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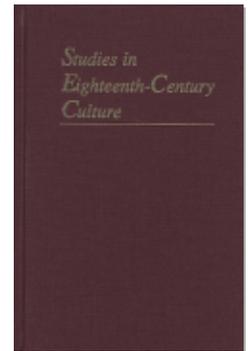
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The Ambivalence of Mockery

REGINALD MCGINNIS

If we take an abstract view of things, forgetting momentarily what we know and considering the attack on the office of *Charlie Hebdo* as a future possibility, it does not appear obvious that this event would necessarily come to be associated, as it has, with an eighteenth-century writer and a debate on the place of Enlightenment principles in today's societies. Although the contributors to *Charlie Hebdo* had been variously referred to as "progressives," "republicans," "democrats," "secular," "rationalists," and "humanists," it is possible to outline the history of events leading up to January 2015, as Jane Weston Vauclair and David Vauclair do in a recent book, with almost no mention of Voltaire.¹ There is something quite extraordinary, then, in the almost unanimous and more or less spontaneous appeal to Voltaire on this occasion. As John Dugdale observed in *The Guardian*, in the wake of the attacks, Voltaire's name and image were hard to avoid. The *Treatise on Tolerance* had become a best-seller 250 years after its original publication. "It was down Paris's Boulevard Voltaire that record numbers (including 44 world leaders) marched [January 11, 2015], and it was a portrait of him that the Palace of Versailles put on display in tribute to the jihadists's victims."²

According to Vauclair and Vauclair, what was understood by people identifying with *Charlie Hebdo* by holding a "Je suis Charlie" sign or liking the hashtag varied from person to person. And there was also a "Je ne suis pas Charlie" movement.³ Looking back over what was written at the time, a

broad consensus nevertheless emerges in expressions of solidarity with the victims of the attack and in how *Charlie* was related to Voltaire. The foreword to a small book published in February entitled *Je suis Charlie* states that millions of French people rose up unanimously among other things to defend values of their country such as tolerance and freedom of expression. The same theme was echoed in a booklet also published in February 2015 under the title *Nous sommes Charlie* which brought together classic texts by Voltaire, Diderot, and Beaumarchais, with texts by contemporary writers, several of whom refer specifically to Voltaire, and always in a manner consistent with what we might call the “standard interpretation.” This interpretation was exemplified by the Société Voltaire in an article entitled “Voltaire aussi serait Charlie,” published in *L’Express* a week after the attack, which begins by stating: “c’est aussi Voltaire qu’on a voulu assassiner,” meaning the values he symbolized.⁴ This interpretation sees philosophy as an antidote to fanaticism, and opposes secular values to religious obscurantism.

To present Voltaire in this way is, of course, largely legitimate. What I am calling the “standard interpretation” can be substantiated by countless quotations, including those provided by the Société Voltaire in their article for *L’Express*. But this interpretation is insufficient—particularly in the context of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. By presenting this in terms of an opposition between philosophy and religion, we are likely to overlook another aspect of Voltaire’s writings which is perhaps no less important: his systematic reliance on religious forms in his critique of religion. For strict adherents to the “standard interpretation,” this reliance is often dismissed as irony. In an article in the *Revue des deux mondes* from April 2015, Michel Delon, for instance, attributes Voltaire’s imitation of religious forms to “a taste for pastiche.”⁵ But if this is a matter of aesthetics, it is not only that. It is more akin to a method, an approach to solving an issue, particularly the issue of what he views as religious superstition, including ritual.

Voltaire’s critique of ritual is elaborated in his *Essay on Manners*, in the *Philosophical Dictionary* and in *Questions on the Encyclopedia*. I do not have space here for a full examination of this issue, so I will limit myself to one example. In the article “sect” from the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire opposes the teachings of all great men to superstition, and the respect commanded by the former to the scorn reserved for the latter: “Toute la terre siffle celui qui prétend qu’on ne peut plaire à Dieu qu’en tenant à sa mort une queue de vache.”⁶ In contrasting men who teach the love of God and virtue with those who are mocked for their beliefs, Voltaire has a specific purpose. He wishes to eliminate what he considers superstition by holding up as objects of universal scorn the men who believe in it. The teaching of virtue, in this instance, takes the form of an expiatory rite. The men “the

whole world” laughs at are charged with errors of which Voltaire wishes to rid humanity, just as he says the Egyptians charged a goat named *Hazazel* with the sins of the guilty.⁷

The critique of ritual in Voltaire does not result in the end of ritual, but in its paradoxical renewal. The question, as I see it, is part of what I consider more broadly as “mock ritual,” understood both as sham or pretend ritual and as ritualized mockery. Assessments of the “legacy of Voltaire’s anticlericalism and ‘wit’” should take into account not only his influence on secular values such as tolerance and freedom of expression, but also on what I am calling “mock ritual.” What the Société Voltaire writes of the artists of *Charlie Hebdo* killed in the attack—that they were “parmi les représentants les plus brillants, les plus marquants, les plus exemplaires d’un esprit voltaïrien encore et toujours vivant”—is also true of their systematic reliance on religious forms in their approach to mockery.⁸ Charb, for instance, wrote a monthly entry for the magazine *Fluide glacial* under the heading “La fatwah de l’Ayatollah Charb” and later authored two volumes under a similar title.

As Vauclair and Vauclair observe, *Charlie Hebdo* did not consider laughter as an end in itself, but as a means.⁹ They observe that the cathartic function of laughter is also an indirect form of violence capable of wounding people—“et qui, dans le cas de *Charlie Hebdo*, a indubitablement fait souffrir ceux qui étaient moqués.”¹⁰

The use of mockery as a means of eradicating evil, or of eliminating superstition, in the context of *Charlie Hebdo* is virtually identical to what we find in Voltaire, except that modern authors often appear unaware of the problems posed by this approach. Voltaire was always wary of his own method. A text from the 1750s, *To what extent one should fool the people*, as well as passages from the *Philosophical Dictionary*, suggest the difficulty in taking to its ultimate conclusion a process that relied on the very thing it sought to eliminate.

I will end with a quotation from an article by a self-proclaimed atheist, British journalist Brian Reade, who wrote in *The Daily Mirror* shortly after the attack that “all organised religions are worthy of ridicule,” and whose proposal for our digital age corresponds point for point to what I have been calling Voltaire’s ritual expulsion of ritual:

If you really want to be [Charlie], all you need to do is post one of the cartoons on Twitter or Facebook, and if everyone does the same it will travel the world hundreds of millions of times. Then do the same with the cartoon on next week’s front page of *Charlie Hebdo*. It would mean that the terrorists had ended up promoting the joke. They would be the ones responsible for making the world laugh at their god. Who knows, they may even execute themselves for it.¹¹

NOTES

1. Jane Weston Vauclair and David Vauclair, *De Charlie Hebdo à #Charlie: enjeux, histoire, perspectives* (Paris: Eyrolles, 2015).
2. “Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* becomes bestseller following Paris Attacks.” *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/16/voltaire-treatise-tolerance-besteller-paris-attack>.
3. Vauclair and Vauclair, *Charlie Hebdo* 13.
4. “[I]t was also Voltaire that [the killers] wanted to assassinate.” My translation. Société Voltaire, *L’Express*, 14 janvier 2015, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/ralliement-a-voltaire_1640602.html.
5. “[L]e goût du pastiche.” My translation. Michel Delon, “Comment Voltaire est devenu voltairien,” *Revue des deux mondes*, avril 2015, 28.
6. “The whole world hisses the man who claims that we can please God only by holding a cow’s tail when we die.” Voltaire. *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin, 1972), 375.
7. See the article “Expiation” from Voltaire’s *Questions on the Encyclopedia*, in *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 117.
8. “Among the most brilliant, influential and exemplary representatives of a Voltairean spirit that is still alive.” My translation. Société Voltaire, “Voltaire aussi serait Charlie.”
9. Vauclair and Vauclair, *Charlie Hebdo* 140.
10. “[A]nd which in the case of *Charlie Hebdo* unmistakably caused suffering for those who were mocked.” My translation. Vauclair and Vauclair, *Charlie Hebdo* 79.
11. “Could Twitter be the downfall of terrorists even if we’re not really all Charlie?” *The Daily Mirror*, 9 January 2016, accessed 13 April 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/could-twitter-downfall-terrorists-even-4951051>