

## THE MOHAMMED CARTOONS CRISIS

### Reporters Without Borders organised a conference to discuss it

*Paris, 9 February 2006*

How can freedom of expression and respect for people's feelings and identity be reconciled? asked Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Robert Ménard when he opened an international conference in Paris on 9 February attended by politicians, religious officials, diplomats, intellectuals and journalists. Here is what the participants said:

**RÉGIS DEBRAY, FRENCH PHILOSOPHER**

“It's not a conspiracy against anyone. There's a conflict of duty between freedom of expression and respect for others, but the two are not incompatible as long as the issue is approached calmly and with historical perspective. Freedom of expression is established in article 11 of France's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and in the 1881 French press law and ends where the rights of others begin. In Alsace-Lorraine, an article of the criminal code (never applied but never repealed either) still punishes blasphemy with three years imprisonment. German, British and Dutch laws also penalise blasphemy.

“So freedom of expression is the result of a long and complex process. Civilisations have to coexist and we mustn't impose our rules on another culture, but we have to keep a sense of proportion between Western colonial abuses and the unacceptable and irreparable fires, murders and physical excesses that have come after them. We must oppose intolerance, but not arrogantly or ignorantly, so as to respect everyone's identity.”

**MOHAMED BECHARI, PRESIDENT OF THE FRENCH NATIONAL MUSLIM FEDERATION AND VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE FRENCH MUSLIM COUNCIL**

“We need to strengthen the dialogue between cultures if we're to combat the blind fanaticism of Islamists and secularists. The response to violence certainly isn't more violence. We have to condemn the rise of populist movements in Arab countries and stress that the right to information is sacred, but why print cartoons that provoke people? Are they part of a theological debate about depiction of the Prophet or are they more an expression of racism and xenophobia?

“Let's stop wild accusations and preaching about loyalties to French and European Muslims. They oppose terrorism and they too believe in freedom of speech and opinion. The only way to get civilisations to coexist is to use the shared secular space to establish a true dialogue, as long as this space isn't hijacked in the name of press freedom.”

**ODON VALLET, FRENCH HISTORIAN, DOCTOR OF RELIGIOUS SCIENCES**

“Look at *Star TV*, the world’s most popular station, especially in China and India. Its soap stars don’t eat pork, so as not to offend Muslims, or beef, to avoid offending Hindus, and instead eat chicken. Such big differences are sources of both self-censorship and artistic discovery. Film director Martin Scorsese would never find financial backing these days for *The Last Temptation of Christ* and no producer would today accept the Monty Python film *The Life of Brian*.

“But no religion is entirely iconoclastic or its opposite, iconodulic. Islam has many exceptions to the non-depiction of Mohammed, which was only banned from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Some words and writings also come up against the same obstacles. Voltaire’s *Mahomet* and Montesquieu’s *De l’Esprit des lois* would be turned down by publishers today or be liable to prosecution. So what’s at issue in the current crisis is not so much the image or depiction as respect. It may be increasingly hard in a globalised world to reconcile freedom of expression and respect, but we have to try.”

**SOHEIB BENCHEIKH, RESEARCHER IN ISLAMIC SCIENCE AND FORMER MUFTI OF MARSEILLE**

“My fellow Muslims are showing a surreal ignorance of both Islam and freedom of expression by their excessive reactions. The Koran says we should rise above all pointless argument. ‘Turn back evil by good,’ it says. The Prophet said that those who call him a storyteller or a liar will answer before God.

“The idea of freedom of expression isn’t yet rooted in Muslim countries. The people asking the Danish government to apologise don’t know two basic rules. They don’t realise they can answer back by defending their own values in the name of freedom of expression and that this freedom means the press is independent of the state or religious ideology. A confident religion doesn’t fear criticism or shy away from debate. And Islam doesn’t just belong to Muslims, it’s a message to all humankind, and the Prophet is a public, human, historical figure. He isn’t as holy as Jesus and isn’t to be venerated in the same way.

“So the row about the cartoons doesn’t stem from depiction of Mohammed but from juxtaposition of two absolute rights – freedom of expression and the respect for beliefs. I say to [leading Muslim scholar] Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi: Don’t ask governments to apologise. It’s nothing to do with them. The media is independent. Those societies are based on a balance between the government and the media, which criticises and prints cartoons.”

**NAWAF NAMAN, PRESS OFFICER AT THE KUWAITI EMBASSY IN PARIS**

“Religion is very important and protects our culture but press freedom and freedom of expression must be respected. News today isn’t just national, it’s worldwide and governments are no longer the only ones that control it. We have to get out of this crisis, which is only helping the extremists.

“We must build a bridge of dialogue between the Arab-Muslim part of the world and the West. I call on Reporters Without Borders to set up a commission to look at this possibility with representatives of Muslims from all over the world. I assure you Arab countries will

support it. Many Muslims feel insulted by the cartoons of Mohammed, especially by the one showing his turban as a bomb.”

**RENÉ PETILLON, CARTOONIST ON THE FRENCH SATIRICAL PAPER LE CANARD ENCHAÎNÉ**

“Let’s look at how this all started. A Danish paper organised a competition for cartoons of Mohammed. Ten of the 12 it printed were harmless and only two were a problem because they dangerously assimilated Muslims with terrorists. One of the two (the one with the turban-bomb) was exaggerated out of all proportion for political reasons. Forgers distorted it and sent it round the Arab world and the whole fuss centres on this one cartoon.

“Everybody must calm down. When an opinion is offensive, the issue can be settled in court and that’s the end of it. Cartoonists censor themselves all the time, but when you aren’t a Muslim, the taboo of depicting the Prophet doesn’t concern you. It was a huge mistake by the Danish cartoonists. It was a professional error, that’s all. I’m astonished at the political fallout. You have to make allowances for that.”

**DENIS GARREAU, A LAWYER WITH THE FRENCH COUNCIL OF STATE AND THE COUR DE CASSATION (SUPREME COURT)**

“As a simple citizen, first of all, I think the cartoons are as objectionable as the ones you see in many newspapers in the Arab world that caricature Jews and their religion. The assimilation of terrorism to Islam in one of the Mohammed cartoons is just as bad as spreading the contents of the so-called Protocols of Zion, as the soap opera Al-Shatat, broadcast by the Hezbollah TV station Al-Manar, does.

The law says freedom of expression, unlike freedom of thought, is not absolute. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen clearly says it is one of the most precious rights we have and that people can be punished for abusing it. The European Convention on Human Rights says it includes both rights and duties. The limits are when it undermines public order and encroaches on the rights of others.

The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that any censorship is bad but admits that freedom of expression can be limited to include respect for religious beliefs. Freedom to express an opinion or an idea does not mean freedom to insult or abuse and the courts are there to punish this. The banning of Al-Manar or publications in the age of satellite transmission and the Internet is pointless and only increases misunderstanding and pushes things to further extremes. The only solution is to encourage dialogue to achieve understanding and mutual respect for cultures and civilisations.”

**RACHID BENZINE, ISLAMIC EXPERT AND WRITER**

“Condemning things doesn’t help debates about society. Fires are now breaking out all over – violence on one side and reprinting the cartoons on the other. The idea of what’s sacred differs in each society. This crisis shows what’s taken for granted – in the name of the holy, one has the right to be violent. We have to get away from that. We’re making international relations a religious issue, seeing events through religious eyes. But who decides what’s holy? We have to make people understand how holiness originates in our societies. The crisis doesn’t indicate so much a clash of civilisations as a clash of ignorance and of misunderstanding each other by both sides.

“Does freedom of expression have any limits? Is freedom to believe absolute? It’s less a clash of values than a scale of values. The cartoons made fun of Islamic principles, which ban depiction of the Prophet, and in effect took that away from Muslims, who felt it was a very violent thing to do. What’s the nature of freedom of expression in a globalised media? We have to be very careful. We don’t all have the same symbols but we all see the same images. To get out of this crisis, we have to find a new language. We lack concepts to describe what’s happening today because events are moving too fast and we’re only talking. We have to appeal to everyone’s sense of responsibility.”

**MONCEF MARZOUKI, WRITER AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST**

“The split between the two worlds is increasing. The Arab-Muslim world says: ‘They’re not just occupying our lands, backing dictatorships and looting our resources, but also touching the things most sacred to us.’ The West responds that: ‘They’re invading us and attacking our values.’ This split isn’t going to end. The cartoons are just part of a string of confrontations between civilisations that some are even hoping for.

“The Arab regimes are now exploiting Mohammed but how many Mohammeds have they jailed, tortured and killed? The West is also manipulating the situation, with the United States using the cartoons row to put pressure on Syria and Iran. Can we stop this tsunami? We have to stand at the highest level, as humanity, to overcome this lumping together. To solve the crisis, the martyring of the Palestinians must stop, the occupation of Iraq must end and the West must drop its support for Arab dictatorships.”

**ABBAS AROUA, WRITER AND ACADEMIC**

‘Cartoons themselves aren’t the issue, it’s what they contain. Freedom of expression is fundamental and everybody must defend it, but it’s exercised in a moral, political and economic framework and context. There are positive elements in this crisis. It’s turned a latent conflict into a clearly enunciated one. This is necessary for it to be resolved. It gives the West a better understanding of Muslim sensibilities because it reveals two problems – ignorance of the other side and injustice towards it. The Muslim world may find the strength through this crisis to fight for freedom of expression.

“In a multicultural society and a globalised world, everybody has to realise that a conflict of sacred values must be resolved in a legal way. Everyone must work to end the crisis. Islamic intellectuals must explain to Muslims in their countries that a foreign government can’t apologise for a newspaper and Western media must realise that Muslims can feel outraged, not just exploited or manipulated. The crisis won’t be solved by a treaty between countries. Arab governments are as profane as the Danish newspaper because killing or torturing is also being profane towards sacred things. The solution will come through a dialogue between peoples.”

**AXEL KRAUSE, US JOURNALIST**

“We must remember there are six million Muslims in the US, many of whom voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004. Europe has been targeted for the first time, instead of the United States.

The flags burning in “the Arab street” are European, not US ones. So Americans are feeling quite relieved.

“Most US media have refused to print the offending cartoons. Only the *Philadelphia Enquirer* has done so. The vice-president of the American Association of Editorial Cartoonists said there was a right but not an obligation to publish such depictions. Perhaps countries such as Iran and Syria are deliberately exploiting the crisis but that’s just a theory. The Bush administration is being very cautious because of the growing criticism by Americans of the war in Iraq.”

**MAREK HALTER, PHILOSOPHER**

“I refer to my mentor Voltaire in the case of the Protestant Calas. Voltaire didn’t like Protestants, but he always said he’d fight for their right to express themselves. I’ve known two totalitarian systems, Nazism and Stalinism, so censorship makes me shudder. By the same count, I was against banning the [extreme right] National Front party [in France]. I had the same immediate reaction about the cartoons. And Mohammed isn’t God either. But I felt uncomfortable when I saw the cartoons because they reminded me of the ones of Jews decades ago, with the same way of drawing Semitic individuals with a hooked nose and big ears. Then I saw the demonstrations and the calls for hatred, especially by the Iranian regime.

“We have to firmly defend certain principles, such as freedom of expression and criticising censorship. But don’t forget the world is like a ship. If someone starts a war, the ship sinks with everyone in it. You can draw cartoons about anything. [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad is organising a competition to draw cartoons of the Holocaust. We as Jews will survive that. A bit like when anarchists drew cartoons of God. Some people retorted: ‘So he’s still alive!’”

**ARNAUD LÉVY, EDITOR OF THE FRENCH DAILY FRANCE-SOIR**

“People tried to dissuade me from taking part in this debate so as not to add to the tensions. But there was this magic word ‘dialogue,’ so I came along. We at *France-Soir* have opted for debate right from the start. Though we’re at the centre of the controversy [in France], we’re still explaining our decision to print the cartoons. We were careful to print them with captions saying we were doing so as a matter of news interest and that we realised they could offend some people.

“Then we reported the comments of those who criticised us. This is a debate about principles – freedom to believe and the accompanying respect for believers, and freedom of expression and the matching respect by the media. In France, everything that isn’t banned is permitted. Printing the cartoons with explanations didn’t break the law. We took precautions, so we don’t regret what we did. “I’m glad a debate has developed. Despite sometimes the stench of anti-Semitism.

“I hope more modern voices will be heard in the Muslim world above those of fanatics who distort the Koran. We in France need to teach more about the history of religion and the

richness of Arab-Muslim culture. To combat discrimination, we should also talk about Arab poetry and music that can unite us.”

**LAKHDAR BELAÏD, JOURNALIST ON *FRANCE-SOIR***

“I wondered whether I should take part in this conference. I was against my paper printing the cartoons and I still am. I wasn’t the only person on the paper to think so. We all discussed it, all grades of staff, and often the youngest (French or foreign-born) were the most against it. They’re used to France’s racially-mixed society and they know it’d shock many people. Like everyone, I used the respect argument. We wanted to defend the duty of the press to be responsible and we didn’t want the cartoons to stir things up.

“This crisis is happening at a particular moment. During the suburban riots or when immigrants died in fires in dilapidated housing, some journalists were very keen to find religious motives for that. Once again, we’re victims of this lack of discussion and social perspective. We’ve got an old anti-clerical tradition in France. We’re proud of the [French] 1905 law [separating Church and state] and, since the beginning, Islam has been in an inferior position. Today, it’s become dangerous to fiercely defend, like a fortress, freedom of expression and secularism.”

**NOËL COPIN, FORMER MANAGING EDITOR OF THE FRENCH CATHOLIC DAILY *LA CROIX***

“I’m not speaking for *La Croix* here. Like Marek Halter, I’m for Voltaire’s notion of press freedom. But I’ve had lots of experience with press freedom and religion. During a [French] TV programme by Michel Polack, a cartoonist made fun of Christ. I objected, but I didn’t think the programme should be banned. I just wanted to find a way to avoid offending believers. We and Polack decided it would be OK to attack individuals, such as the Pope, but not a religion. Since then, Polack has publicly said he thought it was a bad compromise.

“As a Christian, I don’t ask that sacred things be respected, because they’re impossible to define. In some countries, the flag is sacred. But we must respect those who believe in God. These days, I’m afraid a kind of trade union to defend religion is developing. We must beware of such ill-advised moves and especially of pointlessly strengthening the law in these matters. We can be responsible journalists. We should always ask ourselves the basic question: ‘Do we have to do this?’ Believers must also accept criticism.

“In this new crisis, political leaders must urge people to be responsible without yielding on the principle of freedom of expression. Journalists must continue their in-house debates about all this. Only by doing our reporting job well can we help to reduce the clash of ignorance on each side. The French media has tried to explain Islam better since the 11 September attacks. But with this new crisis, we’re falling back into stereotypes.”