100 YEARS
NEW REPUBLIC

The Man Behind the Most Infamous Cartoon of All Time

Danish Editor Flemming Rose defends his crusade against political correctness

By Elizabeth Winkler
December 9, 2014

Flemming Rose has been called a Nazi, a Muslim-hater, and a Danish Satan. He has been simultaneously targeted with death threats and blamed for the deaths of 200 or more innocent people around the world. Since September 2005, when he commissioned now-infamous cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed for the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, Rose has been a focal point for the tension between respect for cultural diversity and the protection of democratic freedoms.

This image of Rose as provocateur extraordinaire is difficult to reconcile with the man himself: Soft-spoken and reflective, he gives the impression of being still a little surprised to have caused such a stir. “I am not by nature a provocative person,” he explained to me when I met with him in Washington, D.C. “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.” It’s baffling to him that Westerners couldn’t see his decision to publish the cartoons as an act in defense of the values on which liberal democracies were founded.

Rose commissioned the cartoons, including Kurt Westergaard’s incendiary image of Mohammed with a bomb in his turban, in order to highlight growing problems of self-censorship in Europe. In London, the Tate Gallery withdrew an installation that featured the Bible, Talmud, and Koran torn to pieces. Museum administrators were wary of offending Muslims, especially in light of the July 2005 bombings. In Denmark, a children’s writer couldn’t find an illustrator for a book about the life of Mohammed; the person who finally agreed to the drawings did so on the condition of anonymity. Meanwhile, the Dutch minister of justice seized on the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh to argue for the necessity of hate speech laws. If the laws had been in place, he insisted, Van Gogh wouldn’t have been murdered—because his film, which critiqued the treatment of women in Islam, would never have seen the light of day in the first place.

Criticizing Islam didn’t constitute a legal offense, but the social pressure to tread softly was immense. The cartoon was a way to insist on freedom of speech and to show the extent to which it was threatened in some of the world’s leading democracies. “Should it not be considered a mark of civilization that in the face of barbaric violence, we respond only with a cartoonist’s pencil?” Rose asks. Still, Muslims around the world erupted in protest; Danish embassies were attacked; a Somali Muslim broke into cartoonist Westergaard’s home wielding an axe and a knife; the newspaper’s offices were evacuated because of bomb scares; and Danmarks Radio, Denmark’s leading public-service media, asked Rose how many bombs had to go off before he apologized.

Rose has spent the years since then speaking at universities and discussion panels, defending his decision, and looking inward. “I found I needed to reflect on my own history and background,” he said. “Why was this debate so important to me?” Rose’s new book, *The Tyranny of Silence: How One Cartoon Ignited a Global Debate on the Future of Free Speech*, is part of his “personal quest” to make sense of the madness that has engulfed the last decade of his life.

The book tacks between the personal and the historical, between Rose’s own intellectual evolution—especially the influence of his years as a correspondent in Soviet Russia—and the forces of modern European history. He sees the democratic state in crisis, unable to contain the internal disparities of a multicultural society. Instead of increasing the diversity of expression, diversity of culture is constraining speech. Since 2005, Rose believes, self-censorship has only gotten worse. Last August, for example, a Swedish artist was convicted of “inciting hatred” and sentenced to six months in prison for exhibiting “racist” works in a private gallery. Rose feels the specter of Orwellian thoughtcrime, but in Europe, he maintains, “Freedom is not likely to be liquidated suddenly… Rather, it will occur gradually and without fuss.”

Rose attributes the rising tide of political correctness to people’s seemingly benign desire to live in a harmonious society. Rose is sympathetic to the idea that ethnic groups, especially minorities, want to protect themselves from criticism—but criticism is part and parcel of living in a democratic society. Without it, he argues, we risk regressing to a pre-Enlightenment mindset: “Before the Enlightenment, the Church perceived verbal attacks on doctrine as physical attacks on the Church. The achievement of the Enlightenment was to separate words and actions. And to me, that is a very important distinction between a civilized and an uncivilized country.”

The Holocaust, especially, haunts European debates about the criticism of religious and ethnic minorities. In the satiric cartoons of Islam, advocates of censorship see the anti-Semitic propaganda of Nazi Germany. Rose has confronted this argument time and again: hateful images and hateful speech lead to hateful deeds. But, he insists, this is a flawed reading of history. In fact, Weimar Germany had hate speech laws protecting the Jews. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, was taken to court several times because of anti-Semitic remarks, and Julius Streicher, editor of the Nazi publication *Der Stürmer*, was imprisoned twice.

These laws weren’t terribly effective—in part because they made minor heroes of Goebbels and Streicher. Every time Streicher’s magazine was taken to court (36 times in about a decade), he garnered media attention. Crowds cheered him; a young Hitler even waited for him outside jail. But the laws also failed because the verbal assaults on Jews were accompanied by physical assaults. In the first four years of the Weimar Republic, Rose observes, there were 400 political murders; that is, a political murder almost every third or fourth day by the radical right and the radical left. And while hate speech cases were prosecuted, the vast majority of assaults on Jews weren’t. The atmosphere was one of tremendous intimidation—different in degree though not in kind, Rose seems to imply, from the kind of intimidation at work in Western societies today. “The story of the Weimar Republic,” he argues, “is in fact a story about a very weak state power that was not able to protect the rights of its citizens.”

The solution, as Rose sees it, is to permit verbal and visual critiques of any and all groups while aggressively prosecuting physical violence. He cites the case of Aryeh Neier, an American Holocaust survivor who, in 1977, defended the right of Nazis to march through Skokie, Illinois, a town heavily populated by Jews who had fled Hitler. The case is in part a matter of principle: freedom of speech must be defended as a democratic right even when we don't like what is being said. But, Rose says, it also carries an interesting strategic lesson: because the Nazis were allowed to assemble, they didn't get the kind of attention they wanted. The movement dissipated.

But Rose's most intriguing argument for freedom of expression is the idea that censorship isn't just a political crime, a violation of fundamental civil rights, but also a crime against human nature. It reduces people to passive objects; it denies the innate human instinct to language, expression, and narrative. There is an existential, not merely political, quality to Rose's argument here, and this is perhaps what has sustained his nearly decade-long defense of a few cartoons.

And if censorship is a violation of human nature, it begs the question: Is the push to be culturally "sensitive" forging a different kind of political subject in the West? What are we becoming? We'll end, Rose responds, "in the title of my book, in a tyranny of silence. That's what I fear."