



C I C E R O  
M A G A Z I N E

## Free Speech, Self-Censorship, and the Cartoon that Shook the World

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When Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in 2005, its editor, Flemming Rose, and his country, Denmark, found themselves at the center of a global battle about the freedom of speech. The “Cartoon Crisis” spiraled into a violent international uproar as Muslims around the world protested. Danish embassies were attacked and more than 200 deaths were attributed to the protests.

**These cartoons ignited a wave of violent protests across the world, something no one could have anticipated. Suddenly you were being labelled an anti-Islamist and receiving death threats. Danish embassies were attacked and people were killed in resulting protests. What was the original purpose of the cartoons? What were you attempting to say in publishing them?**

The cartoons didn’t come out of the blue. They were published for a reason. It began with a story about a children’s book about the life of the prophet Mohammed. The story ran on Denmark’s wire service in the middle of September 2005. The author said in the interview that he had difficulties finding an illustrator to depict Mohammed for fear of rebuke. This story caused a big debate in Denmark about self-censorship, and at my newspaper we had a discussion about follow-up stories. A reporter suggested that we invite artists to depict Mohammed and find out if self-censorship is a problem or not. Two weeks before I had been in touch with the chairman of Denmark’s Cartoonist Association, so I asked him if his members would contribute to the project.

At that time we were still not sure if the children’s writer spoke the truth about his troubles finding an illustrator, though it later was confirmed by his publisher. While we were having a debate inside the paper about publishing or not, two museums removed pieces of art thought to be offensive to Muslims without asking the artists, a publisher in Finland deleted a sentence considered offensive from a book by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and several translators of the book insisted on anonymity due to fear. A stand-up comedian in Denmark acknowledged that he had no concerns mocking the Bible in front of a camera, but was afraid of doing the same with the Koran. And after a meeting in Copenhagen between Denmark’s prime minister and a group of imams, two of the imams called on the prime minister to pass laws that should protect Islam

against criticism and use his influence to get a more positive coverage of Islam in the media, i.e. a call for censorship.

All this happened within one or two weeks in the second half of September 2005 and convinced me and the other editors that this was a legitimate story that we had to publish. It was a classic journalistic exercise: You hear about a problem and try to find out if it's true or not. Was there self-censorship among artists or not? We decided to follow a classic principle: Don't tell, show. To me the talk about self-censorship had another aspect as well. I had lived in the Soviet Union and worked with dissidents. I had seen what self-censorship can do to a society and how easy it is to silence people.

**Some have compared the cartoons to racial propaganda during the WWII-era, especially against Jews by the Nazis. Others add that it is a textbook example of a Western, Orientalist perspective of the East and an exhibit of a systematic program to cast Middle Eastern society as dangerous. Why are these people wrong?**

They are wrong for several reasons. The cartoons are not targeting a group as critics claim, but a religious doctrine. One of them even targets me and my newspaper. Other cartoons are targeting the children's writer, cartoonists themselves, and a Danish anti-immigration politician. Even [Kurt] Westergaard's cartoon of the prophet with a bomb in his turban is in no way stereotyping or demonizing Muslims.

Images are by their nature open for different kinds of interpretation and that is what makes them explosive in mass communication. Interpretations differ across time and culture and from individual to individual. Westergaard's drawing depicts Muhammad as representative of Islam, in the same way as images of Jesus refer to Christianity, as pictures of Karl Marx refer to Marxism, and as Uncle Sam to the United States. Taking the further step to claim that the image of Muhammad, not only refers to Islam but to all Muslims is far from valid.

In contrast to the anti-Semitic cartoons of prewar -Germany, Westergaard's drawing includes no generalizing feature that may be taken to be true of an entire community. Portraying Marx with blood on his hands, Christ holding a glass of beer, or the Christian God armed with a bomb does not mean you think that all Marxists are murderers or that all Christians are drunkards or terrorists. Westergaard's stylized bomb may refer to the specific small groups who do commit acts of violence in the name of their religion, just as the drawing of Christ armed with a bomb might refer to a small group of Christians. Nothing in the cartoon can be claimed to stereotype Muslims.

I disagree that the cartoons provide a text-book example of a Western, Orientalist perspective. The cartoons have as little to do with the Middle East as cartoons of Jesus do. Mohammed and Jesus were both from the Middle East. The context for the publication of the cartoons was Islam in Denmark and Europe, not the Middle East.

**Clearly there are examples of single events or statements igniting the kind of unrest or violence experienced during the so-called "Cartoon Crisis." Parts of the American civil rights movement and the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King beating and recent**

**events surrounding the shooting of Trayvon Martin and in Ferguson, Missouri are examples. However, each of these events was caused by perceived widespread social injustice by the state and triggered by one event—the straw that broke the camel’s back. Supporters or apologists for the reaction to the cartoon have argued that it was also a straw that broke the camel’s back—a pent-up reaction to prejudicial, racist conduct toward Islam and social injustice in the West. In rare circumstances, mass violence is sometimes the only way to force change in states and society. Was the violent reaction to the cartoon, about more than the cartoon itself, such a rare circumstance or was it an overreaction not to be tolerated by societies that believe in freedom of speech?**

The unrest in the US you mention was preceded by violence. Rodney King was subject to police violence and Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were killed. Justified or not, people reacted to what they perceived as excessive use of violence. A cartoon published in a newspaper can in no way be compared. Making a cartoon seems to be a quite civilized way to react to intimidation and violence, especially a cartoon that does not call for violence but simply depicts a stated fact, namely that some Muslims do commit violence in the name of religion.

One of the key points in my book is that we need to reestablish the distinction between words and deeds, cartoons and actions that has been eroded. That’s very important in a democracy that is characterized by its refusal to criminalize words as if they were deeds. That’s what dictatorships do, not democracies. The riots you refer to took place in the same country as events that triggered the riots. That was not the case with the cartoon crisis. The violence and riots erupted in other parts of the world several thousand kilometers away and the context was lost in translation. One of the Danish imams that played a role inciting public opinion against the newspaper and Denmark acknowledged that in their meetings with counterparts in the Middle East they misrepresented Muslims’ situation in Denmark. The fact of the matter is that Muslims in Denmark enjoy more rights than in almost any Islamic country: freedom of speech, religion, movement, assembly and so on, and they enjoy generous social benefits. In fact, the imam who was the key instigator chose to settle in Denmark because he had a sick child whose treatment was paid for by Denmark. Ironically, the violence and riots took place in countries where citizens do not enjoy freedom of speech, while there was no violence and riots in countries with extensive freedom of expression.

**One simplified view of the reaction to the cartoon is that some Muslims objected to the depiction of their prophet and religion as a violent terrorist with violence—a rather self-defeating, hypocritical argument. Other religious figures—Jesus and the Dalai Lama for example—are constantly skewered in satire. Is it fair—or even wise—for the West and its media to walk on eggshells when it comes to criticism of Islam or the Muslim community, especially when the reason for stifling criticism is the threat of violence, such as seen in the riots? Should Islam receive a special exemption from criticism? Why can we draw cartoons critical of Jesus and the Catholic Church or of Jews and Israel for example, but we cannot do so with Muhammad and Muslims without fear of being labelled racist by both Western and Eastern critics?**

It’s neither fair nor wise. On many fronts history has taught us that if you give in to intimidation and threats you will not get less but more intimidation, because by doing so you tell those who

intimidate that it works, and why then give it up? The cartoons of Mohammad in no way transcended the established norms for satire when dealing with religion. Quite the opposite, if you compare them to cartoons of Jesus in the Danish and European press.

I would argue, that the cartoons worked as an integration project by conveying an important message: We don't expect you to tolerate more or less than other religious groups in our society but exactly the same, and that speaks to the fact that we perceive you as full-fledged members of our society, not as guests or outsiders, and that is a recognition of you as equal citizens. It's difficult for me to see how this can be labeled as racism or discrimination.

**Criticism and freedom of speech are important tools in democratic societies. However, there clearly is a danger when legitimate criticism gives way to blind prejudice. It doesn't have to be religiously or ethnically based either. The state of the American political divide between "liberals" and "conservatives" means the two are always prepared to reject the best and accept the worst about one another. One of the tools used by both sides in these vitriolic debates is to accentuate or emphasize the plight or role of a victim or even create a victim. For example, in debates about equality, liberals focus on women as victims while conservatives often portray employers or churches as the victim of government overreach. In the context of the cartoon crisis, many focused on the plight of Muslims as victims of a racist act, diverting attention from discussing their inexcusable violent reaction. Does this sort of laser-focus on the victim perhaps come at the expense of evaluating the issue? Is it harmful for free speech and legitimate debate?**

Blind prejudice or cognitive bias is a problem in any society. This is a very serious and fundamental problem in today's world. The grievance culture is advancing around the world, not only in the West. In my book I provide examples from India and Russia. The grievance card is being played by all kinds of groups in order to protect them against criticism. I think this trend is being reinforced by migration. More and more people seem convinced they have a constitutional right not to be offended, and if somebody offends their sensibilities they are entitled to punish offenders. Unfortunately, this conviction gets support from lawmakers and it is being exploited by politicians to silence critics.

In a democracy, citizens enjoy many rights. The right, though, that citizens in a democracy should not have is freedom from offense. That is the price we have to pay for enjoying the fruits of living in a democracy. In order to achieve that goal, instead of sending people to sensitivity training when they say something offensive, maybe we should consider sending everybody to insensitivity training, because in an increasingly multicultural world we need thicker skins in order to live together in peace and uphold democratic values.