

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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The recent attack on the French satire newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, was an incident that cut across burning social issues, such as freedom of speech, religion and immigration. But most importantly, it opened old wounds in what we see as a highly polarised world – the “West” vs the “East” – further divided by the recent resurgence of hostage crises, murders and bombings by extremists, and in return the responses by Western policymakers.

While the published cartoons of *Charlie Hebdo* aim to “poke fun at everyone equally,” one can argue that equality is not the same as equity. With a staff that is exclusively white and French, making fun of Catholics and Jews is arguably one thing, but when the mockery extends to these same people drawing hook-nosed, bearded, turbaned caricatures of Muslims, you have to look at it from a different perspective. What is of importance here is the fact that these cartoons – relying mostly on shock value – are aimed at provoking a marginalised and often vulnerable Muslim migrant community from a position of privilege. With increasing anti-immigration sentiments and nationalist movements, the values of secularism and free speech become a neatly shrouded tool to disseminate xenophobia. For example, the law in France against religious symbols in public places specifically target Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab. As for freedom of speech, it does come with a responsibility to understand relationships between communities, between global powers and how people live in a certain society. We have seen time and time again how there is “freedom” as long as the appropriate power holders aren't insulted – witness the outrage that follows whenever the Holocaust is mocked.

But the position of *Charlie Hebdo* in no shape or form justifies the attack that killed twelve people, including two police officers – one of whom was Muslim. As a country with a majority Muslim population, we need to understand that the generally accepted position of Islam is that those who mock it should never be persecuted. On the contrary, issues such as these should be resolved through peaceful, civil dialogue, and even ignored if possible. Some agree that killing innocent people in the name of the Prophet is more insulting than the satirical cartoons themselves.

Many would say that it becomes increasingly difficult to keep one's head high and continue to be patient and understanding in a post 9/11 world, with constant ostracism, invasions and hatred. But does that mean we should lose reasoning and resort to violence? Absolutely not. Unless faced with immediate threat or violence, the murder of someone is indeed a great crime.



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It is saddening to see how most French Muslims and Muslims around the world are being hit by the backlash, despite not being the least interested in politics or even radical ideologies.

If so far we understand that Islamic principles vouch for reasoning with those armed with mockery and insult, why is it that majority of Muslims, who do not sympathise with violence, are expected to apologise? The answer lies in the way in which most media outlets choose to paint the diverse Muslim communities on a static, limited canvas – a canvas which generalises all Muslims as sharing the same notions of violence, of “backwardness” and of “barbarism.” It is saddening to see how most French Muslims and Muslims around the world are being hit by the backlash, despite not being the least interested in politics or even radical ideologies. What makes it even worse is how some Muslims must face the fury of extremists, who believe that violent methods are the only way to defend their religion, and on the other hand, if they object to these drawings they are assumed to be siding with the terrorists. To put it into perspective, many Muslim communities are now between a rock and a hard place.

But beyond this, the wider picture is even more sinister. The attack continues to push France and the rest of the world into a binary of “us” vs “them,” of the

“civilised” vs the “barbaric.” It takes away the complexities of societies, the multiple narratives, and most importantly the space for people to freely negotiate a just way of life. It destroys the image of a practising Muslim who also happens to be a loyal French citizen. With the hounding of politicians and the media, it neatly adds to the narrative of war by creating a common enemy. While radical Islamic groups feed on anti-Islamic sentiment, right-wing groups do it by justifying actions against all Muslims through events such as these. In the perverted dogmas of leaders on both sides, people are uprooted from their daily lives and are mobilised to fight for the benefit of people with power. While we can only guess who holds the strings to powers such as these, one thing is for sure – it only adds and perpetuates to the intolerance that comes to exist on both sides.

It is the everyday people from all sides, who just want to lead peaceful lives that are being appropriated into this madness. While a global brotherhood may seem like a utopia, power relations such as these move us farther and farther away from it.



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