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ARTICLE

## From Respected Religion Scholar Expert to Cartoon Character: Reflections in the Wake of the Danish Muhammad Cartoon Crisis and Three Decades as Expert to the Media

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### ABSTRACT

Respected scholar, expert, public opinion maker, oracle, under-cover politician, charlatan, cartoon character – all roles “out there” waiting for scholars sharing knowledge with a wider public. Scholars of religion trying to carve out more room in the public arena for a non-religious, scientific approach to religion always risk digging their graves as (respected) scholars. What’s worse, they also risk digging the grave for a valuable and respectable, as well as publicly valued and respected academic, scientific study of religion. The scholar popularizing scientifically based knowledge, not least via the mass media (daily newspapers or public television), may “become” political and controversial to such a degree that s/he becomes a problem for the scientific study of religion, the community of scholars of religion, and the university with which s/he is affiliated. The otherwise valuable engagement threatens the reputation of science as being something valuable, “pure” and “neutral,” elevated above the dirty business of politics and power. In spite of the risks, the engaged scholar, it is, however, also argued, actually can help to strengthen the position, inside and outside the academy, of scientifically based knowledge and of the critical, analytical, scientific study of religion.

**KEYWORDS**

study of religion, methodological neutrality, public intellectual, public sphere, social engagement, Islam, cartoon crisis

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**Introduction**

In the abstract to his 2005 article “The Politics of Wishful Thinking? Disentangling the Role of the Scholar-Scientist from that of the Public Intellectual in the Modern Academic Study of Religion”, Canadian scholar of religion Donald Wiebe wrote:

Although religion may well have relevance for various social, political, economic, cultural, and other related issues in society, I will argue here that this does not oblige the academic student of religion to become engaged with those matters. Indeed, to do so – not as a citizen but as a member of the academic guild which has responsibility to the field/discipline of Religious Studies and the modern research university at large – is to fuse and therefore confuse advocacy and scholarship. The task of the student of religion, *qua* scientist, is to seek to understand and to explain religion and religions, not to create the good society (Wiebe, 2005, p. 7).

With reference to e.g. Weber’s “teachings” about the (ideal) separation of and difference between value-free scholarship of communication thereof and a value judgment (be it religious, moral or political), Wiebe warns about the risks implied if the scholar becomes a *public intellectual*. The fundamental risk, he argues, is that it “may well put academic credibility of this discipline into question” (Wiebe, 2005, p. 8). Moreover, he warns, “[r]eligious and political goals [...] are replacing the scientific agenda of seeking disinterested knowledge about religion and religions” (Ibid.).

Wiebe, in this article, attacks not only religio-theologian public intellectuals but also scholar of religion Russell T. McCutcheon. Wiebe, as also e.g. Ivan Strenski, opines that McCutcheon has become spokesman for an activist and anti-religious application of the study of religion, which, at the end of the day, is no better than a religious-theological pro-religious approach (Strenski, 2006, p. 339 ff.). *En passant*, one may, however, note that McCutcheon, the same year he is criticized by Wiebe, directs a not dissimilar criticism against another US scholar of religion, Bruce Lincoln (2005). McCutcheon (2005) criticizes Lincoln for – in regard to his study-of-religions based critical analyses of e.g. the rhetoric of former US President Bush – for abusing his academic title and status to legitimize what, at the end of the day, are his personal political opinions and agenda. An accusation not dissimilar to the one directed at me by Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* (JP) in the debate following the publication of the Muhammad cartoons. Let us therefore, before we get back to some key methodological

issues take a look at religion scholar Jensen's role(s) in the debate pertaining to the Muhammad cartoons. As a case.

### The Cartoons: Islam-Bashing or Freedom-Fighting – or Raising a Debate?

September 30, 2005, *JP*<sup>1</sup> published “The Face of Muhammed” containing twelve cartoons<sup>2</sup>, including one of a man with a bomb and the Islamic creed in his turban. Mentioning what he considers examples of self-censorship due to fear for Muslim reactions, culture editor Flemming Rose concludes:

The public space is being intimidated. Artists, authors, illustrators, translators and people in the theatre are therefore steering a wide berth around the most important meeting of cultures in our time – the meeting between Islam and the secular society of the West, which is rooted in Christianity. [...] Some Muslims reject modern, secular society. They demand a special position, insisting on special consideration for their own religious feelings. It is incompatible with secular democracy and freedom of expression, where *one has to be ready to put up with scorn, mockery and ridicule* (Director of Public Prosecutions, 2006; trans. and italics mine)<sup>3</sup>.

“The Face of Muhammed” inspired heated debates<sup>4</sup>. About freedom of expression versus religion and religious sensibilities (especially Islam and Muslim sensibilities) and about religious versus secular worldviews, and the Muslim world versus the West. These debates are ongoing, often including issues pertaining to the refugees from Muslim countries, and often framing controversies in terms of “culture wars”.

Reasons for this and for the events, including the violent ones<sup>5</sup>, that unfolded in late January and early February 2006, are many<sup>6</sup>. One obvious reason is that quite a few Muslims *did* feel provoked and offended, and that some of them did see “The Face of Muhammed” as part of a defamatory campaign directed against Islam and Muslims<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://jyllands-posten.dk/>

<sup>2</sup> I use “cartoons” rather than “drawings” because this is the term most frequently used to refer to the drawings and the “affair” in question. The letter from Rose to members of the Danish newspapers illustrators’ union invited them to “draw” Muhammad as they “saw” him (twelve out of forty responded positively by submitting the published drawings).

<sup>3</sup> Flemming Rose, when looking back in 2019 characterizes his then position as somewhat “naïve” (or too black and white) (Krasnik, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For analyses, debates and documents with specific regard to Denmark, see Jensen (2006a/2006b/2006c), Jerichow and Rode (2006), Rothstein and Rothstein (2006), Larsen and Seidenfaden (2006), cf. also Repp (2006), and Modood et al. (2006).

<sup>5</sup> That the controversy was also played out in threats, violent protests, and even in killings, must be mentioned because those reactions became part of the debates. However, the number of Muslims engaged in street fighting was next to zero compared to those who watched such happenings on TV.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jensen (2006a; 2006c) for interpretations of some reasons and contexts.

<sup>7</sup> This is true for the Danish Muslims travelling to the Middle East in late 2005 as well as for the eleven ambassadors who wrote a letter (October 12, 2005) to the Danish Prime Minister referring to what they saw as an “ongoing smear campaign”.

Another reason is that quite a few of *non*-Muslims, including Islamophobs, considered the reactions of some Muslims, especially the violent ones, as a proof that *JP* had been right from the beginning: freedom of expression was under siege, threatened by fanatical Muslims or by Islam *as such*. In their view the cultural war against these Muslims had to be intensified<sup>8</sup>.

Other non-Muslims, though equally critical about the violent protests and in favour of freedom of expression, warned that freedom of expression should not be taken as an absolute right, and that dominant discourses on Islam tended towards legitimating almost any kind of verbal attack on Islam and Muslims. The publication of the cartoons in *JP* was an unnecessary demonstration of power and cultural hegemony directed against an already marginalized minority. The cartoons, in their view, were but one more example of Islam-bashing dressed up as freedom fighting<sup>9</sup>.

At the time when the “affair” turned into a crisis (late January 2006), with fighting in the streets and boycotts of Danish goods, *JP* published a statement saying that *JP* regretted that the cartoons had been offensive to Muslims. That had never been the intention. “At the time they had not”, editor Rose wrote in *Washington Post* February 19, 2006, “realized the extent of the issue’s sensitivity for the Muslims, who live in Denmark and the millions of Muslims around the world”. He had only “tried to test the limits of self-censorship by calling on cartoonists to challenge a Muslim taboo”. And, repeating what he had written in the article of September 30, 2005, he added that Muslims, like everybody else, have to put up with “scorn, mockery and ridicule” (Rose, 2006).

*JP* was adamant in insisting that the newspaper never intended to offend Muslims. Interpretations differing from this official statement have either been totally rejected or labelled as “mean lies”, and *JP* has proven to be extremely zealous in countering opinions differing from their own<sup>10</sup>. The publication of the cartoons was solely intended to provoke a *debate* on the conceived threat to freedom of expression. It was an act of resistance to this threat and an act of freedom fighting<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> A group of intellectuals and opinion makers promoting such opinions were gathered in the so-called *Trykkefrihedsselskab* (cf. below). Some (Brix & Hansen, 2002; Brix, Hansen & Hedegaard, 2003; Pittelkow, 2002) published influential books on the perceived Islamic threat. Similar opinions can be found amongst politicians and political parties. *Dansk Folkeparti* (“The Danish People’s Party”) is the most famous, but in Denmark as elsewhere in Europe others have come into being, e.g. *Sverigedemokraterne and Alternative f. Deutschland*. See e.g. Andreassen (2005), Jensen (2006a/2006c), Hervik (1999/2002/2006), and Hussain (2000) for instances of Islamophobic discourse in Denmark.

<sup>9</sup> This view comes close to the qualified opinions of e.g. former minister of Foreign Affairs, U. Ellemann-Jensen (2007), and former editor-in-chief of *Politiken*, a Copenhagen-based daily, T. Seidenfaden (2007). Cf. Repp (2006), Larsen and Seidenfaden (2006), Hedetoft (2006), Rothstein and Rothstein (2006), and Skadegaard (2006). The view of Jensen (2006a/2006c) is in line with this view, though I suggest that *JP* had several motives, including the one claimed by the newspaper itself.

<sup>10</sup> *JP* in some cases accused the “offender” of defamation and slander. This was the case with the lawyer who, on behalf of some Muslims, filed a complaint against *JP* for defamation and slander.

<sup>11</sup> Consequently, *JP*, Rose and supporters were pleased when Rose was awarded the “Sappho Prize” by the mentioned (see note 8) *Trykkefrihedsselskabet* (“Free Speech Society”) March 27, 2007. *Trykkefrihedsselskabet* was established in 2004 with the aim of defending freedom of expression, not least against attacks from religious groups.

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## The Cartoons: Jensen vs. Jyllandsposten, or Jensen vs. Juste

### Episode 1:

September 30, 2005, a journalist phoned to ask my opinion on a project of *JP* to have illustrators draw Muhammad. I said that irrespective of the not unanimous prohibition against making drawings of Muhammad, some Muslims no doubt would take offense and see it as a provocation and thus get angry with *JP*. I added that I personally saw no reason for publishing such images: the Muslim minority had been the object of more than enough Islam-bashing. But, of course: *JP* had the right to freedom of expression.

I was *not* informed that the cartoons *had* actually been published on the very same day!

### Episode 2:

Next time I got involved was late January 2006 when the whole thing had become regular front-page news due to demonstrations, burning down of embassies, etc. Sunday January 30, 2006, the face of scholar Jensen with a headline “*Jyllands-Posten* was warned” covered the front page of *Politiken* (Høy-Jensen, 2006), a daily critical of *JP*’s publication of the cartoons. In the article, I, “leading scholar of religion” – having been phoned on the day before by a journalist from *Politiken* saying she had had an anonymous email according to which *JP* had contacted Jensen *before* publishing the cartoons, asking his qualified opinion about possible Muslim reactions to drawings of the prophet – was correctly quoted as having answered *JP* journalist that it was his guess that some Muslims would take offense. *Incorrectly*, though, this front-page article also presented me as *warning JP* that the drawings might lead to “*violent protest*”. These words had, moreover, been inserted in the article *after* I reviewed and accepted the quotes right after the interview!

With this photo, headline and article, I got my break-through as a religion scholar-expert, and the same evening, scholar Jensen, but now also “warner-oracle” Jensen appeared on *al-Jazeera* as a Danish Muslim told his Muslim brothers that *JP*, thanks to Jensen, actually knew very well what they were doing – and had done.

### Episode 3:

*JP* denied ever having contacted, not to say *consulted* me, postulating that Jensen himself “made up” the front-page “story”: a media-stunt! A journal for journalism followed up on the story, and after a series of denials from *JP*, they finally (mid-February) found an *JP* editor who admitted that a journalist *had* called Jensen. But, they said, she had called in regard to another matter, only, at the end of the interview, mentioning the cartoons *en passant*. I was not quite happy with this version but did not react: I was primarily relieved that my memory had not played me a trick. I *had* been asked my opinion by *JP*, and I *had* said almost what I remembered saying.

Alas! In early March a journalist from *JP* called again. They have retrieved a tape recording of that interview, and it “proved” that the interview had taken place not *before* the publication of the cartoons but on the very same day. They admitted

that I had had but the very best reasons to think so, but that, of course, did not matter much to them.

What mattered, though, not least to me, was that *JP*, in another front-page headline, a few days later triumphantly “revealed” that leading scholar of religion Jensen *had* been wrong: *JP* had *not* been warned. Though *JP* *did* mention that I had good reasons for remembering as I did, the whole story, of course, made readers wonder: is Jensen (ever) telling the truth?

Seeds of suspicion were sown, and details of the story, to this day, have never been told in the Danish dailies.

#### **Episode 4:**

September 3, 2006, a *JP* journalist presented a “top 20-list” of academic experts frequently quoted in Danish media during the cartoon crisis. The article, “Experts: Oracles”, claims that the influence of experts on public opinion is considerable, raising the question to what degree the experts “fall prey to the temptation of propagating political messages under cover of an academic title?” (Hundevadt, 2006a). Each of the 20 was evaluated according to some (undisclosed) criteria of the journalist: To what a degree does s/he present academic, neutral analyses and to what degree private or political opinions?

Jensen came in number ten, said to, with another scholar of religion, “swing the baton in a more general debate on religion”. Number one and a few others are judged to be predominantly “objective” commentators, Islam scholar Bæk Simonsen to be predominantly a debater. Jensen is judged to be fifty-fifty. Bæk Simonsen and Jensen and a few others (with no documentation) are said to have been “among the most severe and unrelenting critics of the drawings of *Jyllands-Posten* and the way the Danish government handled the situation”.

This article foreshadowed the core of the criticism and accusations (see the bibliography for relevant references) later raised against several scholars, not least Jensen, by *JP*, but also by MP Naser Khader, a leading politician, as well by leading MPs from *The Danish People’s Party*.

#### **Episode 5:**

October 14, 2006, *Politiken* publishes “From Scorn to Hysteria?” (Korsgaard, 2006), an article that, via interviews with several scholars, Jensen being one, focuses on differences and similarities between *JP*’s Muhammad cartoons and later incidents in which various groups of people ridiculed Muhammad by way of caricatures. Jensen – originally turning down the journalist because she first asked his (personal) opinion rather than a qualified opinion as a scholar on how “insightful Muslims in Denmark” might possibly think about the various incidents in comparison to (what they thought about) the *JP* cartoons – said that he was fairly certain such Muslims would think that there was an important difference (discussed below) between the cartoons and later “happenings”. If this reference to what insightful Muslims might think is not taken seriously or neglected, the article *can* be read as expressing Jensen’s (own) opinion on the publication of the cartoons by *JP* rather than his understanding of the opinion of some Muslims.

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**Episode 6:**

Soon after this article, Carsten Juste, editor-in-chief of *JP*, wrote scholar Jensen, with a copy to *JP*'s lawyer and the Vice-Chancellor of Jensen's university. The letter reproduced the quotations from the article in which Jensen commented that some ("insightful") Muslims might infer that the cartoons were "published deliberately to mock and ridicule an altogether central and sacred figure in Islam", and "to lecture other people and to say 'You have not at all reached our level of civilisation, and now we will teach You how to act'", and that the drawings, "were produced to openly and in public tread on somebody's toes". These statements, the letter from Juste said, were untrue. Juste went on accusing Jensen of having, on more than one occasion, used his academic title, along with "dirty tricks and shady methods", to cast aspersions on *JP* and "promote certain political ideas" (From the letter in Jensen's custody).

Finding this letter rather intimidating, I did not respond. Instead, I wrote my Vice-Chancellor asking him to write to Juste expressing the university's unanimous support, stressing the right of Jensen and other scholars to express themselves freely in the media. I did not get the support I wanted: the Vice-Chancellor responded, *inter alia*, that "if one participates in the Islam-debate, one no doubt cannot avoid running into trouble [...]". He ended saying – as his "personal opinion" – that he finds it important for everybody to try his best to make sure that his opinions are based on facts more than on (personal) attitudes. "I know", he concluded, "that it is hard to strike that balance, and that not all readers will agree whether it has been struck or not" (From the letter in Jensen's custody).

**Episode 7:**

Juste and *JP* clearly did *not* think I had struck the balance. December 17, 2006, in an interview with a *JP* journalist Kim Hundevadt, Juste, now in public, attacked me and other scholars: "They lie about the motives of *JP* for publishing the cartoons", he said, "and they abuse their titles to pursue political aims" (Hundevadt, 2006b). In the case of Jensen, said Juste, we have to do with nothing but mean political points of view, with no scientific basis at all.

Receiving no response from me, Juste wrote the Vice-Chancellor directly. The Vice-Chancellor advised *JP* to file a complaint to the university's Ethics Committee if *JP* intended to accuse Jensen of bad "scientific practice".

**Episode 8:**

On December 17, *JP* actually did so, stressing that *JP* did not question the right of Jensen to freedom of expression. No, the complaint was solely directed at his behaviour as a scholar. *JP* requested that the Committee consider whether Jensen had deliberately abused his academic credibility to propagate his personal opinions.

Together with my legal advisers I was of the opinion that the Committee should decline to deal with the complaint. The issue had nothing to do with "scientific dishonesty" or "bad practice" as defined in the Committee's mandate. The Committee, nevertheless, opened the case, requesting me to respond to the complaint.



In my response, I stated that the affair and complaint raised interesting and relevant methodological questions, familiar to the philosophy of science and of great importance to scholars, the community of scholars, and to the universities. I, furthermore, pointed out that scholars, according to the Danish University Act, are obliged to share their knowledge with the wider community, and that the university is obliged to encourage employees to engage in public debates. Finally, the response stated that I had (good) reasons for saying what I did, adding that nothing prevented me from expressing interpretations of *JP*'s motives differing from the declarations by *JP* itself.

### **Episode 9:**

The Committee concluded that the issue raised did *not* fall within the mandate of the Committee. While several media outlets had written extensively about the case, the acquittal of scholar Jensen made no headlines, nor did it ever figure on the website of my university. Apart from a follow-up article in the journal of my labour union, it was only *JP* that made a story out of it. *JP* did so by way of an editorial "I Løgnens Tjeneste" ("*In the Service of Lie*" or "*Serving Falsehood*") (Editorial, 2007b). While acknowledging the support expressed for me by the Practice Committee and Vice Chancellor, it nevertheless continued to accuse me of having abused my role as scholar and the "authority" of my office:

Like everybody else, Tim Jensen has the right to criticize Jyllands-Posten. The problem is, however, that he persists in his mendacious accusations in spite of his knowing better, and, even worse, he does so "on the background of years of research", therewith clothing his lies with a cloak of scientific authority. And here we thought that a scholar holding a university office was supposed to strive for the truth (Editorial, 2007b).

### **Episode 10:**

As you can see, everything was now ready for scholar-expert-warner-oracle-public opinion maker-undercover politician and liar Jensen to take upon him one more role, that of a character in a cartoon, a laughing-stock. All it took was for *JP* to link it to their— at the same time – ongoing smearing campaign against Jensen's colleague Mikael Rothstein: the two of us started to appear as characters in *JP*'s daily satirical cartoon. For more than a week, two figures were inserted, in a most unusual way, into cartoons commenting on other political and cultural happenings.

Rothstein was cast as a missionary man, named "The Hornblower", with a Watchtower-like magazine in his hand. The other, Liar Jensen, next to "The Hornblower", was portrayed as constantly trying to convince readers that he was not lying, e.g. saying: "I am not lying when I say that the Hornblower is a wise guy!"

This series of cartoons was brought to an end in an almost ingenious way: commenting on the political turmoil caused by a new political party, the cartoonist portrayed the parties as ships and boats sailing a stormy ocean. In the shape of a shark, the new party cruised the waters while ships and boats manned with leaders

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of the old parties were either about to sink or boldly riding the waves. Inserted into the background, left behind on a proverbial deserted island, are the two scholars, hanging on to the lonely palm tree, crying out: “We are still here!”

### Some Methodological Reflections

Several episodes have been omitted in this brief *exposé*, and only some key methodological issues can be mentioned in what follows. Allow me to first get back to Wiebe (2005), who at the same time as he wrote as quoted above, also seems to find it alright, nay even valuable and good, if the scholar of religion contributes to public debates about religion. The scholar of religion, he writes, can very well point out and demonstrate “the relevance that knowledge about religions and religion may have for policy issues in the public square” (Weibe, 2005, p. 9), and he ends:

The academic student of religion *qua* human being [...] is more than merely a scholar/scientist; s/he is also a citizen with socio-political, economic and other personal concerns that go beyond science and the agenda of the modern research university, and there is no reason why s/he should not, as an ordinary citizen, engage in the debates related to such concerns in the public square. Moreover, the scholarly/scientific expertise of the engaged academic may even have some instrumental relevance to the achievement of particular social goals, even if these goals involve metaphysical and/or religious assumptions, beliefs and commitments (Weibe, 2005, p. 34).

I think, just like Wiebe, that it is in the interest of the “public good” if the scholar of religion makes his expertise and academic knowledge available to the public, using it to qualify, correct and inform the public and political debate. I also agree with Wiebe that the broader role of *public intellectual*, however, as well as direct efforts to promote religious or explicit or narrowly party political aims rather than efforts to communicate sound knowledge about religion *can* turn out to be very counterproductive as regards the reputation of the science of religion – and equally counterproductive in regard to a society in need of scientifically based knowledge about religion.

But I do *not* share the optimism of Wiebe when he seems to think that “we” are on the safe side as long as the scholar avoids playing the role of a public intellectual (who can express an opinion on almost everything at debate) and avoid using his scholarship to promote religious or specific political agendas. I, on the contrary, claim, based on, on the one hand, some 25 years of experience, the case rendered above being central to this experience, as an expert to the media on things religious (religio-political/religio-social/religio-cultural), and, on the other, on general methodological arguments, that the “renommé” and value of the science of religion can also be put at risk when the scholar tries his best to be a classical expert communicating sound knowledge.

The boundaries between the various roles a scholar can play (or be “accused” of playing) are porous, and the scholar cannot always decide what role he comes to

play. Quite often he will be seen as politicizing, promoting some kind of agenda, e.g. an apologetical pro-Islam agenda. This holds good, of course, also when the scholar, just like me, Bruce Lincoln, and e.g. Ira Chernus (see ahead), is of the personal and political opinion, that the public debate and good not infrequently is suffering from a lack of basic knowledge of facts, a lack of historical, comparative, and analytical-critical distance and approach to religion (*inter alia* to Islam), and that the scholar therefore as an engaged citizen cannot but engage himself in the public debate.

It also holds good if the scholar is of the opinion, as I am, that scientifically founded knowledge and critical-analytical competences also as regards religion is a *sine qua non* for an enlightened, pluralistic, and open-democracy<sup>12</sup>. A stance no doubt making it very difficult to draw a line between, on the one side, the scholar-expert sharing his academic knowledge with the public at large, and, on the other, the scholar-citizen (citizen-scholar) struggling to promote a political agenda, namely the agenda he finds in line with his vision of the good society. It is, I claim, not easy, if at all possible, whether in theory or practice, to uphold a “wall of separation” between the scientific-academic and the political-ideological when it comes to communicating religion-related research-based knowledge and qualified opinions to the public at large.

I would like to emphasize that the basics of what I say now 2019, I said also in 1998, e.g. in the US religion journal *The Bulletin* in an article on “The Scholar of Religion as a Cultural Critic: Perspectives from Denmark” (Jensen, 1998)<sup>13</sup>.

Yet, important changes *have* come about, primarily due to 9/11, the London and Madrid bombings, the Cartoon case, the Charlie Hebdo killings, as well later terrorist killings and attacks in Paris, in Copenhagen and elsewhere. The entire debate on Islam and Muslims *has* become more poisonous, religion and not least Islam more “securitized”. Discussions about the (im-)possibility of the integration of Islam or Muslim immigrants into the “Western” democratic political systems and societies have not become less frequent and polarized, often drawing on and recycling well known Islamophobic and anti-Muslim stereotypes, generalisations and reifications. Add to this, e.g. in Denmark, years of public “Islam-bashing”, also from leading politicians and political parties, for decades from or inspired by the *Danish People’s Party*, a right-wing party and the parliamentary basis for the government 2001–2010 and beyond. A party that made anti-Muslimism and xenophobia central to its own as well as to the government’s policy. Today’s social-democratic (2019–) government to a large degree has copy pasted its politics of anti-Muslim immigration of the past government and the *Danish People’s Party*, at the same time as even more outspoken anti-Muslim political parties has come into being.

These changes are important changes, and it is noteworthy that the Danish association of scholars on Islam did *not* call for a conference on the implications of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the more elaborate argument in e.g. Jensen (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Thus, this article is not the first one from my hand that deals with relevant methodological issues, nor is it the first that does so with special regard to the Muhammad cartoon affair. It is, though, the first to do so in a more comprehensive manner in English. Consequently, though parts of this article are new, others are identical to, or another version of, earlier writings, the titles of which can be found in the references.

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the politicization of the study of Islam in 1998, the year of my article in *The Bulletin*. They did so, however, in 2007, and today, with continued criticism of Danish Islam-scholarship not being “critical” enough as regards the so-called dark sides of Islam, discussions among scholars on these issues have become commonplace.

The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, likewise, did *not* find it necessary in 1998 to publish a booklet on *Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression at the Universities*. In 2007 they did, and they did so, *inter alia*, because of what happened to scholars on religion and Islam during and after the cartoon affair.

Nevertheless: Basics are, as said, more or less, the same: Jensen (1998) wrote: “The present re-politization of religion leads to a re-politization of the study of religion, or at least to a re-consideration of the political implications of our work.” Maybe one can add that “the on-going mediatization of the public sphere and of politics and of religion” need must lead the scholar of religion to carefully consider the ways in which he “shares” academic knowledge with the public at large. The discourse of and within the academia is not the same as the discourse of the media and the journalists, – and the discourse of the scholar-experts to the media may therefore come out as some strange liminal “beast”, betwixt and between.

Though many, including scholars of religion, are able to uphold the role of a classical expert (see below), doing a great job to the benefit of both research and society while communicating via mass media and participating in the public debate, the road from respected and trustworthy “leading” scholar to disrespected and untrustworthy scholar and public opinion maker is not long. When well-meaning experts participate in public, politicized and charged debates, there is always a risk that they may undermine the otherwise existing respect for scientific knowledge.

Mentioning “values” and “value-free”, and thinking about Wiebe and other scholars referring to Max Weber, I recall sociologist of religion Ole Riis’ contribution to a conference in Aarhus in 1998 on *Værdier i religionsforskning og – undervisning i Danmark* (“Values in the Study of Religion and Religious Education”). Riis discussed – *inter alia* in continuation of a critical review of claims of and aspirations for objectivity and neutrality, as well as discussions on the (Weberian) ideal of a “wall of separation” between fact and value, or value freedom in scientific research and personal, political and social commitments – what he thought might be a historical, logical, and unavoidable link between intrinsic scientific values and external, social, or political values. Riis, as I understood him (cf. Jensen, 2001, pp. 41–42), emphasized the value of having the scholar influence the (value) “charged” and anything but value neutral public debate, at the same time as Riis distanced himself from “debaters who are so eager to highlight their values (preferences) in public that the factual basis [of their research based intervention] is gets into the background”. Riis concluded saying that research (as a social institution) has “a responsibility to put forward the relevant factual knowledge, without obscuring its linked values” (as cited in Albinus et al., 2001, p. 32).

What Riis said was familiar to me but not at the time to many others. At the same conference (Jensen, 2001, pp. 41–42), I formulated an invitation to the scholar of religion

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to participate in the public debate and apply his research in defense of a pluralistic and secular society that accepts the distanced attitude to religious phenomena practiced by the scientific study of religion.

This, in fact, has been my “activist” agenda ever since: promoting the scientific study of religion, its approaches and the knowledge accumulated, on the one hand, and the secular, democratic, pluralistic society, and public space that would not function if it did not give room to both the science of religion and religion.

But today, as before, I find it important to continue the discussion on the many problems associated with doing what I (and Riis) think the scholar of religion should do. To, as prescribed by Riis, “present factual knowledge, without obscuring its linked values”, is easier said than done. The scholar can, of course, decide to share knowledge or to participate in the public debate only in the form of, for example, essays or letters-to-the editor, where he as the author is in control of the final product, except as regards context and maybe headline. However, if he makes himself available to journalists who, for example, call him for an opinion, he can and should check quotes. But what about “indirect” quotes, i.e. the summarizing of the journalist, of e.g. half-an-hour of conversation, into a few two-line quotes, and what about the other part of the text written by the journalist that clearly refers to the conversation? What about the context, the heading, the subtitle?

And, what about interviews for radio or TV with half-an-hour’s interview cut to 30 seconds? Without a possibility to check the final product and make objections. What about statements to media in faraway countries? Even if direct and indirect quotes are checked, you can be surprised about the result. It certainly also makes a difference if an interview and a statement appear in a front-page story or on certain page, with a photo of the scholar or without.

The “language” of the media is, as emphasized by Tim Murphy (2001), different from that of the scholarly community, and as pointed out by Klaus Kjølner (2007) in connection with *JP* vs. Rothstein, the scholar, moreover, comes, willingly or not, to play a role in a dramatic and dramatizing media “world”, where a scholar who wants to get through to the audience has to appear as a “whole person”, thus not just as a scholar-expert. Moreover, journalists in many cases ask for not just expertise and qualified knowledge. In addition to that they also ask for a “qualified opinion”. And, even if the qualified opinion is fact- and research based, it is, as I once stated in an interview (Young, 2006), nevertheless an opinion, and thus not barely part of the political debates.

It actually seems to be a general feature of a recent (1961–2001) development that social science scholars in particular but also human science scholars are increasingly used as experts, at the same though also increasingly assuming (or being “assigned”) various kinds of roles (cf. Albæk et al., 2002). One is the “classical” expert role, the scholar delivering “factual knowledge, concrete, professionally-based assessments and corrections to claims that concern the public”, cases in which the scholar’s “special knowledge and insight enriches the [...] the public debate”. In direct contrast to this, you find the researcher who writes essays, op-eds,

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letter-to-the editor etc., which are nothing but, and also meant to be nothing but, “pure political comments”.

But, as the report continues, the scholar increasingly appears in a mix of the two roles, “both informing *and* giving a value-based comment”, and it is most likely this mix that has given scholars and scholarship a new and more significant role. It should also be mentioned, as in the report mentioned, that journalists in this way can more easily appear as “neutral” reporters, leaving it to the expert-scholar to express an opinion. An expert presenting not just brief and accurate information, but also qualified and controversial opinions are, as also noticed by Kjølner (2007), often preferable to the one who “just” provide “naked facts”.

*A propos*, “naked facts”: That too is, of course, not as simple as it might seem at a first glance. Just think of the scholar who – on the basis of repeated claims made in public by e.g. politicians that Muslims are overflowing Denmark, that there are at least 800,000 Muslims in Denmark, and that they are all fanatically religious – comments on this by way of providing the facts that can correct the erroneous claims and thus qualify the debate. The scholar in the “classical” and neutral expert role. Yes, but also a scholar who enters and becomes part of the political debate for and against Islam, for and against immigration of Muslims, etc.

The boundaries between the “classical” expert, the expert-opinion maker, and the politicizing expert-opinion maker *is*, as said above, porous, and it is not rarely very hard if at all possible for a scholar-expert to uphold or signal these boundaries or the transition from one to another role.

Another problem is linked to the fact that the scholar-expert is not just used as an expert in a specific and narrow field but also as a “generalist”-expert. Thus, for example, both Rothstein and Jensen as scholars of religion can (be asked to) comment on matters which strictly speaking are not matters pertaining to their narrower research field, be it to Islam and Christianity or to religious developments (including political debates about religion) in Denmark. Though this generalist-expert role is, I think, perfectly in line with the competences of a classical scholar of religion, actually an expert in “religion in general”, and though the comparative-historical perspective applied to specific contemporary instances of what is called religion is extremely valuable and important as regard the qualification of the public debate on religion, it does, of course, also imply some risks – for example, if the generalist-expert for some reason is accused of not being an expert in regard to the matter at hand, e.g. Islam or Christianity. It is difficult for many people to understand that one can also be an expert on religion in general and on “religion” in public discourses, and that a generalist-comparative perspective on say Islam or Christianity can shed a lot of new light on this religion and the debates about it.

It is an important task, I think, for the scholar of religion to provide critical analysis not just of “religion(s) out there” but of the public debate *on* religion. In many cases, this is actually what journalists ask for and would like to qualified opinions on. Religion is a public and political phenomenon and today a highly politicized public matter, and the researcher who may well provide factual knowledge is also asked, based on his knowledge, his opinion on e.g. some political action. Is it a “smart move”, is it out of line with the “facts on the ground”, etc.?

The scholar-expert can of course choose not to answer such a question, but he can also choose to say that this or that political move, in view of his analysis and knowledge, seems more or less based on facts or not, seems more or less wise or strategic. Certainly, a role fraught with dangers, not least in a “post-factual period” or in countries, like Denmark, where e.g. the government in power from 2000–2010 time and again has frowned at experts accusing them of being but “nitpicking”.

The accusations levelled against me and other researchers at the time of the cases mentioned, namely that they (ab-)used their academic titles to give their personal political opinions a higher degree of credibility entail a linked yet implicit claim: scholars operating in the public space as experts should not be allowed to do so unless they are able to demonstrate that their statements are based on facts, good arguments, the results of a specific research project, etc. Implicit in these claims, some of which (e.g. that one ought not and cannot give a qualified comment unless it is based on a quite specific and explicitly linked research project) most certainly, as indicated above, are based upon a limited understanding of what it means to be an expert and a scholar on religion.

However, implicit are also other ideas (shared also by some scholars) about science and the role and function of the scientist/scholar. One such widespread and deeply held idea is that not just the scientific research process but also the dissemination of the research results, also via mass media, must and can be totally “objective”, “neutral”, and “value-free”. According to the same cluster of ideas, science can and must be kept completely separate from all personal and political ideologies and statements. If it is not *Dr. Jensen*, the scholar of religion from the University of Southern Denmark, who puts forward objective facts and conclusions derived from objective and neutral research, then it is *Mr. Jensen*, who propagates his own personal opinion, and in that case it is bad and wrong, at least if it is not stated loud and clearly: “I now do not speak as *Dr. Jensen*, the scholar of religion, but as *Mr. Jensen*, the engaged citizen”.

Included is, thus, a notion of a neat and clear difference between, on the one hand, the scientist and, on the other, the private person, debater, and the citizen. The former completely neutral and the latter “biased” due to his ethical, political or religious preferences. You either speak as a scholar or as a private person.

Wiebe (2005), cf. the introductory remarks, seems to share this view at least partially. But while Wiebe, no doubt, is well aware that this notion or idea has been the subject of much scholarly debate, and that questions pertaining to apolitical, objective, neutral, and value-free research, as well as to the dissemination of research results or scholarly knowledge is immensely complex, then neither *JP* nor Khader seemed aware of it.

As noted by Kærgård et al. (2007, p. 25), the discussion of “what scientists should and should not say in the public debate” reflects a conception of science that science has largely left behind, namely, that “Science” (with a capital S) holds the ultimate truth, not to be discussed. A conception, accordingly, which, paradoxically, places research results somewhere far “beyond and above the public debate” (Kærgård et al., 2007, p. 26).

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Fact and value, as well as science and politics, can at times be sharply separated from each other. At times, though, it is not so. Neither in theory nor in practice. It is often equally impossible to separate the scholar from the individual person. A scholar is not just a scholar eight hours a day, but rather 24–7. To demand that scholars should not have or express personal opinions is, as Kærgård et al. (2007, p. 29) points out, as absurd as requiring politicians to function without “no knowledge of the world”. To demand that scientists only speak publicly if they have the ultimate truth will, moreover, cause everyone, especially the most honorable ones, to remain silent (Kærgård et al., 2007, p. 26).

During the 2006 and 2007 debate, it was proposed that scholars should be allowed to express themselves publicly about their scientific work *only* if and when their work had been through a peer-review process. This proposal was strongly rejected by others, including Kærgård et al. (2007, p. 28), who emphasized that this would make sense only in very specific cases. For example: it hardly can consider good scientific practice if, immediately the first successful experiment in the laboratory, the scientist runs into the streets proclaiming that he has found a new and miraculous medicine. But it doesn't make sense to require that a scholar who wants to participate in the public debate on the basis of his scholarly knowledge or who is asked some questions by a journalist, cannot do so until having submitted his statements to a peer-review panel.

The scholar-expert, as a matter of course, ought to be capable of serving up sober arguments in favor of his interpretations and qualified opinions, but elaborate explanations, lots of details and reservations are rarely possible. Footnotes, so to say, are not commonly used in mass media, and if Jensen is asked, for instance, to give a one and a half minute statement on television on the difference between Sunni- and Shia-Islam, then he can, at the most, make a brief remark saying that time prevents him from going into any detail. But if he has agreed to participate, i.e. because one and a half minute is better than nothing, and because he may actually be good at “boiling things down” in such a situation, then it makes no sense to judge his one and a half minute by the same standards that apply to a dissertation or article in a peer-reviewed journal.

## Concluding Remarks

In the article “The War in Iraq and the Academic Study of Religion” (2008), Ira Chernus praises (cf. above for the criticism of McCutcheon, 2005) Bruce Lincoln (2005) for his contribution to the public debate with his historical, analytical-critical studies of former US President Bush's rhetoric (Chernus, 2008). In a closing paragraph, Chernus argues, and convincingly so, I think, that it is difficult, if at all possible, to keep separate from each other what he, with reference to the terminology used by the American Academy of Religion, calls, respectively, “historical/analytic-descriptive analyzes” and “constructive-reflective” scholarship. Not just when it comes to a war (in this case the US war in Iraq), but also more generally.

Although Chernus does find a separation between descriptive and prescriptive (normative) scholarship both necessary and possible in many cases, he also finds it possible to connect Weber's separation of teacher and preacher with the same



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Weber's idea that the scholar/teacher through a presentation of his analysis paves the way "self-clarification". Chernus continues: "The claim that self-clarification has a moral value is especially compelling when applied to the political body", and he then goes on to quote Gitlin: "[E]ducation's prime bond to the public weal in a democratic society is to improve the capacity of citizens to govern themselves, and to meet this requirement, educators must 'spur reasoned participation in politics and the accumulation of knowledge to suit'" (Chernus, 2008, p. 865). Chernus believes that it is possible, both in theory and practice, to reconcile "good scholarship" and "good citizenship", and that a scholar of religion such as Lincoln (2005) has managed to do exactly that. He ends, with reference to the current US political and cultural situation:

At such a time, we are particularly called upon to be scholar-citizens, always concerned to serve the demands of good scholarship by upholding their highest standards but, at the same time, equally concerned with practicing our scholarship in the service of good citizenship (Chernus, 2008, pp. 867–868).

I think this can be said with reference to the situation today too, in the US, in Denmark, and most other places. But again: in practice, it is not so straightforward to realize the effort to, at one and the same time, promote and strengthen the scholarship and science/study of religion as well as, at the same time, the pluralistic, enlightened and open society.

It cannot be denied that some scholars may be better than others at doing so, without putting their scholarly reputation as well as that of the community of scholars and scholarship "as such" at risk. Jensen (and Rothstein) maybe did not strike the right balance between the scholar and the engaged citizen, maybe did not master the art of communication via the mass media. Moreover, the context for the cases mentioned may be said to have been particularly "poisonous" due to the extremely controversial cartoon case and the very tense political climate.

Nevertheless, most of the problems that I have touched upon are not caused by personal deficiencies or deficiencies linked to particular "methods". Rather, they are structural, methodological challenges and problems "by default" so to say. It is important, I think, to make this clear if scholars really want to learn from the cases, not least as regards how to best handle the media now and in the future. And, handling the media and sharing scholarly knowledge with the wider society, also by participation in the public debate, has, today even more than before, become part of many scholars' everyday lives, something the universities encourage employees to do, something that is part and parcel, not of the "modern research university" that Wiebe (2005) propagates but of the "post-modern" contract university having to prove itself, its employees, its scholarship, and the future candidates produced, of "use" to society and societal challenges.

The cartoon case incidents, on the one hand, have given me a better understanding of why Wiebe (2005) really has some good reasons for repeatedly warning about the risks associated with "going public". They have, on the other, also made it clearer to me that Wiebe is mistaken if he thinks the scholar-expert can engage in and contribute

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to public debates with his scholarly based factual knowledge if he only can refrain from embracing the role as “public intellectual”. It is not that easy and it is not entirely up to the scholar.

Moreover, the cartoon case incidents, and the developments in Danish society in and in societies around the world ever since, have made me even more convinced that it is absolutely necessary, that at least some (not all, of course) scholars of religion share their knowledge with the community at large. Also, through mass media and by way of active participation in public debate.

The scholar, and the scientific or scholarly study of e.g. religion, certainly always risk “losing face”, inwards and outwards, among colleagues and with the public at large. But this loss is nothing compared to the loss suffered in regard to the quality of the public debate and in regard to the whole ideal of an enlightened democracy if (some) scholars of religion do *not* try to share their approach to religion and their knowledge of religion with society and the public at large. Facts (and facts *do* exist, also in regard to religion and the study of it), *qualified* opinions, and not least qualified *questions* and *problematization* of what otherwise appears to be unproblematic, are vital to an open democratic, society – and to the freedom of science and scholarship.

At the same time, I am still also convinced that propagating the science and scholarship of religion, not just by writing books and articles for other scholars to read in “the ivory tower” but also by way of making science and scholarship of religion known to the public at large, thus trying to make it (more) obvious why having universities with departments for the study or science of religion is of value. I think it “pays off” in the long run, and that the gains by far outweigh the losses that may be the result of, say, the damage caused by the abovementioned cases.

True: the values “at work” within and uphold by the work by scholars inside the walls of the academy, in the “ivory tower”, must be nursed and guarded. But this must be done at the same time as the work done by scholars trying to share with the public at large, whether as expert-scholars, expert-opinion makers, or, maybe one of the “safest” ways to do it, by being university teachers for religious education teachers in public schools.

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