



Caricatured: *Le Monde* and the Mohammed Cartoons

On Thursday, February 2, 2006, the influential French newspaper *Le Monde* displayed a front-page cartoon about the international conflagration ignited by published drawings of the Prophet Mohammed.¹ Many Muslims believed the Koran prohibited pictures of the prophet, and in Muslim countries crowds had burned embassies and people had died in violent protests. *Le Monde's* cartoon, by famed caricaturist Plantu (Jean Plantureux), tried to capture the nature of the controversy. There was no caption; the headline read: "*Islam: les caricatures de la discorde*" (Islam: the cartoons of discord).

Le Monde editors had commissioned Plantu to produce the cartoon because they were torn over whether or not to reproduce the original Danish cartoons that had sparked rage across the Islamic world. The Plantu drawing bought the editors time. But pressure was still building on the national newspaper to publish the cartoons at the heart of the controversy. On Wednesday, competitor *France Soir* had published all 12 cartoons; on Friday, a smaller publication—*Liberation*—published the two most controversial.

France was a country that prided itself on its secular humanism. Religion was deemed to belong forcefully in the private sphere. At the same time, greater Paris—where *Le Monde* was headquartered—had a sizeable Muslim population of some 1.7 million.² In Europe, debate over the Muslim cartoons had devolved into a stand-off between free speech versus respect for religion. As *Le Monde* editors gathered on Friday, February 3, for their midday editorial meeting, they asked themselves yet again: should they publish any of the offending cartoons and, if so, which ones?

¹ *Le Monde* published daily at noon, with the following day's date. Thus the Thursday paper was dated Friday, February 3.

² See: http://www.economist.com/node/12724966?story_id=12724966. France, for historical reasons, does not track ethnicity. Thus population statistics by religious affiliation or ethnic background are only estimates. The Muslim population in all France was estimated at 6 million of a total 60 million.

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Jyllands-Posten

The cartoons in question had first been published fully four months earlier. But reaction to them had spread only slowly. *Jyllands-Posten* (JP), a liberal newspaper in the Danish city of Aarhus, had commissioned the cartoons after Culture Editor Flemming Rose learned that a local children's book illustrator was unable to find anyone to illustrate a book about the Prophet Mohammed, founder of Islam, because by some interpretations, Islam forbade any pictorial depiction of the prophet.³ Rose felt that this was a challenge to freedom of speech and invited 25 members of the association of Danish cartoonists to submit illustrations of Mohammed: "Draw Muhammad as you see him," Flemming wrote.⁴ Twelve of them turned in cartoons.

The article. On September 30, 2005, JP ran an explanatory [piece](#) by Culture Editor Rose—a former foreign correspondent in both the Soviet Union and Iran—intended to start a community conversation about self-censorship. The article, titled "Muhammeds ansigt" (Mohammed's face), was one of several which ran that day on the general theme that, in secular and democratic societies, non-believers should not have to censor themselves for fear of offending believers of any faith, and in this instance, Islam. The newspaper had a daily circulation of 154,000—a medium-sized publication in a small country.

The 12 cartoons accompanied the articles. The cartoons varied in their depictions, and several did not include Mohammed at all. One showed the prophet with a bomb in his turban, another featured a haloed figure on a cloud with arms wide, crying to a line of figures: "Stop, stop—we've run out of virgins!" A more prosaic drawing showed a bearded, shepherd-like figure leading a laden donkey, with a low red sun on the horizon; another was of an artist seated at a table under a bright light drawing a bearded figure.

The cartoons did provoke a reaction. On October 9, the Islamic Faith Community in Denmark demanded an apology. JP said in an editorial on October 12 that it regretted any offense the cartoons had caused, but it did not apologize. Two days later, a crowd of 3,000 demonstrated peacefully in Copenhagen against the cartoons. The protestors claimed that the cartoons lampooned the Prophet and insulted their religion.

There were more developments. In mid-October, a group of 11 Muslim ambassadors to Denmark demanded a meeting with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (he refused). That same week, an Egyptian newspaper, *El Fagr*, reproduced six of the cartoons—one on the front page

³ This assertion in itself stimulated debate about just what the Koran stipulated; in Iran, for example, one can buy pictures of Mohammed.

⁴ Flemming Rose, "Why I Published Those Cartoons," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2006, p. B1, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html>.

and an additional five inside—and condemned JP for publishing them.⁵ The Egyptian re-publication attracted minimal attention. Several Muslim countries, however, delivered diplomatic protests to the Danish government. Meanwhile, the newspaper received a number of death threats and bomb threats. But by and large, throughout the fall the matter remained largely a domestic Danish political issue.

Imams to Mideast. That changed in December. On December 3, a delegation of Danish imams arrived in Egypt for a week of meetings. They carried a 43-page dossier of images they claimed reflected demeaning treatment of Muslims in Denmark. Egypt had already registered several protests with the Danish government, and the visiting Danes met with a variety of officials, including Secretary General of the Arab League (and former Egyptian foreign minister) Amr Moussa.⁶ The delegation's portfolio included the 12 JP cartoons. Another three, however, were unrelated offensive illustrations—for example, Mohammed as a pedophile.⁷ At a December 7 meeting in Mecca, the influential Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) issued a statement condemning the cartoons and the Danish government's failure to protect Muslims.⁸

On December 18, JP Editor-in-Chief Carsten Juste took to the pages of his newspaper to talk about the cartoons and why JP had published them. In an interview, he said that “it was never our wish to insult the Muslims’ faith.” He continued:

If cruder cartoons had been submitted, they would have been pulled...
But there's absolutely no way we will apologize for publishing the
cartoons. If we apologize, then we let down the many generations who
have fought for freedom of expression and other civil rights.⁹

Whatever its intent, this explanation did not calm the waters. On December 29, the prime ministers of the League of Arab States criticized Danish Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen for failure to address Muslim concern over the cartoons. In response, Fogh Rasmussen on January 1, 2006, in his New Year's address to his country defended Danes' freedom of expression and religious freedom. With this, the controversy burst onto the international stage.

⁵ For an image of *El Fagr*, see: <http://freedomforegyptians.blogspot.com/2006/02/egyptian-newspaper-pictures-that.html>.

⁶ Jytte Klausen, “Introduction” in *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

⁷ There was apparently confusion—whether deliberate or inadvertent is unclear—as to which drawings JP had actually published.

⁸ *Cartoons that Shook the World*, Table 1. The pan-Islamic OIC was founded in 1969 to promote Islamic unity and combat anti-Islamic sentiments.

⁹ John Hansen, “The editor and the 12 cartoons,” *Jyllands Posten*, December 18, 2005, <http://jp.dk/udland/article177647.ece>.

Boycotts and burnings

On January 12, the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* reported that the Danish imams had attributed to JP cartoons it never published. But it was too late. On January 21, the International Union of Muslim Scholars called for a boycott of Danish and Norwegian goods.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia was the first government to comply, followed by most Middle East countries, and on January 26, the Saudis withdrew their ambassador to Denmark. In quick order, Libya closed its Danish embassy, masked Palestinian gunmen took over the European Union office in Gaza, and Syria called for punishing the cartoonists. On January 29, protestors on the West Bank burned the Danish flag, and the next day Danes were warned to avoid the Middle East.

JP tried yet again to contain the damage. Culture Editor Rose went on the Arabic-language TV network Al Jazeera on January 29 to express his regret that he unwittingly offended practicing Muslims, but his remarks were not translated into Arabic.¹¹ Editor-in-chief Juste on January 30 published a statement on *Jyllands-Posten's* website in English, Danish, and Arabic which apologized for offending, but not for publishing. The statement noted that the cartoons did not violate Danish law. It said:

In our opinion, the 12 drawings were sober. They were not intended to be offensive, nor were they at variance with Danish law, but they have indisputably offended many Muslims, for which we apologize.

On the same day, European Union Foreign Policy Coordinator Javier Solana issued a statement condemning both the cartoons and the violent protests. On January 30, former US President Bill Clinton at a conference in Qatar described the cartoons as “outrageous.” On January 31, two JP offices were evacuated after a bomb threat.

Media support? Meanwhile, pressure was building on other media outlets to show support for *Jyllands-Posten* and its self-styled defense of free speech. Since the fall, a couple of publications had published a few of the cartoons. The left-wing Dutch *Die Volkskrant* published three on October 29. On January 10, 2006, the small Norwegian religious publication *Magazinet*, as well as the newspaper *Dagbladet*, reproduced all 12 JP cartoons.

But these were weeklies or small publications. The big European media voices were silent—*Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Die Welt* in Germany; *Corriere della Serra* in Italy. The same was true of the English-language press—the *London Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. In France, too, home of *Le Figaro*, and *Le Monde*, readers and viewers saw endless headlines about the Mohammed controversy and its manifestations. As of early January, however, the cartoons themselves were difficult for news consumers to find.

¹⁰ Two Norwegian newspapers had republished the cartoons on January 10.

¹¹ For discussion of the diplomatic aspects of this affair, see: <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/pdf/767/76701102.pdf>

France and religion

France—historically a Catholic country with a substantial Protestant minority—had subordinated religion to secular authority ever since the 1789 revolution, which toppled the Bourbon kings. The revolutionary National Assembly had confiscated all church property, and in 1790, a new law stipulated that all clergy be selected and paid by the state, not the Vatican.¹² The revolution also guaranteed the right of free speech. Article XI of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man said: “The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man.”

A 1905 Law on the Separation of Church and State took it one step further (though the government continued to own 86 French cathedrals and numerous other religious monuments). The 1958 Constitution articulated a vision of a secular and assimilated citizenry. Article 1 said: “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic. It guarantees the equality of all citizens before the law without distinction of race, origin or religion. It respects all beliefs.”

By the early 21st century, religious freedom and a secular government had become the French creed. Under French law, all residents—immigrant or native—were to be treated as individuals, not as members of ethnic or religious communities. Government demographers did not even track ethnicity or religious affiliation, judging them irrelevant to political identity.

However, the law was one thing and social attitudes another. By the 1960s, France’s socio-religious divide was no longer between Protestant and Catholic, but between Christian and Muslim. Like other European powers, France through World War II had maintained colonies—a large number of them in Africa. After brutal wars and liberation campaigns, however, most French colonies had gained independence. French law gave many former colonials the right to live in France and before long, Muslim immigrants from former colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon relocated. The newcomers preferred urban areas, and the cities of Marseilles, Lille, and Paris emerged as centers of Arab settlement. France became home to the largest Muslim population in Europe. Many of the immigrants were low-income or unemployed. The 2003 unemployment rate among former Algerians and Moroccans was over 30 percent, three times the national average.

In Paris, large swathes of territory became majority-Arab communities. The city and its surrounding Île-de-France region hosted one of the largest concentrations of immigrants on the continent. As of January 2005, an estimated 1.9 million, or 16.7 percent, of Île-de-France residents were immigrants born abroad. Many of these areas developed reputations as violent, poverty-stricken, and neglected. Residents lived disproportionately in dense, poorly-maintained high-rise

¹² Steven Kreis, “The Civil Constitution of the Clergy (July 12, 1790),” The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History,” http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/clergy_const.html.

“jungles.” In October 2005, the Paris suburbs erupted. The violence was only the latest in what had been a strife-ridden 18 months across Europe.

Sectarian violence

For over a year, Europe had suffered attacks that seemed the result of a growing rift between Muslims and others in European society. On March 11, 2004, 191 people had died when bombs set by an Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist cell exploded on a Madrid train. Four days later, the French National Assembly had passed a controversial law banning the wearing of overt religious symbols or clothing in public schools. The law seemed to target Muslim women in headscarves or other coverings, and protests were widespread. In November 2004, rightwing filmmaker and Islam critic Theo Van Gogh was murdered in Holland. In July 2005, Muslim bombers motivated by Al-Qaeda struck twice in London.

2005 riots. Paris experienced its own brand of sectarian violence in the fall of 2005. This time, it was not terrorists who struck. Riots broke out in the Paris area of Clichy-sous-Bois on October 27, 2005, after the accidental deaths of two Islamic teenagers. The protests grew steadily, and on November 2, 180 cars throughout greater Paris were set on fire; police arrested 34 rioters. Then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy referred to the protesters as riffraff and promised a “war without mercy” to restore order. By November 12, the violence had spread to 30 cities and the government imposed a state of emergency in the worst-affected areas. It was weeks before the violence was brought under control, and the costs—both financial and social—were high.

With this history so recently put behind them, it was with some trepidation that France followed the controversy over the Mohammed cartoons as it grew through December and caught fire in late January with embassy closings, mass protests in the Middle East, and burgeoning violence.

European press and cartoons

On Wednesday, February 1, 2006, some dozen European newspapers apparently came to a simultaneous decision: the time had come to declare solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten* or to express their own views on the controversy. Publications in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain printed one or more of the cartoons. Germany’s *Die Welt*, for example, ran the cartoon of Mohammed with a bomb in his turban on the front page and three others inside.¹³ The *Berliner Zeitung* printed two. Italy’s *La Stampa* ran a cartoon on page 13, while Barcelona’s *El Periodico* and

¹³ “‘Mohamed met bomhoed’ komt overall,” *De Volkskrant*, February 3, 2006, <http://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/article208225.ece>.

Madrid's *El Mundo* had photos of the drawings.¹⁴ No British or US publications chose to reproduce the cartoons.

France Soir. In France, *France Soir*, with a circulation of 100,000, chose to print all 12 under the headline: "Yes, we have the right to caricature God."¹⁵ A front-page cartoon pictured Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian gods on a cloud; the Danish drawings were on an inside page. The paper's owner, Raymond Lakah, who happened to be Franco-Egyptian, swiftly fired the managing director (editor), Jacques Lefranc.¹⁶ Lakah said the firing was intended "as a powerful sign of respect for the intimate beliefs and convictions of every individual."¹⁷ *France Soir* sold 25 percent more papers than usual that day.¹⁸

The widespread re-publication of the cartoons provoked instant criticism from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and others. There were demonstrations in Turkey. Syria recalled its ambassador to Denmark. The French Foreign Ministry also weighed in: it issued a stern statement that while freedom of expression was valuable, the ministry "condemns all that hurts individuals in their beliefs or their religious convictions."¹⁹ The French Council of the Muslim Faith (Conseil du Culte Musulman) condemned the *France Soir* cartoons as a "real provocation" and the National Federation of Muslims of France promised a suit against the newspaper. Meanwhile, one of France's most influential newspapers—*Le Monde*—had held back on publishing the cartoons.

Le Monde: quoi faire?

Le Monde was a daily national newspaper. Many considered it the French paper of record, and in 2006 it had a circulation of some 350,000. Founded in December 1944 after the German army was driven from Paris, the paper by the 21st century had a reputation as politically moderate. In general, *Le Monde* prided itself on being a paper of ideas. It strove to analyze and interpret the news, rather than simply to report it. *Le Monde* was an afternoon paper, publishing at noon with the following day's date on it. As one editor puts it wryly: "So we are always a little bit ahead or a little bit late!"²⁰

The paper had an unusual organizational structure. Its journalists owned the publication and elected their own top editors and management. An executive editor led the paper, but a

¹⁴ Angela Charlton, *Associated Press*, "Papers Republish," February 1, 2006.

¹⁵ *France Soir*, a once-prominent national newspaper, was in bankruptcy proceedings at the time.

¹⁶ For the record, LeFranc was rehired the following day.

¹⁷ "Muhammad cartoon row intensifies," *BBC News*, February 1, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4670370.stm>.

¹⁸ A free newspaper, *Vingt Minutes* (20 Minutes) also reprinted the cartoons.

¹⁹ *Associated Press*, February 2, 2006.

²⁰ Author's interview with then-Deputy Editor Sylvie Kauffmann in Paris, on May 21, 2010. All further quotes from Kauffmann, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

quartet of deputy editors, known as *le redaction* (the editorial), ran the paper on a daily basis. In early February 2006, Executive Editor Gerard Courtois was out of town. The deputy editors were Michel Kajman, Laurent Greilsamer, Sylvie Kauffmann, and Patrick Jarreau. They shared authority equally, and rotated the person in charge for any given edition. The editors met three times daily—at 7:30 a.m., at noon, and at 5 p.m.—to discuss what would go in the next day’s paper. The morning meeting was quick—a digest of overnight developments. The noon meeting was the largest, included reports from section editors, and covered both daily articles and long-term projects. The afternoon meeting tended to focus on technical questions—placement and space issues. The paper closed every day at 10:30 a.m.

While the deputy editors’ team sought input from all departments, significant decisions, says Deputy Editor Greilsamer, “are taken by a very few people, especially in this kind of matter. We have to consult, but the more consequential the decision,” the fewer the decision makers.²¹ On the other hand, the deputies enjoyed unusual unanimity of views. Editorial meetings could be lively, but rarely involved deep-seated philosophical differences. Explains Greilsamer:

We are people who have known each other for about 20 years, in general, who live in the same office for 3–4 years, who can read each other. We know each other’s sensibilities, our reactions, the ways of analyzing. This is all to say we don’t need to sit down at a table and to ask, “What do we think? What do you think? Why do you think that?” In a way, we know in advance, and almost intuitively... We know each other by heart.

Le Monde had covered the growing cartoon controversy thoroughly. But with the appearance of the cartoons across Europe, it was time to bite the bullet. Should *Le Monde* reproduce the cartoons—which could be seen as support of free speech and media colleagues? Or should it not—out of respect for the large Muslim population in its readership area, and to avoid fanning the sectarian embers still smoldering in Paris? There were several aspects to consider.

Legal. Under French law, group defamation was both a criminal and a civil offense. What’s more, re-publication of a defamatory item was considered a new offense. An 1881 Freedom of the Press law governed the criminal charges: Article 29 criminalized group libel and re-publication, while Article 33 termed hate speech group defamation and criminalized hate speech against religious, ethnic, and minorities. In 2006, the punishment was six months imprisonment and a fine of €22,500 for each insult. There was likely little legal risk for *Le Monde* in republishing the cartoons, but it wanted to make sure it stood on solid legal ground.

Competition. A second consideration was competition. What were other papers doing? *Le Monde* compared itself to such high-brow publications as the *International Herald Tribune*, the

²¹ Author’s interview with Laurent Greilsamer in Paris, on May 20, 2010. All further quotes from Greilsamer, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Guardian, or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. They paid attention as well to what less serious papers like *Die Bild* or *France Soir* were publishing, but did not consider them direct competitors. Last, but not least, were readers. Did the newspaper have an obligation to print the cartoons in order to serve its readers?

During the noontime editorial meeting on February 1, the editorial leaders debated the matter at some length. There was no great enthusiasm for reproduction, but it seemed equally impossible not to run something. Then Deputy Editor Kajman had an idea that might buy at least some time. Cartoons had a long and venerable history at *Le Monde*. What if, instead of running the original and offending cartoons, they commissioned their own—an illustration of the controversy instead of the controversial cartoons themselves?

The paper had four cartoonists on staff, but one was an obvious choice for this assignment. Jean Plantureux (known as Plantu) was an award-winning political cartoonist with some 30 years' experience. "Plantu is the cartoonist number one," says Editor Greilsamer. "In the hierarchy, he's the best, and it's always he who draws for Page One." At the time, Plantu's cartoons appeared on the front page, above the fold. He did not decide on his own topics, but was assigned them. The group decided to ask him to do something on the controversy. Kajman volunteered to track down Plantu and give him a call.

Plantu cartoon

Plantu at the time was traveling in the US. He took a call from his editors on Wednesday, February 1, while at a conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Plantu, a professional cartoonist since 1972, had heard of the Danish cartoons much earlier, when they were first published in September 2005. He says he suggested at the time that *Le Monde* republish them, but his editors declined. Now, with so much emotion stirred up, they still were not eager to republish the original drawings. Plantu agreed with that. He had seen too many instances in which political cartoons had polarized rather than clarified an issue. What happens, he muses, is that "people no longer see the drawing."

It's like the portrait of Mohammed. People no longer see the drawing, they see only the humiliation. So is it necessary to show cartoons that make people blind? I'm not sure.²²

Plantu had no argument with the artist's right to draw Mohammed. But there was a wider world to consider.

As an artist, I should be able to draw Mohammed without any problem. Only, there is not only the artist to consider. The artist should draw

²² Author's interview with Jean Plantureux in Paris, on May 20, 2010. All quotes from Plantu, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

everything, nothing should prevent him. That's the artist. And then I say to myself—but after all I live on the earth, which is a world at war, it's not a peaceful world; that artists' drawings find themselves on the Web; that a drawing can be manipulated; that a drawing can be shown and can be seen as humiliating for millions of Muslims, for example.

Plantu was clear in his view of the political cartoonist's role. He says that “we have to think about the graphic responsibility of our cartoons. We have a responsibility. We have to use that responsibility. We have to goad, we have to disturb, we have to exacerbate, we have to be violent.” Now he had to act on that code of behavior and decide how to depict the controversy over the Mohammed cartoons. Plantu, who was on his way from Atlanta to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, ended up sketching on the flight. He recalls:

Considering the drawings, and looking at how they had resonated, I saw it was a good opportunity to respond to intolerance... I remember I was doing something like a punished student: writing I must not draw Mohammed. Like a student. And then I thought whoa, I may have something here. I rearranged the letters. And then I made the pencil. Then I made the hand, because it was the sketcher, I drew the hand that holds the pencil. Then I thought, I can extend this—and I made the minaret. A drawing, you see, is a syntax—not of words, but of symbols. The letters, the bearded man, the pencil, the minaret: voila. Then the words and the symbols speak together—they make a graphic sentence.

Cartoon published. Plantu sent in his cartoon the morning of Thursday, February 2. Kauffmann says she was confident the product would be first rate: “We’ve been working together for so long, he’s so very much a part of our DNA that we know in a situation like this, it’s going to be what we want.” And it was. Recalls Greilsamer:

He sent us this extraordinary illustration which in a certain manner saved all of us because he said everything. It was a very strong statement of our position but it was not aggressive. It was a position which was respectful, which was intelligent. For me, it was a very, very good drawing.

The cartoon ran within hours in the edition printed at noon—with the publication date of February 3. The [cartoon](#), which ran on the front page, depicted a giant hand gripping a mammoth pencil, writing over and over the words: “I must not draw Mohammed.”²³ The words spiraled into a portrait of a turbaned man with a flowing beard. At the top of the pencil, shaped like a minaret, a small turbaned figure trained a telescope on the trail of words.

²³ “Islam: les caricatures de la discorde,” *Le Monde*, February 3, 2006, <http://www.plantu.net/actu/9-DESSINS-RELIGIONS.pdf>.

The headline read: “*Islam: les caricatures de la discorde*” (Islam: the cartoons of discord), and a subhead said “*La crise provoquée par la publication de dessins représentant Mahomet s’exacerbe*” (the crisis provoked by the publication of the cartoons representing Mohammed is growing). The accompanying news story, written by *le redaction*, reported the growing protests across the globe and that numerous publications in Europe had republished the cartoons.

Le Monde also published an editorial on the dispute on page 2. Called *Caricatures libres* (free cartoons), it quoted the French Constitution’s Article 1 and went on to say:

Religions are systems of thought, construction of the spirit, beliefs which are respectable but which can be freely analyzed, criticized, ridiculed. It is the same with political ideologies. The republican laity supposes religious neutrality and tolerance. It is necessary to distinguish religions from those who practice them. The latter must be protected against all discrimination and against any abusive language based on their religious adherence.

On page 3, *Le Monde* ran two more articles on the controversy. One chronicled the views of eight cartoonists. A second story focused on the European publications which had decided to republish the cartoons. Another two news articles on page 5 noted that Denmark feared the “Mohammed affair” would provoke sectarian violence and that French Muslims had denounced the cartoon reproductions in *France Soir* as a racist act.

And still the controversy refused to die down. *Le Monde* was obliged to keep coverage intense.

Le Monde reconsiders

The edition of Saturday, February 4 (which hit the streets at noon Friday) featured a front page headline: “*Manifestations contre les caricatures de Mahomet*” (demonstrations against the Mohammed cartoons). More followed inside, where Page 4 was devoted to the controversy. There were four main stories, plus a box featuring three precedents for such outrage: Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, and Theo van Gogh.²⁴ One of the articles described the unease and embarrassment of French politicians, torn in how to respond to the French Muslim community.

But as the editors sat down to their daily noontime meeting on Friday, February 3, they realized that all this coverage, while comprehensive, was likely not enough. The question of whether or not to reproduce the cartoons was stubbornly still with them. The reasons to avoid them had not changed. There was still the recent history of riots in Paris to consider. Kauffmann notes that “the Middle East, the Jewish-Muslim divide... is the toughest issue in France... These

²⁴ Nasreen was a Bangladeshi physician, writer, feminist, and human rights activist critical of Islam who fled her country and was expelled from India after denunciations and death threats from Muslim fundamentalists.

debates are always very tough, and on our website it's terrible. It's the issue which gets the most reaction." The editors also worried about whether their correspondents in the Middle East might suffer.

There was in addition discussion of whether *Le Monde* readers took much interest in religious cartoons. As Greilsamer emphasizes, France was a thoroughly secular society. Since the 1970s, especially among the intellectuals who comprised *Le Monde's* core readership, religion was dismissed as akin to magic. He recalls, "In the 1970s, in a certain milieu, to say I believe or to say I practice a religion, it was really to say you were a peasant." Did *Le Monde* readers seriously want to see the cartoons for themselves?

As *le redaction* looked around the table, "people were pretty divided, I think," recalls Kauffmann. "Some thought that we should print them. Others thought that it was not a good idea." She continues:

Some people thought yes, if Muslim readers or people abroad (because there wasn't so much protest in France) find it offensive, why should we add one more layer? Why should we play that against their sensitivity? And the other line was very much... the other camp was we're free. We are in France. We are not a Muslim country. We looked into cartoons that we published 20, 30 years ago about Jesus Christ and they were much, much worse. Even in *Le Monde*. So it was no, why should we fear anything? This is our right. It's freedom of speech. It's a principle.

Greilsamer listed two conditions for the paper even to consider running the Danish cartoons: 1) obtain the views of *Le Monde* correspondents in the Middle East, and 2) ensure that *Le Monde's* treatment of the cartoons, whatever it might be, was respectful. Then there was the secondary dilemma: If the paper decided to print the cartoons, should it run all of them, or some of them? If some, which ones? It was Friday noon, February 3. The Sunday-Monday edition would be on newsstands in 24 hours, at noon on Saturday. If *le redaction* was to get the Danish cartoons into the paper, they would have to make a decision soon.