

## **Balancing Press Freedom and Anti-Racism: Christian Responses to the Cartoon Controversy**

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As this article is being written, a guaranteed-to-be-blockbuster movie, *The Da Vinci Code* is preparing for release. Based on Dan Brown's bestselling novel by the same name, the story suggests that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children whose bloodline exists today. The church (particularly the Vatican), the story contends, hid this fact to perpetuate its male-dominated hierarchical control. This is not new. Conspiracy buffs, enchanted by the idea of a romantic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, have produced many novels and movies over the years.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the insistence by the writers and movie producers that the stories are fictional, the impact they have on the public perception of the story of Jesus is significant. Traditionalists in the church are justifiably concerned that these depictions can compromise its ancient faith. Like in the movies before, there will be protests in front of movie theaters and already many Christian scholars and church leaders have joined the Vatican in its denunciation of *The Da Vinci Code*. Other Christian leaders, having learned from a strategy that worked well for them following the release of the 2004 blockbuster movie *The Passion of the Christ*, are considering using the movie as a teaching tool, to tell the authentic Biblical story.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent examples of this are the Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which saw its Broadway release in the 1971 and the movie version a few years later, as well as the Nikos Kazantzakis novel and its Martin Scorsese movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ* released in the 1988

Quite apart from these novels and movies that arguably represent an alternative theological voice, Christians have had an inordinate share of gratuitously offensive public depictions of their religious symbols.<sup>2</sup> Yet, compared to the protests in the Muslim world to the Danish cartoons, the Christian responses to offensive depictions of their own religious symbols have been markedly mild. It is perhaps not surprising then that Christian responses to the Danish cartoons have been mostly bland. The many and complex reasons for this are beyond the scope of this essay. However, we need to note at least two theological and one political reason for the intensity of the Muslim responses and the weakness of the Christian responses that have been presented in the public discussion of this issue.

First, Muslim protesters contend that the depictions of the Prophet Muhammad goes against a scriptural injunction that prohibits artistic depictions of any prophet. This contention was challenged in a Wall Street Journal opinion column by political commentator Amir Taheri who pointed out that “many portraits of Muhammad have been drawn by Muslim artists, often commissioned by Muslim rulers.”<sup>3</sup> Right wing commentators immediately picked up on this sentiment to buttress their argument that this was a politically, not religiously generated protest. However, in a radio debate, Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan challenged Taheri: "If you ask the Muslim scholars... the consensus is that we are not allowed to portray the Prophets - not only the Prophet Muhammad. This is for two reasons, the first is out of respect and the second is to avoid idolatry.”<sup>4</sup> In this debate, Ramadan conceded that political motivation was indeed a factor, but maintained that this was not enough to generate the intensity of the protest. That intensity, he

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, in 1987 Andres Serrano exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum of Art a depiction of Jesus Christ on a Crucifix submerged in a jar of urine, called *Piss Christ*. Later at the same institution Chris Ofili's presentation of *The Holy Virgin Mary* depicted the Holy Mother Mary surrounded by magazine cut-outs of pornographic images while being covered in cow dung.

<sup>3</sup> Amir Taheri, “Bonfire of the Pieties: Islam prohibits neither images of Muhammad nor jokes about religion.” Opinion Journal, *Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, February 8, 2006

<sup>4</sup> “Amir Taheri Debates Tariq Ramadan: Muhammad Cartoon Fallout” *Amsterdam Forum, Radio Netherlands*, March 11, 2006

contended, was generated by the theological motivation of the stricture against prophet depictions, which, legitimately or not, is affirmed by “over 90% of the Muslim population.”

Second, an early Christian tradition that romanticizes persecutions and martyrdoms experienced by the early church has become somewhat popular among some Christians today.<sup>5</sup> Their theological responses to offensive depictions indicate that since Jesus has always been the subject of offense and derision – the cross, they say, was the ultimate offense -- Christians need not take offense at such depictions. The early church appears to them as a model of perseverance which, though seemingly powerless by earthly standards, overcame the hostility of what was then the most powerful empire in the world. The weakness of the Christian response to offensive depictions of their own symbols can be viewed in light of this notion.

A strong challenge to this Christian passivity came during the height of this controversy in the context of rising Muslim violence against Christians in Nigeria. Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, the Most Rev. Peter Akinola, a leader in the world-wide Anglican conservative movement and president of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) who had for long years advocated non-violent responses from Christians, struck a different note. "From all indications, it is very clear now that the sacrifices of the Christians in this country for peaceful co-existence with people of other faiths has been sadly misunderstood to be weakness.... May we at this stage remind our Muslim brothers that they do not have the monopoly of violence in this nation... CAN may no longer be able to contain our restive youths should this ugly trend continue."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan of Jerusalem challenges this notion in his book *Witnessing for Peace* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003). Contrary to popular opinion, *marteria* is about affirming life, he says, not about death: “It is about living fully in such a way that death is the outcome.”

<sup>6</sup> “Rev. Peter Akinola Speaks Out Against Cartoon Violence in Nigeria.” Statement posted on the *Christianity Today* website on February 22, 2006 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com>)

Recently named in *Time* magazine as one of the 100 people who shape our world,<sup>7</sup> Archbishop Akinola's views are already being received favorably by conservative Christians in the west.<sup>8</sup>

Third, as we will see below, only a few Christian voices engaged the critical questions of this controversy. This, I suggest, has to do mostly with dynamics of power. Western Christians who have enjoyed hegemonic power for over five centuries of European colonial domination are continuing to enjoy it under the empire-building of a professedly Christian US president. This political domination is augmented by two factors: a western-oriented globalization which seeks full economic and cultural hegemony, and politically generated fear of Muslims and Islam now deeply rooted in the western psyche, come to be known as Islamophobia. The challenge from radical Islamicists to western power on 9/11 has so shattered their sense of indomitability and ruptured their sense of security that many are unable to disengage from the hysterical notion of a "clash of civilizations." Such Christians seem eager to place a greater value on freedom of speech than on the value of being anti-racist. Christianity's core commitment to wholesome human community,<sup>9</sup> I contend, requires Christians to place equal value on both these principles. Christians' reluctance to engage the critical questions and speak out more forthrightly will not only be detrimental to their own faith commitments, but at a time when religious communities are under increasing pressure from secular political, economic and cultural forces, of which, indeed, this controversy is a part, to their political self-interest as well.

Critical engagement by Christians, I suggest, needs to take at least the following two issues of context into consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> *Time* magazine, May 8, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Evangelical leader Rick Warren in "Archbishop Peter Akinola: The Strength of a Lion" posted on the *Christianity Today* website, May 3, 2006 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com>), compares him to Nelson Mandela.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 2:15

First, that the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*'s publication of the cartoons was a provocation. Even though in an interview published in the newspaper on December 18, 2005, Editor-in-chief Carsten Juste insists that if it was a provocation, it was not deliberate, he admits that the newspaper's purpose in publishing the cartoons in September 2005 was to test the limits of free expression.<sup>10</sup> Clearly that required them to be provocative. In April 2003, the newspaper declined to publish a set of cartoons on the resurrection of Christ. Jans Kaiser, its Sunday editor wrote: "I don't think *Jyllands-Posten*'s readers will enjoy the drawings. As a matter of fact, I think they will provoke an outcry."<sup>11</sup> Yet, two years later, they decided to print the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad! The intention to provoke is clearly illustrated by one cartoon that depicted the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban and another in which a turbaned heavenly figure pleading with a group of suicide bombers to stop because "we ran out of virgins." The obvious implication of this crude racist stereotype was that every Muslim is a potential terrorist.

Additionally, even if we assume that the Danish newspaper was genuinely unaware of an Islamic religious prohibition against depictions of the Prophet when it published the cartoons, the European newspapers that subsequently published them did so despite knowing that at least in the public perception such a prohibition exists. This was an added provocation.

Second, the Muslim response must be considered in the context of a growing Islamophobia in European societies. The wide-spread youth revolt last year was ample evidence that France was not as tolerant and welcoming a place as it is portrayed to be. In Austria, the Freedom Party, a far-right populist party that opposes immigration and "multicultural experiments," is part of the governing coalition. Both Denmark and Norway have significant anti-immigration party participation in their parliaments (12% and 15% respectively). In

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<sup>10</sup> "The Editor and the 12 Cartoons" <http://www.jp.dk>, February 10, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Gary Younge, "The Right to Be Offended" in *The Nation* February 27, 2006

Germany the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party quadrupled its 2002 national election results and gained 1.6% of the vote. Though the numbers are still small, the rise in popularity of far-right parties is alarming, and they have fared even better in local elections.<sup>12</sup>

Acknowledging the role of Islamophobia in this controversy, the Organization of the Islamic Conference convened a high level two day conference on May 2-3, 2006 in London under the theme, "Challenging Stereotypes in Europe and the Islamic World: Working Together for Constructive Policies and Partnerships." It brought together eminent scholars, politicians, journalists, nongovernmental organizations and diplomats from both the Western and Islamic worlds. A similar event is planned for Denmark on May 13<sup>th</sup>.

Yvonne Haddad, professor of the history of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations at Georgetown University, suggests: "Of the 57 nations that belong to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, 54 have been colonized by Europe. That history is well known in Islamic countries. [And] you've got the current war in Iraq.... Those things form the context for this sort of response. Devout Muslims are offended by the cartoons, but this is not just a religious affront. It's also political."<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Abu-Laben, head of Copenhagen's Islamic Cultural Centre and one of Denmark's most prominent Muslim clerics noted, "This protest is not about the cartoons, offensive as they are. The cartoons are merely the final drop that caused the cup to overflow. The Muslim faith has been under attack for years. There has been intense psychological pressure on Muslims. We have heard Western politicians relate our faith to terrorism, over and over again, and it is too much. This was the response."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> From the "Far Right Politics of Europe," a Special Report at the UK *Guardian* website <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,,711990,00.html>

<sup>13</sup> Neely Tucker, "America's Irreverent Sense of Humor: Christian Symbols Aren't Off-Limits for Parody," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Schofield, "Protests express frustration with the West, cleric says," Knight Ridder Newspapers, reported in Mercury News at <http://www.mercurynews.com>, February 7, 2006

Christian Responses were wide-spread and came from across the spectrum of Christian traditions. World and regional Councils of Churches; church bodies such as the Vatican and Orthodox Patriarchates; denominational families such as the Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans; theological affinity groups such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals; and individual churches responded. I cannot possibly refer to the wide variety of these responses in this short essay. Suffice it to say that these responses typically make two points. One, that responsibility that comes with the freedom of the press required the media to have taken seriously the offense these cartoons would cause Muslims, and two, that the violence in the protests against the cartoons was deplorable.

The statement from the Vatican<sup>15</sup> was typical of the Christian responses. "The freedom of thought and expression, confirmed in the Declaration of Human Rights, can not include the right to offend religious feelings of the faithful. That principle obviously applies to any religion," read the Vatican statement. Coexistence calls for "a climate of mutual respect to favor peace among men and nations. Moreover, these forms of exasperated criticism or derision of others manifest a lack of human sensitivity and may constitute in some cases an inadmissible provocation." The statement also acknowledges that "violent actions of protest are equally deplorable." "Reaction in the face of offense cannot fail the true spirit of all religion," the Vatican said. "Real or verbal intolerance, no matter where it comes from, as action or reaction, is always a serious threat to peace."

From the locations that are closest to this controversy, from the Councils of Churches in Denmark and Europe where we would expect strong engagement of the critical questions, we

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<sup>15</sup> John Thavis, "Vatican says freedom of expression does not mean offending religions" Catholic News Service, February 6, 2006

have weak statements. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark's press release<sup>16</sup> first sets up the context in favor of the Danish tradition of free expression: "During more than one and a half centuries we have in Denmark developed a culture and a society, which is built on democracy including freedom of religion and freedom of speech. This culture is founded on respect for the individual person, a respect we have learned from the Christian Gospel among other factors. Therefore freedom of speech does not exclude showing respect for the individual person's religious faith. On the contrary, the respect for the individual person is the presupposition for having freedom of speech in Denmark. With freedom of speech follows respect for others." Then the church body addresses, one assumes, as boldly as it can, the concern at hand: "At this moment with a heated discussion going on in Denmark we call for a consideration of the connection between respect and the freedom of speech." That the best call the Danish Council of Churches can make is for a "consideration of the connection between respect and freedom of speech," is mind-boggling. The statement does allude to provocation, but does not condemn it. It alludes to how the secularization of the culture has weakened the knowledge of Christianity, but does not name the corresponding rise of Islamophobia. Church leaders do offer to "create a forum where religious leaders can debate common issues," but nothing in their language causes me to expect that anything worthwhile will come out of such a forum.

The statement from the Conference of European Churches,<sup>17</sup> a fellowship of some 125 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus 40 associated organizations does better, but still does not engage the critical issues. While

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<sup>16</sup> "Freedom of Speech and Respect," Press Release issued by the board of the Committee for Church and Encounter with other Religions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) on February 2, 2006. [http://www.religionsmoede.dk/index.php?indl\\_id=2813&id=5822](http://www.religionsmoede.dk/index.php?indl_id=2813&id=5822)

<sup>17</sup> "European Christians are committed to respect Muslims," Press release No. 06-06e, Conference of European Churches, February 3, 2006.

supporting the Danish churches, the statement adds a stronger message which, in relation to other faith communities, offers to “show humility and openness,” a readiness “to listen to their insights whilst ready at the same time to be open and honest about points at which we differ,” and to speak openly about the need to stand against images of confrontation within civil society and to work for that reconciliation.”

If the Councils of Churches’ responses were bland, the Evangelical community’s response was offensive. The European Evangelical Alliance’s statement<sup>18</sup> is written with such a condescending attitude that if anything, may have added insult to injury. It says in part: “As a group of people with deep faith convictions, the European Evangelical Alliance understands the upset among our Muslim friends and co-citizens about something that they perceive to be deeply insulting to their faith.” But in very the next sentence they contradict themselves. “At the same time, as Europeans, we also understand that our largely secularized societies find this upset incomprehensible.” They clearly didn’t understand “the upset.” The statement goes on to be patronizing: “The satirizing or criticism of faith is common in European media. Other faith communities (particularly Christians), while often being upset, have got used to these comments.” Get used to it, Muslims, they are saying, because if they can offend us with derogatory depictions of our religious symbols, why should they offend you! “The European Evangelical Alliance strongly supports the principle of freedom of speech and an independent media. At the same time, while we believe people should be free to express what they wish, we long for a society in which people think hard before expressing ideas that are bound to cause deep offence.” Do they seriously think that the editors of *Jyllands-Posten* didn’t think hard before publishing these cartoons? From their own admission, the Danish newspaper’s editors *did* give the matter serious consideration, but published the cartoons anyway. The statement then

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<sup>18</sup> “Publication of Danish Cartoons,” Press release from the European Evangelical Alliance, February 9, 2006.

goes on to defend the nation of Denmark, totally ignoring demonstrable evidence of rising Islamophobia in their country.

If the European Evangelical community was patronizing, the US Evangelical community was confrontational. In an informative article, Matt Stearns of Knight Ridder newspapers sums up the positions of several US Evangelical leaders.<sup>19</sup> He begins with the Rev. Ted Haggard, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals: "...concerns about the goals of radical Islamic leaders, a sense that a double standard pervades the Muslim media and a general distaste for organized violence have overridden any empathy most Christian conservatives might feel for angry Muslims." Similarly, conservative leader Gary Bauer, President of the Family Research Council: "Unfortunately, the protesters are hinting that the cartoonist might have been right. They're killing fellow Muslims and destroying property. Maybe the radical protests are validating the cartoon instead of proving that cartoon wrong." These responses, quick to condemn and slow to engage the Muslim community, are unfortunately typical of the public sentiments of other US Evangelical leaders.

By far, the most engaging Christian response came from the World Council of Churches. This, the world's foremost Christian ecumenical body comprising 340 Protestant and Orthodox church bodies met for its General Assembly in February at the height of the cartoon controversy. Addressing the cartoon controversy, the WCC's Minute on Interfaith Relations<sup>20</sup> says: "As people of faith we understand the pain caused by the disregard of something considered precious to faith. We deplore the publications of the cartoons. We also join with the voices of many Muslim leaders in deploring the violent reactions to the publications." The Minute stresses the

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<sup>19</sup> Matt Stearns, "Muslim anger gets little sympathy from Christian conservatives," *The Kansas-City Star*, February 12, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> "Minute on mutual respect, responsibility and dialogue with people of other faiths" adopted by the 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

right to freedom of speech, describing it as "both a right and a responsibility," which "works best when it holds structures of power accountable and confronts misuse of power." However, it continues, "By the publication of the cartoons, freedom of speech has been used to cause pain by ridiculing peoples' religion, values and dignity." This misuse should nonetheless be met by "non-violent means like critique and expressions of firm disagreement." It acknowledges that the tensions over the cartoons reflect other issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq. It continues, "The real tension in our world is not between religions and beliefs, but between aggressive, intolerant and manipulative secular and religious ideologies." Nevertheless, it says, "We recognize a growing respect and tolerance in all cultures. Many are learning that it is possible to be different, even to disagree and yet remain in calm dialogue and work together for the common good." In formal proposals adopted by the Assembly, the Minute asks member churches and ecumenical partners to show solidarity with those experiencing attacks on their religion. It recommends that they address the underlying social, economic and political reasons for division. It specifically urges churches in contexts "where religion interacts with politics in a way which causes division" to deepen interfaith dialogue and develop common codes of conduct. It calls on member churches and ecumenical partners to address racism, caste, stereotyping and xenophobia, and reaffirms the commitment to the right to freedom of speech while calling member churches to contribute to a reflection on "how to uphold the need for ethical behavior and good judgment in using this right."

Noteworthy also are strong statement made by two prominent church leaders. The Most Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in an interview with David Frost,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Transcript of Archbishop's interview with David Frost in Sudan, Sunday 5th March available at [http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/060305.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/060305.htm)

perceptively defined the question. "I think in some parts of the world there was hysterical overreaction, violent overreaction, but we then have to ask the next question – so why was this such an iconic issue? Why did it spark in the way it did?" Saying that the answer is multi-layered, he proceeded to answer his own question. "I think it has to do with this curious two-fold perception that Muslims in the West and in the world generally, still feel they are at a disadvantage. We look out, we the British liberals, right-thinking people, we look out and we think Islam is strong, menacing, terrifying. Their own perception of themselves is that they're constantly being pushed to the edge of every discussion and every negotiation in the world. And we're not talking about terrorists but about the average Muslim."

Perhaps the best articulation of the problem and Christian response came from Anglican Archbishop and Nobel laureate, Desmond Tutu who described the furor over the cartoons as the "reaction to an offense rather than the cause." "What has happened and the aftermath has been seen as a symptom of a more serious disease," said Tutu, "Had relationships been different, one, the cartoons might not have happened, or if they had, they probably would have been handled differently."<sup>22</sup>

"Insulting the beliefs and customs of people and religions is not freedom of speech. This is not only related to Islam. We must respect the beliefs of other nations and religions whether we believe in them or not. If we don't believe or approve of them, we must challenge them through discussion and intellectual undertakings," he said. Tutu noted that freedom of expression also came with some obligations. "Imagine if the subject had been the Holocaust and it had been treated in a way that the Jews had deemed offensive and the reaction of the Danish government and international community had been as it is now," he said. He lamented the negative

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<sup>22</sup> Tanalee Smith: "Tutu: Muslim anger not just about cartoons" Associated Press, published in *The Mercury News*, February 28, 2006

stereotyping of Muslims and wondered why North Ireland's Protestants and Catholics, the Oklahoma City bombers or even the Nazis had never been labeled "Christian terrorists." "Look at the Ku Klux Klan, who use a cross as their symbol and propagate hatred against others and encourage lynching. And yet we never hear someone say, 'There's an example of how Christianity encourages violence,'" Tutu said.

As the movie *The Da Vinci Code* debuts there are reports from many parts of the world that Muslims are urging Christians to protest. An inter-religious coalition of the "religiously offended" would signal the media establishment impervious to religious sentiment that it cannot afford to offend religious people. While such an initiative is understandable in an era of rampaging secularization, I find this initiative unacceptable.

The early Christian settlers who came to the United States seeking religious freedom, in their struggle to affirm that value, also struggled to establish a press that is free from governmental control and religious censorship. A free press, they affirmed, is the only institution that could guarantee both democracy and religious freedom. Throughout history as governments or religious bodies attempted to muzzle the press, freedom-loving Christians were in the forefront of supporting that right. Standing in that tradition, even in the midst of these controversies, I would much rather see a Christian and Muslim coalition that not only supports the freedom of the press but seeks to educate and hold the press accountable to highest standards of respect in their reporting.

Yet, in the cartoon controversy, another principle is at stake. The Christian commitment to wholesome human community is an affirmation that regards each part of God's creation as equally valuable in God's sight. Anti-racism: i.e. the commitment to fight systemic bigotry and

prejudice that dehumanize parts of the human community is an important part of this commitment. The Christian respondents seem to have found that acknowledging both these principles in one statement was a difficult balancing act.

Christian responses to the cartoon crisis that were solely based on the freedom of the press argument came across as being offensive because they lacked an indication of their commitment to anti-racism and its derivative commitment to human community. It seems obvious that those Christians didn't have, or didn't care to have, a relationship with the Muslims. On the other hand, while the statements from the World Council of Churches and the two Archbishops are by no means perfect, they deserve commendation for honestly attempting to articulate the balance between these values.

The best gift Christians could offer to Muslims is the assurance of their commitment to stand together in the struggle for full participation in the human community. In that context, rather than statements that are bland, offensive or even seek to commend for the sake of commendation, the best statement Christians could have written is one that articulated their struggle to uphold these competing and cherished values at the same time.