Charlie Hebdo

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The tragic attack on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* earlier in January was, in effect, an attack on free expression in the West by a strain of Islam that is far too common. *Charlie Hebdo* is well known for its irreverent satirical treatment of almost every religion and ideology in the world. The publication had already endured a bombing in 2011 for printing cartoons of Muhammad. This time, two terrorists stormed the newspaper's office, killing nine editors, a building worker, and two police officers. The message was clear: you do not get to exercise free speech when it comes to Islam.

Islamists have some common ground here with the American left. Neither will tolerate any criticism of Islam, and both have that totalitarian impulse to control what other people are allowed to say.

The left has got terrorism apologetics down to a science by now. They've had a lot of opportunities to practice it, considering the almost 25,000 Islamic terror attacks since September 11, 2001. With each instance we see a common procedure. The left responds, didactically, that not *all* Muslims are to blame, as if anyone raised the idea in the first place. Then come the self-righteous articles about how we *really* need to be most concerned with "Islamophobia," a word applied to any criticism of Islam. What's left out of the picture? The recurring terror attacks themselves.

It's becoming harder to ignore Islam's penchant for horrendous acts of violence, a tendency with no analogue in any other major religion. The West has had its share of violent Christian extremists, with Anders Breivik foremost among them. But there's a difference between a violent religious extremist in an overwhelmingly secular society and an epidemic of violent religious extremism in a fanatically religious society. There's not much that's moderate, from our Western perspective, about how Islam is commonly practiced in Muslim countries. In Iraq, according to a 2013 Pew Research study, more than half of all Muslims favor stoning as the punishment for adultery. In Palestine, 40 percent of Muslims say that attacks against civilians in defense of Islam are often or sometimes justified. Over 90% of Muslims in Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Afghanistan believe that a woman must obey her husband in all cases whatsoever. These aren't marginal populations. We have our own religious radicals in the United States, but you won't find many Christians who want to make Leviticus global law.

The left is so hesitant to criticize Islam because leftists have proclaimed themselves the protectors of minorities in the West. They know little other than criticizing Western culture, Western religion, and Western politics. That's why I didn't expect to see any marches at Hamilton College over the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, or any emails from Nancy Thompson for that matter. A lot of Hamilton students and administration are far more attuned to fictional cases of racism than to real and repeated Islamic attacks. It's much more hip to act like an infinitely tolerant cosmopolitan when the shootings and bombings seem so far away.

Obviously criticism of the West is extremely important. But the very fact that we can do it is what sets us apart from the rest of the world. If we can't bring ourselves to condemn other cultures for attacking freedom of speech, how can we protect against it in our own countries?

American colleges have seen an epidemic of anti-free speech policies in recent years, and it reflects a popular culture where public personalities have to tread lightly in order to avoid the

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terrible crime of offending someone. Last May, Mel Brooks lamented that Blazing Saddles couldn't be made in the current politically correct culture. Even more recently, Chris Rock said he stopped doing stand-up at colleges because students were getting offended at everything. We may be going the way of Europe, where in many countries you can be thrown in jail for offending someone under vaguely defined "hate speech" laws. The irony of French President Hollande's participation in the Je Suis Charlie march is that, in the same week, his government was busy arresting dozens of people for "hate speech."

This is a bad path to go down. If we're content with being at the mercy of whiners and offense-takers, then maybe Islamism is right at home in the West.

If, on the other hand, we value free speech, we need to exercise it loudly and without limit. Make offensive jokes. Enjoy stereotypes and caricatures like the ones in *Charlie Hebdo*. Dare to have a sense of humor, even if a lot of people are rattling the handcuffs and asking, What are you laughing at?

The Right to Offend

Peter Alexander Bresnan | *Guest Contributor*

In the weeks following the attack on the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, an international conversation about the importance of free speech began to simmer. On the Sunday after the attack, 1.5 million Parisians, along with various world leaders, took to the streets to express their solidarity with the magazine, uniting underneath banners that read "Je Suis Charlie." It was an inspiring display of *fraternité* that sent a clear message: We will not tolerate any assault on our right to open expression, which is the basis of a free society.

While I wholeheartedly support the actions of these protesters, I think that there has been a significant misunderstanding as to what this fight is really about, what it really means to say "Je Suis Charlie." In our fury and frustration over the savage killing of nine *Charlie Hebdo* staff members, and in our zealous attempt to stand up for free speech, we have forgotten that the conversation we need to have is not about free speech at all. It's about tact.

When it comes to humor, I am undeniably an extremist. I believe that there are no laws governing comedy, and that for a comedian or satirist nothing is off-limits. Without the ability to offend, comedy cannot exist. Does this mean that being offensive is the same as being funny? Of course not, since every joke needs a context (this is why Stephen Colbert is funny, and Rush Limbaugh is anything but). To me, humor = offense + context. The nature of the offense could be as small as an offense to expectation ("I certainly wasn't expecting that!") or as large as an offense to human decency (jokes about terrorist attacks, Bill Cosby, rape, etc.). But the offense is there either way.

So it's impossible to judge the quality of a joke based on how offensive or inoffensive it is. Instead, we have to judge it on the basis of its *tactfulness*. Is the joke *appropriate* given the context (i.e. the time period, the audience, the social climate)? For example, the week after the September 11th attacks, *The New Yorker* ran no cartoons; nothing would have been funny given the context of shock and horror that enveloped the country. But the following week, they ran a cartoon depicting a forlorn man sitting at a bar, saying "I figure if I don't have that third Martini, then the terrorists win." This second joke was funny (and is still funny) because it came at a time when the offense and the context of American despair, a desperate search for respite from fear, fell in line with one another. This is what makes it a good joke.

But when you say "Je Suis Charlie," you are not supporting this latter, more successful kind of humor. You are supporting the less successful kind. You are supporting the right of a person to make jokes about terrorist attacks the day after a terrorist attack. You are supporting the right of a comedian to tell a joke about Michael Brown in front of an audience of Ferguson natives. You are supporting the right of a magazine to publish a depiction of the Muslim prophet Mohammed that is expected (and perhaps intended) to offend 23% of the world's total population. To stand up and declare "Je Suis Charlie" is to support tactlessness, bad jokes, offense without context. This is what *Charlie Hebdo* specialized in, and what nine members of its staff died for.

It's easy to say you value free speech, since most of the time free speech is synonymous with appropriate speech, tactful speech, and inoffensive speech. It's more challenging—but even more important—to allow the kind of speech you cannot condone: the bad jokes, the cruel cartoons, the anti-Semitic jeremiads shouted by some idiot on a streetcorner. Because the reality is that free speech is not just comprised of the speech we like to hear. As a society that purports to stand by free speech, we must allow all that is distasteful to stand alongside what we consider appropriate. And while we all have a right to fight against tactlessness with our own words and actions, as many do, we cannot outlaw offense. Free speech means nothing without it.

Islam and Violence

Andrew Nachemson | *Staff Writer*

In the weeks following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, there were two opinions I heard repeatedly that deeply troubled me. One was a notion that somehow freedom of speech was to blame for this tragedy, rather than murderers. The other response, publicly expounded by Bill Maher, is an idea that Islam as a religion is more violent than others and is itself was to blame. I would never deny that Islam has a serious problem with violence and extremism. Relative to other religious groups Muslims are certainly more prone to religiously motivated violence, and the Pew poll of global Muslims shows a disturbing level of support for extreme Muslim beliefs, but I still do not believe this means Islam as a religion is more violent than others.

The Quran does explicitly condone violence against nonbelievers in certain passages, but if you want to find a religious text that is equally (if not more) violent, unforgiving, and intolerant of other beliefs, look no further than Judaism's Torah. The Quran is violent, but in a relative sense it is not significantly more violent than Christianity, and is significantly less violent than Judaism. I am a Bar Mitzvah'd, Sunday school educated Jew, and I found the God of the Old Testament to be vengeful, murderous, jealous, and sometimes outright evil. But, when we examine the global Jewish population today, we do not find the same level of religiously motivated violence as is common in Islamic communities.

Another example that attacks the notion that religious texts and teachings are indicative of the culture that surrounds them is the presence of Buddhist extremists in Myanmar. Most people would think that Buddhist texts represent the most peaceful mainstream religion, and it's probably true, but even Buddhism is not free from the stain that is religious extremism and intolerance. As recently as 2013, Buddhists in Myanmar attacked and killed 32 teenage Muslim students. That type of behavior is not encouraged or condoned anywhere in prominent Buddhist texts, but certain social trends have lead to its existence.

I believe that the explanation for violence in Muslim communities is much more complicated than the misguided notion that Islam is simply a violent religion. Given the relative lack of extremism in Judaism and the presence of extremism in Buddhism, I think it's clear that violent texts are not necessarily indicative of violent cultures. In Myanmar, Buddhist extremists are responding to a fear that their nation, which has been traditionally defined by its religious affiliation, will be transformed into something with which they no longer identify. Something very similar is happening to the global Islamic population, and I think it's an inevitable phenomenon in a globalizing world.

The Islamic world is perhaps the second most powerful demographic after the western world. In a globalizing world, countless cultures begin to streamline, tending towards one global superculture. Obviously, the most powerful community will have the biggest impact on the structure of this new superculture. The Islamic world is not powerful enough to define the superculture, but is powerful enough to resist it. A huge portion of our world is living in fear that its culture, and therefore its identity, will be destroyed by globalization and western hegemony. Islamic extremism is a response to this fear of a socioeconomic phenomenon, not an expression of Islamic teachings.

There is a culture of violence and extremism that currently surrounds the religion of Islam. We must never be afraid to criticize and oppose that culture. But, we shouldn't mistake the culture for the religion itself, and we should make an effort to understand the socioeconomic factors that have contributed to the presence of this violent extremism, including examining the role our foreign policy may have played.