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New ‘Tyranny of Silence’ book: Danish ‘Cartoon Crisis’ editor weighs what he’d change — and what he would not

By [Michael Cavanaugh](#)
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EDITOR’S NOTE: *One of the more ignorant things I occasionally hear people say in my line of work is that a certain artwork is “just a cartoon.” If they had any understanding of the hot thunderclap power of a single image upon the brain’s hard-wiring, they would instead say warily, “Oh-my, it’s a CARTOON.” This interview reminds of the potential potency, for good or ill, for right or wrong, of a distilled still image.*

– M.C.

AMID THE MURDER threats and security alerts and thrown axes, Flemming Rose is not, he says, confrontational by nature.

Rose is best known as the Danish newspaper editor who — in reaction to what he saw as increasing self-censorship by visual and verbal artists — nearly a decade ago commissioned 12 cartoonists to express their thoughts about Islam and freedom of expression. Rose, then the culture editor of Jyllands-Posten, saw this not as a provocative stunt, he says, but rather as an act of journalism.

His 2005 commission of these works — including the most socially incendiary: Kurt Westergaard’s depiction of a Muslim wearing a bomb-like turban — would ignite the “Cartoon Crisis,” as Rose terms it, capitalized. These cartoons would lie near the cultural center of a maelstrom of international events within several years, including protests and attacks in such hot spots as Libya and Nigeria, and upon Danish embassies, and more than 100 deaths. Most directly, Rose’s life was constantly threatened and Westergaard — who spent much time in hideaway locations — was attacked in his home by a blade-wielding man.

In 2006, just months after the commission, Rose wrote a piece for The Post headlined, [“Why I Published Those Cartoons,”](#) in which he said: “Our goal was simply to push back self-imposed limits on expression that seemed to be closing in tighter.” His intent was not to “demonize or stereotype Muslims,” he wrote, but rather to include and integrate them into the larger “Danish tradition of satire because [they] are part of our society, not strangers.”

Now, with the clarity of hindsight and nine years’ remove, Rose is sharing his insights and reflections in a book (released today in the United States) titled, [“The Tyranny of Silence: How](#)

[One Cartoon Ignited a Global Debate on the Future of Free Speech.](#)” The book was published here by the Cato Institute in Northwest Washington, where Rose spoke yesterday before an afternoon public appearance at the Newseum (where, the editor says, he drew “kind of an open audience...of people with their own agendas”).

Rose had actually been trying to sell this book in the American market for years, as far back in 2007. “My impression was that they hesitated because they might have been a little afraid of what would have happened,” Rose tells The Post’s Comic Riffs. “There’s still fear.”

Although Rose commissioned the Danish cartoons in response to incidents of “self-censorship,” they notably do not appear in his international book, which is roughly half the length of the original domestic book he published four years ago.

“I’m fine with it,” Rose says of excluding the cartoons. “From the very beginning, I distanced myself from that part of the process. ... I would like it to have the cartoons, but I will not insist. I will leave it to negotiations with different publishers in different countries.”

That is partly because Rose’s motivation, he says, is simply to get his story out — his version to counter the narrative that arose. “It was Westergaard’s image that would change my life,” Rose writes,” as the editor became a target of hate and a figure of Islamic intolerance, set against “the tension between respect for cultural diversity and the protection of democratic freedoms.” And so this book, he writes, is “an attempt to reconcile that public symbolism with my personal story.”

“I felt I was misunderstood in a lot of quarters,” Rose tells Comic Riffs. “I’ve been besieged and painted as an Islamaphobe — that I have Muslims for breakfast. I’m not that hostile and confrontational by nature. That’s why the book is not only about this specific case. It also deals with Christianity in the time of wars over religion ... and similar international threats.

“There are Orthodox Christians in Russia who are trying to silence opponents that they see as [being] against their faith,” continues Rose, who was a Moscow-based correspondent for many years, and whose wife, Natalia, is Russian. “It’s a book about free speech in a globalized world. The cartooning crisis is just a starting point. It’s far wider in scope, in its ideas and religions and history.”

Rose isn’t calling for cartoonists to publish “images of the prophet Muhammad,” he says. But he does urge that people be truthful that self-censorship is occurring.

“I understand that people feel intimidated,” Rose tells us. “I think we should be honest about it. We should not [apologize] it away to be polite. We mock all religions, but we give special treatment to one religion right now. I’m just calling for honesty so we know what we’re talking about.”

Rose draws a comparison to how other religions are depicted in satire. “Look at the cartoons dealing with Christianity,” he tells The Post. ” We do not hesitate to be offensive. ... Basically

my approach is this: If you give in to intimidation, you will not get less intimidation, you will get more intimidation.”

“Tyranny of Silence” is no apologia, but the author does acknowledge that had he to do it over again, he would modify his approach.

“I have changed my stance. I thought nine years ago that mine was a big influential newspaper in Denmark,” says Rose, who is now the foreign editor at Jyllands-Posten. “I thought we could change the situation and win this battle. Now I understand you need growth and support in society in order to fight intimidation. You need thousands and thousands [of artists] to do the same thing in order to counter that fear.”

That was what Seattle artist Molly Norris was attempting when her illustration launched “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” in response to “South Park” episodes that edited depictions of Muhammad, Rose says.

“I know that from my own life in the Soviet Union: If you want to dilute the fear and the threat, you need more people to challenge it. They [opponents] cannot come after millions.”

Rose returns to history to illuminate his point. “I think that was what happened ... during the Enlightenment: People took on those taboos,” Rose tells us. “It was uncomfortable and not always pleasant. Christians had to accept that this is the price you have for living in a democracy. People from time to time will say something that is offensive to your religion. It’s a painful process, but I don’t think you solve anything by shutting it off.”

Although he weighs some editorial decisions heavily, Rose does not apologize for, or second-guess, publishing Westergaard’s cartoon. “He’s basically depicting a reality — he’s saying through the cartoon that SOME Muslims are committing violence in the name of Islam,” the editor says. “There is no demonizing of Muhammad in that cartoon. There is no relationship between his face and the bomb on his head, and no stereotyping of Islamic features. It’s not like the anti-Semitic cartoons we talk about and see.”

Rose allows that he wished he would have handled himself differently. “On some individual matters, probably — I would change how I handled this in the media,” Rose tells The Post. “I gave too many interviews. I got taken away by all the attention I got. I would have been more disciplined in terms of media appearances. ... But that’s minor details.

“The key things — no, I would not change. ... I always challenge my own opinions — are you sure? I doubt myself,” Rose continues. “But in this case and the decision we made and the sequence of events, it makes sense to me.

“I look at my own values in terms of equality and right and wrong. I don’t see I did something that did not fit my value system. I do not regret it.”