

Misusing the Principle of “Freedom of Expression”: “Fundamentalism in Thought and Opinion” vs. What Happened to Charlie?

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Global Research, January 26, 2015

[TFF Press Info](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

My answer is simple: the issues surrounding the horrific attack on Charlie Hebdo disappeared so fast because the general Western reaction was ill-considered/phony and therefore unsustainable.

But there is actually still quite a lot to be discussed.

Secondly, European politicians and media chose – quite uniformly for a professed pluralist society – to not discuss the possible causes. The more convenient interpretation was that the perpetrators were just madmen and people like that should be hunted down and eliminated (like IS in Syria and Iraq).

Without causal analysis we can more easily go straight for more “security”, intelligence, surveillance and more police and military in the streets – in short, symptom treatment.

Further, when we deny human beings any motives we de-humanise them and then they don’t deserve to be heard or treated as humans. Evil is always ‘the other.’

The attack on Charlie Hebdo was not an attack on the entire Western culture, democracy or freedom of expression as such. The perpetrators would hardly know such a concept.

It was an attack at one weekly magazine for what it had misused freedom of expression to do.

Misused?

Freedom and wisdom of expression can be combined. There are at least 4 reasons why we should be proud of the principle of freedom of expression and therefore be wise enough to not misuse it or make it a weapon against others.

Manners, customs, civility, empathy, respect...

I have the freedom to do a lot – tell the lady next to me at a dinner table that she is ugly or that her husband who died a month ago was, in my view, the most stupid and criminal person I’ve ever known and therefore she should be happy instead. But I don’t.

If we always said anything that comes to our mind and ignore every kind of tactfulness and etiquette, we lose our humanity and society would everybody’s fight against everybody else.

Consequences

As peace researcher Johan Galtung has stated in one of his columns at TFF, you may have freedom to express yourself but not freedom from the consequences of doing so.

If you think you have freedom to express your views about freedom, democracy and human rights in, say, Iraq and invade it to make that point you may do so if you also have the physical power. But it has consequences – at the moment called IS and deep anger throughout the Middle East which is likely – whether we choose to understand it or not – to come back as boomerangs for years.

Identity & humiliation

Anything having to do with other people's identity must be treated with care and empathy. Poking fun of people's nationality, language, religion, skin colour or gender, or handicaps they may have, is bound to cause much more resentment than, say, an argument about politics or what is right and wrong.

There is one exception – with close friends you may tease, use irony and self-irony, poke mutual fun, give and take with no harm intended.

Conflict and a-symmetry

It is particularly counterproductive to practise your freedom of expression 100% when in conflict with someone. The more tense a situation is, the wiser it is to think carefully about how you express your views before you say things you'd regret the day after.

This is particularly true when the conflict is a-symmetric; the stronger party to a conflict should be extremely careful not to humiliate, use derogatory language and threaten if the purpose is to solve problems. Read Iran, for instance.

Or read the Middle East in general after about 100 years during which the West has invaded that region, chopped up countries, changed regimes and coups and – like France in Algeria – run a colonial system with all it implies in terms of torture, rape, exploitation, humiliation, death and destruction.

As a Danish politician said about the attack on Charlie Hebdo – inadvertently revealing his colonial mind-set: “But the new thing is that these new wars of religion now takes place on our soil...”

If you are a mediator in someone else's conflict and personally sympathise a lot with one side – just try to express that freely and see how much the other side(s) will trust you afterwards.

Freedom of expression fundamentalism and New Atheism

To practise freedom of expression knowingly ignoring those four areas – and there may be others – is conflict illiteracy. It's bound to create or aggravate conflicts instead of healing them – and lead to psychological, physical, cultural or other types of violence.

It makes peace, mutual co-operation, trust – and dialogue as a tool for it – virtually

impossible. Take the consequences of it if you do - don't act as if you are offended or a victim.

The philosophy of [New Atheism](#) seems to be one of several sources of the new attack on religion as such rather than on extremist practises of religion. It argues that "religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticised, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises."

This is, of course, yet another basically Western type of fundamentalist thinking: Since I am an atheist (or since I believe in atheism...) and know that the Western rational, science-based argument is superior to religion, I use my freedom of expression to attack religion as such, not just those who practise religion in a terrorist/extremist manner.

It can be argued that it is the right of everyone to be a believer or an atheist (which, as Gandhi maintained is also a belief) and believe in the secular state and society - and argue for it.

But to argue that everyone else ought to be an atheist too is something entirely different.

And a sort of fundamentalism - like freedom of expression fundamentalism - and missionary attitude that will only spell trouble ahead in a world that gets more and more mixed across old dividing lines.

Perhaps it was all summarised by Gandhi when he, shortly before his death, was asked by a Western journalist what he thought of Western civilisation. He paused for a long time and then said with a smile: "I think it would be a good idea."

Wisdom of expression goes with freedom of expression. Both are needed on the road to peace in diversity.

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