

# Michael Totten: What Christopher Hitchens Said, That Bears Repeating

Christopher Hitchens on Today's Paris Massacre

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Gunmen shouting "Allahu Akbar" [attacked the offices of French satirical newspaper named \*Charlie Hebdo\* and killed twelve people](#), including journalists and two policemen.

Radical Islamists apparently don't share the paper's sense of

humor.

What good is legal freedom of speech if violent enforcers of a *different*, older, and foreign set of laws take it upon themselves to punish you extrajudicially?

This is not a new problem, not in the Middle East and not in the West. A few years ago I spoke with Christopher Hitchens about it and here's what he said.

**Hitchens:** Let's do a brief thought experiment. I tell you the following: On New Year's Eve, a man in his mid-seventies is having his granddaughter over for a sleep-over, his five-year old granddaughter. He is attacked in his own home by an axe-wielding maniac with homicidal intent. Your mammalian reaction, your reaction as a primate, is one of revulsion. I'm trusting you on this. [Laughs.]

**MJT:** Oh, yes. You are correct.

**Hitchens:** Then you pick up yesterday's *Guardian*, one of the most liberal newspapers in the Western world, and there's a long article that says, ah, that picture, that moral picture, that instinct to protect the old and the young doesn't apply in this case. The man asked for it. He drew a cartoon that upset some people. We aren't at all entitled to use our moral instincts in the correct way.

[...]

**MJT:** The current president of Ireland said Muslims have the right to be offended by Westergaard's cartoons. I suppose that's true as far as it goes, that everybody has the right to be offended by anything, but why...

**Hitchens:** Ah yes. This is not new. I've written about this many times. It's reverse ecumenicism. It first became obvious to me when the fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989. The reaction of the official newspaper of the Vatican

was that the problem wasn't that the foreign leader of a theocratic dictatorship offered money, in public, in his own name, to suborn the murder of the writer of a book of fiction in another country, who wasn't an Iranian citizen. The problem was not that.

You and I may have thought, bloody hell, this is a new kind of threat. But it's an old level of threat. Blasphemy is the problem. That was also the view of the archbishop of Canterbury. The general reaction of the religious establishments to that and to the Danish case—and, by the way, of our secular State Department in the Danish case—was to say the problem was Danish offensiveness. A cartoon in a provincial town in a small Scandinavian democracy obviously should be censored by the government lest it ignite—or as Yale University Press put it, *instigate*—violence.

Instigation of violence can only mean one thing. I know the English language better than I know anything else.

**MJT:** *Instigate* means it's on purpose.

**Hitchens:** These people are saying the grandfather and granddaughter were the authors of their own attempted assassinations. These are some of the same people who say that if I don't believe in God I can't know what morality is. They've just dissolved morality completely into relativism by saying actually, occasionally, carving up grandfathers and granddaughters with an axe on New Year's Eve can be okay if it's done to protect the reputation of a seventh century Arabian man who heard voices.

**MJT:** It's hard to psychoanalyze other people, but I sometimes suspect that blaming Salman Rushdie and Kurt Westergaard, as many writers have, for bringing down the wrath of these maniacs from Somalia and Iran, may be a way of convincing themselves they'll be safe as long as they don't cross the same line. Any writer or graphic artist must, at least for a

second, think oh fuck, they could come for me if I don't watch out. They can say to themselves they'll be fine if they don't cross that line.

**Hitchens:** But the line will never stop shifting.