

# European Journal of Cultural Studies

<http://ecs.sagepub.com/>

---

## **The politics of humour in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal**

Giselinde Kuipers

*European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2011 14: 63

DOI: 10.1177/1367549410370072

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ecs.sagepub.com/content/14/1/63>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *European Journal of Cultural Studies* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://ecs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://ecs.sagepub.com/content/14/1/63.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 10, 2011

[What is This?](#)

# The politics of humour in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal

*European Journal of Cultural Studies*

14(1) 63–80

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions: [sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1367549410370072

ecs.sagepub.com

**Giseline Kuipers**

University of Amsterdam &amp; Erasmus University Rotterdam

## Abstract

This article analyses the Danish ‘cartoon crisis’ as a transnational ‘humour scandal’. While most studies conceptualize this crisis as a controversy about free speech or international relations, this article addresses the question why the crisis was sparked by cartoons. First, the article discusses the culturally specific ‘humour regime’ in which the cartoons were embedded. Second, it analyses the power dynamics of humour. Thirdly, it discusses how the cartoon crisis added a new element to the image of Muslims as completely Other and lacking in modernity: they have no sense of humour. Analysis of this controversy as humor scandal allows us, first, to identify its ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Next, it underscores the emergence of a transnational public sphere. Finally, and most importantly, it highlights the politics of humour – a slippery, often exclusive mode of communication – in national and transnational public spheres.

## Keywords

cartoon crisis, cartoons, Denmark, humour, humour scandal, Islam, modernity, power, public sphere, transnational

## Introduction

Despite its association with mirth, sociability and lightheartedness, humour can bite, hurt, offend and enrage. A dramatic illustration of this ‘dark side of humor’ (Lewis, 2006) is the

---

### Corresponding author:

Giseline Kuipers, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, OZ Achterburgwal 185, 101DK Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: [g.m.m.kuipers@uva.nl](mailto:g.m.m.kuipers@uva.nl)

international controversy caused by the Danish 'Muhammad cartoons'. In the early months of 2006, 12 cartoons dealing with – but contrary to popular belief, only some of them directly depicting – the Muslim prophet Muhammad, which were originally published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, caused a major international crisis.

Journalistic and scholarly analyses of this 'cartoon crisis' have interpreted it predominantly as a conflict about freedom of speech, following the original framing by the Danish newspaper (Hussain, 2007; Kunelius et al., 2007; Lewis, 2008). Often, this dispute about free speech is presented as part a wider conflict or 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West. Other analyses have stressed the political interests underlying this crisis, showing how politicians and activists employed the cartoons to push specific local or national agendas (Ammitzbøll and Vidino, 2007; Klausen, 2009).

However, analyses of the cartoon crisis rarely address the question why it was sparked by *cartoons*. By any standard, cartoons are an unusual form of free speech: visual rather than verbal, intended to spur laughter and amusement and ambiguous because of their 'non-serious', humorous nature. This sets cartoons apart from the serious, rational and verbal discourse that is supposed to constitute public discourse – at least in its ideal-typical version (Habermas, 1989).

This article argues that in Denmark, Europe and globally, the cartoon crisis is best understood as a transnational 'humour scandal'. Such humour scandals – public controversies about transgressive humour – are recurring events in media democracies, playing out social divides through a dramatization of moral and political rifts. The cartoons' humorous nature was central to the unfolding of the controversy. The editorial introduction to the cartoons framed them explicitly as 'mockery, ridicule and derision' – terms denoting (hostile forms of) humour. In the international press, the editor defended the cartoons as 'satire', signaling more sophistication but still implying non-seriousness. Many protestors seemed specifically stung that these images were cartoons, 'ridiculing' or 'trivializing' their religion. Protests against the cartoons were often cited as proof of Muslims 'having no sense of humour'. The global escalation pushed this humour scandal into the 'real' politics of international relations, boycotts, riots and frantic diplomacy, thus obscuring the politics of humour underlying the crisis.

The cartoon controversy provides us with a unique opportunity to analyse the politics of humour in an increasingly transnational public arena. Despite the significant – probably growing – presence of humour in the public sphere, scholars have paid little attention to the politics of humour. Moreover, in line with general positive connotations of humour and affiliated domains such as satire and comedy (Billig, 2005), scholarly work on humour in the public sphere stresses its liberating and critical qualities. For example, the 'carnavalesque' has been celebrated as an alternative popular public sphere based on joking and mockery of hierarchies (Habermas, 1996).

This article argues that the politics of humour in the cartoon crisis were rather less critical, enlightened or liberating. Existing power relations were reinforced rather than criticized or inverted, and the humorous nature of the cartoons impeded rather than stimulated open exchange. I will briefly describe the cartoons and the crisis before turning to the politics of humour. First, I analyse the culturally specific 'humour regime' in which the cartoons were embedded. Such humour regimes require a degree of discursive control and community that is hard to maintain in an era of mass migration and transnational

media. However, even within this humour regime the cartoons were not uncontested. Second, on the basis of extensive analysis of the cartoons, their original framing and debates about the cartoons' meaning, I will analyse the power dynamics of humour. Because of their humorous – non-serious, polysemic and exclusive – character, the cartoons ended up consolidating a discursive regime with limited opportunity for successful objection. Rather than being liberating, here, humour led to an utterly disempowering conundrum of being laughed at. Finally, I discuss how the cartoon crisis added a new element to the image of Muslims as completely Other and lacking in modernity: that they have no sense of humour.

Given its global scope, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of the controversy. The article primarily looks at responses to the controversy that explicitly address the cartoons' humorous nature; and analyses mainly English-language contributions to the debate. Often, these are from non-native speakers addressing international audiences, underlining the transnational character of this controversy. Finally, the article focuses mainly on European responses, with one notable exception: a cartoon competition in Iran which was explicitly launched as a 'counter-attack' to the Danish cartoons. This competition targeted a transnational audience, making it a unique satirical intervention from an Islamic country in the emerging transnational public sphere.

## The cartoon controversy

In the past decade Denmark, like other European countries, has witnessed a heated debate about migration and national identity. Denmark has always been homogeneous, with little ethnic or religious diversity, and it still has few immigrants by European standards. Although Muslims make up only about 3 percent of the Danish population (Hussain, 2000), the debate about immigration and identity has focused on this group. Since 2001, when Prime Minister Rasmussen formed a Centre-Right coalition with support of the controversial nationalist People's Party, Denmark has enforced what is generally considered to be the strictest immigration policy of all European Union (EU) Member States, leading to increasing political and ethnic polarization (Klausen, 2009).

*Jyllands-Posten*, the newspaper that published the cartoons, is a conservative-liberal newspaper that is generally sympathetic to the Centre-Right government. In September 2005, Fleming Rose, the culture editor, heard of writer Kåre Bluitgen's problems in finding an illustrator for his children's book on Muhammad's life. Rose saw this as another sign of growing self-censorship of materials potentially offensive to Muslims. In response, he invited cartoonists to 'draw Muhammad as they see him'.

The 12 cartoons filled a whole page of the newspaper, under the heading 'Muhammad's face'. In the middle of the page was an editorial introduction:

The modern secular society is rejected by some Muslims. They demand a special position, insisting on special consideration of their own religious feelings. It is incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where you must be ready to put up with mockery, ridicule and derision. It is certainly not always attractive and nice to look at and it does not mean that religious feelings should be made fun of at any price, but that is of minor

importance in the present context. It is no accident that people in totalitarian communities are thrown in prison for telling jokes or critically portraying dictators. This usually happens with the excuse that the work offends the feelings of the people. Denmark has still not gone this far, but the examples mentioned show that we are on our way to a slippery slope where no one can foretell where the self-censorship will end. That is why *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* has invited members of the Danish editorial cartoonists union to draw Muhammad as they see him. (Rose, 2005)

The cartoons surrounding this editorial were varied in style and content, ranging from sharply political to more lighthearted, with some even critical of the newspaper's initiative. The cartoon generally considered most offensive – which therefore has been reprinted most and is now the most famous – shows a bearded man with a bomb with a lighted fuse in his turban. On the bomb, in Arab script, is the Muslim profession of faith. Some other cartoons paint a violent image of Muhammad: one shows a wild-looking Muhammad with a beard and a drawn sword, his eyes covered by a black bar as if to conceal his identity, flanked by two veiled women; another portrays the Prophet with devil's horns.

Several of the drawings are more ambiguous. One image shows a man with a donkey, in a desert with palm trees; another a face with a turban, beard, star and the crescent moon. In one (rather funny) cartoon, Muhammad can be seen warning off suicide bombers at heaven's gate because they 'have run out of virgins'. In some cartoons, the Prophet is portrayed indirectly or not at all: a stylized drawing of veiled women with a rhyme about women's oppression; a drawing of a sweating cartoonist sketching a bearded man; a police line-up with the leader of the Danish people's party, the writer of the book about Muhammad, along with persons who could be Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. Another cartoon portrays a schoolboy called Mohammed in front of a blackboard with a text in Persian: 'The editorial team of *Jyllands-Posten* are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs.' Two cartoons criticize *Jyllands-Posten's* initiative as a 'PR stunt'.

Thus, taken together, the 12 cartoons are heterogeneous and quite ambiguous. Without the context of the editorial introduction and the other cartoons, some cartoons may not have seemed to be about Muhammad or Islam at all. It is the introduction that frames the issue unequivocally: as a matter of free speech versus religious censorship, a negation of the 'special rights' of Muslims and a defence of 'mockery, ridicule and derision'.

In the first months after publication, the cartoons attracted little attention outside Denmark. Although it has become commonplace in descriptions of this controversy to refer to the 'rage' of 'Muslim communities' in Denmark and beyond, the responses of Muslims in Denmark generally stayed within the limits of a liberal democracy: petitions, letters to editors, demonstrations and complaints filed in court. However, some of the cartoonists, especially Kurt Westergaard who drew the cartoon with the bomb, received death threats.

The controversy escalated in January 2006 when diplomatic and popular protests started in several – but by no means all – predominantly Muslim countries (Klausen, 2009; Kunelius et al. 2007). Governments of Muslim countries made formal protests, there were demonstrations in which Danish flags and embassies were set on fire and Danish goods were boycotted from Manila to Nigeria. Although estimates vary, more than 100 people have been killed, often shot by police during protests (Kunelius et al., 2007). The protests were set off by a tour of Danish imams rallying for support

throughout the Middle East. Responses in 'the West' were diverse as well, ranging from overwhelmingly supportive to critical. The cartoons were reprinted as a sign of support for *Jyllands-Posten* and free speech in virtually all the countries of continental Europe. However, responses in Australia, Canada, the UK and USA were generally more reserved. In these countries, there were no reprints in media of any significance.

Both in Western countries and in the Islamic world, the crisis was cited as proof of a clash of Islamic and Western civilizations. In the Muslim world, the cartoons were generally presented as yet another sign of Western disrespect for Islam. However, in Denmark and in most of (Western) Europe, the controversy was rooted in a more specific debate about Islam, national identity and modernity. In the past decades, the formerly homogeneous nation-states of Western Europe have become more ethnically and religiously diverse. This diversification, along with consolidation of the EU and increasing globalization, has led to heated debates about national identity in all Western European countries. Muslims, who make up a large proportion of new immigrant groups in most of Europe, became the focal point of these debates (Bowen, 2006).

A central opposition invoked in these debates is the opposition of modernity versus tradition. In secular Europe, adherence to religion is easily constructed as something of the past. Moreover, the family culture and treatment of women and gays in Muslim communities are felt to be at odds with modern individualism and egalitarianism. This image is reproduced in Rose's editorial: the framing as free speech pitted against religious intolerance highlights the putative incapacity of Muslims to deal with the central Enlightenment conception of free speech. Many tropes of non-modernity are present in the cartoons: oppression of women, strong religiosity, lack of emotional control and a tendency towards violence – exemplified by bombs, swords and wild-looking beards.

Modernity is also invoked on the other side of the debate. Critics of the cartoons portrayed their defenders as provincial and narrow-minded (Linde-Laursen, 2007). Here, modernity is equated with cosmopolitanism: a willingness to accept differences and see the relativity of one's beliefs. The cosmopolitan argumentation was dominant on the left of the Danish political spectrum, whereas defence of free speech – unlike in France or the USA – appears to have become a right-wing cause in Denmark.

There are uneasy alliances on both sides of this debate. Defenders of free speech have found themselves joining sides with nationalists arguing against the EU and immigration and for national pride and the supremacy of national culture. Cosmopolitans found themselves teaming up with groups arguing for traditional values such as the prohibition of blasphemy, and thus with people who did not see the relativity of their own viewpoints at all. Thus, appeals to modernity and Enlightenment – in both versions – were linked with appeals to more atavistic sentiments. Essentially, however, much of the public debate about the place of Islam in various European countries is a continuation of Europe's longstanding attempts to define modernity and thus itself.

## The cartoon crisis as humour scandal

As Rose's editorial introduction explains, the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* were an intervention in this debate about Islam in Danish society. In European countries such as

Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK, disputes about the cartoons were quickly incorporated into national debates resembling the Danish one. Outside Western Europe, the cartoons often ‘landed’ in different contexts, with an impact that *Jyllands-Posten* and Fleming Rose had neither sought nor expected.

The question I address here is how *cartoons* became the catalyst for this controversy. Why did Rose opt for cartoons to make his point about free speech and self-censorship? Why did cartoons, rather than more ‘serious’ news facts, cause such a stir? Moreover, the protests, once begun, swiftly attracted significant media attention, which suggests that *protests against cartoons* – rather than other protests in the Islamic world – struck a chord in the (western) media, setting off a cycle of news, more ‘mediagenic’ protests and more news.

I argue here that the humorous or satirical intent implied by the cartoon genre accounts, at least partly, for the cartoons’ potency in causing offence. The newspaper framed them explicitly as ‘mockery, ridicule and derision’, and many protestors seemed specifically stung by the fact that the images were cartoons. Around the world people are schooled in the visual conventions of global popular culture. People understand that cartoons are not ordinary images: they belong to a non-serious domain that is linked with fun and freedom, but also with ridicule and disparagement. Even if the cartoons were not necessarily funny (Lewis, 2008), the genre signals frivolity and irreverence. Furthermore, the cartoons were directed against the symbolically charged domain of religion – a risky field for humorists everywhere. In orthodox Islam (as in orthodox Christianity) the sacred is generally considered to be incompatible with non-seriousness.

Although humorous genres are known globally, humour is notoriously culture-specific. In different countries and contexts, people have different notions of what constitutes good humour and what is off limits to joking. In the *International Herald Tribune*, the Swiss Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan, who during the crisis emerged as the main spokesperson of moderate European Islam, wrote:

[I]n the Muslim world, we are not used to laughing at religion, our own or anybody else’s. This is far from our understanding. For that reason, these cartoons are seen, by average Muslims and not just radicals, as a transgression against something sacred, a provocation against Islam ... Muslims must understand that laughing at religion is a part of the broader culture in which they live in Europe, going back to Voltaire. Cynicism, irony and indeed blasphemy are part of the culture. (Ramadan, 2006)

Indeed, mocking religion is more common in Western than in Muslim societies. As Ramadan notes, many European societies have a long history of humour in the public sphere. Comedy and satire are central domains where social rifts are demarcated and played out (Lewis, 2006). All Western societies know ‘humour scandals’, public controversies about humour that ‘goes too far’, in which moral and political boundaries are made highly salient (Kuipers, 2006a: 134ff.). Many social movements have profiled themselves through humour and mockery (’t Hart and Bos, 2007), whereas others have manifested themselves through their objections to humour. For example, racist and sexist humour became a central battlefield for feminist and anti-racist movements.

Humour scandals revolve around humorous treatment of ‘sacred’ topics such as religion or royalty, immoral topics such as sex and nudity, or humour targeting excluded



groups. The Danish cartoons did two out of these three: targeting a sacred domain and a disadvantaged minority. The pictures and the rather belligerent commentary indicate that *Jyllands-Posten* was trying to provoke a scandal. At first, the controversy seemed to be exactly that: a good old-fashioned humour scandal, with public protests, a lawsuit, even attention from the foreign press.

Humour and satire are governed by 'humour regimes' (Kuipers, 2006b): unwritten rules stipulating who can joke about what. Humour regimes can be seen as specific discursive regimes (Foucault, 1980) governing a non-serious and irreverent communicative mode that does not always obey the rules of 'serious' discourse. The relation of humorous utterances to truth differs from normal discourse: they do not have to describe 'real' beliefs or intentions (Mulkay, 1988). As a result, things said or done in jest can be more insulting and degrading than normal communication. However, humour regimes are clearly bounded: they declare some topics off-limits and endow some with more rights to speak in jest than others. They silence people, too, by dictating that one 'should be able to take a joke'. Such regimes, like all regimes drawing social boundaries, are infused with power. Some taboos and some sensibilities are more valid than others. Humour scandals, then, highlight power relations.

By writing to newspapers, organizing demonstrations and going to court, Danish Muslims generally followed the 'procedures' of the local humour regime. In most of Europe, the controversy followed similar procedures, although sometimes with different outcomes. It was not until the scandal went global that the notion of satirizing the Prophet became violently contested. The cartoons were uprooted from a national public sphere with a well-established (though not uncontested) regime governing public humour, and transplanted into communities with different humour regimes, as Ramadan noted – but also into a conflicted and contested transnational public space less equipped to deal with humour scandals. What seemed a fairly typical humour scandal – a rite of media democracies everywhere – spun out of control.

## The politics of humour

However, the story does not end here, with the safe and rather smug conclusion that along with being free, democratic and secular, western societies have a tradition of satire whereas Islamic societies lack such a tradition. In stating that 'Muslims must understand that laughing at religion is a part of the broader culture in which they live in Europe, going back to Voltaire', Ramadan tried to strike a conciliatory note. Commentators were rather pleased to repeat this analysis, and the ensuing exhortation to Muslims to adapt to European culture, read Voltaire and get a sense of humour. Appeals to cultural difference also struck a chord with multiculturalists, who had been arguing for respect vis-à-vis Muslim culture all along.

Such an analysis contrasting the western satirical tradition with the lack thereof in Islamic cultures ends up reproducing a divide between western and Islamic cultures, ignoring the specific nature of the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* (Klausen, 2009). More importantly, it ignores the problematic and contested nature of the humorous domain, even in well-established public spheres of liberal democracies. Humorous communication is non-serious, making its purport fundamentally polysemic and easy to deny. In



addition, it is exclusive: while humour forms a bond between those who laugh together, at the same time it shuts out those who do not share that laughter. Therefore, humour scandals, while ubiquitous, are not necessarily harmless or without consequences.

### *Humour and non-seriousness*

As with all communication framed as non-serious, cartoons are fundamentally ambiguous. Humorous utterances are not to be taken literally: they cannot be translated directly into arguments, statements or other forms of communication with less tenacious relationships with truth or reality (Mulkay, 1988). This makes cartoons and jokes so effective in causing controversies: disputes about the meaning of humour can never be settled. Moreover, humour aims for emotional as well as cognitive responses: amusement and aesthetic pleasure, but also less lofty emotions such as pride, aggression, disdain, glee or scorn.

Despite the newspaper's explicit framing, many people's interpretations differed from the one put forward in *Jyllands-Posten*. The most sustained dispute was whether the cartoons were about Islam in general, or about certain aspects of Islam. In the transnational controversy the cartoons were usually considered to be about Islam as a whole. However, Rose and Westergaard disputed this interpretation. In doing so, they called into question the legitimacy of many objections against the cartoons.

In a contribution to the *Washington Post*, called 'Why I published those cartoons', Rose (2006) wrote:

The cartoons do not in any way demonize or stereotype Muslims ... One cartoon – depicting the Prophet with a bomb in his turban – has drawn the harshest criticism. Angry voices claim the cartoon is saying that the Prophet is a terrorist or that every Muslim is a terrorist. I read it differently: Some individuals have taken the religion of Islam hostage by committing terrorist acts in the name of the Prophet. They are the ones who have given the religion a bad name. (Rose, 2006)

Westergaard made a similar comment:

I have no problems with Muslims. I made a cartoon which was aimed at the terrorists who use an interpretation of Islam as their spiritual dynamite. (McLaughlin, 2008)

Such comments do not take into account the slippery nature of humour: even the cartoon's artist cannot authoritatively decide what its 'real' message is. There is no way to pin down the meaning of a cartoon and make it true for everyone. Yet at the same time, cartoons may acquire a fixed and very real meaning for specific persons – Westergaard, Rose, but also the people taking offence.

The problem of ambiguity is illustrated by Rose's description of his debate with Tariq Ramadan:

[T]he principal disagreement was clarified during an exchange about the famous cartoon depicting Mohammed with a bomb in his turban. Ramadan insisted that this cartoon was saying

that the Prophet was a terrorist. I replied that to me and the author of the cartoon it was about Muslims committing terrorist acts in the name of Islam and the Prophet. Ramadan rejected this interpretation and called on me not to ignore the perception of the cartoon by millions of Muslims. 'Thank you,' I said, 'You have just proven my point, that in a multicultural democracy one has from time to time to accept offense, because different groups, different believers and non-believers, will have different understandings of what can be said and published and what can not.' (Rose, 2007)

Rose and Ramadan's readings of the same cartoon differ. Moreover, they do not agree on the consequences of their dispute about the cartoons' meaning. Ramadan argues that people should acknowledge possible interpretations by others. In Rose's perspective, the ambiguity of the cartoons implies that there is no reasonable grounds for objection. Because people are bound to have different understandings of the cartoons, they have to 'accept offense'.

Non-seriousness provides people with the opportunity to deny some interpretations ('not demonizing Muslims at all'); or to try to fix other interpretations ('the Prophet is a terrorist'). However, there is no way to reach agreement on the meaning of a cartoon. Because it is framed as humour, it is possible to deny or disregard offended responses, even to deny any serious import at all: it's 'just a joke'. Like all non-serious communication, cartoons always leave room to deny meaning and escape accountability. Ultimately, this leads to deadlock or victory for the viewpoint of the loudest or strongest. This poses a problem in any public sphere – in Denmark, but even more within transnational public space, where interpretations are more diverse and opportunities for exchange of ideas rarer.

### *Humour and power*

A second reason for the contested role of non-serious communication in the public sphere is its relation to power. Laughing at something or someone defines it as outside the social order. Hence, humour and laughter often function as a social corrective (Bergson, 1999; Billig, 2005). Moreover, humour tends to follow social hierarchies: people generally joke 'downward' rather than 'upward' (Mulkay, 1988; Pickering and Lockyer, 2008; Speier, 1998).

The unwritten rules of humour in most western societies stipulate that humour in the public sphere should be 'upward' and 'inward'. This is encoded in the role of humorists and satirists: they are at the margins of the public sphere, in the slightly disreputable comic domain from which they aim their jokes and jibes at the centre, at those in power and their accepted truths. The archetype here is the jester who has the freedom (and the duty) to mock the king. This etiquette of public humour is exemplified by ethnic humour: although joking about excluded minorities is prevalent in the private spheres of all western societies, in the public domain, people make jokes about their own group or groups with higher or equal social status (Kuipers, 2006a).

The power politics of the Muhammad cartoons was criticized both in Denmark and in the global debate. These cartoons were created by members of a majority, mocking a minority group in a prominent national newspaper. Moreover, the cartoons mirrored global inequalities, with 'the West' (with Denmark its unusual representative) poking fun

at the Islamic world. Many critics saw this as insulting, inappropriate or even racist and anti-Islam. Several commentators, including former US President Clinton, drew parallels with anti-semitism. Rather than playing the part of the court jester, critics argued, *Jyllands-Posten* functioned as a guardian of the social order (Linde-Laursen, 2007).

Criticisms of the power dynamics of the cartoons were countered in different ways. The first response is exemplified again by Fleming Rose. In the contribution to the *Washington Post* cited earlier, he states:

We have a tradition of satire when dealing with the royal family and other public figures and that was reflected in the cartoons. The cartoonists treated Islam the same way they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. And by treating Muslims in Denmark as equals they made a point: We are integrating you into the Danish tradition of satire because you are part of our society, not strangers. The cartoons are including, rather than excluding, Muslims. (Rose, 2006)

Rose takes the traditional liberal view on equality: all people should be treated equally, regardless of background and status. Hence, all participants in Danish society are satirized equally, yet everybody is free to 'strike back' in equally insulting ways. This defence was brought up in many national debates, voiced by people of strikingly varied political positions. However, as I hope to show below, opportunities to joke and joke back are not divided as equally as this worldview assumes.

A second response to the criticism that the cartoons were inappropriate because they targeted an excluded group held that, in a global context, the cartoons did not target a marginalized underdog at all. Rather, they baited a dangerous global power, thus exposing the power and danger of Islam. In 2006, 12 well-known Islam critics, including Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Salman Rushdie, published a manifesto describing the crisis as 'not a clash of civilizations nor an antagonism of West and East ... but a global struggle that confronts democrats and theocrats' (BBC News, 2006). In this reasoning, the crisis must be understood not in the light of national ethnic relations, but of the agendas of radical European Muslims and totalitarian regimes in the Middle East. To sustain this argument, astute analyses are provided of how various parties used the cartoons to further their interests (Ammitzbøll and Vidino, 2007). However, these analyses often conflate Islam with fundamentalism, and European Muslims with political regimes in Muslim countries. Thus, these critics downplay or disqualify the objections of moderate Muslims, including the not particularly powerful Muslim minorities in Denmark and other European countries.

### *The conundrum of being laughed at*

The final problem of humour in the public sphere is that being laughed at leaves people with few elegant ways to respond. When laughed at, one can laugh along and probably feel bad about it, try to ignore it, or object and get angry and be accused of not having a sense of humour – a deadly reproach in Western societies. It is hard to deny the shift to a humorous frame without turning it into an embarrassing situation (Billig, 2005). Moreover,

being an object of laughter often causes an acute sense of exclusion and humiliation, almost akin to social paralysis (Bergson, 1999). This hampers people's ability to respond appropriately – let alone elegantly – to jokes at their expense.

The problem of the elegant response to humour is related to its power dynamics: the opportunity to react in a dignified manner depends on status. Laughing along with jokes at your expense, or ignoring them, is the typical response of those with little power. Often, people with higher status are not even aware that their downward jokes are not appreciated – as people in power often are the least reflexive about social hierarchies.

Objecting to humour is the strategy of groups with growing self-respect. Many social movements and anti-defamation leagues have objected to racist, ethnic and sexist humour. The classic example is the feminist objection to sexist humour. Traditionally, women have been portrayed as lacking a sense of humour (Gray, 1994). This stereotype reached its apex in the image of the humourless feminist, even becoming the subject of a joke:

How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?  
That's not funny!

This aptly summarizes the downside of protesting against jokes. Refusal to accept the comic frame is unpleasant and abrasive: people objecting to humour 'spoil the fun', show they 'can't take a joke' and thus 'have no sense of humour'.

The most dignified response requires more confidence and social resources: to joke back. To my knowledge, Danish Muslims have not attempted to respond to the cartoons in a humorous way during the crisis. Instead, satirical responses by Muslims have come from outside Denmark. The first satirical Muslim response I am aware of consisted of three cartoons published in February 2006 by Abu Jahjah, the Belgian chair of the Arab European League, claiming to show that 'Europe has its taboos too, though they are not religious taboos' (Belien, 2006). One cartoon showed Anne Frank in bed with Hitler; another showed Steven Spielberg asking Peter Jackson, director of the fantasy epic *Lord of the Rings*, for assistance with a Holocaust movie. Jackson responds: 'I don't think I have that much imagination, Steven – sorry.'

The Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* organized an international competition for the best Holocaust cartoon, with a similar legitimation: to show that Western societies also have topics that are off-limits to joking (Iran Cartoon, 2006). Contributions for this competition, which explicitly addressed international audiences, came from the Muslim world and from Brazil, France and Italy (Freeman, 2006; Slackman, 2006). The winning cartoon, by a Moroccan artist, was published in various western newspapers, including *Jyllands-Posten*. It shows a bulldozer with a Star of David building a wall in front of a mosque. On the wall, in black and white, is a picture of the Auschwitz railway station. The competition awarded several cartoons that are rather rough on western sensibilities: cartoons suggesting that the Holocaust is a myth or that the suffering of Palestinians is worse than the Holocaust. Moreover, the portrayal of Jews often draws on stereotypes of Jews considered to be quite painful in the West.

As these examples show, Muslim satirical responses came from people with access to the global public sphere from an institutional basis outside Denmark: a transnational organization and an Iranian newspaper. This is related not only to the practical issue of

access to the public arena, but also to the nature of humour. Joking back requires power, access and confidence. Moreover, detachment is required to come up with an alternative perspective, a humorous 'gestalt switch'. Here, this switch was the notion that westerners also have something too sacred to laugh about: the Holocaust. Emotional involvement and the social paralysis caused by ridicule often impede the detachment necessary for an alternative humorous view.

This is the conundrum of being laughed at: people who are the butt of a joke often cannot come up with anything more dignified than 'That's not funny' – a rather feeble response that leaves them wide open to the deadly reproach of not having a sense of humour. This conundrum is the result of three characteristics of humorous communication. First, the ambiguity of humour makes it possible to deny and escape the meaning of humorous utterances. Second, humour's connection to power excludes those who are not 'in on the joke', and tends to follow social hierarchies. Third, the pressing nature of the funny framing leaves people with few elegant ways to escape, disrupt or protest against this frame. To challenge jokes successfully requires power. This seems to have been the conundrum in which many Muslim observers of the cartoons have found themselves, in Denmark, Europe and the rest of the world. Their protests – whether lawful and polite, or violent and angry – led to the same conclusion: Muslims do not have a sense of humour.

## Modernity and the Muslim sense of humour

The cartoon controversy did not cause or create the belief that Muslims have no sense of humour. Rather, it was a dramatic articulation, with global impact, of an already emerging discourse about Muslim humourlessness. Here I can only describe some of the many examples I found of this discourse. For example, in 2006, the American comic Albert Brooks produced a movie called *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, about a comedian sent to India and Pakistan by the American president to find out what makes Muslims laugh. Clearly, such a title creates low expectations and the movie does indeed paint a bleak picture of the Muslim sense of humour.

The image of humourless Muslims also appears in Bruce Bawer's 2006 bestseller *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within*. He describes learning Norwegian as an American in Norway:

[T]he feeling of community in the classroom – a community that extended across barriers of generation, nationality and economic status. And, not least, religion: several of us were Christians; three (I think) were Muslim; one was Jewish. The Muslims, none of whom were fundamentalists, were easygoing and conspicuously Westernized. Yet they were the exceptions at Rosenhof. In classes down the hall, women in *hijab* sat with male relatives providing the family escort without which they were prohibited from leaving home ...

Our class was lively, irreverent, fun; as we learned Norwegian, we also learned about Norwegian folkways and gained insights into our own and one another's native languages and cultures. Our discussions brought into focus previously unexamined attitudes and assumptions

that our native cultures had bred into us; and as we recognized in all this the common foibles and follies of the human species, we laughed – laughed in easy self-mockery and laughed, too, in our celebration of the opportunity we'd been given to grow beyond our native cultures.

From the other classes we never heard the sound of laughter. (Bawer, 2006: 36)

Muslims have set out increasingly to defy this humourless image. The past years have witnessed the rise of Muslim comics in Canada, Europe and the USA. Internationally, the most successful is a comedy troupe of three American Muslims who toured North America and Europe with a show called 'Allah Made Me Funny' (see [www.allahmademefunny.com](http://www.allahmademefunny.com)), explicitly stating as their purpose to show that Muslims have a sense of humour.

In August 2008, the German Central Council of Muslims launched a well-publicized humour contest among young German Muslims. The website explains:

Be Muslim and funny? Is that possible? Muslims don't understand fun, are always serious and grim. Right? That, in any case, is the widespread image, that many people – and often we too – have of us. So it's no surprise that the question comes up: as a Muslim, can you laugh or even laugh *about* Muslims? Is that allowed? (<http://waymo.de/comedycontest>; author's translation)<sup>1</sup>

The contest invites Muslims to

shoot a funny video, make a Muslim joke, tell an authentic Islam-related experiences that had you rolling on the floor laughing, be one of the first Muslim comics, write a humorous song or draw a cartoon ... Fat prizes are beckoning. (<http://waymo.de/comedycontest/>)

As these examples indicate, this discourse of humourless Muslims exists in Europe and the USA. On both continents Muslims feel the need to disprove this stereotype. Clearly, not having a sense of humour is felt to be undesirable: but what does 'not having a sense of humour' imply in this case? First, the perceived Muslim lack of humour denotes social exclusion: a group without humour is a group that does not belong. Marginalized people often lack the power to initiate or respond appropriately to humour, leading others to see them as humourless. There is a parallel here with the other category said to lack a sense of humour: women. As feminist critics have pointed out, this is a common mechanism of social exclusion: the results of exclusion are constructed as personal shortcomings – humourlessness – while attributes of power are praised as individual quality: a sense of humour. (Gray, 1994)

Second, not having a sense of humour is associated with (strict) religiosity. There is a long tradition of animosity between fundamentalist religion and frivolous pastimes: Puritans closed down theatres, Calvinists forbade dancing, the Taliban banned music. In secular Europe, Muslims stand out for their overt religiosity and especially since 9/11, Islam is often conflated with fundamentalism. Hence, the Muslim lack of humour has come to be seen as a symptom of a more general opposition to fun associated with (fundamentalist) religion.

Finally, having a sense of humour is associated with modern personhood. As Wickberg (1998) has shown, humour has become central to western notions of personhood since the 19th century. It is now a desirable social attribute for everyone from potential spouses to political leaders. People even follow courses to develop their sense of humour (Lewis, 2006). In today's western societies, not having a sense of humour is not a trivial reproach, but a fundamental personal shortcoming.

Bawer's quote aptly summarizes the importance of humour to western personhood. Christians, Jews and 'conspicuously westernized' Muslims ('the exceptions') are irreverent, open and willing to laugh at themselves. He contrasts this with the veiled women and their escorts: grim people, whose lives are guided by religion, tradition and hierarchy, who never laugh. Humour encompasses many traits central to modern personhood: being a free, reflexive, self-controlled, socially flexible individual. Therefore, accusing people of not having a sense of humour indicates not only their social exclusion, but their unsuitability for modernity.

## Conclusion

### *The politics of humour in a transnational public sphere*

This article analysed the Danish cartoon crisis as a particular form of public controversy: a humour scandal. Such scandals are dramatizations of social divides. They demarcate group boundaries by highlighting moral and political oppositions – usually within societies, but in this case transnationally. Such controversies often lead to reordering of social positions: a realignment of power relations, strengthening of one paradigm at the expense of another, the emergence of new discourses and accepted truths. In this controversy, what was at stake was not only the relation between European 'natives' and Muslim immigrants, or between 'the Islamic world' and 'the West', but also the meaning of modernity. Does modernity imply the 'right to offend', or rather the obligation to put up with difference? Is modernity compatible with Islam? Can Muslims be part of a modern democracy?

Overall, this controversy seems to have strengthened the notion of fundamental incompatibility between Islam and the West, a 'clash of civilizations'. This is supported by the newly-emerged discourse about Muslims' lack of humour – or, in the milder phrase used by Tariq Ramadan, no 'tradition of satire'. Such interpretations frame the controversy in the light of fundamental cultural differences, thus obscuring its power dynamics. I have argued here that these power politics are central to this crisis: the non-serious, ambiguous nature of the cartoons made it almost impossible for (European) Muslims to respond in a dignified way.

The power dynamics of the cartoons were most fraught for Muslims in Denmark and the European countries where the cartoons were reprinted. In these countries, where Muslims are a small minority and humour has high status, the cartoons left them little room for elegant responses. In the Islamic world, showing anger at the cartoons clearly was not considered to be a sign of a problematic lack of humour. The public demonstrations of anger in Islamic countries were the outcome of different power dynamics. Here,



offence at the cartoons was the dominant (often officially supported) position. Being 'not amused' became a sign of strength.

Therefore, the 'winners' of the controversy are the people and parties in Europe arguing against immigration and Islam; the regimes and organizations in the Muslim world campaigning against the West, who used the cartoons to promote local interests; and radical Muslim organizations in Europe. The 'losers' of the cartoon crisis are first and foremost the majority of European Muslims, who found themselves powerless to effectively protest against the cartoons. In general, they played by the rules. Yet they found themselves silenced, stigmatized as being unfit for western society and lacking a sense of humour.

The analysis of this controversy has wider implications for the analysis of the public sphere. As the first transnational 'humour scandal', it highlights the emergence of a transnational public space (Fraser, 2007; McLaughlin, 2004). The controversy underlines the fragmented nature and complicated power dynamics of this transnational sphere. Governments as well as transnational institutions found themselves at a loss about procedures, spokespeople and responsibilities. Groups that are excluded in one place found powerful allies elsewhere. However, it took several months and intensive campaigning to bring the cartoons to the attention of international publics. The 'flow' of images from national to transnational public space is by no means automatic and unmediated. Rather, transnational flows depend on transnational power brokers and mostly nationally based institutions such as governments and newspapers (Klausen, 2009).

Most importantly, this analysis highlights the role of humour in the (transnational) public sphere. Scholarly work on humour in the public sphere often stresses its liberating and critical qualities. Authors working in the Habermasian tradition have turned to the work of Bakhtin (1984), celebrating the 'carnavalesque' as an alternative popular public sphere characterized by excess, mockery and inversion of hierarchies. Habermas describes the carnivalesque as 'the periodically recurring revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines' (Habermas, 1996: 427; cf. Gardiner, 2004). This alternative public sphere is reminiscent of the place of comedy and satire as it is commonly understood: a slightly disreputable, marginal domain from which comics and jesters mock those in power.

The Muhammad cartoons show that humour is not always confined to a marginal, alternative sphere. When humour is used in the 'official' public domain, as it was here, it becomes entwined with power and exclusion, drawing a sharp boundary between those who laugh and those who are not 'in on the joke'. As a non-serious and fundamentally ambiguous form of communication, humorous communication is slippery: potentially hurtful, hard to contest, easy to deny. Therefore, this article contributes to the recently emerged scholarly 'critiques of humour' (Billig, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Pickering and Lockyer, 2008). These critical accounts of humour do not deny the positive, pleasant, liberating and critical aspects of humour. However, they call attention to the dark side of humour, pointing to the elements of control and hostility which can be disguised in a jocular tone or a funny picture. With increasing transnational communication and intercultural exchange, the fields of humour, comedy and satire are becoming increasingly fraught. However, humour can be a force for good as well as evil.

Dealing with disparaging humour is one of the tasks that all emancipating groups must tackle. The most elegant solution also requires the most resources: joking back, and preferably in style. The harsh Holocaust jokes from Iran were an effective counter-attack, but did not exactly provide an opening for conversation. In this respect, the recent emergence of Muslim comedians all over the Western world is more promising: not because this shows that Muslims are 'integrated' or 'westernized', but because by using the humorous mode of communication, Muslim comics mark their increasing status and access to the public sphere. Because the humour of these comedians, in contrast with both the Danish and the Iranian cartoons, is inclusive: an invitation to laugh together, rather than a jibe aimed at silencing others.

## Acknowledgements

This article was made possible by grant 451-03-091 from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. Earlier versions of this article were presented at Vanderbilt University and the University of Amsterdam. The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions, to Joram Pach for his help with the Danish translations, and to Paul Lewis and Richard Lloyd both for their encouragement in writing this article and for their insightful comments.

## Note

1. The original link to this extract is now expired, but see also <http://islam.de/10255.php> and [www.ufuq.de/newsblog/154?task=view](http://www.ufuq.de/newsblog/154?task=view) (consulted 25 September 2010).

## References

- Ammitzbøll P and Vidino L (2007) After the Danish cartoon controversy. *Middle East Quarterly* 14(1): 3–11.
- Bakhtin M (1984) *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Bawer B (2006) *While Europe slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within*. New York: Broadway Books.
- BBC News (2006) *Writer's Statement on Cartoons*. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4764730.stm>.
- Belien P (2006) *War of the Cartoons*. Available at: [www.brusselsjournal.com/node/762](http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/762).
- Bergson H (1999) *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Los Angeles, CA: Green Integer.
- Billig M (2005) *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage.
- Bowen J (2006) *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves. Islam, the State and Public Space*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Foucault M (1980) Truth and power. In: Foucault M, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. New York: Random House, 109–133.
- Fraser N (2007) Transnationalizing the public sphere. In: Benhabib S, Shapiro I and Petranovich D (eds) *Identities, Affiliations and Allegiances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45–66.
- Freeman S (2006) *Iranian Paper Launches Holocaust Cartoon Competition*. Available at: [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article727849.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article727849.ece).
- Gardiner M (2004) Wild publics and grotesque symposiums. Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere. *Sociological Review* 52(supp. 1): 28–48.

- Gray F (1994) *Women and Laughter*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Habermas J (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas J (1996) Further reflections on the public sphere. In: Calhoun C (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 421–461.
- Hussain A (2007) The media's role in a clash of misconceptions: the case of the Danish Muhammad cartoons. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 12(4): 112–30.
- Hussain M (2000) Islam, media and minorities in Denmark. *Current Sociology* 48(4): 95–116.
- IranCartoon (2006) *The Results of Holocaust Cartoon Contest – 2006*. Available at: <http://irancartoon.com/120/holocaust/index.htm>.
- Klausen J (2009) *The Cartoons that Shook the World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kuipers G (2006a) *Good Humour, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kuipers G (2006b) The social construction of digital danger: debating, defusing and inflating the moral dangers of online humour and pornography in the Netherlands and the United States. *New Media & Society* 8(3): 379–400.
- Kunelius R, Eide E, Hahn O and Schroeder R (eds) (2007) *Reading the Mohammed Cartoons Controversy: An International Analysis of Press Discourses on Free Speech and Political Spin*. Bochum/Freiburg: Projekt Verlag.
- Lewis P (2006) *Cracking Up: American Humour in a Time of Conflict*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis P (ed.) (2008) The Muhammad cartoons and humour research: a collection of essays. *Humour* 21(1): 1–46.
- McLaughlin K (2008) *Danish Prophet Cartoonist Says Has No Regrets*. Available at: [www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSL2618773120080326?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0](http://www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSL2618773120080326?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0).
- McLaughlin L (2004) Feminism and the political economy of transnational public space. *Sociological Review* 52(supp. 1): 156–176.
- Linde-Laursen A (2007) Is something rotten in the state of Denmark? The Muhammad cartoons and Danish political culture. *Contemporary Islam* 1(3): 265–74.
- Lockyer S and Pickering M (2008) You must be joking: the sociological critique of humour and comic media. *Sociology Compass* 2(3): 808–820.
- Mulkay M (1988) *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Müller M, Özcan E and Seizov O (2009) Dangerous depictions. A visual case study of contemporary cartoon controversies. *Popular Communication* 7(1): 28–39.
- Lockyer S and Pickering M (eds) (2008). *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Ramadan, T (2006) Free speech and civic responsibility. *International Herald Tribune*, 5 February. Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/opinion/05iht-edramadan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/opinion/05iht-edramadan.html).
- Rose, F (2005) Muhammeds Ansigt. *Jyllands-Posten*, 30 September. Available at: [http://multimedia.jp.dk/archive/00080/Avisside\\_Muhammed-te\\_80003a.pdf](http://multimedia.jp.dk/archive/00080/Avisside_Muhammed-te_80003a.pdf).
- Rose, F (2006) Why I Published Those Cartoons. *Washington Post*, 19 February. Available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html).
- Rose, F (2007) *My Debate with Tariq Ramadan*. Available at: [www.pajamasmedia.com/flemmingrose/2007/10/18/my\\_debate\\_with\\_tariq\\_ramadan/](http://www.pajamasmedia.com/flemmingrose/2007/10/18/my_debate_with_tariq_ramadan/).
- Slackman M. (2006) Iran exhibits anti-Jewish arts as reply to Danish cartoons. *New York Times*, 25 August. Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2006/08/25/world/middleeast/25iran.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/25/world/middleeast/25iran.html).

- Speier H (1998) Wit and politics: an essay on laughter and power. *American Journal of Sociology* 103(5): 1352–1401.
- 't Hart M and Bos D (2007) (eds) *Humour and Social Protest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wickberg D (1998) *The Senses of Humour: Self and Laughter in Modern America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

### Biographical note

Giselinde Kuipers is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and (part-time) Norbert Elias Professor of Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She has published widely in English and Dutch on humour, media, popular culture and cultural globalization, and is the author of *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Mouton de Gruyter, 2006). Currently, she is writing a book about transnational humour for which she did fieldwork in four European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland.