“Why should I give them my mind as well?”

— The Dalai Lama (1935-), when asked if he was angry at the Chinese for taking over his country.

THE CHALLENGE OF A FUNDAMENTAL DICHOTOMY

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Few things so challenge the successful application of general semantics principles as a fundamental dichotomy of ideas. The global polarization brought about the publication of 12 cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* had none of the earmarks of such a rift, at least not at first. Yet, as I write this, fires smolder in the Danish embassies in Beirut and Damascus and Muslim protestors burn flags in capitols around the world. By the time you read this, some resolution may have emerged, or things may look even worse. But what can we say about this amazing explosion of fury and righteousness, this shouting match of claims and counter-claims, from a GS point of view?

We contend that humans make meaning, rather than discovering it embedded in the words or actions of others. Humans assign meaning to events based on their training, beliefs, and choices about what they consider important or significant. From this perspective, we see that the Danish newspaper can intend one meaning by publishing the cartoons while Muslim readers can assign a very different meaning when viewing them. While this may seem obvious, especially to those acquainted with GS, not everyone agrees with this basic
concept. To some, one particular meaning has such potency and substance that they cannot imagine how anyone could not see it or not feel it when they consider these cartoons. Strong beliefs like these can obscure the possibility of other valid viewpoints.

But say we accept this, that different parties to this conflict extract different meaning from the publication of these drawings. Can we reconcile these meanings? The newspaper asserts that the cartoons grew out of the simple search by a Danish author for someone to illustrate a manuscript about the life of Mohammed. When no illustrator would brave the possibility of Islamic censure for creating such drawings, the paper issued a public challenge and published the results. Whatever they believed about their initial intention, it soon became an issue of free speech to them, free speech and freedom of the press. Eventually it became an issue of culture-clash. Some said that the decision to print or reprint the cartoons showed insensitivity, but defended the necessity of a free press. As Morag Mylne, Convener of the Kirk’s Church and Society Council in Scotland noted, “There will be times when the better judgment is not to publish something when it is known that it will cause offence. But that judgment should never compromise the fundamental value of free speech.” (1)

The Muslim reaction initially remained within Danish borders. In the view of most Muslims, secular law and religious thought come from the same source. As a result, they took their complaints to the Danish government. In the view of most Westerners, the press operates independent of government control. The Danish prime minister pointed out that he had no role or responsibility for the paper’s actions and recommended that the Muslim clerics sue, a very Western remedy.

Only after a Norwegian paper reprinted the cartoons and the Danish imams took evidence of the blasphemy to the Middle East to gather support did the rancorous debate reach the international headlines. Demonstrators in Iraq carried signs that said “Butcher those who mock Islam” while the French daily France Soir defiantly reprinted the cartoons, under the front-page declaration, “Yes we have the right to caricature God.” After that, Muslims from all across the world joined the protests. Some even petitioned the UN to pass a resolution condemning offenses against prophets, beliefs, and religion as crimes and calling for those who commit them to be punished. Mere days passed before the embassies began to burn.

Some commentators have suggested sub-plots to this story, most notably that the intensity of the emotions expressed stems less from stated ideals than from tensions surrounding the immigration of Muslims into European countries. Others point to the obvious strain on relations caused by the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Both” sides have motivation to exaggerate the differ-
ences between them. I put “both” in quotes to remind us that the players in this conflict do not represent monolithic structures, but rather that each person stands somewhere along a multi-dimensional spectrum of beliefs, experiences, and activities. In moments like this, we often seem to see a distinct line dividing the world into two opposing halves, when in fact, the division obscures widely divergent views on each side.

So here we have two cultures apparently diametrically opposed. On one side stand the Danish publishers and all those European papers and citizens who claim the right to free speech and contend that “we will decide what are jokes for us and the circumstances, within our nation-state, in which they are told.” (2) On the other side stands nearly the entire Muslim population of the world, who claim the right to the sanctity of their religious beliefs and contend that “the people who published these cartoons have taken liberty too far. Muslims hold the prophet sacred in their heart. His face should not be shown.” (1)

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In general semantics terms, both sides have made certain errors in how they think and speak about their situation. The Danish paper, by way of apology, has said that had they known this would have inflamed such a reaction and put Danish citizens in jeopardy, they would not have printed the drawings in the first place. They failed to imagine, or credit, the possibility that such an apparently secular and intra-national action could have global repercussions. By going directly to the Danish Prime Minister for an apology, Muslims clerics appear to have attributed to Denmark the same integration between government and religion that exists in many Islamic nations. They failed to imagine, or credit, the nearly complete autonomy exercised by inhabitants of the extremely secular countries of Western Europe. “Both” sides failed to conduct a factual evaluation, but operated as if their own views of the world represented “all” they needed to consider.

In studying general semantics, we assert that individuals have sole responsibility for their reactions. Certainly the events to which they react influence their reactions. But ultimately, each reaction results from a choice, conscious or otherwise, to view a particular event in a particular light. Even a person with excellent mental training and self control will react involuntarily to some extent, if they consider the event extremely significant and provoking. So we might expect people raised in a religion that ultimately ascribes all meaning
to God to exert less conscious control over their emotional reactions, especially towards those they might see as “infidels.” And we might expect people raised on the principles of the French revolution to reject the need to consider the religious sensitivities of those they might see as “outsiders.”

The quote from the Dalai Lama at the beginning of this piece reminds us that we must take responsibility for our own reactions. Each side in this conflict feels they have a “right” to feel angry, but feeling angry is choice we can make or refuse. The Dalai Lama suggests that choosing to be angry relinquishes personal control to those we are angry with. In this case, if each side had chosen not to respond angrily, it might have stopped much sooner and perhaps could have resulted in a more heartfelt apology offered without defiance and accepted without fires and marches.

So, what do we, as general semanticists, have to offer these two sides that could calm angry hearts and reduce inflamed tempers? What fatal flaw of abstraction or communication has led us to this moment? I don’t have an answer, although I certainly believe that general semantics provides an outline for conflict resolution. If the people involved in this explosion of misunderstanding had learned in school how to moderate their emotion reactions using the formulations of general semantics, would any of this have happened? But more importantly at this moment, can we make a useful statement that applies to the actuality of the moment — something that might help to moderate the evaluations of angry people who have not had the benefit of such training? That, to me, constitutes the challenge. How do we meet it? Send a letter to the editors here, or sign on to the Institute’s discussion forum at http://www.learn-gs.org/cgi-bin/boards/discus.cgi and offer your thoughts.

REFERENCES

1. http://news.scotsman.com/international.cfm?id=183562006