



CHARLIE, QU'EST-CE QUE ÇA VEUT DIRE?

By the time this issue appears, the murders of ten members of the staff of the Parisian satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and two policemen at the hands of Islamic terrorists will be many news cycles in the past and, in all likelihood, generally forgotten as the media move on to the next big issue or event, and then the next after that. The diminution of the widespread and often frenzied attention to the affair offers an opportunity for reconsideration of what it means to say “*Je suis Charlie*”—or not to say it. This reflection requires us to ask what “Charlie” means; that is, what is the moral and political significance of the abrasive social satire practiced by the magazine and of the widespread support for it?

The outpouring of grief for the victims, defiance of the terrorists who would silence them, and solidarity with the ideal of free expression, no matter how offensive, at whatever cost, was quite impressive, among both the French and many of their allies. The widely repeated assertion of identification with “Charlie” would seem to indicate a resurgence of commitment to Voltaire’s principle “I detest what you write, but I should give my life in order that you be able to continue writing.”

Nevertheless, there is surely a certain

irony here, not to say conceptual dissonance, in view of the laws against “hate speech” in place today in France and much of Europe. A Muslim comedian, “Dieudonné,” was arrested in Paris for saying “*Je suis Coulibaly*,” in reference to the Islamist who invaded a Kosher grocery store and killed four of its patrons, after already having killed a policewoman. Writing in the *Weekly Standard* (January 26, 2015), Sam Schulman questions the effectiveness of laws forbidding hate speech and Holocaust denial; he maintains that anti-Semitism and hostility to immigrants has intensified in Europe since such laws have passed, while remaining steady (and low) in the United States with its firm commitment to freedom of speech and the press enshrined in the First Amendment. Schulman thus adds a pragmatic argument to the moral case for First Amendment absolutism characteristic of important strands of conservatism as well as of classical liberalism.

Moreover, approval of *Charlie* is hardly monolithic, and there is uneasiness even among undoubted supporters. Numerous prominent Muslims condemned the murders but also condemned the satirical cartoons, which in their view provoked the violence. Pope Francis likewise condemned the terrorism and voiced sympathy for the victims, but

qualified it with an infelicitous analogy to a man insulting someone's mother and getting punched in the nose. Even in the pages of *National Review* (February 9, 2015), a magazine with an unwavering commitment to freedom of the press, Rob Long avers, "*Charlie Hebdo* isn't funny."

Long's article unfavorably contrasts *Charlie* with the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, which he finds "rude and utterly hilarious," because, in his view, it embodies a certain subtlety and even ambivalence—"both a sharply nasty satire on LDS doctrine and a declaration of the power of faith." It is the combination that he finds funny, and he even allows, "*Charlie Hebdo* is funny in context, if you imagine someone really uptight—a cleric, say, or some humorless religious fanatic—reading it." In both cases, the putatively nuanced as well as the heavy-handed, giving offense is an essential element in the humor.

For my part, the few *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons that I have seen strike me as not the least bit funny; indeed, I find them repulsive regardless of the object of the attack. I rather suspect that I should find *The Book of Mormon* considerably less amusing than Mr. Long does, but I shall never know, for I have no intention of seeing it. While I am not at all persuaded by Mormonism, it seems to pose no threat to society, while offering benefits to most of its adherents. I can think of no reason for participating in a gratuitous slur on the religion of Mitt Romney, anymore than I should buy tickets to *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, a similar theatrical attack on Catholicism mounted some years ago. In fact, I rather think a world free of all these productions would be a better place.

Nevertheless, should a resuscitated brigade of the Knights Templar burst into the studio where an anti-Christian play was being staged and batter to death the actors with

battle axes and broad swords, I should be as appalled as I am by the atrocity in Paris early this year—and as gratified by the apprehension of the perpetrators. Further, I think that conservatives (and Christians and Jews who take their religion seriously—often the same persons) should be exceedingly chary of laws forbidding blasphemy or insults to faith.

Conservatives ought to recognize two important points here: first, there are circumstances in which particular issues are not amenable to legal regulation, and there are some issues that can hardly ever be sensibly subjected to the law. Second, all societies engage in censorship, but it is only effective when institutions are in place to enforce a general consensus about what may properly be said or published. In other words, laws and rules against the promulgation of utterances and images deemed offensive only work when backed up by social sanctions.

Let's take the second point first. Over the past several decades in America, without any legal prohibitions, it has become impossible for anyone who wishes to keep his job or maintain even a shred of social respectability to use certain insulting epithets to refer to African Americans. This is surely a salutary development, an advance in public decency and comity. Over the same period, the public use of a coarse, aggressive term for sexual intercourse has become virtually without consequences—by contrast, a thoroughly insalubrious development.

The one term offends some persons, the second others; those with clear sense of decency are offended by both. A generally accepted sense of public decency ought to govern what is acceptable in public discourse, but a clear, reasonable idea of decency, of decorum, has vanished from our society—largely as a result of a cultural deconstruction orchestrated by dominant figures in the entertainment industry, the media, academe,

and, more recently, the judiciary and the government. Hence censorship is exercised arbitrarily and maliciously in the interest of competing ethnic, racial, and “gender” groups with their various grievances. For example, an actor of impeccably progressive views was recently constrained to issue an abject ritual apology for having used the phrase “colored persons” (a polite term when I was a boy), although “persons of color” is a perfectly respectable phrase. In the absence of a coherent sense of what counts as acceptable speech, taking offense becomes an ideological blunt instrument for bludgeoning political opponents into submission.

The law is always a dubious means of dealing with the question of what constitutes decorous speech and images, and is especially sinister now. Progressives, who ought to celebrate a great triumph of increased civility, are instead intent upon erecting a labyrinthine speech code throughout society, which would virtually criminalize deviant thought. Governments cannot legislate courtesy and decorum; the attempt to do so eventually produces tyranny. Examples abound in the twenty-first century. France, with its equivocal combination of laws against “hate speech” and the motto *Je suis Charlie* ought to take heed—and so should America.

All the essays in this issue of *Modern Age* were written before the massacre in Paris, yet they all have a bearing on the moral and political problems raised by this dreadful incident. Yuval Levin’s discussion of reform conservatism offers a sketch of a political program that provides an alternative vision of society rather than simply repairing piecemeal the tears made in our constitutional order by unchecked progressivism. However one may respond to his specific proposals, Levin renders an important service to

conservatives by reminding them that an effective politics must rest upon a sound community, that our freedoms—of speech and religion, for instance—are only secure in a supportive cultural context, not in isolation. The lesson is reinforced by Bruce Frohnen’s exposition of “The Limits of Law,” which points out how the attempt to legislate absolute individual freedom destroys the community responsibility that makes any freedom possible.

John Stuart Mill is certainly one of the preeminent champions of freedom in the English-speaking world, but a figure of some ambivalence for conservatives. Scott Yenor and Timothy Fuller both urge us to approach his particular version of liberty with caution. These two essays, like those by Yuval Levin and Bruce Frohnen, help us reflect upon how our commitment to liberty must be tempered by measure and purpose and thus grasp the significance of the terrible assault upon *Charlie Hebdo*, which involves not just freedom of speech but also freedom of movement from country to country, freedom of cultural distinctiveness, and the malicious exploitation of political freedom by those who utterly oppose it—like the Kouachi brothers.

In addition to our usual array of reviews and poems, this issue concludes, on a note of fortuitous irony, with a consideration of the significance of Mel Bradford after twenty years. As fate would have it, when the journal was going to press, we learned with sorrow of the deaths of both Walter Berns and Harry Jaffa—the latter a notable intellectual opponent of Bradford’s. Their debates were often carried on in the pages of *Modern Age*, and I suspect that both men would see something appropriate about being remembered here at the same time. Expect a full tribute to Harry Jaffa by Brad Watson in the summer issue.

—RVY