Before the Internet, any publication was seen only by a restricted audience of faithful readers. Now, when anyone, anywhere in the world, is able to have access to anything published in a very foreign and far-away country, does the idea of freedom of expression need to be revisited?

This issue became a very real one on January 7, 2014, when two terrorists gunned down eight writers and cartoonists, along with two security officers and one policeman, working for French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. For years, the magazine had received numerous threats from Muslims fundamentalists for publishing cartoons criticizing Prophet Muhammad. Condemnation of this attack was immediate and unanimous in the Western world. By contrast, in Muslim countries, some militants approved of the crime, saying it was right to kill those who insult the Prophet.

This massacre raised significant questions about freedom of expression and respect for religion. Are cartoonists allowed to ridicule God or is religion forbidden ground for the critic? The question is not seen in the same light everywhere in the world: France and the United States, for example, do not consider religious belief with the same respect. Some religious people have a sense of humor, enjoy satire, and dare criticizing God and making fun of themselves as believers. Others are more reserved.

**Cartooning has a long tradition in France**
Since the Revolution, political cartoons have played a role on the French political scene. Cartoons set the tone of a magazine and newspaper; in
France, they often have functioned as editorials. “Cartoons aim at informing while distorting reality, analyzing speeches and statements using shortcuts, using excessive and simplified drawings, in order to make the reader laugh” writes Art History Professor Bertrand Tillier.1 “Cartoonists are outrageous by nature, often insulting, never afraid of obscenity, vulgarity, or even pornography to get their message across. They happily cross the limits of what is morally acceptable or totally ridiculous.”

This tradition has survived for the past two centuries with more or less subtlety, with cartoonists trying to ridicule the powerful and the arrogant, be it political leaders, church dignitaries or royalty, attacking these subjects’ sense of superiority at least for a moment. Bad taste and total disrespect are common to all types of caricatures, and some of their authors have gone to jail over these images.

The first satirical journals appeared in France in the XIXth century. By the 1930s, many newspapers were regularly printing cartoons inside their pages or even on the front page. These caricatures were seen as a way to communicate an opinion that could not be expressed seriously, offering an outlet to show hatred without real action.

Religion often has been the subject of these cartoons. Most caricaturists do not seem to be interested in the sacred, but revel in making fun of any cult or demonstration of faith: The clergy is one of the main targets of their criticism.

Religions are seen at best as mere superstitions, at worse as expressions of fanaticism, something that is bound to disappear when everybody has access to science and knowledge. Extremists who commit murders in the name of religion—from Islamic Jihadists to Christian anti-abortionists—have served to fuel this anti-religious sentiment, encouraging some to see religion as some dangerous perversion of the mind.

**Freedom of expression: a fundamental right in Western democratic countries**

Freedom of expression was first established as a fundamental right in France when it was inscribed as article 11 of the “Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen,” voted on August 26, 1789. But, even then, says lawyer Alexis Fournol, it was never absolute and has to be compatible with other basic rights.2 Abusing freedom of expression was a crime.

In 1832, during King Louis-Philippe’s monarchy, the weekly magazine named “Caricature” revealed that the magazine had been sued 23 times,
heavy fines imposed, and the publisher sentenced to jail. In 1835, a law was passed to punish offenses against the king. The situation eased up a little after 1860, but only in 1881 did parliament pass the law on press freedom, still in force today. This law of 1881 ended the crime of “outrage to public and religious morality.”

France has not been alone in enshrining the concept of freedom of expression into law. The First Amendment to the American Constitution prohibits the making of any law that would respect an establishment of religion, impede the free exercise of religion, abridge the freedom of speech or infringe on the freedom of the press. As part of the American Bill of Rights, the First Amendment was adopted on December 15, 1791, at the time of the French Revolution.

Most European countries also have similar laws but, even if freedom of expression is considered essential, it is never an absolute. The European Convention on Human Rights sets forth the principle of freedom of expression but adds it can be restricted according to the law.

Today, as Germany welcomes hundreds of thousands of refugees, most of them from Syria and other mainly Muslim countries, for example, it stresses to them the need to accept the rules of their new home. “Freedom of speech means everyone may say what they think. Freedom of the press means you may make jokes, even about religion,” Deputy Finance Minister Jens Spahn explained in a TV program introducing Germany to asylum seekers.3 “Even when jokes are made about the Koran, this must be tolerated,” he stressed.

Freedom of creation is not an issue in the debate: anyone can draw anything, this is a private matter. Only the publication of an offensive cartoon could be subjected to rules and regulations, mainly not to disrupt public order. This is where opinions differ, however. Some governments, for example, in the name of not disrupting public order, have reserved the right to sue publications that make fun of them or criticize their policies. Other governments have enacted laws against ridiculing religion.

Religion is especially ridiculed in France
In France, defiance of religion is rooted in its history. The French Catholic Church was, for centuries, a rich and powerful institution linked to the monarchy, seen as a power exploiting the masses, threatening people with hell after death if they did not go to church on Sunday. During the
Revolution, which was also directed against the clergy, priests were executed, churches destroyed. Believing in God has since been widely considered as some sort of superstition.

Most people living in France do not believe in any God and are proud to say it. Of course, the Catholic Church has retained influence; it still runs some schools and hospitals, with subsidies from the state. Christian culture is widely respected, mainly through art treasures created by numerous artists throughout the centuries. Catholics leaders, however, do not have much influence and very few people confess they believe in hell. Mocking God and religion is seen as a popular game, like making fun of politicians or any public figure. Politicians as well as religious leaders are regularly ridiculed as been greedy, corrupt, and power hungry.

While politicians of all stripes have been regularly ridiculed in France, not all religious leaders have been targeted by its cartoonists. Until fairly recently, only Catholics, especially priests and the Pope were constantly portrayed, in good or, more often, bad light. All religions also are not treated equally by cartoonists. Very strict French laws against anti-semitism, for example, have protected Jews from being caricatured.

History has forced Europeans to learn their lesson: In the 1930s, Jews were portrayed in such a negative way that some people came to believe this propaganda. When discriminatory laws were passed against Jews, not many citizens protested. After the Holocaust, Europeans saw how such propaganda could pave the way to disaster in a manner nobody could have imagined until it happened. European countries are now very aware of this danger. Most of them do not allow satire when it comes to Jews, although Jews themselves love making fun of themselves.

European Muslims now ask: why can’t we be protected by law, too?

This question is very relevant since Islam does not allow pictures and representations of God. Christian culture has been kept and fed with the help of works of art, such as churches, temples and cathedrals, statues, and paintings depicting in various ways Christ and the saints.

**No pictures of the Prophet**

According to several Sunni Hadiths—the sayings of the Prophet which constitute a source of guidance for Muslims—Muhammad forbids portraits of human beings. Still, Saudi princes often have paintings of their ancestors in their homes or offices. The Koran does not forbid portraits.
Shiite Muslims do not recognize the Sunni Hadiths. Paintings representing Mohammad or Caliph Ali, his son-in-law, can be bought in Teheran bazaars.

In theory, this interdiction applies to Muslims only. But Islamists warn Europeans that they are committing a crime when drawing a picture of the Prophet. Since there is no authority empowered to impose a general law to all Muslims all over the world, anyone can interpret the Koran one way or another.

When a cartoon depicts Mohammad in a very depreciatory way, Muslims do not take it as a joke. The scandal is enormous and Muslims are not the only ones who find it shocking. Westerners know they do not have to look at these pictures, and they also know that they are free not to buy the magazine. But Muslims who live in countries where they are not granted the same freedom of expression as citizens in the West cannot imagine that such a cartoon could be published without the approval of the country’s government. They consider it as some sort of official statement, which it was never meant to be.

In 2005, a Danish newspaper, the Jyllands-Posten, decided to write a story on press freedom and illustrate it with cartoons picturing the Prophet, to show that freedom of the press was a fundamental right in Denmark. Twelve cartoonists agreed to draw a picture and have it published with their signature. The cartoons were published on September 30. One of them pictured Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban in the shape of a bomb. Another one showed the Prophet welcoming terrorists in heaven telling them: “Stop, stop, we do not have virgins anymore”, a reference to the belief that martyrs will be greeted by 70 virgins upon getting to Paradise. A third one show God, Buddha, Jesus Christ, and a Rabbi saying: “Stop complaining, Muhammad, we’ve all been ridiculed here.”

Several newspapers throughout the world reprinted the cartoons, which could be seen on the Internet. In Denmark, the wave of protests did not last more than a few weeks.

Then, a local imam, Abou Laban, living in Denmark, decided to use these cartoons to denounce Western countries’ attitude toward Muslims. He took them and other drawings to a meeting of the Islamic conference held in Cairo in December. “During this conference, every participant saw an opportunity to be seen as the champion of Islam,” explains Egyptian journalist Muhammad Al-Sayed Saïd.⁴
The caricatures were published a little later in France, by the daily France-Soir then by Charlie Hebdo. All over the world, people took sides. Demonstrations led to several deaths, in Africa particularly. A lot of people found these cartoons offensive. Many Muslims thought of them as blasphemous, a very serious offense.

**Blasphemy: a very serious offense**

At one time, blasphemy was punishable by law in European countries. In most of the Muslim world, it still is and can be a very powerful weapon against people of other religion.

One of the most spectacular cases is that of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman, who has been sitting in jail for the past seven years, after being accused of blasphemy by women in her village. In June 2009, the 38-year-old mother was involved in an argument with other women of her village, who got angry with her for drinking water in a cup they claim she should not have used. A few days later, Asia Bibi was arrested, accused of criticizing the Prophet. In 2010, she was sentenced to death by a local judge. The verdict, which had to be upheld by a superior court, was criticized in Pakistan and abroad. Two prominent politicians were assassinated after advocating on her behalf and denouncing the blasphemy law, which had been passed in 1986. The sentence was confirmed by the Lahore High Court in July 2014, but suspended a year later by the Pakistani Supreme Court. A new inquiry was ordered. At the beginning of 2016, Asia Bibi was still sitting in jail, waiting for a new trial.

Commenting on this decision, Dominican father James Channan, from Lahore, said that there were about 130 Christians and 950 Muslims jailed in Pakistan under accusation of blasphemy. “These are often false accusations, real reasons being economic or personal ones,” he explained.

Defining blasphemy as “the attacking, wounding and damaging of religious belief,” author David Nash explains how Western countries have evolved: “For the medieval world, blasphemy seemed more obviously a public order problem in which the miscreant needed primarily to be disciplined. Christian authorities used this argument of a potential disruption of public order to punish blasphemy. But, as time passed, efforts to limit the state control over religions slowly discredited the power of blasphemy legislation. Agendas of social and cultural inclusion that
protect individuals and their religious beliefs are now in conflict with the issue of freedom of expression,” David Nash concludes.

This is exactly what happens with the cartoons of the Prophets, considered in Muslim countries as an insult to him and Islam in general.

**Freedom of expression versus freedom of religion?**
The publication of these cartoons raises two main issues: Why such intolerance for what is only a drawing? Why do the cartoonists not want to admit that they were disrespectful?

Most countries are not like America, a country of immigrants. Places like France or Denmark, take in refugees and asylum seekers but are not at ease with very different cultures and expect newcomers to accept their values and give up some of their traditions. France and Denmark are different, since France is strongly secular. Sixty-two percent of the population say they are Catholics, but only 50 percent of them believe in God and church attendance is very low. In Denmark, 85 percent of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. French secularism is seen by believers as a way to drive religion out of the public sphere. This policy is not much questioned when, in a very Catholic region like Brittany, processions take place in the streets: Most of the population enjoys the joyful atmosphere and see the event as folklore more than expression of a religious belief.

Nowadays, when Muslims lay down their prayers mats in the streets of Paris—disturbing the traffic—there are some protests: The majority of the local population does not approve and everyone repeats that religion should stay a private affair.

Where is freedom of religion? say Muslims, who have no place to gather and pray, unlike Catholics and their many churches. How can secularism be a reality if there are no places to worship? Militants of a true secularism—”laïcité” in French—are more and more vocal to criticize religious traditions, even Christian ones: Every year, they fight to have Christmas cribs removed from public places such as Christmas markets or city halls.

France makes more fun of religion than America where there is a basic respect of beliefs, something France wants to reject militantly. Religious studies are not part of French public universities, except in Alsace-Lorraine, for historical reasons. Philosophy students can complete their
curriculum without any theology class. Today’s teenagers lack religious culture.

Olivier Roy, Professor at the European University Institute in Florence and a specialist of Islam, goes as far as talking about a “phobia about religion” in France, a total misunderstanding of what religion is and has meant to billions of people across the world for centuries.

Culture and religion drifting apart

New tensions have appeared in Europe because religion and culture are now drifting apart. Secular societies favor not only individualism, but development of different communities, apart from each other. Priority is given to personal development fulfillment at the expense of common values. Collective efforts to promote unity within a society are not seen as important.

The Charlie Hebdo massacre highlighted this when surviving members of the editorial team repeated their right to publish whatever they wanted, saying they were only cartoons.

Charlie Hebdo’s specialty has always been to make fun of rich, famous or powerful people. Much more than Islam, Catholicism has been a favorite target: Caricatures of God, priests, and popes are much more common than those of imams and the Prophet. Its editors take pride in bad taste. They enjoy their role of “bad boys” immensely. “We just want to have fun,” says Laurent Sourisseau who signs his cartoons “Riss.” 7 Seriously wounded in the January attack, he is the new editor in chief of Charlie Hebdo.

Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons have always been insulting. French readers know it. When the magazine made fun of religious leaders, a lot of people did not like it. But, since their audience was very limited, nobody paid much attention. Charlie Hebdo’s circulation fell year after year and it would have been forced to close down had it not been attacked in January 2015.

The only concession made by the survivors of the January attack is the withdrawal, from their front page, of the line “irresponsible magazine,” proudly displayed before.

Respect and responsibility

In France, there is a real debate about this irresponsibility that the Charlie team still holds on to. To this day, Riss refuses to take into account...
the fact that their cartoons could hurt people’s convictions and feelings. “Not my problem,” he says, dismissively.

Not all cartoonists share his view. Jean Plantureux, known as Plantu, probably France’s most famous cartoonist who has been drawing for the daily “Le Monde” for forty years, disagrees with the Charlie team. Cartoonists cannot print everything, Plantu says, because they have to understand their audience. In a recent colloquium, Plantu and Riss publicly disagreed. Plantu said that artists should explain their work to people from other cultures, arguing that cartoons should bring people closer through humor, not divide communities or create hatred.

Very soon after the January massacre in Paris, some people denounced the “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) motto, saying: “Je ne suis pas Charlie. (I am not Charlie.)” Nobody approved killing people over a drawing, but many people did not like the impertinence Charlie Hebdo stood for: Voltaire came to the rescue with his famous quote calling for tolerance: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” (Scholars today claim Voltaire actually never said he was ready to die to allow someone he disagreed with to express his opinion, but he strongly defended everyone’s right to have a personal opinion).

A year on, with Charlie Hebdo continuing its provocations, more and more people are taking their distance with drawings that fewer and fewer people find amusing.

The Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, which angered Muslims by publishing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad ten years ago, sparking a wave of protests in the Muslim world, took a different stand after the massacre and decided against republishing Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons.

“We have lived with the fear of a terrorist attack for nine years, and yes, that is the explanation why we do not reprint the cartoons, whether it be our own or Charlie Hebdo’s,” Jyllands-Posten said. “We are also aware that we therefore bow to violence and intimidation,” the newspaper wrote in an editorial, thus admitting that freedom of expression has its limitations. “The concern for our employees’ safety is paramount,” it added to explain its decision.

In the United States, the debate was triggered by the decision of the American freedom-of-expression advocacy group PEN to give the magazine the Freedom of Expression Courage Award, on the grounds that “the
defense of people murdered for their exercise of free speech is at the heart of what PEN stands for,” according to PEN president Andrew Salomon. About two hundred writers decided to boycott the event, arguing that the cartoonists were ridiculing the Muslim community in France.

“Our concern is that, by bestowing the Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award on Charlie Hebdo, PEN is not simply conveying support for freedom of expression, but also valorizing selectively offensive material: Material that intensifies the anti-Islamic, anti-Maghreb, and anti-Arab sentiments already prevalent in the Western world,” 200 members of PEN explained in an open letter.

The protesters’ point that, at all times, caricatures have meant to ridicule people in power. If it was insulting, it was understood that these people could defend themselves.

In several countries, Muslim leaders said the whole community, not only their leaders, was insulted by the caricatures of the Prophet.

In France today, the second and third generations of Arabs are culturally Muslims. A lot of them are not very religious and do not believe in God. Most of them are not happy with the future they can see for themselves: Their experience is that of second-class citizens, living in poor neighborhoods. At the same time, their religion tells them it is the best in the world, since Muslims see Islam at the ultimate religion, the achievement of Judaism and Christianity with Jesus being a prophet. Through the Internet, they also know that the Islamic world is not doing too well. Muslim culture, once thriving and renowned, is not seen as prestigious as it was. Besides, their sisters often do better than they do in school and get jobs more easily, which does not correspond to the traditional place and role of women.

According to Olivier Roy, religious identity can help them find an identity.

“Right now there is a disconnection between religion and culture. It’s very obvious with the second and third generations. The ethnic, linguistic, cultural barriers between the different groups are collapsing, but not necessarily collapsing because of assimilation. What we have now is the reconstruction of religious identity without the bonds of culture, language, and history,” he explains. “Of course, this transformation of a population from a cultural minority to a faith community is problematic (...). Many young Muslims now reassert a religious identity, which is no more associated with the country of origin of the family.”
Which values do we hope to protect?

“We may ask what values we hope to protect by defending not only the freedom of speech but also the right to caricature or insult religious figures. The Western tradition defends this right, but in a situation in which anti-Muslim political parties are on the rise in France and Germany, Christian religious leaders need to become public mediators,” echoes Wilhemus G. “Pim” Valkenberg, a professor of religion and culture at the Catholic University of America and director of the Institute for Inter-religious Study and Dialogue.”

When it comes to caricatures, freedom of expression may clash with freedom of religion, which, concretely, means the possibility to practice the religion of your choice, to go to church, to have a place to pray, and to be buried according to a special rite. All this means respect from other communities.

Freedom of religion is more difficult to guarantee, because laws are not sufficient to create an atmosphere of freedom. It is a question of culture: Are all religious communities ready to accept others and respect their rituals? There comes the difficulty to accept a caricature that your own culture would not tolerate, such as ridiculing the Prophet.

Pope Francis’s reaction was shared by millions of people all over the world. When asked to comment on the Charlie massacre, the pontiff answered that freedom of expression was a right, but, he added, “it should be used without hurting others. If a friend of mine says bad things about my mother, he can expect me to hit him in the face! One cannot provoke, insult other people’s faith and make fun of it. Every religion, which respects human people, has its dignity.” The pope also stressed that killing in the name of God was an aberration.

Humor, irony, satire, ridicule... What are we talking about?

Generally speaking, humor is a way of telling something underlining its surprising, funny or ridiculous features, with the result that listeners or viewers laugh when they hear it or see it if it is a picture. A caricature is a drawing that exaggerates someone’s features to ridicule him or her. People laugh at the expense of the person who is the object of a caricature.

A caricature is a satire and, as such, it can be very destructive. Gilbert Highet, former professor at Columbia, who has written about Latin
author Juvenal, author of some of the world’s earliest satirical poems, sees two types of satirists: the optimist, who uses frank and obscene words to show the truth, hoping to bring about reform, and the pessimist, who hates people and his cruel words aim at destroying them. Is Charlie Hebdo trying to destroy Muslim faith? Its insulting representation of the Prophet certainly hinders efforts toward a better understanding between religions and fuels feelings of distrust or even hate that the Muslims may harbor toward Christians.

The Charlie Hebdo cartoonists knew that their work angered many people. Their offices were fire-bombed once, they received death threats, and they lived under police protection. They choose to ignore these consequences, in the name of freedom of expression.

“Charlie Hebdo waved the banner of the right to offend all people equally,” writes Virginia Ingram, lecturer of academic language and literacy at Murdoch University, Perth.12 “The severity of this cartoon attack is a plain provocation. Charlie Hebdo provided its readers with outrage but did not offer a constructive outlet for this intense energy (...). To enrage a person without offering a non-violent solution is reprehensible.”

In France, many people thought the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists just had not realized times had changed and thought they could caricature Muslim leaders the way cartoonists made fun of priests in the XIXth century.

Humor is used to provoke amusement, to make people laugh. Either by making a funny comment about an awkward situation or about one’s failure, or by being ironical, making fun of a public figure, twisting a statement he made or highlighting an inappropriate comment or an action, which did not bring the expected results. When it is directed against someone, it can turn into satire or even insult very quickly and creates division. Most people do not find this funny at all. This is how the Prophets’ caricatures were seen by most people. Does this mean that religions have no sense of humor?

**Do religions have a sense of humor?**

Religious people can have a sense of humor, but they do not necessarily agree on what is humorous. Every religion, addressing fundamental questions humans have asked themselves since the beginning of time, needs to be able to take some distance with the sacred. Commenting on God’s
actions or saying, in a benevolent manner, helps believers deal with the sacred. So, what are the limits?

Most religions start with respect to the following: respect for God, but also respect for humanity, created by God.

This respect will take different forms: allowing or not to picture God, to pronounce God’s name, to kill another human being or to permit people from different faiths to pray with them. All religions have in common a tendency to allow ironic comments when they are made by a member of the community, not by others. Religion is like family. Outsiders are not allowed to criticize it. Only those who belong to it can.

Irony is to be found everywhere in the Bible. One of the most famous text, Genesis 18, 10–17, tells how Sarah, Abraham’s wife, laughed when she heard God promise him she would have a son a year from then. Abraham and Sarah are old, they have not had any children. How does Sarah react? She laughs: “a child, at my age?” There must have been some bitterness in her voice, since she must have hoped for years to bear children. Abraham and Sarah go as far as naming their son “Yitskhak” which, in Hebrew, means “he was joking.”

When God later asks Abraham to sacrifice his son (Genesis, 22, 1–19), there is some irony too: God never had any intention to see Yitskhak die; he just wanted to test Abraham’s trust in him.

Another famous story, the Book of Jonah, is a real satire. Jonah, a prophet, is commanded by God to preach against atrocities committed in Niniveh. Jonah does not want to obey God, so he runs away. He boards a ship, a big storm arises, and Jonah finally admits to the crew that he is responsible for it and says that if he is thrown overboard, the storm will cease. Jonah jumps into the sea where he is swallowed by a big fish. Jonah spends three days in the fish’s belly, then he gets out and goes to Niniveh to tell the inhabitants to change their ways and renounce violence, which they do. Jonah is not happy with this sudden conversion. He admits to God that this is not his idea of justice, which should mean punishment for those who have done evil. But God is a God of forgiveness, more powerful that simple justice, and divine love is unconditional, something we find hard to understand. “The book of Jonah questions our image of God,” says Roselyne Dupont-Roc, former professor of Bible studies at the Institut Catholique of Paris. “God is always different than what we imagine. The Bible forces to go beyond what we see first, to keep seeking God.”

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Many biblical tales are disconcerting, a sign that God wants people to try to get in a relationship with the divine, enter a dialogue that is not written in advance, tease God occasionally, but always in a constructive way: There is a constant negotiation between God and humanity, and humor is often there.

The New Testament

The New Testament does not, at first sight, offer many opportunities to laugh.

Still, experts point to irony in John’s gospel: Irony conveys the message by means of incongruity of appearance and reality, causing the characters to misunderstand what is happening. A good example can be found in high priest Caïphas’s statement to the Pharisees: “You do not know what you are talking about. You don’t understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed” (John 11, 49–50).

When Jesus speaks in parables, he uses provocation. For example, when he says: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God,” the disciples’ reaction is clear: “Then who can be saved?” (Matthew 19, 24–25).

Jewish humor

Jewish humor finds its roots in the debates related in the Talmud, which questions God’s teaching and tries to understand by challenging the Scriptures. Everyone argues, according to very precise rules, to understand better God’s word. These arguments are filled with jokes and puns, and disagreements are expressed with a lot of humor.

Jewish humor also developed as a way to face the difficult situations the Jews had to live throughout centuries. Humor created a distance with the reality of a cruel situation, as a self-defense mechanism. “We laugh about ourselves before the others do,” says Professor Judith Stora-Sandor, from Paris VIII University, “Humor is in our genes, it is part of our identity.” This is a reaction found with all oppressed populations, a way to fend off fear. In any case, humor is positive and constructive. The irony used to make fun of the authorities who oppress them is used as protection, a shield against their power.
Islam: smiling with the Sufis

Death threats against cartoonists who draw the Prophet have led a lot of observers to conclude that Muslims do not have a sense of humor. This is not true, even though non-democratic regimes do not allow much criticism and humor. It is also true that it is not permitted to mock the Prophet. Muslim tradition has a hero, Nasraddin Hodja, who impersonates a form of resistance to excessive power. Legend has it that this character lived in the Xth century, wearing a turban traveling on his donkey. An ordinary man, he is portrayed as both naïve and tricky, dumb and very clever. He gets into all sorts of troubles, in a way that echoes in everyone’s life. This character gave his name to a satirical magazine “Molla Nasraddin” published between 1906 and 1931 in Azerbaïdjan. This publication is said to have had a political influence in a lot of Muslim countries. It denounced corruption of the ruling classes, made fun of the clergy, criticized Western colonial policies, and even published cartoons! The magazine was often censored or forbidden and finally had to close down under the Soviet regime. In Anatolia, eastern Turkey, a mausoleum is said to be the tomb of Nasradin Hodja.

More subtle is the humor of the Sufis, Muslim mystics. Sayd Bahuddin Majrooh, an Afghan Professor of French and philosophy, published an anthology, “Rire avec Dieu: Aphorismes et contes soufis” (Laughing with God: Sayings and Sufi Tales). This collection of very short stories shows a very merciful God who communicates with humans through humor, pointing at their failures but always forgiving. Humans laugh at themselves, there is neither satire nor irony, and these stories make the reader smile with pleasure.

Our intellectual world knows no borders anymore. The Internet makes every document accessible anywhere in the world. But all the countries which form this very diverse world do not have the same past, the same cultural references, the same values, the same religions: what is sacred for one is not for the other. We have to choose between fueling conflict or trying to live together in peace. It requires efforts from all of us, at every level of society, in every country. The task is enormous, but it is the only choice for mankind.

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Notes
1. In L’œil magazine, Paris, March 2015
2. idem
4. Quoted in the 40-minute program “Marhaba” (hello in Arabic) on the private cable channel n-tv
9. idem
12. Quoted by Virginia Ingram « From Jonah to Charlie Hebdo »
13. Interview with the author