

Does Charlie Hebdo drift into racist caricatures?

The first edition of the magazine since the attack in which 12 people were killed featured a cartoon of Muhammad on its cover. Myriam Francois-Cerrah objects.



I've never really been a fan of Charlie Hebdo – its humour was often too bawdy for my taste and I agree with one of their former employees, Olivier Cyran, that in recent years it has often drifted into racist caricatures, reinforcing an already toxic environment for French Muslims.

For an allegedly anti-establishment magazine, it failed to challenge, and often buttressed, the state's well-documented increasing restrictions on the basic freedoms of Muslims. It also used the sorts of racial stereotypes in its imagery which foster precisely the sorts of racist attitudes they purported to be challenging. At some point, one's claim to be anti-racist has to be diminished if the subjects of racism – minorities themselves – tell you you're being racist. Ignoring their voice is arguably a dubious form of anti-racism.

My kind of satire is the type that punches up, the type that holds the powerful to account and mocks authority – there is a huge difference between mocking the clerical class that used to rule France through privileged access to power and mocking the faith of the descendants of immigrants

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largely locked out of power and experiencing acute levels of prejudice.

The memorial edition [front cover](#) bothers me only in one regard and that is in the racial stereotypes employed in the depiction of the prophet Muhammad, a shorthand here for Arabs and Muslims more broadly. We (thankfully!) wouldn't accept an image of a hooked-nose Jew, so it is unclear to me why images of hooked-nose Arabs – because forget who the prophet Muhammad is to Muslims, he is an Arab man being depicted in racially stereotypical terms – isn't more disturbing to others. One of my favourite caricatures by Charlie Hebdo was one featuring the prophet Muhammad being beheaded by an extremist. That image perfectly captures the hijacking of the faith by radicals and the truth that Muslims are the primary victims of terrorism and the main target of retaliatory violence.

Myriam Francois-Cerrah is a British writer and journalist. This article was originally published in [The Guardian](#).

Note from Timothy Garton Ash: in line with this website's '1-click away' policy, you can click on a link from the text to see the actual cartoon.

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