

Point Person: Our Q&A with Flemming Rose

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*Few people in the world know the price of free speech better than Flemming Rose, the editor at Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten who invited illustrators to send in depictions of the prophet Muhammad in 2005. Muslims around the world were enraged, and more than 200 deaths were attributed to protests surrounding what came to be known as the “cartoon crisis.” Today, Rose, 57, lives under guard. He is among figures, including novelist Salman Rusdie and the staff of French satire magazine Charlie Hebdo, who landed on extremists’ death list. Rose met with Points in Dallas recently to talk about his book, *The Tyranny of Silence*, published last year, and his thoughts on how the ideal of free speech is evolving around the world.*

Did you know the cartoons you published would be provocative?

No, but I would say even if I had known, what’s the difference? But I didn’t ask for this fight. The cartoons grew out of a very specific situation. A writer wrote a book about the prophet, and he went public, saying, “I wrote this book, but I had problems finding an illustrator.” The first issue was, was this true? If it was true, was it just a single incidence, or was it part of a broader trend? If it was part of a broader trend, was this self-censorship based in reality or was it just the product of self-censorship?

Those were the two questions being debated in Denmark. We also published written stories about this, calling the chairman of the writers union, of the cartoonist association, the painters union, translators, publishers and so on. Then we had this discussion, how are we going to follow up on this? Somebody came up with this idea: Why don’t we invite illustrators to draw the prophet to see, “Is there self-censorship? How are they going to solve this challenge? Will we receive no cartoons?” I think this was a classical journalistic exercise. Nobody anticipated the kind of reaction we received, and in fact, just a few months earlier, another Danish newspaper had published a cartoon of the prophet as a psychiatric patient, and there was no reaction.

So why was there a violent reaction to what you did?

It had to do with the fact that these cartoons were exploited by the political leaders and groups in different countries in the Muslim world. It was beneficial for them to present themselves as the true defenders of the prophet, to fight internal opposition. So it was a coincidence in that sense, I think.

In the past nine years, what effect has the cartoon crisis had on your personal freedom of movement and security?

It depends on where I travel. It has been different from time to time. For a time, I've more or less had a free life. Of course, there are places where I cannot go, also in Copenhagen and other parts of Denmark, but I had more or less a free life. After what happened in Paris and in Copenhagen, the situation has changed dramatically, so I now have security around the clock, bodyguards whenever I leave my house.

You write that this debate about freedom of speech today is global, across religions and cultures.

I looked into India, where you have Hindu nationalists that are very aggressive, and they want to silence criticism. I lived in Moscow for 11 years and ... worked for the Danish refugee council with refugees from the former Soviet Union. It's not confined to one part of the world. It has to do with the forces of globalization and identity politics that is becoming increasingly problematic when it comes to defending free speech. Your own city, I was just told, is getting increasingly multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious. The same with Copenhagen, where I come from, the same with other parts of the world.

Unfortunately, a very common reaction is for groups to protect their identity against criticism. That's why they try to get laws passed that criminalize criticism of what is sensitive to them. That's also why you have this notion of tolerance, which originally meant the ability to live with things that you dislike, the ability to live with speech that you find outrageous and upsetting — provocative. That is tolerance.

But today it means, basically, that people who say something offensive are the intolerant, so it's exactly the opposite compared to what the concept originally meant. I think it all comes from this sense that people feel that they have a right not to be offended, and that implies, "You should not criticize what I believe in."

So today, tolerance is defined not by tolerance, but by intolerance.

Exactly. If you take, historically, the relationship between tolerance and freedom, they are historically closely interconnected, and freedom grew with tolerance in the sense that the doctrine of religious tolerance in Europe evolved as a consequence of the religious wars in the 16th and the 17th centuries.

Protestants and Catholics and others had been killing one another for decades, centuries, and finally they understood, "We cannot erase everybody. We have to somehow figure out a way to live together in peace, even though we despise and think they are infidels — the Protestants or the Catholics or other people of faith. That's how the concept of tolerance came about. But today it means exactly the opposite, that you're not allowed to say anything that other people may find offensive. It means that the burden of tolerance has shifted from the receiver of speech to the speaker.

I have been called intolerant because I published those cartoons. I believe those who are intolerant are those who would like to censor these cartoons and have them banned or even worse.

Where, then, do you think the line should be on free speech?

I think that the world could become a better place if there was a global First Amendment. I am a big admirer of the First Amendment and the status that the First Amendment enjoys in the U.S. Constitution. In the American system, free speech is not balanced against any other right. I think you have shown, through your own history in the 20th century, American citizens have been allowed to say more and more, to speak freer and freer. And at the same time, the United States has become a less racist society. I think it documents that there is no logical, automatic relationship between giving people the right to say racist things and that racist speech will be followed by racist action and racial discrimination.

So what would be an example of speech that incites violence?

I don't think any offensive speech is incitement to violence. I'm all in favor of the American interpretation that implies the need to be a clear and present danger, that action will follow words in the near future.

You're complimentary of the United States' view on free speech, but a lot of people would argue that the social pressures on free speech here are stifling.

If I were to write my book today, I would be far more critical of the American experience. I think in terms of the constitutional system, you have the best protection in the world of free speech, but the social pressure and the political correctness and what is going on on campuses of colleges is far worse than in any European country.

It's as if when you go to college, you have a right to feel mentally comfortable, and if somebody is challenging that comfort, you have a right to create these safety zones where you can go and nobody will say anything offensive if you don't like what is being said in class. I'm concerned what is going to be the status of free speech in the United States when this new generation is being elected to Congress, when they are sitting on courts, newspapers, media, civil society.

If they are going to take this understanding of free speech out into society, sooner or later, maybe the First Amendment will not be liquidated in a legal sense, but they will find ways to get around it. I think it's very concerning.