

# I Am Not Charlie Hebdo

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[David Brooks](#)

The journalists at Charlie Hebdo are now rightly being celebrated as martyrs on behalf of freedom of expression, but let's face it: If they had tried to publish their satirical newspaper on any American university campus over the last two decades it wouldn't have lasted 30 seconds. Student and faculty groups would have accused them of hate speech. The administration would have cut financing and shut them down.

Public reaction to the attack in Paris has revealed that there are a lot of people who are quick to lionize those who offend the views of Islamist terrorists in France but who are a lot less tolerant toward those who offend their own views at home.

Just look at all the people who have overreacted to campus micro-aggressions. The University of Illinois fired a professor who taught the Roman Catholic view on homosexuality. The University of Kansas suspended a professor for writing a harsh tweet against the N.R.A. Vanderbilt University derecognized a Christian group that insisted that it be led by Christians.

Americans may laud Charlie Hebdo for being brave enough to publish cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad, but, if Ayaan Hirsi Ali is invited to campus, there are often calls to deny her a podium.

So this might be a teachable moment. As we are mortified by the slaughter of those writers and editors in Paris, it's a good time to come up with a less hypocritical approach to our own controversial figures, provocateurs and satirists.

The first thing to say, I suppose, is that whatever you might have put on your Facebook page yesterday, it is inaccurate for most of us to claim, Je Suis Charlie Hebdo, or I Am Charlie Hebdo. Most of us don't actually engage in the sort of deliberately offensive humor that that newspaper specializes in.

We might have started out that way. When you are 13, it seems daring and provocative to "épater la bourgeoisie," to stick a finger in the eye of authority, to ridicule other people's religious beliefs.

But after a while that seems puerile. Most of us move toward more complicated views of reality and more forgiving views of others. (Ridicule becomes less fun as you become more aware of your own frequent ridiculousness.) Most of us do try to show a modicum of respect for people of different creeds and faiths. We do try to open conversations with listening rather than insult.

Yet, at the same time, most of us know that provocateurs and other outlandish figures serve useful public roles. Satirists and ridiculers expose our weakness and vanity when we are feeling proud. They puncture the self-puffery of the successful. They level social inequality by bringing the mighty low. When they are effective they help us address our foibles communally, since laughter is one of the ultimate bonding experiences.

Moreover, provocateurs and ridiculers expose the stupidity of the fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are people who take everything literally. They are incapable of multiple viewpoints. They are incapable of seeing that while their religion may be worthy of the deepest reverence, it is also true that most religions are kind of weird. Satirists expose those who are incapable of laughing at themselves and teach the rest of us that we probably should.

In short, in thinking about provocateurs and insulters, we want to maintain standards of civility and respect while at the same time allowing room for those creative and challenging folks who are uninhibited by good manners and taste.

If you try to pull off this delicate balance with law, speech codes and banned speakers, you'll end up with crude censorship and a strangled conversation. It's almost always wrong to try to suppress speech, erect speech codes and disinvite speakers.

Fortunately, social manners are more malleable and supple than laws and codes. Most societies have successfully maintained standards of civility and respect while keeping open avenues for those who are funny, uncivil and offensive.

In most societies, there's the adults' table and there's the kids' table. The people who read *Le Monde* or the establishment organs are at the adults' table. The jesters, the holy fools and people like Ann Coulter and Bill Maher are at the kids' table. They're not granted complete respectability, but they are heard because in their unguided missile manner, they sometimes say necessary things that no one else is saying.

Healthy societies, in other words, don't suppress speech, but they do grant different standing to different sorts of people. Wise and considerate scholars are heard with high respect. Satirists are heard with bemused semi-respect. Racists and anti-Semites are heard through a filter of opprobrium and disrespect. People who want to be heard attentively have to earn it through their conduct.

The massacre at Charlie Hebdo should be an occasion to end speech codes. And it should remind us to be legally tolerant toward offensive voices, even as we are socially discriminating.

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