

Why I Published Those Cartoons

By Flemming Rose
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Childish. Irresponsible. Hate speech. A provocation just for the sake of provocation. A PR stunt. Critics of 12 cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten have not minced their words. They say that freedom of expression does not imply an endorsement of insulting people's religious feelings, and besides, they add, the media censor themselves every day. So, please do not teach us a lesson about limitless freedom of speech.

I agree that the freedom to publish things doesn't mean you publish everything. Jyllands-Posten would not publish pornographic images or graphic details of dead bodies; swear words rarely make it into our pages. So we are not fundamentalists in our support for freedom of expression.

But the cartoon story is different.

Those examples have to do with exercising restraint because of ethical standards and taste; call it editing. By contrast, I commissioned the cartoons in response to several incidents of self-censorship in Europe caused by widening fears and feelings of intimidation in dealing with issues related to Islam. And I still believe that this is a topic that we Europeans must confront, challenging moderate Muslims to speak out. The idea wasn't to provoke gratuitously -- and we certainly didn't intend to trigger violent demonstrations throughout the Muslim world. Our goal was simply to push back self-imposed limits on expression that seemed to be closing in tighter.

At the end of September, a Danish standup comedian said in an interview with Jyllands-Posten that he had no problem urinating on the Bible in front of a camera, but he dared not do the same thing with the Koran.

This was the culmination of a series of disturbing instances of self-censorship. Last September, a Danish children's writer had trouble finding an illustrator for a book about the life of Muhammad. Three people turned down the job for fear of consequences. The person who finally accepted insisted on anonymity, which in my book is a form of self-censorship. European translators of a critical book about Islam also did not want their names to appear on the book cover beside the name of the author, a Somalia-born Dutch politician who has herself been in hiding.

Around the same time, the Tate gallery in London withdrew an installation by the avant-garde artist John Latham depicting the Koran, Bible and Talmud torn to pieces. The museum explained that it did not want to stir things up after the London bombings. (A few months earlier, to avoid offending Muslims, a museum in Goteborg, Sweden, had removed a painting with a sexual motif and a quotation from the Koran.)

Finally, at the end of September, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen met with a group of imams, one of whom called on the prime minister to interfere with the press in order to get more positive coverage of Islam.

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So, over two weeks we witnessed a half-dozen cases of self-censorship, pitting freedom of speech against the fear of confronting issues about Islam. This was a legitimate news story to cover, and Jyllands-Posten decided to do it by adopting the well-known journalistic principle: Show, don't tell. I wrote to members of the association of Danish cartoonists asking them "to draw Muhammad as you see him." We certainly did not ask them to make fun of the prophet. Twelve out of 25 active members responded.

We have a tradition of satire when dealing with the royal family and other public figures, and that was reflected in the cartoons. The cartoonists treated Islam the same way they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. And by treating Muslims in Denmark as equals they made a point: We are integrating you into the Danish tradition of satire because you are part of our society, not strangers. The cartoons are including, rather than excluding, Muslims.

The cartoons do not in any way demonize or stereotype Muslims. In fact, they differ from one another both in the way they depict the prophet and in whom they target. One cartoon makes fun of Jyllands-Posten, portraying its cultural editors as a bunch of reactionary provocateurs. Another suggests that the children's writer who could not find an illustrator for his book went public just to get cheap publicity. A third puts the head of the anti-immigration Danish People's Party in a lineup, as if she is a suspected criminal.

One cartoon -- depicting the prophet with a bomb in his turban -- has drawn the harshest criticism. Angry voices claim the cartoon is saying that the prophet is a terrorist or that every Muslim is a terrorist. I read it differently: Some individuals have taken the religion of Islam hostage by committing terrorist acts in the name of the prophet. They are the ones who have given the religion a bad name. The cartoon also plays into the fairy tale about Aladdin and the orange that fell into his turban and made his fortune. This suggests that the bomb comes from the outside world and is not an inherent characteristic of the prophet.

On occasion, Jyllands-Posten has refused to print satirical cartoons of Jesus, but not because it applies a double standard. In fact, the same cartoonist who drew the image of Muhammed with a bomb in his turban drew a cartoon with Jesus on the cross having dollar notes in his eyes and another with the star of David attached to a bomb fuse. There were, however, no embassy burnings or death threats when we published those.

Has Jyllands-Posten insulted and disrespected Islam? It certainly didn't intend to. But what does respect mean? When I visit a mosque, I show my respect by taking off my shoes. I follow the customs, just as I do in a church, synagogue or other holy place. But if a believer demands that I, as a nonbeliever, observe his taboos in the public domain, he is not asking for my respect, but for my submission. And that is incompatible with a secular democracy.

This is exactly why Karl Popper, in his seminal work "The Open Society and Its Enemies," insisted that one should not be tolerant with the intolerant. Nowhere do so many religions coexist peacefully as in a democracy where freedom of expression is a fundamental right. In Saudi Arabia, you can get arrested for wearing a cross or having a Bible in your suitcase, while Muslims in secular Denmark can have their own mosques, cemeteries, schools, TV and radio stations.

I acknowledge that some people have been offended by the publication of the cartoons, and Jyllands-Posten has apologized for that. But we cannot apologize for our right to publish material, even offensive material. You cannot edit a newspaper if you are paralyzed by worries about every possible insult.

I am offended by things in the paper every day: transcripts of speeches by Osama bin Laden, photos from Abu Ghraib, people insisting that Israel should be erased from the face of the Earth, people saying the Holocaust never happened. But that does not mean that I would refrain from printing them as long as they fell within the limits of the law and of the newspaper's ethical code. That other editors would make different

choices is the essence of pluralism.

As a former correspondent in the Soviet Union, I am sensitive about calls for censorship on the grounds of insult. This is a popular trick of totalitarian movements: Label any critique or call for debate as an insult and punish the offenders. That is what happened to human rights activists and writers such as Andrei Sakharov, Vladimir Bukovsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Natan Sharansky, Boris Pasternak. The regime accused them of anti-Soviet propaganda, just as some Muslims are labeling 12 cartoons in a Danish newspaper anti-Islamic.

The lesson from the Cold War is: If you give in to totalitarian impulses once, new demands follow. The West prevailed in the Cold War because we stood by our fundamental values and did not appease totalitarian tyrants.

Since the Sept. 30 publication of the cartoons, we have had a constructive debate in Denmark and Europe about freedom of expression, freedom of religion and respect for immigrants and people's beliefs. Never before have so many Danish Muslims participated in a public dialogue -- in town hall meetings, letters to editors, opinion columns and debates on radio and TV. We have had no anti-Muslim riots, no Muslims fleeing the country and no Muslims committing violence. The radical imams who misinformed their counterparts in the Middle East about the situation for Muslims in Denmark have been marginalized. They no longer speak for the Muslim community in Denmark because moderate Muslims have had the courage to speak out against them.

In January, Jyllands-Posten ran three full pages of interviews and photos of moderate Muslims saying no to being represented by the imams. They insist that their faith is compatible with a modern secular democracy. A network of moderate Muslims committed to the constitution has been established, and the anti-immigration People's Party called on its members to differentiate between radical and moderate Muslims, i.e. between Muslims propagating sharia law and Muslims accepting the rule of secular law. The Muslim face of Denmark has changed, and it is becoming clear that this is not a debate between "them" and "us," but between those committed to democracy in Denmark and those who are not.

This is the sort of debate that Jyllands-Posten had hoped to generate when it chose to test the limits of self-censorship by calling on cartoonists to challenge a Muslim taboo. Did we achieve our purpose? Yes and no. Some of the spirited defenses of our freedom of expression have been inspiring. But tragic demonstrations throughout the Middle East and Asia were not what we anticipated, much less desired. Moreover, the newspaper has received 104 registered threats, 10 people have been arrested, cartoonists have been forced into hiding because of threats against their lives and Jyllands-Posten's headquarters have been evacuated several times due to bomb threats. This is hardly a climate for easing self-censorship.

Still, I think the cartoons now have a place in two separate narratives, one in Europe and one in the Middle East. In the words of the Somali-born Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the integration of Muslims into European societies has been sped up by 300 years due to the cartoons; perhaps we do not need to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again in Europe. The narrative in the Middle East is more complex, but that has very little to do with the cartoons.

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