

Spring 2006

Politics and Propriety in Oman: Omani Reactions to the Danish Cartoon Controversy

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Politics and Propriety in Oman:
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Asia, Oman, Muscat and Nizwa
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Oman: Diplomacy, Development and Identity, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2006

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Astract:

This paper investigates the unusually quiet reaction in Oman, in comparison to many other Muslim countries, to the Danish cartoon controversy in the spring of 2006. Through interviews with young adults, elites, members of the religious establishment, and the business community, the author demonstrates how people learned about the controversy and how their reactions were influenced by the economic and political concerns of the regime. The survey showed that the young adult survey respondents almost uniformly misunderstood the relationship between press and government in the West, and in Denmark in particular, and that they felt powerless to protest the perceived insults in any way other than the grass-roots organized boycott. He follows the progress of boycott and shows how the controversy was resolved, by investigating the reactions of local supermarkets and the Omani (government-controlled) press. The study proves that it was primarily the desire to maintain economic stability (and therefore a safe atmosphere for foreign investment) that led the regime to strictly control the public discourse on the controversy.

Keywords: Denmark, Islam, cartoons, Oman, boycott

Topic Codes: 111, 516, 521

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18 May 2006

Over the past few decades the internationalization of media has transformed the world in which we live. Brought on by both the technological revolution and globalization, this change has proven to have two significant and conflicting consequences. On one hand, it has had the power to bring people together. Today Indonesians with satellite television can watch Saudi Arabian coverage of the hajj and attempt to spot their kin from the masses encircling the Ka'ba. Meanwhile, farmers in Afghanistan can read a newspaper online, learn about the struggles of South American farmers and begin to empathize with their hardships. On the other hand, this transformation has had the power to tear the people apart. Events in one corner of the earth can spark the masses of another into upheaval. One culture's value of free speech is another's irreverence of God; cartoons in one place are blasphemy in another. For better and for worse, instances like these that have begun to influence the worldviews of people throughout the world. And, alas, it is the latter of the two hands that grips the headlines of the new internationalized media. Although instances of the media's power to divide people are bountiful, it is toward one example that we shall focus our attention: the recent controversy surrounding the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed and, particularly, how the crisis unfolded in Oman.

I. The Caricatures and the Controversy Beyond Oman

The cartoons were first published in the small Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 September 2005 as the winners of a competition. The contest arose after Kare Bluitgen, a Danish children's author, complained that he could not find an artist to depict the Prophet Mohammed in his upcoming illustrated book, because no one was willing to disobey the Muslim conviction prohibiting images of the Prophet.¹ In response to this call, the editorial board of *Jyllands-Posten* wrote that "we are on our way to a slippery slope where no-one can

¹ Asser, Martin. "What the Muhammed cartoons portray." 9 February 2006. *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4693292.stm> 24 March 2006.

tell how the self-censorship will end.”² *Jyllands-Posten* then invited “cartoonists to ‘draw the Prophet as they saw him,’ as assertion of free speech and to reject the pressure by Muslim groups to respect their sensitivities.”³ With this the floodgates opened and depictions of the Prophet poured in. In the end, 12 cartoons were published in the *Jyllands-Posten*; some being highly insulting, such as one portraying the Prophet Mohammed as a sword wilding assassin, and others being more humorous, such as one mocking Bluitgen for using the contest as a public relations stunt.⁴ Nevertheless, all were artistic renditions of the Prophet himself and thus in violation of Muslim conviction.

The caricatures immediately received an outcry from Muslim leaders in Denmark; however, they yielded little response from the rest of the Muslim world.⁵ In fact, on 17 October 2005 the Egyptian weekly *Al-Farj* republished six of the cartoons, wrote an article condemning them and predicted a public outcry. Despite this prediction and it being the first time the cartoons were published in the Muslim world, they stirred up little public response.⁶ They did, however, move ten ambassadors from Muslim countries to complain to the Danish Prime Minister on 20 October.⁷ For the cartoons to receive the public outcry *Al-Farj* anticipated would require a much more conscious effort on behalf of Muslim leaders in Denmark. It would require sharing their concerns to the leaders of the Muslim world.

Following the faint public reaction to the cartoons in Egypt, a group of Islamic leaders in Denmark decided to internationalize the issue. During the proceeding months a delegation of Danish Muslims went to the Middle East to meet with the region’s religious and political

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Reynolds, Paul. “Cartoons: Divisions and inconsistencies.” *BBC News Online*. 13 February 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4708216.stm> March 24, 2006.

⁶ Slackman, Michael and Hassan M Fattah. “Furor Over Cartoons Pits Muslim Against Muslim.” 22 February 2006. *The New York Times*, pp. A1.

⁷ “Muslim cartoon row timeline.” 19 February 2006. *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4688602.stm> March 24, 2006.

leaders.⁸ The delegation brought with them a 43-page dossier discussing the treatment of Muslims and their religion in Denmark.⁹ Within this document was a critical overview of Denmark's treatment of Islam, including the 12 cartoons originally published in the *Jyllands-Posten* in late September and, in addition to these, three extra, fraudulent¹⁰ cartoons that it claimed depicted the Prophet Mohammed.¹¹ These three additional cartoons were significantly more derogatory and hateful than the original dozen published in the Danish newspaper. The delegation found a ready audience for their case in the Middle East and their pamphlet quickly spread throughout the region.

After weeks of lobbying public leaders in the Middle East, the delegation would find their issue catapult into the international spotlight by a single statement. Their efforts landed the 43-page dossier in the hands of those attending the Organization of the Islamic Conference's (OIC) December summit in Mecca. Although the issue was not on the agenda of the summit, the OIC released a statement on 6 December condemning the cartoons, claiming that people were using the freedom of expression as a pretext to defame religion and calling for the United Nations (UN) to sanction Denmark.¹² With this statement the issue arose on the international scene. Following the OIC condemnation outrage in Muslim states became more public and the issue began to get coverage on state television stations.¹³ Although the statement alone did not mark the beginning of the international protest

⁸ Reynolds, Paul.

⁹ Full-text of the dossier is available on Wikipedia.org, see:

“Akkari-Laban dossier.” *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. 2006. Wikipedia Online. 5 May 2006. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akkari-Laban_dossier>

¹⁰ Numerous sources have suggested that one of the most widely circulated cartoons -- often referred to as the “pig cartoon” -- was, in fact, originally published in a French newspaper some years ago mocking a contestant in a pig squealing contest that is held each summer. See <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8959820>> for the original story.

¹¹ Reynolds, Paul. “A clash of rights and responsibilities.” *BBC News Online*. 6 February 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4686536.stm> 27 March 2006.

¹² Fattah, Hassan M. “At Mecca Meeting, Cartoon Outrage Cystallized.” 8 February 2006. *The New York Times*. pp. A1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

movement, it did immediately internationalize the issue and bring it to the attention of the Muslim masses. Over time the issue began to spiral out of control.

Protests soon erupted from Morocco to Indonesia. On 26 January 2005 the political cataclysm began when Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador to Denmark and Libya closed its embassy in Copenhagen. Four days later, the European Union's (EU) office in Gaza was raided by gunmen demanding an apology for the publication of the cartoons. On the 31 January the *Jyllands-Posten* apologized for the cartoons, while the Danish Prime Minister defended the right to freedom of expression. The following day newspapers in France, Italy, Spain and Germany republish the caricatures to assert their right to free speech. This initiated a pattern of republication and reaction, which became increasingly violent over time. On 4 and 5 February, the Danish embassies in Damascus and Beirut, respectively, were attacked by angered masses. In Beirut the Danish embassy, along with its Norwegian cohabitant, was burnt down. The next day the protests began to claim lives as five people died in protests in Pakistan and one in Somalia. The Iranian government then cut all ties to Denmark as protesters assaulted the Danish embassy in Tehran, subsequently prompting the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* to commence a mock contest where artists submitted cartoons portraying the Holocaust, Israel and America.¹⁴ This pattern continued throughout the rest of the month of February resulting in a political, economic and social crisis, deepening the chasm between the Western and Western worlds.

The events that took place unleashed many of the underlying tensions in various parts of the world. In many places the controversy caused social friction to erupt. Perhaps the worst instance of this was in Nigeria, where outrage over the cartoon resulted in feudal

¹⁴ All information for this paragraph was taken from: "Muslim cartoon row timeline." 19 February 2006. *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4688602.stm>. -This site has a timeline showing many of the significant events in the cartoon crisis.

violence.¹⁵ Christians in southern Nigeria slaughtered over 100 Muslims in retaliation to the murder of 18 Ibos Christians by Muslims infuriated by the cartoons in the northern part of the country.¹⁶ For days there was death and destruction as Muslims and Christians burned each others' homes, businesses, mosques and churches.

The controversy has also provided ammunition to Muslim extremist groups. In Syria and Iran, for example, many groups have used the cartoons as justification for the perception that the Western world is anti-Islamic and have tried to manipulate the issue to compliment their political ambitions.¹⁷ In Lebanon on 9 February a Shiite ceremony turned into a political display as thousands showed to protest the cartoons.¹⁸ Thus the controversy has underscored the contest between opposition movements and their governments.¹⁹ Sadly, the degree of the violence in the protest movement suggests that these groups have been quite successful in their efforts.

The fallout of the cartoon crisis has also revealed two characteristics about relationships among religions. Firstly, it has revealed that the international religious community has the ability to unite. A diverse array of religious leaders -- from the Pope to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani -- have unanimously renounced violence and called for a peaceful response to the cartoons. Secondly, the reaction has shown that the Muslim world has the ability to overcome its sectarian differences in the face of a threat to Islam. During a Friday sermon at the Grand Mosque in the holy city of Mecca, the Saudi preacher Saleh bin Humaid praised this newfound unity by saying "A great new spirit is flowing through the

¹⁵ Polgreen, Lydia. "Nigeria Counts 100 Deaths Over Danish Caricatures." 24 February 2006. *The New York Times*, pp. A8.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Mutual incomprehension, mutual outrage – Islam and free speech." 11 February 2006. *The Economist*, Special Report: US Edition.

¹⁸ "Muslim cartoon row timeline."

¹⁹ Slackman, Michael and Hassan M Fattah.

body of the Islamic nation. The world can no longer ignore the nation and its feelings.”²⁰

Nevertheless, calls by religious leadership for calm have proved to have little sway over the masses; the violent response seemed to be out of their control.

The crisis has also received a noteworthy response from both Western and Muslim governments. The response from Western governments was remarkably uniform. Most, including the US and Britain, have claimed that freedom of expressions is a right that comes with the responsibility to respect differences. In the West, some public opinion leaders retorted this by claiming that their governments failed to stand up for their fundamental beliefs by not asserting the artists’ and newspapers’ rights to freedom of expression. However, it seems that this response was aimed at giving Muslim moderates evidence that free speech is compatible with Islamic beliefs, thereby discrediting the position of Muslim extremists. In this sense Western governments used the issue as an opportunity to distinguish between Muslims who violently and peacefully responded to the controversy.²¹ By encouraging a moderate reaction Western governments hoped to lessen the perception that this crisis was clash of civilizations.

Even more significant were the Muslim governments’ responses to the crisis. Throughout these states the prevailing trend was to increase censorship of the media. Some pundits have suggested that many of the Arab regimes used these policies to establish their religious credentials.²² In Jordan, for example, King Abdullah responded so harshly to the republication of the cartoons in his nation that it threw back his allies. He claimed to be especially offended by the publications because of his direct descent from the Prophet.²³ In Saudi Arabia an entire newspaper was shutdown for reprinting a selection of the

²⁰ “Mutual incomprehension, mutual outrage – Islam and free speech.”

²¹ Reynolds, Paul. “A clash of rights and responsibilities.”

²² Slackman, Michael and Hassan M Fattah.

²³ Ibid.

cartoons.²⁴ In the end, eleven journalists in five different Muslim countries faced prosecution for publishing the cartoons.²⁵ Some scholars have also suggested that the controversy gave regimes justification for cracking down on Islamist opposition groups.²⁶ With the upheaval escalating, authoritarian regimes had an ideal opportunity to suppress their opposition in a manner that both suited Western interests and their own survival. Other experts have maintained that the same governments used the controversy as a scapegoat from domestic ills.²⁷ It provided an opportunity to refocus popular discontent on external enemies and away from a regime's failure to address issues such as unemployment and education. In sum, the Muslim regimes saw the media as fueling popular furor, providing justification for Muslim extremism and degrading Islam. Increasing censorship of the media was thus a win-win policy for Muslim governments.

The Muslim popular response to the cartoons was ultimately a boycott of Danish goods. In terms of popular participation the boycott was a resounding success. Arla Foods, a Danish dairy company said that the boycott had been "nearly total."²⁸ At the height of the boycott Arla Foods claimed to be losing \$1.5 million a day in exports to the Middle East. The tumultuous business environment caught Danish companies off guard. Unlike American businesses, Danish companies are not accustomed to international pressure and struggled to adapt to the Muslim boycott.²⁹ Many companies initially ran full-page advertisements in Middle Eastern newspapers asserting that Denmark respects all religions. This strategy quickly proved to be counterproductive by helping boycotters identify potential targets;

²⁴ Usher, Sebastian. "Saudi paper 'shut' in cartoon row." 20 February 2006. *BBC News Online*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4734500.stm> 5 May 2006.

²⁵ Slackman, Michael and Hassan M Fattah.

²⁶ Qureshi, Emran. "The Islam the Riots Drowned Out." 12 February 2006. *The New York Times*, pp. D1.

²⁷ Friedman, Thomas. "Empty Pockets, Angry Minds." 22 February 2006. *The New York Times*, pp. A19

²⁸ Pfanner, Eric. "Danish Companies Endure Snub by Muslim Consumers." 27 February 2006. *The New York Times*, pp. C1.

²⁹ Ibid.

therefore, companies began to take a low profile by removing logos and advertisements from products and publications throughout the Muslim world.³⁰ Perhaps the hardest hit company was Kuwaiti Danish Dairy. Although the company has not had an affiliation with Denmark for decades and is completely Kuwaiti owned and operated, the company's sales fell by 95% in some markets.³¹ It is also worth noting that some sectors of the Danish economy -- such as shipping and other services that do not directly interact with consumers -- have not been affected by the Muslim boycott.

All this evidence suggests that there was not one ultimate authority orchestrating the boycott, but rather that the campaign was largely conducted by individuals acting on their own personal convictions. This was most apparent in the quality of goods that were boycotted. These products tended to be consumer goods from companies with clear affiliations to Denmark. The most evident example of this was the substantial drop in sales felt by the Muslim company Kuwaiti Danish Dairy. From this perspective, the campaign did not seem to have the direction that comes with a well-defined leadership. For this reason I believe the controversy and the response it received says more about the personal convictions and values of individuals in the Muslim world than it does about the ability of organizations to galvanize the masses. Therefore, by studying the crisis in Oman we can shed light on some aspects of both the relationship between the Muslim and Western worlds and the inner-workings of Omani society. However, before we can venture toward the case at hand it is necessary to locate this study within a greater context. It is only after understanding the dynamics at work during past incidents that can one view the recent controversy in its entirety.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

II. Contextualizing the Controversy

Although the controversy over the Danish cartoons caught many off guard, there is a long and rich literature concerning the factors influencing such events and similar crisis that have occurred in the past. Much of this literature deals with the technological and information revolutions and how they are politically, socially and culturally transforming the world in which we live. There is also a great deal of information available pertaining to the nature of Islamic art and the prohibition of representations of the Prophet Mohammed and God. In addition to this, the Muslim world has been outraged, often galvanized, by the treatment of their religion in the Western world many times in the past and a significant amount scholarship has emerged to assess these particular cases. It is therefore necessary to consider and understand this body of information before we can come to view the recent controversy in the appropriate context.

One of the most researched topics relating to this controversy is the impact of the technological and information revolutions on the Muslim world. The full scope of this topic transcends the breadth of this essay; however, certain aspects of this scholarship can vastly contribute to our understanding of the issue at hand. The most fundamental consequence of this transformation is that as new communications technology becomes available to consumers of all backgrounds, the old asymmetrical balance of communication technology between the state and the public is reversed.³² Innovations such as faxes, compact discs and video-recorders permit individuals to become the disseminators and makers of information, not mere recipients. Thus state monopolies on the flow of information are diminishing and individuals are becoming increasingly globally conscious and interconnected. Information no

³² Eickelman, Dale F. and Jon W. Anderson. 1999. "Redefining Muslim Publics," pp. 1-18 in: Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Eds.) *New Media in the Muslim World: The emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. p2.

longer flows vertically from a decision-making elite to the masses of society, but rather horizontally within the masses themselves.³³

The proliferation of this information technology has subsequently transformed the characteristics of Muslim publics throughout the world. By undercutting traditional conceptions of authority it allows the masses to determine what it means to be and live as a Muslim does in a modern world. As shown by Dale Eickelman, the proliferation of this technology is “among other consequences, helping to alter the way large numbers of Muslims, in [rural Oman] and elsewhere, think about themselves, their religion and their politics.”³⁴ Individuals are no longer solely embracing the beliefs espoused by religious and political authority, but instead are becoming increasingly aware of contemporary issues and interpreting them in their own personal manner. The spread of modern technology and information and the ensuing collapse of traditional structures of religious authority prompt Eickelman to assert, “Islam has been democratized.”³⁵ Although this may be a premature assertion, it is clear that the information and technological revolutions are transforming notions of authority.

In addition to this, the technological and information revolutions have resulted in the internationalization of the media. Individuals today have access to media sources and ideas from all walks of life, are therefore exposed to formerly inaccessible facets of other civilizations. As geographic, linguistic, political and cultural divisions cease to be barriers to the flow of information, individuals are forced to rethink their role in both society and the

³³ Norton, Augustus Richard. 1999. “The New Media, Civic Pluralism and the Slowly Retreating State,” pp. 19-28 in: Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Eds.) *New Media in the Muslim World: The emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. p21.

³⁴ Eickelman, Dale F. 1998. *Mass Education, the New Media and Their Implications for Political and Religious Authority*. Abu Dhabi, UAE: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. p6.

³⁵ Eickelman; 1998, p14.

world. Populations are consequently becoming more globally conscious. In regards to the impact of this transformation on the Muslim world Eickelman notes:

A new sense of public is emerging throughout the Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contests over the use of symbolic language of Islam. New and accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global, so that even local issues take on transnational dimensions.³⁶

It is this combination of changing factors -- nature of authority, the flow of and access to information and the characteristics of publics -- that has allowed the information and technological revolutions to have such great impact on world events. It is this shift that has ultimately made it so that, as Eickelman puts, "local issues take on transnational dimensions." In light of recent events this statement seems to be nearly a fact. Events in an obscure Danish newspaper have brought the masses of the Muslim world to upheaval.

Although I am not quick to pronounce the triumph of information and technology over the hierarchical nature of Muslim religious and political authority, I do believe that this assertion beckons further quantification. An important aspect of this study is, therefore, to determine to what extent the attitudes and behavior of individual Muslims concerning the controversy was shaped by personal convictions rather than by the direction of authority. With this dynamic in mind it becomes important to review the Islamic convictions most directly related to the controversy at hand.

It is quite apparent that Muslim convictions played a significant role in the events that unfolded. To begin, the cartoons were an immediate violation of Muslim principles in that they were artistic renditions of the Prophet Mohammed. Images are strictly prohibited by the Qur'an and pictures of the prophets or God are considered the most severe violation of this prohibition.³⁷ Not only were the Danish cartoons images of one of Islam's holiest figures

³⁶ Eickelman; 1998, p16.

³⁷ Gocer, Asli. 1999. "A Hypothesis Concerning the Character of Islamic Art." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Volume 60, Number 4, October 1999, pp. 683-692. p683.

and an infringement of Islamic law, they were also extremely derogatory and insulting to the faith as a whole. However, what accounts for these convictions and gives Islamic art its unique character?

There is a rich scholarship concerning Islamic aesthetics, especially regarding the prohibition of images. As noted above, there are many Qur'anic verses that are used to substantiate the claim that images are not permissible; however, only one verse directly addresses the issue:

And [mention, O Muhammad] when Abraham said to his father Azar, "Do you take idols as deities? Indeed, I see you and your people to be in manifest error."
(6:74)³⁸

This verse strikes at the root of the theological prohibition. It illuminates the fear that such images could become the focus of worship and subsequently transform into the deity itself in the mind of the beholder. To the Muslim, figurative representations are to be avoided because they run the risk of equating imperfect human creativity with divinity. This rejection of pictorial art is also justified in the belief that the qualities of God must be replicated in art.³⁹ Unlike painting and other similar art forms, which are bound to human talent and thus error, Islamic art attempts to come as near to perfection as human ability permits. As a result, Muslim art tends to consist of mathematic and natural patterns. Muslims theoretically justify this art form on the basis that artistically producing mathematical perfection is emulating the qualities of God.⁴⁰

Another Islamic art form is the calligraphy of Qur'anic verses. Duplicating passages of the Qur'an is seen as theologically just because it is reproducing the words of God in an

-The most frequently quoted passages are 34.12, 3.42, 5.92, and 6.74; however, as one scholar asserts that these are "post facto justifications" (Gocer; 1999, p692).

³⁸ The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meaning. 1997. Abulqasim Publishing House. Translated by Saheeh International: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

³⁹ Gocer; 1999, p690.

⁴⁰ Gocer; 1999, p691.

eloquent manner. In calligraphy, as in mathematics, there is minimal room for human manipulation and, as a result, minimal potential for error. As show by Asli Gocer, these considerations lead Muslims to conclude that “art that is not theologically reflective is metaphysically vacuous and morally pernicious, and hence it has no place in good society.”⁴¹ In Islamic societies, figurative art represents both a potential deviation from and threat to its theological pillars. Consequently, art that most accurately portrays the qualities of God and has the least potential for theological deviation is most permissible in Muslim societies.

In addition to this, Islamic beliefs regarding the Prophet Mohammed also played a significant role the behavior of individuals during the cartoon crisis. There is a considerably large and detailed history concerning the relationship between Muslim principles and the life of the Prophet Mohammed. The Sunna and Hadith, for instance, are both compilations of the acts and deeds of the Prophet during his lifetime and are used as primary sources when formulating Islamic law.⁴² The Prophet Mohammed is seen as Islam’s exemplary figure and his emulation is regarded as most virtuous. The exalted life and deeds of the Prophet are pillars of Muslim society and the cartoons threatened their credibility. As with any well-revered leader, assaults on their character quickly manifest into assaults on the populations that follow them. In light of this it comes as no surprise that the Danish cartoons galvanized the Muslim masses.

Regrettably, this is not the first Western-Muslim debacle. The record of the Western-Muslim relationship is as laden with conflict -- military, economic, cultural and otherwise -- as nearly any other relationship in history. For our present purposes it is therefore necessary to survey some of the past controversies between the two parties over the propriety of expression and the treatment of religion. From disputes over the *Jerry Springer Show* to the

⁴¹ Gocer; 1999, p690.

⁴² Esposito, John L. 1998. *Islam: The Straight Path*. New York, NY; Oxford University Press. pp 77.

Dutch film *Submission* (2004), numerous comparisons have been made between past controversies and the recent incidents surrounding the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. Although much can be learned from studying each instance, I believe that it is most important for this study to focus on the events that are most similar to the recent controversy: impacted by the internationalization of the media, Muslim convictions and the environment that they emerged into.

One of the first instances a publication provoking a debate of global scope was in the late 1970s. This was the controversy surrounding the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said.⁴³ The book itself is the author's assessment of Middle Eastern studies in the United States; yet the controversy it ensued marked a turning point in the nature of the conflict between the Muslim world and the West. As shown by Sadiq Jalal Azm, the debates that proceeded were "universal and encompassed all of the globe, transcending geographic, cultural and linguistic borders."⁴⁴ For the first time Western treatment of the East had caused a transnational dispute; however, this controversy never would have rose to such a large scope and degree had it not been for the role of the media in internationalizing the issue. It would be nearly ten years before an incident would match the severity of the cataclysm caused by *Orientalism*.

Perhaps the most similar controversy to the one at hand was the fiasco surrounding Salman Rushdie's book *Satanic Verses*. Published in the late 1988, the book suggested that during the Prophet Mohammed's time in Mecca, before the Hijra, he had received a revelation from Satan permitting him to compromise with the polytheists of his own tribe.⁴⁵ Even though the controversy over this portion of the Sura of the Star is widely acknowledged

⁴³ Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

⁴⁴ Azm, Sadiq Jalal. "The Satanic Verses Post-Festum: The Global, The Local, The Literary." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Volume 20, Number 1&2, 2000, pp. 44-66. pp. 44.

⁴⁵ Rushdie, Salman. 1988. *The Satanic Verses*. London, England: Viking publishers.

and dealt with in Muslim scholarship, Rushdie's rendition of the event received a worldwide response.⁴⁶ The timing of the controversy was also significant. The book was published both at the end of the Cold War and preceding the UN brokered peace agreement to end the Iran-Iraq War. For our present purposes, several aspects of the Rushdie affair are worth further consideration.

Firstly, the media played a profound role in the escalation of the crisis. Following the publication of the novel, the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini came out against it by issuing a message to the Muslims of the world which called for the death of Rushdie and his publishers.⁴⁷ Despite the fact that the Iranian press merely called the statement a message (*payâm*), as the story hit the international press two French scholars, Oliver Roy and Gilles Kepel, began to write about the issue calling it a fatwa.⁴⁸ This terminology subsequently spread amongst the international press syndicates, thereby inadvertently transforming the issue into a transnational political, cultural and religious crisis. Although much has been made of Khomeini's statement, the interests it served and the reaction received, one thing remains certain: the international media's treatment of the issue enabled it to demand global attention, which perpetuated the crisis.

Secondly, there was a distinctive response to the Rushdie affair in the Arab world. The riots, property destruction, murder and hate speech that occurred in the West, non-Arab Muslim states and in states with substantial Arab minorities was non-existent in the Arab world.⁴⁹ There were neither popular calls for the death of Rushdie nor attempts to fulfill Khomeini's "fatwa."⁵⁰ The affair never became an issue of the street; popular galvanization never occurred. Above all, in Arab states the debate remained within the intelligentsia.

⁴⁶ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p58-60.

⁴⁷ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p54.

⁴⁸ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p55-56.

⁴⁹ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p63.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Interestingly enough, much of the Arab non-political elite was in support of Rushdie. They empathized with the hardships he had come under following the publication of his novel and understood the religious and political forces at work. Thus the issue remained largely an elite affair in the Arab world.

Finally, there was a significant interplay between the crisis and Arab politics. The issue emerged on the international scene shortly after the conclusion of both the Iran-Iraq war and the Cold War. With this in mind, some saw Khomeini's statement as an attempt to assume the leadership of Islam in the post-war environment.⁵¹ The fact that the crisis was perpetuated by the statement of a Shiite political leader caused the issue to fall into the context of the Sunni-Shiite dispute. As a result, it was in the interest of many Sunni Arab leaders to downplay the issue, because it decreased the threat that Khomeini would fulfill his ambitions. Additionally, some saw the event as a Zionist-Western ploy to sow Sunni-Shiite dissent. By questioning the sincerity of Mohammed's intentions some Sunni Muslims perceived the novel as suggesting the Ali was, in fact, the rightful prophet.⁵² In view of the political environment the issue emerged into, it is understandable that many attempted to downplay the issue in the Sunni Arab world.

When considering the recent controversy over the Danish cartoons much is to be learned from the scholarship already available. Lessons from the Rushdie affair, other events in the past, Muslim convictions and the impact of the technological and information revolutions on the Arab world all shed a great deal of light on the reactions it received. For these reasons, I shall continue to draw from the information presented above throughout the analysis of the current affair. In conclusion, it must be said that, as Azm asserts:

[A]s existing Arab societies reach out for development, seek economic progress, acquire scientific technical skills and, in the process, shed the old

⁵¹ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p64.

⁵² Ibid.

paradigm, Rushdie-like cases will continue to arise -- big and small, local and pan-Arab -- with a regularity approaching that of a natural law.⁵³

In this sense the current controversy is a magnified continuation of a long chain of similar incidents. It is only unique in timing, not substance. Therefore, to explain where we stand today we must understand where we stood yesterday. With this in mind, it is now time to investigate the Omani reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy.

III. Methodology

The aim of this study is to determine how various groups in Oman responded to the recent Danish cartoon controversy and why. Or, to put it more specifically, to address the controversy from a number of different perspectives in order to shed light on the similarities, differences and relationships among the reactions of different groups in Oman. Accordingly, I approached this study with a variety of research methods. To do this I divided my research into two general groups. The first consisted of the local professionals -- namely government officials, the Danish consulate, religious leaders and retailers -- that were most directly involved with the cartoon controversy. The second group consisted of young Omani males ages 15 to 22. Although it would have been preferable to have the time and resources to survey a much larger sample of the Omani population, I believe that by focusing on a much more specific group I was able to yield a more accurate representation of the reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy within a shorter period of time. Furthermore, the demographic selected is the one that I have the most access to and the one that is the most likely to speak out about the issue at hand.

In researching the reaction of local elites I used numerous research methods. All research was done through either fieldwork or semi-structured interviews with the local elite.

⁵³ Azm, Sadiq Jalal, p65.

My fieldwork consisted of anything from going to local stores to see if they sold Danish butter to reading online newspapers and postings. By doing this I was attempting to find measurable, empirical sets of data that would accurately represent the breadth of the Omani reaction. I also interviewed a number of local professionals involved with the controversy. For each interview I would prepare a set of questions appropriate for the individual's position. My hope was that these questions would provide some direction to the interview rather than dictate its emphasis. The aim was thus to allow the informant to provide the information that he or she deemed most important and for me to simply get out of the way and record. On occasion, local sensitivities proved to be a hindrance to the success of this semi-structured format in which case the interview would take on a more formal structure.

In researching the second group I used a similar methodology. As with this local elites, the aim of each interview was to allow the informant to express what he believed was most important to this issue. However, unlike the first group, the Omani youth were given a much more structured interview. Each informant was asked the same 29 questions in the same order (see Appendix A for interview questionnaire). These questions were divided up into four distinct sections: general information, the cartoons, the boycott and the outcome. Each section is aimed at determining specific perceptions of and experiences with the given topic. By presenting the informants with the same questions I could get a better sense of the differences and similarities of opinion and experience within the group. Furthermore, the standardized interview allowed me to probe the informant about a number of topics in a manner that was consistent throughout the research period. This method enabled me to most accurately see the commonalities and differences among the informants' experiences and perceptions.

Considering the sensitive nature of my topic, I was bound to confront a number of obstacles during my research. The most immediate dilemma I faced was finding informants.

Many of the individuals I approached for interviews initially saw my study with a great deal of skepticism. Unfortunately, many people refused to talk to me or would and then refuse to answer many of the interview questions. On one occasion I was even accused of being a Danish spy!⁵⁴ Once this obstacle was evaded I still came into a number of dilemmas.

First of all, there was always the fact that many of the informants perceived my inquiries as threatening. To resolve this dilemma I tried to frame my study in a manner that was as neutral and constructive as possible. Secondly, the nature of my interviews also made them prone to the deference and expectancy effects. Informants were both apt to answer my questions in a manner that they believed I desired and in a manner that I had shaped through the interview process. To avoid these potential dilemmas I attempted to frame the interviews in a manner that revealed as little as possible about what my opinions are and what I expected to hear. When informants would ask me for my opinion on a given issue I would defer until after the interview was complete so that my answer would not impact their responses. Finally, during a few occasions I experienced trouble with the impact of a third-party on the interview process. This dilemma was resolved by simply adjusting the location of the interviews to a more private setting. Fortunately, this solution worked resoundingly well. In the end, I would like to emphasize that although no social study can be conducted without researcher bias, I did try my best to limit the impact of my own position on the outcome of my research.

IV. Caricatures of the Omani Reaction

When attempting to understand the Omani reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy I believe it is best to look at the issue from the top-down. This is because the views of individuals within a society are largely shaped by the political, economic and social

⁵⁴ Abdul Lateef, Department Head of Consumer Goods at Carrefour, Personal Notes, 25 April 2006.

circumstances in which they live. Therefore, it is only after understanding the strategies with which the government, local elite and the business sector used to handle the issue that one can draw an accurate picture of the perspectives and experiences of a population. Then, with both in hand, one can paint a picture of the issue in its entirety.

Section 1: The Omani Elite and the Caricatures of Controversy

To fully comprehend the Omani response to the Danish cartoon controversy one must understand the reaction of the Omani elite. The Omani government, media, business and religious communities' reactions add an important dimension to our discussion of the Omani response. The response of the Omani elite played an important role in the crisis as it unfolded, because their actions helped to create the environment in which the perceptions of the Omani youth were formed. As we shall see, the efforts of the local elite were predominately aimed at minimizing the escalation of the controversy in Oman and securing economic interests by diminishing popular dissent.

Surprisingly, neither the Omani government nor the Omani religious community were involved with the Danish cartoon controversy. Speaking on behalf of the Omani government Dr. Mohammed al-Ansari, Assistant Secretary General for Session Affairs at the Majlis Al-Sura said that "Although I think many people felt strongly about the issue, the government made no public statements and did not get involved with the situation."⁵⁵ Sheikh Khalfan bin Mohammed Al-Esry confirmed this assertion and added that the religious community did the same; "The government did not interfere or intervene. The same goes from a religious angle, they did not get involved."⁵⁶ Moreover, when asked if he ever mentioned the controversy in his sermons Sheikh Khalfan Al-Esry went on to say, "Yes, I told them it was a stupid idea,

⁵⁵ Dr. Mohammed al-Ansari, Assistant Secretary General for Session Affairs for the Majlis Al-Sura, Personal Notes, 26 April 2006.

⁵⁶ Sheikh Khalfan bin Mohammed Al-Esry, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

because it is running away from the reality, it is merely a boycott of convenience.”⁵⁷ When pressed on what he meant Sheikh Khalfan Al-Esry continued, “The boycott does not do anything to fix the source of the problem. How do you love the Prophet?” he rhetorically asked, “You emulate his way of life. The Prophet never would have initiated a boycott.”⁵⁸ Although Sheikh Khalfan Al-Esry may have publicly addressed the issue, his message advised against popular action in the form of a consumer boycott. Instead, he encouraged Omanis to respond to the Danish caricatures by emulating the life of the Prophet Mohammed and his deeds, which he argued would discredit the message the cartoons conveyed far better than any consumer boycott.⁵⁹

The Danish Consulate in Oman had a similar reaction to the controversy. When I met with Anwar Ali Sultan, the Danish Consul-General, he was quick to summarize the environment in Oman in the following manner:

Oman, unlike other nations in the Muslim world, had a very quiet reaction to the cartoons. No one was in the streets protesting. No one behaved violently. People only peacefully boycotted Danish goods. As a result, the Omani government and the Danish government did not have to do anything, because there was nothing to be done.⁶⁰

Furthermore, when asked about how Danish companies operating in Oman were advised to respond to the crisis the Consul-General replied, “There are no Danish businesses in Oman, so no Danish companies had any problems.”⁶¹ Although this statement is blatantly untrue (Cowi & Partners LLC, Nawras, Larsen A&CE, and Maersk Oil Oman BV, for example, are all Danish owned and operated and are some of the largest companies in Oman),⁶² it reveals that the Danish government had a strategy akin to that of the Omani government and religious community. It neither took a proactive stance nor even went so far as to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Anwar Ali Sultan, the Danish Consul-General, Personal Notes, 25 April 2006.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

acknowledge the situation. In a way, all three parties seemed to be abiding to the English cliché, “Out of sight, out of mind.”

The Omani media’s treatment of the controversy is also worthy of consideration. At the international level, the Omani people had access to the same information as every other individual with a satellite television. Omanis were just as conscious of the events occurring throughout the world as any other person who is keeps track of the world around them. However, the story greatly differs when it comes to the media coverage of the controversy as it unfolded in Oman. In Oman there was scant coverage of the events that occurred. Throughout all of my research I was only able to find two articles dealing with the Omani response to the Danish cartoon controversy. Perhaps this was result of my basic comprehension of the Arabic language which limited my research to English publications; however, considering how widely spoken English is in Oman -- for instance, there is a royal decree saying that all signs must be in English as well as Arabic -- I believe that any information published in Arabic about this issue would have also been published in English.

Both the articles I found happened to be from the *Times of Oman* and published in early February. The first article, entitled “Companies dealing in Danish products worried” (1 February 2006), is worthy of extensive consideration. It is the first article published about the controversy in Oman and despite its short length, is very telling of how the issue was framed within Oman. For this reason, I feel a large portion of the article deserves explication.

Although there has been no official move to boycott Danish items, especially in the wake of the apology by the Danish publication’s editor, those dealing in Danish products still fear the worst: a backlash from the consumers.

However, others like Khalid Ehsan, country manager, Arla Foods (Lurpak–Puck cheese), spoke on a positive note. He highlighted the positive

movements following the fallout after the cartoon was published and noted that the situation would ameliorate in a short span.⁶³

Considering that all news coverage of events in Oman are provided by an agency within the Ministry of Information, the Omani News Agency (ONA), I view the Omani press coverage of the Danish cartoon controversy as an extension of the Omani government's will. It therefore comes as no surprise how remarkably well this quotation fits into strategy of downplaying the issue. To begin, this article was published on 1 February 2006, which is during the first days of the crisis's escalation and the day following the Danish government's initial apology. Secondly, the article notes the apology by *Jyllands-Posten* and qualifies "a backlash from the consumers" and the "worst" fear of Danish companies. It also goes on to present Arla Foods in a positive light. Despite the looming disaster, the company's country manager is said to have "highlighted the positive movements following the fallout...and noted that the situation would ameliorate in a short span." This degree of optimism astounds me. The favorable tone of the article is hardly what I would expect from a Muslim state press. I also find it extremely significant that in the first article published in the Omani press about the issue there is mention of both an apology by the Danish government and of the positive aspects Arla Foods, a primary target of the consumer boycott. The latter article compliments these observations.

The second article, entitled "SQU students rally against blasphemous caricatures" (5 February 2006), has the same connotations as the first. The article begins by saying that nearly 100 Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) students gathered to protest the Danish caricatures portraying the Prophet Mohammed.⁶⁴ The article notes that the students "not only

⁶³ "Companies dealing in Danish products worried." 1 February 2006. *Times of Oman*.
<<http://www.timesofoman.com/newsdetails.asp?newsid=25163>> 5 May 2006.

⁶⁴ "SQU students rally against blasphemous caricatures." 5 February 2006. *Times of Oman*.
<<http://www.timesofoman.com/newsdetails.asp?newsid=25328>> 5 May 2006.

strongly denounced the cartoons, but also stressed the need to act against the blasphemy.”⁶⁵

The article also mentions that leaflets have been dispersed throughout the country and suggests that there is a desire to formally ban Danish products in Oman.⁶⁶ However, the article’s focus quickly shifts. The article goes on to highlight the struggles of two companies, Nestle and Ferrero, to clarify the fact that they are not Danish.⁶⁷ Although the article’s varied tone and sudden shift in focus make it problematic to make assertions, I still believe that the final sentences of this article address the controversy in the same favorable tone as the prior one.

Considering that this issue was both a religious matter and highly politicized at the international level, I find the religious and governmental responses worthy of further consideration. In my opinion, each of these parties appear to be downplaying the issue in Oman. Although one can only speculate as to why this may be the case, it seems probable that a number of interests were served by pacifying the Omani reaction. As suggested by Said Al-Harhi, Press Secretary for the Embassy of the United States of America:

Danish business has a lot of influence in the Omani government and economy. Denmark is very involved with the airport, telecommunications and even the dairy industries. As a result, to protect the Omani economy from any hardships the Omani government tried to be quiet and downplay the event in Oman.⁶⁸

Moreover, one local Imam, who wishes to remain anonymous, confirmed that the Omani government instructed imams not to discuss the Danish cartoon controversy during Friday prayer.⁶⁹ Consequently, “No Imams in Oman said anything about the controversy” and the religious community never got involved.⁷⁰ The statements of the Danish Consul-General also seem to downplay the issue. For instance, by asserting “There are no Danish businesses

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Said Al-Harhi, Press Secretary for the US Embassy in Oman, Personal Notes, 22 April 2006.

⁶⁹ Local Imam, Personal Notes, 10 May 2006.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

in Oman,” the Consul-General nullified the possibility of protest by eliminating any potential targets. In my opinion the policy of downplaying the controversy in Oman had two distinct aims. Firstly, as noted above, it secured local economic interests tied to Denmark business and, secondly, it decreased the likelihood that Oman would experience the mass upheaval seen in other nations throughout the region. Furthermore, by remaining so uniquely pacified Oman would reinforce its image as a beacon of stability in a tumultuous region and provide further justification for the notion of Omani exceptionalism.

The Omani business community also had a noteworthy response to the cartoon controversy. In fact, the business sector’s response to the controversy was so complex and multifaceted that I believe that it is deserving of a study of equal, if not greater, volume. However, for our purposes it is only necessary to summarize the important aspects. The response by the business sector in Oman was not significantly different than the responses discussed in section I of this paper. The Danish companies in Oman most severely impacted by the crisis were Danish food producers. For the most part these companies tried to take a low profile or, if possible, publicize their connection to Oman. Santop juice, for example, is a locally produced Danish product. As the crisis escalated Santop put the label of the Omani Products Campaign on its beverages in an attempt to highlight its connection to Oman.⁷¹ Other companies, such as Arla Foods, worked through various international Muslim organizations to improve their public relations.⁷² Over time this strategy proved to be successful as their products found their way back on to the shelves of retailers in Oman.⁷³

The reaction of Omani retailers is also significant. This group’s response was predominately aimed at maximizing their credibility with their Omani customers. Most did this by taking a very proactive stance on the controversy by acting on their customers’ behalf.

⁷¹ Khalid Saeed Al-Shuaibi, Head of Executive Office for Omani Products Promotion Campaign, James O’Mealia’s Personal Notes, 23 April 2006.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

For instance, Abdul Lateef, Department Head of Consumer Goods at Carrefour, said, “immediately after the controversy started [Carrefour] stopped supplying Danish goods, because we consider ourselves part of the community. Anything that we can do to support the community, we feel obliged to do.”⁷⁴ Other retailers, such as Safeer Hypermarket, hung signs around their stores informing their consumers of whether or not they were selling Danish products and why.⁷⁵

In my opinion, this evidence suggests that local retailers took the situation as an opportunity to advance their business interests. By removing Danish products from their shelves shortly after the controversy erupted, these retailers promoted their images as pious Muslim businesses and, consequently, improved their public reputations. It would come as no surprise to me that Muslim consumers would prefer to shop at a store with similar values to their own, over one that took no stance on an issue such as this. Ultimately, I suspect that many retailers sought to tap the controversy for an edge on their competition. Furthermore, if most retailers voluntarily removed Danish products from their shelves as part of a business strategy then Omani consumers had to do very little to greatly impact Danish companies. With this said, it appears that a large portion of the consumer boycott may have merely been a repercussion of businesses looking for an advantage in a perfectly competitive marketplace. Nevertheless, as we shall see, all of the young adults interviewed in this study acknowledged taking part in the consumer boycott. Then again, how often do Omani males shop for dairy between the ages of 15 and 22?

In conclusion, I believe that the efforts of the local elite were predominately aimed at minimizing the escalation of the controversy and securing economic interests. The Omani government and religious community attempted to do this by downplaying the issue. Their efforts were largely aimed at staying out of the controversy in the hope that non-intervention

⁷⁴ Abdul Lateef, Department Head of Consumer Goods at Carrefour, Personal Notes, 25 April 2006.

⁷⁵ Field Notes, Personal Notes, 29 April 2006.

would allow Oman to be as least impacted by the fallout of the crisis as possible.

Conversely, the business community took a very proactive position. Many local retailers saw the crisis as an opportunity to gain on their competition, while many producers saw it as a looming catastrophe. Consequently, both set out on lavish public relations campaigns to improve their reputations with Muslim consumers. With this context in mind it is possible to consider the reactions of the Omani youth to the Danish cartoon controversy.

Section 2: The Omani Youth and the Caricatures of Controversy

The perceptions and experiences of the male Omani youth concerning the recent Danish cartoon controversy are complex and multifaceted. From the research I conducted it is clear that there is a wide range in opinions and experiences; yet, it is still possible to find general patterns by looking for the similarities and differences among these opinions. In total nine separate interviews were conducted, eight of which were done in a one-on-one format. These interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were, by far, my most informative research method. The one remaining interview was a group interview conducted in Nizwa with nine local, male residents.⁷⁶ This was the first interview performed in the study and even though much was learned from the session, the format was quickly dropped for the more personal one-on-one format. Although more research may still be done on this topic, much can be said about the information conveyed during these interviews.

From the onset I believe it is essential to identify the means by which the individuals interviewed came to know the Danish cartoon controversy. The majority of the informants -- two-thirds -- said they had initially learned about both the cartoons and the boycott by word of mouth. In fact, one informant went as far to say,

⁷⁶ Anonymous A, Personal Notes, 1 April 2006.

I heard about it everywhere: friends, family, mosque, everywhere. It was the story at every home. When you arrive at a house they would not welcome you home, but instead they would say, “Do not buy Danish milk!”⁷⁷

This suggests that the information about the controversy spread most quickly in a highly informal, conversational manner; or, to put it differently, the news spread like gossip. As a social scientist, this means the information I collected has two troublesome characteristics. First of all, it is nearly impossible to trace the information back to its original source and, secondly, it is likely that at some point the information was subject to individual interpretation before it got to the informant. Nevertheless, considering that my aim is to determine individual perceptions of the cartoon controversy, my research was not substantially impacted by the characteristics of the information I was acquiring. However, not all of the informants initially heard about the controversy through word of mouth. Two of the nine people read about the issue on the Internet via e-mail.⁷⁸ Furthermore, when the informants were asked how they learned about the boycott of Danish goods, three individuals said they had received an e-mail listing what companies to boycott.⁷⁹ This suggests that communications technology, namely the Internet, played a major role in the proliferation of information concerning the Danish cartoon controversy. Moreover, a number of the informants acknowledged that they subsequently learned more about the controversy on the television. In the end, however, only one of the seventeen total people I discussed the issue with had actually seen the Danish cartoons.⁸⁰

One informant’s source of information was significantly different than those of the others interviewed and, for this reason, I believe it deserves special attention. This young adult had primarily learned about the Danish cartoons, the boycott and the outcome of the

⁷⁷ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

⁷⁸ Anonymous F, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006; Anonymous G, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

⁷⁹ Ibid; Anonymous I, Personal Notes, 5 May 2006.

⁸⁰ Anonymous F, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

boycott through papers handed out during Friday Prayer at his local mosque.⁸¹ Not only was the mosque the original source of his information concerning the affair, but it also continued to be his primary source of information throughout the duration of the crisis. In his opinion the mosque played a central role in the events that unfolded. According to him, it was the “papers given out on Friday prayer, which got the people to stop buying Danish goods, which then got the stores to stop selling Danish goods.”⁸² Considering the response of the Omani religious community discussed above, this response seems very out of place; however, it must be stressed that he learned about the issue from papers handed out at the mosque and from the words of a religious authority figure. Although this informant was an anomaly in the interviews conducted, I think that his experience is no less noteworthy. If one of the informants had this experience others in Oman are bound to have shared it with him.

While discussing the Danish cartoons with the Omani youth I came into a number of interpretations of the events that unfolded. First of all, at least four of the informants, a strong minority, explicitly stated that the Danish newspaper knew the cartoons would cause the massive upheaval that occurred. For instance, when asked if the newspaper knew that the cartoons would receive this reaction one individual strongly replied, “Yes they knew it.” When asked why he was so certain the young man continued, “because they did not draw something that shows the Prophet as beautiful. This I know.”⁸³ Another person said that the newspaper “wanted to see how the Muslims felt about the Prophet and were just trying to get the Muslims to react.”⁸⁴ A large number of the informants shared these sentiments and seemed to believe that *Jyllands-Posten*’s aim was to provoke the Muslim masses and perhaps,

⁸¹ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

⁸⁴ Anonymous I, Personal Notes, 5 May 2006.

as one person put it, monetarily benefit by the fallout of the crisis.⁸⁵ However, there turned out to be far more to the informants' interpretations of the controversy than this alone.

A second, and interrelated, interpretation I discovered was that nearly all of the Omani youth I interviewed perceived the cartoons as an attack on Islam as a whole. "They were talking about all Muslims and not just Osama bin Laden, because they can do pictures of Osama bin Laden or Al-Qaeda, but instead they chose to do our Prophet, which insults all Muslims," said one young man.⁸⁶ Another informant more vehemently put it, "Yes, [the cartoons are attacking Islam]. They are trying to prove that we are bad, when they are actually bad and when they day comes they will learn this."⁸⁷ In my opinion, not only does this interpretation provide an ulterior motive for *Jyllands-Posten's* publication of the cartoons and rationalize the perception explored in the previous paragraph, but it also explains why the cartoons were of the Prophet Mohammed in particular. As shown in section II, many of the practices, behaviors and social norms in Muslim societies are founded on the life and deeds of the Prophet; therefore, by insulting the Prophet the cartoons struck at many Omanis' core beliefs, values and practices. Thus, in the eyes of the interviewees, by degrading the figure all Muslims desire to emulate, the caricatures were making a commentary on the Muslim world as a whole. In doing so the cartoons managed to alienate a majority of Muslims and provoked them into action.

In sum, the Omani youth's views regarding the publication of the Danish cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* and other publications centered around their perceptions of authorial intent. This became most apparent when I asked the informants how they saw Muslim journalists who republished the cartoons. A number of the respondents shared the view that, as one person put it, "there is a difference between when Europeans and Muslims published the

⁸⁵ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

⁸⁶ Anonymous H, Personal Notes, 2 May 2006.

⁸⁷ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

cartoons, because when Europeans did it they were trying to be humorous and when Muslims did it they were trying to show how the religion was being treated.”⁸⁸ However, some of the young men saw the issue very differently. One person believed that Muslim “journalists were wrong [to reprint the cartoons], because it allowed small children to see the cartoons...and begin to misunderstand Islam.”⁸⁹ In spite of this, the same individual saw the publication as an attempt to attack and discredit his religion. In conclusion he said, “[I have learned that] they have their own book so why do they want to get into our book? Why are they trying to spoil Islam?”⁹⁰ Another individual went so far as to say that the “journalists in the Middle East who [published the cartoons] were not Muslims, they only published it for money.”⁹¹ Despite these differences each informant substantiated their views on the bases of the publications’ intent in printing the cartoons. Whether aim was for financial gain, to support anti-Islamic views, to inform Muslim populations about the treatment of Islam in the Western world, to attack Islam and Muslims alike, or simply because it was the news of the day; each informant had strong beliefs regarding the intent and interests served by the publication of the Danish cartoons.

Investigating Omani perceptions regarding the boycott of Danish goods was also a major aspect of this study. By determining some general pattern in their perceptions my hope was to understand how the Omani youth see themselves and their actions in a greater context. Accordingly, a large portion of each interview was spent discussing how the informant had learned about, participated in and viewed the goals of the boycott of Danish goods. As noted above, one-third of the individuals interviewed acknowledged receiving an e-mail that listed which companies to boycott and one of the informants learned about the issue through papers handed out at Friday Prayer. Every person interviewed also disclosed that they had, in fact,

⁸⁸ Anonymous H, Personal Notes, 2 May 2006.

⁸⁹ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

participated in the boycott by refusing to purchase Danish products. Still, only one person went beyond the boycott and participated in an online discussion about the controversy with other Muslims from around the world.⁹² What was most telling, however, were the informant's perceptions about the ultimate goals and impact boycott itself.

I found two distinct perceptions concerning the goals and impact of the boycott of Danish goods. Each of these perceptions ultimately sheds a great deal of light on the Omani understanding of the controversy as a whole. The first, and most prominent, perception was the hope that the boycott would end Muslim humiliation by the Western world. Many of the informants expressed utter desperation about Islam's current global status and saw the boycott as a means to change. One informant bluntly stated the goals as "to make Denmark realize that we won't just sit and watch them humiliate us, we will stand up for ourselves and for our religion."⁹³ Later in the same interview the informant went on to say that he believed the controversy "really showed people that Westerners see [Muslims] as a pile of dirt, ...they think we are nothing and that they can do anything they want to us."⁹⁴ When asked the same question another interviewee said that the aim of the boycott was to "keep Denmark out of business" and to show them that they cannot survive alone.⁹⁵ Another young adult shared this view and said that the goal of the boycott was "to show Denmark that they cannot survive without the Muslim world. They need our respect."⁹⁶

This sense of humiliation and lack of respect was also sharply expressed when I asked how the informants felt the Western world views Islam and the Muslim world. To this one individual said, "the Western world has lost faith in us. They do not believe in us anymore.

⁹² Anonymous H, Personal Notes, 2 May 2006.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

⁹⁶ Anonymous G, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

That is why they are making these cartoons.”⁹⁷ This informant strongly believed that the goal of the boycott was to put an end Muslim humiliation by Western society. When asked the same question another young man replied, “they think all Muslims are terrorists.”⁹⁸ I believe this individual saw the consumer boycott as an ideal middle-ground between the overly aggressive and hostile acts that create such stereotypes and the complaisant, non-responsive behavior that permits such incorrect perceptions to exist. Thus by participating in the boycott this individual was standing up against the humiliation of his society in a manner that is seen as just by the insulting party. To many of the individuals interviewed during this study the boycott of Danish was both a just and civil response to the disrespect and humiliation they faced. It consequently showed the potential to be an effective means of change. However, one question still remains: whom, exactly, are they trying to change?

The second widespread perception I discovered while researching the boycott was the belief that the Danish government bears ultimate responsibility for the controversy. Even though the informants nearly universally placed blame for the cartoons on the shoulders of the artists who drew them, the vast majority of the informants saw the Danish government as responsible for everything else, including the publication and the crisis that proceeded. For instance, when asked whom he believed is responsible for the cartoons and their publication one young adult said, “The government in Denmark, because they were the one’s who made it.” When asked why he was so certain he replied, “Because the cartoons came from Denmark.”⁹⁹ Another individual expressed a similar view by saying, “The Danish government [is responsible for the cartoons and their publication], because they got the Danish newspaper to publish the cartoons. The government controls everything, so if they didn’t want the cartoons to be published they wouldn’t have been.” When asked who bears

⁹⁷ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

⁹⁸ Anonymous I, Personal Notes, 5 May 2006.

⁹⁹ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

ultimate responsibility for the reaction the cartoons received the same person was quick to assert: “The government of Denmark.”¹⁰⁰

The same informants also quantified the success of the boycott by how much it changed the behavior of the Danish government. When asked if he believed the boycott was successful and, if so, what it had achieved one informant replied, “Yes, because at first the Prime Minister of Denmark did not want to apologize and then following the boycott the government and the magazine apologized.”¹⁰¹ He went on to stress that getting the government to change its behavior was the biggest sign of success and the primary goal of the boycott. When asked if the boycott was successful another person said, “Yes, it might force Denmark to apologize.”¹⁰² Many of the informants shared these views and saw any change in the policies or statements of the Danish government as a sure sign of success.

The perceptions concerning the role of the Danish government add an interesting twist to the story. From what I gathered during this portion of my research I have come to the conclusion that the Omani youth have a significant misunderstanding of the power dynamics and role of government in Western societies. As shown above, there was a widespread belief that the Danish government had created the cartoons, pushed their publication and failed to intervene when the crisis ensued. The statement that “The government controls everything,” in particular, shows a severe unfamiliarity with the division of power that exists in Western societies. Furthermore, it helps to explain why so much of the hostility during the crisis that was aimed at the Danish government and not at the newspapers that published the cartoons. Perhaps the individuals interviewed see the spheres of Western governments as akin to the Omani model and, consequently, see any act by the Danish press as an extension of its government’s will. If these beliefs are as widespread as they appear to be from this study,

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Anonymous F, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

then it comes as no surprise that such a large portion of Muslim resentment toward Western governments is driven by the treatment of the Muslim world in the Western media.

In the end, I believe that a great deal of the controversy centered on differing values regarding the freedom of expression. As the controversy escalated, for instance, freedom of speech became Western actors' primary alibi and the responsibility to respect religion became the Muslim world's greatest allegation. For this reason, I feel that it is important to understand where the average Omani youth stands on the issue of free speech. Doing so will help to understand the perceptions discussed above, shed light on Omani opinions regarding the merits of civil liberties and, ultimately, enhance our picture of the Omani reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy.

The individuals interviewed for this study had mixed views regarding the merits of free expression. For example, when asked for his opinion on the argument that the cartoons were justified by the right to freedom of expression one informant said, "we as Muslim cannot tolerate these kind of things, there is a very thin line between freedom of speech and disrespecting others' religions. And they crossed that line."¹⁰³ Later in the interview the informant put it more plainly by rhetorically asking, "Where does freedom of speech come when there is religion? There is not freedom of speech when it comes to religion."¹⁰⁴ However, when the same individual believed that freedom of speech is compatible with Islam.¹⁰⁵ Another individual strongly disagreed with this assertion by saying that "[Freedom of speech] is a bad idea for culture and religion, especially with Islam."¹⁰⁶ One person went even further by saying that "There should not be freedom of speech, because there are lines that should never be crossed."¹⁰⁷ Two individuals, however, had significantly different

¹⁰³ Anonymous H, Personal Notes, 2 May 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous I, Personal Notes, 5 May 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous F, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

answers to the same questions. One person had never heard of the term “free speech” and after having it explained to him confirmed that he had never come across the concept before.¹⁰⁸ The second young adult expressed his views on the matter with an entirely different rationale. “In Europe [free speech] is good, but here there is the royal guard who can catch you and it is not definitely allowed. But in Islam free speech is okay.”¹⁰⁹ To this young man the troubles surrounding the value of free speech in Oman are largely products of the government and not necessarily in conflict with the nation’s cultural and religious heritage.

Although this diversity of opinion makes it difficult to formulate generalizations about the views of the population as a whole, it is still useful in that it highlights the rationales individuals use while justifying their opinions. Interestingly, one aspect of each informant’s rationale was universal: each substantiated his view on the basis of religion. Religion was always the deciding factor. It is possible that the universality of this response was partly a result of an expectancy effect in the interview process. After spending 30 to 45 minutes discussing the Danish cartoon controversy and its blatant disrespect of Islam, I believe the respondents were more likely to allow that topic -- disrespecting religion -- to play a larger role in their responses to the questions at the end of the interview. Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that the vast majority of the opinions on free speech were rationalized on the basis of religion.

The two divergent responses also deserve special attention. The view that the Omani government is limiting freedom of expression in Oman helps to explain many of the obstacles I encountered while researching this issue. Firstly, it helps to explain why I had so much difficulty recruiting informants and getting them to openly discuss their views on the

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous C, Personal Notes, 20 April 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous G, Personal Notes, 30 April 2006.

controversy.¹¹⁰ For example, when one individual was asked why he was hesitant to be interviewed he cited the attacks on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 as the beginning of the US and Omani government's crack down on dissent and explained that for his own safety it was best to keep quiet.¹¹¹ Secondly, if such beliefs are widespread it explains why the other informant claimed to have never heard of the term "free speech." Considering how large of an issue free speech currently is, I find it hard to believe that he had never come across the concept before. For this reason, I regard his unfamiliarity with the term with a great deal of skepticism. In my opinion, it is likely that he was trying to avoid compromising his own interests with the threat of the perception addressed above.

Although there is a very diverse set of perceptions among the Omani male youth regarding the Danish cartoon controversy, there are a number of conclusions we can deduce from this study. Firstly, the Omani youth saw the cartoons as attacking all Muslims and their religion and as attempting to provoke them into action. Secondly, they saw the Danish government as chiefly responsible for the controversy and all the ensued. Thirdly, they felt humiliated by the entire fiasco and saw the boycott as a way to end this sentiment. Finally, they saw religion as off limits to free speech.

V. Conclusions and Considerations

Throughout my research of both the Omani elite and the Omani rank and file I came across one recurring theme: a steadfast belief in Omani exceptionalism. Both groups strongly believed that Oman is, and will continue to be, the regional exception. Both groups lauded Omani tolerance of diversity and believed that Omani religious and cultural values were what allowed the nation to remain exceptional. For instance, Sheikh Khalfan Al-Esry claimed that

¹¹⁰ Anonymous B, Personal Notes, 15 April 2006; Anonymous E, Personal Notes, 29 April 2006.

¹¹¹ Anonymous B, Personal Notes, 15 April 2006.

“Oman is different than other places, there are no rivalries in the religious communities” and that “This is because of how Omanis are raised. Omanis are very peaceful people.”¹¹² One of the young adults interviewed expressed a similar belief by saying, “In Oman there are only Islamic mosques, never ones divided up by sect. It is not like in other parts of the Muslim world where people look at each other and keep to themselves. Here everyone prays, works and lives together.”¹¹³ After concurring with the impact of Oman’s unique religious composition, Hamad Rashid al-Musharafi, the Secretary of Information and Media at the Majlis al-Sura, added a cultural aspect to the explanation of Omani exceptionalism: “The reason there is such little crime in Oman [is because of] the small population with strong communal relationships. Everyone knows everything about everyone; therefore, if anyone does anything, everyone will know who did it.”¹¹⁴ Nearly every individual I interviewed agreed with the notion of Omani exceptionalism. It was, by far, the most widespread sentiment discovered in this study.

Although I am in no position to embrace or dismiss the validity Omani exceptionalism, I can conclude from this study that there is much more to the veracity of this concept than the unique traits of Omani culture and religion. In the case at hand, for example, the Omani government and religious community both played an exceedingly important role in ensuring that the controversy did not escalate. It shall forever be impossible to definitively measure impact of the religious community’s non-involvement on the issue’s escalation; however, it is certain that this non-involvement vastly limited the number of public forums that individuals could use to discuss the controversy and subsequently mobilize. In fact, I find it remarkable that only one Omani interviewed had learned about the Danish cartoons at the mosque. Conventional wisdom suggests that number would be far

¹¹² Sheikh Khalfan bin Mohammed Al-Esry, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

¹¹³ Anonymous D, Personal Notes, 24 April 2006.

¹¹⁴ Hamad Rashid al-Musharafi, Secretary of Information and Media for the Majlis al-Sura, Personal Notes, 26 April 2006.

larger. Furthermore, the Omani government's non-involvement also stopped the issue from escalating on a political level. By not reacting publicly to the crisis the Omani government stopped itself from becoming involved in the political fallout that ensued. Not only did this help to reassure Danish companies that Oman was still a safe and stable environment, it also helped to prove that the regime was not going to use the issue to bolster its Islamic prowess to its citizenry like others regimes around the region. Ultimately, all parties were served well by the Omani response to the Danish cartoon controversy.

With a full picture of the recent controversy in mind it is now possible to see it in a greater context. As with similar events in the past, the impact of the information and technological revolutions, Muslim convictions and the timing of the recent controversy played significant roles in determining how the crisis unfolded. First of all, although only one of the Omani youth had actually seen the cartoons, one-third of the informants said they had learned about the boycott online. Yet despite this access to information and communication technology the government's policy of downplaying the event was still extremely effective. By cutting off public forums of debate, particularly the mosques, the government was very successful in limiting the dissemination of information about the event in Oman. Consequently, the government succeeded in limiting the crisis escalation in Oman.

Secondly, Muslim convictions played an important role in determining the perceptions of individuals about the controversy. As noted above, each informant rationalized the merits of free speech on the basis of religion and saw the cartoons as an attack on their faith. Each individual's interpretation of the event centered on his interpretation of his own religion.

Finally, the timing of the crisis played an exceedingly important role. Although it is unclear what impact international events have on the behavior of individuals, it is clear that the current international environment had a significant impact on the crisis as it unfolded

throughout the world. The burning of the Danish embassies in Beirut and Damascus, for instance, underscored the tensions between Syria and Lebanon and occurred near the anniversary of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Furthermore, the crisis emerged shortly following both the January Palestinian elections that saw Hamas rise to power and the departure of Ariel Sharon from Israel's political scene. Additionally, the controversy arose in the midst of an unpopular US-led war in the heart of the Muslim world. In such an international environment it is no surprise that cartoons from an obscure Danish newspaper could cause such a calamity.

In the end, much can still be learned from the Danish cartoon controversy in Oman. There are a number of issues that I have not adequately addressed in this study. A greater understanding of these topics would undoubtedly contribute to both our grasp of the Omani reaction to the controversy and the knowledge base of Oman in general. Although there is a wide-range of topics worthy of consideration, a small number stand out in my mind:

- (1) To what extent did the Ibadi response deviate from that of the Sunni and Shiite reactions? Did this play a significant role in defining the character of the Omani reaction to the caricatures?
- (2) Is there a significant difference in the perceptions of the Danish cartoon controversy among the different social groups (Swahili, Lawati, Balushi, et cetera) in Oman? If so, what accounts for these differences?
- (3) What role did businesses play in propagating or minimizing the cartoon controversy in Oman? What impact did business strategy have on the overall Omani experience?

A greater understanding of each issue would invaluablely contribute to the knowledge base of Oman. Each would shed light on specific aspects of the controversy in a manner that I believe would make up for the shortcomings of this study. I also feel that there are numerous topics not thematically related to the Danish cartoon controversy in Oman, but are still in need of greater scholarship. Perhaps most pertinent would be an in depth examination of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; namely, what its role is in Omani society, its decision-making processes and some case studies involving it. Another important topic that is in need of

research is the international political economy of Oman. Particularly how the nation's economic interests impact its response to international events. Further knowledge on each of these topics would surely provide the coming generations with valuable insight to the functioning of Omani society.

In conclusion, I believe much is still to be resolved. The Omani youth displayed a large misunderstanding of the Western power relationships, which partly caused them to hold resentment toward Denmark as a whole, and not merely the media outlets that published the cartoons. This misunderstanding greatly contributed to the escalation and severity of the crisis. Additionally, many of the Omani youth expressed a desire to productively participate in the fallout of the crisis, but with limited mediums for public participation many shared the sentiment of one youth when he asked, "What else is there to do?"¹¹⁵ The Muslim youth need more access to positive mediums of public participation; otherwise individuals that participate in extreme behavior shall forever drive Western conceptions of Muslim populations. Perhaps worst of all, Oman and other non-violent responses may have been drowned out in the sea of media coverage highlighting the violent aspects of the controversy's fallout, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes of the Muslim world in the Western conscious. Unfortunately, I feel that little has been resolved by the conclusion of the Danish cartoon controversy. In my opinion, more accurate information needs to be available in both the Western and Muslim worlds so that in future incidents all parties will be better informed. This would greatly limit the escalation of such crisis and ultimately create more intercultural understanding. Alas, better information is merely a stepping-stone to greater progress; it alone would not suffice. Nevertheless, with this newfound knowledge we must push forward in the hope that progress may be achieved in the future, insha'allah.

¹¹⁵ Anonymous I, Personal Notes, 5 May 2006.

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* All interviews entitles “Anonymous” are of Oman men ages 15 to 22.

Appendix A: Youth Questionnaire

Part I: General Information

- 1) How many years old are you?
- 2) Are you male or female?
- 3) Are you employed, unemployed or a student? If employed or student, where?
- 4) Are you married? If yes, for how many years? How many children?
- 5) What is your religion?
- 6) Are you Swahili, Lawati, Balushi, Omani, ect...?

Part II: The Cartoons

- 7) Did you ever see the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed?
If yes, When? Where? With whom? How did they make you feel?
If no, how did you hear about them?
- 8) What do you think caused these cartoons to be published? Explain.
- 9) What message do you think the cartoons conveyed? Why?
- 10) Why do you think the cartoons caused the reaction they did?
- 11) Do you think the newspaper knew the cartoons would receive this reaction?
- 12) Why do you think the cartoons were published again by other newspapers? Especially by both Muslim and Western journalists? Is there a difference between the actions of two? Why?
Was this republication good or bad/justified or unjustified? Why?
- 13) Who do you think is responsible for the cartoons and their publication? Why?
- 14) Who is responsible for the reaction the cartoons received?

Part III: The Boycott

- 15) How did you learn about the boycott of Danish goods?
- 16) Did you participate in the boycott? If yes, why and how did you participate?
- 17) Did you protest the Danish cartoons in any other way? If yes, how?
- 18) Do you think the boycott was sufficient? If no, what else needs to be done?
- 19) What were the goals of the boycott? Why? What will this change?
- 20) Do you think this boycott was successful? If yes, how do you know? What did it achieve? If not, what else needs to be accomplished?

Part IV: The Outcome

- 21) How do you think the Western world views Islam and the Muslim world? Why?
- 22) What effect do you think the cartoon crisis had on Western views of the Muslim world?
- 23) What effect do you think the cartoon crisis had on Muslim views of the Western world?
- 24) What do you think the Western world learned from the cartoon crisis? Why?
- 25) What do you think the Muslim world learned from the cartoon crisis? Why?
- 26) What have you learned from the cartoon crisis?
- 27) Do you agree with the idea of free speech? Why or why not?
- 28) Do you think anything was solved by cartoon crisis? Why or why not?
- 29) Do you think a similar crisis could happen again? Why or why not?