**Charlie Hebdo’s Defiant Muhammad Cover Fuels Debate on Free Speech**

By [DAN BILEFSKY](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/dan_bilefsky/index.html)JAN. 13, 2015

PARIS — Immediately upon unveiling its new cover — a depiction of Muhammad — the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo on Tuesday reignited the debate pitting free speech against religious sensitivities that has embroiled Europe since 12 people were killed during [an attack on its Paris offices](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/08/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-paris-shooting.html) by Muslim extremists a week ago.

[The cover](http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/01/12/mahomet-en-une-du-charlie-hebdo-de-mercredi_1179193) shows the bearded prophet shedding a tear and holding up a sign saying, “I am Charlie,” the rallying cry that has become synonymous with support of the newspaper and free expression. Above the cartoon on a green background is the headline “All is forgiven.”

While surviving staff members, at an emotional news conference, described their choice of cover as a show of forgiveness, most Muslims consider any depiction of their prophet to be blasphemous. Moreover, interpretations quickly swirled around the Internet that the cartoon also contained disguised crudity.

One of Egypt’s highest Islamic authorities warned that the cartoon would exacerbate tensions between the secular West and observant Muslims, while death threats circulated online against staff members.

A preacher, Anjem Choudary, the former leader of a radical group that was banned in Britain, [was quoted](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/charlie-hebdo-radical-cleric-anjem-choudary-calls-cover-depicting-mohamed-an-act-of-war-9975618.html) by a British newspaper, The Independent, as saying that the image was “an act of war” that would be punishable by death if judged in a [Shariah](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/sharia_islamic_law/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) court.

Beyond new threats — and the potential for more violence after a week in which both mosques and Jewish sites were attacked — the persistence of what many Muslims see as continuing provocations opened complaints about a double standard in European countries, whose bans on hate speech some see as seeming to stop short of forbidding ridicule of Islam.

“If freedom of expression can be sacrificed for criminalizing incitement and hatred, why not for insulting the Prophet of Allah?” Mr. Choudary [wrote last week on Twitter](https://twitter.com/anjemchoudary/status/552817038436356096) on the same day as the massacre at Charlie Hebdo, during which the attackers indicated they were avenging Muhammad for the newspaper’s insults.

Supporters of the iconoclastic newspaper defended the cover as a fitting and defiant tribute to Charlie Hebdo’s slain cartoonists. “I have no worries about the cover,” the cartoonist who drew it, Renald Luzier, who uses the pen name Luz, told assembled reporters at the offices of the newspaper Libération, which the Charlie Hedbo staff has used since the attack. “We have confidence in people’s intelligence, and we have confidence in humor. The people who did this attack, they have no sense of humor.”

“I’m sorry we’ve drawn him yet again,” he added, “but the Muhammad we’ve drawn is a man who is crying.”

Laurent Léger, an investigative journalist with Charlie Hebdo, shrugged off the idea, circulating on social media, that the cartoon contained one or even two hidden renderings of male genitals. “People can see what they want to see, but a cartoon is a cartoon,” he said. “It is not a photograph.”

Muslim leaders as far away as Egypt condemned Charlie Hebdo, recalling threats received by a Danish newspaper in 2005 after it, too, published cartoons satirizing Muhammad.

[Continue reading the main story](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/14/world/europe/new-charlie-hebdo-has-muhammad-cartoon.html?_r=0#story-continues-3)

Elsa Ray, the spokeswoman of the Paris-based Collective Against Islamophobia in France, declined to react specifically to the new cartoon, but said that cartoons that lampooned Muhammad breached the limits of decency and insulted Muslims. “The freedom of expression may be guaranteed by the French Constitution, but there is a limit when it goes too far and turns into hatred, and stigmatization,” she said.

Moreover, she argued that the failure of French courts to clamp down on cartoons satirizing Muhammad was a double standard, given the robustness of action taken when Jews were insulted by cartoonists or artists, including Dieudonné M’bala M’bala, a comedian, who in 2013 came under the scrutiny of courts, which [banned a series of his shows](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/world/europe/for-hateful-comic-in-france-muzzle-becomes-a-megaphone.html).

Mr. M’bala M’bala has said it was a shame that a Jewish journalist had not been killed in the gas chambers. He has also come under fire for popularizing a gesture that strongly resembles a Nazi salute.

In a statement on [his Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/dieudonneofficiel) after [Sunday’s enormous unity march](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/world/europe/paris-march-against-terror-charlie-hebdo.html) in Paris, Mr. M’bala M’bala expressed his admiration for Amedy Coulibaly, the gunman behind the killings at a kosher supermarket. “As far as I am concerned, I feel I am Charlie Coulibaly,” he wrote, alluding to the “I am Charlie” rallying cry. The Paris prosecutor’s office said Monday it had opened an investigation to determine if Mr. M’bala M’bala should be charged with promoting terrorism.

Mr. M’bala M’bala said he was being unfairly targeted.

French laws safeguard the freedom of speech, but there are many exceptions to the rule.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls told the National Assembly on Tuesday that “blasphemy” was not in French law and never would be. But he refused to draw any analogy between the satirists of Charlie Hebdo and Mr. M’bala M’bala.

“There is a fundamental difference,” he said.

Some cultural observers praised Charlie Hebdo for upholding Western values of liberal democracy, even at risk of violence. Flemming Rose, the former cultural editor of the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, whose 2005 publication of cartoons lampooning Muhammad — including one with his turban depicted as a lit fuse — [drew violent recriminations](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/international/europe/08denmark.ready.html) that reverberated across the world, recalled that the publication of the cartoons resulted in a fatwa against him by a radical cleric, threats against the newspaper [and one of its cartoonists](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/world/europe/13denmark.html), and attacks against Danish embassies in the Middle East.

Mr. Rose said in an interview that Jyllands-Posten had decided not to publish the latest Charlie Hebdo caricature for fear the newspaper would be targeted again. Still, he said it was imperative that Western newspapers not surrender to Islamic radicals.

“We aren’t republishing the Charlie Hebdo cartoons because we are afraid,” he said. “But I know well that if you give in to intimidation, it works.”

His comments reflect the debate that last’s week attacks have ignited in newsrooms and in the streets and cafes in Europe.

Jérôme Fenoglio, the managing editor of Le Monde, said his paper had decided to publish the Charlie Hebdo cartoon on its cover because “it is an important document that we wanted to show to everybody.” The cartoon, Mr. Fenoglio said, “didn’t carry any insulting message.”

“We defend our right to be able to publish any cartoon, but never those which would be aggressive,” Mr. Fenoglio said. Though he said that some of Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures were “not funny” and could “uselessly” offend people, “each paper makes its own judgment.”

“Freedom of the press is an absolute right,” Mr. Fenoglio said, “but each paper has its own free will, and chooses what seems pertinent or not.”

Some American newspapers, including The New York Times, [did not reproduce the Charlie Hedbo cartoons](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/14/world/europe/new-charlie-hebdo-cover-creates-new-questions-for-us-news-media.html) that mocked Islam. The Times called the decision an editorial judgment that reflected its standards for content that is deemed offensive and gratuitous.

The decision drew criticism from some free-speech advocates who called it cowardly in the face of a terrorist attack, which the newspaper disputed.

“Actually, we have republished some of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, including a caricature of the head of ISIS, as well as some political cartoons,” Dean Baquet, the executive editor of The Times, said in a statement. “We do not normally publish images or other material deliberately intended to offend religious sensibilities.”

The Washington Post, which published a single previous Charlie Hebdo cartoon of Muhammad on its printed op-ed page last Thursday, republished the new cover on its website on Tuesday. Martin Baron, the newspaper’s executive editor, said the images did not violate its editorial standards.

“It has to be deliberately, pointedly, needlessly offensive,” Mr. Baron said.

More publications have published or plan to reproduce Charlie Hebdo’s newest cover online. Three million copies of the newspaper will be published on Wednesday in 16 languages.

The proliferation of the cartoons is heightening concern that the already precarious climate in Europe will worsen, with the possibility of more violence. Some newspapers that reproduced the cartoons in solidarity after last week’s attack have themselves been threatened or targeted already.

A Belgian newspaper, Le Soir, received an anonymous call Sunday from someone threatening that “it’s going to blow in your newsroom.”

The same day, in Germany, stones and an incendiary object were thrown through the windows of the headquarters of a newspaper, Hamburger Morgenpost, damaging the archive but causing no injuries.

Khalil Charles, spokesman for the Muslim Association of Britain, said free speech had been allowed to defy common sense and had given way to insults. Referring to last week’s attacks, he added: “Muslims are appalled, like everyone, about what happened. But this is criminality that should not be attached to Islam, and the Prophet should not be attacked as a result.”

# What is the aim of satire?

By [Alexandra Petri](http://www.washingtonpost.com/people/alexandra-petri) January 9

“Satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful. I only aim at the powerful. When satire is aimed at the powerless, it is not only cruel — it’s vulgar.”

-Molly Ivins

Let’s talk about free speech and satire, for a moment.

There has been a lot of interesting [pushback](http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2015/01/in-the-wake-of-charlie-hebdo-free-speech-does-not-mean-freedom-from-criticism/) to all the “Je Suis Charlie” solidarity.

“Murder is vile and unconscionable. Freedom of the press must be protected. But racist trolling is not heroism. Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie,” tweeted Laurie Penny of the New Statesman, echoing the sentiment of many.

“In an unequal world, satire that ‘mocks everyone equally’ winds up serving the powerful,” Saladin Ahmed noted, also on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/saladinahmed/status/553226403261710337).

Jennifer Schuessler [writes over at the New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/arts/an-attack-chills-satirists-and-prompts-debate.html?smid=tw-nytimes) that “some in the cartooning world are also debating a delicate question: Were the victims free-speech martyrs, full stop, or provocateurs whose aggressive mockery of Islam sometimes amounted to xenophobia and racism?”

I think it’s important to be careful how we talk about this. This desire to hold satire to a high standard is a good impulse. To ask that people earn the right to be listened to by choosing their targets carefully and punching in the right direction is simple best practice.

Still, this suggestion that Some Things Should Be Off-Limits makes me a little nervous. “Nope, sorry, RIGHT satire only” – that, to me, is a slippery thing to say.

“We love satire,” people say, “but that’s not satire. That’s racism. That’s xenophobia. If we saw satire, we would embrace it and protect it. If it were funny, we would laugh.” This feels very dangerous. This is a very malleable line.

I know many sane and reasonable people who will say, “No, I think I can draw a line, and it isn’t actually all that malleable,” and yes, you could probably draw a line that would be very satisfactory to a large number of people. And yes, “How dare you say I couldn’t SAY EVERYTHING I WANTED TO?” is a classic first-worlder’s tantrum. And yes, in an unfair world, giving immunity to all directions of punches seems like cruel piling on. I grant all that. But I think to protect the “right” kind of satire, you have to protect the “wrong” kind. Because there will come a day when you find yourself on the wrong side of the line.

Even the best get it wrong. Remember when the Onion had to [apologize for and retract that tweet](http://www.theonion.com/articles/the-onion-apologizes,31434/)? There needs to be room for people to flub and be bad at it, because otherwise you risk losing the stuff that counts.

I wish we were able to invoke civility in this debate. Which sounds bonkers – like debating what is the right fork to use in a foxhole. It seems like a small-bore approach to a large-bore problem, a discussion about ideas deeply enough held that people are willing to kill or die for them.

Still, the whole point of civility, in its ideal form, is to offer a set of rules that you apply to yourself no matter whom you’re dealing with. Regardless of whom you’re walking into a building with, it is polite to hold open the door. It’s a certain measure of courtesy that you afford to everyone — a consideration of their feelings that you take because it’s the right thing to do.

And going in with the principle that you should conduct yourself toward others with a certain measure of consideration, you are able to have a much more productive discussion than if everyone’s stuck trying to rule what other people can and cannot say. Whether or not you say a thing is something you can actually control. Whether or not a thing gets said, by anyone, is something you can’t.

“As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination,” wrote Oscar Wilde. “When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.” There’s a difference. What’s wicked is what other people tell you is wrong. What’s vulgar is what you tell yourself is beneath your own standards.

The Molly Ivins quote from above has been circulating, and it expresses some of the unease that people have felt in the wake of the attacks. But I think her choice of words is telling — that she calls punching down vulgar, and cruel, puts it in terms of courtesy. That’s how you get it to stop.

That doesn’t mean letting the bad stuff off easily, though. You can say, “You know, that’s not edgy, it punches the wrong way, and I don’t think it’s funny. A person who says a lot of things like that is not a person I care to listen to.” You should say that. That’s how you move the conversation.

Yes, it’s hard, and yes, it’s slow, and yes, everyone draws lines in different places. Out of the places where everyone draws those lines, you get a consensus, and hopefully the conversation improves. But there’s a big difference between “I should not say that. I would not say that. I do not approve of anyone who says that” and “That is offensive and should never be said. Not even if it’s newsworthy. Not even if it’s what a conversation is about.”

That’s too far.

There’s a distinction between something that is right to say and something that you have a right to say.

So we have to approach this cautiously. There is a point when self-censorship becomes censorship, full stop. And that’s the point when you’re not saying something NOT because you think, well, I’d rather not be the sort of person who’s said that, it’s rude, it’s wrong, it punches down, but because I am afraid to say that because of the consequences. At that point it becomes intimidation.

Then you don’t change people’s minds; you silence them. And the whole point of all this — satire, art, any of it — is to puncture taboos and create a conversation that can change minds. “Freedom of opinion and freedom of expression are indispensable conditions for the full development of the person,” as the [Human Rights Committee](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf) observes.

More speech. Better speech. That’s the way up.