

Free Speech Bites



Martin Rowson on Free Speech and Cartoons

Nigel Warburton: *Martin Rowson is a satirical cartoonist. I asked him about free speech, cartoons, and causing offence. Don't listen to this podcast if you are offended by swearing.*

Nigel Warburton: *Michael Rowson, welcome [to Free Speech Bites](#).*

Michael Rowson: Hello.

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're going to focus on is free speech and cartoons. I wonder if you could begin by saying something about your own work as a cartoonist.*

Michael Rowson: I suppose I have a bit of a reputation for being one of the more hard-hitting Lefty cartoonists, and I'm very fortunate - this isn't just brown-nosing - to work for the *Guardian* who tolerate that kind of thing from me and Steve Bell, although sometimes I think they don't notice until it's too late. I see myself, very proudly actually, as part of a uniquely British tradition. We are, as a country, the only country in the world that has had over 300 years of tolerated visual satire, which hasn't been subjected to the kind of constraints it has in other countries around the world, which is why, since the advent of the Internet, when Steve and I have had our work available to a global audience, we have had such visceral responses from people who are just not used to this kind of thing. As soon as they started putting our work on the *Guardian* website and the *Guardian* website took off in America, the traffic of hate mail, hate email, from America, was quite extraordinary, quite deliberately targeted. After a while, you could tell that these were specifically organised events, when you could get seven or eight thousand emails saying 'Fuck off you limey cunt!', you know that somebody is actually behind this. But nonetheless, I think to begin with they were genuinely shocked, and I did get emails from people saying 'You don't understand, he's our head of state, he's our commander-in-chief, you wouldn't do cartoons like this of your queen.' At which point you say 'Would you just come over here and look at 300 years' worth of vile images of the royal family'. There's a wonderful story about, in the 18th century, in about the middle of the 1780s, the French ambassador of the court of St. James wrote a despatch to Versailles saying 'this county is on the verge of a revolution, they're going to do what they did 150 years ago, there's going to be mayhem, they're going to chop off the King's head: all you have to do is walk down Fleet Street, walk down the Strand and you'll go past these hundreds and hundreds of little kiosks selling the most disgusting images of the royal family'. And of course he was absolutely wrong: he was completely wrong because they had a revolution in France, where they didn't have satire, they had these samizdat sex

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libels against Marie Antoinette, and all of it was kept under control and it was a pressure-cooker, and it exploded. So in a way, the reason why we didn't have a revolution, slightly to my regret, was because we had people like Gillray and Cruikshank and the rest of them.

Nigel Warburton: *Satire is a particularly powerful weapon and can offend people, as well as dislodge them from their seats of power...*

Michael Rowson: Well, I don't think that's what satire does. I mean, I used to think when I finished doing a drawing, Ah! I've drawn his nose so big he cannot possibly remain in office for another minute when he sees this!' And then I realised it's not about that, it's actually not about that at all. It's a combination of things, and it's a fundamentally human trait, I believe, and I'll explain that by referring to a wonderful book of anthropology I read a few years ago, by an anthropologist called Christopher Boehm, who was a primatologist who used to work at the Jane Goodall Institute, and he wrote this book called *Hierarchy In The Forest*, where he looked at the politics of the great apes. And the politics of the great apes is hierarchical, you know, so the social great apes, the chimpanzees, the bonobos, gorillas, are all sort of hierarchical patriarchies, although bonobos are more matriarchies (interestingly enough, of course, they also have the rather endearing quality of actually having sex with each other as a kind of hyper-grooming), and he then thought 'Well, I'd better look at the 'third chimpanzee,' what Jared Diamond describes as the third chimpanzee, which is, of course, us: the last species of hominid left standing. And so he looked at the ethnography of over 150 years of all pre-agricultural peoples - humans in the wild, if you like - over all inhabited continents, and found that not only are they not hierarchical, they were actively egalitarian, this is where it gets interesting: their prime tactic for maintaining egalitarian societies was mockery. And there's a wonderful story about the old bushmen of the Kalahari, and describing how this bushman, this particularly good huntsman, goes off into the veldt, comes back with a springbok over his shoulder and says 'Behold this springbok I have killed, am I not a great huntsman, make me your leader!' To which the !Kung people replied, bless their little cotton socks (though they wouldn't wear them in the desert obviously) they replied 'Call that a springbok you wanker. Fuck off!' And that is something which all human beings recognise about themselves: we use humour as a sort of social cement, we use it to repel people, we use it to attract people, 'good sense of humour', this kind of thing, and we use mockery as a powerful social tool, we use it to enforce friendships, and we use it to keep people in their place. And satire is merely an extension of that, and it's actually to even up the score and make bearable the monstrous injustice we've suffered for 10,000 years of having hierarchical systems and princes and popes and priesthoods and all the rest of it, and in laughing at them, we release these endorphins which quite simply make us feel better.

So the purpose of satire is not to topple the kings from their thrones, but it's just to make us feel better about the fact that they're sitting on the thrones in the first place. I genuinely believe you can judge the health of a society to the degree in which satire is tolerated, because if they can't take people laughing at them, then you know that they're going to start committing all manner of crimes over the slightest little thing and they are, by definition, tyrants: because you must be able to laugh at these bastards who think they're better than the rest of us.

Nigel Warburton: *So what about when people are targeting racial features for example, there's a terrible history of that?*

Michael Rowson: Well, you see, this is how you define satire. I would not define that as satire. Satire is a subset of humour, and it's a very specific subset, and it conforms to the great American journalist, H. L. Mencken's definition of journalism, which is 'to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.' Therefore the point of satire is: you should only attack people more powerful than yourself. Being a bleeding heart liberal, I don't do racist, sexist gags. I don't attack people for what they are, I attack them for what they think. In terms of religion, I view religion as an opinion and therefore I think it's fair game. Somebody's ethnicity or sexuality is not fair game because it's what they are, it's not what they think. That's how I do it, personally. Obviously there has been a very long-standing tradition of deeply racist cartoons, deeply racist iconography. *Punch* in the 19th century's depiction of the Irish, and one of the reasons why Zionist critics of my criticisms of the actions of the state of Israel can say this is the most vilely anti-Semitic cartoon to appear since the closure of *Der Stürmer*, was because *Der Stürmer* ran vilely anti-Semitic cartoons. But I don't do anti-Semitic cartoons, I would insist.

Nigel Warburton: *Yet, some people think of their religion as not simply chosen, but part of their culture, part of their inheritance, as it were, that is, not everybody sees religion as free-thinkers might see it.*

Michael Rowson: Yeah... So? It's one of those things. It becomes a completely maddening circular argument. But it's a very interesting tactic which I've seen deployed over and over again. Interestingly, the first people to deploy it really effectively have been the pro-Zionist lobby in equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, and therefore you say 'You should not have said that because it's anti-Semitic and I am offended!'. If you use being offended as an offensive weapon it means you've stopped all conversation immediately. There is no longer a debate, you have won because the other person has behaved outside the realms of decent human behaviour because they've been offensive. And so people are constantly saying 'You have offended me!'. Well, actually, I'm offended by people believing in religion; I

don't expect them all to stop just because I'm offended. Tough, really. I have, over the years, apparently, succeeded in deeply offending such a wide group of people that you think after a while, 'Actually, um, um, um, maybe they are using this for a reason beyond the straightforwardly being offended one.' The most wonderful example was atheists, when I got to the atheists. They didn't say 'Fuck off you cunt', they didn't label it like that quite. But I did a cartoon for *New Humanist*, a cover for *New Humanist*, where they were looking at the new atheism, and I did a picture of Dawkins sort of skipping along, looking happy like Fotherington-Thomas from the Molesworth books, banging his wrists together sort of happy, happy, joy, joy. And on Dawkins' own website I was alerted by the editor of *New Humanist*, to this long debate saying that this was one of the most vilely homophobic images anybody had ever seen, because I'd linked it to Dawkins' 'Out' campaign in which he was trying to encourage people to out themselves as atheists in America - which is very laudable and wonderful, you should be allowed to express your opinions freely, of course you should. Except he was expropriating the language of gay liberation, and gay liberation is about simple, straightforward human rights and being treated equally before the law, and I thought it was slightly inappropriate. And so there was Hitchens in the background standing out and proud and the sort of logo that Dawkins was using for his campaign and all these people saying 'This disgracefully homophobic image! This disgracefully homophobic image!', and then a Brit, obviously, said 'No, he's not being gay he's just being happy he's skipping along in a field banging his wrists together'. Someone said 'He's clearly a limp-wristed caricature of a gay man', but he wasn't limp-wristed because he was actually, his wrists were quite sort of taught when he banged them together, and it sort of went on and on and on and finally somebody said 'He is clearly meant to be gay, he is wearing sandals which are a clear gay signifier.' At which point you just sort of pull your head off and throw it out the window. But it's extraordinary, people taking offence deliberately as a tactic to shut up conversation.

Nigel Warburton: *In recent years, there have been some fairly dramatic responses to cartoons, not just offensive emails sent to you, but people killed in riots as a result of, particularly, the Danish cartoons.*

Michael Rowson: Well the Danish cartoons is the famous instance, and, as you say, people were killed in riots. This is the by-product of one of the most ludicrous episodes in modern history, I think. The people who died were all Muslims who were shot dead in Muslim countries, by Muslim policemen or Muslim soldiers because they'd been fermented into rioting by Muslim clerics - you would have thought that would have been a bit of an own goal, really. My attitude to this is actually slightly counter-intuitive, it refers back to the thing about H.L. Mencken, 'afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted,' that you don't attack people less powerful than yourself. And *Jyllens-Posten* is a right-wing Danish

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newspaper which has been running anti-immigration campaigns for decades, and they used this story about not being able to illustrate a children's book about the prophet Mohammed with pictures of the prophet Mohammed, and provocatively, blew it up out of all proportion, in a way, by provocatively targeting a group of their fellow Danes who happened to be a poor, powerless group of people, who probably clean the toilets and empty the bins in the *Jyllens-Posten's* offices. Because of that, I thought the commissioning of the cartoons was initially, a provocative and aggressive act: it wasn't satire, it was nothing to do with that. It was actually targeting these poor and powerless people. But what happened next, after a long delay, nobody noticed when they came out to begin with, nobody paid any attention to it, but when you had Danish Mullahs hawking these images around the tyrannies of the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Saudi Arabia, and you suddenly have spontaneous riots by people who are so deeply offended, in countries that I think you'd find that you don't have spontaneous riots, as we've seen in Syria recently. It ceased to be about cartoons, it was all about power, it was all about using this as a tactic of taking offence. But both sides took up such ludicrous positions because it is as false to say 'My greatest freedom is my freedom to say whatever I like about whoever I want, whenever I want to say it' as it is to say 'My greatest freedom is never to be even mildly upset by anything you might say'. These are both ludicrous positions and they were taken up by both sides. I mean, from my point of view, it made things extremely difficult because the press in this country got absolutely terrified by the whole thing. I did a cartoon for *The Guardian*, which was the first cartoon I'd done for them in the 12 years I've been working for the paper, on the leader page, which actually had to be checked by the editor. Prior to that, the commentator had been fine with it, but this had to be checked by the editor. And it was a picture of a burning Danish ligation in Beirut, and I captioned it at the top 'If I were you I wouldn't even look at this' and it was somebody saying 'Funny isn't it, how you can sometimes see faces in the flames, I mean over there looks... DON'T EVEN THINK IT!' And people of course looked at it and said, 'Oh yes, yes I can see the face of the Prophet'. No! No way! Nowhere there at all! It was in the eyes of the beholder. I did one, which I thought was actually quite nice, which almost got into *The Scotsman* until they pulled it at the very last minute, of just a copy of *Jyllens-Posten*, and behind it you can see a turban, and a think bubble saying 'Doesn't look anything like me'. I think that was finally published in *New Humanist*, but the weirdest one was in *The Daily Mirror* where I illustrate Tony Parsons' column every week, and it was a week later when they had had these nutters, and I think that's a reasonable way to describe them, who marched through central London saying 'Death to the enemies of Islam, behead cartoonists' and as a cartoonist I took a certain amount of offence at that, you know, obviously I shouldn't take too much offence. And Tony, it was fine for Tony to write about this, but it wasn't fine for me to illustrate it. This is the weird thing: I did all these different variations of it, quite anodyne stuff, there was a photograph of some of these people holding up placards saying 'Behead the enemies of

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Islam' pushing a pushchair, and I just had this kid looking up at his parents going 'Oh god, I wish they'd grow up', this kind of thing. But then I couldn't do that, couldn't do that, and so they said 'Well illustrate the second lead'. The second lead was about *Celebrity Big Brother* where they had that bloke, that rock star who's sort of halfway transsexual who's got these hideous collagen lips, I'm trying to remember his name, and I did him and he has a coat made out of monkey skins, and I did a sort of picture of him saying 'I don't know about all these pictures of prophet Mohammad, I wish they'd stop depicting me in the newspapers' and they said 'No, no you can't possibly do that, they'll think you're comparing Pete Burns, that's his name, they'll think you're comparing Pete Burns to the prophet Mohammad' and I said 'Oh for god's sake!' And then *The Mirror* said 'Look, look, look we've got at least 60,000 Muslim readers', and I said 'Think about this from a commercial point of view, they've got to buy the paper before they burn it!'. And they said 'No, no do something else.' And you get sort of sucked into this labyrinth of mirrors, of distorting mirrors and it's just sort of madness.

Nigel Warburton: *Now, you've said where your limits are, you've said you will not satirise people who are weaker than you, but that's just a code of your practice, isn't it? It's not the legal requirement. Do you think the law should tolerate freedom of expression to the extent where other satirists can caricature people weaker than them?*

Michael Rowson: Is it an absolute principle? The last cartoonist who went to prison in this country...? It's a nice trick question, a pub-quiz question - when was that? Oh was it the 1870s? No it was the 1980s. It was the cartoonist for *Bulldog*, the British Movement paper, and he got sent down for inciting racial hatred. If I was to do a cartoon which actually broke existing laws, then I'd have to take the consequences I don't think you should introduce more laws, but it's one of those things, how do you police people's expression of their opinions beyond the way that society does it, and society does it very effectively in all sorts of different ways. And there's also the difference between public and private discourse: there is an absolute difference between public and private discourse, and I'm one of those people who actually breaks that Chinese wall so people will deem what I said to be offensive because I've actually broken the Chinese wall between public and private discourse. A perfect example of that public and private discourse division, was when Princess Diana died and there was a public outpouring of emotion and people said they couldn't say anything bad about it to comparative strangers. But those same people who were weeping in the streets and leaving floral tributes, were in fact telling the most appalling jokes about Diana to each other in pubs with their mates, with their intimate friends.

It's odd, actually, the way some people can be so offended by what one does that you actually feel slightly chastened. I was reported to the Press Complaints Commission last year, by a woman who strongly objected to me using the word 'psychopathic' in a talk

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bubble describing Margaret Thatcher. And this woman was herself a psychopath, and she had been offended. She wasn't the object of my offence, she wasn't the person I was targeting, so, to an extent, I regretted upsetting her and I apologised to her. But that wasn't quite good enough. The Press Complaints Commission threw it out, obviously, because otherwise they'd be useless, I don't know what they would have done anyway, but sometimes people get offended by things that simply aren't there. I think there are people crying out to be offended by things. I did get an email recently by someone who was requesting me to engage in a debate about the pejorative way, through my depiction of the financial elite as a fat cat in a pinstripe suit, how I was demeaning fat people, and whether or not I would engage in this debate, and I just didn't reply because I thought 'This is going to get nowhere, I'm just being set up as an Aunt Sally: look at this evil man who is denigrating fat people.' You get to the point where you can't depict anything for fear of offending somebody. Nobody worries about me being offended, nobody ever seems to worry that I might be offended by being accused of being comparable to one of the cheerleaders for genocide, when they say an anti-Israel cartoon is like a cartoon in *Der Stürmer*, and I've said this to people who've said you know 'Your cartoons are like in *Der Stürmer*' I've said 'Actually, don't you think it's slightly offensive, you are equating me with genocidalists, you are saying that I am a murderer. Has it not occurred to you that that might be a) libellous, and secondly, deeply, deeply offensive?' But of course I don't count, because I'm a cartoonist.

Nigel Warburton: *Well, people take offence, but some people are, presumably, psychologically harmed by some cartoons. I mean, if you're a vulnerable person and you're repeatedly caricatured at a certain point, there might be damage.*

Michael Rowson: Well, if you're a vulnerable person by my criteria, that you only attack people more powerful than yourself, you're in the public eye, you've placed yourself in the public eye. If you don't like it, retire to private life. It's very simple and straightforward. If you're seeking election, or seeking public acclaim in this society, and you can't take people laughing at you, then you've chosen the wrong job.

Nigel Warburton: *You've spoken of this 300 year tradition of satire, of visual satire in Britain - are things going to remain the same? Do you get the sense that we're going to have these freedoms, we're going to have these great satirists continuing for the next few decades?*

Michael Rowson: Satire is one of those weird things because people are constantly announcing the death of satire, they announced it after Princess Diana died - I remember it well. The only time it may have been right was when Tom Lehrer quit as a songwriter after Henry Kissinger got the Nobel Peace Prize because reality had outstripped anything satire

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could ever think up. But it's weird. You see, you talk to people about satire, you talk to anybody that works in television, and they will claim that there was no satire before 'That Was The Week That Was', and there is no satire now because you haven't got 'Spitting Image.' Well, you open a daily newspaper, every daily newspaper has a cartoon in it. You listen to people joking, telling jokes, and I think it will always be there. People will be doing it to a lesser or greater degree because it's just, it's the sort of background noise that human beings make, along with laughing about everything else, laughing at their leaders is just one of the things we do, and we do it very well.

Nigel Warburton: *Martin Rowson, thank you very much.*

Martin Rowson: Thank you.

[ends]