

Head-on Collision at Charlie Hebdo

12 DEAD, 20 WOUNDED

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Nidra Poller

Clash of civilizations, star wars, the big bang, a certain idea of France was murdered in cold blood on January 7th. An allahu akhbar commando stormed into the offices of Charlie Hebdo, executed twelve people, wounded another twenty; four of them critically. It is painfully difficult to sort out nuggets of accurate information from the sound and fury that fills the airwaves and the streets of Paris. [12 noon, one minute of silence has been decreed by the government, outside my window I hear car horns furious at someone blocking the street, rumbling machines working on a nearby building, almost drowning out the dirge sounded by the church bell on the corner, icy rain pelts on hurried passersby...].

An infinitesimal minority of the 5 or 6 million Muslims living in France—two brothers identified as Sherif and Said Kouachi—wiped out the staff of an in your face magazine that has been offending everyone for 45 years. A mixture of pornography and scatology was served up weekly in a hallmark sloppy cartoon style with brief texts that lashed out like a not yet emancipated adolescent at chosen targets. The sweet smiling faces of yesterday's victims—Charb, Cabu, Tignous, Wolinski, Honoré, Maris—convey the abiding innocence that was brutally assassinated. They made good-natured grotesque fun of everyone including themselves...in a heretofore protected world.

In 2005, Charlie published the Mohamed cartoons with the same

insolence as it habitually employed on priests, rabbis and other benighted believers. Courageous, yes...but also blinded by their own enlightened tolerance. On this and subsequent occasions the Charlies reiterated their faith in humanity, Muslims included. Mocking fanatics was a gesture of affection for fellow citizens of the Muslim faith. The mockery was inclusive, not aggressive. It was a way of saying "you belong to our wonderful culture."

Today, Phlippe Val, director of the magazine when the Mohamed cartoons were published, cannot hold back his tears. "I've lost all my friends." Val gives credit to French governments Left and Right that protected him and his staff since that fateful day. "Without police protection we would not have been able to carry on." Though Charlie Hebdo was acquitted of defamation in 2006, the court established de facto anti-blasphemy by granting the magazine a limited right to offend Islam in the context of the worldwide controversy surrounding the Mohamed cartoons. Dalil Boubaker, rector of the Central Mosque of Paris, one of the plaintiffs in that case, was represented by Francis Szpiner, who also represented France 2 in the case against Philippe Karsenty and, subsequently, the family of Ilan Halimi against the Gang of Barbarians.

At the time, Boubaker voiced disapproval of the violence ripping through the Muslim world over the cartoons, while pleading for respect for Islam and the prophet. Yesterday he rushed to the site of the killings and voiced his disapproval of an act that sullies Islam and betrays its sacred respect for human life. If the Charlie Hebdo massacre is France's 9/11 as many suggest, the religion of peace message that so quickly replaced don't tread on me in the US is even more insistent here in France.

The usual array of experts, specialists, authors, former secret service agents and well-trained journalists is making the distinction between Islam and these allahu akhbar fanatics. The bodies of the victims were still lying in pools

of blood in their boardroom while the concern had already shifted to the innocent Muslims who might be fingered because of this aberrant misuse of their beautiful religion.

Spontaneous demonstrations formed all over France, 100,000 in all, with 35,000 at Place de la République. The Je suis Charlie [I am Charlie] slogan caught on instantly worldwide. Sincerely moved, often to tears, honest citizens stood in the frosty cold, holding up pencils as a sign of résistance. We Are Not Afraid they declared in a little light show Place de la République. Memorial candle burners occupied the field conquered last summer by flag burners, the black mournful mockup of a Charlie Hebdo front page replaced the black flag of jihad flown last August, a tribute was made to two policemen killed in the line of duty yesterday, there where the caliphators had attacked police with rocks and bags of broken glass.

[2:30 PM—it is reported that the two suspects robbed a gas station, abandoned the car they hijacked on the run yesterday, and are somewhere in a zone between Villers-Cotterêts and Crépy-en-Valois. Commandos in Puma helicopters are circling over the area, under the watchful eye of TV cameras. The bucolic place names have all the perfumes of an eternal France that is slashed today by the intrusion of another world it still refuses to see.]

In 2008 a different sort of scandal targeted Charlie Hebdo: editorial director Philippe Val was accused in some quarters of “censorship” for kicking out the unashamed anti-Semite Siné. In my coverage of that story— Tempest in a Trashcan http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm/frm/25151/sec_id/25151— I noticed an element that had escaped other commentators: an article by Charb making fun of those who claim the al Dura video is a hoax, and relaying the bit about Israelis killing Palestinian children wholesale.

The firebombing of Charlie’s offices in 2011 raised a first

ripple of public indignation. Defiant, the staff brought out a CHARIA HEBDO issue, under the direction of editor in chief Mohammed. On the next to the last page of that issue, chock full of scandalous acts, positions, and nudity on the theme of sharia, a full-page interview with David Chemla, president of the French branch of Peace Now and European secretary of the J Street lookalike JCall. The release of 1,000 prisoners in exchange for Gilad Shalit, including 280 responsible for the death of 600 civilians shows, says Chemla, that Israel can erase its red lines for a good cause. They will have to do some more erasing, he advises, in order to make peace with the Palestinians. [My coverage: Auto da fe in Paris http://www.newenglishreview.org/blog_email.cfm/blog_id/38896/Auto-da-fe-in-Paris-its-no-joke]

In a video filmed before a mountain of charred documents, Charb admitted that he might need police protection from now on. But he said he had more chance of getting run over by a Vel-lib (municipal rental bike) than to be killed by an Islamist... "there are so few in France."

The November 9th issue featured on its cover a cute little Charlie kid receiving a drooling kiss from a sweet bearded guy in Salafist dress. "Love is stronger than hatred," proclaims the cover. The issue is filled with testimonials from all over the world, and strong with a spirit of we will not be cowed. In his personal account of the aftermath of the fire, Charb has "a thought for the Muslims who are the first victims of this fire." It's going to be exploited by the Far Right to discredit all Muslims. In fact, wrote Charb, we can't be sure the attack did come from Islamists. Maybe it was fascist provocateurs! Anyway, the hacking and death threats come from foreign Islamists.

But the Kouachi brothers, of Algerian origin, were born in Paris!

In January 2013 Charlie Hebdo brought out the first volume of

an irreverent apologetic Life of Mohammed comic book [LaVie de Mahomet] illustrated by Charb. The prophet is portrayed with comical awkwardness but his message and life story are told with orthodox respect.

The philo-Muslim theme is endlessly repeated over the past 24 hours. Imams that swear allegiance to the values of the Republic are featured on TV. Those who preach jihad are not mentioned even in a whisper. The Muslim in the street is spotlighted, a caring citizen like any other. A woman in hijab places flowers on the altar in front of the Charlie Hebdo offices. In reply to a journalist who asks "Are you concerned?" she offers a little homily: "The prophet never attacked unless he was attacked. Then he responded with kind words and only if they were ignored did he fight. When he fought, he really fought!"

The younger brother, Sherif Kouachi, was briefly imprisoned for his activity in the 19th arrondissement terror cell that recruited jihadis for Iraq. At the time, journalist Mohamed Sifaoui, himself a refugee from the Algerian terror wave, declared that it was the American invasion of Iraq, not Islam that provoked the Buttes Chaumont terror cell. Today Sifaoui claims that rising xenophobia in France fuels Islamic radicalization, and we have to deal with both. The BBC outdid everyone, bringing in the sly wily Muslim Brotherhood Tarrq Ramadan to tell us infidels how we should behave to avoid this kind of attack.

I24 news commentator Ali Waked candidly admitted that he had been in the midst of a "group" not far from the station's Jaffa studios Monday night: "The majority said Charlie Hebdo had insulted the prophet and got what was coming to them."

Worldwide media are showing an unprecedented mobilization in France. Undeniably, a nerve has been hit. There has been nothing like it since the first Islamic attacks going back to the 80s and increasing exponentially since October 2000. There

was no public outcry last month when the I Télé channel dropped the popular debater Eric Zemmour, after publication of Le Suicide Français, in which he expands on the Islamic problem facing France.

Of course the issue of press freedom takes on immense significance when the staff of a magazine is decimated by two men with Kalashnikovs. The reaction to the Charlie Hebdo massacre is neither artificial nor hypocritical. But the question of Islam is an abyss. Unless it is faced honestly, fearlessly, without false reassurance, the masses of enlightened citizens standing up for their freedom today will slide into that chasm.