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Learning from Cartoons The Globalisation of Free Speech

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THE anger and violence generated by the publication of twelve cartoons representing the Prophet Muhammad in a crude and unfavourable light has led to several polemical diatribes. These sharp exchanges are taking up a significant amount of column inches in newspapers around the globe on either the importance of religious sensitivity or the sanctity of free speech.

Events that have unfolded may be summarised as follows: A small Danish newspaper – with a circulation of only about 150,000 – on 30 September 2005 published the cartoons. Following from this, Muslim Danes protested against this act and Islamic states expressed their deep dissatisfaction. From that moment on, what was essentially an issue restricted to Denmark took a global turn when several newspapers in the European Union republished the cartoons while several television stations broadcast the images as well. The result of this has been protests on the streets of Muslim states, the organisation of commercial boycotts of Danish goods and attacks on several Scandinavian embassies.

The publication of the cartoons has been defended from various positions. The foreign editor of Jyllands-Posten, the Danish paper at the centre of the storm, has maintained that its publication was motivated by a desire to question the issue of self-censorship when Islamic issues are discussed. In France, France Soir, the newspaper that republished the cartoons, defended its actions through the right to freedom of expression. Indeed, when the cartoons ran in the newspaper, the headline for it declared: “Yes we have the right to caricature God.” In Germany, in the newspaper Die Welt, the republication of the cartoons has been defended by its editor as an attempt to expose the “hypocritical” press of the Middle East where Jews are often portrayed in an unfavourable and racist manner.

The three different defences presented highlight three very different issues that are going on amidst this cultural storm. One, the Danish defence is inspired by the need for not only introspection but also a public discussion on how sensitive matters are treated in the public sphere. Two, the French defence is driven by the desire to uphold an uncompromising principle of free speech; and three, the German defence highlights how the global press need to be balanced when covering events.

Though all three issues are important and deserve a thorough debate, these issues have obscured the larger and more important matter at hand – freedom of expression is now an issue with intense and immediate global ramifications. As states become more and more

multicultural through immigration, and as information is transmitted at increasing speed around the globe, there is a need now to take stock on the global responsibilities that come with the right to freedom of speech.

The Globalisation of Free Speech

The right to freedom of expression has been defended for centuries. For example, Socrates maintained its importance in the Greek city state of Athens during his trial; Erasmus was of the view that '[i]n a free state, tongues too should be free'; the First Amendment in the US Bill of Rights guarantees free speech; and Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights holds that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

What is noticeable about the examples above is that the right to freedom of expression is focussed on the right to free speech within a state. It does not take into account the repercussions of this freedom when it is disseminated around the globe.

Events surrounding the Danish cartoons have propelled to the fore this disconnection between the rights held by individual citizens of a state and the global responsibility that now comes part and parcel with this right. Previously, more often than not, when controversial issues were discussed, the fallout of a discussion would have repercussions only within a particular state. However, with the globalisation of information, this right to free speech now comes with a global responsibility that takes into account different cultures, histories and religions around the world.

Hence, although the Danish, French and German newspapers were doubtlessly within their national rights to publish the cartoons as all three countries guarantee the right to freedom of speech, they failed to consider this right in relation to the global audience.

Being Responsible while Being Free

If it is agreed that the right to free speech comes coupled with a global responsibility, what does this mean for the three different defences offered by the three different newspapers?

With regard to Jyllands-Posten, it could be asked if the best catalyst to provoke a debate on self-censorship when it comes to discussing matters concerning Islam was best served via the twelve cartoons. Admittedly, it is sometimes necessary to be controversial in order to provoke people out of their cerebral slumber. But with religious tensions running at a high in the post-9/11 world, it has to be acknowledged that insensitive cartoons are by no means the best method to achieve the goal.

As for the defence offered by France Soir, the reprinting of the cartoons offered very little to the debate concerning the importance of free speech. If the reprinting accomplished anything at all, it succeeded in heightening emotions and driving the different camps further apart rather than drawing them together with a more detached rational debate. Akin to the 1953 movie *The Wild Ones*, when the lead character Johnny – leader of a motorcycle gang that rides into a small American town – is asked, “What are you rebelling against?” the reply given is, “What have you got?”. Hence, instead of attempting to foster a mature debate, the editors have decided to act like disaffected teenagers.

It is from *Die Welt*'s defence that perhaps some serious lessons can be drawn. There is little

doubt that the 'Muslim' media often presents anti-Semitic views that do little to forward understanding. The media from both sides now have a duty to engage in some serious self-reflection on their rights and social responsibilities. Just as the 'Western' press has a responsibility not to continually focus on fundamentalist Muslims at the expense of the majority moderate position, the 'Muslim' press should consider the risk of their furore over this current issue being perceived as an example of the pot calling the kettle black.

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