

kåre bluitgen

AUTHOR OF *THE QUR'AN AND THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD*

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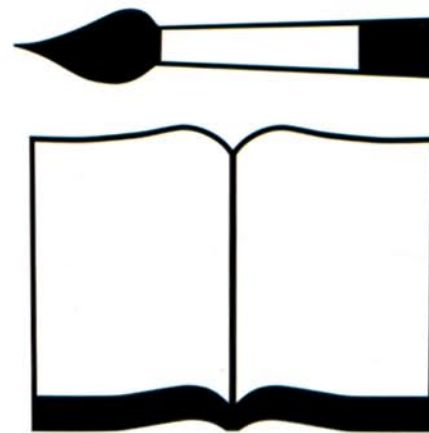
DANISH ILLUSTRATOR AND CARTOONIST

Interviews by Steven Heller

Kåre Bluitgen In September 2005, Kåre Bluitgen, a Danish journalist and author, was contacted by a reporter from the Danish news agency Ritzau who had heard about Bluitgen's problems in finding an artist to illustrate his latest children's book, *The Qur'an and the Life of the Prophet Muhammad*. (Islamic law forbids Muhammad's image from being depicted.) Other newspapers followed up on the story. In response, Flemming Rose, culture editor at *Jyllands-Posten*—a major morning daily—asked 40 illustrators to render their own interpretations of the prophet. Two weeks later, Bluitgen saw a page of 12 cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* along with an article reporting that what he had experienced was one of several incidents indicating that some artists, fearing reprisals, were holding back. Many artists were indeed afraid to draw on the subject since the brutal murders in Holland of Pim Fortuyn, a conservative politician who actively campaigned for anti-immigration policies, and Theo van Gogh, a controversial documentarian who criticized the Muslim community in his work. It was in this atmosphere that the 46-year-old Bluitgen wrote his book about the life of Muhammad to bridge the growing gap among cultures. Instead, the cartoons critiquing his predicament generated a furor that erupted into violent international protests. In this interview, Bluitgen discusses the unforeseen, tragic consequences of his search for an illustrator and where he believes the "cartoon wars" will lead.

HELLER: When the culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten* asked 40 cartoonists to offer their depictions of Muhammad, did you anticipate the international protests that would result? **BLUITGEN:** No, not really, and I don't think *Jyllands-Posten* did, either. In Denmark, we are used to cartoons making fun of Jesus, of our Queen, of disabled people... of everybody. And often we regard this [as an] appreciation of the persons depicted. Besides, many Muslims agree that it's okay for a non-Muslim to portray the prophet. Even some of the Danish imams claimed that in public. **HELLER:** Why did you write a book on Muhammad in the first place? **BLUITGEN:** I hoped to promote a better understanding among different cultures and religions in Denmark. I live with my children in a part of Copenhagen with a Muslim majority. I have experienced many kinds of conflict that can arise from poor integration, and I think we have to know about the heroes of all the different cultures and religions living together in Denmark. Another reason for writing the book was my wish to tell a good story, which the life of Muhammad really is! **HELLER:** I understand that you asked three illustrators to collaborate with you on this project, but each declined. What were their reasons? Were you surprised? **BLUITGEN:** In fact, I asked more than three, but some didn't have the time and others didn't wish to depict Muhammad because it might be regarded as disrespectful toward Muslims. But those who refused because of fear mentioned the fate of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. And I wasn't that surprised; of course the killing—and other incidents—have af-

fectured some European artists. **HELLER:** Who ultimately illustrated your book, the cover of which depicts Muhammad astride Buraq, the steed on which the prophet rides to the heavens? **BLUITGEN:** An anonymous artist. **HELLER:** Was there any protest in the Muslim community over the book? **BLUITGEN:** There has been no protest over the [book] illustrations at all. Some of the radical imams have mentioned that one can easily see that the text is written by an atheist. But I have been as loyal to the original Muslim sources as possible. There is no connection at all between the cartoons [in the newspaper] and the



drawings in my book. The illustrations in the book are respectful and directed at children. The cartoons are made in a satirical tradition. **HELLER:** The job of political and satiric cartoonists is to bring issues to light and make people think—and inevitably make some people angry. Do you believe that this collection of cartoons did that job as well as it

could? **BLUITGEN:** It is always easy to be wise after the event! But it is worth remembering that two of the cartoons portray me and make fun of me, and one ridicules the whole idea of *Jyllands-Posten* commissioning those cartoons. Personally, I think that at least some of these now world-famous cartoons can lead not only to anger, but also to reflection.

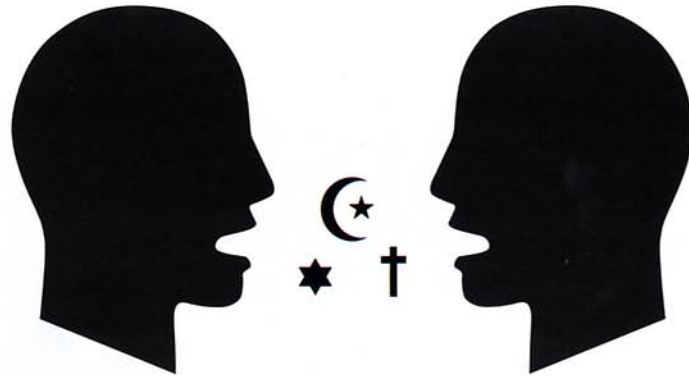
HELLER: Were these images blasphemous?

BLUITGEN: I don't think so. But even if some of them were, to me it's still a question of freedom of expression. In my opinion, powerful ideologies and religions have to be discussed and questioned, sometimes even in a provocative way. But still, I have chosen

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a completely different attitude in my book, as my intention was to get people together.

HELLER: As a journalist, would you have run these cartoons in a magazine or newspaper? **BLUITGEN:** I would, because there was a reason to do it: The paper was referring to a



handful of incidents that might suggest that some European artists were self-censoring themselves because of fear of radical Muslims or because of an extreme willingness not to offend this specific religion. **HELLER:** Denmark is long known for its liberalism, but there is also a fear of immigration. Do you believe that *Jyllands-Posten* was playing to fears or was it honestly trying to address issues of free speech? **BLUITGEN:** Maybe I'm not the right person to answer that question. I usually believe people when they express their intentions. It is well known, however, that *Jyllands-Posten* is a right-wing paper supporting restrictions upon immigration. On the other hand, the paper has won prizes for good coverage of successful immigrants in the Danish society. **HELLER:** Some of the protesters are politically opportunistic, but many protesters are honestly offended by what they feel is an insult to their faith. Do you believe this protest is warranted? **BLUITGEN:** If you feel offended, it's your right to express your feelings in demonstrations, letters to the editor, etc. But of course you are not allowed to use violence. I have only heard of violent riots outside Europe, in parts of the world where, I think, almost nobody has seen the cartoons. And where people have limited possibilities of expressing themselves in the ways available to us. **HELLER:** In the U.S., some news organizations have refused to publish the cartoons, directing readers to the many Web sites where they are shown. The rationale is not to stoke the fire. As a journalist, do you believe the press has a responsibility to show these images? **BLUITGEN:** Yes,

indeed. Firstly, because the reader needs to know what it's all about. If you write article upon article about a cartoon, the reader will say: Now, please let me see for myself what you're writing about! Secondly, no matter if you like the cartoons, this is a question of principle. When a paper, not violating any law, is put under heavy pressure for using its freedom of expression, other papers and media should stand up in solidarity and, in this case, publish the cartoons too. Freedom of expression did not fall from heaven; thousands have fought for it—and we still have to fight for it every day, because there will always be people who would prefer to limit it. **HELLER:** How has this controversy impacted your life and work? Is your book suffering? **BLUITGEN:** It hasn't impacted my life that much. The conflict is about the cartoons. The book has sold more copies than expected because of the cartoon controversy, some of them probably to customers who will soon forget the book or maybe not even read it. What I'm interested in is the use of my book in schools so that our children can come to know more about each other. **HELLER:** Do you think there is a way to represent Islam in satiric cartoons that will not be offensive? **BLUITGEN:** Yes, but on the other hand, I am afraid there will always be fundamentalists finding it offensive that non-Muslims even deal with Islam. And we need to ignore such extremists. **HELLER:** Do you think this controversy has made artists and writers more aware of the complexities of covering Islamic culture? Or do you feel it has had a stifling effect? **BLUITGEN:** It's too early to say. If you asked

a cartoonist or an illustrator of children's books to draw the face of Muhammad today, I guess very few would do it. But in the long run, I trust that a lot of people have become aware of how important free speech is, to all members of the community; it is a freedom that they, up until now, may have regarded as a given. I think you need to take a respectful attitude to other cultures and religions—but never a submissive one.

K, 45, is a Danish illustrator and cartoonist who lives and works in Copenhagen. He has freelanced for several newspapers and magazines during two decades of work. One of his cartoons was among the 12 about Muhammad that appeared in *Jyllands-Posten* and triggered the protests around the world. He consented to be interviewed on condition of anonymity because of threats to his life. Here, he discusses the reasons for and ramifications of the controversy.


HELLER: Did you have any sense at all when you submitted your cartoon that, months later, it would spark demonstrations around the world? **K:** You have to understand that these drawings were made for a Danish newspaper, to a Danish audience, in a Danish debate. The intention was not to offend or demonize a religious minority in Denmark. If you look at [each of] the 12 drawings, they represent an individual perspective on the issue that *Jyllands-Posten* brought up: Is there self-censorship in the Danish media when it comes to dealing with Islam and religion-related problems in Denmark? In this country, we have a tradition for open debate on religious matters. We have little respect for authorities political, military, bureaucratic, and even religious. Our society has only been multiethnic for 20 to 30 years, so we have just recently learned that some of our citizens have a very rigid and more sensitive relationship with their prophet and religion. You can say that we have learned it the hard way.

HELLER: In retrospect, do you think this was really a free-speech issue, or an opportunity to express pent-up feelings in Denmark

only possible if we see the nuances in our communities. **HELLER:** Do you believe the protests are warranted? **K:** I now know that a

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against Islam? **K:** Seen in the rear-view mirror: If a person is asking me to shut up, not in respect to his belief but in fear of violence, it's difficult not to see that as a restriction of my freedom to speak. **HELLER:** Arguably, many of the cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten* are rather simplistic, and a few might even be compared to anti-Semitic cartoons, given the use of stereotyping. Having viewed all the work, how do you feel about this statement? **K:** It is so easy to compare a critical, satirical cartoon depicting minorities to what happened in Germany up to and during World War II. I must state that *Jyllands-Posten* is not a national paper owned by the government, picking on or demonizing a certain group of people in our society. **HELLER:** In your opinion, were these images blasphemous? **K:** These images were made by non-Muslims; we are not forbidden to make them according to Danish laws. **HELLER:** Do you believe that this collection of cartoons expressed the issues of a multiethnic society as well as it could? **K:** There is no doubt that we have roused a debate in Denmark and internationally. My hope is that we get into a dialogue between the Western and the Muslim parts of the world, so that we can understand and profit from our different cultures. This is

lot of Muslims have been offended. *Jyllands-Posten* has apologized for this. If you live several thousand miles from Denmark, it is impossible to understand what the drawings are about when seen out of context. **HELLER:** In the U.S., some news organizations have refused to publish the cartoons. How do you feel about this decision? **K:** I realize that in a time when both of our countries are engaged in the war in Iraq, there is a focus on the way the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prisoners are treated and [on] terror in the name of holy war in the U.S. and Europe, [so] we have to step carefully. You have chosen not to rerun the drawings. You have your ethical and moral integrity, which I as a Scandinavian must respect. **HELLER:** How has this controversy impacted your life and work at this time? **K:** This has been tough for me, my colleagues, and family. This is not everyday for us. There are things in my profession, for a long time to come, that I won't touch with a stick. Whether this has increased my freedom of speech or not, only the future will show. 

Editor's note: In the interests of covering the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy in a way that considers equally the sensitivities of a religious and ethnic group as well as the safety of those threatened by the violence in reaction to it, *PRINT* has decided against reprinting any of the illustrations with this column.