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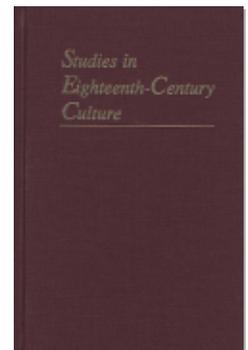
Forum Introduction Tolerance, Free Speech, and Civility from  
Voltaire to *Charlie Hebdo*

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# Forum Introduction Tolerance, Free Speech, and Civility from Voltaire to *Charlie Hebdo*

DENA GOODMAN

On 7 January 2015, terrorists entered the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, slaughtered twelve editors and cartoonists and wounded several more. The next day, in an article titled “Écrasé par l’infâme: Un journal héritier de la tradition satirique à la française à la défense d’une liberté d’expression absolue,” the media critic of *Le Devoir* noted that “La lutte contre l’intolérance (l’ ‘infâme’ de Voltaire) a été la grande affaire de Voltaire et des Lumières.”<sup>1</sup> In the days and weeks that followed the author of the *Traité sur la tolérance* was repeatedly enlisted on behalf of *Charlie Hebdo*’s right to speak out against religious fanaticism in the name of reason. On 11 January Parisians held copies of Voltaire’s treatise aloft like standards as they marched up the Boulevard Voltaire to the Place de la République, declaring: “Je suis Charlie.”<sup>2</sup> Two days later, an American ex-patriot living in Paris blogged on the *Huffington Post*:

I can’t say that *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons were entirely to my taste, nor would they perhaps have been to Voltaire’s. But the old *homme de lettres* would have challenged us that in a truly

free society, we must police our own judgments as fiercely as we police our borders. That without the liberty to be tasteless and puerile, there is no liberty to be innovative and sublime. That religions—all religions—are a free society's natural enemies until they reconcile themselves to tolerance, skepticism, and humor. That enlightenment, finally, is not an age, or a country, but an ancient and humane idea in constant battle with the darkness outside and inside us.<sup>3</sup>

On 18 January, the *Guardian* reported that the French publisher Gallimard was printing 10,000 copies of Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance*. By then a poster featuring a young but stern-looking Voltaire emblazoned with the words, "Je suis Charlie," was plastered all over Paris.



**Figure 1.** Paris, 11 July 2016. Photograph courtesy of Anne Depaulis, posted on Voltaire Foundation blog, 12 July 2016. <https://voltairefoundation.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/voltaire-je-suis-charlie/>. Accessed 19 December 2016.

The centrality of Voltaire to the French response to the attack seemed to demand some kind of intervention by those of us who have made the Enlightenment our central scholarly concern. That spring the Société Française d'Etude du Dix-Huitième Siècle published *Tolérance: le combat des Lumières*, a paperback anthology of quotations from a broad range of Enlightenment authors. Distributed in newsstands throughout France, it sold for less than 5 euros. Catriona Seth, president of the society, closed her introduction to the volume by calling upon her readers to defend the utopian ideal of the Republic of Letters “par tous les moyens démocratiques” and to find a way to rise “comme citoyens, de la société à laquelle nous aspirons.”<sup>4</sup> In January 2016, on the anniversary of the attack, Open Book published a translation of the French volume in the UK. A project of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, it can be downloaded for free in pdf. Readers downloaded it 10,000 times the first week.<sup>5</sup>

With this forum, the Society for Eighteenth-Century French Studies (ASECS's French caucus) aims to stimulate a wide-ranging conversation about *Charlie Hebdo*, the attack on it, and the French response. Each of the interventions that follows calls into question any simple understanding of the Enlightenment legacy for France today. Each author asks us to go beyond waving a Voltairean flag to think more deeply about what lessons we might learn from the Enlightenment in the wake of this horrific event.

The first three papers take a closer look at Voltaire. Jeffrey Leichman argues provocatively that it is not Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance*, but his play *Mahomet*—an “unapproachable, racist, offensive, outdated” play—that we should be teaching in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Despite or perhaps because Voltaire's aim was to ridicule Christian fanaticism through the figure of Islam, it brings out the uncomfortable contradictions that are the most enduring legacy of the Enlightenment. Those contradictions, it might be noted, are found also in making the notoriously anti-Semitic Voltaire a figure for the Jewish editors of *Charlie Hebdo* whose attackers went on to unleash their wrath in a Jewish supermarket.

Reginald McGinnis focuses on Voltaire's use of mockery. He argues that Voltaire did indeed use mockery as a weapon against religion in precisely the same way that *Charlie Hebdo* does. McGinnis, however, gives Voltaire credit for understanding the dangers of such an approach—dangers that *Charlie Hebdo* and its champions would do well to acknowledge.

Indeed, Jack Iverson shows that when it came to religious tolerance, “Voltaire was keenly aware of the importance of words and the fact that, in some situations, the art of persuasion can require self-censorship and moderation.” Voltaire might not have been as quick to declare, “Je suis Charlie,” as those who marched up the Boulevard Voltaire, he suggests.

Fayçal Falaky turns our attention away from Voltaire and toward one of his contemporaries: Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of a fundamentalist form of Islam. Disturbingly, he shows that a sect to which ISIS and Al-Qaeda can trace their origins was championed by Enlightenment writers and their nineteenth-century heirs as “a sort of simple and rational theology shorn of the superstition accrued over the centuries by misguided ‘Mohammedans.’” Going further, Falaky suggests a parallel between the civilizing mission to spread Enlightenment and the fundamentalists’ violent struggle for a purified religion.

The final two papers step back to reflect more broadly on the Enlightenment’s legacy in the light of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Focusing on John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Religious Toleration*, Ourida Mostefai mounts a passionate defense of religious tolerance, concluding that the Enlightenment’s central problem, “of how to curb the excesses of one’s beliefs without impinging on the freedom of one’s inner conviction continues to be ours today.” Elena Russo is not so sanguine. She focuses not on the inspiring values of freedom and toleration, but on what she calls “our competing commitments to the sacred.” That is, she warns that one response to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack has been to allow emotions to define the limits of speech—the spaces it cannot enter—and that this too is an Enlightenment legacy. Once we allow people to silence others on the basis of how words make them feel, she suggests, we are on very dangerous ground.

## NOTES

1. “The struggle against intolerance (Voltaire’s ‘infamy’) was the great affair of Voltaire and the Enlightenment.” The title of the article translates as “Crushed by infamy: A newspaper that is heir to the French satirical tradition in defense of an absolute freedom of expression.” <http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/medias/428273/charlie-hebdo-et-la-tradition-satirique>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

2. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/shortcuts/2015/jan/18/beginners-guide-voltaire-philosopher-free-speech-tolerance>. Accessed 15 August 2016. The *Guardian* illustrated this article with an image of the same poster I discussed above.

3. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lex-paulson/charlie-hebdo-voltaire-an\\_b\\_6455032.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lex-paulson/charlie-hebdo-voltaire-an_b_6455032.html). Accessed 15 August 2016.

4. “By all democratic means;” “let us find a way to rise, as citizens, to the level of the society to which we aspire.” Catriona Seth, Introduction to *Tolérance: le combat des Lumières* (Société Française d’Etude du Dix-Huitième Siècle, 2015), 6.

5. <http://www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/opinion/responding-charlie-hebdo-translations-tolerance>; <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/418/tolerance-the-beacon-of-the-enlightenment>. Accessed 15 August 2016.