

The Danish Caricatures

By Xhavit Shala

Götz Von Olenhusen, a German legal expert on media¹ said following the caricature crises that in recent years authors of satirical pieces on Christianity had ended up in court. The Austrian cartoonist, Michael Haderer, has been sentenced in absentia to six months in prison because of having represented Jesus as a hippy smoking mariuana. If the authors of the satirical pieces would have been treated in the same way and had they not forgotten the fact that freedom of expression should not be misused to the level of insulting the religious semtnments of believers, the events that happened would not have followed that course.²

The publication of the caricatures provoked a wave of negative sentiments in three different areas. They were putting out an image for the prophet, which for Muslims is a forbidden act. They were satirizing him through the caricature and presented him as a terrorist; all actions that seriously provoked the sentiments of the Muslim believers. This publication was a very shameful act carried out by the authors and the publishers of the caricatures. However, all of this does not justify at all the violent reaction that took place in various Muslim countries, a violence that seriously threatened public security and harmed Islam's image. These incidents will most certainly encourage the European lawmakers to take measures to protect the sanctity of free speech and better define a proper relationship between the right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

The image of Islam as a religion of peace is being seriously undermined by the violent actions carried out or encouraged recently by individuals, terrorist organizations and certain states in the name of Islam. The absence of single official spiritual center on interpreting disputable notions of Islamic philosophy has given room to interpretations that are wrong and are made to achieve certain goals. The vacuum created in the institutional hierarchy of Islam since the fall of the Ottoman Empire has created room for misinterpretations and misuse of the faith for political interests of certain groups. It is for this and many other reasons that the reestablishment of a world spiritual leadership for the Muslim faith has become neccesary. The reestablishment of such a center in a moderate Muslim country like Turkey, which is also a NATO member and EU candidate, would contribute to peace and encourage peaceful interactions between civilizations.

The crises with the caricatures while initially based on religious arguments was quickly manipulated and politically exploited. When analyzing closely the sequence of events, one would note that they are closely connected with political developments in the Middle

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² The article was first printed in the daily "Tirana Observer", February 14, 2006

East. The caricatures were published by the Danish "Jyllands-Posten" on September 30, 2005. It was around this time that international pressure on Iran's nuclear program was building. At the same time, the evidence uncovered by the international investigation on the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister, Hariri, was pointing towards Damascus. And it was in Iran and Syria the place where the most violent manifestations took place. It is also known that in Lebanon³ where violent protests were also staged, the Syrian secret services still operate as if in their home.

Both Iran and Syria tried to shift their political crises to the international scene through the manipulation of religious sentiments, thus attempting to transform it into a crisis between Islam and the West. Teheran's initiative to organize a competition on Holocaust caricatures as a response to the action of European newspapers best illustrates this. Strangely enough, the terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda who have tried to establish a monopoly on violent actions in the name of Islam, have yet to react to the publishing of caricatures. Perhaps and were taken by surprise by their new rivals.

The publication of caricatures was thus transformed into an international political issue that involved Albania as well. The Albanian Muslim Community reacted in a mature and civilized manner. The representatives of the Community, while harshly condemning the publication of the caricatures as a serious insult and provocation of the sacred sentiments of the Muslim believers, said that they did not condone the violent protests that took place in many Islamic countries. Their faith does not allow the incitement of violent responses. In their statement, the Albanian Muslim believers called on Muslims everywhere not to fall pray to ill-intended provocations that do not bode well for Islam, the future of Europe and of peace in the world.⁴

The Danish Ambassador also visited the HQ of the Albanian Muslim Community to deliver a statement by his Prime Minister that condemned the satirization of the prophet. The Ambassador must have surely felt pleased to be representing Denmark in a country with moderate and civilized Muslims. Muslims in Albania reacted with maturity to the provocations made and declared that violence was unacceptable. "If you react violently, you have moved out of faith, out of yourself and the spirit of the early Muslims,"

³ The burning of the Danish Embassy in Beirut caused great political troubles in the country. The Minister of Interior, Hassan al Sabaa, resigned and the attacks were condemned by the whole political specter and some politicians accused Syria of being behind the attacks. It is believed that one person died and 30 others were wounded and 200 hundred people were arrested. Among those arrested there were 70 Syrians, several Palestinians and the rest Lebanese. Some politician accused Syria that it was inciting violence in an attempt to undermine the security of Lebanon. Saadal al Hariri, a distinguished Sunni politician said that this was a black day for the Muslim in the country.

⁴ "Neue Züricher Zeitung" of February 9, 2006 devotes an article titled "A testimony of maturity among the Muslims of the Balkans" to the reaction of the Muslims in the Balkans on the publishing of the caricatures in the Danish paper. There should not be any fear from provocations in the only European area with a Muslim tradition because the integration of the Balkan's Muslims is a fact. There are several million Muslims who live in the territories of former Yugoslavia, Albania and Macedonia. The attitude toward faith as a personal matter helps explain why there were no protests in the Balkans. A demonstration that was staged in Bosnia gathered only 250 protesters."

Fehtullah Gylen, one of the most well known authors of Islam today and respected interlocutor of Pope John Paul II, says.⁵

The Albanian Muslims issued clear messages saying that they are concerned not only about the characterization of their prophet but about the violence against the EU embassies also. While they gave messages of peace to all Muslims evrewhere, the Albanian political scene fell into confusion when the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affaires asked for help from the Albanian politicians to do what the Albanian Muslim Community⁶ had already done, that is, give messages of moderation. “I have asked my Albanian counterpart, Moratino said, to deliever messages of moderation to the Islamic Conference”⁷ He said that he had also discussed the issue with the General Secretary of the Islamic Conference and the General Secretary of the Arab League and the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affaires. Quite sincerely, he also confided that the Turkish President and the Prime Minister of Spain were also involved in mediating a lowering of tensions.

Moratino’s statement was taken as a curse by a certain segment of the Albanian political scene⁸. It was almost translated as stigmatization of our country, as a catching in fault for being Muslims, a statement that allegedly made our effort for EU integration futile. The Spanish Minister is not only a person very well acquainted with the Middle East, but also a Spanish politician who knows Albania very well. It was him 25 years ago who in his capacity of a Spanish diplomat visited Tirana in an effort to explore the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania.

Moratino picked Albania for the fact that Albanians have a secular state system, are connected with a thousand ties with the western civilization and are making efforts to regain its trust. But the five hundred years of history under the Ottomans, the cultural legacy of that time and the large number of Muslims make Albania a reliable negotiator with the east.

In view of this history of the country, the Spanish minister asked for Albania’s help because he remembered that we are descendants of Scanderbeg, the Christ’s athlete, who defended the western civilization for 25 years from the attacks of the ottomans. He remembered Mehmet Ali Pasha, the founder of modern Egypt, called by the poet La Martin “the armed disciple of western civilization among the Arab countries.”⁹ Moratino

⁵ Toward a world civilization of love and tolerance - Fehtullah Gylen. “Prizmi”, 2005.

⁶ Tirana, February 7, 2006. The Albanian Muslim Community harshly condemned the publication by the Danish paper and then the republication by several European dailies of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad. In a press release distributed late in the afternoon it considered these publications a serious insult and provocation of the sentiments of all Muslims. On the other side, the Albanian Muslim Community expressed its disagreement with the reactions that took place in many Islamic countries. The reaction of the Muslims, the statement says, should be mature because the faith they represent does not allow that they respond to these attacks with the same manner..

⁷ The Spanish Minister of Foreign Affaires, Migel Anhel Moratino, visited Albania on February 6, 2006, at the height of protests against the caricatures.

⁸ “Voice of America ”, February 7, 2006: “All the former Ministers of Foreign Affaires of Socialist Governments said today that Albanian does not have the means to undertake such roles and furthermore according to them it should not get involved in matters of such nature».

⁹ Xhavit Shala-“Albanians at the Crossroads ”, page 109. ACNSS, Tirana 2004.

believed that we would be like Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mehmet Pasha, who created a society that upheld the value of religious tolerance, established peace between the Palestinians and Israelis 175 years ago and waged war and won against the wahabites that were threatening the Islamic faith. Moratinos believed that we would know how to take advantage of our position of a bridge between the Islamic East and the Christian West and would know how to render a service to the western civilization so as to increase our standing there and in view of the fact also that the time will come when we will have need of the Spanish vote in the EU.

Moratinos request was met with negative reactions by a large part of opposition while there was only silence from official circles. Why should we hide? Albania has regularly attended all meetings of the Islamic Conference since the entry into this organization. It is hard to conceive that Albania's entry into this organization, which took place during the first term in office of the current government, happened without prior consultation with our strategic western allies. Our entry into the Islamic Conference was in the interest of western countries also. Through Albania's membership, the West can send to the Islamic Conference the model of a state that while having a Muslim majority population is a secular and democratic state. The efforts of the United States and the European Union to encourage democratic reforms in the Middle East demonstrate clearly the objectives that the west wants to achieve

It is nonsensical also to believe that the left wing government that ran Albania for the last eight years would have refused to withdraw from the Islamic Conference had our strategic western allies requested it that it do so. During all of this period they could have left this organization at any time but did not. Any further discussion on the topic of withdrawing our membership from the Islamic Conference is pure speculation made to score narrow political points. Our country has suffered no loss from its membership into the Islamic Conference. Members of this organization are even countries with a symbolic presence of Muslim populations, like Russia or other countries. These countries have joined the organization to serve their geopolitical interests. It is worth keeping in mind also the contribution the member countries of this organization made in voting in the UN Resolution that condemned the Serb genocide in Kosovo in 1999.

The Albanian delegation attended the last summit of the organization that was held last December. This conference adopted the ten year plan and the Declaration of Mecca.¹⁰ Both documents highlight the spirit of the Conference in support of dialogue between

¹⁰ Florent Çeliku, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and participant in the Mecca Summit, said to daily "Korrieri", of December 2005,: "During the summit Albania's position was to appraise the role of the Conference in regional and global developments and the joint efforts in the fight against terrorism and promotion of human rights and legality ...

It was also emphasized that we believe that the contributions of international organizations, in spite of their differences, serve to achieve a consensus on resolving acute problems that humanity is faced with. ... Albania supports the points of the ten year Plan of the Organization which offers good solutions for mankind in general and for each country of the organization, in particular ...

At the same time, Albania follows with close attention those parts of the plan that may lead us towards an overlapping of the commitments of our countries in various organizations. We support the strengthening of unity among multilateral organizations and respect, at the same time, the differences between member states."

civilization, understanding and equality between people as a precondition for a world that respects tolerance, which are values the west is insisting upon today. Albania has officially notified the Conference members of its Euro Atlantic intentions and that it will pay close attention to that part of the adopted plan that may overlap with the country's commitments with other organizations.

Concluding this analysis, we could say that the Albanian political class failed to demonstrate its readiness to help reduce the effect of the caricature crises. Both Spain and the EU asked the Albanian political class to help by giving messages of moderation because they were convinced the Albanians who have lived for centuries between Christ and Muhammad, were in the position to deliver these messages and reflect these values. But the elements that other recognize as our values, we consider as non-values. We must not forget that if we do not remember to respect ourselves, others will not respect us also.

Tirana, February 14, 2006