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Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu

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Charlie Hebdo and the Moral Equivalence Fallacy

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University)

The tragedy of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris kicked off what we hope is not a harbinger of 2015 things to come. The massacre by radical Muslims of some dozen employees of the satirical Paris magazine has set off a wave of newfound “freedom of expression” advocates. And so it should. While freedom of expression does not mean that one must accept what another says, it does vouchsafe the right to say it.

That the French version of what Americans would think of as *Mad Magazine* or *The Onion* is at the heart of this controversy may be fitting but if truth be told, we’d all prefer it to be a serious journal of opinion. *Hebdo* is not a grand magazine with high-flown ideals. It’s *The Harvard Lampoon* for adults, making fun of everyone and everything without regard to race, creed, color, religions, or peoples. *Hebdo* has attacked Jews, Christians, Adventists, clergy, politicians, governments, and now, of course, jihadists. Until *Hebdo* took on that last group, most Americans had never heard of the magazine. Now, the whole world knows about it.

Any librarian could have told any one of those jihadists that they were making a gross tactical mistake with respect to trying to silence the magazine. True to form in cases of censorship, the magazine that struggled to sell 50,000 issues per publication cycle, published three million last week, all of which sold out in less than two hours. The magazine will publish another two million and release those, making sure that what once stumbled its way to 50,000 an issue is now well on its way to 100 times that many. For how long is anyone’s guess. But for now, everyone knows *Hebdo*. If those bloody jihadists were looking for some sort of remorse, they were mistaken. The prophet Mohammed is on the new cover declaiming, “Tout est pardonné,” or all is forgiven.

Now everywhere we see “Je suis Charlie,” I am Charlie, a message of solidarity with the magazine and in mourning for the lost lives who never saw it coming. But the question occurs to me whether those who wear these signs of solidarity fully understand what they are saying. Americans especially are prone to believe that all countries and peoples embrace the same ideals on which this country was founded. We believe, optimistically, if naively, that if we can just sit down with our enemies, beer or not, we can talk them through our differences with each other and all will be well. With a naiveté known only in Americans, we worked out this routine regularly during the Cold War. American political leaders were “played,” often with promises of summits, diplomacy, and breakthroughs, all to no avail typically because our opponents simply did not share the same, some, or any of ideals as did we.

This is not to say that America never makes mistakes, hasn’t been wrong, or ever embraced the wrong ideals. Our history is replete with our mistakes. But the fact of the matter is that the country has striven to do better. We work hard to overcome our missteps and do make strong efforts to make restitution when possible. We have the worst form of government...except for all the rest.

This is not so much the case with all other countries. Many do not share our desire for a free press; many do not believe all people are created equal, and some do not like the idea that everyone shares an equal opportunity to the riches that America proffers to its citizens. This does not mean, of course, that there are equal outcomes.

If nothing else, *Hebdo* has taught us that there really are bad ideas in the world, and that bad people try to inflict those bad ideas on others. It has also taught us that there are people in the world for whom discussion and compromise are simply not options, or more specifically, options that are dramatically and murderously ruled out. It's easy to think of standing firm on principle when, secretly, or perhaps subconsciously, we think that if given the chance, we can talk these folks to reason. Jihadists have proven again and again they are not capable of such things.

In at least one way, when we hold up our "Je suis Charlie" signs, as we doubtless should, we are also saying that we are not what jihadists are, or what any other group that defines itself by the term "radical" is. We are saying that we stand firm on the principles that founded this country and any other that values freedom of speech and religion. But it means that we stand ready to defend those principles beyond mere sign-holding and phrase-making. It means a very uncomfortable admission for some Americans, not to mention some librarians: some ideas are so bad that they need to be eradicated.

That's the hard part: when you get to the place where you realize that moral equivalence is a fallacy, and that talking, discussing, or shuttle diplomacy are simply empty and meaningless gestures to groups that deny them, hate them, and are willing to die to prevent them. When we say "Je suis Charlie" we are saying in effect that we plan to be as firm in this belief as those who wish to eradicate it are in their misguided one. That flies in the face of all that multiculturalism has tried to teach us. In the end, realizing that there are good and bad ideas and that there are good and bad people, and that there are bad people who hold horrific ideas and must be marginalized, is a giant step into the adulthood of ideas.

Shuffling off our multicultural moral equivalent coil may prove easier said than done. Events like *Charlie Hebdo* help get us to an uncomfortable crossroad. Whether we will hold up only signs, or do more to disenfranchise those who hold these wrongheaded ideas, will be the difference between letting freedom ring, or merely continuing to gong the tintinnabulation of the moral equivalent fallacy.