Chapter 14

Art, Values, and Conflict Waged in Satirical Cartoons: The 10-Year Rhetorical Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The first international art controversy erupted after the publication of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in Denmark’s Jyllands-Posten in 2005. Unlike prior art controversies, the Muhammad cartoon controversy, as it came to be known, engaged millions of people around the globe. Debates and protests surrounding competing sacrosanct values received massive media attention. As the conflict between Western free speech and 10th anniversary of the September 30 publication of the cartoons approaches, the world mourns the loss of more lives in connection with the continuing controversy. By examining the constellation of speech acts associated with Flemming Rose, Stephane Charbonnier, and Lars Vilks, this chapter examines whether satire is an effective rhetorical device for resolving disagreements involving conflicting sacrosanct values, and if and how it ameliorates or contributes to conflict in increasingly multi-religious, multiethnic, and multicultural societies.

INTRODUCTION

Artistic, social, and political conflict has been on simmer across Europe in the 10 years since Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten’s (Jyllands-Posten) published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005. Within six months of their release in the newspaper, nothing less than a global crisis surrounding the art was marked by interruptions in trade between countries; destruction of property; protests, peaceful and violent; and numerous deaths. Embassies were burned. Diplomatic relations either suffered or were cut off entirely between Muslim countries and Denmark, as well as other Western countries that republished the images.

Over the course of history, artistic expressions have, on occasion, turned into sites of conflict. The most controversial expressions have been those that impinge sacrosanct values through a melding of the sacred and the profane. Historically, these had been local or regional in scope (Hall, 2009, p. 20).
However, the September 30, 2005 publication of the Muhammad images resulted in an international row. Three factors related to the time period in which they were published account for this. One, the world had entered the digital age. Internet technologies made it possible for coverage of the conflict by major and lesser known broadcast and newspaper outlets to bring the controversy to the laptops, TVs, and doorsteps of households around the globe (2009, pp. 20-21). The general public was no longer a mere consumer of news. The public affected the perception of events through comments on major and alternative news sites, blogs, and new social media platforms. In addition, individuals contributed to the story’s speed of transmission through email and the texting technology that was gaining widespread usage. Two, non-Western traditions and customs such as wearing hijabs were perceived as human rights violations that oppressed women. Discursively, Muslim religious piety became synonymous with being backward and contrary to basic Western freedoms. Three, antecedent rhetoric associated with the terrible events of 9/11 characterized Muslims as terrorists—especially if they were pious believers and regardless whether they were secular. These messages, mediated globally, had and still have a profoundly negative affect on the perception of Muslims everywhere (2009, pp. 20-21). These three factors have helped to sustain this art conflict for 10 years.

Initially, the aim of this chapter was to examine Denmark’s handling of the cartoon conflict in the 10 years since 2005. The project was to conduct an up-to-date analysis of public rhetoric in Denmark with communication from *Jyllands-Posten* as the focal point and in the context of country’s new international, cultural arts programs focused on the reconciliatory role of art. The artistic initiatives overseen by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs engage artists of former conflict zones with Danish artists to promote artistic and cultural diversity in Denmark. However, at the time of writing, the horrific events at the office of Charlie Hebdo in Paris took place on January 7, 2015 (BBC News, 2015). Days later, one man was murdered while attending an “art, blasphemy and the freedom of expression” event that was hosted at Krudttonden café in Copenhagen (Helsel & Grimson, 2015). Hours after that, a Jewish man was murdered outside of a synagogue in Krystalgade, Denmark (2015), which Danish police say was in connection with the murder at Krudttonden café.

Exploring the social and rhetorical significance of Denmark’s new arts and cultural programs remains of interest. However, the project paled in significance and critical importance beside the rhetorical phenomena involving life and death. It was determined that the rhetoric produced by key individuals close to the 10-year crisis would shed light on the effectiveness of satire. Given the steady publication of images and escalation of the conflict that now involves mass murders, it is imperative to interrogate the rhetorical strategies employed in this ongoing crisis. Not as a way of analyzing the complex and catastrophic 2015 Paris and Copenhagen events in their totality. Rather, in an effort to provide insight into the function of satire. Specifically, the speech acts associated with Flemming Rose, Stephane Charbonnier, and Lars Vilks.

To be clear, no level of injury to religious sensibilities justifies murder—no matter how vile or inappropriate the depictions, no matter how acute the hurt inflicted, no matter how rhetorically violent the speech acts. That the rhetoric has continued for 10 years and has steadily progressed to mass murder forcefully demands scholarly examination into how the rhetoric that is fanning the flames of the crisis functions. It is undeniable that the recent horrific and unjustified loss of life is inextricably tied to the free-speech rhetoric that began in 2005 with *Jyllands-Posten*. What reasonable argument can be made that the rhetoric is working when the outcome is the loss of life—lives of satirists and bystanders? There is none. Nor is there a persuasive argument that the rhetoric is not dangerous. The scholarly responsible response to extreme rhetoric is to subject it to vigorous investigation. Using narrative paradigm (Fisher,