

# Freedom of speech: An appeal to Europe

To learn to live at peace with one another in a diverse world, we must show tolerance and respect for the faiths of others



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For *The Straits Times*

On Sept 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 editorial cartoons. Most of the cartoons depicted Prophet Muhammad. The newspaper stated that it was an attempt to contribute to the debate about criticism of Islam and against self-censorship.

When the cartoons were published, Muslims in Denmark protested, and the protest was taken up by Muslim communities all over the world.

Some of the protests became violent and led to the death of 250 individuals. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East, organised a boycott of Danish products.

## CHARLIE HEBDO

On Nov 2, 2011, the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* published an issue with the Prophet as the alleged guest editor. A day after its publication, the premises of the newspaper were firebombed.

In September 2012, the same newspaper published a series of cartoons of the Prophet, in very bad taste. Speaking at the United Nations soon after the publication of the cartoons, then US President Barack Obama said: "The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam. But to be credible, those who condemn that slander must also condemn the hate we see in the images of Jesus Christ that are desecrated, or churches that are destroyed, or the Holocaust that is denied."

On Jan 7, 2015, two gunmen forced their way into the premises of *Charlie Hebdo*. They opened fire and killed 12 members of the staff. The world reacted in horror to this outrage. Many of the leaders of the world, including those from Muslim countries, joined then



A poster of French teacher Samuel Paty on the facade of the City Hall building in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine. He was killed last month, days after showing his class caricatures of Prophet Muhammad that had been published by *Charlie Hebdo* a few years ago. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

French President Francois Hollande in a public display of solidarity.

## SAMUEL PATY

Mr Samuel Paty was a French school teacher. He taught at a junior high school in a commune called Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, not far from Paris. Early last month, Mr Paty was teaching a class on freedom of expression. He showed his students two cartoons of Prophet Muhammad from *Charlie Hebdo*. Some of his students and their parents were unhappy with his action.

On Oct 16, an 18-year-old Muslim immigrant from Russia, Abdoullakh Abouyevidovitch Anzorov, went to Mr Paty's school. He asked a number of the students to identify Mr Paty. He followed him, killed him with a knife and decapitated him. Anzorov was shot dead by the police.

Before the incident, in an Oct 2 speech against "Islamist

separatism", President Emmanuel Macron described Islam as a religion that is currently in crisis. On Oct 21, at a national memorial in honour of Mr Paty, at which the Legion of Honour was conferred posthumously on the slain teacher, Mr Macron said France would not disavow the cartoons.

Meanwhile, cartoons of the Prophet from *Charlie Hebdo* were also displayed on some public buildings in two cities in the south of France.

On Oct 31, in response to criticisms about his remarks, Mr Macron gave an interview to *Al Jazeera* to emphasise that there is no stigmatisation of Islam in France, although the government has the duty to uphold French values of freedom of expression. He also published an op-ed in the *Financial Times* on Nov 4 to make similar points.

On Nov 2, a teacher at a high school in Rotterdam in the Netherlands went into hiding after

receiving threats following a classroom discussion on the killing of Mr Paty.

During the discussion, some students took offence over a satirical cartoon hanging in the classroom, and a photo of the image began circulating on social media within a day. A young woman has been arrested on suspicion of inciting threats.

There was a similar incident at another school in Den Bosch on Nov 5 and the teacher involved was also subjected to threats. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has called the threats to the teachers "absurd" and "intolerable".

## THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Almost all the countries of the world, including Muslim countries, have condemned the killing of Mr Paty.

At the same time, many thoughtful persons outside Europe have appealed to Denmark,

France, the Netherlands and other European countries to refrain from insulting Islam and its Prophet.

The central question is whether freedom of speech includes the right to slander Islam or any other religion.

## THE SECULARISATION OF WESTERN EUROPE

Over the past 50 years, Christianity has been on the decline in Northern and Western Europe. In a May 2018 report by the Pew Research Centre, it was stated that the majority of European Christians were non-practising. Western Europe has become one of the world's most secular regions.

The report also found that only a minority, about 22 per cent, of Europe's Christians attended monthly church services. In every country, except Italy, non-practising Christians outnumbered those who

attended church regularly.

The secularisation of Western Europe may explain why Europeans see nothing wrong in mocking the Prophet of Islam and naming bars and restaurants after Lord Buddha. Europeans must understand that while Western Europe has become less religious, this is not the case in other parts of the world.

For example, there is increasing religiosity among Muslims. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. At present, Islam has 1.9 billion adherents, accounting for 24.9 per cent of the world's population. Christianity has 2.4 billion adherents, or 31 per cent of the world's population. Islam is projected to overtake Christianity as the biggest religion of the world after reaching parity by 2070, according to Pew Research Centre.

## LIMITS TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech is an important human right. It is protected by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

All legal systems, however, recognise certain limits to freedom of speech, such as defamation, perjury, incitement to violence, pornography, obscenity, sedition and blasphemy.

In 16 European countries, including France, the denial of the Holocaust is not protected by free speech. The Holocaust led to the death of six million Jews. To deny that this tragedy had happened is deeply offensive to Jews across the world. For this reason, the denial of the Holocaust is made a crime in those countries. This is laudable.

## EUROPE AND THE WORLD

Both Asia and Europe do not exist in isolation. We are part of the world and we want to live in harmony with the rest of the world. In order to do so, both Asia and Europe must consider the feelings of the other regions and countries of the world.

We live in a very diverse world. We have peoples of different races, religions, languages, cultures and ideologies. We live on the same planet and we must learn to live at peace with one another. For this to happen, we must show tolerance and respect for the faiths of others.

Religion seems to be less important to many Western Europeans; it is, however, very important to the followers of many religions, including Islam. In Singapore, we value religious harmony.

## APPEAL TO EUROPE

In order to preserve that harmony, we show respect for all religions, even if we are irreligious. Your freedom of speech must not violate my freedom not to have my religion satirised or mocked.

I make this sincere appeal to my European friends to reconsider the wisdom of recent actions which might be misconstrued as disrespect for Islam and its Prophet.

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