

# *In Defense of Freedom of Expression*

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*Translated from the French by Dominic Thomas*

**O**N MAY 5, 2015, I had the honor of presenting the satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* with the 2015 PEN / Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award. This award is given annually in New York by PEN America, an organization founded in 1922 to promote literature, freedom of expression, and human rights. The organizers made it perfectly clear that the award in no way represented any kind of endorsement of the French newspaper's editorial policies. Rather, this was an opportunity to pay tribute to the courage of the journalists who, at the expense of their lives, had fought for freedom of expression. In fact, the newspaper had already been the target of a terrorist attack in 2011, and *Charlie Hebdo* did not capitulate on that occasion, just as it has refused to do so since the more recent attacks that cost the newspaper the lives of eight members of its editorial team.

These decisions go somewhat against the grain. Let us consider, for example, the decision made by Random House in the United States to cancel the scheduled publication of Sherry Jones's historical novel, *The Jewel of Medina*, which tells the story of Aisha, one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives. According to Random House, their decision was based on comments they received from Denise Spellberg (an associate professor of history and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas at Austin), who claimed that the fictionalized account was tantamount to a declaration of war against Muslims and a public safety hazard likely to have analogous repercussions to those faced by Salman Rushdie upon publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel that provoked widespread outrage and resulted in a fatwa being issued calling for his death and leading to the deployment of extensive security measures. And then there was also

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another case, when Yale University Press expunged all twelve of the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons originally published in the Danish newspaper in 2005 from a version they published of Jytte Klausen's academic book, *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (2009). This decision was justified in a statement issued by the director of the press, John Donatich: "the illustrations are widely available elsewhere. You can see them right now on Wikipedia or dozens of other sites. And finally, there was an argument to be made that printing the cartoons and accompanying illustrations would simply perpetuate the misunderstandings and reignite the very conflict that [the book] intends to analyze in a balanced and nuanced way."<sup>1</sup>

For some time now, we have been witnessing the capitulation of American publishers in the face of threats of Islamic terrorism. This surrender has taken the form of an anticipated and "preventive" self-censorship imposed upon authors with the objective, some have claimed, of not adding fuel to the fire. In spite of the global response to the attacks of January 7, 2015, media outlets (such as the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Times*, and a number of television channels) in the United States overwhelmingly interpreted the situation along these lines. These reactions had little to do with the puritanism so often attributed to America but instead were linked to a genuine fear of reprisals from Islamic terrorists if they were seen as complicit with the heresy committed by the French newspaper by also publishing images of the Prophet. But the fact remains that freedom of the press (of information) is an important element of freedom of expression in general. Blurring in this manner such a crucial component that would have given readers the opportunity to decide for themselves effectively served to "orient" information and ultimately to hold *Charlie Hebdo* responsible for, in some ways even "deserving" of, its punishment for trying to impose its views on the question of freedom of expression.

Were these the same reasons that prompted six fellow writers (Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose, Teju Cole, Rachel Kushner, and Taiye Selasi, and shortly thereafter some two hundred others) to boycott the planned tribute to *Charlie Hebdo*? Just one week prior to the ceremony, the American novelist Francine Prose, one of the leaders of the "rebels," published an article in the *Guardian* newspaper under the heading "I Admire *Charlie Hebdo's* Courage. But It Does Not Deserve a PEN Award."<sup>2</sup> The boycotters blamed France because, according to them, and as summarized in the words of Peter Carey in an interview with the *New York Times* on April 25, 2015, France had failed to "recognize its moral obligation to a large and disempowered segment of their population"—in other words, its Muslim citizens. But just what is this "moral obligation" invoked here that somehow trumps those constitutional precepts that recognize above any other principle the freedom of opinion and, I might add, are written into law? What is freedom of expression worth without this "cultural arrogance" Peter Carey also alludes to, in the face of fanatics who seek to impose *their* view of the world on us by means we have come to experience.

Many of the writers who did not attend the ceremony—such as Teju Cole, who was born in Nigeria—come from parts of the world we have grown accustomed to pointing the finger at because of their intolerance, their propensity to trample on human rights under regimes that reduce the people to silence. Because of the position these writers took—a position they

<sup>1</sup> Statement by John Donatich, director of Yale University Press, September 9, 2009, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/KlausenStatement.asp> (accessed July 20, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Francine Prose, "I Admire *Charlie Hebdo's* Courage. But It Does Not Deserve a PEN Award," *Guardian*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/28/i-admire-charlie-hebdos-courage-but-it-does-not-deserve-a-pen-award> (accessed July 20, 2015).

themselves described as an act of bravery and a symbolic rejection of “French arrogance”—they in fact missed the one real opportunity they were handed: namely, to send a clear message home or even to denounce the increasingly worrisome intervention of the American authorities in the area of freedom of expression that is in theory at least considered a fundamental right in most nations deemed civilized. The arguments these detractors came up with, at times absurd and contradictory, served to highlight their glaring lack of familiarity with *Charlie Hebdo*, a newspaper many in reality had never heard of prior to the January 2015 attacks. For if they had known more about the spirit of *Charlie Hebdo*, and in particular the historic role it had played in France in the struggle for freedom of expression, they might have understood that the “arrogance” they perceived—what I would call *intellectual* impertinence—is actually inherent to the French. I would add that there is no France without arrogance, or in the words of the eighteenth-century playwright Beaumarchais, “without the freedom to criticize, there is no true praise.” They might have known that *French impertinence* is handed down through culture, through history, in the very way in which one looks at the world. In the end, they might have understood that France has always been at the forefront in the fight to recognize freedom of expression, a right that had to be exacted despite the burden of monolithic thinking and dogma embodied in religion. And moreover, there is nothing surprising about the fact that one of the earliest advocates of freedom of expression was none other than the French humanist Sébastien Castellion, who stood up to Calvin in the sixteenth century over the interpretation of the Bible after the Spanish theologian and medical doctor Michel Servet was burned at the stake because he had questioned the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

My fellow writers might also have noted that during that same century, and still in France, the famous Edict of Nantes granted Protestants both civil and political rights, as well as freedom of religion, values that were at the very heart of Enlightenment ideals. The French Revolution of 1789 was the culmination of events that had marked an entire century, a century in many ways obsessed with the question of freedom of expression, a notion that would subsequently spread throughout Europe thanks to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The battle was worth it to the extent that freedom of expression was conceived of as a weapon with which to guard or fight against political or religious abuses, since, to borrow from Lord Acton, “All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Recognizing freedom of expression as a fundamental right would later lead to other significant developments, including the questioning of the ideology of slavery, a practice still very much present in the Enlightenment, and also to furthering the goals of political pluralism. Recognizing freedom of expression was also an important step in the process of identifying racism in its multiple manifestations, of putting into place safeguards under the aegis of international bodies, and providing a voice to people thanks to associations or trade unions. All of this history, this long quest for freedom, is contained in each and every one of Cabu’s, Wolinski’s, Charb’s, or Tignous’s caricatures, all of whom left this world on that dismal day of January 7, 2015. Surely it would not be misleading to say that the most basic form of freedom of expression consists in being able to have an opinion or say whatever one thinks on any subject and then debate without any taboos, in full respect of the laws in place and so long as these in fact reflect the will of the people (a necessary clarification in order to exclude from our discussion those “banana republics and dictatorships” that force their people to sing the praises of and worship their life presidents or monarchs).

You can only imagine my surprise in New York, while I was waiting in the lobby of the hotel in which the authors attending the PEN World Voices Festival were staying, a festival during which, as I previously mentioned, a tribute was to be paid to *Charlie Hebdo*, when the novelist and photographer Taiye Selasi, born in London to a Nigerian mother and a Ghanaian father, asked me for clarification on *Charlie Hebdo*! More specifically, she was interested in knowing what this publication represented for France and also for us Francophone writers. The problem though is that she was attempting to shut the stable door after the horse had already bolted! She had already signed the petition against the plan to give the award to the newspaper and, along with the other boycotters, did not attend the reception at which Salman Rushdie's presence stood out, an author more than just a little outraged by these gestures after having fought tooth and nail for this award to be given to *Charlie Hebdo*.

In reality, Selasi's rather-tardy decision to solicit another viewpoint made me realize the degree to which freedom of expression in the United States is shaped today by an obsession with security and has increasingly been restricted in anticipation of terrorist attacks, especially when it comes to the infamous Patriot Act and other "exceptional measures" rushed into law in the wake of 9/11. This act of Congress, the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001, was signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 26, 2001, and essentially granted the authorities limitless powers for any search claimed to be related to terrorism. This so-called "antiterrorism legislation" served to bolster the idea that liberties in general, even those relating to free speech, were secondary to security imperatives.

To be fair to America, France also considered enacting "exceptional measures," a kind of "French-style Patriot Act," in the immediate aftermath of the January 7, 2015, attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*. Under the circumstances, the temptation to follow the United States was great, but the heated discussions that ensued served instead to highlight the shortcomings of the Patriot Act, legislation that had been transformed into a political tool that now threatened civil liberties. This became all too evident in the amendments that were made to the original document and in the pervasive links that surfaced between immigration and terrorism and Islam and extremism and that were later used in elections by candidates short on ideas who saw in every Muslim a potential terrorist, even an enemy infiltrated into the country. In the end, what I am saying is that for many Americans who discovered *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, the journalists who were victims of the attacks and who had decided to feature a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad on the front page of their newspaper were basically rubbing salt in the wound and "provoking" the extremists. This is also the position taken by those writers who accused *Charlie Hebdo* of being racist or Islamophobic. Their positions also underscored the extent to which American society and French society do not speak the same language when it comes to freedom of expression. In America, religion remains off-limits to criticism, since America sustains a form of puritanism that is ever more out of touch with conventions and practices of everyday life; meanwhile, American presidents continue to pledge allegiance "under God." But true and lasting freedom comes only when one has shed the pressures imposed by society. Writers have a responsibility to lead the way by example. If one is able to write in complete independence and liberty, then we will never lose sight of the fact that brave women and men came before us and gave their lives for a particular freedom that has arguably never been under greater threat: the freedom of expression. A