

Charlie, Copenhagen, the Niqab & that Odious Francis

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It was with a deep sense of both sadness and outrage that I learned that two persons had been killed and several wounded in two related shooting incidents in Copenhagen on the 14th and 15th of February 2015. The gunman was shot and killed by police a few hours later. Although it is often difficult to know with certainty the motives of the perpetrators of this kind of act of extreme violence, all available evidence indicates that we are dealing with yet another Islamist act of terror, all too similar to the massacres which occurred in January in Paris at the offices of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and in a Jewish grocery store. In fact, the first of the Copenhagen shootings took place at a public event “Art, Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression” organized in honour of the victims of the massacres in France, and the second at the city’s Great Synagogue.

The tragic events in Paris gave rise to a massive international movement in solidarity with the targets of the attacks, in particular the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*. The threat to freedom of the press, freedom of expression and especially freedom of conscience which these attacks represent was widely discussed and denounced, and rightly so.

Nevertheless, this response was not unanimous. Pope Francis Ist, despite his assiduous habit of cultivating an image of being an open-minded reformer in order, apparently, to mitigate the loss of influence and clientele which his Church has suffered in recent decades, expressed the opinion that: “One cannot provoke, one cannot insult other people’s faith, one cannot make fun of faith.”^[1] This opinion is completely unsurprising for anyone who has not forgotten that the Catholic Church has arguably been, until very recently, the most obscurantist, backward and powerful religious institution on our planet, although it has recently been overtaken by Islam, in particular by the extremely malignant variant of Islam known as Islamofascism – whose violence Francis’ declaration excuses. The effectiveness of seductive Franciscan propaganda is such that many do indeed seem to have forgotten that fact ever since the new pope’s election; it is thus very appropriate that Francis has, rather inadvertently, given us a reminder. The healthy irreverent attitude which religious authorities commonly call “blasphemy” undermines their authority and displeases them enormously.

Let us be perfectly honest. To intimate, as the pope has done, that the murdered cartoonists in some way deserved their fate is, although very much what we might expect from him, nevertheless a reprehensible and odious declaration. (On this topic, I recommend the very irreverent video “Fuck The Pope!”^[2] by *Mr. Deity*.) Furthermore, Francis was not the only one to express such an attitude.

The appropriate action to take, in the wake of the tragic events of Paris and Copenhagen, is precisely the opposite of what the pope suggests. Instead of encouraging self-censorship out of “respect” for beliefs which deserve none, we must instead eliminate formally and definitively the legal aberration which is responsible for the creation of the pseudo-crime of “blasphemy.” That is, we must work for the repeal everywhere, in every country of the world, of each and every law which criminalizes the free expression of religious opinions.^[3] An excellent starting point would of course be article 296 of the Criminal Code of Canada, entitled “Blasphemous Libel.”

In addition, it is important that the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons be disseminated as widely as possible – instead of imitating the spineless reflexes of many media who censored them – and that objective analysis of their content be encouraged. This would affirm the importance of freedom of expression while simultaneously countering the sensationalistic misinformation spread by cowardly or ignorant journalists and by unscrupulous imams.

Meanwhile, an event seemingly unrelated to the bloody shootings occurred closer to home: The Federal Court of Canada rendered a decision in favour of a Muslim woman who wears the niqab and who opposed the rule requiring the removal of any face-covering during the swearing-in ceremonies for new Canadian citizens. Recall that in December of 2011, minister Jason Kenney announced that wearing the niqab or burqa would henceforth be forbidden at such ceremonies. The recent Court decision thus ends that rule. A few days later, the federal government announced its intention to appeal that decision.^[4]

Secularists are unanimous in their support for a ban on any clothing which would hide the face during citizenship ceremonies. I say this with a certain discreet smile, because the certainty of that assertion is due to the fact that it is a tautology, i.e. it is true by definition. Anyone who would allow a candidate for citizenship to cover her or his face while taking the oath of citizenship cannot be a secularist; rather, they would probably be multiculturalist. For one thing, it is unacceptable to display a religious or political symbol in a manner so ostentatious that it acquires more significance than the ceremony itself, a ceremony whose purpose is a formal welcome by one's adopted nation. Furthermore, even in the absence of any symbolism whatsoever, clothing which obscures the face is completely incompatible with the occasion. Indeed, it is inappropriate even if there are no security concerns, i.e. even if the identity of the person is guaranteed by some means other than facial recognition.

How long can a citizenship hearing last? An hour or two? A half-day perhaps? An individual who refuses to comply with this constraint during an event which is very short and yet very significant is undeserving of citizenship, because he or she, by refusing to comply, attaches less importance to that citizenship than to his or her religion or to the peculiar dress which he or she has arbitrarily chosen to adopt. The ban on face-covering at citizenship hearings is even less constraining than the ban on religious and political symbols among public servants while on duty, and it is at least as important.

The federal government must be congratulated for doing the right thing by appealing the removal of the ban. This of course does not mean that we naïvely consider Prime Minister Harper and his Conservative Party to be defenders of secularism. On the contrary, it is widely known that Harper and many of his MPs are Evangelical Christians with a socially conservative agenda. Recall for example the notorious Office of Religious Freedom instigated by the same government with the ostensible goal of defending religious freedom on the international stage but whose real agenda is to curry favour with Evangelical Christian voters by promoting their sectarian interests. If the niqab were a Christian fashion accessory rather than a Muslim one, events would very probably have taken a very different turn.

The government of Canada has thus made a good decisions for reasons which are somewhat dubious, or perhaps by chance. But whatever the reasons, it is the right decision.^[5]

Now, despite appearances, and despite an enormous difference of degree, this controversy concerning the niqab has something significant in common with the recent Islamist attacks in France and Denmark. In both cases, the principal actors – the assassins in the case of the attacks, the niqab-wearing complainant in the other case – attach greater importance to their ideology, that is to say, to their religion (or to their

particular version of that religion) than they do to real, material, down-to-earth considerations, fundamental considerations such as human laws, human lives and human needs.

In both cases, the actors grant highest priority to the “divinity” which, in their worldview, prescribes proper behaviour and whose will they claim to know intimately. In both situations the actors behave like spoiled children – very violent and murderous children in the first situation – children who insist that everyone else must modify their behaviour in order to accommodate and comply with the actors’ personal and virtual – i.e. unreal – priorities. The violence of the assassins is physical, extreme and extra-legal. As for the complainant, her mission is to subvert the practices of a democratic society and the rule of law by using legal measures which have evolved in that society through a long and complex process of modernization of mores. In other words, she uses the tools of an open and free society in order to promote an impenetrable ideology which would destroy all personal freedoms.

As for those who would let the complainant win the day, those who refuse the state even the limited power to impose a few elementary rules during a ceremony in which that state formally grants the privilege of citizenship to newcomers, they have something in common with those odious fools who intimate that the murder victims deserved their fate. What they share is more than just intellectual sloth, they share something indecent: the habit of succumbing to the temper tantrums of the spoiled children, excusing and thus facilitating their misdeeds.

Links

1. “Pope Francis Speaks Out on Charlie Hebdo: ‘One Cannot Make Fun of Faith’,” 2015-01-15, <http://time.com/3668875/pope-francis-charlie-hebdo/>
2. « The Way of the Mister: Fuck The Pope! », Vidéo de Brian Keith Dalton, surnommé *Mr. Deity*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xDnxv6eFNQ>
3. End Blasphemy Laws, The campaign to abolish blasphemy laws worldwide, <http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>
4. “Harper says Ottawa will appeal ruling allowing veil during citizenship oath,” 2015-02-12, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/harper-says-ottawa-will-appeal-ruling-allowing-veil-during-citizenship-oath/article22979142/>
5. “NOT THE WAY WE DO THINGS HERE,” Petition of the Conservative Party against the niqab at citizenship hearings, <http://www.conservative.ca/pcc/not-the-way-we-do-things-here/>