Morten Høi Jensen on *The Tyranny of Silence*

Avant Charlie: The Danish Cartoon Crisis

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January 30th, 2015

> But who cares about the Danes?
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> — Fatma El-Zahraa Etman, Egypt's Assistant Foreign Minister for European Affairs on February 18, 2008

IN 2010 I BEGAN WRITING a short-lived and by all accounts not very interesting literary blog for the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. A mutual acquaintance had passed on some of my articles to the paper's cultural editor Flemming Rose, who in turn invited me to drop by his office in central Copenhagen. We had never met, but like all Danes I knew who Flemming Rose was very well: the man behind the publication of 12 cartoon renderings of the Prophet Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005 — cartoons that were used to ignite anti-Danish sentiment across the Middle East. The backlash culminated in a consumer boycott of Danish goods and the burning of Danish embassies in Tehran, Damascus, and Beirut in early 2006.

But the Flemming Rose in whose cramped and book-lined office I drank a tasteless cup of cafeteria coffee was not the fire-breathing Islamophobe his critics made him out to be. On the contrary, he was a reserved and soft-spoken intellectual with a wry smile and a penchant for Russian formalism. (He was the Moscow correspondent for *Berlingske Tidende* from 1990 to 1996 and for *Jyllands-Posten* from 1999 to 2004.) Since he had all but disappeared from public life in Denmark, he seemed to me especially lonely sitting there in his little office, where in the course of our meeting no one came by and no one called. Before leaving I asked him a little clumsily about his personal safety, and whether he had ever thought of writing something on the controversial subject that he probably knew better than most. He said he already had, and gestured toward a large stack of papers on the desk in front of me that I hadn't realized was a manuscript. "It's called *The Tyranny of Silence*," he said.

The book's publication in 2012 was the first time since 2006 that Rose had offered a sustained insight into his and *Jyllands-Posten*'s motivations for their commission of 12 caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in September 2005. In the intervening years he had been vilified by his colleagues in the Danish press, denounced by politicians at home and abroad, and the target of

several foiled terrorist plots. In October 2009, two men were arrested in Chicago for plotting the assassination of Rose and cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, whose caricature of Muhammad with a bomb in his turban proved to be the most controversial of *Jyllands-Posten*'s cartoons. One of the men, David Headley, an American also involved in the 2008 Mumbai massacre that killed over 160 people, conspired with an al-Qaeda cell in the United Kingdom that would carry out the attack against Rose and Westergaard. Among the ideas touted was for them to force their way into *Jyllands-Posten*'s offices and murder the offending journalists — a plan that eerily foreshadowed the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7.

Appearing on Danish television following the events in Paris, Rose said that*Jyllands-Posten* had been the target of "five to ten" foiled terrorist plots in the last nine years. The closest anyone ever came to succeeding was in January 2010 when a 28-year-old man of Somali origin broke into Kurt Westergaard's home in Aarhus armed with an axe and a knife. Westergaard, who was looking after his five-year-old granddaughter, managed to escape into a panic room and alert the police. When officers arrived at the scene, the intruder threw his axe at them and was shot in his leg and hand before eventually being arrested. He was believed by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) to have ties to both the Somali terrorist organization al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda affiliates in East Africa.

In spite of Rose's unenviable status as a prized target of Islamist militants,*The Tyranny of Silence* is anything but an exercise in self-pity or gung-ho apologetics. On the contrary, it is a subtly crafted and self-effacing investigation of the Cartoon Crisis and the debates about free speech that surfaced in its wake. "I am not by nature a provocative person," Rose writes early on. "I do not seek conflict for its own sake, and it gives me no pleasure when people take offense at things I have said and done."

But neither does he regret his actions. *The Tyranny of Silence* is not an apology; it is one man's narrative among many. "In the open society," Rose writes, "history moves forward through the exchange of new narratives." He explains that during a conversation with Salman Rushdie in 2009 he came to understand that "what differentiates open and closed societies is the right to tell and retell our own and other people's stories." Any attempt to prevent those stories from being told is not simply a restriction on free speech; it is an assault on human nature. "When we spoke," Rose recalls, "Rushdie observed that from childhood, we use storytelling as a way of defining and understanding ourselves. It is a phenomenon that derives from a language instinct that is universal and innate in human nature."

By framing his book in this way, Rose is careful to avoid being perceived as a wronged journalist out to clear his sullied name. His discomfort with his own notoriety is palpable; he corrects misconceptions and relates his personal history but clearly prefers the journalist's cool detachment. (It is characteristic of him that a brief vignette of his childhood rapidly evolves into a consideration of the Danish housing shortage of the 1960s.) All the same, having been singled out by the world's most feared terrorist organization, Rose's leading role in the Cartoon Crisis was in some sense scripted for him. As he explains in the book's opening pages:

Everywhere I go, I seem to provoke controversy. At American universities, I've been met by placards and students protesting against my speaking. When I was scheduled to lecture at a university in Jerusalem, a demonstration called for my removal. When I talked about freedom of

speech at a UNESCO conference in Doha last spring, local media branded me “the Danish Satan,” the authorities were inundated with angry emails, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs set up a hotline for citizens who complained about my having even been allowed into the country.

The irony of his situation is surely not lost on Rose. A man who attempted to spark a debate about the limits of free speech is greeted throughout the world with calls for his silence, his removal, and even his death. For the better part of a decade he has lived under constant police protection, and on occasion has even had to spend time abroad because his safety in Denmark could not be guaranteed. As of September 2013, Rose was still on al-Qaeda’s most-wanted list, along with the now-deceased Stéphane “Charb” Charbonnier, one of the 12 people shot in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* earlier this year.

It all began in September 2005. When it was revealed that Danish author Kåre Bluitgen was having trouble finding an illustrator for his children’s book about the Prophet Muhammad for fear of violent reprisals, several Danish newspapers printed stories about the tensions between freedom of speech and religious censorship. In light of this debate, Rose invited 40 cartoonists to contribute their own images of Muhammad to *Jyllands-Posten*as a test of the limits of that censorship. Fifteen cartoonists responded. Their images were printed on the front page of *Jyllands-Posten*’s Culture Section on September 30, 2005, with an accompanying editorial by Rose.

Looking at the cartoons now, it’s difficult to understand what all the fuss was about. They range from the decidedly innocuous to the mildly provocative. One depicted Kåre Bluitgen in a turban and accused him of peddling in self-promotion. Another image showed Muhammad as a student in a Danish classroom pointing to a blackboard that read, “The editorial staff of *Jyllands-Posten* are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs.” One simply portrayed a sweating cartoonist in the process of drawing Muhammad while nervously looking over his shoulder, while yet another showed a rather neutral Muhammad walking in the desert next to a donkey. Even a cartoon showing suicide bombers being turned away in heaven because they have run out of virgins seems uncontroversial and, by satirical standards, fairly run-of-the-mill. And yet none of the cartoons have been reprinted in the American edition of *The Tyranny of Silence*, nor were they included in Professor Jytte Klausen’s *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, published by Yale University Press in 2009. This is of course a blatant absurdity, like publishing books about Picasso without any illustrations of his art, not to mention a way of preserving the cartoons’ aura of danger and infamy instead of trying to deflate it.

The most “offending” cartoon was the one drawn by Kurt Westergaard depicting a stern Muhammad with a bomb for a turban and the Shahadah (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”) inscribed on it. Yet the cartoon is not a caricature (Muhammad is quite naturalistically drawn) and does not unambiguously equate Islam with terrorism; it is much more open to interpretation. Jytte Klausen explains in her book that Westergaard “intended his drawing to show that radical Muslims use the Prophet’s name to justify violence.” Westergaard says as much himself when Rose interviews him in *The Tyranny of Silence*: “The bomb is an age-old symbol of terrorism, and I thought if I use the Arabic inscription from the Islamic creed I’d be able to make the point clear that Islam is the terrorists’ spiritual ammunition.”

Whatever their subtleties and nuances, however, the cartoons were quickly appropriated by commentators, politicians, and Muslim religious figures for political ends. Tensions flared throughout Denmark as death threats against the cartoonists were reported; 11 ambassadors from the Middle East demanded to speak with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Within two weeks of the cartoons' publication, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League sent letters to Prime Minister Rasmussen, who refused to meet with the ambassadors on the grounds that Danish law prevents the government from interfering with the press. Shortly thereafter several Muslim organizations filed a blasphemy complaint against *Jyllands-Posten* (blasphemy is prohibited according to Danish law), though the newspaper was later acquitted.

In December of that year, a coalition of Danish imams traveled to the Middle East in order to stir up the anti-Danish sentiment that peaked in early 2006 with the burning of Danish embassies in Beirut and Damascus and the boycott of Danish goods throughout the region. Oddly enough, one of those imams, Ahmed Akkari, published a memoir last year in which he repented his role in what was Denmark's worst international relations crisis since the Second World War. His book detailed the complicity of the Egyptian embassy, the imams' secret meetings with Hezbollah and Hamas, and their tacit approval of anyone who would resort to violence in response to the cartoons.

But it wasn't just Muslim radicals and Middle Eastern governments who lashed out at Denmark. Everyone from Vladimir Putin to Bill Clinton condemned the cartoons and the perceived insult to religious sentiments. A joint statement from the UN claimed that "the anguish in the Muslim world at the publication of these offensive caricatures is shared by all individuals and communities who recognize the sensitivity of deeply held religious belief." In France, President Jacques Chirac condemned the cartoons shortly before embarking on a series of trips to Saudi Arabia to negotiate an arms deal worth an estimated 400 million euros.

In his reportage on the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic extremist in 2004, Ian Buruma observes that "the shadow of World War II […] is never far from any Dutch crisis" — an observation that might just as easily be applied to the rest of Europe. One of the most common criticisms leveled at *Jyllands-Posten* — and, indeed, one of the most common criticisms made against any attempt at satirizing or caricaturing Islamism — was that the cartoons were reminiscent of anti-Semitic propaganda in Germany in the 1930s. Such a comparison, of course, isn't meant to put things into perspective but rather to stain and even silence one's opponents. Comparing someone to a Nazi isn't an argument; usually, it's a way of avoiding argument.

One of the strongest sections of *Tyranny of Silence* is Flemming Rose's investigation of the claim that the fate of Muslim immigrants in Europe today is comparable to the situation of Jews during the rise of Nazism — and *Jyllands-Posten*'s cartoons therefore reminiscent of *Der Stürmer*'s racist propaganda. He faults the Nüremberg trial against Julius Streicher, the hysterically anti-Semitic editor of *Der Stürmer*, for establishing "clear ties between the Nazis' mobilization of the media, which in words and pictures had demonized and blackened the character of the Jews, and the subsequent Holocaust." In Rose's view, the equating of words with deeds is troublesome in the extreme. "It is a logic that has no empirical basis," he writes, "yet

that argument continues to drive advocates of wide-reaching constraints on the freedom of speech."

Rose observes that the Nazi agitators of the 1920s did not make incitements to racial hatred against the Jews with impunity. On the contrary, he explains, "insulting communities of faith — Protestant, Catholic, or Jew — was a punishable offense" in the Weimar Republic, carrying up to three years' imprisonment. What's more, Joseph Goebbels, Julius Streicher, and the writer and publisher Theodor Fritsch were all prosecuted for their anti-Semitism — Streicher twice. "On the occasions on which he was sent to jail," Rose remarks, "Streicher was accompanied on his way by hundreds of sympathizers in what looked like his triumphal entry into martyrdom. […] The German courts became an important platform for Streicher's campaign against the Jews."

The failure of the Weimar Republic was not that it allowed Nazis to get away with racist speech but that it allowed them to get away with political murder. Rose refers to the well-known human rights activist Aryeh Neier, a Jewish refugee who in 1977 defended the right of a neo-Nazi group to march in the town of Skokie, Illinois, who writes in *Defending My Enemy*(1979) that "the history of the Weimar Republic […] does not support the views of those who say that the Nazis must be forbidden to express their views." While persecuting Nazis for wearing uniforms or voicing their opinions in public, the Weimar courts allowed politically motivated murder to go unpunished. It was a government, Neier writes, that lacked the political strength and will to safeguard the liberties of its own citizens.

"Streicher's and other Nazis' Jew-baiting occurred in a society with no real freedom of speech," Rose comments, "thus no possibility to counter the witch-hunt against the Jewish community [existed]." Like Neier, he emphasizes the need for a clear distinction between words and actions. "Words might offend or shock, but they can be countered in kind. Words are a democracy's way of dealing with conflict."

Rose also objects to the comparison between Muslim immigrants and Weimar-era Jews because it is a chauvinistic way of victimizing a large and variegated group of people from different countries and cultures. He doesn't doubt that many Muslims in Denmark and elsewhere were indeed offended by *Jyllands-Posten*'s cartoons — but "likewise, no doubt, many people of Muslim background were offended at being cited in support of that view when no one had bothered to ask them about it." In fact, it prompted several dissidents from Muslim countries living in Europe to publicly proclaim their right to apostasy — an act that is, Rose reminds us, punishable in some Middle Eastern countries by death. The Somali-born activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali calls this "the racism of low expectations":

When you approach a blond, blue-eyed, white Dane, you expect a high degree of tolerance and reason. But faced with someone like me, you say, OK, let it go. That is the racism of low expectations, and that's what you are guilty of when you reduce the Cartoon Crisis to a story about a powerful newspaper bullying a minority. It's a distortion of the essence of the matter. To harbor lower expectations of my ability to be tolerant and reasonable compared to the majority is to discriminate against me.

This is where critics who believe *Jyllands-Posten* or Theo van Gogh or*Charlie Hebdo* should not be allowed to criticize or even insult the Muslim faith run into trouble. What they consider to be

racist or offensive speech in Europe has quite a different connotation in, say, Egypt or Jordan or Saudi Arabia, countries in which any perceived insults to Islam are punishable by lengthy prison sentences or, in some cases, death. It is not said often enough that the majority of the victims of Islamist extremists are other Muslims — be they Shiites, Ibadhis, Alawites, Sufis, Ishmaelites, or even non-believers or apostates. Hence Rose's insistence on the bravery of Muslim and ex-Muslim dissidents, from Ayaan Hirsi Ali to the Iranian communist Maryam Namazie (both of whom he interviews in *Tyranny*), who in spite of political differences are united in their condemnation of the encroachment of Islamic law on democratic principles (like the Arbitration Act in the United Kingdom that confers legal authority to religious councils in certain family matters). In their view, appeasement of religious laws is a threat to gender equality, LGBT rights, and freedom of expression.

Flemming Rose insists that the cartoons were intended as an insult to ideology, not individual human beings. He doesn't say this out of a lack of sensitivity or understanding — he worked for many years as an interpreter and language teacher for the Danish Refugee Council and saw firsthand "how easy it was for a foreigner to feel like an outsider in Denmark." But even so he finds it difficult, he explains,

to distinguish between causing affront to Muhammad, Moses, Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Maharishi Yogi, or any other prophet we may care to mention, or indeed their ideas, whether they be inscribed in the Koran, the Bible, *The Communist Manifesto*, or a treatise hailing the blessings of the free market.

As Philip Roth might say, fuck the laudable ideologies.

Rose, who studied Russian at university and became very involved with the Soviet dissident movement in the late 1980s, draws a parallel between the fate of people like Namazie and Hirsi Ali and the writers and intellectuals he met under the cover of the Iron Curtain. He views legislation in Muslim countries banning anti-religious speech as being in the service not of Islam (as it is claimed) but of the theocratic rulers, just as Article 70 of the Soviet Penal Code strictly prohibited anti-Soviet activity and propaganda. Certainly the existence of what the American writer Paul Berman has called "an entire social class […] who survive only because of bodyguards and police investigations and because of their own precautions" — a social class that includes people like Hirsi Ali and Maryam Namazie, along with Ibn Warraq, Bassam Tibi, Kurt Westergaard, Taslima Nasrin, Naser Khader, Carsten Juste, and Rose himself, among others — is a case in point. And as the attempted assassination of Kurt Westergaard in 2010 and the recent massacre in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* have proved, the safety of these individuals cannot be guaranteed in a French metropolis or even a remote Danish suburb.

But Rose is not simply concerned that the fear of insulting or offending Islam may effectively silence dissenting voices already living under the threat of death. He is also concerned that it forces an identity — angry, fanatical, and violent — on Muslim Europeans and immigrants:

If we think of the Muhammad issue as a conflict between a majority and a minority, we leave hanging those Muslims who insist on the right to practice their faith differently from the majority, just as we would continually be needing to second-guess who would be entitled to offend and who would not. Moreover, we would be sowing doubt about the necessity of wording

principles concerning the rights of the individual across cultures, nations, religions, races, classes, majorities, and minorities. The idea of universal civil rights would be undermined.

The late Ronald Dworkin made a similar case at the height of the crisis. In "The Right to Ridicule," which appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in March 2006, he explained that freedom of speech is not a product of Western civilization that can be tailored to fit other cultures but rather "a condition of legitimate government." Laws and policies, he explained, "are not legitimate unless they have been adopted through a democratic process, and a process is not democratic if government has prevented anyone from expressing his convictions about what those laws and policies should be."

Ideally, Rose wants European countries to follow the American example of privileging freedom of speech in the First Amendment — especially at the dawn of the 21st century, as those European societies become increasingly multicultural. "The more diverse a society," he writes, "the greater the need for diversity of speech." For this reason he is also opposed to laws criminalizing Holocaust denial or voicing support for terrorism, as has been the case recently in France. On the whole, in fact, his vision of an open society is admirably inclusive. He does not appear to share the view of Europe's conservative pundits who see the fight against religious extremism as a clash of civilizations that pits a tolerant and liberal West against a backward and tribalist East. As he explains, "it took people from other parts of the world, where liberty cannot be taken for granted, to teach me to appreciate freedom of speech." He learned more about the foundations of freedom from the Soviet human rights movement than he did growing up in one of the most liberal countries in the world. One person who influenced him in particular was his father-in-law (Rose's wife is Russian), who was a devout Stalinist. As distasteful and objectionable as Rose thought his political opinions were, he nevertheless felt great affection for him.

Our relationship was a test of tolerance, and it taught me that pigeonholing people according to one identity — communist, Muslim, atheist, whatever — is simplistic. We all possess many identities. I was extremely fond of my father-in-law […] In the end, our mutual disapproval of each other's ideas no longer prevented us from seeing the individual behind them.

There is a similarly arresting moment earlier in *The Tyranny of Silence* when Rose comes face to face with Karim Sørensen, a Tunisian would-be-assassin arrested in 2008 for plotting to kill Kurt Westergaard. (Police found a pistol and two axes and a map of Westergaard's neighborhood in Sørensen's apartment.) Rose interviewed Sørensen at a local police station shortly after his arrest against the advice of security officials who no doubt feared an unpleasant scene or incident might ensue.

But Karim Sørensen, who reminds Rose of the French soccer player Zinedine Zidane, showed no aggression or fanaticism toward Rose. "He seemed smart: open and reflective […] It crossed my mind that he could have been one of my pupils when I had taught Danish to immigrants years ago — a model student whom I would have promoted as an example to others." He had come to Denmark from a corrupt and hierarchical Tunisia with the hopes of making a better future for himself and being able to support his mother. Eventually, however, a stint working as a bouncer at a club in Aarhus landed him in an environment of drugs, alcohol, and petty crime. He divorced his Danish wife and later served a prison sentence for assaulting a guest. Getting a job became

more difficult, and he was reduced to living off his new girlfriend. During a trip back home he found religion. On his return to Denmark he began attending a mosque whose spiritual leader was Sheikh Raed Hlayhel, a particularly orthodox imam who took part in the campaign against Denmark in 2006. Sørensen was gradually radicalized, moved to Copenhagen, and became involved with a radical Islamist group with ties to terrorist networks. Following the publication of the cartoons, he was finally embroiled in the 2008 plot to kill Kurt Westergaard. Rose asks him what he would say if the 72-year-old Westergaard had attended their interview. Sørensen replies:

I would tell him I'm sorry his life and mine have been ruined. Maybe I'd encourage him to read about the Prophet. A lot of people in the West have had a wrong picture of the Prophet through history […] I regret a little bit hanging out with people with extremist opinions. I don't regret it as a person, but it's the reason I'm where I am now. It was my way of finding out what's right and what's wrong.

There's something almost unaccountably moving about this scene, this meeting between two people who shed their ideological identities in the process and simply speak as one human being to another. As Rose comments, "Karim Sørensen did not seem like the kind of person who harbored especially dark thoughts or who was predisposed to killing old men. All he wanted was to get a grip on his life, to regain his crumbling self-confidence, and to amount to something." Radical Islam did indeed boost his self-confidence and make something of him, but it also destroyed him and damaged his self-identity. It's a measure of the humanity of Rose's book that he includes this brief chapter on a different kind of victim of radical Islam — a victim whose sad fate, suspended somewhere between that of other first- or second-generation immigrants and the bizarre delusions of the murderous extremists, it would be wise not to ignore.