



Funny's Funny: Humor Is An Essential Freedom of Speech

By [Flemming Rose](#)

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It's a Sunday morning in 2009, and I'm standing under the shower in a hotel room in Lyon. Rain drums against the window; at the end of a narrow street, I can just see one of the two rivers that flow through the city.

In an hour, I'm due at city hall to participate in a panel discussion organized by the French newspaper *Libération* on challenges to free speech in Europe. I've been doing a lot of that kind of thing in the past several years. Yesterday, I was in Paris. Earlier in the week, I was involved in a heated exchange at a conference in Berlin about Muslims and Islam in the European media.

As I began speaking, a member of the audience stood up, approached the panel, and in a voice trembling with fury demanded to know who had given me the right to tell Muslims like her about democracy. She then turned toward the organizers, angrily asked how they could even consider inviting someone like me, and then stormed out of the room.

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 in the spring of 2009, local media branded me the "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.

In the spring of 2006, I was invited by the Oxford Union to take part in a discussion on freedom of speech, democracy, and respect for religious sentiment. That body is accustomed to controversy. Nevertheless, my visit turned into what local media alleged was the biggest security operation the city had seen since Michael Jackson's visit in 2001.

When I was invited to the World Association of Newspapers' forum in Moscow a few years ago, Russian authorities politely yet firmly implied that they would like me to stay away. I didn't

fully comprehend their hints, so I went to Moscow oblivious. Since then, I have been unable to secure a visa, although I am married to a Russian and lived in Moscow under Soviet rule as a foreign correspondent for 12 years. During that time, though I was clearly anti-communist and openly socialized with dissidents, visas were never a problem.

I could go on citing similar incidents, but what would be the point? On this autumn morning, the picture seems clear. I have become a figure many love to hate. Some would like to see me dead. I have wracked my brain trying to figure out why. I am not by nature a provocative person. I do not seek conflict for its own sake, and it gives me no pleasure when people take offense at things I have said or done. Nevertheless, I have been branded by many as a careless troublemaker who pays no heed to the consequences of his actions.

How did that happen? To the world, I am known as an editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. In September 2005, I commissioned and published a number of cartoons about Islam, prompted by my perception of self-censorship by the European media. One of those cartoons, drawn by the artist Kurt Westergaard, depicted the Muslim prophet Muhammad with a bomb wrapped in his turban. Among the other cartoons we published was another that mocked the newspaper and even myself for commissioning them, but it was Westergaard's image that would change my life.

The debate touches on freedom of speech and of religion, tolerance and intolerance, immigration and integration, Islam and Europe, majorities and minorities and globalization, to name but a few.

The Cartoon Crisis, as it became known, spiraled into a violent international uproar, as Muslims around the world erupted in protest. Danish embassies were attacked, and more than 200 deaths were attributed to the protests. I came to symbolize one of the defining issues of our era: the tension between respect for cultural diversity and the protection of democratic freedoms. My book is an attempt to reconcile that public symbolism with my personal story.

How did the publication of a few cartoons prompt an upheaval so extreme that, five years on, I was still grappling with it? As with most monumental events, there seems to be no simple explanation. Some believe that my newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, carries the main responsibility for the uproar, while others point to Danish imams who traveled around the Middle East inflaming Muslim opinion.

Some believe Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen is the main villain because he did not criticize the cartoons and refused to discuss them with ambassadors from Muslim countries. Still others feel the Organization of the Islamic Conference played a decisive part in orchestrating a conflict to promote that body's rather specific take on human rights, involving an effort to criminalize criticism of Islam under the somewhat ambiguous label "Islamophobia."

Many say countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan took advantage of the cartoons to divert attention from domestic problems. Yet others view the clash as part of a broader struggle between Islam and the West, exploited by radical Islamists to spur followers toward a holy war.

Finally, there are those who blame the secular unbelief of most Danes for their failure to understand the religious sensitivities of Muslims.

Even though the drawings were conceived in a Danish and European context, the debate is global. It touches on issues fundamental to any kind of society: freedom of speech and of religion, tolerance and intolerance, immigration and integration, Islam and Europe, majorities and minorities and globalization, to name but a few.

What do you do when suddenly the entire world is on your back? When one misunderstanding leads to another? When what you have said and done has the world seething with anger and indignation? What do you say to people who ask how you can sleep at night when hundreds of people have died because of what you have done?

What do you say when you are accused of being a racist or a fascist, and of wanting to start the next world war?

In the past five years, I have spent most of my energy trying to address and to understand the criticism that has been leveled at my newspaper and at me. Physically and mentally, it has been an arduous journey: educational, but on occasion overwhelming.

I have engaged with people on all sides of the political spectrum, with friends and enemies, believers and nonbelievers of every stripe. Oddly enough, the dividing lines between us don't coincide with the kinds of political, religious, cultural, or geographic categories one might expect. I don't claim that most Muslims have been on my side, but some have supported publication of the cartoons, while some Christians and atheists have strongly condemned them.

I have compiled an enormous archive of comments and analyses on the Cartoon Crisis from all over the world. At first, I wanted to document that I was right and that others were wrong. But along the way, I found that I needed to look inward, to reflect on my own history and background. Why was this debate so important for me? Why was I from the outset, almost instinctively, able to identify the core issue?

Why did the abstract principle of freedom of speech speak to me more than it apparently did to other people?

I do have strong opinions when it comes to certain things. But I am not a person who takes an instant stand on just anything. I am a natural skeptic. I ponder at length and lose myself in layers of meaning and the many sides of an issue.

I don't see that trait as a flaw: it is the condition of modern man and indeed the core strength of secular democracies, which are founded on the idea that there is no monopoly on truth.

What differentiates open and closed societies is the right to tell and retell our own and other people's stories.

Doubt is the germ of curiosity and critical questioning, and its prerequisite is a strong sense of self, a courage that leaves room for debate. Of course, doubt is by no means unequivocally a good thing. Questioning everything may lead to the point where there seem to be no truths and everything appears equally right or wrong.

In a world of such relativity, there is no fundamental difference between the prisoner in a concentration camp and the regime that incarcerates him, between perpetrator and victim, between those who defend and those who suppress freedom.

That existential dimension of politics first became apparent to me when I traveled to the Soviet Union as a student in 1980. I had no strong preconceptions about the country; politics was peripheral to my youth. What occupied me most were the more esoteric challenges of philosophy, and I was eager to learn more about Russian culture. A long time passed before I began to draw conclusions.

I met my wife that first year and later spent a decade as a correspondent based in Moscow. Over the years, the gravity of life gradually dawned on me.

Growing up in Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s during a time of youthful rebellion, I was naturally imbued with the era's atmosphere of freedom and community. Now, it struck me that freedom could not be taken for granted. People paid a high price for expressing their views. Words meant a great deal—they involved consequences. People were so fearful that official censorship was almost an afterthought. There reigned a tyranny of silence.

All stories begin and end with individuals, their choices and decisions. When I interviewed the author Salman Rushdie in 2009, he articulated a problem with which I had struggled in the wake of the Cartoon Crisis.

I had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that others were telling my story and interpreting my motives without, I felt, knowing who I was.

When we spoke, 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. Any attempt to restrict that impulse isn't just censorship or a political violation of freedom of speech; it is an act of violence against human nature, an existential assault that turns people into something they are not.

What differentiates open and closed societies is the right to tell and retell our own and other people's stories.

In the open society, history moves forward through the exchange of new narratives. Think of slavery in the United States, National Socialism in Germany and communism in the Eastern Bloc, each overcome by challenges to the conventional way of telling the story.

In closed societies, the narrative is dictated by the state and the individual is reduced to a silent, passive object. Dissident voices are punished and censored.

In a democracy, no one can claim the exclusive right to tell certain stories. That means, to me, that Muslims have the right to tell jokes and critical stories about Jews, while nonbelievers may skewer Islam in any way they wish. Whites can laugh at blacks, and blacks at whites.

To assert that only minorities may tell jokes about themselves, or criticize other minorities, is both grossly discriminating and foolish. By such logic, only Nazis may criticize Nazis, since in present-day Europe they are a persecuted and marginalized minority.

Today, a majority of the world opposes female circumcision, forced marriages and ritual violence against women. Should we be unable to criticize cultures that still adhere to those practices because they are minorities?

My experiences have confirmed my basic belief that people have a lot more in common than whatever divides them.

According to some of Europe's militant multiculturalists, the answer is yes. But people in democracies should not be forced to live inside echo chambers in which the like-minded tend only to reinforce their own opinions. It is vital to transgress borders between societal groups through dialogue, and it is important to be exposed to the opinions and beliefs of others. People who talk to one another, exchange views, and tell conflicting stories will affect one another's way of thinking.

Rushdie told me that the conflict over the right to tell a certain story was at the center of his own freedom-of-speech controversy. He said:

The only answer you can give from my side of the table is that everyone has a right to tell their story in any way they wish. This goes back to the question of what sort of society we want. If you wish to live in an open society, it follows that people will talk about things in different ways, and some of them will cause offense and anger. The answer to that is matter-of-fact: OK, you don't like it, but there are lots of things I don't like either. That's the price for living in an open society. From the moment you begin to talk about limiting and controlling certain expressions, you step into a world where freedom no longer reigns, and from that moment on, you are only discussing what level of un-freedom you want to accept. You have already accepted the principle of not being free.

Rushdie's words came just at the right time for me. They opened my eyes and helped me define my own project.

We all are entitled to tell whatever story we wish about the Muhammad cartoons. Thus, the book I have written doesn't attempt to cover every aspect of what happened. I am fully aware that other versions exist that are no less true than my own; in some cases, they may be even more complete.

I am simply recounting the events as I experienced them and other stories that I deem to be relevant to that experience. My personal quest is to create coherence and meaning out of events

that have taken up a lot of room in my own life and in the lives of many others since September 2005.

So the book is also about my own values, about things that are significant to me—books I have read, countries I have visited. It tries to position individual experience within the wider perspective, to explore the relation between my own story and the Cartoon Crisis as a series of events played out on a global scene.

In the space between the big picture and the small lies the answer to my own conflict—the image I have of myself as a person who is not fond of conflict—against the wider, global view of me as a dangerous and irresponsible troublemaker.

So I also look back to the historical forces that have shaped my attitudes, to European history and its sweeping debates on issues such as faith and doubt, knowledge and ignorance, which have shaped the very notion of tolerance.

My experiences have confirmed my basic belief that people have a lot more in common than whatever divides them. Apparent differences of culture, religion and history are significant factors, but they are by no means constant; they change, however slowly.

Think of countries such as Spain, Greece, Portugal, South Korea, Chile and South Africa: until only a few decades ago, brutal authoritarian and oppressive regimes; now open, constitutional societies. Such examples show that we should be hesitant about writing off any culture as innately incompatible with liberty and democracy.

“What is more damaging to Islam? These cartoons or images of a hostage-taker cutting the throat of his victim in front of a camera?”

Current discussion concerning Islam and Muslims reminds me of the debate about communism and the Soviet Russians during the Cold War. At the time, it was often said that whereas we in the West emphasized freedom and the rights of the citizen, in Eastern Europe, more weight was attached to social rights—the right to work, to housing and to free health care and education.

That distinction was put forth as intrinsically cultural; thus, criticism of the Soviet Bloc for civil rights violations was an expression of Western imperialism. I watched a parallel sentiment emerge in the wake of the Cartoon Crisis: a willingness to compromise what we in the West consider fundamental rights because of supposedly intractable “cultural differences.”

My impression was that my friends and acquaintances in Soviet Russia wanted the kind of constitutional freedom and equality encompassed in the notion of universal human rights. But many scholars in the West accepted the premise that Russians were fundamentally different from people in the West; therefore, on the issue of the way it treated its citizens, the Soviet regime could not be judged by Western standards.

That notion explains why they were completely unable to foresee the collapse of the regime after popular revolt: to justify their dubious premise, those scholars were compelled to marginalize the

Soviet human rights movement and other dissident groups. They claimed that such groups were just manipulated by the West as part of a global political maneuver.

Exactly the same is claimed now about human rights activists and critics of Islam in the Muslim world. It's true that real incompatibilities and disparities of culture between the Islamic world and Europe played out during the conflict.

The truth, however, is that the jury is out as long as the population is prevented from speaking freely and without fear of reprisal. Freethinking forces exist in the Islamic world, insisting on free religious exercise and freedom of speech. That was confirmed during the uprisings throughout the Arab world in 2011.

While the Cartoon Crisis raged, a number of newspaper and magazine editors were arrested, and their offices were closed down because they had printed the cartoons—because, although they may have found them distasteful, they believed their readers should have the chance to make up their own minds about the now-notorious drawings.

One of those people, Jihad Momani, editor-in-chief of the Jordanian weekly *Shihan*, wrote the following with reference to a terrorist attack on three hotels in Amman in November 2005: “Muslims of the world, be sensible. . . What is more damaging to Islam? These cartoons, images of a hostage-taker cutting the throat of his victim in front of a camera, or a suicide bomber blowing himself up at a wedding in Amman?”

I note, too, that large parts of the Iranian population rejected an Islamic take on “constitutional rights” put forward in elections in 2009, and many Iranians in the West were actively supportive of *Jyllands-Posten* during the Cartoon Crisis. They knew from experience what was at stake if censorship of religious satire and criticism should be accepted.

The Cartoon Crisis provides insight into the kind of world that lies ahead in the 21st century. It was a crisis about how to coexist in a world in which old boundaries have crumbled. Today, societies everywhere are becoming more multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious. And for the first time in history, a majority of the world's population now inhabits urban areas.

Increasingly, we live side by side with people who are different from ourselves. The risk of stepping on someone's toes, of saying or doing something that exceeds someone's bounds, is steadily increasing. Moreover, advances in communications technologies have meant that events even in the remotest regions of the world are no longer perceived as being distant. All notion of context disappears. Everything that appears on the Internet appears everywhere. For humor and satire in particular, the loss of context opens the door to myriad possible misunderstandings and sources of offense.

Thus, in 2006, the Iranian authorities demanded an apology for a satirical drawing in the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* showing four Iranian soccer players strapped up with bombs and being watched by German soldiers. The accompanying text read, “The German army should definitely be deployed during the World Cup.”

The joke was aimed at German politicians who wanted armed forces to patrol the tournament that was taking place in Germany. But the Iranian religious leadership saw things differently. Molotov cocktails were thrown at the German embassy in Tehran, while the artist responsible for the work was forced into hiding because of death threats.

Another German paper once printed a cartoon poking fun at the private parts of the heir to the Japanese throne—unthinkable in Japan, where the royal family is almost religiously revered.

In a democracy, there is no “right not to be offended.”

Comedians are often keenly aware of the fine line between dangerous and harmless provocation. During a live television show in 2006, Norwegian comedian Otto Jespersen set fire to the Old Testament in the town of Ålesund, a strong bastion of Christian sentiment. Later, when asked to repeat the stunt with a copy of the Koran, Jespersen declined, joking that he would prefer to live longer than another week.

It seemed that Christianity was being treated preferentially. Or was it Islam? In any case, the Norwegian prime minister leveled no criticism of the public burning of Christianity’s holy book—which is fine by me, but why then did he find it so necessary to condemn a small Norwegian newspaper when it reprinted the Muhammad cartoons?

I believe I know the answer to that. But back in September 2005, I certainly did not, which is one of the reasons why *Jyllands-Posten* and I decided to draw attention to the issue of self-censorship in the public debate on Islam in the first place.

If we believe in equality, it seems there are two available responses to threats against freedom of speech. One option is, basically, “If you accept my taboos, I’ll accept yours.” If one group wants protection against insult, then all groups should be so protected.

If denying the Holocaust or the crimes of communism is against the law, then publishing cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet should also be forbidden. But that option can quickly spiral out of control: before we know it, hardly anything may be said.

The second option is to say that in a democracy, there is no “right not to be offended.” Since we are all different, the challenge is then to formulate minimum constraints on freedom of speech that will allow us to coexist in peace. A society comprising many different cultures should have greater freedom of expression than a society that is significantly more homogenous.

That premise seems obvious to me, yet the opposite conviction is widely held, and that is where the tyranny of silence lurks. At present, the tendency in Europe is to deal with increasing diversity by constraining freedom of speech, whereas the United States maintains a long tradition of leading off in the other direction.

Following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, many European countries have outlawed Holocaust denial, for example, and it appears that the United States will increasingly stand alone with its tradition of upholding near-absolute freedom of expression on that issue.

My personal view is that the Americans are right. Freedom and tolerance are, to me, two sides of the same coin, and both are under pressure. As noted earlier, the world is undergoing rapid change. Taking offense has never been easier, or indeed more popular: many have developed sensitivity so exquisite that it has become excessive.

It almost tempts one to ask Europe's welfare states to spend some money, not on "sensitivity training"—learning what not to say—but on insensitivity training: learning how to tolerate. For if freedom and tolerance are to have a chance of surviving in the new world, we all need to develop thicker skin.

Certain regimes, including Russia, China, some former Soviet republics and numerous Islamic governments, agitate in the United Nations and other international forums for laws banning offensive speech. Perversely, although such laws are often put forward in the name of minorities, in practice, they are used to silence critics and persecute minorities.

Unfortunately, such petitions have traction in the international community. Their proponents are prepared to sacrifice diversity of expression in the name of respecting diversity of culture, a contradiction they clearly fail to perceive.

They feel they will further social harmony by maintaining a delicate balance between tolerance and freedom of speech—as though the two were opposites.

But tolerance and freedom of speech reinforce each other. Free speech makes sense only in a society that exercises great tolerance of those with whom it disagrees. Historically, tolerance and freedom of speech are each other's prerequisites rather than opposites. In a liberal democracy, the two must be tightly intertwined.

The Salman Rushdie affair was the first collision in a global conflict that seems likely to shape international relations in the 21st century.

My book comprises nine additional chapters. Three of them consist largely of interviews with individuals who in one way or another have been close to the Cartoon Crisis, and who here shed light on some of its most significant aspects. The first is a Spanish woman whose husband was killed in the Madrid terrorist attack in March 2004, and who later appeared at the trial of the perpetrators wearing a T-shirt showing Kurt Westergaard's cartoon of Muhammad with a bomb in his turban.

Next, I speak with Westergaard himself about his upbringing, his background, and his work, in the light of Denmark's history of free speech and censorship. I include an interview that took place in a detention center south of Copenhagen with Karim Sørensen, a young Tunisian who in February 2008 was apprehended by Danish police on suspicion of planning to assassinate Kurt Westergaard. As Muslims, Karim Sørensen and two of his associates felt offended by Westergaard's depiction of the Prophet.

I interweave my own version of the Cartoon Crisis and events before and after publication of the drawings in September 2005 with the story of some of the constraints that have been imposed on

freedom of speech. I take a look at efforts today to reestablish so-called violation codes: blasphemy legislation, laws against the incitement of hatred and discrimination and laws criminalizing the denial or trivialization of genocide or specific historic events.

I look at my encounters with Russian dissidents in the Soviet Union. In my view, the history of Russian dissidence is highly relevant to the Cartoon Crisis—even though the Soviet Union no longer exists, and the Cold War long ago ended—because I feel it mirrors the emergence of new dissident communities within Islam. Included are interviews I have conducted with Ayaan Hirsi Ali in New York, with Afshin Ellian in Leiden and with Maryam Namazie in Cologne and London.

What those critics say is by no means new: in many ways, there is nothing to add to the discourse on liberty and human rights. Nevertheless, their stories are of immense importance for Europe and the West in general, demonstrating that the desire for freedom is by no means exclusive to the West, and that individuals in other cultures run enormous risks to stand up for “Western” values of freedom and tolerance.

In the book’s final chapter, I examine the global struggle for universal human rights. I tell the story of the heretic Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553, triggering the first great debate in Europe on the issue of religious tolerance. It is a debate that I had thought was won, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the communist empire. I failed to see that Ayatollah Khomeini’s call to all the world’s Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie because of something he wrote in a novel was another major historical turning point.

Today, it seems clear that the Rushdie affair was the first collision in a global conflict that seems likely to shape international relations in the 21st century. Nowhere are freedom and tolerance as deeply ingrained as in the West. That I endeavor to illustrate in the final chapter of the book with stories from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Russia and India, which outline how individuals and groups of individuals suffer violations of their right to free speech and free thought.

Well-meaning people in the West claim that democracies can and should sacrifice a little free speech in the name of social harmony: those stories may lead them to reconsider. Measures ostensibly designed to protect religious symbols, doctrines, and rituals in order to prevent discrimination can lead to horrible persecution of the right to speak freely.

That is one of the main reasons I continue to defend our right to publish the Muhammad cartoons. If I relinquish that right, I also indirectly accept the right of authoritarian regimes and totalitarian movements to limit free speech on grounds of violation of religion and religious sentiments.

I find that unacceptable.

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