

Christopher Cutrone — comments on the Danish cartoon controversy
at “Re-Presenting the Present: the Danish Cartoons, Islam and You”
public panel discussion hosted by the Muslim Student Association
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Hi, my name is Chris Cutrone. I teach Critical Theory here at the Art Institute, and social theory at the University of Chicago, where I am a PhD candidate. First, I would like to thank you for inviting me to participate in this discussion. I am honored by the invitation, and I hope my perspectives and contributions will be helpful in sorting out various dimensions of this issue — and, more specifically, will help you as students to chart your own paths as artists and thinkers through it. I imagine that, as young people and students, especially those of you who are Muslim-American or Muslims living in America, the past several years have been especially trying — as they have been for the rest of us, however differently. The matter of insult and injury — and, of one’s response — is extremely important. How you make sense of the present circumstances and how you might respond to them may prove crucial to your futures, and in ways that cannot be prejudged.

Now, I would like to introduce my comments on the Danish cartoon controversy by saying, first of all, how unfortunate it is that this must be the topic of our conversation. Meaning: I think that it is very unfortunate that the Danish cartoons and the controversy surrounding them must be the frame through which other issues that I consider to be of critical importance will be addressed.

I will stake out my own position very simply: I am opposed to the cartoons (to their having been drawn at all, as well as having been published), and, at the same time, I am opposed to the protests and calls for action against them.

Let me recount for you the various phases of my exposure and response to the cartoon controversy as it unfolded for me. One thing that struck me from the outset was a certain unreal quality of the cartoon controversy. This unreality had two aspects: 1.) that such passionate protests erupted over the cartoons but had failed to erupt over the U.S. invasion of Iraq, etc.; and 2.) the elusiveness of the objects in contention: I couldn’t find reproductions of the images and so felt that I had no idea what was being protested or why. I was deeply ambivalent about the self-imposed ban on republishing the cartoons in American (and, it appears, British) media. On the one hand, it seemed good that American media was not jumping on the bandwagon of indulging anti-Muslim bigotry under the disingenuous guise of “information” — let alone “free speech.” On the other hand, I wasn’t sure whether this ban reflected a mature attitude on the issue, or intimidation at the consequences of offense (something to which the Danish publishers of the cartoons claimed to have been responding), or, what would be worse to me, an all-purpose, blanket, culturally conservative sense of “respect” for what is deemed religiously sacred! (For example, the Christian Right claims to be an “oppressed minority” here in the U.S.!)

This is the way I first negotiated the issue of the “ban on graven images,” the understanding of the controversy that was first floated, that it was the visual representation of Muhammad that had riled people, and not the specific qualities of that “representation” in the Danish cartoons. So, I was frustrated and angered that I could not see the cartoons for myself! The controversy seemed to force me to “take sides,” and in terms I found uncomfortable. I had to pass judgment in a virtual and *ad hominem* way: that the controversy was not about actual events, issues, arguments, and consequences, but about the people themselves, whether the Danish publishers and politicians were bigoted or just insensitive, and whether the protesting Muslims were hysterical! I felt disgusted by all sides.

When I was able, finally, to find reproductions of the cartoons (on the web), I must admit that I was disappointed: they seemed tame and even innocuous, and not at all shrill as I had expected

them to be. I felt especially outraged when I learned that the Danish imams who had stirred the controversy had inflamed it further by including in their propaganda among Muslims far more offensive imagery than had been actually published. I realize now that my first response to the apparently, to me, tepid nature of the cartoons themselves was in error to the extent that to be able to deliver bigoted opinions of others in a calmly deliberate way is no sign of temperament but only of how deep one's bigotry goes! This occurred to me first, ironically, when I browsed an Iranian website that had posted cartoons lampooning the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews, in supposed response to the Danish cartoons. They too seemed to be of calm repose, but this struck me as being especially sinister: how much they took for granted! I had to remind myself of this reality of deeply-seated bigotry because I myself do not feel a shot of fear at the sight of beards, turbans, or headscarves, or of dark-skinned people in general. But apparently others do. So the cartoons finally shocked me. (One expects certain things of a radical right-wing regime like Iran's, but not of the "liberal," "multicultural" Europeans! — As it turns out, the Danish publishers are akin to Fox News here in the U.S.: obviously right-wing, but also "mainstream" in appeal, suggesting a greater menace of more widespread bigotry among the "silent majority.")

Now this brings me to the issue of whether anti-Muslim bigotry can be understood properly as "racist." This is a complicated problem, for it involves not only the question of racism but also the phenomenon of identity categories and their adequate or inadequate basis for social and cultural politics. Is it, as Jean-Paul Sartre [in *Anti-semitism and Jew*, 1943/46], and Frantz Fanon, following him [in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952], put it, a matter of the Other being constructed as such by the dominant social and cultural categories? — Famously, Sartre asserted that Jewish identity (in a country like France) was inextricably bound to, and really the product of, enduring anti-Semitism; Fanon followed him in asserting that blackness is the product of white racism, of no intrinsic value in itself, and that the only future for the Black Man was "white." So, I must raise the question of the basis and significance of Muslim identity. How is this identity meaningful today, and how does it lend itself to possibilities for the future? What I want to say to you, as students, is that there is absolutely no reason for anyone to be terrorized into accepting any specific identity as Muslims. There need not be any implications, in social and political terms, of being Muslim. On the other hand, how does Muslim identity, and politics based on it, relate, or not, to emancipatory possibilities, both in America and at a global scale?

I am an irreligious, and really atheist person. I do not care for any religion in its own terms or according to its own self-understanding, and I find belief in God and theological explanations of our world to be personally alienating. At the same time, I have no toleration for bigotry in any form, the reduction of people to what they supposedly "are." Hence, I also have no patience for identity politics, which responds in the same terms, nor for cultural projects that aim at getting to the *essence of being gay, being a woman*, etc. (I am gay.) I am opposed to laws and policies banning "hate speech," and of course I oppose all laws that sanction "blasphemy" (whatever that might be). Beyond this, I am anti-traditionalist, meaning that I do not think that the past or present existence of anything merits its being valued or even respected as such. I am for the "ruthless criticism of everything existing" (a phrase of the young Karl Marx). I think that everything human must justify itself in light of supporting and promoting human potential and possibilities, and the greatest scope of freedom for exploring these.

The example I use in teaching of this model of freedom I value is personal and involves my homosexuality. I am for sexual freedom, which means that I am not merely in favor of my freedom to be "gay," but rather I am for the freedom to engage in whatever sexual behavior I might want, to explore and develop my sexuality in ways that may not be predetermined. (This

is why I am opposed to the apologies for homosexuality attempted by the arguments about a “gay gene,” etc., which I consider to concede too much, and to close much too much off to myself — and to everyone else!) Most importantly, I extend my support of the freedom to explore one’s sexuality to all others, and not only in terms of how I understand my own sexuality, which may not be appropriate to others. I consider such freedom to be a human right, because I consider sexuality to be an essential aspect of exploring and developing one’s humanity (— at least in terms of what it means to be a human being today). Of course I believe that gay people should be accorded “respect,” but, more importantly, they should be accorded “humanity,” which means the right not be regarded as “gay” in any given way. I have a right to be gay — or not!

More to the point, I have a right *not* to be Christian, despite my ancestry and ambient culture. And so, I assert the right of people of Muslim heritage to *not* be Muslim! What does it matter if one is “gay,” or if one is “Muslim?” What is the significance of what I am taken to be? What is the significance of the cultural heritage against which one has become what one is, and how does one make this history for becoming oneself one’s own, or not? That one’s heritage *does* matter in the ways and to the extent that it might seem is cause for regret, for it *shouldn’t* matter so necessarily! — least of all in the ways it seems to matter in present circumstances. Challenging received values is frightening to the extent that questioning tradition might leave one feeling threatened by the prospect of living in a world *without* values. But the challenge is nevertheless present, and we need to recognize it properly. This means a willingness to question one’s own values to the extent that (as Rilke put it) “you must change your life” [“Du mußt dein Leben ändern,” from “Archaic Torso of Apollo”]. I think that an essential aspect of one’s own humanity is the promotion of the humanity of others. In our world of international society and culture, with its powerful dynamics of transformation and change, this means promoting conditions in which people are as free as possible to question and explore the myriad aspects of their lives without fear. *How* to do this presents many problems, but we should not despair of trying.

So, the Danish cartoon controversy has left little in the way of advocacy for freedom in the sense that I understand it. For this controversy has resolved around the issue of one’s right to be Muslim in the face of challenges of living in a society with other potentially hostile traditions, religious and otherwise, and largely secular mandates for its civil and political institutions. — Need I say that I am steadfastly opposed to the identity of the United States or European civil societies or polities as “Christian?” I support the secular society and state, which finds no basis for itself in any tradition other than its own, and which has emerged, under great contention, only very recently in the history of the world. I do not think that modern society has been actually defined by its various cultural backgrounds, but rather by the ways it has departed from these, which have raised problems and tasks that cannot, by definition, be answered in any “traditional” way. Modern society tasks us with finding ways to better realize our humanity in the freedom to become more and beyond what we “are” in terms given by history. The future, for you, in your years now as students, and beyond, and for the society you will live in, really is open — far more open than you might imagine, and, let us hope, *far* more open than the controversies of the present such as the Danish cartoons might frighten us into believing. We are living in a time of transition — I wish I could say: of *emancipation*. It is up to us whether such controversies of the present mark the beginning, or the end of something. Thank you.