

## Humor and freedoms: a short essay on being Charlie

### Abstract

The violence perpetrated by some Islamic fundamentalist groups in recent years, particularly the murder of the French cartoonists who worked for Charlie Hebdo, in early 2015, bring up doubts in the Western societies regarding the nature of their economic system, their global interconnection, the democracy, and specifically the freedoms. This article analyzes some cartoons of Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, in 2005, and by the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo, in 2012, and it explores their humor, their violence, and the reactions raised by them. The brief reflections derived from the analysis of these cases lead us to a discussion about the 'Western' tradition of satire, addressing religious freedom and freedom of expression, in addition to the very idea of democracy. Theories proposed by classic authors, such as Montesquieu and Stuart Mill, as well as those by contemporary authors who thought of the democratic freedoms, such as John Rawls and Pierre Rosanvallon are addressed, situating this relevant debate of contemporaneity in the long-term. This short essay promotes the debate about the limits of humor, especially in its relation to religions and politics nowadays.

**Keywords:** Humor; Liberty; Democracy; Cartoon; Muhammad.

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## Humor e liberdades: um breve ensaio sobre ser Charlie

### Resumo

A violência perpetrada por alguns grupos fundamentalistas islâmicos nos últimos anos, em especial o assassinato dos chargistas franceses do Charlie Hebdo, no início de 2015, trazem à tona questionamentos nas sociedades ocidentais acerca da natureza de seu sistema econômico, de sua inserção global, da democracia e, particularmente, das liberdades. Este artigo toma algumas das charges de Maomé publicadas no jornal dinamarquês Jyllands-Posten, em 2005, e no jornal francês Charlie Hebdo, em 2012, e explora seu humor, sua violência e as reações que suscitaram. As breves reflexões resultantes da análise desses casos nos levam a uma discussão acerca da tradição “ocidental” da sátira, sobre a liberdade religiosa e a liberdade de expressão, além da própria ideia de democracia. São observadas teorias de autores clássicos, como Montesquieu e Stuart Mill, além de autores contemporâneos que pensaram as liberdades democráticas, como John Rawls e Pierre Rosanvallon, situando esse pertinente debate da contemporaneidade na longa duração. Este breve ensaio promove o debate acerca dos limites do humor, em especial em sua relação com religiões e com a política na contemporaneidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Humor; Liberdade; Democracia; Caricaturas e Desenhos Humorísticos, Maomé.

*What is freedom of expression?  
Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist.  
(Salman Rushdie)*

## Introduction

The thin line between offense and persecution i.e. between opinion and hate speech runs through Rushdie's quote. Being himself the center of a major controversy involving religion, art and beliefs, his words gain weight in addressing the issue of freedom of religion in the public realm. They show that not all identity traits are free from public scrutiny, and that the different ways of representing or criticizing them need to be constantly discussed in order not to lose the freedom of opinion, on the one hand, and not to fall into hate-speech, on the other. This short essay brings forth this debate, focusing on the specific case of Muhammed's cartoons. The present discussion will also include the nature of these images of Muhammed, which were published in *Jylland-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo*. Both cases generated similar controversy, and the intent is to analyze them to reconstruct the argument for the democratic freedoms that support their publication. To some extent, this debate is about the limits of humor - even radical humor - and their inclusion in the democratic camp, which is here purposely taken as an abstract and generalized space.

In this sense, freedoms are taken as absolute and ideal-typical values, so the debate will not attain to specificities of every country and every democratic regime. Often, when the problem(s) of freedom(s) in the contemporary world are taken into reflection, the assumption of democratic condition and its intrinsic freedoms is taken for granted, even if the democratic regime has not even completed thirty years in Brazil and currently suffers of convulsions and doubts. Yet, when such reflections advance beyond the Brazilian situation, it is difficult to assess the democratic freedoms and to take a stand in their characterizations and defense.

Over the past decade, two cases quite typical of this situation took place. The publication of the cartoons depicting Muhammad, first in Denmark in 2005 and then in France in 2012, broke out a worldwide wave of protests and attacks by Muslim extremists. The level of violence of these reactions has raised questions in the West, leading to reflections on the freedoms that are considered inherent to democratic Western societies. In this paper, the place of faith, worship and freedom of speech in these

societies will be analyzed, and the search for the boundaries of these freedoms will be guided by the clues left behind by these cases, discussing whether or not they were overcome through the publication of these images.

Cartoons are polemic by nature. They carry criticism dressed in satire, which plays a social role, as stated by Bergson (2001), in the constant rearrangement of society through the humiliating effect of critical amusingness. Following Bergsonian logic, those drawings, as well as humor in general, show the errors and idiosyncrasies of their targets in mocking them. By doing so, they seek to somehow fix them. It can be said therefore that they act “positively” in society, promoting debate and ridiculing social problems and (questionable) individual actors. For its main critics, the humiliating element, inseparable from cartoons in many cases, would set these representations as harmful to society, as opposed to the perspective defended by Bergson.

## Cartoons and Society

But cartoons still play a key role in contemporary debates, despite the critics and detractors of their humor. This art of violence, which humiliates and chooses sides, is present in virtually all cartoons – especially political ones –, and yet there has never been so many cartoonists working and having their products seen by a multiple audience via the Internet. This leads us to raise some questions, such as: are the cartoons really dangerous and offensive? Are there boundaries to the gag? Where does satire end and attack start? These questions are closely related to the context in which they are produced and to the role of cartoons in different regimes and societies, as the use and perception of their messages tend to change according to the atmosphere generated by the political environment, the existing structures in a given society and the political culture that pervades it.

As cartoons depict primarily elements present in the public arena of a society, they are always stepping on a minefield, where the message constantly flirts with libel and defamation. How can their producers continue their crafts without being prosecuted and convicted for their opinions every now and then? Elmar Erhardt (1988) clarifies that

cartoons must be understood as a "special art of satire", and this is the reason why cartoonists and newspapers are rarely convicted in actions filed due to their criticism. Furthermore, press and opinion freedoms play a central role in the systematic web resulting in the protection of cartoonists.

The satirical nature of these drawings results, however, in controversies that may lead not only to legal consequences, but also to political and violent ones. Cartoons are at the center of political and social issues. They are active parts of the press and participate in this condition of constant political and social vigilance (surveillance in the sense adopted by Rosanvallon [2006]). They take elements from society's imaginary and subvert, exaggerate or give them a different meaning of those normally assigned to them, and they do this in order to strengthen their message and further clarify the point of view being defended. In the role of 'guardians of the system', this set of actions is made as a complaint against controversial facts or elements when not in defense of society. In this sense, the above listed freedoms are necessary to protect them.



Image 1 - BLITT, Barry. The Politics of Fear. In: *The New Yorker*. Jul 21. 2008.

When the image above was published on the cover of *The New Yorker*, a heated discussion about the role of cartoonists took place in the United States. The representation of President Obama as an anti-America fundamentalist Muslim and the first lady as a guerrilla fighter suffered numerous attacks, and the criticism contained in the charge was rejected as steeped in prejudice. Also, the features and "permanent traits" (Töpffer) of its representations could not be overstated. According to its critics, any exaggeration in these elements reveals racism, reducing the president and the entire African-American group by carrying their representation with traits typically taken from simians. Such considerations resulted in the weakening of the criticism against Obama and his government (WASHINGTON). The cartoonists refrained from using critical representations, avoiding the shadow of racism. This situation started an open debate about racism and the role of cartoons in the press in the United States, and the cartoonists were able once again criticize the government without worrying about accusations of racial bias. Similarly, it resulted in a qualitative change in public perception about their work. The boundaries between criticism and racism became clearer: the concept of racism was discussed and it was shown that a critic towards an Afro-American president is not necessarily a criticism because of his African descent.

Yet another debate over humor in the public arena took place in Brazil during the presidential elections of 2010. The focus of this dispute was Article 45, paragraph 2 of Law 9,504/97, which prohibited the 'use of special effects, montages or other audio or video feature in any way to degrade or ridicule a candidate, party or coalition, or to produce or disseminate any program with that effect.' In other words, it forbade comedians to mention politicians during the election period through any media (printed or broadcasted), depriving their listeners, readers and viewers of political critical satire.

This ban was based on the fact that political satire has, in essence, a political-partisan nature, since its products will always take a side (mainly against) in relation to the satirized element – which aligns again with Bergson's theory of humor. This could constitute propaganda, which would go directly against the following item of the same electoral law. Psychoanalytical considerations were also part of the debate, especially the Freudian theory about the "gathering" of supporters provided by the pleasure caused by

laughter (FREUD). But despite the correct assumptions (that a political joke is essentially a political position i.e. opinion), the prohibition was an attack to the higher principles of freedom of opinion and freedom of speech. That was also the understanding of the Supreme Court, which eventually suspend the law in August 2010<sup>1</sup>.

## Religion and Humor – presentation of the cases of Muhammad cartoons

The cases reported here illustrate precisely the controversial nature of the cartoons, as well as demonstrate the fact that humor is an acute element in contemporary society. They show how easily they are questioned and how they reach, even indirectly, the heart of political and social representations. But the public debate around cartoons gained complexity in recent years, when some religious representations have become a subject of discussion.

In September 2005, twelve cartoons containing representations of the Muslim prophet Mohammed were published on the Danish newspaper *Jylland-Posten*. These drawings were the result of a contest sponsored by the paper, which sought artists that were willing to defy the self-censorship imposed in Denmark and Europe regarding portrayal of Islam. Few were those who responded to the ad, and a group of images was then published on September 30<sup>th</sup>, under the title "Faces of Mohammed". The drawings sparked Muslim protests around the world, and the Danish newspaper and cartoonists received support and solidarity from several other media, especially in Europe. Some have even republished the cartoons on their pages to reaffirm its commitment to freedom of speech. Thus, the Muhammad cartoons eventually started a debate across the globe about the social and political role of cartoons and their relation to freedom of expression.

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<sup>1</sup> In: <<http://www.stf.jus.br/portal/cms/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=160528>>. Acessado em 13 de nov. de 2012.



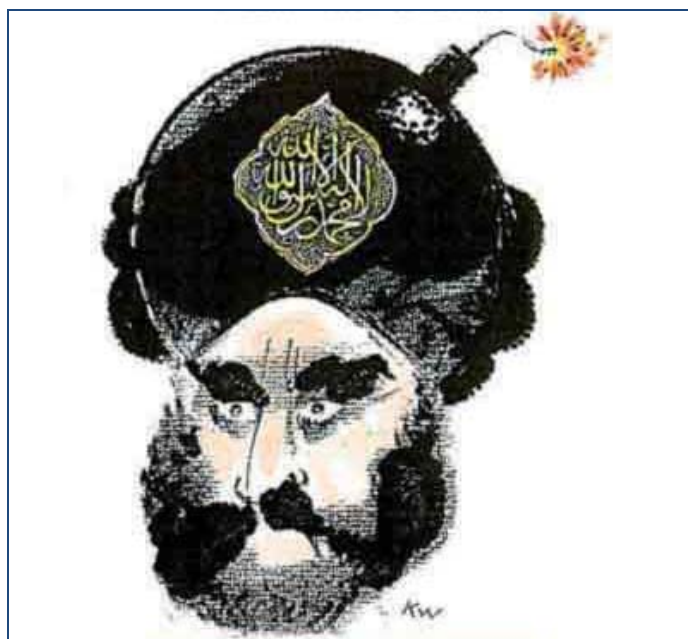


Image 2 - WESTERGAARD, Kurt. Muhammed. In: *Jyllands Posten*. 30. Sep. 2005. p.3.

As described by Dawkins (2007):

Newspapers in Norway, Germany, France and even the United States (but, conspicuously, not Britain) reprinted the cartoons in gestures of solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten*, which added fuel to the flames. Embassies and consulates were trashed, Danish goods were boycotted, Danish citizens and, indeed, Westerners generally, were physically threatened; Christian churches in Pakistan, with no Danish or European connections at all, were burned. Nine people were killed when Libyan rioters attacked and burned the Italian consulate in Benghazi. (p. 51)

The search for the reasons behind the Muslims' protests resulted in two main assertions:

1 – The cartoons depict the Prophet Mohammed, which is forbidden by Islamic laws. At this point, it is a specificity of Islam, and the newspaper and designers were well anchored by the legislative rhetoric. The ban on the representation of Mohammed is a rule that concerns only the members of Islamic religion. The freedom of religion operates here on a two-way street: in States where such freedom is imperative (the case of Denmark and France), a specific dogma of a particular religion cannot be imposed over the non-followers of this creed, as well as specific prohibitions and/or laws. In democratic states, secularism is a dominant trait, and even though religion is not always detached from the State (the case of Israel is the most evident), religious freedom is one of the



fundamental principles that they all share. It is thus evident the impossibility of imposing a specific dogma over the entire population in these States.

2- The second argument against the cartoons advocated that the cartoons depicting Muhammad went against the dignity of the Muslim faith, taking violence - and specifically terrorism - as a generalized and inherent element in the religion, thus characterizing an open attack against it. This premise paved the way to another question, about the interpretation of the drawings, i.e. it indicates the polysemic aspect of images. The cartoon above is analyzable in many ways. It can be interpreted for example as the representation of Islam's (self)implosion. According to this interpretation, one can conclude that terrorism and the fundamentalist branches of Islam end up weakening the religion. The image then shows religion as rather a victim of terrorist violence. The (weak) humor denounces a religion in its way to extinction, close to the point of 'explosion', and Muhammad is here taken as an allegory of Islam. This interpretation would not, in any way, be a form of defamation. Protests against the drawing have shown, however, that this was not the interpretation made by most (DIÈNE). And although some analysts have pointed out different motives for these protests<sup>2</sup>, public discussions focused mainly on freedom of speech and opinion.

The case of the cartoons published in 2012 on *Charlie Hebdo* had a similar development. Here, the drawings were a reaction to a previous event, namely the on-line leak of the movie *Innocence of Muslims*, directed by Mark Youssef. On the movie (of very questionable quality), episodes of the Prophet Muhammad's life are depicted, always in a very satirical way. The image of the prophet was thus not only portrayed in the film, but caricatured, sparking new protests in the Islamic world, as occurred in 2005.

As a reflection of these events, *Charlie Hebdo* published in Paris, in the same week (September 19), its edition satirizing the reactions to the film. Like the film of Mark Youssef itself, the cartoons show scorn against the prophet Muhammad by portraying him in rather tacky poses in front of the cameras.

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<sup>2</sup> Demonstrations against the cartoons took place in the Islamic world and were cited by some analysts as the last weapon of some regimes "to avoid their own destruction" (KORNELIUS cited. PÄGE). Also the destabilization of regimes (as in Pakistan, Nigeria, etc.) was mentioned as reason for the protests (KLAUSEN). These explanations for the events do not focus on the freedom of speech or religion, but on the conflict between West and East i.e. the fundamentalist Islamic culture. According to these interpretations, "the cartoons would not be the reason for the protests, but their trigger" (PÄGE, p. 168).



Image 3 - COCO et. al. In: Charlie Hebdo. Paris, Sep. 19, 2012. p. 14.

As in the case of 2005, the French cartoons did not call upon the persecution of Muslims or contain in their core a hate statement against the religion and its followers. Similarly, the film - although poorly edited and very rude - at no instance encourages the "Western" to a crusade against the Muslims. However, the 2012 cartoons and film did not receive the same support as the 2005 cartoons. In fact, Charlie's images were openly

criticized and the film was censored in some countries. But is there any reason to ban them? Does the criticism contained therein justify censorship? Is freedom of speech here in confrontation with freedom of religion?

### Freedoms of religion and speech: elements of a contemporary debate

These questions are here answered negatively, and in the following pages it is sought to substantiate these answers through the theoretical foundations that are linked to the current state of most democratic countries of the West.

The first question relates to the characterization of freedom as a concept and as a praxis. Different assertions on the subject have been presented. According to the tradition of Montesquieu, freedom is “the right to do anything permitted by law. If a citizen can do what is prohibited by law, then he is no longer free, as all the other people will have the same right.” (MONTESQUIEU, p. 243). But where are the boundaries of freedom - if they do exist?

An extremist libertarian line would argue that there should be no limitation in this field: people should be able to speak freely, regardless of opinion, thought or feeling of others. This line would defend that no one should have a permanent opinion or formed belief, since preconceptions limit the development of debates. The logic of this Libertarianism points that "a strategy to prevent socially dangerous confrontations on fixed beliefs is trying to get rid of fixed beliefs." (RAUCH, p. 102)

This line of argument, rather than defend human dignity and indiscriminate freedom of speech based on freedom and individual responsibility, seems to ensure that any form of criticism and offense is permitted, since the criticism is made with the assumption of rationality. It gets closer to the reasons that led to the emergence of extremist publications at different times in history and attacked the nature of certain people and social groups. Criticism i.e. the attack against races, ideologies or religious groups would thus be justified and allowed. In this respect, philosopher Karsten Weber wrote:

What is usually argued in relation to the boundaries of freedom of opinion and speech is that it would prevent the mass media from being used to legally propagate racist ideas and other forms of 'hate speech' against individuals or groups, that is, against religious or ethnic minorities. If there were guidelines to determine which content could be spread, it would be possible to avoid such statements and possibly prosecute those responsible. But the stipulation of limits to freedom of expression has at least two disadvantages. First, a fundamental right, necessary for the existence of democratic rule of law, would be repressed. Even more problematic is the need for the existence of a legal proceeding that would decide, on the basis of contingent criteria, if expressions exceed or not the limits established by this law. Since it is not possible to formulate in detail what should be prohibited and what can be allowed, such rules would need to be taken very broadly. This way, however, they open the door to arbitrary and opportunistic interpretation. This is seen clearly by the example of discussions on the cartoons of Muhammad, because we can ask: how do these images need to look to become acceptable? What would be allowed to be showed and what would not? But also makes it necessary to ask: who is allowed to ban it? (WEBER, p.42)

All these questions raised by Weber show the complexity of the problem. Isaiah Berlin said that, also regarding issues involving freedom: “No doubt we cannot be absolutely free, and must give up some of our liberty to preserve the rest. But total self-surrender is self-defeating, for then there will be nothing left to preserve.” (BERLIN, 2004, p. 11). The political and social dynamics demand diversity so that the individual qualities and ideas can be preserved. Through diversity, ideas are generated and society develops - this is one of the premises of the democratic state. The exchange of experiences, ideas and personal views promote knowledge and combat myths and prejudices. The case of the Muhammad cartoons is once more emblematic. The protests and discussions that followed the publications revived a debate that put into question some of the myths and preconceived points of view about Islam in the West. Prejudices against Muslims clearly still exist in the West, just as they already existed before the publications. But the debate has certainly contributed to a critical analysis and a partial clarification of it. The cartoons actively participated in the public arena and highlighted the key role that the press and, as part of it, the cartoonists play in democratic societies.



## Religion satirized - considerations on the freedom of speech

The Muhammad cartoons provide an interesting case study, either for the clash of cultures they represent or for the degree of adaptability that Western societies are willing to accept in order to avoid further shocks. They also form an interesting case to analyze the current state of freedom in the West.

In this regard, the first point to be noted is that the papers in question, both the *Jylland-Posten* and the *Charlie Hebdo*, do not promote a systematic persecution against Arabs or Muslims. They differ therefore from typically persecutory publications that promoted hate speech against certain social groups, such as the German *Der Stürmer*<sup>3</sup> and the Rwandan *Kangura*<sup>4</sup>. In both of them, pictorial and humorous representations were systematically presented in order to crush the persecuted groups, the Jews in the first case and the Tutsi in the second. In the case of Danish and French newspapers, there is no systematic persecution. It is still possible to distinguish the tone of satire and the message that the cartoons bring in comparison: both the *Der Stürmer* as the *Kangura* preached the elimination of the depicted element of their societies. The portrayed hate speech is apologetic of violence and encourages a view that demeans the satirized groups. There is, in fact, a call for direct violent action against Jews and Tutsis. This is not confirmed in the representations of Muhammad.

It is necessary to characterize the cartoons regarding the satirized element, which seems crucial in determining the merits of the attacks and accusations against its content. Newspapers and magazines like *Der Stürmer* and *Kangura* attack and satirize immanent properties of the portrayed people and social groups (to be a Tutsi is not a matter of

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<sup>3</sup> *Der Stürmer* was a weekly newspaper based in Nuremberg that fulfilled two functions: the first was to support the Nazi Party and disseminate its ideology, the second was to establish the parameters of the anti-Semitism intrinsic to National Socialist ideology. Its founder, Julius Streicher was sentenced to death in the Nuremberg Trials for the development and spread of the virulent anti-Semitism that was characteristic of *Stürmer*. For more about the paper and the construction of the Jewish enemy in its pages, see: BYTWERK, 2001; SHOWALTER, 1982; LIEBEL, 2011a; LIEBEL, 2011b.

<sup>4</sup> *Kangura* was a Rwandan magazine, published between 1990 and 1994, which actively participated in the construction of a hostile environment for the persecution and the subsequent genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Its editorial intolerance against the Tutsi group was present in all articles and cartoons, in strong resemblance to the German newspaper *Der Stürmer* during the period prior to the Holocaust. For more on the subject, see KABANDA (2007).

opinion or choice). The aim of their drawings was the degradation of a "race" (Jews and Tutsis), i.e., the dehumanization of a socio-racial group through its defamation. Also when they accuse these groups to promote falsehood and immorality through their actions, these actions would be ultimately the result of a degenerate nature, being appointed as an intrinsic feature of the group in question. In the case of Muhammad cartoons, there is no generalization as in the cases above.

Yet (and here a crucial element of freedom of speech is called into question), the religious theme does not have the same nature when compared to racial issues. Racial features are recognized as inherent elements or part of the genetic identity of people, they are not choices. A general attack on these characteristics is an attack on the very nature of a person. This is the purpose of cartoons published on *Der Stürmer* and *Kangura*: to diminish and humiliate the nature of groups of individuals, to classify them as naturally inferior and/or dangerous. Such is not the case of criticism and satire against religions, as these relate to the field of opinions.

This proposition can be defended by the characterization of the concept of religion. This differs from the concept of faith, although the two are intertwined in their praxiological observation. The existence of one or more gods is a matter of faith, it is not a matter of knowledge (there is no empirical basis for such) nor of opinion (it does not belong to the world of senses). Gods have a speculative transcendental existence supported only by faith (KANT, p. 307 *et. seq.*). This is not the case of religion itself. This is characterized by sensory experience, being primarily a praxis with a theoretical and moral set based on a mythology that supports, or rather guides, the actions and thoughts of its followers in accordance to a specific teleological belief. In other words, religions are systems of ideas. It is, however, evident that a multitude of religions is available to be analyzed, considered and chosen. Even if an individual was raised in a religious household and followed its traditions, in a democratic society, the continuation of this practice is determined by a choice to follow that vision over others. This characterizes an opinion, that is, the idea that a religion is better or more able to perform personal aspirations in the teleological order of faith. The criticism of religion or religious dogma is therefore a criticism of this opinion, sheltered and protected by freedom of speech.



The assumption that, through the criticism and the satire exposed in the cartoons, freedom of speech can interfere with the freedom of religion is another question that leads to discussions. That's because, according to Rawls' (2002, p. 143 *et. seq.*) principle of priority of freedom, freedoms may self-restrict themselves, since the exercise of one may restrict another. In this scenario, the one that damages must be dismissed in its condition of basic freedom and, after classification, should be sought to balance the development of both. "As the basic freedoms may be limited when in conflict to each other, none of them is absolute and it cannot be demanded (...) that all basic freedoms are treated equally (regardless the meaning of this demand)" (*Ibid.* p. 150). This is, once again, the already mentioned statement of Isaiah Berlin. It is necessary to indulge in some cases to enjoy the freedoms in the fullest way possible.

Religions, as well as any opinion to be expressed in the public arena, are viable subjects to comments and criticism. As such, freedom of speech does not harm freedom of religion, since it does not suppress the right of choice. The violence intrinsic to any cartoon that satirizes religion does not prevent the exercise of the chosen faith or worship, nor the individual's right to choose it. However, to prevent an individual from criticizing elements of a religion, satirizing them or expressing an opinion on them violates the freedom of speech. The judicial decision that forced YouTube to suppress access to the video *Innocence of Muslims* in Brazil must be analyzed from this point of view. But the peaceful demonstrators that protested against the cartoons and the film in many parts of the world were acting legitimately, exercising not their religious freedom, but the freedom of criticism and speech against the critics themselves. Needless to say, the terrorist attack against the editorial office of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, is on a completely different level.

Some may even argue that, no matter how internalized a religion is in an individual or community, a criticism or satire against a sensitive subject, such as religion, should be punished because it bullies, humiliates and offends its believers. However, to what extent should opinions linked to religion (i.e. intimate and individual choices transposed into the public debate) receive a special treatment that is not extended to other forms of opinion? The fact that the individual can assimilate such criticism as offense or aggression (and not

as a mere dissenting opinion) should be taken into consideration? In the words of John Stuart Mill,

For if the test be offence to those whose opinion is attacked, I think experience testifies that this offense is given whenever the attack is telling and powerful, and that every opponent who pushes them hard, and whom they find it difficult to answer, appears to them, if he shows any strong feelings on the subject, an intemperate opponent. (STUART MILL, 2015, p. 52)

It is in this sense that political freedoms promote a circularity of actions, and the (social, political or religious) criticism exercised by a caricaturist prompts reflection by the society rather than offense. The cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*, heirs of the radical Enlightenment (see Israel, 2009), don't relate to compliance or empathic reflection in the expression of their opinions. In this sense, they were perfectly aligned to what Gertrude Himmelfarb (2011) described as the ideology of reason, i.e. the Enlightenment heritage, linked by the author mainly to France, that defends and fully exercises reason, losing sight of subjective values.

## Conclusion

Cultural manifestations and eventual controversies and protests arising from them (as the cases reviewed herein) are events that illustrate the delicate sociocultural moment brought about by the evolution of globalization. It is much more than a clash of civilizations, the expression coined by Huntington (1997); it is a long process of cultural conformation fostered by the exponentially high exchange of experiences of recent decades.

In this context, it seems easy for us, individuals inserted in a democratic Western culture, to see the "evolution" of the influence of our way of life, our world view, onto the East. We were able to clearly judge the many "Springs" around the world as events detonated and determined by our example, and we are often ready to justify wars in the name of the expansion of democratic values. However, it seems that difficulty lies in the integration and acceptance of cultural differences in our own space. A research by the

Gallup Institute, for example, shows that the negative opinion of US citizens towards Muslims hit 50% (GALLUP INSTITUTE, 2012a), while 21% of the German population and 16% of French and English people feel aversion to the possibility of having a Muslim neighbor (GALLUP INSTITUTE, 2012b). But this hostile environment is not reserved only for Muslims; the same research shows that, although to a lesser extent, Jews, Christians and atheists also have their share of suspicion and prejudice.

The emergence of this atmosphere of imminent conflicts produced societies that deal with sensitive personal issues in a more zealous way. In this context, conflicting opinions, as exposed in the Muhammad cartoons, trigger the alert of fear. In search of balance, however, the temptation of censorship has shown itself very frequently. The contrast of opinions on sensitive issues - particularly the humor about religious elements in our time - has led to increasingly unfavorable results for individual liberties.

Silencing through censorship or intimidation of those who have a contradictory opinion to the majority or to part of the population (the subject of religion can be included here, since much of the population has a belief or a religion) belongs to the tradition of authoritarian dictatorships, not the heritage of democratic liberalism. Democracy works not only towards the freedom of speech, but also towards the open and egalitarian debate, and is guided by the idea that even

when there are people who are an exception to the apparent unanimity of the world on any topic, even if the world is in the right, it is always probable that dissentients have something worth hearing to say for themselves, and that truth would lose something by their silence. (STUART MILL, 2015, p. 48)

The debates and discussions that cartoons trigger serve also, in an ideal scenario, to motivate the expansion of freedom and tolerance in society. The debates are also a way to control extremists - not just politicians, government officials and religious groups, but also cartoonists themselves. Censorship against pure matters of opinion hinders these developments. In fact, one could argue that, following the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson (1777), who in his *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* condemned the

ensorship of religion and opinions on religion: “errors cease to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.” The expression of religious opinion is therefore closely related to freedom of speech in a democratic society, not to a standardization of consciousness. To limit freedom of expression because of real or imaginary offenses (also elements of the realm of opinion) is a contradiction inherent to those who require space to profess their (private) faith publicly.

The weakness of the democratic system seems to be, contradictorily, in its strength: it is in the multitude of beliefs and opinions, ideologies and political ideas that the bacillus that can weaken it can be found. In an attempt to curb some opinions against the common sense, reactionary decisions appear as an apparent solution to a conflict. When authoritarian ideas are seen as possible solutions to democratic challenges, the fall of the rule of law itself will be set in motion.

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