

## CARTOONS: IMAGERY AND CONTROVERSY

Bridie Lonie and Qassim Saad

### Introduction

Bridie Lonie

In March 2006 Otago Polytechnic School of Art held a seminar on the conflicts around the publication by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad. A lecturer in Design Studies was invited to speak from a Middle Eastern perspective and a lecturer in Art Theory & History at the School of Art was invited to respond from a Western perspective.<sup>1</sup> The conflict that provoked this discussion arose from a surprisingly naïve request for an illustrator to illustrate a book explaining the Muslim faith to Danish children. The fact that illustrators were reluctant to work on this project was publicised and characterised as 'self-censorship' by Flemming Rose of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. He responded by commissioning artists to create images which did represent Mohammad on the grounds that this would enable the newspaper to demonstrate that it stood for the principles of freedom of speech.<sup>1</sup> The cartoons were published in Denmark and slowly disseminated throughout the rest of the world in various contexts and with various cautionary or inflammatory editorial comments added. Responses included demonstrations and, in situations where demonstrating was in itself a political act, corresponding violence broke out.

### Images and their Effects: Muslims and the West

Qassim Saad

Throughout history the written text has been the preferred medium of communication for Arab peoples. It is therefore a very descriptive tool, used by literature, poets and story-tellers. The *Qur'an* employs extensive use of 'language imagery' as it explains all aspects of human life and the life of the universe as a whole. For Muslim peoples, the language of Arabic has in itself a sense of holiness; and this is reflected in the importance for non-Arabic Muslims of understanding, talking in, and

reading and writing in Arabic. This is part of the context for Muslim 'aniconism', especially where this applies to matters of religion and belief. All the images which showed the Prophet Mohammad and his companions were historical codices, produced by Muslims who were not Arabic, and were produced in the context of telling the story of Mohammad's life rather than discussing Islamic issues. These images constitute an example of the diversity of Muslim societies and reflected the beliefs of a minority of Muslim groups. This is why such works can be found today in museums and books and tend not to be used by most Muslims.

Newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad have set off an international row with dangerous consequences, both short- and long-term. The controversial cartoons target Mohammad and Islam; and their aim was to equate them with extremism and to suggest that all Islam supports terrorism. In this article I will introduce the religious and historical reasons for the offensiveness to Muslims of the recently published cartoons.

In his book *Democracy in America*,<sup>2</sup> written almost two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville accurately observed that democracies could not exist without freedom of the press *and* that social order could not be maintained with boundless freedom of the press. He thought that this would require a certain balancing act and perhaps that explains why some democratic countries have instituted certain legal and social restrictions to the freedom of the press and to freedom of expression.

With such restrictions in mind, many people are asking why the *Jyllands-Posten* editor would ignore the warnings of experts such as Tim Jensen – a leading Danish religious historian – and publish (and later republish) the provocative cartoons. Not only were they published but also with the most offensive timing possible, first around Ramadan, the holy month in the Muslim calendar, and later during the Pilgrimage season. Why would an editor who, according to the *Guardian*, declined a few years earlier to publish cartoons offensive to Christianity, aggressively promote those cartoons so offensive to Muslims?<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet Mohammad has been described in the *Qur'an* as "a fine example" and as one who possesses "high moral excellence", and God has urged us to follow his manners. Of course, insulting the honour of the most ideal figure in Islam is offensive to all Muslims who take their religion seriously. Although their reactions may differ, they would still be offended because dishonouring another human being, even in lampooning fashion, is unacceptable as Islam rejects certain individuals or nations being favoured because of their wealth, power, or race. God created human beings as equals, and what distinguishes one person from another is faith and piety.

However, there are also no texts in the *Qur'an* or in the *Hadith* (the narrative of the Prophet's life) that would justify extreme overreaction in defending the honour of the Prophet Mohammad or other Prophets of God. Clearly, in their overreaction, the recent rioters have played right into the hands of the extremists from both sides who want to prove that Islam cannot exist in peace with the West and therefore must be dealt with. They have also played into the hands of those who want to blame every historical misery ever suffered by Muslims on the West. It seems no secret that – both

in the West and in the Islamic world – the propaganda machines are controlled by extremists who neither care for dialogue with their counterparts, nor want to understand each other.

Those who conveniently overlook the great majority of moderate Muslims around the world who consider their religion as is described in the *Qur'an*, to be “the Middle Ground Faith”, rely on a pendulum of political confusion that swings in all directions and ultimately affects all Muslims.<sup>4</sup> A campaign seems to operate in the West which one day defines the Muslim enemy as “global terrorism”; the next day as “Islamic terrorism”; then as “radical Islam”; then as “political Islam”; then as “Islamists”; then as “Jihadists”; then as “Wahabis”; then as “Islamofascists”; then as “the Qur’an”; then as “Mohammad”. Indeed, there seems enough inflammable ignorance on both sides that must be carefully addressed, restrained, and in due course, reversed.<sup>5</sup>

### Images in Islamic Art: Historical Background

Qassim Saad

In the *Qur'an* itself, there is no formal statement opposing figurative representations. There is a general consensus about what can be called Muslim ‘aniconism’. Islam came from the Arabian Peninsula and differentiated itself by refraining from the culture of imagery. Initially this reluctance was social and psychological rather than ideological, but, over the centuries, it acquired intellectual and theological justification, and it used various Qur’anic passages and doctrines to do so. The figurative representation of life came to be seen as idolatry. Muslim ‘aniconism’ is, however, opposed to ‘iconoclasm’, which implies the violent destruction of images, something which did, however, happen once in a Muslim context in c.630 when the *Kaaba* was cleansed of its idols. The prohibition against figurative imagery has been only loosely applied, and many argue about these matters in very different ways. But still, the prohibition did affect Islamic art in several ways.<sup>6</sup>

Secular themes were depicted in paintings on early Muslim palace walls and in these the figures of animals and human beings were prominent. In buildings with a religious purpose, however, figures of living creatures were avoided. Although the depiction of living forms was not explicitly forbidden by the *Qur'an*, most jurists, basing their ideas on the *Hadith*, held that this was an infringement of the sole power of God to create life. In the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the mosaics, made at an early period, portray the natural world and houses in a fairly realistic way, and one reminiscent of Roman wall-painting, but showing them without living creatures. The walls of mosques and other public buildings were by no means plain, however. Surfaces were covered with decoration: forms of plants, and flowers, tending to become highly stylised; patterns of lines and circles intricately connected and endlessly repeated; and above all – calligraphy. The art of fine writing may have been created largely by officials in the chanceries of rulers, but it had a special significance for Muslims, who believed that God has communicated Himself to many by His Word, in the Arabic language. The writing of that language was developed by calligraphers in ways which were suitable for architectural decoration. Words in endlessly varied forms, repeated or in sentences, were blended with vegetal

or geometric forms. Thus calligraphy became one of the most important of Islamic arts, and Arabic writing adorned not only buildings, but coins, objects of brass or pottery, and textiles – particularly those woven in royal workshops and given as presents. The writing was used to proclaim the glory and eternity of God, as in the inscriptions round the Dome of the Rock, or to speak of the generosity and splendour of a benefactor, or of the skill of an architect.<sup>7</sup>

The houses built in the early period by the Muslim population of the cities have disappeared, but enough has remained of the artefacts used in them to show that some of them contained works of art similar to those in the palaces. Books were transcribed and illustrated for merchants and scholars; glass, metalwork and pottery were made for them; textiles were especially important as floors were covered with carpets; low settees had textile coverings; and walls were hung with carpets or cloths. All these show, on the whole, the same kind of decoration as that of religious buildings, i.e. formalised plants and flowers, geometrical designs and Arabic words. There is a lack of specifically royal themes, but the human figure is not totally absent, or at least not for long as ceramics made in Egypt show human figures, and manuscripts use animals and human beings to illustrate fables or depict scenes from everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

By the third and fourth Islamic centuries (the ninth or tenth century AD) something which was recognisably an 'Islamic world' had emerged. A traveller around the world would have been able to tell, by what he saw and heard, whether a land was ruled and peopled by Muslims. These external forms had been carried by movements of peoples: by dynasties and their armies, merchants moving through the worlds of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and by craftsmen attracted from one city to another by the patronage of rulers or the rich. They were carried also by imported and exported objects expressing a certain style: books, metalwork, ceramics and particularly perhaps textiles, the staple of long-distance trade.<sup>9</sup>

The disappearance of a unitary structure of government, in the east and west of the Muslim world, was not a sign of social or cultural weakness. By then there had been created a Muslim context held together by many links, and with many centres of power and high culture. The absorption of a large area into a single world had in due course created an economic unit important not only through its size but also because it linked together two great sea basins of the civilised world, those of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The movement of armies, merchants, craftsmen, scholars and pilgrims between them became easier; and also that of ideas, styles and techniques. Within this vast sphere of interaction it was possible for strong governments, large cities, international trade and a flourishing countryside to grow, all maintaining the conditions for each other's existence.

Within this larger Muslim context, early (and later) artists adapted their creativity according to context (secular or religious for instance) and based on precedent in order to communicate their inner beliefs through the production of works of art in line with the ideas of those considered to be jurists within their communities. For the most part rejecting the depiction of living forms, these artists progressively established a new style substantially deviating from the Roman and Byzantine art of their time. In the mind of the Muslim artist, abstract visual forms are very much connected to ways of transmitting the message of Islam rather than with the abundance of figurative forms

used in other cultures. Beauty, in Islam, is a quality of the divine. In Islamic art, humans are seen as instruments of divinity created by a supremely powerful Being, God, (Allah in Arabic) and therefore unrepresentable through their own forms.

This is perhaps the main point of difference in the philosophies of and approaches towards art in a Muslim and non-Muslim context. Based on its beliefs, Islamic art does not need any figurative representation of natural or human forms; as such representations would undermine the meanings and the essence of the Muslim faith. Consequently, Muslim artists engaged in expressing the truth of their faith in a sophisticated system of geometric, vegetal and calligraphic patterns.<sup>10</sup> According to Rabah Saoud,<sup>11</sup> Islam did not need figurative imagery to establish its concepts. (Here, one also thinks of Judaic non-figurative art, but that falls outside the scope of this article.)

Nevertheless, there were some instances where human and animal forms were used in Islamic art. However, these were mainly found in secular private buildings and in historical codices. Most of these instances reflect Mediterranean, Persian, Indian and Turkish strands within the Islamic arts.

One can even see some examples of images of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions in old drawings of scenes of worship and the paying of respect. Even today one can see that Persian and Shi'a Muslims accept and present drawings of many imams and historic Muslim leaders. Thus it is important to understand that it is the majority of Muslims who refrain from figurative representation and that this is not the case for all Muslims. Matters are also complicated further as there are grades of figuration in art works from Iran, India and in some old works from Turkey.

### **What Is Offensive Art in a Muslim Context?**

Qassim Saad

The majority of media writers did not perceive the recent Danish cartoons as works of art. Michael Kimmelman, in his article in the *New York Times*<sup>12</sup> called them "callous and feeble" provocations meant to "score cheap points about freedom of expression." Many non-Muslims looking at the cartoons see them as bland or unclear and do not understand what all the fuss is about; while some of those offended reply that this lack of understanding is part of the problem.

The question of whether the religion of Islam deems any depictions of Muhammad to be offensive is reportedly one debated by Islamic scholars. We need to keep in mind that as Islam spread to Persia and India – civilisations with strong representational traditions – artists did paint him.<sup>13</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art has three portrayals of Mohammad in its collection. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "a spokeswoman said none of the Met's depictions of Muhammad – one from 15th century Afghanistan, one from 16th century Uzbekistan, one from 16th century Turkey – had been displayed for years. The Met's Islamic galleries are [however] closed for renovation until 2009."<sup>14</sup>

The kinds of complexities suggested briefly above are, however, often ignored. In the eyes of many Muslims and Westerners alike, a simplistic notion of a 'clash of civilizations' is being fuelled from within the Western world and many believe that this notion in fact disguises an anti-Islamic crusade guided by Islamophobia. Western media propaganda often presents the Western world

as the 'civilised world with an abiding faith in democracy' facing a war that was declared by forces wishing to establish 'a global extremist Islamic empire'. This reductive and self-serving depiction of the conflict leaves no room for any criticism of the West in general, nor in particular of its use of imagery in relation to Muslim values.

Core principles and values, like freedom of speech, cannot be compromised. However, freedoms do not exist in a vacuum; they do not function without limits. Western secular democracies represent not only freedom of expression but also freedom of religion. Belief as well as unbelief needs to be protected. Seen in this light, Islamophobia is becoming a social cancer and should be as unacceptable as anti-Semitism as it is similarly a threat to the very fabric of a democratic and pluralistic way of life. Thus, it is imperative for political and religious leaders, commentators and experts, and yes, the media, to lead in building and safeguarding our cherished values.

What about Muslim responses? Muslim leaders are hard-pressed to take charge, asserting their faith and rights as citizens, affirming freedom of expression while rejecting its abuse as a cover for prejudice. The many Muslim leaders from all over the world, who have publicly urged restraint and strongly condemned violence, play a critical role. Globalisation and an increasingly multicultural and multi-religious West test the mettle of democratic values. As the current cartoon controversy underscores, pluralism and tolerance today demand understanding and respect between non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

The main issues in this 'culture war' are about faith, Mohammad's central role in Islam, and the respect and love that he enjoys as the paradigm to be emulated. They are also more broadly about identity, respect (or lack of it) and public humiliation.

A recently completed Gallup World Poll that surveyed Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia enables us to find data-based answers about Islam by listening to the voices of a billion Muslims. This particular and ground-breaking Gallup study provides a context and serves as a reality check about the causes for widespread outrage. When asked to describe what Western societies could do to improve relations with the Muslim world, 45% of the replies stated that they should demonstrate more understanding and respect for Islam, show less prejudice, and refrain from denigrating what Islam stands for. At the same time, large numbers of Muslims cite the West's technological success and its liberty and freedom of speech as what they most admire. When asked if they would include a provision for freedom of speech – defined as allowing all citizens to express their opinion on political, social and economic issues of the day – if they were drafting a constitution for a new country, an overwhelming majority of 95% in every country surveyed responded yes, they would.

But – as John L Esposito<sup>15</sup> argues as one voice amongst many – cartoons defaming the Prophet and Islam by equating them with terrorism are inflammatory and disrespectful. They reinforce Muslim grievances, humiliation and social marginalisation and drive a wedge between the West and moderate Muslims, unwittingly playing directly into the hands of extremists. They also reinforce autocratic rulers who charge that democracy is anti-religious and incompatible with Islam.

I strongly believe that the majority of Muslim peoples do not reject the idea of a democratic society, but it is important to consider the varied socio-cultural, educational and political contexts of

the different Muslim societies. In my view democracy is not a standardised prescription. Its long-term processes require development and when it is applied from an external position under pressure it is likely to significantly damage the structure of the societies that already exist: as, notably, in the case of Iraq.

## Radical Democracy

Bridie Lonie

Was this 'conflict' simply about the rights of the press to freedom of speech and publication? And is that the principle that upholds the democratic state? And was this a debate around iconoclasm and the power of the image? Or was it an astute and unprincipled decision to set up a situation of polarisation?

Certainly the genealogy of the situation in a request for images which would breach the Muslim prohibition on the representation of the Prophet in human form was inflammatory.

And the use of the cartoon as a visual form immediately shifted the platform of the debate from the pedagogical and informational aspects of children's illustration to a genre invested with all the bristling values and counter-values of the Western democratic tradition. The cartoon is the artform that lies at the centre of public debate. There is a very close relationship between the determining events of Western European democracy and the growth of the political cartoon.<sup>16</sup> The eighteenth century, which saw the American Revolution and the French, also saw an increasingly skilled genre of satiric representation. In general, political cartooning grew out of the desire to level the pretensions of those who abused power and it is most apt when the relationship between power and person was at its closest. Generic cartoons, which make broad political statements, can become longer-living art but the most focused cartoons are streetwise and specific to the knowledge base and interests of the population at the time. Many of the best forge relationships between an individual physiognomy and its extension into a form typical of any of the sins that beset the powerful. Gerald Scarffe's 1980s images of Margaret Thatcher, for example, capture a personality and its relationship with power that specifically targets human pretensions grown out of control. The human attributes of individuality and emotion level the person to the position a democratic society nominally wants them to be in: a singularity, one vote among many others. Cartoons in this context levelled the great, made power not only temporal but also short-lived.

Thus the commissioning of the cartoons in the context under discussion here was a sleight of hand. It shifted a reasonable concern with the representation of another culture that had already clearly indicated its position to the deliberate production of imagery that was going to be offensive by virtue of its very existence.

There are many definitions and understandings of democracy but the hardest to maintain is that in which differences which are not agreed with are still acknowledged. What strategies should be adopted in a world in which conflicts of belief are an inevitable corollary of the principle of freedom of speech?

In 1993 Chantal Mouffe wrote in *The Return of the Political*:

Once we accept the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism, what needs to be envisaged is how it is possible *under those conditions* to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order. Such an order is based on a distinction between 'enemy' and 'adversary'. It requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas but we will not question his right to defend them.<sup>17</sup>

She continued as follows:

When, as is the case today, liberal democracy is increasingly identified with 'actually existing democratic capitalism', and its political dimension is restricted to the rule of law, there is a risk that the excluded may join fundamentalist movements or become attracted to antiliberal, populist forms of democracy. A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests. If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities.<sup>18</sup>

For whom were the cartoonists speaking? If this was debate, it was not clear to whom it was addressed. Thinking with Chantal Mouffe, their participation in a project that was built on the premise of resistance to another culture's edict indicated that there was no debate possible and as cartoons of a characterised historical figure their works inevitably relied upon essentialism for effect.

If the notion of freedom of speech has as its corollary the notion of respect for difference then dialogue is much more likely to occur and fundamentalisms less likely to grow from a legitimate sense of injustice and misunderstanding.



- 1 These two seminar presenters are co-authors for this article.
- 2 Alexis de Tocqueville's Chapter 11: "Liberty of the Press in the United States" was published in Vol. I of his *Democracy in America* in 1835. This publication has been translated and reprinted many times.
- 3 See Abukar Arman, "For Law and Order to Prevail, Assertive Ignorance Must be Curtailed", 23 February 2006 at <http://usa.mediamonitors.net/headlines/for-law-and-order-to-prevail-assertive-ignorance-must-be-curtailed> as last visited on 2 October 2006.
- 4 See <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2006/02.23/11-ksgcartoon.html> as last visited on 2 October 2006 for Alvin Powell, "KSG Group Says Violence Over Cartoons Result of 'Frustration'", 23 February 2006.
- 5 See endnote 3.
- 6 See Rabah Saoud, *Introduction to Muslim Art* (London: Foundation for Science Technology and Civilisation, 2004) and Oleg Grabar, "Art and Culture in the Islamic world", in Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (eds), *Islam: Art and Architecture* (Germany: Konemann, 2004).
- 7 See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab People* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 55.
- 8 Ibid., 56.
- 9 Ibid., 56-57.
- 10 See R Al-Faruqi, "Islam and Art", *Studia Islamica*, 1973, Vol.37.
- 11 See endnote 6 for Saoud.
- 12 See Michael Kimmelman in Jonathan Mandell, *The Cartoon Crisis*, 20 February 2006 at [http://www.gothmagazine.com/articles/arts/20060223/11768\\_20/02/06](http://www.gothmagazine.com/articles/arts/20060223/11768_20/02/06) as last visited on 2 October 2006.
- 13 See <http://www.ee.bilkent.edu.tr/%7Ehistory/ottoman33.html> for links to images relevant to contribution by author Qassim Saad.
- 14 See Jonathan Mandell as in endnote 12.
- 15 John L Esposito, *Muslims and the West: A Culture War* (Washington DC: Islamic Studies, Georgetown University, 2006) at <http://www.islamonline.net/English/Views/2006/02/article07.shtml###> as last visited on 2 October 2006.
- 16 See images of cartoons as relevant to the contribution by author Bridie Lonie at <http://images.google.co.nz/images?q=political+cartoons&hl=en&btnG=Search+Images> as last visited on 2 October 2006.
- 17 Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (eds), *The Return of the Political* (London & New York: Verso, 1973), 12.
- 18 Op cit.

**Bridie Lonie** is the Head of Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin. She is a writer and has completed a master's project on theoretical frameworks for the art therapy encounter at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

**Qassim Saad** is a senior lecturer in the Design Department at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin. He completed a master's project on industrial design at the University of Baghdad in Iraq and is currently enrolled for his PhD at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Melbourne, Australia.