

THE FARCE OF “FREE SPEECH”

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Samuel Paty, a teacher, and Ahmed Merabet, a police officer, had a number of things in common. Ahmed was Muslim and Samuel was not. Yet both of them were French, and brutally murdered at a fairly young age. Perhaps more importantly, and tragically, both of them lived in a world full of hypocrisy and hate, whether coming from officials or terrorists.

In 2015, Merabet was the first officer on the scene¹ when armed men attacked the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices, and shot him dead along with 11 other persons. The satirical journal had published offensive cartoons depicting the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Paty was killed this October 16th by an 18-year old Muslim refugee with a knife, after Paty had shown some of the cartoons to his students in a class on freedom of expression.

In both cases, the killings were roundly condemned by Muslims in French society and globally, with the Grand Imam of Egypt’s Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, one of the most important figures in the Muslim world, calling Paty’s killing a “wicked terrorist crime”.² This was preceded by condemnations from Al-Azhar Mosque itself and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation which comprises dozens of Muslim countries. And in both cases, Hebdo’s publication of these cartoons has been portrayed as if it is a matter of freedom of speech/expression. This couldn’t be farther from the truth.

To reiterate and be clear, Paty was working within his realm in simply attempting to create a debate among his students on this topic, and it is reported that he took the sensitivities of the Muslim students into account as well. His killing was a horrendous and despicable act.

Simultaneously, the ongoing attitudes of both Charlie Hebdo staff and French officials can be understood as outright discrimination and xenophobia against Muslims at worst, and blatant double standards and hypocrisy at best.

Clearly, there are restrictions on free speech everywhere, the simplest examples of which are laws relating to defamation and contempt of court. Thus free speech is not absolute. Ironically, Charlie Hebdo itself recognized this when, in 2008, it fired cartoonist Maurice Sinet –some might argue hypocritically- for an allegedly anti-Semitic remark he wrote in a column. (Sinet eventually won a court judgment against his former employer for wrongful termination). The question that poses itself here is why wasn't the argument of freedom of expression employed by the journal in this instance?! Double-standards are manifested again when considering that Charlie Hebdo was free to publish the offensive cartoons yet France banned all Muslim protests against said cartoons,³ as far back as 2012.

If one needs more proof on the lie, the myth, that is supposedly “free speech” which Macron and other French officials claim they are vociferously trying to defend, then look no further than the French Gayssot Act. The Gayssot Act, introduced in 1990, not only criminalizes Holocaust denial, but goes much further. The Act uses the French verb *contester*, which is “to question” or “to dispute” something, and not necessarily deny it. You read that correctly; any dispute, questioning or challenging in public, of the official government narrative surrounding the Holocaust, can land you in prison. Accordingly, the cases of prosecuting those charged with violating the Gayssot Act have had high conviction rates. The

same however, cannot be said about those who offend, insult or practice hate speech against other denominations, as the Charlie Hebdo case –backed by the French government- has proven to all. So much for “free speech”!

Surely, almost nothing could be more hateful than singling out the most important and sacred figure of the religion of close to 2 billion people and depicting that person in a cartoon to terrorism, pornography and other heinous acts. Thus, hate speech is clear here, and although there are texts in French law which –theoretically- criminalize incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group belonging to a nation, race or religion, these laws are conveniently ignored in the case of Muslims.

Incredibly, the hypocrisy doesn't end there. When the two-faced Charlie Hebdo magazine officials decided to republish the cartoons this September –after firing Sinet as shown above for an allegedly anti-Semitic remark- Macron defended the journal's decision, adding that it is never his place “to pass judgment on the editorial choice of a journalist or newsroom, never”.⁴ Just a few hours later though, Macron strongly rebuked a journalist⁵ in public, after he published an unflattering story.

In light of all of the above, what conclusions are Muslims supposed to draw? When Macron says that Islam is in crisis,⁶ vows to fight what he calls “Islamist separatism”,⁷ and claims that “Islamists want to take our future”,⁸ the message is no longer against a single terrorist or group of terrorists. Contrast this with the message from Muslim leaders and organizations

previously mentioned, denouncing such terrorist attacks and clarifying that Islam is innocent of them and their perpetrators. And when these

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vulgar, hateful and offensive cartoons, which Macron again vociferously defended at Paty’s tribute, are projected onto governmental buildings in France, for no purpose, this xenophobic, Islamophobic racist message against the entire Muslim world is only reinforced. To make matters worse, the authorities are cracking down on Islamic NGOs including the Collective Against Islamophobia in France,⁹ described as an “enemy of the Republic”(!) by the French interior minister.

The right of free speech –particularly in the press- in democratic societies, is coupled with responsibilities. This right does not negate ethics and morality, nor should said responsibilities be

misinterpreted as an attempt to limit this right. If speech restrictions can be accepted in the law vis-à-vis contempt of court, defamation, national security and reporting on minors, then why not those relating to hateful xenophobic speech towards all, but particularly against minorities?

Yet the attitudes and statements we see from French officials and Charlie Hebdo staff, including the statement by the French Foreign Ministry after calls were made to boycott French products, represent the ongoing arrogant racist mindset which has been carried from France’s atrocity-filled colonial past, and which France has never apologized for.

Endnotes

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/charlie-hebdo-policeman-murder-ahmed-merabet#_blank

² http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/388835/Egypt/AlAzhar-grand-imam-condemns-French-teacher-beheadi.aspx#_blank

³ https://www.businessinsider.com/france-bans-all-muslim-protests-2012-9?IR=T#_blank

⁴ https://www.dw.com/en/frances-macron-refuses-to-condemn-charlie-hebdo-cartoons-of-prophet-muhammad/a-54788078#_blank

⁵ [https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/macron-backs-](https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/macron-backs-free-speech-for-charlie-hebdo-then-rants-at-reporter-for-story-39448#_blank)

[free-speech-for-charlie-hebdo-then-rants-at-reporter-for-story-39448#_blank](https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/macron-backs-free-speech-for-charlie-hebdo-then-rants-at-reporter-for-story-39448#_blank)

⁶ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/2/macron-announces-new-plan-to-regulate-islam-in-france#_blank

⁷ https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54383173#_blank

⁸ https://www.rt.com/news/504586-erdogan-boycott-muslims-france/#_blank

⁹ https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/19/france-beheading-minister-wants-to-dissolve-islamic-ngos-after-murder-of-teacher-samuel-pa#_blank