



Eurozine Editorial

Freedom of speech and the Danish cartoon controversy

"Is freedom of speech a universal human right? Or is it, after all, just one value among others, a value cherished by middle-class intellectuals in Western democracies, but one which other cultures, drawing on different traditions, might well reject as unsuitable for them, and which radical groups within those Western democracies might well challenge as no longer central even there?" This is Ronald Dworkin's question, [writing in Index on Censorship](#) in 1994, a question whose relevance has only increased since the Danish Mohammed cartoon controversy at the start of 2006.

Dworkin is damning of apologists for the curtailment of freedom of speech: "The strong conviction [that freedom of speech is a fundamental human right] is suddenly challenged not only by freedom's oldest enemies — the despots and ruling thieves who fear it — but also by new enemies who claim to speak for justice not tyranny, and who point to other values we respect, including self-determination, equality, and freedom from racial hatred and prejudice, as reasons why the right of free speech should now be demoted to a much lower grade of urgency and importance."

Other commentators, who for Dworkin might represent the "new enemy", make convincing cases for a nuanced understanding of the "fundamental human right". Tom Stoppard [holds](#) that the reason the concept of free speech has "got into such a mess" is that liberalism persists in seeing a "right" as something to be claimed rather than accorded. If claim and counter-claim are presented as absolutes, the debate can have no resolution. And Göran Rosenberg [argues](#) that the formal laws constituting freedom of expression in democratic societies are only the tip of the iceberg of unwritten agreements between citizens about what they can express publicly. In the case of Denmark, the agreement to allow expressions of anti-Muslim prejudice served to produce conflict instead of dealing with it.

For [Isolde Charim](#), both secularist and liberal attitudes towards religion's place in society fuelled the cartoon controversy. Both positions overlook a sea change in the public sphere, where individuals increasingly "go public" with their private identities. The result is a "language of ethical demands", which, in its ability to draw supporters and opponents alike, takes on a totalitarian aspect. And Christoph Türcke, while defending blasphemy as a tool of the rationalist critique of religion, [argues](#) that mockery was and is only rational when used as a weapon against power and oppression. "Rationalism that wants more than simply to be right must learn to judge where its mockery begins to take on a triumphalist tone, one that insults the humiliated rather than unmasks pretensions."

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