

**Restore the right to offend.** By Brendan O'Neill, *The Australian*, 10 January 2015.

The global cry of “Je suis Charlie” in response to the bloody massacre of satirists and cartoonists in Paris has been heartening.

From Paris’s Place de la Republique to London’s Trafalgar Square to the streets of San Francisco, thousands of people have gathered in silence, holding up pens, in memory of the 12 people killed in the brutal assault on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo.

The pens symbolise the freedom to write, to draw, to express in print what lurks in one’s mind. An attendee at the gathering in London spoke for many when he stated simply: “I’m here to support freedom of speech.”

Yet while these quietly angry gatherings have spoken to a deep well of human solidarity, they also feel a little too late.

For the ideal of freedom of speech has been under assault for years in the West, battered by law and by mobs and by super-sensitive cliques of offence-takers, everywhere from France itself to Britain, Scandinavia, America and Australia.

And it has been in part this silent war on free speech, and particularly the institutionalisation of the crazy idea that it is bad to offend people’s sensibilities, that has encouraged Islamists to think they have the right to stamp out Muhammad-reviling material.

Yes, the barbarians who slaughtered the staff of the Islam-disrespecting Charlie Hebdo will have been fuelled by their reading of the Koran or by the vile outpourings of some finger-wagging extremist imam. But they may also have imbibed an idea now mainstream in the West: that feeling offended is the worst thing in the world and you have the right to demand that your offenders STFU.

Tragically, many in the West, including those who call themselves liberal, had forgotten the importance of free speech, and the benefits of blasphemy itself, long before this week’s horrific assault.

Across Europe over the past 30 years offensiveness has been turned into a crime. In every European country, hate-speech laws have been introduced to control and punish the expression of certain beliefs.

A pastor in Sweden was given a one-month suspended prison sentence for describing homosexuality as a cancer. A drunk student in Britain was imprisoned for 56 days for offending black people on Twitter. Over the Christmas break, police in the north of England visited the home of a man who made a joke about a horrific road accident and gave him “strong words of advice”.

In France itself, the former actress Brigitte Bardot has been arrested five times for ridiculing the way Muslims prepare their meat. The novelist Michel Houellebecq was arrested and put on trial for describing Islam as “the stupidest religion”. That those cartoonist-killing gunmen felt they had the right to punish those who criticise their religion isn’t surprising: mainstream French society itself now punishes those who offend Islam or any other minority or “vulnerable

group”. It’s just that where politicians think offensiveness is only an imprisonable offence, the Charlie Hebdo killers think it deserves capital punishment.

It’s not only the law that is used to reprimand offensiveness. A growing culture of “You Can’t Say That”, an informal but nonetheless choking climate of self-censorship in response to cries of “That’s offensive!”, has many Western nations in its grip.

Across Europe, PC mobs — though they never think of themselves as mobs, preferring the flattering tag “campaigners for social justice” — have in recent months successfully squashed art exhibitions, TV shows, university debates and newspaper articles on the basis that they were offensive to blacks, women, transgender people or Muslims.

No, using online petitions — the rotten tomato of the 21st century — to silence someone you hate is not the same as using a Kalashnikov to murder those who offend you. But the aim of both is strikingly similar: to punish the offensive, to cleanse society of blasphemy, whether against a religion or idea or community group.

So the barbarism in Paris has not taken place in a vacuum. It occurred on a continent where anti-offensiveness is written into law and stamped into many campaigners’ hearts, and where liberals all too often side with the offence-takers over the offence-givers, the speakers or writers who have uttered the unutterable.

From the Danish cartoons controversy to recent censorious assaults on laddish magazines, too many Western liberals have responded to threats to free speech by saying: “Hmm, yes, maybe you shouldn’t have said or written that offensive thing in the first place. Tone it down, watch your words, don’t be so scurrilous.”

But we must defend the right to be scurrilous. And shocking. And blasphemous. Freedom of speech doesn’t mean a thing if we only defend it for polite, right-on people who parrot agreeable orthodoxies — we must also defend it for those who shock and rile and outrage.

Why? First, because everyone must have free speech, otherwise it’s not free speech at all, it’s privileged speech. And secondly because offensiveness is a *good* thing. Blasphemy has benefits. The instinct to shock and upset society is often a positive one. In fact, it can be the motor of progress.

As George Bernard Shaw said, “All great truths begin as blasphemies”. Some of mankind’s greatest intellectual leaps forward are a result of people having the cojones to say things that would have sounded Earth-shatteringly offensive in their day.

Whether it was Copernicus outraging mainstream thought by insisting the Earth orbited the Sun or Thomas Paine earning himself a death sentence for saying people should get to choose their political rulers, intellectual daring, a willingness to offend deeply entrenched ways of thinking, helped to deliver mankind from the Dark Ages into the relatively Enlightened societies many of us now inhabit.

The things we are warned off blaspheming against change over time. In the West in the past, it was the Christian God that was protected by a censorious forcefield. Now it’s climate-change orthodoxy, the ideology of multiculturalism, Islamo-sensitivities, gay marriage... These days,

speaking ill of any of those new gods could earn you a metaphorical lashing from the mob, or expulsion from polite society, or possibly a prison sentence.

The straitjacketing of risky thinking and provocative speech is always and everywhere a bad thing, for it discourages true, open debate and makes society intellectually lethargic.

We need more provocation, more eccentricity of thought, more blasphemy. As John Stuart Mill said: “The amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained.” So, if you want to pay tribute to the brave souls at Charlie Hebdo, don’t just hold up a pen in public and then go back to accepting the idea that offensiveness should be strangled — be a bit Charlie Hebdo in your everyday life and blaspheme against gods, prophets, orthodoxies and stupidities in the name of freedom and progress.