



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Aalborg Universitet

Danes relish self-effacing humor

Søndergaard, Bettina Dahl

Published in:
The Roanoke Times. Virginia regional daily newspaper

Publication date:
2006

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Søndergaard, B. D. (2006). Danes relish self-effacing humor. *The Roanoke Times. Virginia regional daily newspaper*, 9.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Danes relish self-effacing humor

Bettina Dahl Soendergaard

Soendergaard is assistant professor at the School of Education at Virginia Tech.

So what's the deal with these Danish Muhammad cartoons?

Until two weeks ago, whenever people heard that I am from Denmark, they usually asked whether Denmark was the capital of Sweden. Now I get a knowing smile — oh, so she's one of "them" people who likes to make fun of others. . . .

We are not a mean people, actually. We don't think so ourselves.

But why did this Danish newspaper even think that it was all right to publish these 12 cartoons on Sept. 30, 2005?

To really understand, you have to understand Denmark. Danish people love satire. We use it everywhere — on everyone and everything — even the queen, the government, politicians, priests. But don't we have any respect for

these institutions? Yes, but we Danes also have a healthy (we think) scepticism toward authorities, and we are not afraid of standing up against the powers. Take for instance the referendum in 2000 when the Danes voted no to adopting the European currency (the euro) despite the fact that the government, the main political parties, the unions and the employers' organizations all campaigned for a yes vote.

We have the so-called Jante Law in our mentality where two of the "rules" are: Do not think that you are better than the rest of us or that you know more than the rest of us.

So everybody is addressed using their first names, including priests, teachers, professors, managers, government ministers. The only exception is the royal family, whom we love for being not too distant from the rest of us, and whom we secretly speak of using their first names since they are almost like family to us.

No, university professor would

even consider putting up his diploma on his office wall, not because they are ugly (well, actually they are), but he would be interpreted as being self-important or snobbish or seen as having a problem with his self-confidence.

Critical and independent thinking is encouraged in our school system from very early on — and this type of thinking is required to get an "A." Knowledge alone is not enough. My teachers and professors loved a good argument, and I was rewarded grade-wise even when we did not agree. We learn that knowledge is good and that often the best answer comes after a critical analysis with no stone left untouched.

This low hierarchy is supposedly also one of the reasons for our very strong economy. The man on the floor is often not too afraid of suggesting changes to his boss; therefore, things get done much more efficiently.

But this wealth is not just used on ourselves. Rich nations agreed at

the U.N. to give 0.7 percent of their GNP to foreign aid. Denmark gives 0.84 percent and is thereby the second-largest giver in the world, with Norway as No. 1. Oh, by the way, the cartoons were also published in Norway.

And the satire is also used on ourselves. It is customary at events, such as weddings, that friends and family write songs telling the other guests about all the foolish things that these people have done (a few good things might also find their way in).

Why do we do this? Are we evil? Actually, it is the exact opposite — the more friends you have, the more songs you will get. To make fun of people is an act of love — you are one of us — just as human. And to be able to laugh at yourself is considered a virtue.

This is how we Danes are. Therefore, please, in the name of multiculturalism and diversity, allow us to remain Danish. And no, Denmark is not the capital of Sweden.

The Roanoke Times

23/2 2006