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Op-Ed Contributor

Capture the Flag

By MARTIN BURCHARTH

THERE seems to be some surprise that the Danish people and their government are standing behind the Jyllands-Posten newspaper and its decision to publish drawings of the Prophet Muhammad last fall. Aren't Danes supposed to be unusually tolerant and respectful of others?

Not entirely. Denmark's reputation as a nation with a long tradition of tolerance toward others — one solidified by its rescue of Danish Jews from deportation to Nazi concentration camps in 1943 and by the high levels of humanitarian aid it provides today — is something of a myth.

What foreigners have failed to recognize is that we Danes have grown increasingly xenophobic over the years. To my mind, the publication of the cartoons had little to do with generating a debate about self-censorship and freedom of expression. It can be seen only in the context of a climate of pervasive hostility toward anything Muslim in Denmark.

There are more than 200,000 Muslims in Denmark, a country with a population of 5.4 million. A few decades ago, Denmark had no Muslims at all. Not surprisingly, Islam has come to be viewed by many as a threat to the survival of Danish culture.

For 20 years, Muslims in Denmark have been denied a permit to build mosques in Copenhagen. What's more, there are no Muslim cemeteries in Denmark, which means that the bodies of Muslims who die here have to be flown back to their home countries for proper burial.

Recently the minister for cultural affairs, Brian Mikkelsen of the Conservative People's Party, asked scholars, artists and writers to create a canon of Danish art, music, literature and film. The ostensible purpose was to preserve our homegrown classics.

But before the release of the canon last month, Mr. Mikkelsen revealed what may have been the real purpose of the exercise: To create a last line of defense against the influence of Islam in Denmark. "In Denmark we have seen the appearance of a parallel society in which minorities practice their own medieval values and undemocratic views," he told

fellow conservatives at a party conference last summer. "This is the new front in our cultural war."

Were it not that a majority of Danes actually believe in this Islamic threat it would seem to be an outlandish pretext. But they do. When the Danish flag was burned on the streets in Arab countries, the reaction here was outrage and calls for standing even more firmly behind Jyllands-Posten. The center-right government gained support in polls, as did the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, without which the government would not have a majority in Parliament.

Now, the general view, expressed in the press and among a majority of Danes, is that the Muslim leaders who led the protests in Denmark should have their status as citizens examined because they betrayed their fellow Danes by failing to keep the controversy within the country.

But the real story is that they and their followers ran out of options. They tried to get Jyllands-Posten to recognize its offense. They tried to enlist the support of the government and the opposition. They asked a local prosecutor to file suit under the country's blasphemy law. And they asked ambassadors in Denmark from Muslim countries to meet with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. They were rebuffed on all counts, though a state prosecutor is currently reviewing the case. But, really, what choice did they have?

This is not the only example of Denmark's new magical thinking. After the flag burnings, the Danish news media began to refer to the white cross on the flag's red background as a Christian symbol.

There was something discordant about this, for we've come to connect the flag less and less to religion. Denmark, after all, is one of the most secular countries in Europe. Only 3 percent of Danes attend church once a week.

Still, the news media were right. Up to a point. Legend has it that the flag fell from heaven during a battle between the Danes and the Estonians nearly 800 years ago. It was a sign from God, and it led the Danes to victory. Now that flag has become a symbol around the world of Denmark's contempt for another world religion.

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