

**Plea for free speech and the need for a satirical voice**  
**by CAROLINE PAUWELS (rector VUB Brussels)**

Opening 'Mea Culpa' - Karl Meersman. Retranchement (NL) 05-08-2018

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening,

And welcome to this particularly beautiful spot, a lovely little church, where we will briefly, temporarily, retreat to focus the gaze, expand the mind, and open the heart to guilt and sinners, or what usually passes for that.

This evening, at the opening of this exhibition of work by Karl Meersman, I briefly want to entertain you about the importance of free speech and about the need for a satirical voice.

Free speech. We are all in favour of that, of course. Except for those things we don't like to read, don't like hear or don't like to see. But apart from that, we are all for free speech. Some things, on that we all agree, are just going too far. Are just too crazy or too dangerous. Or too offensive. Or too damaging. Those things, they obviously can't be tolerated. But apart from that, nay, we are all for free speech.

Ladies and gentlemen, you immediately sense the problem. What I might dislike, offend or shock me, may not be what displeases you, causes offence or shocks. And other people may well draw the line in a different place again.

But if we want to protect everyone from what they don't like to read, hear or see, then there is very little left that can or may be done. Then it is over with free speech. That is why it is always best to tread as carefully as possible when setting limits on freedom of speech or expression.

To make my point, I will briefly quote a nineteenth-century British philosopher: John Stuart Mill. According to Mill, no one can decide for someone else how that other person should live or which way of life is most suitable for that other person. We can, of course, discuss which way of life is preferable. We can use facts, examples and arguments to try to convince each other that we are right. But what we must not do is use coercion of any kind to force others to live the way we want them to. That, it seems to me, is an initial clear starting point. If we accept that, Mill judges, we must also accept that people should have the freedom to figure out which way of life then suits them best.

And if we accept that too, then, thirdly, we cannot avoid the fact that freedom of expression must exist, just as the freedom of information, of debate, of association and thus also the right to live differently from what the environment or the majority dictates should exist.

According to John Stuart Mill, we improve as individuals and as a society when there is tolerance. We learn by confronting views and ways of life that we reject. We understand better if we argue why we disagree and at the same time, we give our own and new insights the chance to prove their worth.

One becomes human in plurality, says Hannah Arendt, my favourite thinker. One becomes wiser, I would add, by also coming into contact with other opinions. Tolerance, including and especially of practices or opinions with which we fundamentally disagree, is ultimately in our own interest. An idea that we initially reject often turns out to be, when we see it put into practice by others, not so bad at all. We can learn from those who hold very different opinions. Moreover, sometimes those who were rivalled by their contemporaries are later praised by new generations as innovators. That is why it is always best to tread as carefully as possible when setting limits to freedom of speech or expression.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The more complex and the more global and diverse society becomes, the more likely it is that great differences will emerge between what people consider venerable or sacred, between what they tolerate and what they despise, between where they think the boundary of free speech should lie. We see this every day. And increasingly so. These days, you only have to open the newspaper or take a moment to go on Facebook and you read that some organisation or person is accusing others of having certain thoughts that hurt their feelings.

And often this really is true: what one person thinks is innocent, shocks the other to the depths of their fibres. But is that sufficient ground to conclude that those shocking opinions, images or practices, should then be banned or censored?

The well-intentioned desire to do justice to everyone means that today everything that is said, written or depicted is rigorously weighed and considered.

In itself, of course, there is nothing wrong with weighing and considering. In itself, there is nothing wrong, if someone says that an opinion or image or practice for him or her is not acceptable. We can then discuss that.

And sometimes, indeed, on the basis of that conversation, mutual understanding of each other's views can arise. We should be able to do that. We should even wish it to occur more often.

But censorship or self-censorship, we must be extremely vigilant about that.

What shocks can be the basis for conversation. It cannot be the basis for censorship. Not for self-censorship, not for critical voices or artists who, fearing the reactions, from now on play it safe.

It cannot be that artists should feel guilty for the work they make. That they should think twice before making their work in public. Not only whether no one would take offence, but worse, whether they would not thereby provoke violent reactions. Think of the Mohammed cartoons, think of Charlie Hebdo.

If we end up in a society where artists have to constantly feel guilty, where censorship and self-censorship become the rule, then we have a big problem.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Humans are just a complicated mess. One believes in Allah, the second in Lenin, a third in nothing at all. Just because we never will be able to agree on what should be treated with respect, freedom of opinion and expression is indispensable.

I have no right to demand that another person respects my beliefs. And similarly I must respect another's freedom, not what that other person believes in. Showing respect to others is extremely important. However, it is not a legal principle, but a norm in interpersonal intercourse.

Indeed, life becomes a lot more pleasant if, regardless of what we think of each other's opinions, we try to treat each other respectfully. But sometimes that does not work: then we say, write or draw things that others find unacceptable. That is unfortunate, but there is not much we can do about it.

At such times, it is good to remember that there will always be someone who is annoyed by our views. They do not have the right to silence us. And neither do we. Banning opinions is something we should be very cautious about. Banning opinions is always a dangerous precedent. Once we have reached for the weapon of prohibition, the temptation to do it more often will occur. At first, of course, it will be about banning opinions that we all indeed think are terrible. But nothing will prevent the subsequent banning of other opinions that we do not share. And then it becomes difficult to justify why what offends one may be banned and what shocks others may not. And then the boundaries begin to shift irrevocably....

Ladies and gentlemen,

Perhaps even more than writers today, it is visual artists who most feel that freedom of expression is under attack. Think of the Danish Mohammed cartoons. Think of Charlie Hebdo. Think of the graffiti that in recent months, among others, caused a stir in Brussels.

We have a particularly rich tradition of satirical visual language. With the spread of the printing press, immediately cartoons began to circulate. From the moment newspapers reached a mass audience, they also contained cartoons.

And even though there was always someone who took offence at some print, a culture grew in which we knew: prints and cartoons are a necessary sanctuary. Cartoonists hold up a mirror to us. A mirror, which may show the cruel reality, but which also makes us see certain things more sharply.

We accepted this sanctuary for cartoonists. We looked in the mirror they held up to us. Because it was fun, to look at high and established traditions in an mischievous or magnified manner. Because we knew there was no harm in not always taking everything so seriously. Because we realised that a society in which laughing with those in power is preferable to a society where you can be jailed for it. We should cherish that rich satirical tradition. We must defend it.

A country where certain things are no longer allowed to be laughed at is a country you'd rather not live in. Nobel literature laureate Dario Fo put it more sharply: a nation that does not like satire is a civilisation that is dead.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are gathered here tonight for the opening of the exhibition 'Mea Culpa' by Karl Meersman. Karl Meersman is part of that rich satirical tradition I mentioned. The tradition of graphic artists like Félicien Rops, Toulouse Lautrec and Honoré Daumier. Artists who express their view of our often bizarre world in cartoons. And who hang them in places where one would not expect to see cartoons, a Protestant church for instance. Artists who question the obvious. Artists who make us look differently at the world and at ourselves. Artists who make us doubt the familiar images, the familiar reality, the things we took for granted until then. From an external view, turning the gaze back inwards, as it were.

He who is free from sin cast the first stone. I think that is also what this exhibition wants to convey.

Karl's visual language is also very Belgian. It is characterised by a humour that is never far away from surrealism. The surrealism that unmask our dogmas, even our own dogmas, and our tunnel-vision.

Karl's images surprise, through their astute observation and unexpected associations. "A joke wrapped in craftsmanship. Satire with a disarming kindness," someone wrote about his work. He does not call himself a provocateur, rather a thorn in the flesh. "Often whispering makes more of an impression than shouting," he let slip in an interview. I like that thought. There is so much shouting, so little whispering. So little really looking.

One of my favourite works by Karl Meersman is 'Portrait of a Country in pieces'. It dates from 2010. Extremely austere in black and white. Against a black background, you see two white jigsaw pieces that do not fit together, but together they form the contours of Belgium. It is a work that, as a Brussels native and a Belgian, initially made me uncomfortable. Portraying Belgium as nothing more than two mismatched jigsaw pieces, with a hole where Brussels should be located? It is a work you are forced to think about. What is it that binds this country together? What do we have in common? Do the jigsaw pieces really not fit together then? Two jigsaw pieces, that is all it took for Karl Meersman to portray the Belgian issue extremely sharp. That's all it took to catch the viewer momentarily off guard. To make them ponder. Make them doubt the obvious. To focus the gaze, broaden it and, subsequently, disrupt it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the merit of good satire. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the merit of Karl Meersman.

Thank you for your attention, Caroline Pauwels (Rector VUB Brussels)