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The Spirit of Democracy

WINNING ESSAY BY **Jocelyn Gerke**

The Spirit of Democracy

BY JOCELYN GERKE

“A FREE PRESS CAN, OF COURSE, BE GOOD OR BAD, BUT, MOST CERTAINLY WITHOUT FREEDOM, THE PRESS WILL NEVER BE ANYTHING BUT BAD,”¹ STATES FRENCH PHILOSOPHER ALBERT CAMUS. HE APTLY RECOGNIZES THE DANGER OF THE EXCLUSION OF A FREE PRESS. WITHOUT FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, THE MEDIA IS MERELY A PAWN.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press. This freedom does not ensure palatable information for all. Rather, it is the reporting of the facts and opinions of those involved. Canada, a multicultural nation, possesses a beautiful diversity of individuals. Thus, the Canadian press, within the spirit of a democratic nation, must have respect for the diversity of race, religion, and culture. However, to fulfill their responsibility to the public, balance is required. Camus' quote states an underlying truth regarding the media: in fulfilling its mandate, it risks offending individuals. On the contrary, if it loses its quest to sufficiently inform the public, it is useless.

Democracy allows individuals the freedom to express an opinion. The distinction between freedom of speech and encroaching on individuals' rights is blurred. The media, both past and present, has struggled with this issue. Recently, this has been demonstrated through a Danish newspaper printing twelve cartoons, which escalated from regular publication to an international affair.

In September 2005, Flemming Rose, the cultural editor for the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, contacted various cartoonists. He requested them to submit satirical drawings depicting their perceptions of the prophet Muhammad. Rose intended to exemplify how many artists and writers impose self-censorship for fear of radical Islamists. Many refused in apprehension of backlash, but others stepped forward. On September 30, 2005, the Jyllands-Posten printed twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. An article featuring self-censorship and freedom of speech accompanied them. On October 14, 2005, members from sixteen Danish organizations condemned Jyllands-Posten. During November and December 2005, Danish Muslims publicized the cartoons throughout the Middle East and called for protests. On January 1, 2006, the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke “out against ‘attempts to demonize groups of people on the basis of their religion,’ ” but stated, “Denmark is committed to freedom of speech.”²

Throughout January and especially in February global tensions rose.

The Jyllands-Posten published an apology on its website, “saying it regrets offending Muslims, but stands by its decision to carry the cartoons.”³ Protests, mostly violent, happened in London, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Kenya, Russia, Indonesia, and throughout other parts of Asia and the Middle East. Many Danish embassies in Arab countries were closed. A few other Danish embassies were set on fire and many people were injured or killed in the protests. At the beginning of February, newspapers in the United States of America, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Iceland, Belgium, Switzerland, Hungary, Portugal, Norway, and Jordan reprinted the cartoons. The newspapers claimed “they reprinted them as a defence of freedom of speech and the right to publish.”⁴ The Norwegian newspaper later apologized for printing the cartoons and the managing editor of a French newspaper was fired. These cartoons incited violence and were the basis of an international conflict.

What was the reaction in Canada? How did the media deal with this controversial situation? On February 3, 2006, the Canadian French-language newspaper, *Le Devoir*, published one of the Danish cartoons. It was the only Canadian publication at that time to publish any of the cartoons. Then, on February 7, 2006, Montreal lawyer Julius Grey, a leading human rights advocate in Canada commented that “Canadian newspapers should publish the cartoons, arguing that by not printing them, the media jeopardizes Canada’s culture of freedom of expression and fails to properly inform its citizens.”⁵ The next day, more controversy was seen as the University of Prince Edward Island’s student newspaper, *The Cadre*, published the cartoons. However, the university administration quickly stopped distribution, not wanting to cause any violence. The Canadian media maintained a peaceful stance. None of the major media organizations printed any of the cartoons, but chose instead a policy of appeasement. Peaceful demonstrations took place in Montreal and Toronto to protest the publishing of the cartoons overseas.

Then, in the middle of February 2006, the country was surprised as the original Danish cartoons were printed. On February 13, 2006, the *Western Standard*, an Alberta-based magazine, published the twelve Danish cartoons. Many expressed disapproval and regret, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Publisher Ezra Levant defended the magazine’s choice, “I’m doing something completely normal. I’m publishing the centre of a controversy. That’s what news magazines do.”⁶

Levant's stance was to report facts, enabling his readers to create their own informed opinions.

Why didn't other Canadian media outlets publish the cartoons? The Western Standard website scornfully points out that the media refused to print the "cartoons out of 'respect' for Islam."⁷ In our democratic society, can this be justified?

The cartoons would have been most offensive to those who follow strict Sharia law. Sharia law, otherwise known as Islamic law or Allah's law, is the code of law from the Quran, the Sunna (the teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammed), analogic reasoning (giyas), and the consensus of the community of Muslim legal scholars. It is not strictly outlined, but rather an interpretation. Thus, conflict has arisen amongst various countries on interpretations. Strictly interpreted, the cartoons would have been offensive, since Sharia law does not allow a visual depiction of the prophet Muhammed. But there is one point to consider. If the media claims to be respectful of Islam, why does it print other pictures and articles that are also contrary to the strict interpretation of Sharia law?

For example, Sharia law covers many day-to-day aspects of Muslims' life, including manners of dress and roles in politics. Though the interpretation of Sharia law changes from country to country, many interpret Sharia law as requiring women to cover all parts of their body except their hands and face. Others are even stricter and additionally require women to wear burqas, a head covering that only reveals their eyes. Obviously, their dress code differs from the pictures the media prints. If the media is concerned about respecting Islam, why does it repeatedly print pictures of women whose clothes cover them far less than that required by Sharia law?

Many Muslim-majority countries have had female heads of state, including Pakistan and Indonesia. However, many traditional Muslim societies, because of strict interpretation of Sharia law, believe that women should not lead countries. This is in reference to Sahih Bukhari writings (Volume 5, Book 59, Number 709) in which he writes, "Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful."⁸ Yet, the media reports on women being actively involved in politics.

Is this not offensive and contrary to Sharia law? Should this not be as offensive as the cartoons? The Western Standard accuses the rest of the Canadian media for not printing the cartoons out of respect. It states,

“No, that is not respect. That is fear.”⁹ It points out that other pictures have been printed that were very offensive to Jews and Christians. Yet, the Western Standard cannot responsibly justify printing these cartoons based on the other media’s actions. By examining the Western Standard’s intent, responsibilities, and rights, it can be understood why this particular media outlet felt compelled to print the cartoons despite circumstances around the world.

Why did the Western Standard print those twelve cartoons? Publisher Ezra Levant defends their decision:

“WE DID NOT PUBLISH THE CARTOONS AS AN EDITORIAL MESSAGE FROM US; WE NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE WITH THE CARTOONS. WE PUBLISHED THEM AS A FACT, AS A PIECE OF EVIDENCE, TO ILLUSTRATE WHAT WAS BEING ‘BLAMED’ FOR RIOTS OVERSEAS. IF JUVENILE CARTOONS COULD REALLY CAUSE EMBASSIES TO BE BURNT TO THE GROUND, THAT IS NEWS THAT’S FIT TO PRINT.”¹⁰

Levant places his responsibility as a writer above the impact on the public. He believes that his foremost responsibility as a writer is to inform: to report in the midst of a conflict, allowing readers to make informed decisions with clearly presented facts. He upholds his position: “We’re running them because they’re the central fact that caused radical Muslims around the world to riot.”¹¹ Yet, was it necessary to print all twelve cartoons? Or even print them at all?

Like the other media outlets, he had the option to describe them in written word. Inherent in the written word is the bias of a writer. Thus, would not the description of a cartoon slant the reader’s opinion more than the actual cartoon? How are facts presented most clearly? Are not both options potentially offensive to strict adherents of Sharia law? I think so.

Whether certain newspapers should have reprinted the cartoons is obviously controversial. It led to riots, demonstrations, and protests. Individuals and corporations hold a responsibility for their own personal censoring or propagating of information. Certain organizations, including Indigo Books, Chapters, and McNally Robinson, felt the Western Standard issue that reprinted the cartoons was offensive to the point that they pulled it from their shelves. That was their decision. They had the authority to withhold the publication. Other organizations kept that issue on their shelves. They too had the power to choose. We live in a democratic society: choice with respect and responsibility.

Throughout history, other religions, including Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, have been satirized in a way that many followers of these religions would claim has been as offensive as the cartoons. Many have not been censored. Should preference be given to one religion over other religions? No. Yet, can actions be justified according to previous history? No.

In Canada, the *Western Standard* and other media made individual choices apart from the government's position. Under the democratic principles upon which Canada is founded, they were empowered with the freedom to choose—one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities. Thus, the connection between Canadian democratic values and the quality of our media is seen. Though it is important, the real issue is not if the cartoons should have been printed. Instead, the underlying issue, the one that surmounts all, is: was the Canadian media allowed freedom of the press? Were they given the freedom to inform the public? The government did not coerce the media and dictate how to inform the public. The media was not required to fabricate facts out of fear. Instead, they exercised freedom of the press.

Rights and responsibilities conflict and are clouded in light of freedom of the press. Many writers believe that their responsibility to inform the public surmounts the public's sensitivity to the issue. Other writers believe that their responsibility is to be sensitive to the public above all. Who is right? Circumstances dictate actions and the obvious answer is blurred; but without freedom of the press, no discussion would be possible. To handcuff the media is to destroy the spirit of democracy.

Notes:

- 1 Albert Camus, "Democracy Quotes," 20 March 2006, <http://usembassy.state.gov/managua/www/whquotes.html> (28 March 2006).
- 2 "Muhammad cartoons: a timeline," *CBC News Online*, 17 February 2006, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/muhammad_cartoons_timeline.html (14 March 2006).
- 3 "Muhammad cartoons: a timeline," *CBC News Online*, 17 February 2006, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/muhammad_cartoons_timeline.html (14 March 2006).
- 4 "Muhammad cartoons: a timeline," *CBC News Online*, 17 February 2006, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/islam/muhammad_cartoons_timeline.html (14 March 2006).
- 5 "Human rights lawyer calls on media to print Muhammad cartoons," *CBC News Online*, 8 February 2006, <http://www.cbc.ca/montreal/story/qc-greycartoons-060208.html> (14 March 2006).
- 6 "Human rights lawyer calls on media to print Muhammad cartoons," *CBC News Online*, 8 February 2006, <http://www.cbc.ca/montreal/story/qc-greycartoons-060208.html> (14 March 2006).
- 7 Ezra Levant, "What were we thinking?" *WESTERN STANDARD.CA*, 13 March 2006, http://www.westernstandard.ca/website/index.cfm?page=article&article_id=1504&pagenumber=2 (15 March 2006).
- 8 "Military Expeditions led by the Prophet (pbuh) (Al-Maghaazi)," *Tanzim-e-Islami*, http://www.tanzeem.org/resources/hadith/Bukhari/059_sbt.html (16 March 2006).
- 9 Ezra Levant, "What were we thinking?" *WESTERN STANDARD.CA*, 13 March 2006, http://www.westernstandard.ca/website/index.cfm?page=article&article_id=1504&pagenumber=2 (15 March 2006).
- 10 Ezra Levant, "What were we thinking?" *WESTERN STANDARD.CA*, 13 March 2006, http://www.westernstandard.ca/website/index.cfm?page=article&article_id=1504&pagenumber=2 (15 March 2006).
- 11 "Western Canadian magazine publishes Muhammad cartoons," *CBC News Online*, 13 February 2006, <http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2006/02/13/cartoons060213.html> (14 March 2006).

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