

# Self Censorship and the Danish Cartoons Controversy

Written by Caitlin Smith

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**'If we don't say what we think or articulate what is generally being thought, then we are self-censoring, which is wimpish.' Discuss Salman Rushdie's remark with reference to the Danish Cartoons Controversy.**

If taken strictly at face value, the publication in 2005, of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed and the subsequent reaction that they triggered, would appear to be something of a simple yet incommensurable and irreconcilable battle between two fundamental pinnacles of democratic society: freedom of expression vs. the right for respect of religious beliefs. (I would suggest that such principles are impossible to compare in terms of their value to society because of the difficulty in apportioning greater importance to one or other moral principle). It strikes me that the debate cannot be one between these two apparently inalienable rights; (not least due to their incommensurability) rather, it must be a debate that is understood in terms of limits, offence, and toleration on behalf of the proponents and advocates of both.

Susan Mendus (1993:194) aligns the debate as being one between 'the forces of lightness and darkness'; *lightness* in this case is meant to represent the 'rationality and tolerance of liberalism', and *darkness* the 'bigotry of fundamentalism'. Writing in relation to the Rushdie affair, she suggests, amongst other things, that the case presents a dilemma for liberals in that they are being invited to make a choice between 'cultural arrogance' (Mendus, 1993:195), and a recognition that freedom of speech cannot always come up trumps. It is however, of the utmost importance that any discussion of this issue does not become one steeped in inflammatory remarks, (as Mendus' words could indeed be interpreted), and that it does not become what it so often has in the past: a debate in which liberal Christians are pitted against Muslims, as this adds nothing to the debate and only serves to lower its tone.

It is certainly true that there are legalistic arguments abound, regarding the right to publicly express an opinion, (those which are mainly centred around the codification of such rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such documents), as well as arguments which draw on the Danish legal system to accord an answer to the dispute, and these are of course relevant. However, whilst making reference to the Danish cartoon controversy, this paper will focus on the morality of placing restrictions on the absolutist conception of freedom of expression, and the consequences for society, democracy, and individualism. Certainly, there are a number of issues of which it is imperative be addressed in this paper, including the uniqueness of the issue of religion as an argument against absolute freedom of expression.

I will begin with a short description of the background to the cartoon controversy, followed by an examination of the merits of free speech and freedom of expression and their applicability to the cartoon affair; the paper will then explore the possible arguments for setting limitations to these freedoms and the morality of doing so. As previously mentioned, explicit throughout the paper will be references to the issue of self-censorship, taken to mean the decision by authors, journalists, illustrators or others, not to discuss, highlight, or draw attention to issues, for fear of persecution, backlash or castigation (imposed or otherwise).

### **The Danish Cartoons: Satirical or Satanic?**

The similarities between the Danish Cartoon affair and the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* are striking, in terms of nature, reaction, and defence. Both Rushdie and the editors of *Jyllands-Posten* (the newspaper in

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which the cartoons were printed) were the subjects of intense anger and outrage, not least in the Muslim world, as well as sympathy and solidarity on the part of others. More importantly, both defended their actions by invoking what many see as the most fundamental rights of the democratic world: freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

There are certainly differences between the two cases; for instance I am convinced that an important aspect of the cartoon affair is the purpose for which they were printed: apparently in protest at what the editors saw as self-censorship by the Danish media over issues relating to Islam and the Danish Muslim population. At the risk of sounding like an ardent liberal, hired on behalf of *Jyllands-Posten* to defend their actions, I am inclined to suggest that the intent behind the cartoons was indeed to create a debate around self-censorship, and that they were not merely published with the intention of causing offence. (This is not to suggest that there was any malicious intent behind the offending extracts of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, rather an observation of the climate in which each was published).

This fact could be interpreted in two ways; firstly, one may suggest that in publishing the cartoons with perhaps more than a small intuition of the reaction that would ensue, that *Jyllands-Posten* is in fact more responsible and morally reprehensible than if the cartoons were merely printed with no thought given to the results; i.e. they were printed with sufficient knowledge of the offence that would be caused. Secondly, one could hold the opinion that the publication of the cartoons achieved exactly what they set out to do, that is, to draw attention to a culture of fear and self-censorship within the Danish media that should be immediately addressed if freedom of expression is to prevail over religious or cultural sensitivities.

What followed the publication of both the cartoons and *The Satanic Verses*, was widespread and furious condemnation of *Jyllands-Posten* and Rushdie, as well as riots, marches, attacks, death threats, and finally, the declaration of *fatwas* (issued in Rushdie's case by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran), offering financial reward to anyone who murdered the publishers, authors, or others connected to the offending articles/images. Proponents of the idea of limits to freedom of expression are swift to point out that they, for the most part, do not accept such reactions as acceptable in any way, shape or form, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that it was the nature and extent of the reactions which drew the issue into the fore, and defenders of free speech cite this as having set a dangerous precedent. The issue of the reactions of offended parties will be addressed further, later in this paper, in relation to the measurement of offence.

## Free Speech: The Means to Truth and Human Fulfillment

*'...the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion'*

*(John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, 1859)*

Perhaps the most ardent and well known proponent of the freedom of speech and expression is John Stuart Mill, who views the suppression of opinion as a distinctly dangerous and suffocating prospect for society as a whole as well as for individuals themselves. Indeed it would be erroneous to suggest that Mill makes no suggestion of the possibility for certain limitations to such freedoms, yet for the sake of explaining the merits of free expression, in this section we will focus on his principle arguments in favour of freedom of speech. Mill (1859) argues first and foremost that the most fundamental advantage to societies which do not attempt to stifle opinion, regardless of whether that opinion be false, or the opinion of a minority, is that it is a necessary and indispensable prerequisite in the search for truth. Mill's belief is centred around the assumption that the truth becomes increasingly appealing and infallible when one allows it to be subjected to falsities, to debate, and to scrutiny, and in a nutshell, the belief that truth will always prevail over untruths.

Now, with regards to the cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, it may well be true that the Danish press subjects itself to a certain degree of self-censorship, and the declared purpose of their publication was to highlight this; certainly the cartoons did to some degree fulfil this purpose. However, this was not the cause of the uproar. The fundamental issue with which many Muslims took offence was the depiction of the Prophet in itself, which is

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forbidden in Islam. What was also seen by many to have been unnecessary was the implied linkage between the Prophet and terrorism (one of the cartoons showed the Prophet with a bomb on his head). Regardless of whether or not one would like to draw conclusions from this depiction, to me, it seems in no way necessary in the search for truth; Mill (1859) himself regards the usefulness of an opinion as being almost as disputable and open to debate as the actual opinion in itself, and suggests that the suppression of opinions because one may find such views offensive, derogatory or condemnable is 'a mischief'.

In the case of the cartoons, and in the case of other such statements of *opinion*, it is not so easy to regard their publication as valid in the search for truth per se; it may well be important for full and rounded debate, but I find it slightly more problematic to assign this case to one in which we can talk of 'searching for the truth'. However it does seem to me that religion itself, whilst often used as the stick with which to beat freedom of expression for fear of offence, is almost entirely dependent on that precise freedom; free speech enables people not so much to find the truth, but to search for what they believe to be true: 'it enables people to choose the moral and religious beliefs which best suit them' (Mendus, 1993:201).

Mill tends to focus his argument around the detrimental effects which he believes will be reaped upon society as a whole, should freedom of expression and free speech be impeded. There is much, if not everything to be said in support of the view that for one to develop rounded opinions and a heightened intellectual capacity, he must be made at least aware, of the opposing interpretations and the critique which he may encounter when attempting to express his opinions. The danger, it is argued, is that in a society in which man blindly and absentmindedly accepts the information he is fed, and conforms to the chosen opinion of the state (i.e. a society straitjacketed by suppression of discussion or thought), human intellect is unable to flourish and society is unable to progress; Mill (1859) suggests that in such societies, the 'moral courage of the human mind' is sacrificed, and an 'intellectually active people' cannot be expected to exist. This prospect is unnerving to say the least, and warns of a descent into the unthinking conformity and passive acceptance reminiscent of a state controlled by 'thought police'.

In this sense, one would take Salman Rushdie's remark about the 'wimpishness' of self-censorship to be entirely true, not least in accordance with the belief that the imposition of controls (self imposed or imposed from above), is almost 'taking the easy way out'. By this I mean, that if a society or a religion is unwilling to submit its beliefs, claims or views to criticism or scrutiny, and a climate of self-censorship endures, one would be led to assume that such a society does not have the courage of its convictions; by avoiding the airing of opposing opinions, the view or belief which is propagated by that society is more likely to persist, be it the truth or a pack of lies, and this prospect, to me, seems to be both dangerous and wimpish.

Very few of us in the present day however, live in entirely homogenous societies, in terms of race, religion or politics, and Mill's comments appear to disregard the fact that religious beliefs are based primarily on the conviction that 'the truth of [their] beliefs is utterly beyond question' (Jones, 1993:124). It is often argued that the very concept of morality itself is based on religion, and that therefore, protection of religious sensibilities amounts to a protection of morality. This appears to be almost entirely irrelevant in a world where almost every society contains people of different faiths and religions, each condoning different moralities; should for example a primarily Christian society protect only the Christians within its population? Certainly, in the case of religious sensibilities, for proponents of setting limits on freedom of expression, it is offence, ridicule and derision, which are often the problem, not the issue of truth. This is the matter in question in the case of the Danish cartoons: should democratic governments protect people of religion from feelings of offence? And if so, where does the buck stop?

## Self-Censorship: The First Rung on the Ladder of Authoritarianism?

Other than the truth, it is easily argued that freedom of speech and expression, and therefore the absence of censorship (self or otherwise) is a fundamental and obligatory basis for democracy. Indeed, it does not take a genius to recognise that the most stringent controls and limits on freedom of speech and expression exist in authoritarian, non-democratic societies, but it is not always clear when instances of self-censorship take place in apparently liberal societies, as self-censorship in itself exists tacitly rather than as an explicit law or order. In fact, it is generally easy enough to find references in legislation, which, whilst upholding freedom of speech, do actually recognise limits to

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such freedoms, (often described as the 'responsible use of the freedom of expression') including the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950 (Sturges, 2006:183). The questions of what these limits should be, who should uphold and police them, and the related problems that may arise from such limits seem to me to provide shaky and unnerving answers.

As previously noted, Salman Rushdie's comment was directly related to self-censorship, but it is highly unlikely that a general and sweeping climate of self-censorship will prevail without some form of tacit direction from authority, or the imposition of a fear of castigation of some description. In the aftermath of both the Rushdie affair and the Danish cartoon controversy, there were calls for legal limits to be placed on the freedom of expression with respect to a number of principles, including: the degree of offence caused, the manner of the expression, and the number of people who claim to be offended. Clearly the explicit imposition of controls regarding the freedom of expression are erring more away from the issue of self-censorship towards censorship in its more overt sense, but it is important to recognise that the Rushdie affair and the cartoon controversy both sparked calls for this type of control. Attempting to place limits on what is seen by many to be the most fundamental principle of libertarian democratic societies is incredibly difficult, not least because such controls are often highly subjective, especially when religious sensibilities are involved; this may also be seen as the imposition of 'religiously based norms of some, on others who do not share them' (Laegaard, 2007:488).

Now, both Rushdie and the editors of *Jyllands-Posten* extolled the virtues of an absolute and total conception of the freedom of expression, and made suggestions that should offence have been caused by their actions or views, then a response of *toleration* should have ensued on the behalf of those offended (in this case Muslims). However, an absolutist conception of the freedom of expression seems to be culturally ignorant and ignores the need in modern multi-racial societies, for racial, cultural and religious harmony, as well as general civil order. These are often cited as the reasons for placing such controls or 'responsibilities' on those who are in a position to shape opinion and whose views are widely heard (journalists, authors etc.). John Stuart Mill (1859), as a utilitarian, invokes this *harm principle*, as adequate moral reasoning for the limitation of free speech and expression, on the basis that, 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others'. In the case of the Danish cartoon controversy, and the scenes which followed their publication, (including the deaths of over fifty people), one would assume Mill to advocate restrictions on publications which may evoke similar reactions in accordance with *the greatest good* principle. However, if one is to assume that the louder they shout, the more they protest, the more destruction they cause, or the greater the level of civil unrest that they produce is to be the basis for whether or not the freedom of speech is controlled, then a dangerous precedent is set; this is what some believe happened in the wake of the cartoon controversy.

The extent and scope of the freedom of expression cannot, I suggest, be dependent upon the willingness of respondents to cause civil unrest and violence. Besides, in terms of the utilitarian argument regarding *the greatest good for the greatest number*, one may become tied up with considerations of minority/majority religious groups, which Mill (1859) himself condemns: 'if all of mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.'

## Conclusion: Is Self-Censorship Wimpish or a Requirement of Society Today?

It strikes me, that governments setting limits (explicit or implicit) upon the freedom of expression may well be a difficult task, and will never be without critics; it also strikes me that those who do criticize, and who support freedom of expression as being absolute, generally occupy positions within the majority, who are less likely to be subject to feelings of offence or ridicule. Whilst democratic societies do indeed rely on free expression to a certain extent for the intellectual development of their populations as well as the democratic legitimacy of their governments, they are also charged with the protection of their citizens, whether this relates to psychological or physical protection. I believe, not least because of the sheer moral and practical difficulties involved in measuring offence and possible limits, that it is fundamentally wrong for democratic liberal governments to impose stringent controls on what can and cannot be said, as it amounts to the ultimate undermining of the nature of democratic society. Rather, contrary to Salman Rushdie's suggestion that self-censorship 'is wimpish', I suggest that self-censorship actually plays an integral role in

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the maintenance of the freedom of expression since *responsible* use of the freedom prevents calls for its revocation, and in today's society, respect for the beliefs, customs and ways of others should be paramount in the mind of those who shape opinion.

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