

# BEHIND THE CHARLIE HEBDO STORY

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To say 2015 got off to a fast start would be an understatement: it seemed that all I did was grant one interview after another, running from one TV studio to another. It was tiring, but also fun. There were, however, a number of things that happened that were not so humorous; dishonesty was commonplace.

Let's start with the cartoons. I was astounded to hear commentators, either hosts or guests, maintain that the cartoons were merely an irreverent mode of expression and that religion was fair game for criticism. They were either ignorant or lying.

No one, save extremists, thinks that religion should be off-limits to critical analysis. That is not what these cartoons were about. They were about insulting people—sticking it in their face. And many of them were not so innocent. Some were so obscene, so disgusting and nauseating, that no respectable TV show or newspaper would ever show them.

So let's stop with the nonsense: these were not Mel Brooks-type satirists who poke fun at everyone—they were vile pornographers disguised as cartoonists. Moreover, they harbored a special hatred of Muslims and Christians, especially Catholics. To wit: an anti-Semite was fired from *Charlie Hebdo* just before the shootings. No one has ever been fired for being anti-Muslim or anti-Catholic.

According to the *New York Times*, Stephane Charbonnier, the publisher who was killed, "was a staunch left-wing activist, raised in a family of communists." His goal, he said, was to make Islam irrelevant. Indeed, he bragged that he would not

quit “until Islam is just as banal as Catholicism.” Given his motivation, it was not surprising to learn that the co-founder of the publication, Henri Roussel, blamed Charbonnier for “dragging the team” to their deaths by relentlessly provoking Muslims.

The media, of course, were quick to bash me for saying that Muslims had a right to be angry, yet they did not have the courage to show the offensive cartoons. My position is that all of the non-obscene cartoons should be shown, but that it would be wrong to flag the truly disgusting ones.

No media outlet was more unfair than *USA Today*. It contacted me asking if I would write an opposing viewpoint essay defending blasphemy laws in the Middle East. Of course, I refused. No matter, they ran an excerpt of one of my press releases, without permission, listing it as representative of support for blasphemy laws. This is yellow journalism, par excellence.

I was struck by the number of conservatives who were highly critical of my position. Some simply hate Muslims with such a passion that there is no cartoon so despicable they cannot justify. Others are driven by a desire for unfettered free speech.

I make my living because of free speech, too, but that doesn't mean there aren't well-established limits to it. The list of expressions that are not protected by law include: obscenity, libel, slander, harassing phone calls, incitement to riot, “fighting words,” copyright infringement, false advertising, misrepresenting one's credentials, treason, bribery, etc.

Freedom of speech was intended by the Founders as a means to an end. The end is the good society. They understood that if the good society is to be achieved, political discourse was a must: we have to be free to agree and disagree about what constitutes the good society. They did not mean free speech to

cover obscenities. Interestingly, in more than one case, those who disagreed with me on the air agreed with me off the air.

I am no stranger to exercises of free speech, having led several demonstrations in the street against anti-Catholic artistic exhibitions. When I was asked by some Catholics to sue Indiana University-Purdue University because it was set to stage a bigoted play, I demurred saying that censorship was not the right remedy. That is why I had the school's chancellor distribute copies of my statement against the play to the attendees.

Even if we grant cartoonists, and others, the legal right to insult our religion, no one has a moral right to do so. I've been saying this for decades, but only recently has it become controversial. Why this simple proposition has to be explained is not a good sign.

When Pope Francis took my side, saying what I had said almost verbatim for two weeks, I was obviously delighted. I was particularly happy to inform radio talk-show conservative Hugh Hewitt: he berated me for my stance early on, saying no bishop or cardinal would ever take my side. Well, Mr. Blewitt, I said, the Bishop of Rome did.

Anyone who saw the video of the pope joking with his friend, saying he would punch him if he cursed his mother, knows it was done in jest. Yes, he was making a serious point: when we intentionally provoke people, don't act shocked when they respond with vigor. When he feigned a punch, everyone laughed, as they should have.

One of the problems with political correctness is its humorlessness. Some people need to take a deep breath and get a life. I am proud to stand with Pope Francis.