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## After the Paris attacks we're in danger of abandoning the right to offend

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Thursday January 22, 2015

In the two weeks since the Paris attacks I have arrived at a few conclusions. Some are partly linked to the fact that I am French, European, a journalist, and that I write for a UK-based global media organisation. I want to dwell here on misunderstandings, on fear, on politics, and on what principles can and should be upheld in liberal democracies in the aftermath of those events.

First, the misunderstandings. Sensitivities vary but mine is that [Charlie Hebdo](#) has never been racist or anti-Muslim; anticlerical, certainly. But there has been a great deal of incomprehension about it based simply on ignorance. One example: the cartoon representing the prophet Muhammad lying naked on his stomach, saying to a cameraman, “Do you like my bum?” Some saw this as pornography, even sodomy. The reference is, in fact, to a scene from a 1963 Jean-Luc Godard movie [featuring a naked Brigitte Bardot](#). Anyone who knows the movie knows the cartoon is about a softly erotic scene, with no aggressive pornography involved. The artist who drew it – and cartoons do stand somewhere between comment and art – was trying to say, “Dare I do this? Yes, I do.” I can see a problem from a religious standpoint – that of blasphemy: Muhammad is depicted. Yet this is one case where Charlie Hebdo is judged to have been outrageous and beyond decency.

Sensitivities can be inflamed by misunderstandings, but sometimes by deliberate manipulation. In his book [Tyranny of Silence](#) Flemming Rose, the editor who commissioned 12 cartoons depicting the prophet for the Danish newspaper [Jyllands-Posten](#) in 2005, describes how that episode began. After the cartoons were published a delegation of Danish imams travelled to the Middle East with a dossier intended to arouse hatred and anger. The file included drawings that were never run, nor commissioned by Jyllands-Posten, including some pornographic ones and a picture of a man disguised as a pig, which was taken at a French rural festival. This aroused public anger, and subsequently there were violent incidents and dozens of deaths. Had the dossier been a faithful representation, would that have been the case?

There has been passionate debate about whether Charlie Hebdo's latest, and very moderate, cover should be shown by the media, and if so, how. Some, including the Guardian, decided to run it as part of the news coverage; others decided it was too offensive and abstained. My view is that the cover image absolutely needed to be shown – not just for its news value, but because all

free, independent media must show solidarity when a massacre takes place in a newsroom because of what its team produced.

The biggest discovery for me, however, was the degree to which arguments made in much of the British media about not hurting sensitivities masked the real reason for not reproducing the image: fear. Some journalists were scared to tweet the [Charlie Hebdo](#) cover. The most honest reaction I found came from Jyllands-Posten, which did not reproduce the cover and clearly explained to its readers that it had made a security judgment. There is no shame in being afraid, but there is courage in recognising that that is the case.

Now the politics. Much has been said about French secularism, or *laïcité*, and how that contrasts with the multiculturalism that is upheld in the UK. But I am struck by how many progressive, leftwing people have come to consider that blasphemy is a line that should not be crossed if we are to live in a society of good manners and peaceful acceptance of cultural differences. On the face of it this puts them on a par not only with Muslim religious sentiment, including that of a minority of fanatics, but with a mindset that says some things are too sacred to be touched. It puts a right not to be offended before freedom of speech.

I was equally puzzled by the lack of a reaction in France to the pope's statement that [an insult justifies a punch in the face](#). Coming so soon after the Paris attacks, these were chilling words. It was also a clear illustration of how religions tend to want to enter the fray of politics. It took Europe centuries of history to reach a point where liberal democracies guaranteed a clear divide between church and state. Are we to go backwards? And who gets to decide what is sacred? With what mandate ?

Equally, I am struck by the argument that we should be especially sensitive to the views of minorities, or any group perceived as weak. They certainly should be listened to, but should they infringe on our free choices in a democracy? It is as if part of the left is being guided either by colonial guilt or the political context of rampant populism seen across Europe. But by this logic, freedom of speech must somehow be curtailed or attenuated because it might otherwise smack of neo-imperial arrogance. Ian Buruma has written much about this in his book [Taming the Gods](#), pointing out how anti-imperialism had survived as the main current of the European left after the communist bloc crumbled. He sums it up this way: "To the knee-jerk defenders of any non-western cause, Rushdie had no right to offend Muslims."

Weakness and vulnerability are also relative notions. Outrage against the 2005 Muhammad cartoons was encouraged by powerful institutions in the Muslim world – just as Iran is a power from which the fatwa against Rushdie emerged. So what can we take away from all this ?

My views largely coincide with those of Flemming Rose, who I spoke to recently: Europe musn't go back to the era before the Enlightenment. Yet that will be the case if the right to blaspheme or to go against anything deemed sacred by some is rejected. "We are still a free society but some of the mechanisms of a society of fear are starting to take hold," he told me, as we discussed self-censorship in the media.

In a globalised, digital world it becomes difficult to define what a minority or a majority is, and whose sensitivities count most. “If you accept the right not to be offended, you won’t be able to say anything that might offend. You have to shut up,” Rose added, explaining where the tyranny of silence starts. “Rejecting the right not to be offended is the price we pay to live in liberal democracy. So we all have to grow thicker skins.”

Thicker skins have one immediate advantage: they help reason to counter irrational passions.