

JE SUIS CHARLIE?

Why Positive Integration of Muslims in France
Reinforces the Republican Ideal

By Emmanuel Todd

We can now say, with the benefit of hindsight, that in January 2015 France succumbed to an attack of hysteria. The massacre of the editorial board of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, as well as of several police officers and the customers of a Jewish shop, triggered a collective reaction unprecedented in our country's history. It would have been impossible to discuss it in the heat of the moment. The media joined hands to denounce terrorism, to celebrate the admirable character of the French people, and to sacralize liberty and the French Republic. *Charlie Hebdo* and its caricatures of Mohammed were enshrined. The government announced that it was giving a grant to the weekly so that it could get back on its feet. Crowds of people followed the government's appeal to march in protest throughout the land: they held pencils to symbolize press freedom and applauded the state security police and the marksmen posted on the rooftops. The logo "*Je suis Charlie*" ("I am Charlie"), written in white letters against a black background, could be seen everywhere: on our screens, in the streets, on restaurant menus. Children came home from school with a letter C written on their hands. Kids aged 7 and 8 were interviewed at the school gates and asked for their thoughts on the horror of the events and the importance of one's freedom to draw caricatures. The government decreed that anyone who failed to toe the line would be punished. Any secondary school pupil who refused to observe the minute's silence imposed by the government was seen as implicitly supporting terrorism and refusing to stand in

▷ French demonstration after the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, Toulon, Jan. 10, 2015. Franck Pennant/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

solidarity with the national community. At the end of January, we learned that some adults had started to behave in the most incredibly repressive ways: children of 8 or 9 years of age were being questioned by the police. It was a sudden glimpse of totalitarianism.



The TV channels and the press told us over and over again that we were living through a “historic” moment of communion: “We are one people, France is united in adversity, born anew by and for liberty.” The obsession with Islam was of course ubiquitous. Not only did political journalists listen to imams and ordinary French Muslims telling them, as did everybody else, that violence was unacceptable, that the terrorists were odious and had betrayed their religion. Journalists demanded of these Muslims, as they demanded of all of us, the incantation of the ritual formula “I am Charlie,” which became a synonym for “I am French.” If they were to be fully accepted as part of the French community, they needed to admit that blasphemy, in the form of caricatures of Mohammed, was an integral element of French identity. It was their duty to blaspheme. On our TV screens, journalists wagged a professorial finger as they explained the difference between an act inciting racial hatred (bad), on the one hand, and religious blasphemy (good), on the other. I found it really hard to have to listen to Jamel Debbouze, the French-Moroccan actor who is a central figure in French culture, being forced to undergo this ordeal when he was interviewed on the TF1 TV channel. He wanted to state that he was a Muslim, that he felt a sense of loyalty to the young people in the suburbs, that he loved France, that he had a non-Muslim wife, that his children had been born from a mixed marriage and that they were the France of tomorrow. He tried to explain to his inquisitor, courteously and painfully, that blasphemy was difficult for a Muslim, that it was not part of his tradition. This was not enough: to be French meant not that you had the right to blaspheme, but that it was your duty. Thus spake Voltaire. I could not fail to remember what I had read about the Inquisition, which interrogated Jews who had converted to Christianity in an attempt to make sure they really did eat pork, like all true Christians.

Xenophobia on the Rise

The relaunch of *Charlie Hebdo* with a state subsidy marked the zenith of the national reaction to the drama. Its cover yet again allowed us to admire Mohammed, with a face as long as a penis, wearing a turban from which hung two round shapes like testicles. This elegant figure had been drawn on a green background—the color of Islam—but it was a dull, insipid green, far from the extraordinarily beautiful and subtle greens that adorn Muslim places of worship.

Any historian who studies long-term trends (*la longue durée*) and is familiar with religious crises, when iconophiles and iconoclasts fought it out, cannot fail to observe that when the French state turns an image of Mohammed depicted as a prick into a sacred image, this constitutes a historic turning-point. France really is going through a religious crisis, one that follows all the religious crises that have given shape to its history, and to European history as a whole, ever since the last days of the Roman

Empire. So we can, for once, follow the media in describing the January 11 street demonstrations as “historic”—a description that was intense, repetitive, obsessive, incantatory; in short: religious.

At that time, I refused to take part in any interviews and debates on the crisis.

And yet I had not hesitated to express my opinion in 2005, when the suburbs erupted into rebellion: I stated that the young people setting cars on fire all over the place were absolutely French. Their acts were strictly speaking criminal, but in my view merely expressed a demand for equality, one of the two fundamental French values. I also emphasized the admirable restraint of the French police, who did not open fire on these kids from the suburbs any more than they had started shooting at the middle-class youngsters in May 1968. In 2005, France was tolerant and free, in spite of the reactions that were naturally and deservedly hostile to the disorder. It was useful to say what one felt. Neither the government, nor journalists, nor society as a whole had succumbed to panic. There was no trace of hysteria to be seen. In 2005, we, the French people, were admirable. We kept our emotions to ourselves. The fear felt by elderly people was silent and led, without any immediate threat to the freedom of expression, to Nicolas Sarkozy’s election as president in 2007. The average age of his electorate was higher than for all the rightwing presidents who had preceded him.

But in January 2015, a critical analysis would not have gained a hearing. How could anyone have claimed that this mass mobilization, far from being “admirable,” showed a lack of sangfroid and, in a word, a lack of dignity under pressure? Or that condemning the terrorist act in no way implied that you were divinizing *Charlie Hebdo*? Or that the right to blaspheme against your own religion should not be confused with the right to blaspheme against someone else’s religion, especially in the fraught socioeconomic context of contemporary French society: repetitive and systematic blasphemy against Mohammed, the central character in the religion of a group that is weak and discriminated against, should—whatever the law courts have to say—be treated as an incitement to religious, ethnic, or racial hatred.

How could anyone oppose virtuous ignorance on the march, or dare to state that these demonstrators, with their pencils as symbols of liberty, were insulting history, since, in the anti-Semitic and Nazi sequence of events, caricatures of dark-skinned, hook-nosed Jews had led to physical violence? How could anyone explain calmly, taking their time to argue their case, that the most urgent thing for French society in 2015 was not an investigation of Islam but an analysis of how it had become paralyzed? How could anyone show that the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly were indeed French, the products of French society, and that the use of Islamic symbols does not inevitably turn those who resort to them into real Muslims? Or that these men were merely the mirror image, a pathological reflection, of the moral mediocrity

of our elected leaders, more intent on ensuring they get their maximum pension than on freeing young people from the exploitation inherent in the low wages they are paid or the way they are marginalized by unemployment?

How was it possible, in the heat of the moment, to suggest that François Hollande, by deciding to call for a mass demonstration, risked glorifying the Kouachi brothers, conferring an ideological meaning on an act that should have been given its true and lesser worth by a psychiatric-style interpretation? After all, madness, as a loss of contact with reality, needs the ordinary forms of social symbolism: schizophrenics imagine they are Napoleon or Jesus, paranoiacs think they are being penetrated by the sun or persecuted by the state. It would have been possible to view the action of the Kouachi brothers with a certain disdain, thereby weakening its meaning. This kind of approach did not, of course, rule out a sociology of the psychosis of Islamism in France. But such an approach was rejected. Instead, we had the dubious privilege of seeing the authorities endow the problem with a negative sacred aura, and this entailed an aggravation of the religious tensions in our society and in our relations with the rest of the world. This had been Bush's choice in 2001, albeit on the basis of much more serious events. Were the seventeen people who died on January 7 really the equivalent of the 2,977 who died in the World Trade Center? Even more than an America so often mocked for its emotional excesses, France overreacted. What had happened on January 11, 2015 to the rational, ironic, witty cast of mind associated with France?

How can people be persuaded to admit that France, as a whole, in its middle classes and not just on its margins, is going through a crisis that is no longer just economic but also religious, or quasi-religious, because the country no longer knows where it is going? The problem of French society cannot be reduced to the suburbs ravaged by the rise of Islamic terrorism: it is much more far-reaching. The focus on Islam actually reveals a pathological need among the middle and upper strata to hate something or someone, and not just the fear of a threat arising from the lower depths of society, even if the number of young jihadists heading off to Syria or Iraq also deserves sociological analysis. Xenophobia used to be confined to the poorer sections of society, but these days it is moving up to the top of the social structure. The middle and upper classes are seeking their scapegoat.

A Component of the Nation

Envisaging assimilation as the sole solution should not lead to any dogmatic and counterproductive application of principles. The dream needs to face up to the reality of the world, the rhythms of life, the social and economic difficulties of the time. The ideology of the universal human being should, from this point of view, lead neither the citizen of the host country nor the immigrant to cease being a human being. We

need to give time to time—accept that we have to live through imperfect transitional moments, to be gentle with each other’s weaknesses. Not just because such an attitude is good in itself—and it really is—but also because kindness is in the long term more effective than confrontation, which always generates hatred and polarization.

The assimilation of the children of Muslim origin is already well advanced, but is currently being slowed down by economic difficulties, by uncertainty in French society itself about its own goals. The atomization and emptiness that accompany or, more precisely, characterize the crisis in the developed world mean that everywhere mechanisms of sheltering, of communitarianism, are being set in motion: they are probably stronger in the France of zombie Catholicism and certain fractions of the Jewish population than in the population of Muslim origin, where family structures are disintegrating. In a context like this, France cannot forbid its Muslim citizens to practice their religion freely and to say, if they believe it to be so, that the caricatures of Mohammed are obscene. This is just a very small part of the problem. Islam needs finally to be generally accepted, legitimated as a component of the nation, just as the Church was. We need to accept a free building of mosques—indeed, we need to make up for our backwardness in this area.

What has just been described is no utopia. *It is the demand for a return to the true past of the Republic. We need to grant Islam what was granted to Catholicism*, in the era of triumphant secularism. The modest size and the fragmentation of the population of Muslim origin in the suburbs mean we cannot draw too close a parallel with the provinces of the Catholic periphery. The Islam of the future will be, in terms of power, between a third and a twentieth part of what the Church represented in the Republic. We need, out of realism and necessity, to admit fully and joyfully that there is now, in French culture, in our national being, a Muslim province. We also need to avoid a new Vendée war, that confrontation which contributed to solidifying Catholicism. It was an accepted Catholicism that spontaneously dissolved in the wake of the Second World War. Our new province, Islam, believes in equality, unlike the Church, which is based on the principle of hierarchy that flies in face of the republican ideal in every point. Thus, a positive integration of Islam would help to reinforce republican culture rather than subverting it.

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