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From a Prophetic Warner to a Villain How a Religious Scholar Became Entangled in the Muhammad Cartoon Controversy

On February 12, 2006, as the Muhammad cartoon controversy was raging, *Time Magazine* addressed the matter. In "Fanning the Flames," author Romesh Ratnesar mentioned that *Jyllands Posten* (JP) knew that publishing cartoon images of Muhammad would get them attention, and that this of course was the point. It was a "deliberate attempt to provoke a debate about what Rose [JP's culture editor] perceived as the stifling of coverage of issues related to Islam." Ratnesar continued:

A leading Danish religious historian, Tim Jensen, warned that some Muslims would take offense at the images, citing a widely, although not unanimously, observed taboo against physical representations of the Prophet. But the paper published the twelve submissions it received anyway, on Sept. 30.

Let us take a closer look. On Monday morning, September 19, over a cup of coffee a journalist at JP got the idea of asking Danish cartoonists to submit drawings of Muhammad.¹ It was the direct result of a story circulated the week before by the Danish author, Kare Bluitgen. Bluitgen, preparing a book for children on Muhammad, said that three illustrators did not want their names known for fear of reprisals by Muslims. The culture editor, Flemming Rose, then seized the idea, and invited the 40 members of the Danish Newspaper Illustrators' Union to submit drawings. Twelve of them submitted cartoons, and on September 30, 2005 they were published in the article "The Face of Muhammad." Its postulated aim was formulated as follows:

Some Muslims reject modern, secular society. They demand a special position, insisting on special consideration of their own religious feelings. It is incompatible with secular democracy and freedom of expression, where one has to be ready to put up with scorn, mockery and ridicule.

When later, on March 15, 2006, the Director of the Danish Public Prosecution decided not to pursue criminal proceedings in the case of "The Face of Muhammad" for violation of Sections 140 and 266b of the Danish Criminal Code,² among other

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1. Cf. "Fra idé til krise," *Journalisten* 3, 2006 (<http://www.journalisten.dk/sw7112.asp>)

2. The decision in English is published at: <http://www.rigsadvokaten.dk/Default.aspx?id=176&recordid176=887>

arguments he opined that JP did not intend to mock just to mock, to provoke just to provoke, but rather to mock and provoke in order to provoke a public and important *debate*. Whether this was right or not, the fact remains: To provoke a debate, one has to provoke, and JP, of course, knew very well that some Muslims would take offense and protest. That *was* the whole point, as the article in *Time Magazine* rightly implied.

So, what is the point when *Time Magazine*, as well as others, made a story out of story about a religious scholar telling JP what they knew very well? And, what is the point of stressing that they published the drawings anyway, neglecting the so-called ‘warning’? Well, the reason why *Time Magazine* did so, most likely, was to support what otherwise may be seen as an interpretation rather than a fact. I also suppose that *Time Magazine* did so because the story of Tim Jensen warning JP had at the time become a part of the whole cartoon story. To write about the cartoon crisis, causes and consequences, on February 12, implied telling the story of the warning.

I assume also that future stories about the cartoon story will have to include this story, even though JP officially denied on March 7 that Tim Jensen warned JP before the drawings were published. After more than a month of intensive search for the journalist who had talked with Tim Jensen, JP triumphantly recovered and showed a tape recording, demonstrating that Tim Jensen did not talk with the journalist *before* the publication of the drawings, but on the very same day they were published. In the article of March 7 intended to clear JP of what was presented as a false accusation, Tim Jensen was said to “acknowledge” that “he did not warn JP about consequences before the publication of the drawings,” and that the interview held “no estimation about what kind of consequences the drawings might lead to, except that ‘some’ Muslims would find drawings of their prophet ‘wrong’.”

Well, the whole story is long and complicated, and here, as so often, the devil is in the detail. Besides, several points have not been fully explained to the public. What follows here is only an outline of the not unusual case of how a local no-story, as it was first considered, became a global big story. This account portrays also at the same time the metamorphosis of an experienced religious scholar into a hybrid of an academic authority and a prophet, a hero and (later) a villain, who as one among others, consciously or not, may have authorized violence.

* * *

It was on January 28, 2006, a nice, almost normal Saturday. Peaceful and quiet, the usual combination of work and relaxation. True, the Muhammad-cartoon issue was about to become a major crisis. More and more stores in the Middle East removed Danish dairy products from the shelves after consumer boycotts called upon by Saudi imams and internet messages. The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs slowly entered the first stage of what was to become a month long state of emergency, and the media and journalists were intensifying matters as they scented big news, blood, crisis and catastrophe. It subsequently became difficult to know whether it was some thousand Muslims or some thousand journalists who were creating the row.

Around noon I received a phone call from a female journalist of *Politiken*, the Copenhagen based left-to-center daily. Also in this case, the paper was in outspoken opposition to the right-to-center JP, it criticized the dominant discourse on Islam and Muslims that paved the way for the publication of the cartoons. It was critical of the handling the crisis by the JP editor-in-chief and the Prime Minister, insisting on the right to freedom of expression which nobody ever questioned, not even Muslim protesters in Denmark. The journalist wanted me to answer some questions for what she called a follow-up on JP's Muhammad drawings.

Being one of the so-called religious experts, I did not hesitate to reply, 'of course.' It is part of my work to deal with journalists. The journalist on the phone asked if it was true that I had been interviewed by JP before they published the cartoons, and whether I had advised or warned them (I cannot remember which word she used) against publishing the drawings.

"Well," I said, somewhat alerted and uneasy, aware of the worsening of the crisis and sensing that she thought this was important, "I don't really know." I talk to many journalists, and at the time of the publication of the drawings, I was fully occupied with preparing a paper on a subject from the late antiquity. I did not even think of Muhammad. "But," I asked, trying to read her thoughts and to recall if I had been interviewed JP at that time, "why do you ask? What's your source?" "Well," she replied, "I have been told so. Actually we received an anonymous e-mail saying so."

Ever so slowly, and pondering if an e-mail could really be anonymous, my memory, started to work. Probably triggered by mentioning the e-mail, I began to recollect, thinking also that most likely I had mentioned the interview with JP during lectures, maybe in one a week ago for a group of journalists on religion in the media. I recalled that a journalist had asked questions about Islam and Muslims and their tradition in regard to images, and possible reactions to drawings in the present Danish context.

Yes, I said to the *Politiken* journalist, I *had* been called, and I had told JP about the various Muslim stances in regard to images of the prophet. I also recalled saying that, one could be sure that *some* Muslims would take offense at drawings of the prophet. At the end of the talk, I recalled, I had argued against publication of the drawings by pointing at the fact that the drawings would be read in the context of the dominant anti-Muslim discourse in Denmark. This included a recent public declaration by the Minister of Cultural Affairs on September 23, 2005, that the government's culture war was to be aimed directly at the backwards ideas and lore of the immigrant Muslims.³ I added that it might be worthwhile to ponder why no one

3. "Medieval Muslim culture (will never be) as valid here in Denmark as the Danish culture ... There are still many battles to win. One of the most important has to do with the confrontation we witness when seeing how immigrants from Muslim countries refuse to honor Danish culture and European norms. In the midst of our country, parallel societies are developing with minorities practicing their medieval norms and undemocratic ways of thinking. We cannot and must not accept this." (Translation by TJ)

had started a campaign in defense of freedom of expression a year ago when Christian lobbyists managed to get a department store to withdraw sandals with images of Jesus. Why step now on Muslims, who were already trampled under foot?

During the talk with the *Politiken* journalist on the phone, I made it quite clear that I had not discussed the published caricatures with JP, and that I had not even seen them, neither at that time, nor later (which was true; I had only seen them described and discussed). I was never asked by JP to comment on the twelve caricatures. All we discussed were general aspects of Muhammad drawings, and at that time I had been thinking only of 'innocent' pictures for a children's book on the life of Muhammad. That is, illustrations, not cartoons or caricatures. Had I known that we were talking of caricatures, my warning would have been very strong. In that case it would have been relevant to discuss the unanimous Muslim attitude to the worst kind of blasphemy in Islamic traditions, namely mocking, scorning and ridiculing the prophet!

At the end of the talk with the *Politiken* journalist on the phone, she agreed to send me the quotations of the interview for checking them. Before mailing me the part of her article where I was quoted, she asked permission to send a photographer. Though getting a bit uneasy again (they had photos in the archive). I eventually agreed. After all, I could not imagine that *Jyllands Posten* had not discussed the matter seriously before publishing the cartoons, and it was only natural to consult experts in order to get their opinion on Islam and iconography. And, as was later said by people from JP, they had been warned against the publication of the drawings even by several of their own leading journalists. So again: what's the story?

The photographer came and took many photos. He mentioned several times that the plan, as far he knew, was to print the interview together with other opinions and a small photo somewhere inside the daily.

The first version of the interview I received by mail read as follows (the square brackets signify my suggestions for changes):

Jyllands-Posten was in such doubt as to whether to publish the twelve Muhammad drawings that they consulted one of the leading religious scholars in the country.

[Of course, I could not imagine all the consequences. B]ut I did tell JP that even if history shows that there is no unanimous tradition against making pictures of Muhammad, there is no doubt [then, without a doubt, there would be those Muslims who would take offense] there are Muslims who could feel offended.

The draft (as well as the final article) then states that the editors-in-chief as well as Flemming Rose so far had insisted that the cartoons were intended to be a commentary on self-censorship in relation to Islam and denied that it was meant as a provocation. The draft continues:

It now turns out that the daily [ought to have known the risk that Muslims would feel offended, and that the drawings consequently might lead to protests] very well knew what the drawings might lead to. Shortly before the illustrations were published [...] Tim Jensen was phoned in order to check the idea.

I said that of course we have freedom of expression in Denmark, but that I personally would [would consider not to publish the drawings] not publish the drawings since that would be an unnecessary provocation seen in the context of the [since in the view of the] general discourse in the Danish public debate on Muslims and Islam [it might be seen as an unnecessary provocation, as fanning the flames]. It would be a superfluous demonstration, the good of which I could not see. [Translation by TJ]

The journalist added that I also asked JP to consider its responsibility not to create conflict between the majority in power and the Muslim minorities. Then I was quoted for something I quite evidently think and say now, but not yet at the time of the interview, namely about the fact that it was not the drawings that had drawn the heat, but caricatures. Finally I added something about the way other agents are using the issue for political purposes.

When returning the text I asked the journalist to add the initial sentence, stressing that “I cannot remember all what I had said to Jyllands Posten at the time.” I did not ask to see the remaining part of the article, the headline or the introduction. She said she accepted my suggestions.

Thinking that this was not a story worth telling, I got a shock next morning, January 29, when I saw a photo of Tim Jensen covering half of the front page of the Sunday edition of *Politiken*, together with the splash headline “Jyllands Posten was warned.” Most of the text was identical with the one I had revised the day before, yet one passage was radically changed. Whereas ‘my’ text read: “It now turns out that the daily ought have known the risk that Muslims would feel offended, and that the drawings consequently might lead to protests,” the article on the front page read: “*But the daily was aware of the risk that the drawings might lead to violent protest. Shortly before ...*”

There was no doubt, a peaceful Saturday had turned into a bloody Sunday. The daily, be it the lone editor in charge Saturday night, or the journalist herself, had blown the whole thing out of proportion and made a story of a non-story. They put words in my mouth, words that might be understood as if I had been consulted by the editors-in-chief and shown the twelve caricatures. This was not so, and I never said anything close to that.

When on the next day I consulted both, the journalist and one of *Politiken*’s editors-in-chief, they stated that they saw nothing wrong in using the word “warn.” Though they might be ready to admit that they (whoever was responsible for the final wording and framing of the article) had stressed certain points, the story as it was true. Besides, they said, later in the article, when being confronted with this story, JP’s editor-in-chief (Carsten Juste) himself used this word when saying that they had been warned by some of the journalists at JP, though he could not recall that they had consulted Tim Jensen. Asked why he did not listen to the warnings by Tim Jensen and others, Juste stated that there were different opinions about this matter.

True, but ... The same day a friend called and ‘congratulated’ me for having entered the long line of prophets or warners so characteristic of the Quran and its

legitimation of Muhammad as a true prophet, all warning about the dire consequences of not listening to the truth. We both laughed at this and at the ludicrous way *Politiken* had introduced me as. Now, “one of the leading religious scholars,” being known for trying to be a good atheist, was portrayed as a hybrid of a scholar-authority and a prophetic warner!

In the evening, as the atmosphere in the media as well as in the Middle East was getting more charged, I no longer laughed when a Danish Muslim popped up on al-Jazeera telling millions of Muslim viewers that JP had been warned, if not by the prophet, then by another authority, the “religious scholar” Tim Jensen.

I was not the only one who was shocked. JP evidently was too. Things were getting out of control. It was on the evening of January 30, that Juste, JP’s editor-in-chief, issued an apology to Muslims, not for having published the cartoons, but for having, after all, offended so many Muslims. Early Monday morning, on my way for an interview with *El Pais* concerning the Danish situation in regard to Islam, Muslim and immigrants, one of the two editors-in-chief at JP, Jørn Mikkelsen, phoned and asked me what this story in *Politiken* was all about. I repeated what I had said to *Politiken*, asking him not to be too tough on the journalist when he found her. Before talking to *El Pais*, I got hold of another journalist at *Politiken* whom I trust, discussing how I felt trapped and (mis-)used in the war between the two dailies and in the hunt for a good story. He agreed that this was the case – and that it was most unpleasant. But this is how things are. I tried to explain the issue also to the journalist from *El Pais*, learning days later, that even he could not relate the story quite truly when writing that Tim Jensen denied to have warned JP.

On Tuesday 31, Flemming Rose wrote a furious denial to *Politiken*, stating that JP never had consulted Tim Jensen. It was an outright lie. I immediately responded, repeating what I had said to *Politiken* and adding that I had not contacted them, but they had contacted me. Responding in private to my open letter, Rose said that after all he was right: I had not been asked my opinion on the actual cartoons, and JP had not been able to foresee the violent protests. I replied that I never had said so either, but that was not the point, neither with regard to my story, nor to that in *Politiken*.

The next two weeks were hysterical. Due to the fact that my name had been on the front page and because of my expertise, newspaper journalists, television and broadcasting people from all over the world came to see me or were on the phone day and night. I thought the pandemonium outside was nothing compared with the pandemonium of the media. Sometimes I asked journalists to cool down, exercise self-censorship, or do damage control instead of fanning the flames.

The *Politiken* plus JP story about the now famous scholar receded into the background. Then one evening, a journalist called from *Journalisten*, the official organ of the association of journalists. She was writing a story about the whole affair, entitled “From Idea to Crisis.” She told that JP still denied ever to have spoken with me on this matter. I repeated my story and added that I hoped it would be verified soon. A week later she called again, saying that I could take it easy. JP had found the journalist who had interviewed me. My story had been confirmed. In *Journalisten* 3/2006 it says:

... the story of Tim Jensen's warning now starts to circulate – also outside Denmark. Following the article in *Politiken*, editor-in-chief Jørn Mikkelsen, sends out an e-mail to all colleagues at JP to find out who had talked with Tim Jensen. It turns out that a working journalist, at the end of a talk on something else, mentions the initiative [the idea of publishing the drawings, TJ]. The comments of Tim Jensen did not reach the editors-in-chief, Jørn Mikkelsen explains.

Politiken writes that we as a daily were warned in advance, and that is factually wrong. In the midst of a swamp of noxious rumors, we also have had to deal with this nonsense that has circulated in the whole world, really fanning the flames,' Jørn Mikkelsen says. [Translation by TJ]

At the end of the article, *Politiken's* editor-in-chief, Tøger Seidenfaden, commented on this: "Tim Knudsen⁴ sticks to his story that he warned a journalist from JP."

In response I wrote to *Journalisten* and protested. The issue of the drawings was not mentioned at the end of a talk about something else, it was the very substance of the talk. That the editor at *Politiken* mistook my name for someone else, may be noticed in passing. Anyway, I may have been misused to some degree by *Politiken*, and JP may try to keep face and even save a journalist from getting into trouble. Who knows why Mikkelsen said what he said. And who cares. I may have been used to fan the flames, in the war between *Politiken* and JP, or elsewhere. I even may have been partially guilty of the death of people fighting in the streets in other countries. Now, however, I finally felt assured that my memory did serve me well.

The story did not end here. On Monday March 6, having just hung up after an interview with a JP journalist on Muslims carrying the Koran during demonstration, an editor from JP called. After a few niceties, he came to the point: Finally, after having tried to track down the story about Tim Jensen warning JP before publishing the cartoons, now he had found the journalist NN, who actually had talked with me on the matter – however, not before publication but on the very same day. Also, she had a tape-recording of the interview. He read a partial transcript, and after having listened, I must say that most likely this is the interview I recalled when *Politiken* called me on January 28. I was shocked, again for my mistake, and this mistake I shall never forget. I apologized for the mistake in regard to the date. But I also was relieved at the same time since my memory did serve me well! On the next day, the JP editor admitted in a front page story that there were good reasons why I thought of it as taking place before the publication of the drawings. The transcript, sent to me later, proved that the interview took place on September 30, the day they had published the cartoons, and that publishing cartoons was not the topic of our talk. Our conversation concerned only general aspects of Islam and its view of drawings. It is also evident from the transcript that I thought they had not yet published drawings, but were planning to do so. This shows that what I said to *Politiken* about the JP-interview five months earlier was true.

4. Tim Knudsen is a well-known political scientist. The media often confound the names of Tim Jensen and Tim Knudsen – but in this case I thought it was strange that the editor-in-chief could not even get the name right. It is, I think, an indication of the overhasty approach and may be even carelessness of some media from time to time.

I asked the JP-editor to send me the transcript so that I could read it. I also asked him how several weeks ago *Journalisten* could quote the editor-in-chief saying that they had found the journalist who had interviewed me, and that my remarks about the drawings had been a small part of a talk about something else. The editor replied that he had no knowledge of this, and he could not understand why the editor-in-chief had said so.

Monday evening I sat down and wrote a comment, intending to mail it next morning so that the JP-editor could use it for his article. Tuesday afternoon, March 7, I learned that he had already published his article about the false story of *Politiken* and Tim Jensen's mistake. The true story, triumphantly describing the recovering of the tape-recording which proved that Tim Jensen did not talk with the journalist before the publication of the drawing, cleared JP of the hideous and false accusation. Tim Jensen "admits" that he did not talk with JP before the publication.

The next day *Politiken* printed its official denial by simply stating that the basis for its article were Tim Jensen's statements, and that he was wrong about the date he was interviewed by JP. The article did neither mention that *Politiken* had contacted me on the basis of an anonymous e-mail, nor taking up the peculiar framing of the story, nor the small but significant change of certain words.

Once again I felt bad. It would have been fair if JP and *Politiken* had given me the chance to comment on the whole story before they published the article and the denial. Later, I tried to get answers to some questions that still seemed important to me. I was told by the *Politiken* journalist that they received not just an e-mail, but letters saying that Tim Jensen had warned JP before the publication. But I was not able to get these letters, and I cannot understand why they are not mentioned by anyone discussing this story. Who send them? Was there more than one letter? The journalist at *Politiken* and others have guessed that the letters or e-mail were mailed by someone at JP disagreeing with the editors' policy on this matter. The journalists of *Journalisten* confirmed to me that statements of the editor-in-chief which is not quite in line with the later retrieval of the tape-recording. I asked JP to send me a copy of the whole tape-recording, so far in vain. The editor told me that the journalist, who interviewed me, had the tape. Contacting her, no longer with JP, I was told that she did not have it, the editor did. So I contacted the editor again, who admits it, adding that it is up to her to give me a copy. She has promised to do so, but until now (June 9) I have received nothing.

That is the end of the story. So far, at least. But what a story? The story in JP mentioned last is a story meant to reveal the truth. But evidently it is also a story intended to hide the truth: JP very well knew that the cartoons would offend at least some Muslims and lead to protest. Hence, it is not relevant whether they have been warned or not.

The story told here is also about ways of authorization of a narrative, ways of the media reporting on, and participating in, the global and local (culture) wars, in local and international politics, and in a newspaper 'war' against each other. A story of wartime journalism, of loss of control and attempts of damage control.

Words are not innocent. In certain times words matter more than at other times. As the Muhammad-cartoon crisis peaked, words mattered so much that I and

other experts were tempted not to speak anymore with journalists. Words, after being spoken – one hour later, the next day or after weeks – would be found in 30-seconds interviews in prime time Danish TV, or quoted in dailies and news around the world: out of context, out of control, and blown out of proportions. They were used for whatever purpose: authorizing home or foreign politics, hate-speech, street fighting, Islam-bashing, JP-bashing, or racism, in Denmark, in Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East.

JP journalists and Danish politicians, as well as others, learnt the hard lesson that news travels fast in the global village, and that an idea conceived over a cup of coffee is transformed into a series of far reaching events out of control. The experts must learn the lesson, too.

