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Resist the Tyranny of Silence After *Charlie Hebdo* Attack

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AARHUS, Denmark -- Philippe Val, at the time *Charlie Hebdo's* director, couldn't hide his contempt when, in 2007 -- in response to the court case against the leftist satirical magazine for publishing some cartoons of Muhammad -- someone asked him whether it had been necessary. Wasn't what Val did merely an unnecessary provocation and an attack against a weak and oppressed minority?

Charlie Hebdo had republished the cartoons from the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper, along with other cartoons of the Prophet made by its cartoonists. It was a reaction against the attacks on the Danish embassies throughout the world, carrying out threats received by our newspaper.

"What kind of civilization would we be if we couldn't make fun of, ridicule, and laugh at those who blow up trains and planes and mass murder innocents?" Phillipe Val asked himself, outraged.

The question must be asked again with renewed intensity after the killings in *Charlie Hebdo's* newsroom.

Satire is one of the ways in which an open society answers violence, threats, and barbarity. Satire is peaceful, even if it stings. It does not kill; it ridicules and publicly exposes that which others wish to keep hidden. It moves us to laughter, not to fear or hatred.

"Satire is a sound civilization's answer to savagery."

Satire is a sound civilization's answer to savagery. Of course, a cartoon is never worth the life of even one person. The problem is that there are some who insist on that idea.

How should we behave insofar as we are agents of free speech? How many threats and terrorist attacks will we have to witness before the "insult fundamentalists," or those who believe they

have an absolutist right not to be offended, understand that by defending their right not to be offended, by absurdly equating bad words and bad actions, they are only serving tyranny?

The killings in Paris are the tragic climax, as of today, of more than 25 years of debate in Europe about freedom of expression and its limits.

It started with Salman Rushdie, who in [1989](#) had to go into hiding after Iranian religious authorities published a fatwa (edict) calling all Muslim believers to murder the writer due to a couple of pages in his novel *The Satanic Verses*.

Since then, it's been one case after another. Most of them have had to do with how to treat Islam in the public sphere of a democracy. But it has not always been about offended Muslims. There have been similar cases involving Sikhs, Hindus, Orthodox Christians, nationalists and all sorts of groups who insist on forbidding the expression of what they deem offensive.

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[Both *Charlie Hebdo* and *Jyllands-Posten* have been forced to go to court.](#) We were both acquitted. In a democracy under the rule of law, the court's decisions should be respected, even when we disagree with the outcome. This is one of the ways in which we resolve conflicts. The other way is through an open and free debate.

Muslim radicals lost this debate in Denmark and France. But instead of following democracy's basic principle of answering words with words, cartoons with cartoons, and allowing verbal arguments to speak for themselves, those who felt offended because of their God or their prophet either clung to or promoted violence.

Because of that, it's shameful that so many voices in this debate have tried to do more than insinuate that *Jyllands-Posten*, *Charlie Hebdo*, the Dutch filmmaker [Theo Van Gogh](#), murdered in 2004, [Lars Vilks](#) in Sweden, [Lars Hedegaard](#) and [Naser Khader](#) in Denmark, [Robert Redeker](#) in France, [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#) in Holland, [Maryam Namazie](#) in Great Britain, and many other Europeans who have been threatened or murdered in recent years, were in some way asking for it.

Even a respectable newspaper like the [New York Times](#) wrote at the time that the cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten* unleashed violence in the Muslim world.

Naturally, that does not mean that the "insult fundamentalists" tolerate violence as a reaction to some cartoons. But what it does imply is that in too many places in our culture, people seem to think that words and deeds can be equally violent and offensive.

A DEATH PENALTY FOR INSULTS

Pakistan and many other Muslim countries have even reached a point where the insult, mockery or ridicule of the Prophet through words or graphics is punished with the death penalty, the same punishment reserved for murder and terrorism. In the last few decades, the politics of identity

and the struggle for an offense-free public space have contributed to the expansion of this way of thinking.

In February 2006, in the midst of the crisis of the Muhammad cartoons, *Charlie Hebdo* published a manifesto called "[Together, Facing the New Totalitarianism](#)." It was signed by Salman Rushdie, Philippe Val, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Dane [Mehdi Mozaffari](#), and many other intellectuals from different parts of the public spectrum who joined in defense of freedom of speech.

The manifesto read, in part, as follows:

After having overcome fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, the world now faces a new global totalitarian threat: Islamism.

We, writers, journalists, intellectuals, call for resistance to religious totalitarianism and for the promotion of freedom, equal opportunity and secular values for all.

Recent events, prompted by the publication of drawings of Muhammad in European newspapers, have revealed the necessity of the struggle for these universal values.

This struggle will not be won by arms, but in the ideological field.

Then it concluded:

We refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of "Islamophobia", a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatization of those who believe in it.

We defend the universality of the freedom of expression, so that a critical spirit can exist in every continent, towards each and every maltreatment and dogma.

We appeal to democrats and free spirits in every country that our century may be one of light and not dark.

Charlie Hebdo was perhaps the only European publication that, despite threats and incendiary attacks, insisted on the right to continue making fun of all religions. It aimed its darts at the Pope as often as it did at the Prophet. It worked from a well-established tradition in which nothing is sacred. A tradition that after the Reformation, and especially during the Enlightenment, kept on growing side by side with tolerance, religious freedom, and freedom of speech.

When, more than 10 years ago [Theo Van Gogh was murdered](#) in a street in Amsterdam by a young offended Muslim, the [Dutch Minister of Justice](#), that is, the highest ranking elected defender in a democratic state, said that a strengthening of legislation against hate speech should be weighed because if such a law had existed in the first place, Theo Van Gogh would still be alive.

In other words, if certain forms of speech had been criminalized, there would have been a chance for Van Gogh, since he wouldn't have been able to do his documentary about violence against women in the name of the Prophet in the first place -- the documentary that led [Mohammed Bouyeri to murder him](#).

"It's shameful that so many people suggested that *Charlie Hebdo* was asking for it."

Today we can say the same thing about *Charlie Hebdo's* staff. If they had only limited themselves to satire against Christianity, politicians, and the Pope, if they had only left Islam alone, they would be alive. But they didn't. They kept on doing their jobs.

And so we come back to our starting point: What kind of civilization are we if we renounce our right to publish opinions and cartoons that some people might deem offensive?

Basically, it's a debate about how to live together in an increasingly multicultural society, while at the same time retaining our freedom. We could search for a false harmony, like they do in unfree societies, by continually criminalizing new forms of speech according to the following maxim: If you accept my taboo and you don't speak critically or offensively about all that is sensitive and sacred to me, I will do the same for you.

In societies like ours, where diversity is growing, this road leads to a tyranny of silence.

Another road is to insist that the price that we all have to pay to live in a democracy where there is freedom of speech and freedom of religion is that no one has a special right to not be offended. The staff of *Charlie Hebdo* won't have died in vain if we choose that road as an answer to their murder.

Flemming Rose was the culture editor of Jyllands-Posten in [2005-2006](#) when he commissioned [cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that set off a global controversy](#), including [riots](#) across the Muslim world.