

In their own words: the politics behind the anti-Muslim cartoons

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Common to the statements of virtually all of the pundits and politicians who have come to the defense of the Danish government and *Jyllands-Posten* in the controversy over the newspaper's publication of anti-Muslim cartoons is a refusal to consider the political context which gave rise to these ugly and offensive caricatures.

This is not accidental. The attempt to portray the publication of drawings that identify Islam with terrorism and other evils as a crusade for "free speech" and "Western values" collapses as soon as one examines the forces that published the cartoons and the political uses to which they are being put.

Such facts are neither mysterious nor difficult to ascertain. That they are ignored makes it all the more plain that the current campaign in defense of the cartoons—which is increasingly being taken up by so-called liberal as well as right-wing commentators—is bound up with broader political concerns of a profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic character.

The lining-up of leading imperialist politicians behind the Danish government and *Jyllands-Posten* was underscored by Tuesday's declaration from the president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, who backed the Danish government's refusal to apologize for the cartoons and told *Jyllands-Posten*, "It's better to publish too much than not to have freedom."

Indicative of the movement of American "liberal" commentators behind the anti-Muslim agitation were the remarks over the weekend of Juan Williams on the "Fox News Sunday" television program. Williams, author of books on the civil rights movement, journalist with National Public Radio, and a regular panelist on "Fox News Sunday," where he serves as something of the "house liberal," criticized Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen and *Jyllands-Posten* for issuing even limited statements of regret for the supposedly inadvertent offense to Muslim sensibilities caused by the cartoons. It was, he declared, an open-and-shut issue of free speech, on which it was impermissible to give any ground.

In point of fact, the entire hue and cry about "free speech" is a red herring, aimed at concealing the deeply anti-democratic character of the cartoons and the political forces behind them. There has been no attempt to censor any of the publications in Europe or the US that have printed the cartoons, nor does the denunciation of them as a political provocation imply support for censorship—no more than would the denunciation of racist anti-African-American cartoons or anti-Semitic caricatures.

The real content of this supposed crusade for press freedom, secularism, women's rights, etc. is spelled out in a column published in Sunday's *New York Times* by Martin Burcharth, the US correspondent for the Danish newspaper *Information*. "To my mind," Burcharth writes, "the publication of the cartoons had little to do with generating a debate about self-censorship and freedom of expression. It can be seen only in the context of a climate of pervasive hostility toward anything Muslim in Denmark."

Burcharth concisely documents this official hostility: "For 20 years, Muslims in Denmark have been denied a permit to build mosques in Copenhagen. What's more, there are no Muslim cemeteries in Denmark..." This, as Burcharth points out, is in a country of 5.4 million with a population of over 200,000 Muslims—a significant and growing minority.

He then homes in on the political motives behind the publication of the cartoons. He notes that the Danish minister for cultural affairs, Brian Mikkelsen, recently summoned scholars, artists and writers to create a "canon of Danish art, music, literature and film."

Mikkelsen is a member of the Conservative People's Party, one of the constituents of the government headed by Rasmussen, which also includes the virulently anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic Danish People's Party.

"The ostensible purpose," Burcharth writes, "was to preserve our homegrown classics. But before the release of the canon last month, Mr. Mikkelsen revealed what may have been the real purpose of the exercise: To create a last line of defense against the influence of Islam in Denmark. 'In Denmark we have seen the appearance of a parallel

society in which minorities practice their own medieval values and undemocratic views,' he told fellow conservatives at a party conference last summer. 'This is the new front in our cultural war.'"

Burcharth proceeds to debunk the version of events leading up to the mass Muslim protests that has been given out by the Danish government and largely echoed in the Western media, and explain how the current furor is being exploited by the Danish media and government to further whip up anti-Muslim sentiment.

He writes: "Now the general view, expressed in the press and among a majority of the Danes, is that the Muslim leaders who led the protests in Denmark should have their status as citizens examined because they betrayed their fellow Danes by failing to keep the controversy within the country.

"But the real story is that they and their followers ran out of options. They tried to get *Jyllands-Posten* to recognize its offense. They tried to get the support of the government and the opposition. They asked a local prosecutor to file suit under the country's blasphemy law. And they asked ambassadors in Denmark from Muslim countries to meet with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. They were rebuffed on all counts, though a state prosecutor is currently reviewing the case. But, really, what choice did they have?

"... After the flag burnings, the Danish news media began to refer to the white cross on the flag's red background as a Christian symbol. There was something discordant about this... Denmark, after all, is one of the most secular countries in Europe. Only 3 percent of Danes attend church once a week...

"Now that flag has become a symbol around the world of Denmark's contempt for another world religion."

That the Danish government would welcome a deliberate provocation against Muslims, in order to incite Muslim protest and then use it to whip up nationalism, racism and similar reactionary sentiments, can come as no surprise to anyone who has any knowledge of the character of the current regime. As the *Financial Times* of Britain put it in a column published February 11, Rasmussen's "centre-right coalition built its programme on two cornerstones: a tax freeze and strict restrictions on immigration."

The article continued: "Soon after his election, Mr. Rasmussen set about severely curtailing the number of foreign immigrants. The government passed laws making it difficult for residents to bring in spouses from outside the European Union."

As the *New York Times* reported in a February 12 article, "A country that touts itself as the world's biggest net contributor per capita of foreign aid recently introduced legislation making it virtually impossible for torture victims

to obtain Danish citizenship. Successful asylum applications to Denmark plummeted to 10 percent last year, from 53 percent."

The same article quoted the cultural editor of *Jylland-Postens*, Flemming Rose—the supposed champion of free speech and Western values—who vented his own nationalist venom and anti-Muslim bias in the following manner: "People are no longer willing to pay taxes to help support someone called Ali who comes from a country with a different language and culture that is 5,000 miles away."

Here are other recent statements, published in the *Times* article, by leading "freedom fighters" of the Danish People's Party:

* "... The People's Party leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, wrote in her weekly newsletter that the Islamic religious community here was populated with 'pathetic and lying men with worrying suspect views on democracy and women.' She added, 'They are the enemy inside. The Trojan Horse in Denmark. A kind of Islamic mafia.'"

* "Morten Messerschmidt, a 25-year-old rising star in the party, said ... 'the culture clash we have been predicting for 10 years has come to pass... These people we welcomed into our country have betrayed us.'"

* "Soren Krarup, the Danish People's Party's spokesman on immigration, said in a recent interview that the furor over the Muhammad caricatures could result in a further tightening of immigration policies. He added that the party was considering sponsoring a measure to freeze Muslim immigration altogether."

We leave it to those who in the name of "free speech" defend this anti-Muslim provocation—especially those erstwhile liberals and radicals who have taken this route to the camp of neo-colonialism—to explain why they are in a bloc with such political filth.



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