Article Le Monde: “Anti-blasphemy laws: a tool of repression threatening the entire world” by Joëlle Fiss

http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/01/12/les-lois-anti-blaspheme-un-outil-de-repression-qui-menace-l-ensemble-de-la-planete_4554610_3232.html

The terrorist attack against the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo reminds us of overreactions we have seen abroad, where jihadists have been known to kill people, in defense of "anti blasphemy" laws. Clearly, that is far away from the French reality and context. Although France is opposed to laws sanctioning blasphemy, it still suffers from its consequences. That shows how important the stakes are, at international level.

Nearly one in two countries (47%) have laws or policies that penalize blasphemy (insulting religion), apostasy (abandoning faith) or libel (defamation or criticism of certain religions or religion in general), according to a study by the Pew Research Center, conducted in 2011.

The laws against blasphemy criminalize any insult against religion or religious symbols. Religious minorities and atheists are directly targeted. Any interpretation of a religious text, which differs from the state's official version, can be sanctioned. Muslim intellectuals expressing minority opinions are also victims. These laws hand out harsh sanctions -even the death penalty- in certain states (eg Pakistan and Iran). They lead to arbitrary arrests and detentions (eg Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia).

When it comes to Islam, anti blasphemy laws always benefit religious radicals. They are manipulated by those who wish to spread social unrest, to destabilize regimes considered too moderate, to trigger an angry crowd, to incite riots or to impose an ultra conservative interpretation of Islam.

In 2014, grotesque abuses occurred. The incidents are not always covered in the French media. In March 2014, hundreds of Pakistanis attacked a Hindu temple in the province of Sindh, following a rumor that a member of the community had desecrated the Koran. In May, Rashid Rehman, a lawyer in Pakistan, was assassinated for defending a university professor accused of blasphemy. In June, a Sudanese woman was sentenced to a hundred lashes and hanging for having converted to Christianity. In July, a woman and two little girls of the Ahmadi minority were killed in Pakistan during a riot, after they published a photo on Facebook deemed "blasphemous". In November, in the Pakistani province of Punjab, a crowd killed a Christian couple suspected of having desecrated a Koran. Last December, the editor of the Indonesian English newspaper Jakarta Post was accused of blasphemy by the police for publishing (ironically) a caricature of the Islamic State, a few months back. On January 9 2015, the Saudi blogger Raif Badwani, who has been convicted of insulting Islam, received the first fifty lashes (from a thousand planned) in a public square in Jeddah following the Friday prayers. He will also serve a sentence of ten years in prison.

These incidents were miles away from French concerns. Today, the country is suddenly plunged into the heart of such unknown violence. Blood is flowing where
religion is commented on. These types of crisis are always sparked by those who want to silence the free flow of ideas and nuanced expression, which are allowed in democratic societies, for example: satire, indignation (so French, after all), irony, comedy, outrage or provocation.

In 2012, US interests were directly targeted over accusations of blasphemy. The anti-Islam film "Innocence of Muslims" was posted on the US platform YouTube, provoking unrest in many countries, including Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Pakistan, Indonesia, Afghanistan and Lebanon. But it was only after the video has been translated into Arabic by Islamists, that the violence began. Amid burning American flags, the riots caused dozens of casualties. Hundreds were injured. Amidst the chaos, the U.S. diplomatic missions were attacked in Tunisia and Egypt, causing a diplomatic crisis between the United States and several countries of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation. Many U.S. officials publicly feared for the country's national security. President Barack Obama even addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, explaining that offence can never justify violence.

Just like the United States, blasphemy charges now constitute a security risk for France's interests. This danger has become real and it is no longer part of a theoretical debate around freedom of speech. The violence can be committed by individuals, or public authorities to implement their "anti-blasphemy" laws.

No one has yet written a manual on "How not to be silenced by threats of violence and intimidation." The only certainty is that this scenario will happen again.

France and the United States must stand together to protect the free flow of ideas, without yielding to external pressures. Even if both states don’t have anti-blasphemy laws, their citizens are still its victims.