



## **'Jihadis want to assassinate me. But I refuse to be condemned to a tyranny of deathly silence': Cry of defiance from Danish editor who printed first controversial cartoons**

By [Flemming Rose](#)

January 10, 2015

It was late on a Tuesday afternoon six years ago when the phone rang. A voice that had become familiar from Denmark's Security and Intelligence Service said two men planning to assassinate me had been arrested in Chicago.

The FBI had foiled another planned attack on my paper Jyllands-Posten, which specifically targeted myself and the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard.

The terrorists turned out to be an American and a Canadian, both of Pakistani origin.

One was linked to atrocities the previous year in Mumbai; he had already visited Denmark twice on planning missions and had purchased his ticket back to Copenhagen.

A year later, Westergaard was fortunate to escape the next attempt on his life.

The 73-year-old artist was watching a film with his young granddaughter when a Somali man with an axe broke in to his home to kill him.

They dived into a safe room he had been forced to put in his house. His assailant was shot and captured by police.

For a decade we have had to live in the shadow of such threats after I commissioned a dozen cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

This was a decision that provoked a storm around the world, with republication of the cartoons in scores of other papers. Yet in spite of the assassination attempts, it was all too easy to be lulled into thinking the threat was abstract, as life continued.

All that changed last week. People were killed in Paris because of cartoons mocking Islam. Our worst nightmare has come true.

These murders challenge democracies in the most sickening style. They present a terrible threat to the free speech that is the foundation of true democracy.

But the tragic events also expose our own hypocrisies, the delusions and evasion we take to keep peace in the short term, along with the destructive culture of grievance that politicians have been eager to exploit.

I knew two of the killed cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo. I had appeared on a panel about threats to free speech with Stephane Charbonnier (aka Charb) and worked on a comic project with Georges Wolinski. I liked them a lot. They were funny and easy-going. Now they are dead.

I also appeared as a witness in a 2007 court case after two Muslim organisations in France accused Charlie Hebdo of inciting religious hatred by publishing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

Among them was the one by Westergaard that became the most infamous of our cartoons – a simple image of the Prophet with a bomb tucked in his turban.

Yet I stumbled almost accidentally into sparking what came to be known as the cartoon crisis, leading to riots, protests and dozens of deaths around the world.

I had taken a post as cultural editor of my paper after years on the road as a foreign correspondent. Among my postings was Moscow, where I was struck by dissidents who stood apart from Soviet society on the strength of their belief in freedom.

The crisis began innocently enough. A children's writer could not find an illustrator for a book about the Prophet Mohammed. Several illustrators declined to do it due to fear; then the one who agreed insisted on anonymity.

We observed several more examples of self-censorship or calls for censorship when it came to the treatment of Islam in the public domain. Theatres, comedians, translators and museums were censoring themselves.

My point was not to provoke or mock anyone, but simply to start a debate about self-censorship in our treatment of Islam compared with other religions.

By proposing a practical demonstration – Show, Don't Tell, a time-honoured journalistic principle – we wanted to let readers form their own opinion. As we soon found out, fears of violence for ridiculing a religious symbol were far from fantasy.

I could never have imagined being condemned as a racist and finding myself on an Al Qaeda hit list. I was constantly asked to apologise for subsequent events, finding myself blamed for the lethal over-reaction of others.

Following the French tragedy, I have been asked again and again my reaction. And the harsh truth is that mass murder in Paris has exposed hypocrisy, even as all those good people declare 'Je Suis Charlie'. I find it strange that people who welcome diversity when it comes to culture, religion and ethnicity fail to welcome the same diversity when it comes to expressing ourselves.

These people are basically saying that the more multicultural society becomes, the less freedom of expression we need. This seems a twisted stance. It should be the other way round – the more different we are, it seems to me, the more we need an open and free exchange of opinions.

Unfortunately, governments defend restrictions on free speech on the grounds of keeping the peace and avoiding clashes between different groups. So they ban hate speech and blasphemy.

In 2004, Theo van Gogh was killed in Amsterdam after making a controversial film about Islamic culture.

The Dutch minister of justice responded by saying his life could have been saved if Holland had tougher laws on hate speech.

But it is not only governments that advocate this blinkered approach. The human rights industry also defends limitations on speech, referring to the protection of human dignity and vulnerable identities.

I was once asked to join a panel discussion organised by Amnesty International and the Danish Institute of Human Rights under the banner Victims of Free Speech.

I suggested there were only victims of crime in a society based on the rule of law and the idea that people exerting long-held statutory rights were 'victims' was nonsense. There was anger at my comments.

Westergaard's cartoon of the Prophet has been criticised for being racist or stigmatising Muslims. I strongly disagree. He depicted Mohammed as representative of Islam in the same way images of Jesus refer to Christianity, Karl Marx to Marxism, and Uncle Sam to the US.

Portraying Marx with blood on his hands, the crucified Christ holding a beer, or the Christian God armed with a bomb does not mean you think that all Marxists are bloodthirsty murderers or that Christians are drunkards or terrorists.

Westergaard's cartoon attacks a hardline religious doctrine, not a particular group within society. I would make a similar point about cartoons lampooning the Prophet Mohammed in Charlie Hebdo.

Philippe Val, former editor-in-chief of Charlie Hebdo, was once asked if they hadn't crossed a line with cartoons mocking the Prophet. 'What kind of civilisation are we if we cannot ridicule those who bomb trains and airplanes and commit mass murder against innocent civilians?' he responded.

Yes indeed, what kind of civilisation are we? This is the key question for the coming days, weeks and months of hot debate.

Do we want to live in a tyranny of silence – or do we defend the right to offend? These cartoons can be offensive to some; they are designed to stir debate.

But labelling such images racist – an opinion aired in the US and UK – is misleading and dangerous.

If you characterise race and religion as similar, you risk supporting those sinister forces who claim that apostasy is impossible and abandonment of religion a capital offence.

Many Muslims believe they are born into their faith and it would be a serious crime to quit Islam. They treat religion as if it is a race. We should not accept that logic.

Identity is a key issue in the modern world. It is no longer easy to answer questions such as: Who am I? Who are we as a community? How do we protect our identity?

But identity politics has become a growing challenge to free speech. We seem more concerned with protecting the sensibilities of groups rather than defending the historic democratic rights that we are entitled to as human beings.

The killers in Paris sincerely believed that human beings at Charlie Hebdo deserved to die because of their offensive cartoons. They felt this was justified by their militant interpretation of Islam.

But the killings were also taking place within a grievance culture that incites people to take offence every time somebody says something they do not like.

The assumption is that there isn't any REAL difference between words and deeds, between a verbal insult and physical violence.

Yet I believe those who support this point of view are playing into the hands of both Islamists and the growing swathe of xenophobic political parties across Europe.

Instead of sending people to sensitivity training when they say something offensive, perhaps we should all be sent to insensitivity training.

We need to grow thicker skins if freedom of speech is to survive in a multicultural world.

*Flemming Rose is author of The Tyranny Of Silence: How One Cartoon Ignited A Global Debate On The Future Of Free Speech.*