

***Charlie Hebdo: Some tough quandaries***

The heinous nature of the crime against the journalists and cartoonists from *Charlie Hebdo* makes it extremely difficult to offer a cool-headed analysis of what is entailed in this barbaric act, its context and precedents, as well as its impact and future repercussions. Still an analysis is urgently needed, lest we fan the flames of a fire that one of these days may well hit our children's schools, our homes, our institutions and our consciences. Here are some thoughts towards that analysis.

*The fight against terrorism; torture and democracy.* One cannot draw a direct connection between the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy and the fight against terrorism waged by the US and its allies since September 11, 2001. It is a known fact, however, that the West's extreme aggressiveness has caused the death of many thousands of innocent civilians (mostly Muslims) and inflicted astounding levels of violence and torture on young Muslims against whom all suspicions of wrongdoing are speculative at best, as attested to by the report recently submitted to the US Congress. It is also well known that many young Islamic radicals claim that their radicalisation stems from their anger at all that unredressed violence. In view of this, we must stop and consider whether the best way to bring the spiral of violence to a halt is to pursue the same policies that have driven it so far, as has now become all too evident. The French response to the attack shows that democratic, constitutional normalcy is now suspended and an undeclared state of siege is in place, that this type of criminal should be shot dead rather than incarcerated and brought to justice, and that such behaviour in no way seems to contradict Western values. We have entered a phase of

low-intensity civil war. Who in Europe stands to gain from it? Certainly not the Podemos party in Spain, nor Greece's Syriza.

*Freedom of expression.* The freedom to express oneself is a precious commodity, but it, too, has its limits, and the truth is that the overwhelming majority of those limits are imposed by those who advocate limitless freedom whenever *their own* freedom is curtailed. The examples of such limits are legion: in England a demonstrator can get herself arrested for saying that David Cameron has blood on his hands; in France Islamic women are not allowed to wear the hijab; in 2008, cartoonist Siné (Maurice Sinet) was fired from *Charlie Hebdo* for writing an allegedly anti-Semitic article. What this all means is that limits do exist, it's just that they vary for different interest groups. Take Latin America, for example, where the major media, which are controlled by oligarchic families and by big capital, are the first to cry out for unrestrained freedom of expression so that they can throw abuse at the progressive governments and silence all the good that these governments have done to promote the well-being of the poor. It seems that *Charlie Hebdo* knew no limits when it came to insulting Muslims, although many of its cartoons were racist propaganda and contributed to feed the Islamophobic, anti-immigrant wave now sweeping over France and Europe in general. Besides many cartoons in which the Prophet is shown in pornographic poses, one in particular was very much explored by the far right. It depicted a group of pregnant Muslim women presented as Boko Haram sex slaves, their hands resting on their belly bump, screaming "Hands off our welfare benefits". At one stroke, the cartoon stigmatised Islam, women and the welfare state. As was to be expected, over the years the largest Muslim community in Europe saw this editorial line as offensive. On the other hand, however, its condemnation of this barbaric crime was immediate. We must therefore reflect on the

contradictions and asymmetries of the lived values some of us believe to be universal.

*Tolerance and "Western values"*. The context of the crime is dominated by two currents of opinion, none of which is conducive to building an inclusive, intercultural Europe. The more radical of the two is openly Islamophobic and anti-immigrant. These are the hardliners of the far right all across Europe and of the right wherever it feels threatened in upcoming elections (as is the case of Greece's Antonis Samara). For this current of thought, the enemies of European civilization are among "us". They hate us, they wield our passports, and the situation cannot be solved unless we get rid of them. The anti-immigrant overtones are unmistakable. The other current is that of tolerance. These people are very different from us, they are a burden, but we have to "put up with them", for, if nothing else, they are useful; we should do it, however, only if they behave moderately and assimilate our values. But what *are* "Western values"? After many centuries of atrocities committed in the name of such values both within and outside Europe – from colonial violence to the two world wars –, a degree of caution and much reflection are in order about what those values are and also about why, depending on the context, now some of them, now others, tend to take precedence. For example, no one questions the value of freedom, but the same cannot be said for equality and fraternity, the two values underlying the welfare state that prevailed in democratic Europe after World War II. In recent years, however, social protection – which used to ensure high levels of social integration – began to be questioned by conservative politicians and is now seen as an unaffordable luxury by the parties of the so-called "arc of governance". Isn't it true that the social crisis caused by the erosion of social protection and by growing unemployment, especially among youth, is like fuel to the

flames of radicalism found among the younger generations, who, in addition to unemployment, are the victims of ethnic and religious discrimination?

*A clash of fanaticisms, not of civilizations.* What we are facing now is not a clash of civilizations, because Christian and Islamic civilization share the same roots to begin with. What we have before us is a clash of fanaticisms, even if some of them are just too close to us to be recognized as such. History shows that many fanaticisms and the way in which they clashed were related to economic and political interests, which in any event were never beneficial to those who suffered most at the hands of fanatics. This is the case, in Europe and its areas of influence, of the Crusades and the Inquisition, the evangelisation of colonial populations, the religious wars and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Outside Europe, a religion as peaceable as Buddhism has legitimised the slaughter of many thousands of members of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority; in 2003, Hindu fundamentalists also slaughtered the Muslim populations of Gujarat, and the likelihood of their rise to power as a result of President Modi's recent victory makes one fear the worst; it is also in the name of religion that Israel is carrying on with its unpunished, ethnic cleansing of Palestine and that the so-called Islamic Emirate is slaughtering Muslim populations in Syria and in Iraq. Could it be that the defense of unrestrained secularism in an intercultural Europe, where many people do not identify with this particular value, is itself a form of extremism? Do extremisms oppose one another? Do they interconnect? What relationships are there between the jihadists and the Western secret services? How come the jihadists of the Islamic Emirate, who are now seen as terrorists, used to be freedom fighters when they were fighting against Gaddafi and Assad? How is it that the Islamic Emirate is funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey, all of them allies of the

West? This being said, the fact remains that, over the last decade at least, the overwhelming majority of victims of all fanaticisms (including Islamic fanaticism) belonged to non-fanatical Muslim populations.

*The value of human life.* The absolute, unconditional revulsion experienced by Europeans in the face of these deaths should make us wonder why they do not feel the same kind of revulsion in the face of a similar, if not much higher, number of innocent deaths caused by conflicts that, at bottom, may have something to do with the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy. On that very same day, 37 young people were killed in a bomb attack in Yemen. Last summer, the Israeli invasion caused the death of 2000 Palestinians, including about 1,500 civilians and 500 children. In Mexico, 102 journalists have been murdered since 2000 for speaking up for freedom of the press, and in November 2014, 43 young people were killed in Ayotzinapa, also in Mexico. Surely the difference in those reactions cannot be based on the notion that the life of white Europeans, coming from a Christian culture, is worth more than the lives of non-Europeans or of Europeans of another colour, whose culture originates in different religions or in other regions. Is it because the latter live at a remove from the Europeans and are less familiar to them? On the other hand, does the Christian injunction to love one's neighbour provide for such distinctions? Is it because the big media and the political leaders in the West tend to trivialise the suffering inflicted on those others, or even to demonise them to the point of making us think that they had it coming?