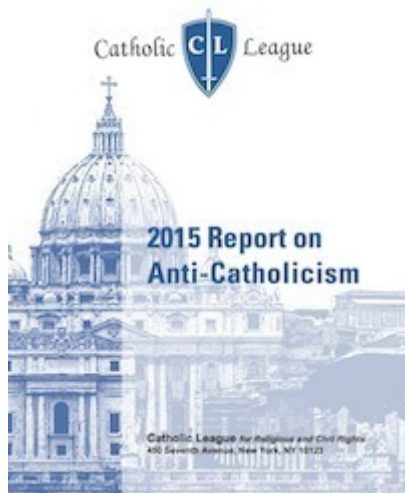


# Charlie Hebdo Controversy



A week into the new year saw the horrible death of 12 people, most of whom worked at the Paris office of *Charlie Hebdo*; a police officer was among the dead. The weekly publication is known for its coarse content and vulgar cartoons. Muslim terrorists, upset with depictions of Muhammad, were responsible for the carnage.

Bill Donohue quickly became part of the story when he issued a news release saying that Muslims had a right to be angry, though they were wrong to react with violence. "Killing in response to insult, no matter how gross," he said, "must be unequivocally condemned." He made several similar statements over the course of two weeks, but many in the media focused exclusively on his comment that Muslims were justified in their anger.

Donohue called the paper's publisher, Stephane Charbonnier, a "narcissist" who "didn't understand the role he played in his tragic death." The Catholic League president drew attention to Charbonnier's comment, "Muhammad isn't sacred to me"; the French journalist dropped that line as justification for his obscene depictions. "Muhammad isn't sacred to me, either," said Donohue, "but it would never occur to me to deliberately insult Muslims by trashing him."

Non-violent offenses, Donohue stressed, must be met with a non-violent response. This was uncontroversial, but what many criticized Donohue for was his insistence that Muslims were unnecessarily provoked. He was simply asking all parties to the controversy to exercise restraint: the cartoonists should not intentionally offend Muslim sensibilities and Muslims

should not overreact by taking up arms.

After being pounded by many pundits and talk-show hosts on radio and TV for his comments, Donohue found welcome relief in statements made by Pope Francis. "You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith." The Holy Father insisted that "We cannot make a toy out of the religion of others. These people provoke and then [something can happen]. In freedom of expression there are limits."

If this wasn't vindication enough, the pope, after denouncing the violence, quipped that if his friend, Dr. Alberto Gasparri, the organizer of papal trips, were "to use a curse word against my mother, he can expect a punch. It's normal." This effectively closed the debate on Donohue: the pope had taken his side.

What follows is a synopsis of the news releases and statements made by Bill Donohue between January 7 and January 16.

### **MUSLIMS ARE RIGHT TO BE ANGRY**

**January 7**

*In Bill Donohue's first statement on the attack he condemned the murder but also drew a connection between the publication's repeated insults of Muslims and the attacks that led to their deaths.*

Killing in response to insult, no matter how gross, must be unequivocally condemned. That is why the killing of 12 people at the Paris office of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* cannot be tolerated. But neither should we tolerate the kind of intolerance that provoked this violent reaction.

Those who work at this newspaper have a long and disgusting record of going way beyond the mere lampooning of public figures, and this is especially true of their depictions of religious figures. For example, they have shown nuns

masturbating and popes wearing condoms. They have also shown Muhammad in pornographic poses.

While some Muslims today object to any depiction of the Prophet, others do not. Moreover, visual representations of him are not proscribed by the Koran. What unites Muslims in their anger against Charlie Hebdo is the vulgar manner in which Muhammad has been portrayed. What they object to is being intentionally insulted over the course of many years. On this aspect, Bill Donohue was in total agreement with them.

Stephane Charbonnier, the paper's publisher, was killed in the slaughter. It is too bad that he didn't understand the role he played in his tragic death. In 2012, when asked why he insulted Muslims, he said, "Muhammad isn't sacred to me." Had he not been so narcissistic, he may still be alive. Muhammad isn't sacred to Donohue, either, but it would never occur to him to deliberately insult Muslims by trashing Muhammad.

## **MUSLIMS AND ARTISTS MUST CHANGE**

**January 9**

*Bill Donohue compared the Muslims who resort to violence in defense of their religion, and the artists who insult people of faith, with Catholics.*

In an ideal world, Muslims who interpret the Koran to justify violence would convert to Catholicism, and artists who think they have an absolute right to insult people of faith would follow suit. If both did, we would have peace and civility.

Catholicism teaches that it is immoral to intentionally kill innocent persons, beginning with life in the womb. It is not a pacifistic religion—it believes in just wars—though it naturally inclines towards non-violence. It most certainly does not counsel violence as a right remedy to insolent behavior. Muslims who say it is morally justified to kill obscene artists, citing the Koran as their impetus, would do us all a favor if they converted to Catholicism.

Catholicism teaches that freedom is the right to do what you ought to do. As such, it is always tied to duty, and to individual responsibility. Once that understanding breaks down—as it has in the West—trouble follows. Unfortunately, many artists interpret their rights as a solo exercise, disconnected from duty or responsibility. But autonomy can never be a sturdy guide to morality: it devolves into relativism and to a wholesale disrespect for the rights of others. Narcissistic artists who associate obscenity with creativity would do us all a favor if they converted to Catholicism.

The central problem with Muslim extremists and irresponsible artists is that neither embodies the virtue of restraint. If they did, they would not act as the barbarians and libertines that they are. Catholicism is the answer.

### **HYPOCRISY RUNS DEEP AT WASHINGTON POST**

**January 12**

Many media outlets criticized Bill Donohue's position on the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. The *Washington Post* published one such article, noting that the offensive cartoons did not meet the paper's standards. However, anti-Catholic artwork was fine with the paper.

On January 7, the *Washington Post* ran an article by Ishaan Tharoor criticizing Bill Donohue for drawing attention to the irresponsibility of the cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo*. He took Donohue to task for not taking a more expansive view of free speech. In his online post, two cartoons from the French weekly were reprinted: one was anti-Muslim and the other was anti-Catholic. They were hardly the worst that *Charlie Hebdo* has penned, but they offered a glimmer of what the publication has given.

The next day Tharoor's article ran again, but this time there were no cartoons. There was an explanatory statement at the

end of his article. *“Editors note: An earlier version of this article included images offensive to various religious groups that did not meet the Post’s standards, and should not have been published. They have been removed.”*

Now how about them apples? If this isn’t bad enough, consider that as recently as the month before, the art critic at the newspaper, Philip Kennicott, bemoaned the fact that an exhibition of Catholic art at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, “Picturing Mary,” did not include his favorite—the portrait by Chris Ofili of Our Blessed Mother that was adorned with pictures of anuses and vaginas, as well as elephant dung. Kennicott called it “perhaps the most famous image of Mary painted in the last quarter century.” That it wasn’t included made this guy angry.

So this is what passes as ethics at the *Washington Post*: it is not only okay to offend Catholics, it is a blow to freedom of speech not to include scatological portraits of the Virgin Mary in Catholic exhibitions. As for anti-Muslim depictions, that’s a different story—they don’t meet the newspaper’s standards. Which is why in 2010 it decided not to run an inoffensive cartoon by Wiley Miller simply because the “Non Sequitur” cartoon printed the line “Where’s Muhammad?” at the bottom!!!

## **FREE SPEECH PHONIES LEARN NOTHING**

**January 13**

*Proponents of free speech cheered the right of Charlie Hebdo to publish offensive cartoons, but supported other limitations on speech.*

A January 8 editorial in the *New York Times* said *Charlie Hebdo* “has been an equal-opportunity offender: Muslims, Jews and Christians,” as well as others, have been trashed. It said that the editorial director, who was killed, believed that “free expression was nothing without the right to offend.” In

a news article from January 13, it quoted a cartoonist at the French weekly saying, "The only thing that is sacred is free expression."

Fact: *Charlie Hebdo* fired a cartoonist for publishing an article deemed anti-Semitic in 2008. No one has been fired for offending Catholics or Muslims. More important, the notion that "the right to offend" should be celebrated—instead of condemned—tells us much about the adolescent streak in both papers (yes, it should be legal to offend, but it is still immoral). Moreover, if the *only* thing that is *sacred* is the right to offend, then absolutely nothing has been learned. That such twisted thinking is commonplace is scary.

### **SHOULD THE MEDIA SHOW THE CARTOONS?**

**January 13**

*Bill Donohue commented on the propriety of showing the Charlie Hebdo cartoons in newspapers and on television.*

When the Danish cartoons were published a decade ago, the media refused to show them. With the exception of the *Boston Phoenix*, which cited safety concerns, the others either gave no reason or feigned interest in not offending people of faith. But if they really believed in freedom of speech, the cartoons would have been shown.

Why? Because none was offensive: the cartoons never descended to the gutter as some of the more recent *Charlie Hebdo* ones have. Yes, some Muslims object to any portrayal of Muhammad, but many others do not. Moreover, the Koran does not proscribe such imagery. Ergo, these inoffensive cartoons should have been shown.

What about the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons? Some are irreverent without being obscene, so there is no reason not to show them. But in the name of decency, the toilet-speech cartoons should not be shown. To do so would be to intentionally insult not only Muslims, but all those who prefer not to have their

sensibilities assaulted with pornographic images.

Reasonable people can disagree as to where we should draw the line; unreasonable people say no line should be drawn. That there are as many unreasonable conservatives as there are unreasonable liberals cannot be denied. Some liberals are so enthralled with the “sacredness” of speech that they have completely lost their moral bearings. Some conservatives hate Muslims so much that no portrayal of Muhammad can be filthy enough to satisfy them.

Bill Donohue admires Jeff Zucker at CNN for having the honesty to say that he wouldn't show the cartoons because he didn't want to endanger his employees. Donohue does not admire Dean Baquet at the *New York Times* for saying his reason for opting out was because the cartoons constitute “gratuitous insult.” After all, it was his newspaper that printed the offensive dung-on-the-Virgin Mary image (complete with vaginas and anuses) on February 8, 2006, the day after an editorial explained that it wouldn't publish the Danish cartoons!

## **INVENTING CONTROVERSY**

**January 14**

*Religion News Service published an article about New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan's response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. In it, the author, David Gibson, attempted to create a division between Dolan's response and Donohue's.*

“In finding no justification for the deaths of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff, [Cardinal Timothy] Dolan seemed to part ways with another prominent New York Catholic, Bill Donohue of the Catholic League, who *essentially* said the newspaper editors had brought on their own slaughter” (Donohue's *italics*). The verbs dropped by Gibson were telling: he couldn't quite state that the New York Archbishop parted ways with Donohue on this subject, so he inferred that they have. Moreover, he inferred that Donohue blamed the victims. Donohue

responded by citing numerous examples where he condemned the murders, and faulted the Muslim thugs who committed them.

## **POPE SIDES WITH CATHOLIC LEAGUE**

**January 15**

Pope Francis condemned the killings of the Paris cartoonists while on board the papal plane to the Philippines, but he also drew a line in the sand. "You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith." While he denounced violence against those who offend us, he also said that if his friend, Dr. Alberto Gasparri, the organizer of papal trips, were "to use a curse word against my mother, he can expect a punch. It's normal." He added, "We cannot make a toy out of the religion of others. These people provoke and then [something can happen]. In freedom of expression there are limits."

Bill Donohue was obviously delighted that the pope has taken the same position that he has on this issue. Radio chatterbox Hugh Hewitt doubted whether a single bishop would side with Donohue. What does he have to say now?

Mindless comments have exploded over this issue. On January 14, Salman Rushdie told an audience at the University of Vermont, "The minute I hear someone say, 'Yes, I believe in freedom of speech, but...' I stop listening." Similarly, Victor Davis Hanson criticized Donohue on January 15 for his "de facto attack on unfettered free speech." Apparently, both of these sages are opposed to laws that prohibit libel, slander, treasonous speech, harassing phone calls, copyright infringements, false advertising, etc.

Even worse is *USA Today*. After Donohue explicitly rejected its request to write an op-ed defending blasphemy laws in the Middle East, the paper ran an excerpt of his remarks as an opposing view to its opposition to these laws. This is more than mindless—it is malicious.



## POPE'S "PUNCH" QUIP AND MORE

January 16

When the pope was on a plane coming back from Brazil in 2013, he said, "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" Over 900 news stories quickly appeared, the majority of which were dishonest: "Who am I to judge?" was all they quoted. Pundits were even worse: they said the pope was asking us to be non-judgmental about homosexuality.

By contrast, newspapers from January 16 gave scant coverage to what the pope said on January 15 about the Paris murders. The pope said, "In freedom of expression there are limits." He condemned the Paris murders, but he also condemned the needless provocations. "You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others." As an example, he said that if his friend, Dr. Alberto Gasparri, were "to use a curse word against my mother, he can expect a punch. It's normal."

The disparity in news coverage can be explained on ideological grounds: the media liked what the pope said on the plane to Rome two years ago but they did not like what he said on January 15 aboard the plane to the Philippines. The reaction of pundits to his "punch" quip is not ideological: it offended many conservatives as well as liberals.

What explains the pundits' reaction? Humorlessness. A video of the pope's remarks shows him standing up, microphone in hand, with Dr. Gasparri standing to his right. The pope was clearly jesting—he feigned a punch at him as he made his quip. Gasparri was cracking up, as were others. But to the humorless, he committed a grave sin. They need to get a life. Too many conservatives are just as stiff as liberals these days.