

'Je Suis Charlie' Demands Free Speech, for Some

By [Pyotr Romanov](#)

January 18, 2015



Unlike many, I do not feel a sense of solidarity with "Charlie." To empathize with the victims of terror is one thing, but in my opinion, the newspaper's employees were foremost victims of an ossified democracy that has lost its capacity for self-criticism.

All of the principles for which "Charlie" ostensibly stands — freedom of speech, democracy, tolerance, etc. — have, in a sense, been set in stone by modern society. But in that process of petrification, they have lost their deeper, more nuanced meaning, to the point where they now have little more significance than mindless, zombie-like chants at a football match.

In short, they have been reduced to a form of fundamentalism, and it is naive to think that fundamentalism is exclusively a religious malady. Militant atheism is essentially no different from religious fundamentalism.

In other words, fundamentalism is any doctrine that aggressively attempts to impose its views on others without realizing that it has already become ossified itself. This applies

equally to democratic states that in recent years have sought to impose their systems on Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and others.

These aggressive entities might even seem to stand firmly upright, even while they have lost connection with real life. It is this fact that makes their adherents akin to zombies.

In principle, any man-made idea has a given shelf life and eventually becomes distorted beyond recognition by its followers. To some extent, this is a normal consequence of modernization — in which life itself clothes old ideas with new attire — but it is even more the result of neglect or of the outright denial of the original postulates underlying the original idea.

Today's advocates of democracy might take a lesson from history, first by recalling their roots. Remember that the U.S. Declaration of Independence declares: "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator" — that is, all of the founding fathers of U.S. democracy, whom most of today's liberals regard as authorities, were deeply religious people.

It is therefore not difficult to imagine how they would have reacted to the cartoons that Charlie Hebdo publishes. It is very unlikely that former U.S. Presidents George Washington, John Adams or Thomas Jefferson would have linked arms with French President Francois Hollande and other Charlie sympathizers.

The conclusion is simple: Insulting the feelings of believers — whether or not you share the founding fathers' belief in a Creator — has no connection whatsoever with democratic values. Ordinary atheism is a natural byproduct of modernization, but combative, affected atheism is a gross distortion of Western society's democratic roots.

The content of Charlie Hebdo has even less connection with creative freedom. As Ekho Moskvyy blogger Grigory Revzin rightly pointed out: "In terms of artistic conception, depth of thought and language, the cartoons are similar to the pictures in a public toilet. ... The principle of freedom of speech does not exist in order to tell off-color jokes about God and church, the state and family, prominent and ordinary citizens."

It was recognized from the outset that the democratic system was better than others, but not perfect. At one point Thomas Jefferson said he would prefer newspapers without a government than a government without newspapers.

But later in life he reversed his position, saying, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle. ... I will add that the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors."

Jefferson might have only been angry because the press of his time had decided to delve into his personal life — something that nobody likes. But it is also clear that we cannot hold up freedom of speech as some sort of absolute and undeniable value that has no limits.

What's more, theory differs from practical application. Jefferson said, "What is practicable must often control what is pure theory." And in this case, the founding fathers would not have

used scandalous cartoons to provoke fanatical Islamists for the sake of their ideal: That goal, its means and the results are all questionable.

I never thought I would hold the same opinion as the head of the Royal House of France, the Duke of Anjou, but in this case our views coincide completely. He wrote, "Charlie Hebdo is an ordinary paper that despises any opinion but its own." And, by the way, such contempt for the opinions of others also bears no relationship to democracy.

In this regard it is also worth considering the words of the outstanding musician and staunch democrat Mstislav Rostropovich, who once said, "Along with the freedom of speech, we have lost responsibility for what we say." And more: "Its advocates barter with truth and offend many." True, Rostropovich spoke those words in reference to Russia in 2002, but in modern France they also "barter away truth and offend many."

I see no point in defending such "freedom of speech." It is a flawed notion and would sacrifice common sense for the sake of "pure theory." For democracy to survive and avoid ossification, it should not defend the likes of Charlie Hebdo but, say, French journalist Eric Zemmour, whom French Prime Minister Manuel Valls recently criticized for daring to write that France was losing its national identity due to the authorities' lack of control over migration.

It is worth fighting for this type of freedom of speech — the right to speak the truth to the ruling powers. But there is no sense in defending obscene cartoons — whomever they might caricature.

Pyotr Romanov is a journalist and historian.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/01/18/je-suis-charlie-demands-free-speech-for-some-a42975>