

# IT'S NOT 'THEM', IT'S 'US' (CONTINUED)\*

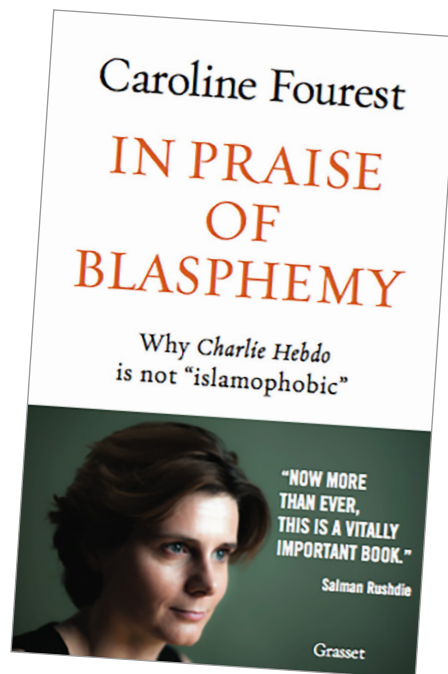
## *In Praise of Blasphemy: Why Charlie Hebdo Is Not 'Islamophobic'*

By Caroline Fourest

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Reviewed by David Martin Jones



*In today's world, democratic and secular countries are islands engulfed by stifling and often deadly religious identities.*  
—*In Praise of Blasphemy* (loc. 1002)

In 1989 the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his blasphemous claim that the Prophet had permitted prayers to polytheistic deities in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). For more than a decade he required police protection. Demonstrations and death threats—including book burnings and bookstore bombings as well as the murder of the book's Norwegian publisher and Japanese translator—represented, as Christopher Hitchens observed, 'the opening shots in a cultural war on freedom'.<sup>1</sup> It is this cultural war and the 'fanatic' assault on blasphemy—the right to speak sacrilegiously of sacred things—that Caroline Fourest, a French journalist and documentary filmmaker who wrote for the satirical magazine

*Charlie Hebdo* until 2006, explores in her recent book *Eloge du Blasphème* or *In Praise of Blasphemy* (only available electronically in English on a UK Kindle account or from iTunes in the US).

The next shot in the culture war was fired in 2004 when a Dutch Islamist of Moroccan descent



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\* **Editor's note:** *Policy* readers will recall from David's Autumn review of Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* that some commentators denounced the novel as Islamophobic even though they had seemingly not even read it. Others ordered their fellow critics to silence the book, Soviet-style. Yet although Houellebecq was once taken to court for calling Islam 'stupid', in *Submission* he is far more critical of Western elites than of Islam. Caroline Fourest's critique of Islamophobia picks up where David's review of *Submission* left off by examining the role of Western intellectual and media elites ('us') in appeasing religious fanatics ('them') and facilitating a climate conducive to fear and violence.

gunned down filmmaker Theo Van Gogh as he cycled to work in Amsterdam. His 'blasphemy' consisted in making, with Somalian activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a short film, *Submission*, deploring the Koran's sexism. The European cultural war escalated dramatically the following year. After the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London, the Tate Gallery cancelled an exhibition that featured an installation depicting torn up copies of the Koran, the Bible and the Talmud. In Denmark, a Danish children's writer complained that he could not find an illustrator for a children's book on the life of the Prophet, and fundamentalists assaulted a lecturer in Copenhagen for reading verses from the Koran to non-Muslim students.

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In October 2005, Flemming Rose, the culture page editor of *Jyllands Posten*, a mass circulation Danish daily, responded to this self-censorship by commissioning twelve cartoons depicting 'The Face of Mohammed'. When the Danish courts failed to prosecute the paper under the state's blasphemy law, a committee of Danish Imams for 'Prophet Honouring' took it upon themselves to internationalise the issue.

In 2006, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Mecca condemned Denmark for using 'freedom of speech to defame religion'. Demonstrations against the cartoons broke out across the globe. Jihadists attacked Danish, Austrian and Norwegian embassies in Syria and Lebanon and burnt down churches in Nigeria. Following these attacks, Scandinavian, Swiss, German and Dutch newspapers published the Danish cartoons in a display of solidarity. The UK, US and Australian media notably failed to follow suit.

In France *Charlie Hebdo* demonstrated its support not only by publishing the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons but also by displaying a cartoon of its own on the front cover. It depicted the Prophet dismissing his fanatic adherents with the comment 'C'est dur d'être aimé par des cons' ('It's tough being

loved by jerks').<sup>2</sup> The Paris Mosque subsequently prosecuted the magazine under France's hate speech laws.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2011—in the wake of the Arab Spring and the election of Islamist parties to power in Tunisia and Libya proposing to introduce a moderate form of sharia law—the satirists published a special *Charia Hebdo* issue. It featured the Prophet as guest editor explaining what 'sharia light' might involve.<sup>4</sup> Jihadists firebombed the *Charlie Hebdo* office on the eve of publication. Its editor, Stéphane 'Charb' Charbonnier, like Rushdie and Flemming Rose, was placed under police protection. In 2013, Al Qaeda put *Charlie Hebdo* on its most wanted list. On 7 January 2015, homegrown jihadists attacked the journal's offices crying 'the prophet is avenged'. The Kouachi brothers killed eight journalists including Charb. On the 11th January nearly four million people demonstrated across France to support freedom of expression, creating the 'Je Suis Charlie' ('I Am Charlie') effect.

Caroline Fourest attended the Paris march. Like many of her former colleagues she was less than impressed by the sudden outbreak of global support for the French satirists' right to blasphemy. In the weeks following the attack she noticed how quickly the mainstream media, academics and politicians distanced themselves from the magazine's satirical assault on religious fundamentalism. 'Je Suis Charlie' mutated into 'Je Suis Charlie, mais...' ('I am Charlie but...').

Interviewed on Sky News (UK) about the post-massacre issue of the journal on the 12th January, Fourest asked, 'How can I comment on the Charlie cover without showing it?'. She had a copy of 'the incendiary device' in her handbag and tried to show it—an image of a tearful Mohammed sporting a 'Je Suis Charlie' sign—on air. The cameras rapidly panned away and the interviewer apologised 'to any of our viewers who may have been offended by this'. As Fourest observed 'we are talking here about a news channel in a democratic country' (531). What, she asked, has British journalism come to 'thinking that people cannot be grown up enough to decide if a drawing is offending or not because you're not even showing it'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed a majority of Britons, surveyed in a *YouGov* poll later

the same month, wanted to see the cartoons, but self-appointed media guardians refused to let them.

### Islamophobia and double think

How had this climate of self-censorship emerged in democracies constitutionally committed to freedom of speech and why had liberal elites in the West become so accommodating of religious ‘fanaticism’ (71)? More particularly have the fanatics, to use Fourest’s term, won the culture war that Hitchens announced over a quarter of a century ago?

These are the questions addressed in *Eloge*. The Anglosphere possesses no journalist quite like Fourest—a Sorbonne-educated, radical, left-wing, gay rights and anti-racist activist, who, after 2001, turned her attention to the religious fundamentalists’ assault on secular values, the subject of *Tirs Croisés* (*Crossfire* co-authored with her partner Famietta Venner in 2003).<sup>6</sup> Since 2012 both the right-wing *Front National* of Marine Le Pen and French Islamic organisations have sued her for defamation.

Although educated at a private Catholic college in Aix-en-Provence, Fourest is a child of the French Enlightenment and committed to the separation of the church and religion from the secular state. It took several hundred years of struggle ‘against religious dictatorship’, she argues, to establish secularism in Europe, ‘and the right to commit blasphemy is the cornerstone of our struggle’. In France, the Revolution abolished the crime ‘of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things’ in 1791 (71). In 1881, the law establishing freedom of the press removed the offence of ‘moral and religious outrage’ from the French legal code, thus guaranteeing the right to blasphemy.

Now, however, jihadists with ‘their bullets and their accomplices’ in academia, the law and the media are ‘trying to turn the clock back’ (72). A post Rushdie illiberal liberal orthodoxy threatens the cornerstone of secular pluralist democracy. Fourest explores its ruling assumptions and the manner in which it dominates academia and the Anglospheric ‘shrines of anti-secular relativism’, the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* (553). She shows that a number of little examined but interlinked propositions hold this anti-secular

ideology together. It is, she contends, a curious mixture of ‘Islamophobia’, empathy with a ‘grievance culture’, and self-censorship that appeases religious fanaticism and facilitates a climate of double think conducive to violence and fear.

Central to this worldview, Fourest argues, is ‘semantics’ or more accurately speech acts that foreclose debate, conceal and prevent thought, and label pejoratively those who seek to expose the totalitarian character of Islamism’s political religion. She quotes Albert Camus, who observed that ‘By naming things wrongly, we add to the misfortunes of the world’ (311). The term Islamophobia does precisely this. As Fourest explains, Shiite propagandists first coined the term in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. Later, those campaigning against *The Satanic Verses* realised they had more to gain by transforming their status from ‘assassins implementing the Ayatollah’s fatwa’ (361) to victims of Islamophobia. In the 1990s, the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)—a London-based, UN-recognised NGO—promoted the term’s use. IHRC chair Massoud Shadjareh hands out annual awards for Islamophobe of the Year. The 2015 ceremony, held less than two months after the Paris massacre, awarded the international prize to *Charlie Hebdo*.

Have the fanatics, to use Fourest’s term, won the culture war that Hitchens announced over a quarter of a century ago?

Islamophobia treats any criticism of Islamic fanaticism as a form of racism against Muslims in general. It elides racist attacks on mosques or Muslim cemeteries with criticisms of sharia law, the treatment of women or religious violence. Islamophobia then is a ‘semantic catch-all for any criticism of religion and a trap for intellectual debate’. It has, however, caught on. The French government-funded Conseil Français de Culte Musulman encourages research into French Islamophobia. The Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France detected, on the basis of discredited data, ‘a wave of Islamophobia’ sweeping France (401) and maintains a map of incidents on its website.

Islamophobia has also become a key term in the 'double think' of prominent Muslim public intellectuals like Tariq Ramadan, the subject of another Fourest exposure, *Brother Tariq* (2008). Ramadan and his fellow travellers, like the Trotskyite owner of the journal *Mediapart*, Edwy Plenel, present European Muslims as misunderstood and marginalised and Islamism as a form of resistance to Islamophobic colonialism and racism. As Fourest observes, 'If words are weapons this is one designed to hurt secularists while feigning to target racists' (315).

Those who detect Islamophobia in secular criticism of religious fundamentalism also find the Islamist recourse to violence explicable in terms of 'a grievance culture' that breeds alienation. Thus for Plenel, homegrown terrorists are 'the victims of a social order that already condemns' them (453).<sup>7</sup> The Kouachi brothers and Ahmedy Coulibaly, the perpetrators of the 7th January *Charlie* massacre, are 'the fruit' of French social and political realities, 'the product of a fractured society' (463). For the Parisian radical feminist and filmmaker Rokhaya Diallo French secular democracy, not the Koran, creates terrorists.

In this context of liberal appeasement, Fourest finds the Anglo Saxon media's Olympian pursuit of balance and cultural sensitivity particularly egregious.

France, as President Obama observed after the *Charlie* massacre in January 2015, has a problem with integrating its large Muslim population. Yet as Fourest argues, the prevailing academic and media left orthodoxy absolves terrorists of all responsibility for their actions, 'as if a difficult childhood could in any way justify grabbing a kalachnikov [sic] (474)'. 'Finding excuses for those who choose terrorism' is an insult to 'all those that poverty, adversity, or boredom' has 'not transformed into assassins. It is a way of saying to the murderers carry on killing to put your message across, we understand you we hear you (526). Finding excuses also obscures the fact that most homegrown

Islamists 'do not turn into monsters because of poverty, but out of choice (and) for ideological reasons' (512).

In this context of liberal appeasement, Fourest finds the Anglo Saxon media's Olympian pursuit of balance and cultural sensitivity particularly egregious. Not only Sky News but also the BBC, CNN and NBC (and for that matter the ABC) refused to show the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons 'out of a sense of moral responsibility'. The British and American media, Fourest contends, have taken balance and 'responsibility' to absurd lengths. They assume that the opinions of those who support *Charlie Hebdo's* right to blasphemy have to be 'counterbalanced by those who support the killers' point of view' (551). In the United States, *The Jon Stewart Show* accused the French government of hypocrisy for tolerating *Charlie Hebdo* but prosecuting Dieudonné, an edgy left-wing comedian, for anti-Semitism under the French Holocaust denial law. Meanwhile, *The New York Times* criticised *Charlie Hebdo's* former editor, Philippe Val, for his failure to publish Iranian cartoons denying the holocaust. Vals contended he wished to make fun of fanaticism, not endorse it. There is an important distinction between jokes 'about violence' and those who 'support' it, a distinction that the humourless advocates of responsible balance seem to have missed (914).

Indeed, in the equivocal world of the Anglo Saxon media 'the massacre and blasphemy (were) equally to blame' (101). True to this 'balanced' reading of events, UK Channel 4 interviewed extremist preacher Abdullah al Andalusi who compared the position of Muslims in contemporary Europe to that of Jews in Nazi Germany. Thus, the murder of the *Charlie* journalists equated with the assassination of Nazi publisher and founder of the Swiss branch of the Nazi Party, William Gustlaff, by a Jewish student in 1936. No UK journalist challenged this 'equivalence between a drawing of Mahomet and a period when the Jews had their citizenship revoked and were being rounded up' to be exterminated (586). Moral relativism posing as balance fails to discriminate between a democratic opinion and a totalitarian practice.

More worrying still, it is often only the apologists for fundamentalism that are permitted a voice in the 'ethically responsible' Anglo Saxon press. Somewhat predictably, *The Guardian* refused to publish a piece it commissioned from US political writer Michael Goldfarb that exposed the equivocation and distortion in Islamist rhetoric. It also refused to publish an article by a British female Muslim blogger condemning Muslim anti-semitism (575). As Fourest observes, British multiculturalists believe 'equality consists in respecting the totems and taboos of each community to ensure peaceful co-existence' (585).

Such a perspective has obvious authoritarian implications. If the purpose is always to avoid offence, then we end up 'importing the laws of dictators and fanatics and placing their sensitivities' above the law (599). Moreover, censoring images that fanatics find blasphemous gives credence to the assumption that *Charlie Hebdo* must have 'produced a prohibited and shameful image', and implies that fanatics not only have the right to be angry, but also to decide what is and is not acceptable. Self-censorship and the ethic of balance and responsibility have the perverse consequence of reinforcing religious taboos and 'making the situation everywhere more dangerous' (682).

French secularism, by contrast, conventionally asserted 'the right to demolish taboos in order to promote dialogue'. It welcomes disagreement as a condition of political freedom. Somewhat problematically, however, the current Anglo Saxon model of balance and responsibility increasingly prevails and constitutes the West's default response to an evolving totalitarian *internationale*. New global media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Google and Twitter reinforce the anti-secular relativism of the Anglo Saxon model, blocking videos mocking terrorists whilst messages 'calling for the murder of apostates or beating up of Islamophobes on social networks are rarely withdrawn' (629). The new media has unintentionally facilitated global intimidation where unregulated social networks propagate 'bigotry and provide platforms for fanatical violence' (639). Thanks to the internet and its tolerance of the Islamist call, Islamic State can now 'attract anyone' (517).

## The tolerance paradox

The liberal dread of being labelled Islamophobic, and a penchant for tolerating the intolerant combined with the fear of provoking violence, have silenced intelligent debate. Over the past decade 'not only the Anglo Saxon media but the art world has also given into fear and opted for self censorship'. After the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre 'a cascade of shows, exhibitions and plays were cancelled' across Europe (718). One event on Art and Violence that went ahead in Copenhagen featured Lars Vilik, a Swedish cartoonist who had drawn an image of the prophet. It quickly closed after a failed jihadist attack in February 2015. Western culture, Fourest argues, 'should fight back, instead it colludes' (732).

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Those who don't collude, like French academic Robert Redeker (who criticised the Koran in a 2006 article in *Le Figaro*), Ayaan Hirsi Ali, or Mohamed Sifaoui (who exposed al Qaeda networks in Europe in 2001) live under permanent police protection. Moreover, when in May 2015 the American chapter of PEN, a society that promotes literary freedom, gave its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to *Charlie Hebdo*, six writers, including Peter Carey and Michael Ondjate, condemned the award. As Salman Rushdie observed of this mixture of literary appeasement and political correctness on a new 'Je Reste Charlie' ('I remain Charlie') website, 'if the attacks against me [in 1989] had happened today, the same writers who are today protesting against the award for *Charlie Hebdo* would not have stood up for me'. He continued that 'if we want an open society then the acceptance of such cartoons is part of this'.<sup>8</sup>

However, the combination of Islamophobia, balance and the omnipresent threat of violence means that it has become impossible to organise 'a simple conference or even a debate on freedom of expression and Charlie without the kind of police protection we see in the movies' (757). The preoccupation with 'safe' spaces on Western

campuses—along with Gulf States endowing chairs in Islamic Studies at Oxford, Princeton or Griffith University in Australia—further inhibits the discussion of uncomfortable ideas like blasphemy and sacrilege. Some 94 out of 198 member states of the United Nations currently have blasphemy laws and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation regularly pushes for the UN Human Rights Council to recognise the ‘defamation of religion’. We now inhabit a world ‘crushed under the weight of obscurantists’ (1000).

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The rising price of freedom, it seems, is too high for many Western governments or their media and universities to pay. Yet those who think ‘that by backing down, they will avoid war are making a serious mistake’. The long war for cultural freedom that began in 1989 is in danger of being lost.

Although not without some basic errors (Jihadi John did not come from an ‘exclusive West London suburb’), uncertain translation and a preoccupation with often acerbic debates within the French Left, Caroline Fourest has written an important, if polemical, analysis of how academia, the arts and the media have colluded with the enemies of secular freedom. This illiberal liberal tolerance has only encouraged what Fourest rightly terms religious fanaticism rather than what the Australian and UK governments persist in calling radicalism or extremism. Our modern understanding of radicalism goes back to 19th century movements for

political and economic reform and social progress that dismissed religion in favour of secularism. What a more religious age than ours recognised as zealotry or fanaticism has a much longer history.<sup>9</sup>

Karl Popper observed of an earlier totalitarian threat to the open society that ‘If we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them’.<sup>10</sup> We should therefore claim ‘in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant’. Unfortunately, this is not an argument that gets much air time, let alone support in academia, the art world or the Anglo Saxon media.

## Endnotes

- 1 Christopher Hitchens, ‘Assassins of the Mind’, *Vanity Fair* (February 2009), 14.
- 2 *Charlie Hebdo* (9 February 2006).
- 3 The courts, however, found that the satirists had not insulted ‘a group of people because of their religion (Fourest, loc. 272)’.
- 4 *Charlie Hebdo* (3 November 2011).
- 5 <http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/what-happens-when-you-try-to-show-the-charlie-hebdo-cover-on-sky-news--lyJKbW0R5x>
- 6 See her profile at <http://www.ojim.fr/portraits/caroline-fourest/>
- 7 See Edwy Plenel, *Pour Les Mussulmans* (Paris: Babelio, 2014).
- 8 <http://www.jerestecharlie.eu/en/horizont/we-must-be-steadfast>
- 9 David Martin Jones, ‘Zealots and Fanatics, Not Radicals’, *Quadrant* (December 2015), <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/12/zealots-fanatics-radicals-david-martin-jones/>
- 10 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol 1 (London: Routledge, 1945), 14.