Charlie Hebdo: *A Heterodox Insider's View*

Jean-Yves Camus

I'd like to briefly explain here how I reacted to the shooting. It was 11:45 a.m. on January 7, when a journalist and friend of mine who works at a famous French daily evening newspaper called to inform me that shots had been heard close to the office where the *Charlie Hebdo* staff were meeting. I had never been to that office, since *Charlie Hebdo* recently changed location and I had been too busy to have a look at the new premises. My first reaction was to immediately call the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* with whom I usually work when I submit my column, just to check that he was really on his vacation. He was, and he was also totally unaware that anything had happened. Being the first to call someone with the news that their friends and colleagues may have been the targets of a terrorist attack is a dreadful and sad experience. After receiving confirmation that not only had there been gunshots, but at least nine people were dead (the toll later rose to twelve), I rushed to the scene with the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, with whom I work on a daily basis as an adviser. We were there at a quarter past noon and were later joined by the minister of the interior and President François Hollande. The police were all over the area, streets had been closed, and the many TV crews and journalists who tried to get a glimpse of the crime scene were kept some two hundred yards away from the building. The president was briefed by the top-ranking police official in Paris and also by the head of the forensic branch. The president asked whether it was possible to enter the building and was given a negative answer, because the bodies of the dead had not yet been removed, and we might have left our imprints all over the scene. So we wandered from one end of the crime scene to the other before the president talked to the press, and I remember having to tell a person who was there with us to avoid walking on the bullets, which were still scattered over the ground. One ambulance

Jean-Yves Camus is a specialist of Far Right movements in Europe and a longtime contributor to the weekly *Charlie Hebdo*. He is a Research Fellow at the Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques and the Director of the Observatoire des radicalités politiques at the Fondation Jean Jaurès (Paris). He is the author, with Nicolas Lebourg, of *Les Droites extrêmes en Europe* (2015).

was still parked outside the building, taking care of a lightly wounded person, but all the people who were not wounded—*Charlie Hebdo* staffers and employees of the other companies sharing the same building—had already been evacuated to a makeshift crisis center that was set up in an adjacent theater. The mayor and her staff, including myself, spent more than an hour inside, talking to the survivors and to their families, who had come in haste to comfort them, and also talking to the many elected officials from all democratic parties who had rushed there to show their solidarity. It was quite a strange experience for me because although I was there in my official capacity, I was also there as a colleague and contributor to the weekly newspaper. We left at about 2:30 p.m., returned to our respective offices, and dealt with the many administrative and political consequences of what had just happened. Little did I know that two days later there would be another attack in Paris, targeting a kosher supermarket only a few hundred yards away from my synagogue.

I have contributed to *Charlie Hebdo* on an (almost) weekly basis since 1993, with the only exception being a few years when I was asked to leave because of my dissenting opinion with the then editor in chief over the issue of how to cover topics related to Islam. That was just after the satirical newspaper had published the cartoons of Muhammad. I did not object to their publication but was concerned that the newspaper devoted too much editorial content to Islam and had become, somehow, a single-issue publication. While I stick to my belief, I want to emphasize that neither the publication of the cartoons nor the very harsh words some of the contributors to *Charlie Hebdo* have used when writing on Islam can justify in any way the bloodshed that took place on January 7, 2015. In order to have my point of view properly understood, I need to tell how I became involved in writing for *Charlie Hebdo* and why I agreed to contribute, despite the fact that I am very, very far from being a Leftist or an antireligion activist or nostalgic for post-1968 "flower power."

To begin with, I am not even a journalist. That is precisely why I welcomed the invitation to join the *Charlie Hebdo* team. Back then, in the mid-1990s, one of the major topics in the French political debate was the Front national's (FN) winning 15 percent of the vote on an anti-immigration and xenophobic platform, with Jean-Marie Le Pen becoming (in)famous for his anti-Semitic ramblings. Starting in the mid-1980s, I had been one of the few French political scientists to study the Far Right, which was wrongly believed to have died in the ashes of the Third Reich and in the prison cells of the French "épuration." I had published a book and many academic articles on this topic but was frustrated that my knowledge remained confined to the small community of like-minded colleagues, and I felt the need to share what I knew about the FN with a wider audience. I must say that I had not often read *Charlie Hebdo* when François Camé, then the editor in chief and, like me, a graduate of the Institut d'études politiques de Paris, class of 1981, asked me to contribute on a regular basis, but I accepted.

One of my reasons was that *Charlie Hebdo* is a left-wing newspaper. The Alternative Left is not my political home. I was raised in a Conservative family and although I now side with the Social Democrats, I think that the Far Left often offers too-simplistic answers to the rise of the FN. It holds the view that it is Fascist and that the government should ban it altogether, and it supports the idea that the average FN voter is nothing but a racist redneck with a very small brain and a lower-grade education. Well, the sociology of FN voters, as well as the history of the French Far Right, shows that one should be more subtle, both in the analysis of the phenomenon and in trying to address the issues that are at the core of FN ideology. The invitation to contribute to

Charlie Hebdo was a real opportunity for me to write for people I otherwise would not have met because they belong to a political tradition that is not mine. I must say that in more than twenty years of association with the newspaper, and except during the short period of time I have already referred to, I have never been asked to follow a specific editorial line, which would have infringed on my freedom of thought.

Now there is another reason for my close association with the newspaper: I harbor some of the features most of its readers love to hate. I am an observant Jew who would describe himself as Modern Orthodox by American standards. I live in a country where the so-called Secularist Left can be (and often is) quite negative about religion. As for myself, I do not think that believers (in any religion, including Islam) are backward bigots whose only contribution to community life is to oppress those who do not share their beliefs.

So my reasoning was, rather than put anathema on those who, like *Charlie Hebdo*, deride all religions, including, on several occasions, Orthodox Judaism, why not try to show them that you can be observant and still believe in the usefulness of the concept of *laïcité*? Why not prove to them that when you are really confident in your faith, and proud of it, you can, and even have to, allow others to make fun of your way of life, religious garb, and set of values? My concern is that if I contribute only to newspapers that are aimed at my community, I shall not help to strengthen the concept of an inclusive society and I shall no longer bring any valuable insight to the public debate. The key word here is "respect"—that is, respecting the constitutional right of nonbelievers and atheists to hold their views and asking them in return to let me live according to my religion.

It worked: I never had any experience of a *Charlie Hebdo* staffer who did not respect my lifestyle or made any comment that would have even bordered on anti-Semitism. Otherwise, I would have left on the spot. Just to clarify, when in 2008 a columnist wrote an anti-Semitic article, he was immediately fired and the newspaper chose to pay him the huge sum of 90,000 euros rather than keep him on the payroll. Many of those who do not like *Charlie Hebdo* will say that the newspaper is not anti-Semitic but it promotes Islamophobia. I have carefully weighed the pros and cons of this argument, both before and after the publication of the cartoons of Muhammad. As you may know, "Islamophobia" is a word that is not used by the newspaper, because it is seen as having been coined by the Khomeini regime as a propaganda tool aimed at criminalizing any criticism of Islam. Although scholars have shown that this is not true ("Islamophobia" was first used in France by Orientalists writing about French North Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century), the concept of Islamophobia is still rejected by a significant number of those who support the French idea of secularism.

However, I have stood firm in explaining that Islamophobia does exist and that the word should be used to describe those who are phobic in their rejection of Islam—that is, those who hold the view that Islam and/or its sacred texts should be banned on European soil. This kind of mad belief, as well as the concept of a worldwide Muslim conspiracy to take over the rule of non-Muslim lands, whether by force, conversion, or immigration, is absolute nonsense and does not give any practical political solution to the real problem of how to tackle terrorism and the growth of radical Islam. However, after more than twenty years working with *Charlie Hebdo*, I have never read anything in that publication that would fall within the above definition of Islamophobia. The newspaper has always been outspoken in its rejection of anti-immigrant prejudices, whether those immigrants be Roma, Christian, Muslims, or whatever. It is one of the very

few that has called for the unconditional and immediate right of undocumented immigrants to stay in the country and move freely within the borders of the European Union. It has never called for a ban on the Koran or on the building of mosques. It has supported the 2004 law that forbids wearing the hijab in schools and in public administration (but not in private businesses or on the streets), and although I was not so keen on condoning this legislation, one needs to remind oneself that it also applies to the Jewish skullcap and Sikh traditional attire.

The only contentious issue I have with *Charlie Hebdo* is on its call for a ban on ritual slaughter for reasons that have to do with animal rights. My objection to them is that I have the constitutional right to eat kosher and observant Muslims have an equal right to eat halal. But once again, *Charlie Hebdo*'s campaign against ritual slaughter has nothing to do with Islamophobia, because it applies to all kinds of religious ritual slaughter and thus does not discriminate against Islam.

I must add, especially for our American readers who may not have had the opportunity to read the newspaper, which has long been reluctant to put its content online, that although *Charlie Hebdo* is a satirical weekly newspaper, it is much more than a publication full of cartoons. It is one of the very few newspapers in France that, being financially independent from any corporate group or political party, is totally free to continue in the tradition of investigative journalism. On topics like the financing of political campaigns, the environment, ethnic discrimination in housing or in the workplace, and the dubious connections between some politicians and (rich) foreign dictatorships, it is a newspaper that is really worth reading even if one does not share its stand on religion. In other words, the journalists there are not monomaniacs who are obsessed with religious fundamentalism. It just happens that for over twenty years, and more so now, Islam *is* an issue in France, in a way that is very different from the situation in the United States. Because France is a former colonial power in North Africa and we have yet to really come to grips with this part of our history. Because the southernmost part of our country is only one hour by plane from Algiers, which means that regardless of what the Far Right says, there is no way we can isolate ourselves from the Arab world. And because, notwithstanding any restrictive legislation on immigration that might be passed in the future, there are around six million people living here who originate from the Muslim world and will stay here. This *Charlie Hebdo* has repeatedly said and we are proud of it. I feel the newspaper has to be respected for that and is entitled to sound the alarm when a small but vocal minority within the Muslim population wants to impose their theocratic rule on their fellow believers and on the non-Muslim population.

When the terrorists attacked the premises of the newspaper on January 7, 2015, I was of course stunned by the magnitude of the killing but, I must say, not that surprised. What struck me the most was the span of time between the publication of the cartoons of Muhammad (February 8, 2006) and the attack: nearly nine years. This means that the Kouachi brothers, who were already active within radical Islamic groups in 2003–4, waited that long before carrying out their plot, while still going on with their routine, everyday lives. It is their level of fanaticism that made an impression me.

Many radio and TV stations and newspapers asked for my comments on the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. I appeared on two or three talk shows on the day of the shooting and the day after. Then I decided I should stop accepting invitations. The explanation I gave is that after all, I am neither a victim nor a survivor. I am just an outside contributor who cannot feel the emotions, shock, and anguish that those who were on the premises when the shooting took place and who survived are still suffering. One of them is still in a wheelchair. Another had to undergo extensive

plastic surgery to have his face repaired. Even those who were less seriously wounded have had their lives devastated. So who am I to speak on their behalf?

My last comment is this. A few days after the shootings, the Catholic traditionalist daily newspaper, *Présent*, published an article devoted to criticizing *Charlie Hebdo* because it is a staunch opponent of the FN and, thus, an enemy of freedom of speech. My name was mentioned in the article, so I decided to contact their editor in order to be given a right of reply. I insisted that I was not taking any legal action, so that they were totally free to reject my request and I would not sue them. My letter was immediately published, though, and I thank them for having done so. My message was crystal clear. The big difference between the killers and me, I argued, is that they did not mind taking the lives of their enemies, while I hold the belief that my enemy is also a human being and has the right to live even when his ideas or behavior hurt me. Maybe my attitude stems from some outdated, dovish, left-wing, stupid humanitarianism. However, I explained that I do not want even my worst enemies (such as neo-Nazis or former Nazis, Holocaust deniers, and Muslim Jew-baiters) to fall under the bullets of someone who pretends he is acting in the name of my religion or my ideology. A