



Author Slams ‘Tyranny of Silence’ Surrounding Islamic Cartoon Crisis

By Larry Luxner

February 1, 2015

Cartoons and the Prophet Muhammad do not seem to mix very well. Flemming Rose learned that the hard way nine years ago — long before anyone even dreamed that two masked terrorists, dressed in black and armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles, would storm the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo and gun down 12 people after the irreverent French magazine published caricatures deemed offensive to Muslims.

Rose knows what that special hell feels like more than most. In early 2006, violent riots shook the Islamic world after the Danish newspaper editor commissioned and published 12 satirical drawings that depicted Muhammad — including one showing the prophet with a bomb-like turban. He has been marked for death ever since.

In the beginning, few people outside Denmark saw the offending cartoons, which had appeared in September 2005 in Rose’s Copenhagen daily Jyllands-Posten. Local Muslims protested, claiming the drawings had insulted Islam (portraying the Prophet Muhammad is considered blasphemous), while fellow Danish newspapers joined in solidarity with Jyllands-Posten. (Charlie Hebdo also reprinted all 12 cartoons.)

The controversy quickly spread throughout Europe, and efforts by the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to resolve it diplomatically failed when Danish officials refused to punish the newspaper, and in fact stood by the newspaper’s decision to publish the cartoons in the name of free speech.

By January 2006, demonstrations began erupting from Beirut to Benghazi, and furious Muslims — most of whom had never seen the caricatures — attacked Danish embassies in half a dozen countries. In India, a minister in the state government of Uttar Pradesh announced a cash reward for anyone who beheaded cartoonist Kurt Westergaard. An Arab boycott of Danish goods caused a 50 percent drop in exports to the Middle East.

All told, the violence triggered by the newspaper's cartoons killed more than 200 people around the world. But Rose — whose life was threatened numerous times — stands by his actions in the autumn of 2005.

“I don't feel guilty for these people's deaths, and I don't think a cartoon is worth a single human life. The problem was, a lot of other people did feel that way,” Rose told *The Washington Diplomat*. “They were willing to kill because of a cartoon. Human beings are not robots or animals who are not able to reason. When violence is committed, it means individuals made a decision to commit violence.”

Rose laments that the violence has succeeded in shutting down free speech and scaring journalists. After last month's Paris attacks, dozens of newspapers, magazines and websites around the world reproduced the very cartoon that had so angered the terrorists who ultimately took the lives of 17 people. Notably, *Jyllands-Posten*, the Copenhagen paper where Rose works, wasn't among them.

“We caved in and we've been very honest about it,” Rose told BBC-TV on Jan. 14, a week after the carnage in Paris. “Sometimes, the sword is mightier than the pen. We have been living with death threats and several foiled terrorist attacks in my own office for the past nine years. Perhaps if the reaction worldwide had been a little bit different in 2006 — if we had received stronger support from media organizations insisting that this is something we have the right to do, even though you may disagree with what we did — we would not have been in the situation we are now.”

Rose said it's obvious there's still a lack of understanding of the reasoning that goes into editorial decisions.

“One thing is to publish a cartoon as an act of solidarity. Another is to publish a cartoon because it's news,” he said in the BBC interview. “Publication does not mean endorsement. And our cartoons had nothing to do with mocking a minority. It was about targeting blasphemy. We're losing a battle, but we're not losing the war.”

At the same time, in an early January article for *Politico* magazine, he lamented that “the intimidation has grown more murderous — more intimidating — than ever. Already, in the immediate aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo killings, news publications in the United States and around the world were publishing blurred images of the Mohammad cartoons so as not to offend.... In this way we are, slowly but surely, watching our too-often ‘neglected principles’ of free speech eroding away.”

Rose, 56, was speaking on the subject of free speech weeks before the Paris onslaught, when he visited Washington in mid-November to promote his well-timed new book, “*The Tyranny of Silence*.” Incidentally, none of the original 12 cartoons that *Jyllands-Posten* printed appear in the volume's 240 pages.

And that doesn't bother Rose, whose main objective was not to ignite another controversy but to simply tell his side of the story — in this case with the help of his publisher, the Washington-based Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. In fact, during his week in the United States, Rose did at least 15 interviews with a variety of media outlets including The Washington Post, Al Jazeera America, Fox Business, MSNBC, Foreign Policy magazine and Politico.

“There's been amazing interest in the book, far more than I expected,” he said.

One reason, he muses, is that it touches on universal principles that affect all societies, like the protection of free speech versus fear of offending a particular minority, religion or ethnic group.

“I think this is the basic debate,” Rose explained. “There are people in other countries who would like to determine what a newspaper in Denmark should be allowed to publish. The diversity in societies around the world means there is social pressure for passing laws, and even if you don't pass laws, people submit themselves to censorship in order not to say anything that might be offensive.”

Two relatively new factors frame this debate, he said.

“One has to do with technology, the fact that what is being published by a newspaper in a small country in a language very few people can read is immediately accessible by people all over the world. That creates a lot of room for misunderstanding and manipulation, because when information travels, quite often the context gets lost in transmission,” Rose said. “The other new factor is migration. People are moving across borders never before seen in the history of mankind. Every society in the world is getting more multicultural, more multiethnic and more multi-religious.”

But intolerance is increasing as well. Barely two years after publication of Westergaard's cartoon showing Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, Danish police arrested two Tunisians and a Moroccan-born Dane on charges of planning to murder the cartoonist. Two years after that, Westergaard was surprised in his own home by a Somali man wielding a knife and an axe. He fled to a recently installed panic room and called police, who arrested the intruder. It was later determined that the would-be assassin had links to the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab; he was eventually sentenced to 10 years in prison, followed by deportation from Denmark.

Rose said that except for the attacks on Westergaard, the cartoons didn't create a violent storm in Denmark. “All the violence that erupted in the aftermath of [their publication] took place in countries where citizens do not enjoy free speech, and where they do not have the right to criticize religion.”

Westergaard, now 79, lives under constant, round-the-clock protection; police are camped out in his backyard, ready to foil the next assassination plot against him.

“That’s the irony. People said, ‘If you say we are violent, we’ll kill you.’ They don’t understand the irony of their own words,” Rose observes. “All the threats and attempts on Westergaard’s life and terrorist attacks against the newspaper confirmed the content of that cartoon: that some Muslims commit violence in the name of their religion. It’s a fact of life. That’s why I don’t understand why people are so upset with those cartoons.”

Rose told *The Diplomat* he’s been unfairly painted as a racist Islamophobe whose life’s mission was to denigrate Muslims in the eyes of the West. Nothing could be further from the truth, he insisted. “The publication of the cartoons, the reasons behind it, the sequence of events, my line of defense — it all makes sense to me. It fits my value system. I’m a liberal in the European sense of the word. I believe in freedom. I’m against hate speech laws, and I’m not anti-Muslim.”

What he’s against is violence, intolerance and a refusal to see the truth, which is that other religions like Christianity can be freely criticized but Islam is singled out for special treatment. Rose argues this phenomenon is particularly acute in Scandinavian countries that have opened their borders to refugees from Iraq and other war-torn Muslim lands.

“Sweden perceives itself as a humanitarian superpower. So they have this image that they are a very nice country, and it implies they should not accept any offensive speech,” he said, arguing that authorities often fear antagonizing the Islamic community. “A black man had been beaten severely in southern Sweden, and it created a huge uproar because people thought white supremacists were behind this. But it turned out they were Arabs. Then the human rights industry didn’t want to discuss it anymore.”

But the rise of Islamic radicalism across Europe cannot be ignored, Rose warned. In the Swedish city of Malmö, for instance, there’s one Arab district where police officers, firefighters and emergency responders hesitate to enter.

“A few years ago, Sweden’s Ministry of Integration polled the population in this ghetto, and the women said they enjoyed more rights and freedoms in the Middle East than they felt in this ghetto in Sweden,” he said. “A country like Sweden is doing quite badly because they don’t want to confront these issues. They are living in a world of extreme political correctness, so the debate is being suppressed.”

What many people don’t know is that besides the Muhammad cartoons that grabbed world headlines, *Jyllands-Posten* also reprinted a full page of cartoons from the Arab world that were clearly anti-Semitic in nature. Often depicting Jews with hooked noses, some of these illustrations denied the Holocaust, while others painted Israelis as bloodthirsty terrorists who killed Arab children with help from Uncle Sam.

“The Muslims are so up in arms about these cartoons but then they endorse anti-Semitic cartoons that in many ways are more offensive,” Rose pointed out. “Our cartoons did not target individuals or Muslims as believers. It targeted religious doctrine. In a democracy, you should

have the right to question and challenge ideas. This is about free speech in a globalized world. If it should be a criminal offense to publish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, it should be a criminal offense to deny the Holocaust. And if it's a criminal offense to deny the Holocaust, it should be a crime to deny the Armenian genocide, or the crimes of communism or the Soviet occupation of Latvia.”

Rose, whose wife is Russian, spent many years covering the U.S.S.R. as a foreign correspondent for a large Danish newspaper. He said the Soviet dissident movement of the 1960s and 1970s had a huge influence on him.

“I used to work as a translator at the Danish Refugee Council, receiving refugees from the Soviet Union. Among them were dissidents. I was very influenced by them. They were struggling and risking their lives and welfare for the liberties we enjoyed in the West. Some of them went to prison camps. Their insistence on struggling for this human dignity really impressed me,” he said.

In 2009, Rose attended a UNESCO conference in Qatar, marking his first visit to a Muslim country since the “cartoon crisis” four years earlier. Locals were so angry with his presence that Qatar’s Ministry of Domestic Affairs set up a special hotline for citizens to call in their complaints. Five years later, people in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf emirate are still complaining he was let into their country.

But that’s OK, too. Rose clearly doesn’t mind a little controversy now and then.

“I like debate,” he said. “If you believe in something, you’ll want to defend it. You don’t need to talk to people with whom you agree. That’s boring.”