



Why the Charlie Hebdo Massacre Won't Stop Free Expression

Laïcité and Freedom

Lessons from Charlie Hebdo

BY JONATHAN SCRIVEN

A couple of years ago, as I entered the staff room at the French international *lycée* where I teach, I found a group of my colleagues standing around a large table in the middle of the room. On one side of the table there was a variety of pastries, cheeses, crackers, and bread; on the other were three or four bottles of champagne—corks removed, ready to pour. At the center of the table was a large hand-made sign that read, “*Laïcité: 105 ans!!*” It was December 9, 2010, and my colleagues were celebrating the 105th anniversary of the French law on the Separation of the Churches and the State—the 1905 law that officially established state secularism in France.

At the time I was a bit embarrassed because I had never heard of the law. I knew, of course, that France *had* such a law but was not aware that it was important enough to celebrate with *un petit goûte*—a little snack—during an afternoon break at school. Plus, I thought to myself, *It's not like this is the fiftieth or hundredth anniversary. It's the 105th anniversary. Who celebrates the 105th anniversary of anything?*

Last month, when heavily armed gunmen entered the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 10 staff members and two police officers, one of the first thoughts that came to my mind was that afternoon back in 2010. France has struggled in recent years to find a balance between religious expression and



secularism, and I instinctively realized that *laïcité* (secularism) would be a topic of conversation in the weeks and months to come. But I also knew that the conversations about *laïcité* would encompass much more than just religion and religious freedom. You see, for the French, *laïcité* is a concept that is much more closely tied to liberty than to religion. Freedom from the constraint of religious influence and domination is essential for what they call “freedom of conscience.” Historically, in France, one was either within the Catholic church or outside of it; there was no middle ground. *Laïcité* emerged from a desire for freedom from the moral authority of a single dominant religion. Creating separation from this religion was, therefore, the ultimate expression of liberty.

And here in France, that is where reactions to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks begin. The attack was

Stéphane Charbonnier, the editor of *Charlie Hebdo*, poses with his magazine on September 19, 2012. The magazine is part of a long tradition of French satire.

People hold placards reading “Je suis Charlie” (“I am Charlie”) during a silent gathering in Nice, France following the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*



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first and foremost an attack on *liberté*—an idea that is extremely important in French history and culture. But among friends I have talked with, the role of religion in France is also a topic that is coming up more and more. There are other issues, of course, but I'll briefly focus on some of the historical and contextual ideas that contribute to the French understanding of liberty and secularism.

Je Suis Charlie

A French friend of mine told me the day after the attack that “this is personal,” not just because the events took place on French soil but because the attack came against the press, one of the most important pillars of the French concept of *liberté*. France is immensely proud of the role it has played in promoting free speech and freedom of the press around the world. Most French people can tell you very quickly that *Agence France Presse* is the oldest news agency in the world (established in 1835) or that the first mass-circulation newspaper was *Le Petit Journal*, a Parisian daily first printed in 1863 that was, by the mid-1880s, printing more than one million copies every day. (An interesting note

about *Le Petit Journal* is that it was also the first French paper to include an illustrated supplement each week, starting the tradition of including illustrated commentary that is so important around the world today).

To give you an idea of how important the press is in French history and culture, the history curriculum during the final year of high school (the famous “baccalaureate year”) includes a major section called *Médias et opinions publiques en France*, which essentially covers how and to what extent the press has influenced public opinion in France. One of the topics students study in depth is *J'accuse*, an open letter written by French intellectual Émile Zola in 1898 and published in a newspaper called *L'Aurore*. The letter was addressed directly to French president Felix Fauré and claimed, among other things, that the government's decision to convict Alfred Dreyfus, an officer in the French army and a Jew, of espionage and treason was blatantly anti-Semitic. The letter was wildly controversial (the government went so far as to sue Zola for libel, and he was forced to flee to England to avoid prison), but it was credited with changing public opinion on the entire Dreyfus Affair. It is in this tradition—the idea that the

press can, and even should, be a part of the public conversation—that most French people view the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy.

Charlie Hebdo is not *Le Petit Journal* or *Agence France Presse*, that is for sure. It isn't *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, or *Libération* either, for that matter. *Charlie Hebdo* is a relatively small satirical magazine that prints about sixty thousand copies every week. When I asked my friends and colleagues about the magazine, I was hard-pressed to find anyone who read it regularly. But, as one friend told me, "We always see the cover." And it is the cover that satirizes, offends, provokes, shocks, and denigrates . . . everyone. Many French people I know do not particularly like the magazine, and some patently dislike it, saying it often goes too far. A couple of days after the attacks, a colleague told me she thought it was "a terrible publication." She then added, without hesitation, "*Mais aujourd'hui, je suis Charlie.*" ["But today, I am Charlie."]

Charlie Hebdo is freedom and liberty for the French. It doesn't matter if one likes the magazine or not; it symbolizes the notion that ideas and the freedom to express them are alive and well in France. And while many French people may disagree with the viewpoints expressed in the cartoons on the cover each Wednesday, they are united in their defense of its right to publish them.

The role of *laïcité*

Though France did not fully separate church and state until the 1905 law I mentioned earlier, *laïcité* is one of the core concepts of the French constitution. Article 1 formally states: "*La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale.*" The combination of the constitution and the 1905 law was intended to curb the power of an establishment religion—Catholicism in this case—and create a society where the practice of religion was both something to be protected at all costs and something to keep out of politics at all costs. Today political leaders are free to practice their own religion but are expected to keep religious views out the public discourse, the idea being that religious positions are generally not compatible with reasoned political debate. But

French secularism has gone beyond the halls of the *Assemblée Nationale* and is now often applied to citizens in public places, leading to frequent conflict between the government and those who wish to publicly display their religious affiliations (particularly France's large, fast-growing non-Christian population). Because faiths such as Islam, Sikhism, and Judaism are often accompanied by strict dress codes (think hijab, turban, yamaka), they have increasingly been the target of bans imposed by the government. In 1994 the French government tried to make a distinction between "discreet" and "ostentatious" religious symbols. Those considered ostentatious, including the Muslim hijab, were banned from all public places in the country. In 2004 the French banned all "conspicuous" religious symbols from public schools, carefully making sure not to mention any religions in particular so as to avoid charges that the law was targeting Muslims. In 2011, France became the first country in Europe to ban the burqa in public. The ban was challenged in European Union courts but upheld in a 2014 decision.

How does all of this relate to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks? Many friends I spoke with were firm in their view that the attacks were an act of terror aimed, essentially, at the Western ideals of freedom, liberty, and democracy and should not be viewed as a "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim world and the West. Yes, the assailants were radical Islamists, but the issue is not really religion per se. Others are not so sure. A teaching colleague, a strong atheist, summarized his views like this (I'm summarizing here):



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It may not be strictly about religion, but one issue that we [the French] are going to have to address is how to apply the idea of *laïcité* today and going forward. This is not 1905. We have a lot of non-Christian immigrants, and we have a complicated history with many of our Muslim immigrants—the Algerian war wasn't that long ago, you know. We have to figure out a way to talk about religion, at least as it relates to how non-Christians are integrating into our country. If we continue to avoid this, we are headed for some really, really big problems.

As we were talking, some other colleagues came around, and we began talking about what French secularism really is—or rather, what it should be. I was somewhat surprised to hear several people argue that, though they fully agreed with and supported *laïcité* in France, the application of the idea needed some revision. No one was exactly sure what a new application of French secularism would look like, but a theme that emerged in our small group was that perhaps in an effort to protect freedom of thought and religion, the French conception of *laïcité* actually infringes on people's right to express their religion or, in some cases, actually prevents it. Indeed, all around France, people are trying to come to terms with what, exactly, secularism means in 2015. A poll published a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks revealed that two-fifths believed that, since images of the Prophet offended Muslims, they should not be published.¹ Some see a double standard being applied after the arrest of controversial French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, following his post on Facebook that appeared to sympathize with the killers (he was charged with “apology for terrorism,” a French law that had been on the books for only one year).

In some cases, secularism goes even further and is used to advocate right-wing policies. France's far-right party, the Front National (FN), uses the idea of secularism to promote a xenophobic and anti-Islam agenda. Days after the attack, FN leader Marine Le Pen (daughter of longtime FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen)



M'bala M'bala



Le Pen

called Islam an “odious ideology” and called on French leaders to immediately suspend the Schengen Agreement, the EU statute that allows for free movement of people and goods among countries.² Back in 2012, she drew criticism for comparing Muslims who prayed openly in public to the Nazi occupation of France. This is important because Front National is not some fringe political party; it is the third largest party in France. In 2013 Le Pen received almost 20 percent of the vote in the French presidential elections, and in last year's European Parliament elections, Front National won the most seats of any party in France.

Perhaps because of the rising popularity of Front National, leading intellectuals in France are beginning to more openly debate *laïcité*. As more and more non-Christian immigrants feel marginalized within France, frustration on all sides increases. In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde* in 2012, Jean Baubérot, one of France's most influential historians and perhaps the world's leading expert on secularism, argued for some changes, saying that the 1905 law was now being used to limit religious freedom by effectively removing the visibility of religion in public areas, something he argues the law was not intended to do. Baubérot blames right-wing factions in France for what he calls *la laïcité falsifiée* (a falsified secularism) and argues that rather than using the concept of secularism to ensure and protect freedom (*liberté*), conservatives have manipulated it into something that is blatantly hostile toward Muslims and Islam.³

Former French president Nicholas Sarkozy, a member of the conservative UMP party, tried to

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soften the rhetoric on the issue during his campaign in 2007. He called for a more “positive *laïcité*,” one that recognized the contributions that religion and faith-based groups have played in France’s history and one where religious freedom could be used to illustrate the importance of liberty in general. A year later, when he welcomed Pope Benedict XVI to France, Sarkozy spoke about how important it was to respect secularism without being hostile to conversations about God and faith. At a reception for the pope at a Cistercian monastery in Paris, Sarkozy said that it was “legitimate for democracy and respectful of secularism to have a dialogue with religions” and added that it “‘would be madness’” to simply ignore religion. Sarkozy was roundly criticized in the French media for speaking so openly about religion in the public square. In a large headline the next day, *Libération* called his attempts to find a balance between religious expression and public discourse “Mission Impossible.” The weekly magazine *Marianne* warned that he was promoting religion everywhere he went: “We have to watch our President when he travels. Outside our borders, our president can reveal himself to be a passionate missionary for Christ. . . . Traveling in Arab lands, [he] transformed himself into a fanatical zealot for Islam.”⁴ A few years later, these same publications roundly praised Sarkozy for supporting legislation in France that outlawed the burqa in public.

That brings us back to *Charlie Hebdo*. Four days after the initial attacks, millions of French citizens marched through the streets across France—in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, and near our home in Nice—in what were called Unity Rallies. The goal was to show support for those who lost their lives, to defend freedom of speech and expression, and to, more generally, unite French people around the ideals that have shaped their country for more than two hundred years: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Many carried the now famous *Je suis Charlie* signs, some held over-sized pencils high in the air, while others simply walked in silence holding a small candle in front of them. The message was clear: though masked men

tried to kill these ideals, they had failed. It was as if the whole country had been asked, “Are you going to let terrorism win?” and they had responded with a resounding, “Non!”

In many ways, the French reaction has been similar to reactions in the United States after 9/11 or in the UK after the “Tube” bombings in 2007. Americans and British also came together in their countries to rally around values such as freedom, liberty, and democracy. But in France, people are also uniting around another idea: secularism. In an emotional speech before the National Assembly six days after the attacks, French prime minister Manuel Valls spoke passionately about how the country should respond to the attacks, urging both lawmakers and citizens to do even more to uphold basic French values. “The response to our society’s urgent needs must be strong and without hesitation. It lies . . . in the Republic and its values, first and foremost *laïcité*, which is the guarantee of unity and tolerance.” He then conveyed the message he had given to France’s educational leaders the day before. “I sent them a message about making an all-out effort, a message about being strict, a message which must be echoed at



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every level of national education: the only issue which matters is *laïcité, laïcité, laïcité!* This is central to the Republic and therefore schools!"⁵

The conversations to come

The days and weeks after the attacks were traumatic and difficult for the French people, and during this time I have been immensely proud to be living in France. The French will not be intimidated by these attacks. Like others who have been victims of terror, the French have decided that they will not allow terrorism to win. They have said they will be defiant, and they have been. Friends of mine had spoken at length about how these events must not cast a shadow over all Muslims but must instead be seen for what they were: an act of terror committed by people who deliberately misrepresent the fundamental ideas of Islam. At my school, a group of students led a small vigil near the main administration building a few days after the attacks. They each held two signs in the air, one saying *Je suis Charlie* and the other identifying their religion. What a sight to see signs that read "I am Muslim," "I am Jewish," "I am Christian," and even "I am an atheist."

There are, of course, many other issues that surround the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, and they will linger for months, even years. As time passes and the events of January 7 slowly fade away, there will be conversations that need to take place. These conversations will be difficult and contentious. They will include discussion



about the limits of freedom and liberty, the role of religion in society, the political impact of events like the Paris attacks, immigration and integration, radical Islam, measures to combat terrorism, and many, many others.

I'm not sure what the result of these conversations will be, but I am sure that *Charlie Hebdo* will be there each Wednesday with a brand new issue satirizing and making fun of all parties involved. ■

Jonathan Scriven teaches history and political geography



at the Centre International de Valbonne, an international school near Nice, France. Jonathan is a graduate of Andrews University and recently completed a doctorate in

international relations at the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations in Geneva, Switzerland. Prior to moving to Europe with his family, Jonathan taught at several Adventist academies in the Washington, DC area and worked for five years at Washington Adventist University.

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