

The dignity of the outcasts

Rik Coolsaet

The escalating international row over a dozen cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten looks to many Europeans as an exaggerated reaction by hypersensitive Muslims.

In Europe, a clear tendency exists, even among the most articulate defenders of multiculturalism, to portray the row by simply opposing freedom of speech and religious backwardness.

In the Muslim world, Europe and the West at large are now conveniently being portrayed as insensitive anti-Muslim crusaders. Both sides thus unwittingly subscribe to Samuel Huntington's thesis of an inevitable clash between incompatible cultures. A crucial point is missing in the debate, however.

To me the uproar inspires me with a mixture of both irritation and comprehension.

Irritation is what bubbles up when taking a closer look at some of the governments who are now so vehemently complaining about the publication of the Danish cartoons and filing formal protests with the Danish government. Isn't it hypocritical that some of the same governments tolerate newspapers and journals in their own country, including some closely linked to them, that contain articles one cannot but qualify as racism against "crusaders" or Jews, thus stirring up the same hatred between communities and cultures they now condemn?

Can one accept a protest about the cartoons from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, who only recently termed the Holocaust a "myth"?

These governments are playing cynically politics with the real feelings of discomfort and anger that their citizens experience.

At the same time, I understand the anger many Muslims feel about the cartoons. I appreciate a remark by Ismaël Ferroukhi, a Moroccan-born French film director. "We've had our share of criticism of Islam," he said a year ago. "I'm no longer willing to accept any more of it. It feels like shooting at an ambulance."

Those who feel besieged neither need nor are ready for self-mockery. In the West, most non-Muslims are simply unaware that Muslims personally feel deeply hurt by attacks on what they as individuals hold dear.

What is perhaps even more important to apprehend, given the extent of the present uproar, is that non-Muslims are totally ignorant of the feelings of humiliation and subjugation that nowadays are so prevalent among Muslims and Muslim communities, contributing to an enhanced sentiment of solidarity among Muslims worldwide.

In the Middle East, many Arab citizens are frustrated by their collective failure to break the stalemate in their societies that was so forcefully documented by the Arab Human Development Reports. The reports highlighted the lack of political freedom, the oppression of women and the isolation of Arab science as the main causes for the malaise of the Arab world. The humiliation Arabs feel at their inability to get rid of leaders like Saddam Hussein by themselves will inevitably have enhanced the sentiments of hopelessness in that part of the world.

In Europe, many second- and third-generation youngsters within migrant communities from Muslim countries – and sometimes their parents, too – are increasingly turning to religion in their search for certainties and recognition in an uncertain and complex world. They embrace Islam as their

new identity, just as born-again Christians in the United States embrace the Bible. Deepening religious commitment and a rise in identity politics is a worldwide phenomenon caused by the rapid transformation of societies. It is a quest for recognition and identity.

For Muslims, both in the Arab world and in Europe, religion is what keeps them upright. It is the source of their dignity. One should always tread carefully when people's dignity is involved. When the steppe is burning, you don't fan the fire. Unless you want to prepare the way for extremists, who in the end will be the only ones to benefit if peoples and cultures are pitted against one another – both in Europe and in the Muslim world.

(International Herald Tribune, 7 February 2006)