Charlie Hebdo: a perspective one month on

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25 years after the Rushdie Affair, one month after the atrocities in Paris and days after the attack on a free speech seminar in Copenhagen, Sadikur Rahman looks at what lessons free expression activists and opponents have taken.

Another European city, this time Copenhagen, has been attacked because it had the temerity to host a small talk about free speech and cartoons. Two more people have lost their lives, and two more families have been left devastated. One person was killed at the event, whilst the other was targeted because he was Jewish, a recurring target for Islamist fundamentalists.

The reaction in the UK press to the Copenhagen attack has been muted, perhaps because we're getting so used to these attacks and it is no longer a surprise. Much of the reporting has been deeply troubling. The BBC, for example, constantly referred to the "controversial" cartoonist Lars Vilks. Despite the fact that only those objecting to freedom of expression would find him controversial, they deliberately chose to use this terminology. One LBC reporter even asked "whether it was wise to host a debate on free speech". It seems to me that nothing has been learned from the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre.

The *Charlie Hebdo* murders were a critical moment. We will reflect back on the attack as a turning point. In the future, those bemoaning the loss of free speech and expression will say we should have taken more action now, been more robust, less scared of the fanatics, and less polite and squeamish about printing the cartoons. But now it is too late. Instead, the attacks could have been a turning point in getting blasphemy laws repealed around the world.

It is much like the Salman Rushdie *Satanic Verses* protests in 1991, one can trace many Islamist movements and the increasing religious awareness of British Muslims from that moment. It was then that the forces of Islamism and the anti-blasphemy lobby cut their teeth. Many now look back at that pivotal moment and believe that we should have been less willing to tolerate the protests against that book. Had society and the press been more willing to defend the right to offend and freedom of expression when these movements were still in their infancy, perhaps we would not be where we are today. Instead, most of the press seemed to blame Rushdie for having written 'offensive' material in the first place.

Although there was initially an outpouring of solidarity and sympathy in the Paris marches it has still not led to any sense of safety in being able to publish simple pictures. On the contrary, there seems to be a new turning away from support of the cartoonists, with statements qualifying the right to free expression by saying that we should be sensitive to religious and cultural feelings.

Apart from one or two exceptions, few mainstream papers in the UK or America published the pictures. This shows how much success the killers have had. The position has now been reached whereby no one will publish these pictures both because of safety fears and because it will be seen that unless the story deserves it there is no need to cause 'offence'. They are being constantly published on the internet, but mainly by campaigning groups in support of free expression and of course to some extent that can be done anonymously. Without strength in numbers and spreading the danger around, so few are expected to shoulder the burden of free speech for so many.

Just last week there was a demonstration organised by the Muslim Action Forum outside Downing Street against the publication of the cartoon by *Charlie Hebdo*- the organisers in fact gave thanks to the British press, which had respected the protestors' views. The prevailing mood seems to be that although we have the right publish these pictures, we should not in fact exercise that right and specifically we should not criticise religion. Whether that is because of fear or a genuine wish not to offend is irrelevant. It means that, in fact, the right to free expression is lost and we have truly censored ourselves.

After the *Charlie Hebdo* incident there was much talk that somehow secularism itself was to blame. It was implied that the French state in its insistence on secularist principles was too aggressive and played into the hands of Islamist militants, by banning the Niqab in public for instance. It was argued that this somehow led to a sense of alienation which nurtured fundamentalist, nihilistic attitudes amongst some members of the Muslim population. This all ignores of course the fact that it was cartoonists who were specifically targeted, which suggests that it had nothing to do with alienation or racism, and everything to do with Islam's prohibition on depictions of the Prophet.

Of course there are no easy solutions, but I would suggest two ways of moving forward. The first is of course an internal debate within Islam, which to some extent outsiders will have very little input on, other than to wholeheartedly support the likes of Majid Nawaz and other reformers. Many Muslims have tried to show that the depictions of the Prophet were common in the past and that certainly seems to be the case. However, it is telling that often those articles are for the 'West's' consumption, namely an attempt to lecture the non-Muslims about the tolerant ideals of Islam and also to repeat the mantra that the murders had nothing to do with Islam. What these writers actually need to do is convince their many co-religionists (Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS) that Islam can be a peaceful religion; Western leaders don't really seem to need much convincing of that.

There is now an articulate lobby which demands obedience to a *de facto* blasphemy law. We need to re-educate ourselves and be equally articulate and argue against such encroachments. This is even more important amongst the young, who are less religious but perhaps more politically correct, and who seem to view all ideas as equally valid. One need only view the actions of various student unions around the country in evidence of this.

Some of this needs to take place in the classroom and schools where fundamental ideas about our society are inculcated, ideas like free speech, human rights, democracy and secularism. We need to tackle all forms of non-violent extremism, because it is clear that this can lead to violence when left unchallenged. That is not to say we should ban things such as the veil, but we should be free to openly criticise the religious ideas behind them

Surely the lesson from France is not that there was too much secularism but there wasn't enough. It is simply not enough to have a secular government and secular policy, to solely concentrate on who is in power, or who is in government and to think that a change there will lead to a more secular society or the absence of religion from public life. That seems to me to be elitist. We need to disseminate and propagate secular principles to the public at large and be willing to engage in debate. We need to be willing to risk stating the obvious, starting from first principles- for example, explaining what it means to have freedom of expression. The French state has to convince many French Muslims of the values of secularism- they are not engaged; they are not challenged and they have been left to their own devices and many have fallen for fundamentalist ideas. We in the UK and Europe generally need to push secularism into the private sphere. And at risk of using religious language, we need to proselytise the values of secularism on a wider scale.

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