

Effing the Ineffable: Demystifying the Muhammad Cartoon Controversy

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Introduction

On September 30th of 2005 the *Jyllands-Posten*, a Danish newspaper, published twelve cartoons of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. Islamic law forbids all depictions of Muhammad because they are idolatrous, and the fact that these cartoons were perceived as disrespectful intensified the offence. Many Danish Muslims felt that these illustrations were inappropriate, even discriminatory; people staged protests and demanded apologies, and Muslim organizations condemned the *Jyllands-Posten*. Regardless, the cartoons – and other, even more insulting ones – quickly spread. Newspapers in dozens of countries reprinted the offending cartoons, and the speed of internet communications meant that the illustrations were available for viewing by anyone. As more and more countries became involved, protests escalated to riots and people on both sides of the controversy were killed.

Why did this crisis occur at all? Surely the *Jyllands-Posten* knew that depicting Muhammad would be inflammatory, yet they did it anyway. Furthermore, when protests occurred, the news editors refused to retract the cartoons or offer a suitable apology. Many non-Muslims felt that the Muslim

reaction to the cartoons was exaggerated, and websites and newspapers all over the world continued to reprint the illustrations in spite of, or perhaps because of, the distress and violence they caused. The uproar is not a unique event, and is not bound solely by the specifics of Islamic law and Western notions of freedom. The interaction between these positions, however, can be understood according to sociological observations concerning the behaviour of people in general. In this paper I will argue that although it seems that this controversy can be explained by Max Weber's theory concerning secularization and disenchantment, it is through Emile Durkheim's lens of sacred and profane that we can most clearly see through to the centre.¹

Max Weber

"The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'"² said Max Weber, addressing what it is that makes western civilization so unique. Rationalization is "the general tendency within modern capitalist societies for all institutions and most areas of life to be transformed by the application of rationality"³ and disenchantment is that aspect of rationalization comprising the devaluation and disappearance of the mysterious, the magical and the awe-

¹ Although contemporary scholars have done much to further and amend the theories of Weber and Durkheim, this paper focuses on the original work. Inclusion and interpretation of contemporary theories based on Weberian and Durkheimian theory is beyond the scope of this paper.

² Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Trans. and ed. H. H. Gert and C. W. Mills; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 155.

³ D. Jary and J. Jary, "Rationalization" in *Collins Internet Linked Dictionary of Sociology* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Press, 3rd edn, 2005), 512.

inspiring.⁴ One result is secularization, or the increasing specialization of cultural and social spheres; religious ideas lose influence on knowledge production and religion increasingly becomes something personal and private rather than universal and enmeshed. Weber wrote that rationalization was a major force in modern Western society, not only through its influence on religion, but also on math, science, art, architecture, politics, and the economy.⁵

It is quite possible that the controversy over the Muhammad cartoons comes from the conflict between the secularized and rationalized Western culture and the anti-secular Islamic culture. It could be that the West has become so secular and religion so individualized that religious figures, although sacred, are not seen as deserving public rights. If disenchantment is as powerful a force on Western Europe as Weber believed, a consequence may be that it allowed people in Western Europe and the Americas to see it as appropriate and right to unmask what they might see as backward superstitions. Immigration and the increasing speed of communications put secular and non-secular people in close contact, and the widely different beliefs on the ideal relationship between religion and public life are bound to be the subject of conflict.

In “Legislating Religious Freedom: Muslim Challenges to the Relationship between ‘Church’ and ‘State’ in Germany and France” Katherine

⁴ William Ramp, Lecture Notes, Lethbridge, Alberta, 1 February 2006.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Trans. T. Parson; Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 3rd edn, 1998), 13-31.

Pratt Ewing⁶ details some of the issues which have already arisen as the type of conflicts a Weberian analysis may lead us to expect. She explains that the issue of the “freedom of Muslim communities to practice Islam in publicly visible ways” has manifested in conflicts over things such as “building freestanding mosques that look like ‘real’ mosques or broadcasting the call to prayer with loudspeakers.”⁷ Although this appears to be clear-cut evidence of secular state versus religion, the fact that these governments “permit Christian practices but ban what Muslims claim to be analogous Muslim practices”⁸ suggests that secularization is not necessarily the underlying force. In Germany and France it appears to be the lack of rationalization and bureaucratization, not the absence of secularization, of the Muslim community which leads to the confrontations with the state. Ewing states that

[In Germany and France] these governments have actually dealt with religious communities (even including Protestants) as corporate groups. Muslims have threatened the status quo not, ironically, because they have group expectations, as an American observer who regards religion as an individual private matter might expect, but because there is no single clear organizational structure that subsumes all Muslims.⁹

Emile Durkheim

Although secularization theory may explain some of the events comprising the Muhammad cartoon crisis this theory begs the question of whether or not the West really is secularized. The answer to this, of course, would depend

⁶ Katherine Pratt Ewing, “Legislating Religious Freedom: Muslim Challenges to the Relationship Between ‘Church’ and ‘State’ in Germany and France,” *Daedalus* 129.4 (2000), 31-45.

⁷ Ewing, “Legislating Religious Freedom,” 33.

⁸ Ewing, “Legislating Religious Freedom,” 33.

⁹ Ewing, “Legislating Religious Freedom,” 40.

on the definition of religion and religious thought. By Emile Durkheim's definition the West is not secular, and it may indeed be the religious ideas held in the West that are the root of this controversy. Rather than define religion in terms of ideas of the supernatural or divinity, Durkheim explains that religious thought is characterized by the disposition to classify items and ideas into the mutually exclusive categories: *sacred* and *profane*.¹⁰ The criteria that define the sacred and the profane are thus: that sacred things are "protected and isolated by prohibitions," while the profane things are "those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must be kept at a distance from the sacred."¹¹ Whether positive or negative, sacred things are those that must be kept separate. Furthermore, these definitions must be shared by the group in order to constitute a religion. A definition such as this considers many ideas religious that Weber would have deemed secular, such as democracy, individualism or science, all of which Durkheim did address as having religious elements.¹²

Regardless of the definition of religion it is unquestionable that Islam is one, and that the prophet Muhammad, a major element in the Muslim faith, is held sacred in it. The only unforgivable sin described by the Qur'an is "associationism or idolatry (associating or allowing anything to usurp God's place) [and this] concern not to compromise the unity and transcendence of God

¹⁰ Emile Durkheim, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life," in M. Emirbayer (ed.), *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 87.

¹¹ Durkheim, "Elementary Forms," 89.

¹² William Ramp, Lecture Notes, Lethbridge, Alberta, 9 March 2006.

led to an absolute ban on any image or representation of God or Muhammad.”¹³ Thus, in a Durkheimian sense, Muhammad is untouchable; to “touch” him with the profane tools of paper and ink, or even the profane sense of sight would be to defy the prohibitions that set him apart, that make him sacred.

When the editors of the *Jyllands-Posten*, and subsequent journalists all over the world, chose to publish the cartoons of Muhammad, it was not out of a secular impulse. This was not a conflict based on the religious beliefs of Muslims and the anti-religious beliefs of the secular West; it was based on conflicting ideas of the sacred. While to Muslims, the prophet Muhammad’s sanctity makes him untouchable, his very untouchable-ness strikes at the heart of one of the major sacred concepts held dear in the West: the sanctity of freedom of expression.

That this is what the original publishers felt was at stake is evident in their rationale for publishing the drawings in the first place. CBC News Online reported the *Jyllands-Posten* cultural editor as saying that “the call for pictures was a reaction to the rising number of situations in which artists and writers censor themselves out of fear of radical Islamists.”¹⁴ Later, when the newspaper did apologize, they specified that they were not apologizing for printing the cartoons; rather they were sorry that Muslims were offended by them. “If we really went out and apologized,” said Editor-in-chief Carsten Juste, “then the

¹³ J. L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

¹⁴ “Muhammad Cartoons: A Timeline,” *CBC News Online*, 15 February 2006, np. Retrieved 15 March 2006, from http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/muhammad_cartoons_timeline.html.

Middle Eastern dictatorships would be able to control what we put in our papers.”¹⁵ Foreign papers as well were motivated to print the cartoons by concerns about free speech. By February 2, 2006, the cartoons had been printed in papers in more than fifteen countries; in one French newspaper the cartoons were published under the provocative headline “Yes, we have the right to caricature God.”¹⁶

If there is one religion that those in the West can be said to be adherents, even fundamentalists of, it is the cult of the individual, in which the rights of the individual person are unassailable. Freedom of expression is a key element of individualism as it is through our own personal ideas and opinions that we differentiate ourselves. It follows that restricting our right to express these opinions limits our self-sovereignty. The rule that sets apart this sacred notion of freedom of expression is that this freedom must be unlimited; there cannot be any constraints on our expression (other than self-imposed) or else we do not have real freedom. This issue is often raised in circumstances when someone feels his or her rights have been compromised by the expression of another’s; for example, libel may put someone at risk of harm so is not condoned. Rules of indecency, such as restricting pornography, are similarly intended to keep certain people from harm. In general, though, any attempt to limit expression is viewed as an

¹⁵ “Danish paper apologizes for publishing cartoons of prophet,” *CBC News Online*, 31 January 2006, np. Retrieved 15 March 2006, from http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/muhammad_cartoons_timeline.html.

¹⁶ “Muhammad Cartoons,” np.

attack on freedom of expression, and since the publication of the Mohammad cartoons is not viewed by western media as putting Muslims at risk, the prohibitions on depicting Muhammad is seen as an attack of this sort. It is then the duty of believers to defend freedom of expression by deliberately expressing that which was forbidden. Julius Grey, a prominent Canadian lawyer and human rights advocate said that “Canadian newspapers should publish the cartoons, [...] by not printing them, the media jeopardizes Canada’s culture of freedom of expression and fails to properly inform its citizens.”¹⁷ This is why the cartoon controversy grew into a crisis; the louder Muslims asserted their right to have no depictions of Muhammad created, the louder others asserted their right to depict anything and everything.

Possibilities for Reconciliation

Although the specific event of the Muhammad cartoon controversy has been the subject of this paper, this is not an isolated occurrence. Rather, the conflicts between “secular” sacred ideas and “religious” sacred ideas have manifested in various controversies, such as the wearing of the Sikh *kirpan* in Canadian schools or the Muslim *hijab* in government institutions in France, as well as the teaching of creationism in American schools, or the gay-marriage issue in Canada and abroad. The Muhammad cartoon controversy is simply the most recent and perhaps the most internationally fraught issue in a long line.

¹⁷ Muhammad Cartoons, np.

Since Durkheim's theory seems to best describe the situation, then it is to Durkheim again that we turn in order to look for strategies towards resolution. In "Culture and Political Crisis: 'Watergate' and Durkheimian Sociology" Jeffrey C. Alexander applies Durkheimian theory to the creation and resolution of a social crisis. He claims that there are five factors in this process, which are:

[First,] that there has to be sufficient social consensus so that an event will be considered polluting, or deviant, by more than a mere fragment of the population. [...] Second, there has to be the perception [...] that the event is not only deviant, but that its pollution threatens the 'centre' of society. Third, if this crisis is to be resolved, institutional social controls must be brought into play. [...] Fourth, social control mechanism must be accompanied by the mobilization and struggle of elites and publics which are differentiated and relatively autonomous from the structural centre of society. [...] Finally, fifth, there have to be effective processes of symbolic interpretation, that is, ritual, and purification processes that continue the labelling process and enforce the strength of the symbolic, sacred, centre of society while [further deviantizing that which is] structural, profane, and impure.¹⁸

Alexander appears to offer some hope for the successful resolution of the social crisis in question: clearly the event was considered polluting and threatening to the centre of society. Institutional controls were brought into play, various publics mobilized against the polluting force, and symbolic interpretation has occurred throughout. This, however, applies equally to both sides. To the European and North American media, the polluting force was censorship and the mobilization was the printing of the "forbidden" drawings. To the Muslims, on the other hand, the polluting event was the publishing of the drawings and mobilization was the demands for them to cease. This event was not one of social

¹⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Culture and Political Crisis: 'Watergate' and Durkheimian Sociology," in *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity*, 159-60.

crisis happening to one society, but two crises and two societies. The answer to one was the problem to the other: what was positive sacred to one was negative sacred to the other.

In "Transnational Dialogue in an Age of Terror," Marc Lynch discusses the urgent call for dialogue that arose in the wake of the terrorist attack on the United States World Trade Centre and Pentagon. He argues that, although tragic, the ramifications of the attack were such that several new conditions were created that "suggest a real possibility for a politically meaningful dialogue about Islam and the West."¹⁹ These conditions are: "a parallel sense of insecurity and fear which created a demand for such dialogue on the part of the powerful, [and] the emergence of a virtually unprecedented issue-specific global public sphere focused on the question of relations between Islam and the West."²⁰ He makes no predictions as to the success of the dialogue, but the fact that the Muhammad cartoon controversy happened and escalated so severely five years after the terrorist attacks suggests that if there has been such dialogue, it has not been successful to any great degree. Whether any dialogue can be meaningful at all is a pertinent question, as any calls for dialogue must take into account these fundamental differences in sacred and profane. Unfortunately, this lack of common definitions may make any real communication impossible.

¹⁹ Marc Lynch, "Transnational Dialogue in an Age of Terror," *Global Society* 19.1 (2005), 8.

²⁰ Lynch, "Transnational Dialogue," 8-9.

Conclusion

It seems likely that the most powerful explanation of the crisis that erupted over the publication of the Muhammad cartoons is a combination of the theories presented rather than one or the other. Secularization in the West has led to a growing disenchantment with religion and an understanding that religion is personal and private. With the separation of church and state, new ideas, secular ideas, took over the role of sacred concepts in the lives of westerners. The disjunction between the idea of “freedom of expression” as sacred, and the traditional ineffable nature of Muhammad as sacred was played out in the decision of the Danish newspaper to print the cartoons and subsequently in the controversy that followed. Meanwhile, the inability of rationalized western societies to understand and deal meaningfully with Islamic groups which do not have a centralized, bureaucratized organizational structure increased the confusion.

I do not think that this controversy will be the last of its type, as it seems that in the resolution of this social crisis the two camps have become nothing but more entrenched. Meaningful dialogue must occur, although the barriers appear insurmountable. As the riots are calmed and the news fades from the public consciousness, we must hope that some common ground can be found.

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