



Four Questions for...Flemming Rose

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In 2005 the former editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* oversaw the publication of cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammed. We spoke to Rose about that incident, which led to death threats for the paper's staffers and riots in the Middle East, as well as terrorism, and free speech.

With the murder of staffers at *Charlie Hebdo* earlier this month, the issue of free speech is topping headlines more than it has in recent memory. Do you think this is a topic that we, as a society at large and in the press, don't address as much as we should?

The U.S. has for a long time been a multicultural, multireligious and multiethnic society, a society of immigrants that was founded by Christian minorities who fled religious persecution in Europe. That may be the reasonable explanation for not publishing cartoons targeting Islam as a religious doctrine, in whose name violence is being committed from Peshawar to Paris. But it is happening both in countries where Muslims are an absolute majority and in countries where Muslims constitute a minority. So this argument doesn't cover situations where members belonging to a majority commit violence in the name of their belief.

The U.S. media have obviously decided to censor themselves when it comes to religion and they insist that it isn't a free speech issue. It's just decent behavior. I am not convinced. It's fine with me when media do not want to offend, but then they should be consistent in applying that principle. I think the motive behind editorial decisions not to publish Mohammad cartoons is fear, and it would make the public debate about free speech a lot easier if editors were more honest about their motives.

In November your book, *The Tyranny of Silence*, was published in the States; in it, you tackle the intimidation some journalists face today that inhibits their ability to do their job, and bring to light certain stories. What do you think most often gets lost in discussions about free speech today?

I think that one of the big challenges to free speech is that we live in an increasingly globalized world in which almost every society and country is getting more multicultural, multireligious and multiethnic. How do we secure a free and open exchange of ideas across groups in a world of

growing diversity? The more different we become the easier it will be to be offended by what somebody belonging to another group says. Many politicians do believe that the more diverse a society gets in terms of culture, ethnicity and religion the less diversity we need when it comes of ways to express ourselves. In my book I argue for the opposite point of view: If we welcome diversity of culture we should also welcome more diversity when it comes to speech. That won't be easy, and it will take a broader understanding of the fact that in a democracy nobody has a special right not to be offended. Taking offense is the price we pay for living in a liberal democracy with free speech.

While violence towards journalists, artists and dissidents is one of the most glaring threats to free speech, political correctness is often a more insidious one? Do you agree? (and, either way, can you elaborate?)

Yes I do, and quite often it's more difficult to argue against political correctness. Violence is a language with no ambiguity. Everybody gets the message. Political correctness exercises a social pressure: You should not say this because it may be offensive to somebody, or if you want to be nice and morally responsible and respectful person you shouldn't say this or that. That's a pretty intimidating argument because the majority of us would like to be nice and responsible to our fellow human-beings.

Some have said that, while what happened to the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* is a tragedy, to lionize those who died, for publishing things that are clearly offensive to so many people, is to miss the point. What's your take on this sentiment?

I strongly disagree. Cartoons targeting a religious doctrine, is the most civilized and benign response to violence, intimidation and other kinds of repression in the name of religion I can think of. A cartoon doesn't kill, it's a way of correcting stupid behavior of one kind or the other. Let me quote the former editor of *Charlie Hebdo* when confronted with the same question said: "What kind of civilization would we be if we couldn't make fun of, ridicule, and laugh at those who blow up trains and planes and mass murder innocents?" Indeed.