

16134 Charlie Hebdo and freedom of speech

Jonathan Freedland Guardian online 15 January 2016

I hesitate to criticise Charlie Hebdo. After 11 of the staff had been murdered, the only fitting response was sympathy for the families of those slain.

If the goal was to stop Charlie, the killings failed. The magazine continues to publish provocative cartoons. In January it published a depiction of last summer's photograph of the drowned body of the toddler and refugee Alan Kurdi, face down on the shore. "What would little Alan have grown up to be?" ran the caption. The answer, with an illustration of two men, their faces part-monkey, part-pig, arms outstretched, pantingly chasing two women: Alan would have become "an ass groper in Germany".

The cartoon uses the distressing image of the refugee crisis – a dead child – to crack a joke. It has caused outrage, accused of making the racist suggestion that all male refugees from Syria are sexual predators, and that the child Alan was destined to become as brutish as the men who assaulted women on the streets of Cologne on New Year's Eve.

So far Charlie Hebdo's defenders have fallen into two categories. Some make the basic case that freedom of speech is an absolute and indivisible right, which includes the right to produce crass images that are horribly offensive. Martin Rowson of the British Cartoonists' Association, believes Charlie Hebdo is determined to breach the line that separates public from private by cracking the kind of sick jokes that are usually whispered in playgrounds or pubs.

Another way to defend the cartoon is that Charlie Hebdo's target was the European public and press, overflowing with tears for a child in August, then showing anger at the criminals of Cologne in January. In this view, the magazine is mocking us for our wildly changing generalisations, casting those fleeing Syria as all saints one minute, all sinners the next. Let's say that's what the artist intended. Even then the cartoon was wrong. For it made a mistake that countless satirists have made before: in seeking to expose a problem, it only made it worse.

Satire does not come with a licence, controlling how it will be exploited or misunderstood. But laughing at the weak is never funny, and there is nobody weaker than a dead child washed up on a beach. If you're aiming a lethal arrow, be sure to shoot straight at the target. Because if you miss, you might not hurt your enemy: you might just help him instead.

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