



## ***Fundamentally Danish? The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis as Transitional Drama***

**Heiko Henkel**

*Copenhagen University, Denmark*

---

heiko.henkel@anthro.ku.dk

**Abstract:** A closer look at the Muhammad cartoon crisis illuminates some of the key issues that were, and continue to be, at stake for the various actors in the public contestations over the legitimate place of Muslims (and the Islamic tradition) in Danish society. Using a conceptual framework developed by Axel Honneth, I suggest in this article that the cartoon crisis is part of an ongoing struggle for recognition in Denmark, through which the terms by which Muslims residing in Denmark are recognized as legitimate citizens/residents of Danish society are negotiated—and on which Muslims may recognize the demands of Danish majority society as legitimate. As much as the cartoon affair was an event that, as Palle Weis (2006) writes, “suddenly” ruptured Danish society in 2005, it was therefore also part of a process that continues to shape social actors and their relationships.

While the related themes of immigration and integration had come to play a central role in Danish public debates since the late 1990s, the cartoon affair (in Danish usually referred to as *Muhammedkrisen*, or the Muhammad crisis) galvanized public attention in an unprecedented manner. As Palle Weis, then editor of the Danish daily *Information* noted in 2006: “Suddenly all normal public debate ceased. When *Jyllands-Posten* had published the Muhammad cartoons, all the issues the Danes had spent time discussing—the real estate boom, social security, and the challenges of Denmark’s aging population—seemed unreal and banal.” Weis continues, suggesting that “even if it is difficult to imagine it

now, these issues will reappear. And yet, nothing will be quite as before” (Weis 2006:7). But why is it that the cartoons and the subsequent public debate had this enormous impact on Danish society? What were these debates about? And what, if anything, was not quite as it had been before at the end of the affair?

Ironically, although the cartoons were published in the name of securing freedom of expression in Denmark, in the eyes of many international observers Denmark’s image as an open and progressive society has been severely tarnished as a fallout from the crisis and its lingering aftershocks. And not without some justification. While Denmark in many ways remains a prime

---

**Heiko Henkel** received his PhD from Princeton University in 2004. He is associate professor at the anthropology department of Copenhagen University where he has been teaching since 2007. He has longstanding research interests in European social and intellectual history as well as in the recent history of Muslim revival movements, especially in Turkey. His current research interests focus on the encounter of European liberal publics with Muslim minorities.

example of a well-functioning liberal democracy, securing a high quality of life to a very broad percentage of its population, the question of to what degree Danish society is willing to accept cultural diversity has yet to be answered. As elsewhere in Europe, the voices within Denmark that seek to define “Danishness” in the narrow terms of ethnic nationalism and openly question the legitimate place of “foreigners” (with or without Danish citizenship) in it have become louder and more influential over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> But the discomfort with Denmark’s Muslim minority is by no means restricted to the “usual suspects” on the political right. Also within traditionally liberal sections of the Danish public, practicing Muslims enjoy little sympathy. So little, in fact, that the mere association with “fundamentalist” Islam seems to place those in question outside the limits of “Danishness” and at times even outside the protection of due juridical process. Over the past decade or so, a broad public consensus seems to have emerged in Denmark that perceives a particular kind of cultural difference—the alliance to the Islamic tradition—as intensely problematic. And yet, it would be mistaken to view the cartoon crisis as a turning-of-the-tide from tolerance to xenophobia. In many ways, the conflicts and debates surrounding the cartoon crisis reflect trends that have long characterized Danish society, but have surfaced in novel ways as Danish society confronts new challenges at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A closer look at the cartoon crisis illuminates some of the key issues that were,

---

<sup>1</sup> According to a survey among 1,253 Danes conducted by Interresearch for the Danish think-tank, Cevea, almost half of all Danes (48.1 per cent) connect the chauvinist and relatively small Danish People’s Party “most” with the concept of “Danishness” (*Information*, 18.9.2008, p. 1, 17). The Social Democrats, whose political influence during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was crucial to the rise of the social welfare state that characterizes Denmark until today, scored 14.8 per cent.

and continue to be, at stake for the various actors in the public contestations over the legitimate place of Muslims (and the Islamic tradition) in Danish society. Using a conceptual framework developed by Axel Honneth, I will suggest that the cartoon crisis is part of an ongoing struggle for recognition in Denmark, through which the terms by which Muslims residing in Denmark are recognized as legitimate citizens/residents of Danish society are negotiated—and on which Muslims may recognize the demands of Danish majority society as legitimate.<sup>2</sup> As much as the cartoon affair was an event that, as Weis writes, “suddenly” ruptured Danish society in 2005, it was therefore also part of a process that continues to shape social actors and their relationships.

In his now classic formulation, the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) has suggested that much of social interaction takes the form of *social dramas*. According to Turner, social interactions are dramas in the double sense that they form sequences of events that unfold in certain structured patterns over time, and in the sense that rather than simply enacting given structural formations, the actors involved in social dramas perform and dramatize conflicting interests and positions with uncertain and sometimes surprising results. Examining the cartoon crisis can thus help us understand what social actors may accomplish through the critique of Islam, on the one hand, and by foregrounding their indignation over the publication of the cartoons, on the other.

Taking its cues from Honneth and Turner, this paper argues that the significance of the cartoon crisis can best be understood by seeing it as a transitional drama in a struggle for recognition. What is at stake in this struggle are not only the legitimate claims and counterclaims actors

---

<sup>2</sup> Honneth 1996; see also Taylor 1994; Habermas 1994.

can make on each other in Danish society, but also the forms of identity that can mutually be recognized as “Danish.” In the drama that unfolded around the publication of the cartoons, it was not only the relationship between Danish majority society and its Muslim minority that became redefined, however. At least as importantly the relationships among various “Danish” actors were redefined. For instance, the public critique of Islam has enabled tacit new alliances between the Danish nationalist right and the left in the wake of the cartoon affair. And finally, the critique of Islam has helped Danes to re-imagine themselves as Europeans in new ways, defining a particular communality with their German and Swedish neighbors (and old rivals) in contrast to practicing Muslims near and far. In this performance of Danishness as Europeaness, a new emphasis on “secularity” has come to play a central role. And it is in this dramatic performance of secularity that the Danish drama converges most strikingly with other European dramas being currently played out across the continent.

### **THE MUHAMMAD CARTOONS: LOCAL CRISIS, GLOBAL ALIGNMENTS**

On September 30<sup>th</sup> 2005, the Danish broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* published the now (in)famous 12 “Muhammad cartoons” it had solicited from members of the Danish national association of cartoonists. In the following weeks and months, the publication of the cartoons became the object of heated condemnations by many Muslim associations and at public rallies and meetings. Numerous demands were made that *Jyllands-Posten* should retract the cartoons and apologize to “the Muslims.” In response, *Jyllands-Posten’s* editor-in-chief insisted that he “would not dream” of retracting the cartoons or apologizing for

their publication.

It soon became clear that the publication of the cartoons had severely escalated the simmering conflict between major sections of the Danish public and Denmark’s Muslim minority. Increasingly over the past decade, many Muslims—religious Muslims and their organizations in particular—had felt that Danish society and state had failed to fully recognize what they saw as their legitimate demands. This non-recognition was felt in the widespread and often harsh critique of religious Muslim practices, ranging from public condemnations of the Muslim headscarf as unsuitable for Danish society to the bureaucratic regulations that require Muslims to arrange burials through a pastor of the Danish *Folkekirke*, the Lutheran state church. It is most visible in the intensely negative representation of Muslims in the Danish media (Hervik 2002, Hussein 2000) and the almost ubiquitous display of suspicion towards practicing Muslims since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. The publication of the Muhammad cartoons, and the subsequent official and public support for *Jyllands-Posten*, were broadly perceived by Danish Muslims as a dramatically staged escalation of this non-recognition of Muslim residents of Denmark as *Muslims*. In the following weeks, the Danish media recurrently reported threats against *Jyllands-Posten* and individual cartoonists that were, in turn, widely discussed and angrily condemned in the media and in everyday conversations. While many in the Muslim community were seriously outraged at the publication of the cartoons, the Danish majority public was seriously outraged at their outrage—a pattern that would continue to define the entire affair.

The cartoons themselves were varied in style and content. While some of the cartoonists interpreted *Jyllands-Posten’s* call for producing images of the prophet Muhammad by presenting more or less aggressive critiques of Islam through the use of

heavily stereotyped images of a dangerous and misogynist Oriental, others appeared to have sought to present non-confrontational drawings. In a self-reflexive move, one contributor submitted a representation of his own anxiety on the issue, and one of the drawings poked fun at the newspaper's contest itself in a way that was not immediately recognized either by the newspaper or by its readers.<sup>3</sup> The 12 cartoons were presented together with a commentary by journalist Fleming Rose, who explained that the cartoons were initiated by *Jyllands-Posten* to challenge what he described as the creeping submission of the Danish public to illegitimate Muslim demands. Contrary to these Muslim demands, Rose argued, it was not only the right, but in fact the duty, of the press to disregard and challenge such religious sensitivities when Muslims sought to impose these concerns on society in general.

Already 10 days after the cartoons' first publications, the affair had created an echo far beyond Denmark. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, al-Jazeera's Arab language website published an interview with Denmark-based imam, Raed Hlayhel, in which he discussed the offensive cartoons and aired his anger at their publication. Many other reports and comments on al-Jazeera and on a wide range of news outlets in the Middle East and elsewhere were to follow.<sup>4</sup> The affair quickly developed into an international diplomatic crisis: on October 12<sup>th</sup> numer-

ous ambassadors of Muslim-majority countries called on prime minister Fogh Rasmussen to take legal actions against the cartoons' publication. Fogh Rasmussen not only refused to intervene, but refused to meet the ambassadors at all, and insisted the government had no role in the dispute other than protecting the press's freedom of expression. Over the next weeks and months, the cartoons became the focal point of angry demonstrations in a number of Muslim-majority countries, condemning Denmark and the West. Most of these remained non-violent. However, in a number of incidents (including Syria, Lebanon, and Libya) violent clashes erupted with the security forces and dozens of people were killed, Danish embassies and consulates were torched and other buildings associated with Denmark were attacked. Although protesters linked the violence to the Danish cartoons, in most of these incidents the organizers and their motives remained unclear.

As the protests against the cartoons spread around the globe and for months became a mainstay on the news the world over, the cartoon crisis also became a major topic in public debates in Europe and North America. While the public (with the exception of religious Muslim communities) almost unanimously dismissed Muslim claims of state intervention against their publication, the assessment of the cartoons was divided. While many supported the publication, and a number of European newspapers re-published the cartoons in solidarity with embattled *Jyllands-Posten*, many others worried that the cartoons would further worsen relationships with Muslims inside and outside Europe, already under strain from unresolved conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and the ongoing controversy over the Muslim headscarf in Europe.

In Denmark, a string of demonstrations by Muslim organizations condemning the cartoons (with sporadic threats of retalia-

---

<sup>3</sup> Lars Refn's drawing shows a Danish schoolboy named Muhammed in front of a blackboard with Arabic script. The boy with his curly black hair wears a football shirt of a club called Fremtiden (The Future) and teasingly sticks his tongue out at us. The note on the blackboard behind him says, in Farsi, 'The Journalists of Jyllands Posten are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs'.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Jazeera's English language website provides an easily accessible overview over Middle Eastern perceptions of the controversy, while <http://da.wikipedia.org> provides a useful chronology over the events from October 2005 to February 2006.

tion against *Jyllands-Posten*) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an outpour of commentary in the media condemning Muslim protests kept the affair at the center of public debate throughout much of 2006. The debate became especially heated when it emerged in early 2006 that a number of Danish imams had traveled to the Middle East to actively seek support for their protests against the cartoons' publication from Muslim publics, media organizations, and governments. In the ensuing debate the imams claimed that they were forced to shore up support from outside Denmark, because the Danish state and the majority public had failed to respond to their legitimate demands to protect Danish Muslims from *Jyllands-Posten's* defamatory publications. Almost unanimously, public commentary in Denmark denounced the move by the group of imams, seeing it as further proof that their allegiances were not with Danish society but with the Muslim world. The public and the media overwhelmingly supported the view that *Jyllands-Posten* was within its rights to publish the cartoons (or indeed had good reasons for doing so) and condemned Muslim protests as infringements on the right to free speech. A minority of commentators, among them the widely respected former foreign minister Ellemann-Jensen (like Fogh Rasmussen a member of the liberal-conservative Venstre party), criticized the cartoons' publication and the government's defiant stance. A poll from January 2006 shows that of those interviewed 54 per cent thought it was wrong of Fogh Rasmussen not to have met with the 11 ambassadors. At the same time, 77 per cent were against an apology by Fogh Rasmussen whereas 13 per cent were in favor.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of 2006 the feeling of immediate crisis at the cartoons' publica-

---

<sup>5</sup> Percentages according to a Vilstrup poll cited in the newspaper Politiken, 30. January 2006.

tion slowly receded and was replaced by a more general discussion over the legitimate place of (religious) Muslims in Danish society. As in other European countries this debate is far from over, and the continuing profusion of news items pertaining to a wide range of problems associated with the presence of Muslims in Denmark (suspected political radicalism, problematic social practices linked to Islam, issues of delinquency linked to Muslim youth) indicates that the "Muslim problem" remains at the center of Danish public consciousness. Fortunately, the protests over the cartoons had not caused casualties on either side, either in Denmark or elsewhere in Europe, and thus the relationship between the major Muslim organizations in Denmark and the state never broke down entirely.

The dispute at the center of the crisis, whether or not the publication of the cartoons was legitimate or not, and whether the state had the duty to protect the Muslim minority from what many Muslims saw as a vicious attack on their religious identity, remained unresolved in the sense that no agreement or compromise was reached between the struggling parties. It was *de facto* resolved in *Jyllands-Posten's* favor, however, by the non-intervention of the government and the broad public support for *Jyllands-Posten*. Nevertheless, the process of negotiation and dialogue between Muslim organizations and Danish majority society continues, and even has gained a new sense of urgency and purpose since the crisis. While in many ways not much had changed, things were not quite like before either.

Before we turn in more detail to the conflict in Denmark, it is instructive to briefly consider the dynamics of the cartoon affair's international dimensions. Clearly, by traveling to the Middle East and actively soliciting support in their struggle with the Danish state and majority public, the imams had seriously escalated the dispute. Not only did they radically expand



the stage on which they could voice their discontent, they also mobilized a transnational alliance that transformed the marginalized Danish Muslim minority into a formidable adversary. The enormous global echo of the affair highlights that in 2005 the “local” conflict over the publication of a number of cartoons in a nationally influential but internationally virtually unknown newspaper was “legible” for a global audience—legible not in the sense that this global audience was necessarily able to fully understand the drawings’ content (or were even likely to have seen the drawings) nor in regard to the local context of the controversy.<sup>6</sup> But across the globe, many people evidently assumed they understood the main aspects of the conflict well enough; and many felt sufficiently addressed by what seemed to be at stake to feel compelled to mobilize—and to a considerable extent polarize—the public opinion on a perhaps unprecedented scale.

Two factors are often mentioned to explain the enormous echo of the cartoons in Muslim publics: (1) within Islamic traditions the representation of the prophet Muhammad is generally (although not uniformly) seen as prohibited by Islamic law, and (2) the cartoons constituted (and were meant as) a direct provocation of Muslim sensitivities. While both are important factors, taken separately they are hardly enough to explain the reaction the cartoons have provoked. After all, there are surely an almost infinite number of practices around the world that contradict Islamic legal reasoning and provocative critiques of Islam are evidently fairly common. The cartoons, however, connected these two aspects in a particularly effective way: They (some of them, anyway) not only depicted Muslims in a derogatory fashion, they did so in a highly stylized and recognizable manner

---

<sup>6</sup>To my knowledge, there are as yet no studies of the perception of the cartoons in the Middle East.

by commenting on the most venerated figure of the Islamic tradition, the prophet Muhammad. The drawings thus became iconic in that they both represented Western non-recognition of Muslim sensibilities and dramatically performed this non-recognition. Once the Danish cartoons and their story had been taken up by the media in the Middle East and elsewhere, they could be mobilized to unite a usually fragmented Muslim public already fluent in the language of Muslim-Western antagonism.

Therefore, if the Muhammad cartoons presented the Danish imams with an almost perfect object to mobilize a pan-Muslim public, the angry condemnation of the cartoons by religious Muslims also provided a potent rallying point for a broad range of critics of Islam. Not only did many observers in Europe, North America, and elsewhere sympathize with the critical commentary the cartoons sought to make, the angry condemnation of the drawings, and especially the often perceived (and sometimes real) threat of violence related to these condemnations, exemplified to these commentators the problem they connected with Islam: its apparent intolerance. To show, in fact to provoke this “intolerance” was, of course, the explicitly stated purpose of the cartoons’ publication in the first place.

In Denmark, the cartoons provoked not so much a single Muslim response but a cluster of responses. In spite of this diversity, two poles can be distinguished: for many Danish Muslims, the cartoons provoked an immediate and angry response as the news of their publications filtered through media outlets and the social networks connecting Muslims resident in Denmark. For others, the response was equally prompt and clear, as they defended *Jyllands-Posten’s* right to publish the cartoons in the name of freedom of expression. For many others, however, the publication of the cartoons provoked an often slow and reluctant, and sometimes agonizing and

contradictory, response as they tried to weigh their conflicting impulses and alliances that impacted on their assessment of the stormy public dispute over the cartoons. One thing, however, was shared by virtually all those who lived in Denmark and identified themselves as Muslims (or were identified so by others), and which radically distinguished their position from the “international” contestation over the cartoons: As Muslims living in Denmark they were compelled to take—or rather, they had to find and modulate—a position in the hostile public contestation over the cartoons.<sup>7</sup> They had to declare *in which sense* they were Muslim in a public debate in which the very legitimacy of Muslim identity in Denmark<sup>8</sup> was at stake. In other words, they had to show that as Muslims they could comply with a “Danish” way of life. The indignation about the cartoons’ publication and the critique of Muslim “intolerance” quickly created an opposition between “Muslims” and “secularists” in the globalizing public—an opposition that was reinforced in the ensuing public debates in a process described by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1958) as *schismogenesis*. As is characteristic for schismogenetic processes, each side began to define the other in increasingly strong terms as its opposite, leading to a discursive constellation in which “Islam” became juxtaposed to “freedom of expression,” and vice versa. The alignment produced by this schismogenetic process thus made plausible a particular dualistic imaginary within which people, despite their wide range of experiences and life-histories, could

inscribe themselves into a simple dichotomy. The emergence of this global dichotomy, in turn, quickly enabled actors in the Danish conflict to feel part of a much larger contest, extending solidarity along a line that divided those who felt offended by the cartoons and those who did not. Despite the apparent ability of the conflict to polarize public opinion on a global scale, however, much of the commentary around the world was actually markedly guarded. This was notably the case in the Anglo-American public, where the anger expressed by many European commentators found little echo. Former British foreign minister Jack Straw, for instance, known for his otherwise hawkish critique of political Islam, criticized the publication of the cartoons. Also notably guarded was the response of *Yeni Safak*, one of Turkey’s most influential “Islamist” newspapers, which hedged its own critique of the cartoons by citing a long list of prominent (non-Muslim) European critics of the cartoons.

The terms of this challenge were not entirely transparent, however. Although throughout the cartoon crisis it often appeared as if Danish Muslims were facing the demands of a virtually unified Danish majority public to demonstrate their Danishness, these demands contained different, even conflicting impulses. On the one hand, the demand for Muslims to demonstrate their Danishness often was a call for their assimilation to a particular ethnonational tradition. On the other hand, the reference to Danishness often referred not so much to a particular (Danish) national tradition, but to Danishness as a national variety of a more universal liberal model of society. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the cartoon affair was that it enabled these conflicting versions of Danishness to converge in their critique of Islam. To better understand the emergence and significance of this hegemonic configuration we need to take a step back for a moment and consider

<sup>7</sup> For a compelling compilation of responses by Danish Muslims see for instance Lotte Folke Kaarsholm, ed. (2006), *Muslims-Dansk Dagbog: 19 dagbøger fra Muhammed-krisen* [Muslim-Danish diary: 19 diaries from the Muhammad Cartoon crisis], Informations forlag, Copenhagen.

<sup>8</sup> ‘US, British media tread carefully in cartoon furor’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2. June 2006

the demand for “tolerance” as a central topic in contemporary public debates.

## TWO SIDES OF “TOLERANCE”

Across Europe, the intensified push toward globalization that followed the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 provoked a renaissance of nationalist sentiments. In Eastern Europe, this renaissance was nourished by aspirations of nationalist movements to state power; in Western Europe, the major focus points of this renaissance were the emergence of new minorities through immigration and the challenges that increasingly pluricultural societies seemed to pose for the social cohesion of established nation states (Appadurai 1996; Beck 2000; Gingrich and Banks 2006). These debates often generate two opposing camps. On the one side are those who emphasize the necessity for nation states (or ethnic groups aspiring to nationhood) to assert the primacy of one distinct “national culture” over other cultural traditions in society and to make this “national culture” the source of national identity, the normative basis of state legislation, and a national code of civility. On the other side, critics of these neo-nationalist tendencies argue that liberal democracies must take their cultural plurality into account in order to maintain their democratic legitimacy and must not in the name of defending (anyhow spurious) “national values” discriminate against and marginalize minority communities, whether these are long established or recently emerged through immigration.

The public debate in Denmark about immigration and the legitimate place of “new” cultural traditions in Danish society is in many ways recognizable in these terms. Although the supposed threat to Danish society from immigration had been on the political agenda in Denmark since the 1970s, it had mostly been a fringe issue

evoked by the populist rightwing *Fremskridtspartiet* (the Progress Party). By the late 1990s, however, immigration had become a central feature in the Danish political debate. Under the leadership of Pia Kjaersgård, the party had morphed into the more successful *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF, Danish People’s Party) with a sharpened nationalist profile and an agenda claiming to defend the interests of “common” Danish people. Moreover, the former prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen from the liberal-conservative *Venstre* party had fought a successful and unusually aggressive campaign to oust the Social Democrat-led coalition government in 2001, central to which was the accusation that the Social Democratic government was too lenient in its immigration policies. Since 2001, Fogh Rasmussen has led a coalition government with the smaller *Konservative* party that depends for its majority in parliament on the support of Kjaersgård’s *Dansk Folkeparti*.

In many ways, therefore, the conflict over the cartoons neatly fits into a trend in Danish society that Ulf Hedetoft (2003) has described as the substitution of a “humanist” framework that underpinned earlier Danish approaches to immigration with a new “cultural absolutism.” While he notes that the assimilationist discourse is not new, Hedetoft suggests that this it is today accompanied by three elements that give it a new virulence: “its near-total hegemony; the assumed link between ‘culture’, ‘cohesion’ and ‘social functionality’ ...; and the way in which this discourse has, on its own terms, started to assimilate and demote pluricultural discourses” (Ibid.). As scholars of nationalism have often pointed out, the “cultural absolutism” of ethno-nationalism is not simply the reflection of strongly integrated societies but a product of what Arjun Appadurai has called “ethnic mobilization”: the mobilization of nationalist discourses and forms of identity for the purpose of achieving and maintaining political power. Without doubt, Denmark’s histori-



cal trajectory provides rich resources for the mobilization of such a nationalist discourse. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Danish society had emerged to an unusual extent as a socially, culturally, and indeed ethnically integrated society—if one chooses to look past the immigration of “new Danes” with a wide variety of cultural traditions since the 1960s.

A decisive moment for this process of integration is the year 1660, when King Frederik III, after an almost lost war with neighboring Sweden, disempowered the Danish landowning nobility, aligned himself with the emerging urban bourgeoisie, and declared absolutism (*enevælde*) the official state form, giving the king and his cabinet direct administrative power over all citizens. The emergence of the characteristically strong Danish state over the next three centuries, with its centralized bureaucratic administration and an increasingly well-integrated society, coincided with the progressive loss of territory. As a 19<sup>th</sup> century saying had it: what Denmark had outwardly lost was to be inwardly gained.

Among the many developments that contributed to the progressive integration of Danish society, three deserve particular mention: (1) The privileged place of the Lutheran Protestant church as state church (today known as *Folkekirke*, literally: People’s church) has been a cornerstone of Denmark’s constitutional order since 1848. Within this institutional framework, it was the Lutheran reform movement led by Nikolai Grundtvig (1783-1872), whose influence is still felt in Denmark today, that defined the central place of the Folkekirke in Danish society. Grundtvig turned the fostering of a combined Christian-national sentiment in *all* Danes (including the rural poor) into a national credo in Denmark; (2) The wide reach of Denmark’s cooperatives movement (*andelsforeninger*) contributed to the strong economic integration of Danish society. These cooperatives became crucial actors in Denmark’s soaring agro-industry

in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were also central to shaping both Denmark’s food retail business and the structure of its urban housing supply. Finally (3), while the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had seen its share of divisive political conflict and polarization, the so-called Kanslergade-agreement of 1933 laid the basis for a rapprochement between all major social and political segments of Danish society. Politicians representing the working class, the bourgeoisie, and the rural classes agreed on a political platform that centered on the creation of a social welfare state that was to benefit all social layers. This agreement pioneered a social model that was to be adopted by most western European states after WWII. On the basis of this social consensus, Danish society emerged as a society that was exceptionally integrated politically, economically, socially, and not least culturally. As Steffen Jöhnke points out<sup>9</sup>, the welfare state can be seen as an extraordinarily effective integration machine—one not designed in the first place for integrating “foreigners” but to forge successive generations of Danish citizens into proper Danes. The acquisition of a particular canon of civic virtues, of Danishness, is thus at the same time the likely result of this historical process of integration and the precondition for being recognized as a proper citizen of Danish society.

In Denmark, as in many other European countries, debates concerning immigration have often been entangled with other debates about the plurality of social life. While conservatives tended to criticize both immigration and the emergence of “alternative lifestyles” on the basis that public norms and values should be derived from an apparently inherited “national cul-

<sup>9</sup> Steffen Jöhnke (2007), *Velfærdsstaten som Integrationsprojekt* [The welfare state as integration-project], in Fog Olwig and Pærregaard (eds.) *Integration: Antropologiske Perspektiver*, Museum Tusulanum, Copenhagen, pp. 37-62.

ture,” others, who argued that society should reflect the plurality of people’s inclinations, championed openness to “alternative” ways of life (like communal living arrangements, the use of “soft drugs,” the recognition of gay civic unions, radical ecological projects, etc.) and tended to champion the toleration of lifestyles related to foreign cultural traditions. At least initially, the publication of the Muhammad cartoons and the crisis that followed seemed to mirror this constellation. The cartoons were published in *Jyllands-Posten*, a conservative newspaper with a track record of calling for “tougher” immigration policies and worrying about the undermining of “Danish” values by immigrant communities apparently unwilling to properly “integrate.” And it was the government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen that fuelled the crisis by long refusing any kind of conciliatory gesture towards the Danish Muslim minority or the intervening ambassadors. But as the cartoon crisis unfolded, it quickly became clear that this opposition of ethno-nationalist right and a multicultural left had lost much of its meaning in the Danish debate and helped little to explain the frontlines in the conflict. In fact, the two camps seemed to have merged into one and “all of a sudden” a new political constellation had emerged: On the one side, Denmark’s Muslim minority, and on the other side, a broad majority of the Danish public, defined by its critique of the Muslim minority. While this Muslim minority was defined by its indignation over the cartoons (on various grounds), the Danish majority public demanded that Danish Muslims had to tolerate the offensive cartoons and sharply criticized them for refusing to do so. In other words, while previously the demand for “tolerance” was primarily directed toward “illiberal” tendencies within Danish (or German, or Dutch, etc.) society, now it became directed toward the Muslim minority. Whereas previously the demand for tolerance demarcated a room of possi-

bility, it now described a *conditio sine qua non* to be fulfilled by those seen as not fully qualified to be members of Danish society.

As Wendy Brown (2006) has pointed out, in recent years the concept of “tolerance” has been central to public debates in Euro-American societies. While “tolerance” has also been an important concept in liberal social theory, over the past decade or so it has emerged as central in a broad range of discourses and policies that seek to regulate civic conduct within Euro-American societies as well as to legitimize political and military interventions outside their territories. Brown notes that almost all political projects within these societies now claim to be “tolerant,” although disagreements over the degrees and modalities of tolerance certainly persist. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Brown suggests that current discourses and practices of “tolerance” can best be understood as examples of “governmentality,” that is, the assemblage of concepts, rules, and practices that define and modulate the modes of legitimate practice of the inhabitants of liberal societies. Brown argues that, just as in Foucault’s classic formulation, the concepts and practices of “tolerance” have become a “conduct of conduct” in the sense that, without providing an overt and rigid set of rules, they regulate the actor’s possibilities and limits. As Brown and also Saba Mahmood (2006) point out, religious Muslims in particular have become objects of this new concern for “tolerance” as they are widely perceived to pose a particular problem to the regime of tolerance in liberal societies.

How seamlessly a “humanist” and a “nationalist” critique of Islam can go together becomes clearer if we look, as an example, at the comments of the Danish politician Villy Søvndal in 2008.<sup>10</sup> The remarks made in his official blog and a subsequent interview were Søvndal’s response

<sup>10</sup> *Information*, 21. February 2008.

to a rally by Danish Muslims who voiced their discontent with the renewed publication of some of the cartoons in the Danish press. This, in turn, had happened as a response to the apparent last-minute uncovering of a murder plot against one of the original cartoonists a week earlier. The police operation was broadly publicized by the security services and hailed in the press, but it quickly became apparent that despite lengthy observations, the security services had very little evidence to substantiate their dramatic allegations. Indeed, the case against the accused had to be dropped; one of the accused, who had acquired Danish citizenship, was freed shortly after, the two others, who had gained permanent residency, were to be deported without juridical hearing. At the point of writing, one of them has left Denmark, the case of the other is still pending.

Søvndal is the leader of Denmark's *Socialistisk Folkeparti* (SF, Socialist People's Party), which, with a "progressive" and explicitly multicultural political platform, gained 12% of the vote in the past election. At the same time, leading members of the party have been highly critical of Muslim organizations in Denmark, not least their stance in the cartoon crisis. Søvndal's comments are framed as a strong critique of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), a group with branches in many countries, known for its provocatively confrontational (if non-militant) critique of liberal society, and its project to establish a new "Kalifat." There is thus nothing surprising in Søvndal's dismay with the group, and Søvndal correctly points out that it represents only a fraction of Muslims in Denmark. What makes Søvndal's comments relevant for this discussion, however, is that his critique of HT becomes the conduit through which he sketches the contours of the conflict around the Muslim presence in Denmark more generally.

From the outset Søvndal's critique is two-pronged: it is directed both at HT and

against all those who do not explicitly (enough) distance themselves from HT. Søvndal singles out a leading member of *Islamisk Trossamfund* ('Islamic Congregation,' the largest Muslim association in Denmark, with a longstanding record of accommodation with the Danish legal system) who had demonstrated together with members from HT against the renewed publication of the cartoons. After having established a chain of association between HT, *Islamisk Trossamfund* (IT), and all those who feel offended by the publication of the cartoons, Søvndal then draws a line between what is proper to Danish society and what is beyond its limits and thus cannot be part of an inner-Danish political debate or indeed of Danish society proper. Those holding these "fundamentalist" views, Søvndal suggests, should therefore go elsewhere (presumably to the Middle East) where their medieval views would be welcomed. (It should be added, perhaps, that it is not immediately clear which Middle Eastern regime would welcome the political demands voiced by HT). For Søvndal and critics like him, Muslims associated with "fundamentalist" Islam are thus in a position categorically different from other political opponents, say, supporters of the Danish People's Party: while the latter can be politically engaged the former are beyond the pale of political debate.

Søvndal's comments indicate some of the challenges (practicing) Muslims face in the current debate about Islam in Euro-American society. In the polemical polarization between "us Danes" and "them fundamentalists" there is little place for those who wish to register their dismay with the publications of the cartoons and/or their association with the mainstream of Islamic traditions and yet to claim belonging to Danish society. This is emphasized in a passage where Søvndal criticizes Birthe Rønn Hornbech, minister for integration and Church affairs, for her public offer to meet with a representative from IT. Unde-

tered by the fact that IT is the biggest Muslim organization in Denmark and has established an agenda of interpreting Islam within the Danish legal framework and explicitly aiming to be compatible with liberal society, Søvndal suggests that such a meeting would give undue legitimacy to fundamentalist organizations that claim to represent Muslims without democratic legitimacy.

As minister for integration and Church affairs, Hornbech is both responsible for the administrative leadership of the Folkekirke and for overseeing other religious traditions in Denmark. By assailing Hornbech for her public offer to meet with a representative from IT, Søvndal presents us with a candid reading of the state of Danish secularism: clearly, in his reading, religious traditions are not to be treated equally in Denmark. While we can assume that Søvndal has no qualms about Hornbech's meeting with the representatives of the Folkekirke (in fact, the minister being the church's chief representative), in his view the largest Danish Muslim organization is unfit to be met by the minister of religious affairs. Søvndal's position reflects a political configuration in Denmark where the Folkekirke is simply an accepted part of a broadly hegemonic social consensus, whereas Muslim religious organizations are not.

Some commentators were quick to point out that Søvndal's position converged with the rhetoric of Denmark's other "people's party," the chauvinist *Dansk Folkeparti*, which routinely argues that Muslims are alien to Danish culture and society. Perhaps, it was suggested, Søvndal's comments even constituted an attempt to reach out to its voters. My point here is not to suggest that Søvndal's comments were intended to signal a divergence from SF's traditional support for cultural pluralism in Denmark in favor of joining DF's xenophobic political platform. The critique of Muslim protests over the publica-

tion of the Muhammad cartoons, however, allows commentators such as Søvndal to casually expand their critique of a particularly provocative "fundamentalist" groups to mainstream Muslim organizations—and to establish in the name of Danishness a tacit alliance across the political divides of Danish society on the grounds of a shared outrage over the un-Danish demands of Muslim political activists. The critique of Islam has become an avenue through which a particular inner-Danish, and indeed inner-European, communality and solidarity can be claimed and, at least rhetorically, established.

## CONCLUSION

As with other struggles for recognition, the conflict over the legitimate place of Muslims and their alliance to the Islamic tradition in contemporary Denmark is no one-sided affair. While Danish civil society and state seek to define the conditions on which Muslims and other new Danes are accepted as fellow citizens (whether with or without formal citizenship), Muslims residing in Denmark are in turn vying to carve out such spaces in terms acceptable to them. Of course, neither side is itself homogenous but contains groups and individual actors with diverse and often conflicting interests and demands. And, as Honneth (1995) suggests out, all actors in struggles for recognition are likely to be transformed in these contestations in often unforeseeable ways.

As citizens or residents, Muslims in Denmark have the same legal, political, and social rights (to use the classical typology developed by T. H. Marshall (1964)) as other Danish citizens/residents. Nevertheless, many Muslims in Denmark, especially practicing Muslims, have long felt that Danish society does not properly recognize them *as Muslims* and thus negates a central aspect of their identity. To put it in Haber-

masian terms, it could be argued that in the Danish debate over the legitimate role of Islam in society, the Danish majority public fails to separate its own cultural tradition from Denmark's political culture. Whereas the former is rooted in a particular historical experience shared only by this majority society, the latter must be negotiated among all citizens. According to Habermas this distinction between the cultural tradition of majority society and a country's political culture is the structural condition for democratic society under pluricultural conditions.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not this is the case, or whether it is the Muslim side that seeks to universalize its own particular cultural tradition continues to be disputed. Whatever the truth of this, in the current situation Muslims in Denmark also have a wide range of possibilities for pursuing their claims for recognition. One avenue is for Muslims to embrace the mainstream version of "Danishness" and to downplay or abandon links to the Islamic tradition. Another avenue, pursued by many religious Muslims in Denmark, is the ongoing construction of networks and associations that provide the infrastructure for Islamic forms of discourse and practice—and, making use of the space provided by legal, political, and social rights, for projecting Muslim forms of life into Danish society. In the dispute over the cartoons, moreover, religious and non-religious Muslims often had the opportunity to have their views heard in the media—though seldom to the same extent as critics of Islam. Most dramatically, they were able to expand the stage on which the debate over the legitimacy of the cartoons took place. This strategy proved extraordinarily effective even though it carried both costs and benefits. As the chorus of Muslim protests grew louder, and especially when embassies were torched and people died abroad in clashes

with security services, when Danish firms became the target of consumer boycotts and Danes at home and abroad found themselves the targets of anger and potential violence, many Danes saw their suspicions against religious Muslims confirmed. At the same time, the dramatic show of solidarity from Muslim publics, and not least the specter of violence, suddenly made the Danish Muslim minority appear as a very serious adversary that could hardly be ignored. After all, as Honneth also points out, in many struggles for recognition majority publics have historically extended recognition to minorities in exchange for social peace.

Danish society (the state as well as civil society) responded to the escalating conflict strategy in a complex way. Muslims became the object of an intense process of "securitization" and often exceedingly polemical critiques by pundits and politicians. At the same time, both the state and civil society actors put forward a wide range of offers for dialogue that held the promise of working toward a recognition of Muslim demands. To use again Victor Turner's model of the social drama: after an agonizing period of crisis, where the very foundations of coexistence between Danish mainstream society and the Muslim minority were put into question, during 2006 this coexistence found a new (albeit preliminary) equilibrium. In the end, Danish Muslims accepted, albeit grudgingly, the publication of the cartoons; and the Danish public accepted, equally grudgingly, the Muslim discontent with them.

But if the Muslim struggle for recognition in Denmark is not one-sided, it is clearly uneven. Muslims in Denmark are a politically marginal minority and therefore have little influence on the enormously powerful institutions that regulate modern societies. Further, the dispute over the legitimate role of the Islamic tradition in Denmark has evolved in such a way that certain Muslim demands, such as the request for

<sup>11</sup> Habermas (1998: 105ff),



the government to censure the publication of the Muhammad cartoons, appear to many Danes to challenge the very foundations of Danish society, and indeed of liberal society more generally. Countering these demands has thus emerged as a passionately held project of a wide range of political actors in Denmark and other Euro-American societies. Moreover, as I have tried to show, the critique of Islam has acquired a positive, solidarity-inducing aspect. In the critique of Islam, the cohesion of Danish society is experienced and reinforced. There is, in other words, a “speaker’s” benefit connected to the critique in the demarcation and enactment of community through a sharp drawing of the limits of solidarity and belonging. As I have noted, something similar holds true for Muslim critics of Denmark across the world who experience common bonds across other divisions in their condemnation of the cartoons and those who support them. But if, as surely they must for pursuing a future life for themselves and their children in Denmark as (practicing) Muslim citizens, they maintain ties *both* to the Islamic tradition *and* seek to be recognized as legitimate members of Danish society by the Danish state and majority public, Muslims in Denmark face a painful dilemma.

If, as I have tried to show, the demand for “tolerance” articulates as a shorthand the demand for complying with a particular, historically emerging form of citizenship (as both proponents and critics of liberal society seem to agree<sup>12</sup>), the question is whether these demands are formulated in terms of “ethnic” citizenship—and thus demand assimilation to a particular cultural tradition—or in terms of republican citizenship—and thus open up the possibility of a process of incorporation of new cultural traditions into a pluricultural context.

<sup>12</sup> The most prominent of those I have in mind are Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, Sheila Benhabib, Talal Asad, and Wendy Brown.

Or perhaps, rather, as the Danish case suggests, we should ask whether these conflicting notions of citizenship can be sufficiently disentangled so as to offer aspirant members of society the possibility of becoming members of that society without denying their own sense historical experience and identity.

The question, in other words, is whether Danes and Muslim residents of Denmark will find a formula in which they can recognize each other’s demands. What is called for is thus nothing less, but also nothing more, than an update of the Kanslergade agreement of 1933 in which the major sections of Danish society worked out a framework within which their mutual demands were recognized for decades to come. In the absence of this, both Danish majority society and Muslim new Danes are likely to face considerable challenges in the future. If Danishness is not expanded to incorporate hyphenated identities such as Muslim-Danes (similar to Muslim-American) it is difficult to see how the antagonism between Danish majority and Muslim minority should be overcome, with obvious repercussions for the life-chances of Danish Muslims and the potential for social peace and security for Danish society.

Moreover, the enormous pressure on Muslim minorities to conform to narrowly defined versions of secularity is in danger of undermining the very foundations on which Danish society (like other contemporary Euro-American societies) claims to build its moral superiority: a liberal constitution that grants every citizen the same opportunities to pursue his or her life-project. In his blog, for instance, Søvndal criticizes the continuing discrimination of Muslims in Denmark. But in his commentary on the second cartoon affair he does not even in passing engage with the problematic conduct of the Danish state in its handling of the alleged murder plot, which overruled established legal safeguards by

referencing the alleged exceptional danger posed by Muslim militancy.

It is difficult not to be reminded here of the figure of *homo sacer*, used by the Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) to draw attention to the common recourse of modern states to a “rule of exception” in order to justify the suspension of legal norms in relation to certain groups. Although the claims touted by the security forces, the government, and an endless stream of public commentators were never confirmed, the suspects remained in custody, apparently both beyond the rules of due process and even a residual sympathy of the public. The accusation of being a Muslim terrorist made the released suspect quite literally an outcast to Danish society, and the sad centerpiece of a public spectacle in which the authorities demonstrated the extent to which they were prepared to claim a state of emergency that allowed them to circumvent due legal process. As Hannah Arendt (1951) has famously noted, rather than following from universal human rights, the access to civic rights is in fact the precondition for human rights to become meaningful.

The disconcerting ease with which the Danish government and large sections of the public are prepared to suspend long-established legal safeguards in dealing with those associated with Muslim militancy can only be explained, it seems to me, against the background of the dramatically staged suspicion that religious Muslims—both within and without—represent the very opposite of Danish civility.

#### REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of exception*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1980. *Naven*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Beck, Ulrich. 2000. *What is globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2006. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Empire and Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gingrich, Andre and Marcus Banks. 2006. *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and beyond*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1994. Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State. In *Multiculturalism* ed. Charles Taylor, 107-148. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *The inclusion of the Other*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hedetoft, Ulf. 2003. 'Cultural transformation': how Denmark faces immigration. *Open Democracy* web journal: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/> (30 October 2003, accessed October 25, 2009).
- Hervik, Peter. 2002. *Mediernes muslimer*. København: Nævnet for Etnisk Ligestilling.
- Honneth, Axel. 1995. *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hussein, Mustafa. 2000. Islam, Media and Minorities in Denmark. *Current Sociology*, vol.48(4):95-116.
- Mahmood, Saba. (2006). *Politics of Piety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Marshall, T. H. 1964. *Class, citizenship, and social development*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. The Politics of Recognition'. In *Multiculturalism* ed. Charles Taylor, 25-74. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Weis, Palle. 2006. Forord. In *Muslimsk-Dansk dagbog* ed. L. F. Kaarsholm, 7-9. Copenhagen: Informations Forlag.