



## Danish journalist sees ‘nightmare’ sparked by cartoon commission

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January 9, 2015

When Flemming Rose first contacted some two dozen Danish cartoonists about a commission in 2005, he had little idea of the chilling string of events that would unfurl.

The [publication of 12 cartoons](#) depicting the Prophet Mohammed in Jyllands-Posten, the Danish daily, sparked protests across the Middle East and dozens of deaths. [Several terror plots](#) against the paper have been foiled over the years. The cartoonist who depicted Mohammed with a bomb in his turban was only saved from an [axe-wielding extremist](#) in 2010 by his panic room door.

The drama culminated in Paris this week with the [massacre at Charlie Hebdo](#), the French satirical magazine whose editor, Stephane Charbonnier, decided to reprint Jyllands-Posten’s cartoons in 2006 out of solidarity and then increasingly made Islam a subject of his sharp-edged pen.

“It’s really sad. It’s a big shock. It’s really, really terrible. It’s a nightmare coming true,” says Mr Rose, himself on a [purported al-Qaeda wanted list](#).

But anybody expecting Mr Rose to be repentant would be wrong. “I don’t regret commissioning those cartoons. I don’t believe that a cartoon is worth a single life. The problem is that there are quite a few people who believe otherwise and then we are confronted with this dilemma: what do we do?”

It is a growing consideration across Europe, where the Charlie Hebdo massacre has crystallised the debate about a cherished notion of free speech and satire — even if it offends — where all subjects must be fair game, especially religion. Such speech often relishes provocation and is at odds with the political correctness that has sanitised much US discourse

Its exercise has carried murderous consequences not only for the editors of Charlie Hebdo but also Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch film-maker who was shot to death in 2004 for producing a film about violence against women in Islam that many Muslims deemed blasphemous.

As Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, wrote on the social network this week: “Different voices — even if they’re sometimes offensive — can make the world a better and more interesting place.”

For Mr Rose, it is about a fundamental challenge to European democracies. The problem is what he terms “grievance fundamentalism”, or the right not to be offended.

Before commissioning the cartoons Mr Rose, then the paper’s cultural editor, had been concerned about mounting incidents of seeming self-censorship. He recalled London’s [Tate Gallery excluding an artwork](#) showing torn copies of the Koran, Bible and Talmud and a Danish comedian who said he would think about urinating on the Bible but not the Koran. “It was a classic journalistic approach: you hear about something and you want to find out if it’s true or not,” he says.

Reaction was slow to build. It was only after Danish imams toured the Middle East that the big protests started across the Muslim world. In the middle of the violent clashes, Charlie Hebdo reprinted the cartoons and added another by its own illustrator, Cabu, one of those murdered this week. It showed Mohammed saying: “It’s hard to be loved by idiots.”

An element common to both Jyllands-Posten and Charlie Hebdo was condemnation of their actions by politicians. Denmark’s then prime minister criticised those who “demonise groups of people based on their religion” while Jacques Chirac, French president at the time, said: “Anything that can hurt the convictions of someone else, in particular religious convictions, should be avoided.”

Charlie Hebdo [persisted](#) in spite of death threats and [the firebombing of its offices in 2011](#). “I think in many ways the publication of those cartoons has been vindicated, tragically, every time something like this happens,” Mr Rose says.

He remains adamant that causing offence to a group or person should not be sufficient to stop publication. “People do get offended by opinions, by angles of stories, by images that they don’t like.

“I think this grievance fundamentalism has gone too far. If you should consistently follow that principle you would not be able to publish a single story in the Financial Times.”

Like other western European countries, Denmark is struggling to respond to radical Islamists. In the meantime, the populist rightwing Danish People’s party topped the polls in June’s European elections.

Mr Rose believes Europe’s free speech dilemma will only worsen. “When you have a society that is growing more and more multicultural, more and more multi-ethnic, more and more multi-religious — if we think that growing diversity should be met by less diversity when it comes to ways of expressing ourselves, I think it’s a blind alley for democracy.”

This week, his newspaper was again the subject of criticism. But this time it was because it was the only big Danish daily not to reprint Charlie Hebdo's cartoons. Jørn Mikkelsen, Jyllands-Posten's editor, said it was not self-censorship but instead reflected the "special reality" at the paper, which increased security at its offices this week.

Mr Rose, now foreign editor, says his focus is on his job but concedes that many at the newspaper are afraid. "I think we should be honest about our fear and start to talk about it so we just don't explain it away by political correctness. I mean, we are afraid."