



Speaker Uninvited to Academic Freedom Event

Elizabeth Redden

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The University of Cape Town has disinvited a speaker set to give its annual TB Davie Academic Freedom Lecture for fear of security risks and the possibility of provoking conflict and further polarization on campus.

The university withdrew the invitation to Flemming Rose, who as culture editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* commissioned cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that some Muslims considered blasphemous. The publication of the cartoons in 2005 triggered widespread protests and riots across the Muslim world, some of which turned deadly.

In rescinding the invitation, Cape Town's vice chancellor, Max Price, invoked the language of "safe spaces" and asserted that bringing Rose to campus for his scheduled August talk "might retard rather than advance academic freedom on campus."

The university committee that extended the invitation to Rose refused to rescind it but was overruled by the university administration. In [a statement](#) the Academic Freedom Committee described Rose as an "eminently qualified candidate" to speak on issues including religious tolerance, threats to education, free thought and free expression. The committee expressed regret about the administration's decision "and what it reveals about the limited scope of academic freedom at UCT."

A 3.5-page letter from Price, the vice chancellor, states that the decision to withdraw the invitation was made reluctantly, "since we recognize that a decision not to provide an official platform to Mr. Rose is an acknowledgment of the limitations on freedom of expression in general and academic freedom on our campus."

"No freedom, however, is unlimited," the letter continues. "As with all rights, context and consequence are also critical."

The [letter from Price to the Academic Freedom Committee](#) cites three main reasons for the rescinded invitation. The first two relate to the possibility that Rose's talk could provoke protests on campus and create security risks.

“We are convinced his presence at this time would lead to vehement and possibly violent protest against him and against UCT,” Price wrote on behalf of the university administration. “The risks are to the security and bodily integrity of Mr. Rose himself; to those who will host him, and those who will attend the lecture; to the ability to hold a public lecture without total disruption; to the fragile but uneasy calm which currently exists on campus; and to the positive interfaith relations which currently mark public life in the Western Cape.”

That brings Price to the third reason cited in his letter -- that, he wrote, “bringing this speaker to deliver the TB Davie lecture in the current environment might retard rather than advance academic freedom on campus.”

For more than a year now South African university campuses have been rocked by student protests calling for “decolonization” and “transformation” of universities and addressing issues of race, class and affordability of higher education. The protests have in some cases escalated into acts of violence or vandalism. In February, eight Cape Town students were arrested and six suspended after protestors allegedly burned artwork and vehicles and petrol-bombed the vice chancellor’s office.

“Everyone is deeply aware of the very testing circumstances that pertain to freedom of expression about controversial ideas in this country at present, particularly on university campuses,” Price wrote. “Our campuses have become charged spaces, in which ideological and social fault lines have become intensely politicized, sometimes violently so. We are committed to weathering these storms in ways that acknowledge and protect the need for safe spaces to confront and debate such matters. We know that many within our universities don’t feel safe to engage, which undermines the spirit of mutual tolerance and understanding.”

“This is a deeply worrying situation which all adherents of academic freedom should find disconcerting, and ultimately unacceptable,” Price's letter continues. “Academic freedom cannot survive, let alone flourish, in such an atmosphere. But will progress on this issue be advanced by inviting someone who represents a provocatively -- potentially violently -- divisive view to make the case for a considered version of academic freedom that is avowedly sensitive to the concurrent rights to dignity and freedom from harm?”

The letter goes on: “If the brief of the [Academic Freedom Committee] is to protect and promote academic freedom on campus and beyond, then we cannot see how the invitation to Mr. Rose at this time will promote this goal. Indeed, it is far more likely to open up a broad new front of hostility between groups of students and staff, and to lead directly, both in the days before and after the lecture, to heightened tensions and possibly physical altercations, precisely at a time when many on campus are feeling bruised and misunderstood by the events of the past 16 months. This risks diminishing, rather than bolstering, the opportunities for proper and mutually respectful intellectual and institutional engagement.”

David Benatar, a philosophy professor at Cape Town and a member of the Academic Freedom Committee, accused Price of engaging in “doublespeak He wishes to restrict academic freedom in order to advance it,” Benatar wrote in an op-ed published on *Politicsweb*, a South African news site.

Benatar wrote that the “university should be standing firm on freedom of speech and teaching those who do not already know, that this value extends (most crucially) to people with provocative and even divisive views.”

In a response to the vice chancellor's letter posted on the *Index on Censorship* magazine's website, Rose wrote, “I find it disgraceful that the vice chancellor Mr. Max Price puts the blame on me instead of taking responsibility for his decision. He is afraid that some people might react in certain ways to my presence. That’s not my responsibility. If they choose to act in a way that concerns the VC, it’s their decision, not mine. The VC has to hold them responsible for their actions, not me. It’s the heckler’s veto.”

Rose also objected to Price’s characterizations of him in his letter. Price wrote, “Mr. Rose is regarded by many around the world as right wing, Islamophobic, someone whose statements have been deliberately provocative, insulting and possibly amount to hate speech, and an editor of a publication that many believe took a bigoted view of freedom of expression.” (Price went on to write, “No doubt all these claims can be contested, and the precepts of academic freedom should require us to hear him out. But presenting a speaker such as Mr. Rose as the chosen champion of the University of Cape Town to deliver its symbolic and prestigious TB Davie public lecture on academic freedom will, in our judgment, divide and inflame the campus.”)

Rose described himself as a “classical liberal” and pointed out that he recently defended the free speech rights of Muslim imams in a *Politico Europe* piece. He wrote that in his book *The Tyranny of Silence: How One Cartoon Ignited a Global Debate on the Future of Free Speech* (Cato Institute, 2014), he did not focus only on Islam but also wrote "about the Russian Orthodox Church silencing of criticism, Hindu nationalists' attacks on an Indian Muslim artist and so on and so forth."

Nadine Strossen, the John Marshall Harlan II Professor at New York Law School and an immediate past president of the American Civil Liberties Union -- and Cape Town's chosen speaker for the TB Davie lecture in 2011 -- wrote in a letter to Price and others at Cape Town that she considers Rose to be “one of the most principled, courageous exemplars of intellectual freedom and freedom of conscience, including freedom for religious and other beliefs Of course, I would neutrally defend Mr. Rose’s right to speak at UCT -- and the UCT community’s right to hear his ideas -- even if I strongly objected to his ideas. But he is especially deserving of a forum such as the Davie lecture because his ideas have been so widely caricatured and misunderstood, and because these ideas are urgently important precisely due to the sensitive nature of the issues they address.”

Strossen wrote that she is “troubled by the ongoing threat to academic freedom that Dr. Price’s letter signals. On the one hand, he asserts that UCT ‘hope[s] never again to have to interfere with an invitation to deliver a lecture on academic freedom.’ On the other hand, though, he later endorses ‘a considered version of academic freedom that is avowedly sensitive to the concurrent rights to dignity and freedom from harm.’ In other words, it is only his version -- or UCT’s ‘official’ version -- of academic freedom that will be honored, not that of the [Academic Freedom Committee], or the viewpoint-neutral version that would be consistent with the South African Constitution and UCT’s own proud traditions, as exemplified by TB Davie.”

However, Peter Hervik, an anthropology professor at Denmark's Aalborg University who has studied the Muhammad cartoon controversy and whose negative review of Rose's book was cited as a source in Price's letter, said he thought UCT found itself in a difficult position. The security risks are real, he said, and have continued to evolve since the invitation to Rose was first extended in March 2015. (He cited for example the Islamic State-claimed shooting in May 2015 at an event in Garland, Tex., where cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad were exhibited.) Of Rose himself Hervik questioned whether he as a journalist and nonacademic was a good choice for a lecture on academic freedom. He described Rose as someone who speaks from a “superior, entitled position where he’s saying, ‘I have the right to offend, to ridicule, to mock and so on,’ but his opponents do not have that privilege” because they do not hold positions of power in the media and elsewhere.

“The university could have done better homework, so they really knew whom they were getting,” said Hervik. At the same time, he said, “People have the right to become wiser and disinvite [speakers]. It’s not a happy situation, it’s unlucky, but I think they have the right.”