

Cartoon violence

The publication of cartoons satirising the Prophet Mohammed raised big questions about the relationship between Islam and the West.

Fergus O'Shea examines the controversy

It enraged Muslims across the world. Embassies were attacked, flags burned and 150 people killed. Embargoes were placed on Danish and other Western products. The Islamic world railed against a perceived insult. Someone had to pay.

On 30 September 2005, Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in various guises. It was a less than inspiring effort at satire, but resulted in widespread indignation and protest.

Although to the average Westerner the cartoons may have appeared harmless, even silly, to the Muslim believer the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed in any way or form is an insult to everything they believe in.

Dr Nooh al-Kaddo, originally from Iraq, spent many years in Britain before coming to Ireland in 1997 as the first Director of Clonskeagh mosque in Dublin. He has enjoyed his time here and in general finds the Irish welcoming and friendly.

But he insists that people in the West have little understanding about what their Prophet means to Muslims.

"The problem is that in the West you do not know what Mohammed means to me, as a Muslim believer," said Dr al-Kaddo. "He should be before myself, before my family, my children, before my wealth, before everything."

"So if you go and say something about him like those cartoons did, the role model that I have all my life, since I opened my eyes, is being damaged."

Two weeks after the publication of the cartoons 3,500 people took to the streets in Copenhagen in peaceful protest. In November, several European newspapers re-published the images, triggering further protest. Labour strikes began in Pakistan the following month, and several organisations criticised the Danish government. More protests occurred in January 2006, and later that month a boycott of Danish goods was introduced. Several countries withdrew their ambassadors to Denmark, and widespread protests, some of them violent, began.

The protests continued in February. In

Damascus, Syria, both the Norwegian embassy and a building containing the Danish, Swedish, and Chilean embassies were stormed and set on fire by protesters. In Beirut, thousands of people protested on the streets, and the Danish General Consulate was stormed and set on fire.

"I think that maybe the reaction was excessive, in the sense of burning buildings and flags – that is not acceptable," said Dr al-Kaddo. "I can't see any problem with demonstrating and going to the streets. This is part of the democratic process, but to do more than that by killing and burning is not acceptable."

"But I cannot blame the people; you in the West just don't know what Mohammed means to us."

'the cartoonists should be sued, take them to court, this is your right'

When put to Dr al-Kaddo that in the West people hold the idea of freedom of speech as highly as Muslims hold their Prophet, he said there should be a limit to freedom of speech. "If you are affecting my freedom by affecting my belief then that is not freedom. True freedom is when you say things that are true. There has to be some kind of limit. If I don't receive respect what worth is my freedom?"

While *Jyllands-Posten* has not apologised for publishing the cartoons, it did issue a statement acknowledging that the cartoons "offended many Muslims, which we would like to apologise for".

But for Dr al-Kaddo this is simply not enough. "In my opinion the cartoonists should be sued. I spoke to some Muslims in Denmark and I said 'take them to court, this is your right and see what happens. If it is rejected take it to the higher court, because this is a free democratic country where you can fight your case. It is your right.'"

When the irony of his references to the rights of people in a free democratic country is mentioned, Dr al-Kaddo sharpens his argument. "When you show this picture of Mohammed as a terrorist, as a man leading terrorists, destroying the model I have of Mohammed as a perfect being, it is wrong. Denmark is not an Islamic country; why not choose someone else? It is not their business."

Fleming Rose, cultural editor of the newspaper which first published the cartoons, denied that the purpose of the cartoons had been to provoke Muslims. He said: "Religious feelings cannot demand special treatment in a secular society." He added: "In a democracy one must from time to time accept criticism or become a laughing stock." In an interview with the *Washington Post* on 19 February Rose explained further by saying that "the cartoonists treated Islam the same way they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions."

Several editors were fired for their decision to print the cartoons or their intention to print them, most notably Jacques Lefranc, managing director of *France Soir*, which is owned by an Egyptian businessman. Outside of Europe, in Jordan, Yemen, Malaysia and Algeria, editors of newspapers were fired, forced to resign and even arrested for publishing the cartoons. Some newspapers were closed down by their governments indefinitely.

Ultimately the cartoon controversy is a question of freedom of speech. According to Robert Spencer, a scholar of Islamic history, theology and law, freedom of speech encompasses the freedom to annoy, to ridicule and to offend. Spencer wrote: "As it grows into an international cause celebre, the cartoon controversy indicates the gulf between the Islamic world and the post-Christian West in matters of freedom of speech and expression. And it may yet turn out that as the West continues to pay homage to its idols of tolerance, multi-culturalism and pluralism, it will give up those hard won freedoms voluntarily."

But for Dr al-Kaddo the cartoons are further proof that the West does not understand.

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