

No offense given: Commotion over caricatures

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

Early in October, Yale was abuzz with passionate debates about the freedom of expression. Participants included Yale students and professors, as well as prominent alumni such as John Bolton (former U.S. ambassador to the UN) and David Frum (economic speechwriter for former president George W. Bush). Also present was Kurt Westergaard, the Danish cartoonist who drew a famous caricature of the Prophet Muhammad with his turban morphing into a bomb with a lit fuse—one in a series of cartoons on Islam published in a Danish newspaper that set off a worldwide reaction. Another voice was that of Jytte Klausen, author of *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, a just-released Yale University Press book on the caricatures.

Why all the commotion? The controversy was sparked earlier this summer when Klausen asked Yale University Press to include in her book the original caricatures. The press initially agreed, but after consulting many experts, the Yale administration decided that the caricatures should not be reprinted. Some, including Bolton and Frum, disagreed, seeing the decision as a case of self-muzzling triggered by fears of terrorist reprisals, and accusing Yale of a kind of advance caving-in to terrorist demands. Many Muslim students at Yale, on the other hand, thought that reprinting the cartoons would be giving a Yale platform to those who engage in hate speech. Some of them even objected to Westergaard's presence on campus.

Flemming Rose, cultural editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish paper that published the controversial caricatures, justified his decision by arguing that in liberal democracies people have many rights, but they do “not have a right not to be offended.” For Rose, the right to offend, which is a corollary of the absence of the right not to be offended, includes the right to desecrate. Let's assume that he is right: in liberal societies there is an open season for offending and desecrating. The question, then, is this: Should we, as citizens of liberal democracies who embrace liberal ideals, do everything we have the right to do? Should Yale University Press have reprinted the caricatures?

It should not have. I was one of the “experts” consulted by Yale. Here is a brief summary of my advice and my reasoning. First, the reprinting of the caricatures would likely have provoked violence on the part of some who felt offended. That violence would have been unjustified and indefensible, of course, but that would have been of small comfort to any victims. The concern is not a matter of wanting to spare Yale a bit of trouble that a few extra police could easily prevent, as Bolton suggested. In the aftermath of the publication of the caricatures, Denmark was a comparatively safe place; Nigeria was not. Riots triggered by Rose’s decision to exercise his right to offend led to many deaths thousands of miles away—a consequence of living in an interconnected and interdependent world. Yale would have acted irresponsibly had it followed Rose’s suit, and doubly so since Yale’s exercise of the right to offend would have been completely gratuitous. After all, the caricatures need not be reprinted in a scholarly treatise on their effects; I’ve read the entire manuscript without having seen the cartoons, and my understanding of the book was not deepened after having seen them (they’re available on the Internet).

Second, though gratuitously offending others may be our right, the exercise of that right hardly counts as a mark of a well-lived life. At issue is not the appropriateness of expressing one’s opinion and arguing for one’s position. I have had extensive debates with Muslims about the key issue that the caricatures address—the claim that Islam is inherently a violent religion. Muslims were not shy about telling me that the Bible promotes violence and that Christians have a violent history. I returned in kind (while noting that secular ideologies have hardly done better). We argued strenuously—and parted as friends. It would have neither helped my case nor marked me as an admirable human being had I also insulted them. But why, a person may ask, is desecration of religious symbols so offensive to many deeply religious people? Though some religious people cannot stand having their faith subjected to criticism, many live comfortably with reasoned criticism. For all of them, symbols of faith are not merely intellectual propositions, but also expressions of deep identity.

In sum, Yale’s decision not to reprint the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad was a good one. Reprinting them would have been irresponsible and would have offended people by desecrating what defines their very selves. I see Yale’s decision not as a result of “self-muzzling,” but as a fruit of imperturbable civility; not as a consequence of “giving in to the extremists,” but of taking responsibility for the likely effects of its actions on third parties. This is what we must do in a pluralistic

world where we are highly interconnected and thoroughly interdependent.