Five questions and responses on freedom of expression and freedom of religion:
How can I discuss these issues with my students?

In the context of daily media coverage of the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher attacks in France, the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre felt it important to provide a short resource for teachers to support a calm discussion of the events and the fundamental questions relating to freedom of expression and freedom of religious expression. Informed and respectful discussion and debate in the classroom generates rich learning and reflection on contemporary issues of hate, discrimination and antisemitism in today’s world. We hope these five questions and answers will help!

**Question 1**: What is Charlie Hebdo and what is satire?


**Question 2**: What is freedom of expression? Is it permissible to say anything we wish under the terms of freedom of expression? Is it okay to be blasphemous?

**In Canada and Quebec**:

Freedom of expression, of opinion and of the press is part of the fundamental rights and freedoms found in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms of Quebec (art. 3) and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (art. 2). They enable each individual to freely express their ideas through all means deemed appropriate. These rights form the basis of a free and democratic society. A reasonable limit imposed on freedom of expression is that of discrimination (Quebec Charter) and whether expressions are deemed hateful or ridicule an individual or a group of people. The Canadian Criminal Code (art. 296, 297, 317-319) establishes that it is an offence to advocate or promote genocide, publish defamatory libel, or publicly incite hatred.

Freedom of expression is not absolute. The Charters limit certain freedoms deemed discriminatory or hateful. Judges interpret each situation in the light of the facts and jurisprudence. In Canada, there have been convictions of those who publicize hate speech against Jews, (R v Keegstra, [1990 ]), homosexuals ( 2013), Roma (2005) , etc.

Source: Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Supreme Court of Canada

Additionally, *An Act to Prevent and Stop Bullying and Violence in Schools* is an amendment to the *Education Act* and the *Act respecting Private education* and aims to prevent any forms bullying and violence in Quebec schools. Bullying is defined as: “any direct or indirect behaviour, comment, act or gesture, including through the use of social media, intended to injure, hurt, oppress, intimidate or ostracize, and includes cyberbullying”.

**What is it considered hate speech? Seven historic cases to read about and discuss with your students**: [http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/when-is-it-hate-speech-7-significant-canadian-cases-1.1036731](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/when-is-it-hate-speech-7-significant-canadian-cases-1.1036731)
On the internet? In theory, country-specific laws apply. It is extremely difficult for the authorities to control the information that circulates on the internet. However, some internet sites define rules of use. For example, Facebook can decide to exclude a member or withdraw certain content it deems inflammatory.

Developing Digital Citizenship – This website provides numerous links to resources for elementary and high school teachers in developing responsible use of technology: [http://dcp.lbpsb.qc.ca/](http://dcp.lbpsb.qc.ca/)

Can anything be considered humorous? According to Canadian law, if it does not stigmatize or defame, and nor is it hate speech, humour such as the publishing of cartoons is permissible. We must not forget that the use of freedom of expression can shock or offend some people. Charlie Hebdo does not target any specific affiliation, religious or otherwise.


Sub-question: Who is Dieudonné and what is the connection to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and discussions about freedom of expression versus hate speech?
[http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/charlie-hebdo-who-is-dieudonne](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/charlie-hebdo-who-is-dieudonne)

Question 3: What is freedom of the press?

Freedom of the press is recognized by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a central component of free expression. Using various forms of media to communicate one’s thoughts and opinions is an important right in a democratic nation such as Canada. Such freedoms, however, are limited by civil responsibilities outlined in the Criminal Code. An LES entitled “Freedom of Expression in the Media” is a MELS activity that can be accessed from the LEARN website, (scroll down to the section entitled “ERC Learning and Evaluation”)
[http://www.learnquebec.ca/en/content/curriculum/personal_dev/erc/index.html#resources](http://www.learnquebec.ca/en/content/curriculum/personal_dev/erc/index.html#resources)

Question 4: How can I discuss and teach about these issues in the classroom?

Part of the MHMC’s educational mandate is to provide tools for the promotion of respect and human dignity, and to present opportunities for intercultural understanding. Respectful and informed discussion and debate in the classroom enables students to express differing beliefs. We suggest the following tips for addressing the issues raised by the Charlie Hebdo attacks, while providing some helpful links for teachers below:

1) Ensure that your students understand the recent events in Paris and their relationship to the larger issues: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of religious expression, and the notion of limitations regarding such rights;

2) Emphasize the importance of challenging different points of view while still respecting religious, cultural, linguistic, political and gendered identities in and outside of school contexts;
3) Delineate parameters for active and respectful listening through in-class discussion, while encouraging your students to express their responses to the issues noted in point # 1 through dialogue or respectful debate.

http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/programme-ethique-et-culture-religieuse/programme-enseignement-secondaire/competence-3-pratiquer-le-dialogue/sens-de-la-competence-3/

Links for teachers:

Reflections from Educators:

French teachers discuss Charlie Hebdo attacks in class:


How to respond to controversy in the classroom; From the Three Faiths Forum (an educational organization focusing on building interfaith dialogue through diverse communities)


Pedagogical tools and strategies:

Satire and Free Speech: A New York Times resource and activity:


Have your students respond to the Charlie Hebdo attacks through art, as demonstrated by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts:


Question 5: Why consider the hostage taking at a kosher grocery store an act of antisemitism?

Antisemitism is the prejudice, discrimination, and hostility against Jewish people based on religious, ethnic, and so-called racial distinctions. This historical phenomenon has existed for over two thousand years, with the Holocaust being the most extreme example of antisemitism. The Holocaust was the systematic persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.


Antisemitism remains prevalent in today’s world. Holding Jews hostage - while assassinating four of these individuals in a grocery store frequented by Jewish customers on a Friday afternoon (a time during which Jews prepare for the Sabbath) - was an intentional act of hatred and antisemitism.

**Sub-question:** Why is the French and global Jewish community concerned about the antisemitic attack in the kosher grocery store in the Portes de Vincennes neighbourhood?
