

**Religious Representations in the Francophone  
Iconographic Satire Landscape: The Analysis of *Charlie  
Hebdo's* Caricatural *Bande Dessinée*,  
*La Vie de Mahomet (2013)*.**

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**A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts (Research)**

**This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.**

**I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.**

**No generative AI was used in the preparation of this thesis. *Grammarly* was used throughout the drafting process.**

**Catia de Piccoli**

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## Table of Contents

Table of Figures .....	5
Introduction .....	6
Research Aims .....	9
Methodology.....	10
Scope & limitations.....	13
1. Literature Review.....	15
1.1. <i>Bande Dessinée</i> and Comics studies .....	15
1.2. Sequential caricature and the Tillier's typology .....	17
1.3. Literature on <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> .....	18
1.4. The harm principle and conditions of reception .....	22
1.5. <i>Islamogauchisme</i> and Islamophobia.....	25
1.6. Blasphemy .....	29
1.7. Literature on <i>Charlie Hebdo's</i> single-panelled portraits .....	31
1.8. Literature on <i>LVM</i> .....	33
2. Contextual and Formal Analysis of <i>LVM</i> .....	38
2.1. Factoring in media and audience changes .....	38
2.1.1. Perception of <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> prior to <i>LVM's</i> release .....	39
2.1.2. The collaboration between Charb and Zineb El-Rhazoui.....	42
2.1.3. Editorial and material considerations.....	44
2.1.4. Structural considerations .....	46
2.2. Peritext for a factual approach.....	48
2.2.1. The factual perspective and endnotes .....	49
2.2.2. Map, Chronology, and Muhammad's succession .....	53
2.2.3. Endpapers .....	57
2.3. Eliciting intentionality with prefaces and postfaces .....	58
2.4. A mediated approach.....	64
2.5. Results and Findings.....	65
3. Multimodal Analysis of <i>LVM</i> .....	68
3.1. Judging a BD by its covers .....	69
3.1.1. Overriding a taboo on images .....	70
3.1.2. Religious texts and the French law position .....	70
3.1.3. The Arts and literary descriptions .....	74
3.2. A Multimodal Lens on Covers .....	77
3.2.1 <i>LVM1</i> and <i>LVM2</i> covers (magazine format) .....	78
3.2.2. The cover of <i>LVM3</i> .....	88

3.3. What the narrative reveals .....	93
3.3.1. Humour and religious iconography. ....	94
3.3.2. Sexually explicit images .....	101
3.3.3. Selected textual elements .....	106
3.4. Results and Findings .....	108
Conclusion.....	110
List of References .....	117
Primary Corpus .....	117
Books, Articles.....	117
Newspapers articles & Blogs/Webzines' articles.....	122
Editorials .....	124
Documentaries & interviews.....	125
Podcasts .....	126
<i>Charlie Hebdo's</i> website .....	127
Readers' reviews (in Babelio, fnac, Amazon.fr, Amazon.com) .....	127

## Table of Figures

01	Sample of Charb's aesthetic register .....	20
02	<i>Le Monde's</i> Article (2015/02/23) .....	41
03	Representative Sample of Endnotes .....	52
04	Map, <i>LVM3</i> , p. 4 .....	54
05	Chronology, <i>LVM3</i> , p. 155 .....	55
06	Sample of The Prophet's succession, <i>LVM3</i> , p. 156 .....	56
07	Endpapers, <i>LVM3</i> .....	57
08	<i>LVM1</i> Magazine Front Cover (January 2013) .....	77
09	<i>LVM2</i> Magazine Front Cover (July 2013) .....	82
10	Cloud Symbolism in Illustrated Manuscripts .....	84
11	<i>LVM3</i> Book Front Cover (September 2013).....	89
12	<i>LVM3's</i> Book Back Cover .....	91
13	<i>LVM1</i> , p. 23. Humour .....	96
14	<i>LVM1</i> , p. 17, panel 1. Humoristic repertoire .....	97
15	<i>LVM1</i> , p. 9. The Wink: Neutralising Images .....	99
16	<i>LVM1</i> , p. 11. The Description of the Prophecy .....	102
17	<i>LVM2</i> , p. 7. Paradise .....	105
18	<i>LVM2</i> , p. 16. Representative Sample of Textual Elements .....	107
19	<i>Charlie Hebdo's</i> Cover, no 1694, (2025/01/07) .....	116

**Research Question:** How does *La Vie de Mahomet*'s novel strategy—which combines a BD form and substantive analytical tools in peritext—contribute to asserting authorial control over the caricatural representation of Islam in secular French culture and, ultimately, to the renewal of the caricatural genre?

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## Introduction

What prevents criticizing Islam from becoming “as banal as [criticising] Catholicism” is the fact that criticizing from a position of privilege is not the same as criticizing from a position of subordination. (Darling-Wolf, 2016, p. 5).

We need to push the boundaries of freedom of expression and say that depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a BD is part of a strategy to normalise Islam in France.<sup>1</sup> (Zineb's interview, *www.revue-internationale.com*, 2013/09/25)

Zineb and Darling-Wolf's viewpoints quoted above show opposing positions that exist among a broad public in France's secular yet multicultural context. Religious caricatures are divisive, even in secular societies like France, where they are ubiquitous in street kiosks and news agencies and where this satirical media has been historically used to challenge power structures. However, there has been an alternative way to approach religion in satire; *La Vie de Mahomet* (hereafter *LVM*) by *Charlie Hebdo* published in 2013, represents one. This thesis examines the role of *LVM*, a caricatural *bande dessinée* (hereafter *BD*) by the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, in renewing the caricature genre making inroads into *BD* and through its use of *BD* form and analytical tools to assert authorial control when representing Islam within secular culture. *BD* refers to the francophone tradition of graphic storytelling that combines sequential art and written text, using panels and speech balloons, to construct meaning. It is contextually shaped by its cultural, political, and historical environments.

*LVM* plays with the tension between religious irreverence and freedom of expression, a tension that existed in 2013 and would peak in 2015 with the Paris attack. Events such as the Caricature Affair<sup>2</sup>, the

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. Original: "Nous devons pousser les lignes de la liberté d'expression et dire que représenter Mahomet dans une bande dessinée participe d'une stratégie de normalisation de l'islam en France."

<sup>2</sup> Twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and *Charlie Hebdo* decided to republish the portraits adding one of their own. See 1.7.

Trial<sup>3</sup>, and the 2015 shooting that decimated most of the editorial team<sup>4</sup>, and the 2020 beheading of secondary school's ethics teacher, Samuel Paty – who was killed for showing a religious caricature to his class – demonstrate the place occupied by freedom of expression and religious caricatures in contemporary French society. The terrorist attack at *Charlie Hebdo's* headquarters has raised questions about the longevity of religious caricatures. The relevance of humoristic and satirical cartooning is also reconsidered in a volatile environment where security is a concern, and modern sensibilities are hurt by a genre whose primary function is to shock and offend (Ory, 2015, p. 19; Quinton, 2006, p. 5; Chappatte, 2019).

The year 2012 ended with a media announcement by Stéphane Charbonnier, aka Charb, caricaturist and then director of publications for *Charlie Hebdo*: the French satirical magazine would shortly publish a Special Issue on the life of the Prophet Muhammad in a multi-panelled BD form. It was to be called *La Vie de Mahomet*. This biography of the Prophet of Islam would take up the religious caricature register that, although it had become commonly used in *Charlie Hebdo's* single-panelled cartoons, still remained contentious within and beyond the Muslim community. However, Charb's announcement was cryptic; it suggested that this upcoming BD should have been published well before the newspaper had started using religious figures of Islam in its satirical cartoons. In his own words, Charb said: "I think that's where we [*Charlie Hebdo*] should have started, that is, making Muhammad known, making Islam known before laughing about it and having fun with it."<sup>5</sup> ([www.rts.ch](http://www.rts.ch), 2013/01/02)

This statement underscores the aim of the authors of *LVM*, Charb and Zineb, to bridge the divide that existed between their intentions and the public perception. To that end, the didactic biography of the Prophet's life addresses accusations of Islamophobia and racism that had been levelled against *Charlie Hebdo* while providing readers with historical and cultural context to better understand the satire. *La Vie de Mahomet*, marked a deliberate departure from *Charlie Hebdo's* previous publications of religious caricatures. The viral caricatures of those earlier publications were deemed offensive to Muslims who identified with the represented characters in those satirical cartoons. By contrast, in

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<sup>3</sup> *Charlie Hebdo* was unsuccessfully sued by a collective of Muslim organisations. See 1.7.

<sup>4</sup> Among the victims were the pillar-caricaturists, such as Cabu, Charb, Honoré, Tignous, and Wolinski. Note that the three days of terror that shook Paris targeted not only *Charlie Hebdo* editorial team, but also the Jewish community with the second attack on a kosher supermarket and its customers. The combined attacks led to 17 deaths: 12 people died at *Charlie Hebdo's* headquarters, 4 people at the Hypercasher, and one police officer was killed while the terrorists tried to escape.

<sup>5</sup> My translation. Original: "Je pense qu'on aurait dû commencer par-là d'ailleurs, c.-à-d., faire connaître Mahomet, faire connaître l'islam avant d'en rigoler et rigoler avec."

*LVM*, Charb and Zineb began to leave aside the single portraits of the Prophet for which *Charlie Hebdo* was known.

For this rendition of the life of the Prophet, *LVM*'s authorial strategy utilises a BD form with a lengthy 130-page narrative structure in a multi-panelled layout. The authors take a factual approach in their caricatural biography, and it is accompanied by analytical tools in peritext such as explanatory prefaces, extensive warnings in postfaces, visual and textual documents, and 148 annotated endnotes which validate the recounted episodes of the Prophet's life. *LVM*'s extensive peritext is an unusual feature for the caricature genre, which typically assumes readers' ability to understand culturally and politically situated references and the context. The choice of a satirical register offers a playful approach to *LVM*. This thesis will analyse the impact of these strategic tools aimed at educating the readers and clarifying the authors' intentions. This BD is an alternative form that sparks debates on the role of satire, the limits of freedom of expression, and the ethical responsibilities and rights of cartoonists in secular France.

To do so, the corpus is constituted of two versions of *LVM* published in the same year. The two versions were published in different formats. *LVM1* and *LVM2* were first published in magazine format (respectively in January 2013 and July 2013) by *Charlie Hebdo* magazine as a double special issue. They formed the complete historical rendition of Muhammad's life. An edited and augmented version, *LVM3*, was published in September 2013 by *Charlie Hebdo*'s publishing house, *Les Echappés*, in a hardcover book format. Throughout the thesis, I specify which format and issue I am referring to using '*LVM1*', '*LVM2*', and '*LVM3*'. I use '*LVM*' when referring to the BD in general and its common content. The two-part biography corresponds to two distinctive periods of Muhammad's life. *LVM1* titled *Les débuts d'un prophète* (The Beginnings of a Prophet), contains 64 pages, including the preface and two pages of endnotes. *LVM1* covers the Mecca period, starting with the Prophet's birth and upbringing, then touching upon the origins of the Islamic civilisation and the emergence of religious tradition, before ending with Muhammad as a spiritual leader spreading the new monotheistic religion. *LVM2*, *Le prophète de l'islam* (The Prophet of Islam) contains 78 pages including one page of endnotes. The second part describes Muhammad's transformation into the head of his community and a gifted warlord. His arrival in Medina marks the start of Islam's expansion and the commencement of internecine conflict. Thus, *LVM1* and *LVM2* formed Muhammad's complete biography.

*LVM3* is a compiled, edited, and augmented version of the double special issue which was published as a hardcover book. The content appears similar at first glance, but an in-depth exploration reveals additional chapters and changes to the peritext between *LVM1/LVM2* and *LVM3*. The new chapters

are embedded into the narrative, and all contain sensitive images, such as nudity<sup>6</sup>, images of sexual intercourse<sup>7</sup>, and representations of God's foot, torso, and beard<sup>8</sup>, flaunting the total ban on God's depiction by Islamic doctrine<sup>9</sup>.

Both formats are analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 to show that certain editorial and production-related decisions were integral to the authors' broader strategy to reassert control over how *LVM* would be perceived and interpreted by the readers.

## Research Aims

The adoption of a BD form as opposed to single-panelled portraits and the insertion of explanatory documents marked a shift in the way *Charlie Hebdo* approached Islam in its caricatural productions. By integrating these features, *LVM* attempted to recalibrate the relationship between the authors and the audience, reducing the potential for misunderstanding while maintaining the satirical critique central to *Charlie Hebdo's* ethos. By blending the BD medium with substantive peritextual elements, *LVM* asserts authorial control over the meaning of the visual narrative and mitigates claims of harm or Islamophobic intent. Additionally, the analysis explores how its authors' strategies reflect broader shifts in caricature practices in response to changing audience dynamics and cultural sensitivities.

The thesis' focus is on the different layers of the authors' strategies, whose functions are to regain agency over the meaning emerging from this multimodal production. To reassert their control, Charb and Zineb made several key decisions related to materiality, publication operation, change of form and approach, and additions of peritext, which include: (i) playing with different formats (magazine and book); (ii) opting for a staged release strategy of different versions of the text; (iii) adopting a BD medium form relying on long narrative structures and a multipaneled layout over 148 pages; (iv) approaching the biography of the Prophet using a factual perspective and including the historicisation of the sacred texts; (v) adding a substantive peritext, including all elements external to the visual/textual narrative, such as covers, prefaces, postfaces, endnotes, a map, a chronology and the presentation of the Prophet's successors. Providing peritext to reassert authorial agency is further achieved by adopting a BD form. Thus, this thesis aims to explore *LVM* in comparison to two existing

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<sup>6</sup> P. 64, "*Les ablutions*", "The ablutions".

<sup>7</sup> See p. 118, "*Vendredi Saint*", ("Good Friday").

<sup>8</sup> See p. 112-113, "*Les cinq prières*", ("The five prayers").

<sup>9</sup> See also other added chapters relating to the suspected adultery of the Prophet's second wife, Aicha (pp. 97-99) and the Prophet's infatuation for Maria the Copt (pp. 93-96).

approaches to portraying sensitive topics: the caricatural subgenre, *la caricature de moeurs* (a caricature of mores), henceforth *CDM*, and the cultural mediation approach (Aboudrar and Mairesse, 2016). When discussing structural changes, such as BD media form with long narrative structures (sequential form), the thesis asks whether *LVM* could be included in the caricature subgenre *CDM*. According to the art historian Bertrand Tillier, *CDM* comments on evolving norms and behaviours rather than essentialising and stereotyping individuals. Tillier writes: "His [the cartoonist's] aim is to mock individual behaviours or collective customs. [...] The cartoonist dissects and mocks values and habits."<sup>10</sup> (Tillier, 2015, p. 33) Throughout the analysis, the authorial strategy is compared to a cultural mediation approach that purports to mitigate claims of harm emerging from the interpretation of the polysemic text and clarify both, the authors' intentions and the targets of the caricatural charge. *LVM* contains prefaces, postfaces, warnings, endnotes, and chronology, which constitute tools that contextualise the production and explain the content for both contemporary and future audiences. the research will evaluate whether the peritext, the combination of all multimodal elements encoded in the text, and the use of a humoristic register have the potential to prompt engagement with the content, lessen emotional reactions, and serve as a buffer between the narrative and its audience, and ultimately contribute to the current conversation on religious representations.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach, using two key frameworks. Firstly, it uses a paratextual analysis which draws on Gérard Genette's (1997) theory of peritext and epitext to analyse how *LVM*'s formal and contextual elements frame its narrative and clarify its intent. Secondly, it employs a multimodal discourse analysis based on Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's (1998, 2020) social semiotic methodology to decode the semiotic resources in *LVM*'s visual and textual elements.

As Gross and Latham (2017) write:

The concept of paratext was defined by Gérard Genette (1997) as common elements provided within a book (peritext) and elements outside of the book (epitext) that refer to the book and can affect individual, as well as cultural, perceptions of a text. Examples of peritextual

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<sup>10</sup> My translation. Original: "Son dessein est de railler les comportements individuels ou les coutumes collectives. [...] le caricaturiste dissèque et raille les valeurs et les habitus. "

elements include the foreword, table of contents, index, and source notes. Epitext refers to communications outside the book that can influence whether and how the text is read. Examples of epitext include book reviews, interviews, author websites and letters, and critical literary analysis. Genette's theory defines paratext as follows: Paratext = peritext + epitext (p. 5) (Table 1). (p. 116)

In the analysis, paratext is pivotal as peritext can give an insight into the creative process and epitext offers a view into the BD's perception. Paratext is relevant insofar as peritext and epitext disclose the authors' attempts at asserting control to lessen the interpretative conflicts, as detailed in *The Contextual and Formal Analysis of LVM* (Chapter 2), and show evidence of a mediated strategy between the sensitive content and the readers. In *LVM's* peritext, the context of its production and the authors' intentions are offered to a wide contemporary and future audience.

In addition, the adopted analytical method draws upon a multimodal approach to the text. Multimodality is a term widely discussed by linguists and semioticians, but also used in media studies, education, sociology, and psychology (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2018). Thus, a variety of disciplines and theoretical approaches can be applied to multimodality. The relevant approach to my research is the social semiotic application to multimodality which was taken up in the early 1980s in Australia by Gunther Kress and Bob Hodge, later joined by Theo Van Leeuwen (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2018, p. 8). These scholars were influenced by Michael Halliday's (*Language as Social Semiotic*, 1978) social semiotic theory of communication. The methodological framework was first described in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1998), where Kress and Van Leeuwen extended their focus beyond spoken or written language to include visual communication. They approached a multimodal text representing characters, symbols, settings, and more, like a story about the relation between those represented elements, their interactions with each other and/or with the reader, and whose whole meaning is revealed in a final composition of the text. They wrote:

Our 'grammar of visual' describes how depicted elements – people, places, and things – combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension. To generalize, we might say that if the traditional approach has focused on *depiction*, our focus is on *arrangement*, on *composition*. (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 1)

A multimodal text is any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code, that is, through images, written language, design elements, and other modes, plus their combinations. Multimodality helps establish what are the contributions of each resource to the construction of text.

The methodology involves breaking down the object of study into components and understanding how they work together to produce contextually constructed meaning (Flewitt et al., 2019). This multimodality approach is used in Chapter 3 to decode authorial viewpoints deliberately embedded in the visual and textual elements using semiotic resources, each offering distinct potentialities. The perception of this text by a wide audience is also considered. Thus, the multimodal analysis is used to make sense of the broad range of meanings ascribed to the text by its different readers.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, there are three dimensions or meanings to images. The first is the *representational* dimension: how elements are represented, who/what they are, and what they mean in the narrative. The second is the *interactive* dimension: how the different types of participants – characters, readers, and authors – are interacting within their category and with each other. The third is *compositional*: how all those dimensions work together on the image. In the analysis, I move across all dimensions, trying to work out the meaning of the text, including both the authors' intentionally encoded meaning in covers and the story, and the meaning not intended by the authors nonetheless perceptible to the audience.

The representational dimension shows that meaning is either encoded in a *narrative structure* that shows unfolding events (using vectors or gazes) or embedded in a *conceptual structure* that relates to represented symbolic attributes. The interactive dimension deals with the triangular relationship between a cultural product, its author, and its audience. It explores how individuals, objects, and places interact with one another and with all participants involved, such as readers and authors. The various relationships they established can be expressed through the choices of gaze, the size of the frame and positioning, and specific attitudes or perspectives: for example, a smiling face may demand the reader to enter into a relation of social affinity or the choice of framing such as close-ups serve to increase proximity between the reader and the character. The last dimension regarding the image composition consists of asking how all elements work together in the image to make meaning. It looks at the *information value* that is attributed to each visual effect. This is evidenced by the positioning of each element (for example, left and right, top and bottom, centre and periphery), the salience of each element (for example, graduation in sharpness, size, tone, or foregrounding), and the elements' framing.

A multimodal analysis which traverses through three dimensions of images as well as written words, media, and other design elements can pinpoint where, in *LVM*, the authors wrestle with ethical matters with legal consequences and where they made possible compromises when engaged in the representation of polarising issues for local and global audiences.

## Scope & limitations

This thesis's corpus includes the three issues of *LVM*: This focused corpus is justified by the presence of original material and formal features, such as various formats, BD form, and analytical tools in peritext. The thesis explores how the additions of those peritextual elements make an inroad into the BD genre and address issues of authorial intentionality to solve or lessen interpretative conflicts in the visual narrative. It also discusses the contribution of those formal elements to the legacy of the BD that tackles religious matters and the sacred.

While this research focuses on the authors as agents of innovation and their initiative to modify practices, both the production and the narrative remain open to multiple readings and can still be perceived in different ways by multiple members of the audience. Rather, the latter remain free to interpret the text beyond the creators' intended significance. Also, members of the text's audience who are averse to religious caricatures would avoid this type of religiously offensive production and form an opinion without accessing or perusing *LVM*. Nicolas Idier, historian and ex-director of the *Cité Internationale de la bande dessinée et de l'image (CIBDI)* draws on the work of the sociologist Stuart Hall to explain the three main types of behaviour of this latter kind of audience, namely rejection, partial acceptance, and full acceptance (Idier, 2020, p. 212). By refusing to engage with the BD, various agents (for example, believers in Islam, the media in Arabic and Islamic states, French media representing Muslim readers' viewpoints, religious and political representatives of Islamic states, and political commentators) may legitimately and predictably not engage with productions like *LVM*. But graphic satire has also gathered partial or complete appreciation for aficionados and informed readers. When readers consent to engage with *LVM*, can the combination of its formal elements and its factual approach represent the authors' earnest attempt at fostering comprehension of a polysemic narrative and lessening the impact of the satirical charge? By embedding historical contextualisation and key information into the BD, such as naming the caricatural targets, a mediated strategy is essential: it could affect the issue of intentionality, the perception of degradation, and humiliation emerging from the narrative and bridge the gap between the audience and the cultural production. My thesis seeks to show that *Charlie Hebdo's LVM* demonstrates an alternative way to use religious iconography in satire. Through the strategy, the BD gives immediate access to context and authors' intentions before embarking on the reading of a controversial text.

The next chapter examines the core and associated literature that situates this production at the intersection of BD and cartooning practices, which mainly relates to *Charlie Hebdo*, its history, ethos, ethics, and more. It includes controversies that engulfed this satirical magazine as they were catalysts

for trying new forms such as sequentiality and the addition of peritext, but also a foundational book that defines *CDM*, the abundant literature on single panels that have generated hostile reactions against the magazine, and finally the scarce scholarly articles that specifically commented on *LVM*.

# 1. Literature Review

This chapter situates this research within the broader literature concerning two fields that intersect with *LVM*, namely BD and caricature in editorial cartooning. It also argues for how *LVM* should be classified in relation to key subgenres of caricature. My approach to *LVM* extends beyond BD and caricature to explore a crossover, one under-researched caricatural subgenre: *caricature de moeurs* (*CDM*). As I argue in this chapter, while *LVM* shares the characteristics of *CDM*, such as the media form (that is, a sequential form), exaggerated features, social commentary, it also incorporates unique formal elements – preface, postface, endnotes, and other analytical documents. These additions function as devices purposefully employed by the authors to pre-emptively address and strategically engage potential critiques, particularly concerning *Charlie Hebdo's* history.

Existing scholarship on *Charlie Hebdo*, one of the longest standing<sup>11</sup> French satirical magazine focuses on its religious single-panelled cartoons and the context of their emergence, often overlooking *LVM*, which is generally, arguably placed in this category of “The Prophet’s Caricatures”. This label, however, obscures the unique contribution of this work to the discourse surrounding iconographic satire, which encompasses ethical, legal, social, religious, and political dimensions, all of which reflect the complex and often conflicting values at play in contemporary French society. The research gap is addressed here by exploring *LVM* within the context of critical discourses surrounding Islamophobia, ‘*Islamogauchisme*’ (Islam-leftism)<sup>12</sup>, the ethical and legal concept of harm, and blasphemy. Furthermore, the impact of globalisation on the reception of *Charlie Hebdo's* often divisive cartoons is considered in this overview of the literature. Lastly, I will review commentaries on *Charlie Hebdo's* single-panelled portraits and the limited literature available on *LVM* specifically. This existing literature has informed this study, but has overlooked the role of authors during the creation stage and their agency in developing tools to mitigate interpretative conflicts from a cultural mediation perspective.

## 1.1. *Bande Dessinée* and Comics studies

This research on religious representations in the francophone iconographic satire landscape belongs to the developing academic field of BD and comics studies. Libbie McQuillan (2005, p. 9), a scholar

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<sup>11</sup> *Charlie Hebdo* was established in November 1970. The other newspaper is the centenary *Canard Enchaîné*. *Siné Hebdo*, now *Siné Mensuel*, is relatively new, launched after the caricaturist Siné parted with *Charlie Hebdo* in 2008 over a controversy over his alleged antisemitism.

<sup>12</sup> Purportedly, the Left’s support for radical Islam, see 1.5.

specialising in francophone BD, notes that the widespread popularity of the BD medium in France and Belgium explains the early interest of francophone academia for BD in the early 1960s. Laurence Grove (2014, p. 84) echoes McQuillan's writing when discussing BD's legitimisation process in France.

Emerging from the mass print culture, this medium's textual and visual nature appealed to the novel field of cultural studies, interested in the phenomena of urban counterculture and popular culture. For Libbie McQuillan (2005, p. 11), BD opened itself to different areas of research in the Humanities departments; this hybrid (textual/visual) medium soon became relevant for peripheral areas such as art, literature, media, history, graphic design, and more. Besides being a message-conveying medium, BD is an artistic endeavour depicting stories ranging from fiction to biographies, memoirs, and education manuals. The anglophone literature on BD was helpful in clarifying the different pathways toward recognition taken by the BD and comics traditions in the francophone world and abroad. It offered comparisons and rationales behind the relative success of francophone BD tradition and anglophone comics tradition in their respective zones, noting the pivotal role played by state patronage in France (Grove, 2014, p. 84; McQuillan, 2005, p. 7). While it fell short of explaining the context in which this thesis on *LVM* is situated, it gave some insight into the difference in perception and reception between *Charlie's* production and the BD genre more generally. This difference was noticeable in the wake of the 2015 massacre, with French politicians and governmental officials joining the rallies and marking the state's full support for freedom of expression.

In the 1960s, linguistics, and semiotics research which focused on studying signs, symbols, and their interpretation – dominated the field of BD studies and sought to define the genre BD. Then, from the 1970s theorists and authors, like Thierry Groensteen (1999) and Benoît Peeters (2002), participated to the theorisation and definition of BD, and looked at BD's formal proprieties, such as its panels, speech bubbles, and gutters, as signs that needed decoding to reveal meaning. Semiotics is relevant to my analysis. In Chapter 2, a multimodal method (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) was used to interpret the meaning emerging from every element in images contained in covers and narratives; this literature was informative in retracing the lasting contribution of semiotics applied to BD and cartooning. While earlier scholars understood BD as unidimensional, more recent authors have noticed hybrid forms: the BD specialist Jane Weston Vauclair (2009, p. 109) talks of "hybridisations" between single-panelled editorial cartooning and BD that have coexisted in *Charlie Hebdo* production.

## 1.2. Sequential caricature and the Tillier's typology

Academic research into crossovers between BD and caricature is scarce. One of the foundational articles for this research that defines a caricatural BD was found in *La Caricature... et si c'était sérieux? Décryptage de la violence satirique* (Ory et al., 2015, p. 33), published shortly after the 2015 Paris terrorist attack at *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters. This whole book was a concerted effort by scholars to explain the genre at a tragic time in caricature history. One chapter of this book, "Une grammaire de la caricature", focuses on a typology directly applicable to *LVM*'s hybrid nature. In this chapter, the caricature specialist Bertrand Tillier (p. 33) breaks down different caricature subgenres pertaining to the francophone tradition. In addition to the subgenres of "*portrait-charge*" ("loaded portraits") and "*caricature de type*" ("stereotypes"), typically presented in single-panelled cartoons, one type of caricature stands out for its full-length BD media form: "*caricature de moeurs*" or "caricature of mores" henceforth *CDM*, which is distinctive for its long narrative sequences in a multi-panelled layouts<sup>13</sup>.

Besides the differences in form – that is, multi-panelled BD vs. single-panelled cartoons – the subgenres also vary in their function and targets: *CDM* aims to engage in contemporary debates rather than merely reporting on transient media events; *CDM* avoids negative stereotyping and its satirical charge is directed at societal issues, not individuals, through critiques of evolving behaviours and societal norms. Tillier does not offer examples of *CDM* in this chapter, but does mention several authors of the subgenre, notably René Pétillon and Cabu, among those who used *CDM*. It appears that Tillier has overlooked Charb and Zineb's *LVM*. This omission can be explained by the singular form found in *LVM* which has quirks that may confuse a systematic application of one framework. Paying attention to mixed forms and genres reveals new opportunities for explorations in the BD and the press fields. This subgenre keeps *LVM* anchored to the cartooning tradition to which the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine belongs. At the same time, *LVM* injects new perspectives into caricature practice in a climate characterised by precaution among professionals, in particular among *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff already under police protection in 2013. The following scholarship on *Charlie Hebdo*'s single-panelled cartoons, grouped together by the press as "The Prophet Caricatures", helps to elicit *LVM*'s context of creation, as this BD engages in similar contentious religious representations and *LVM*'s reception may have been affected by its association with "The Prophet Caricatures".

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<sup>13</sup> Note, there are different layouts: single strips, full page, or BD length.

### 1.3. Literature on *Charlie Hebdo*

Existing literature on *Charlie Hebdo* explores the magazine's milestones which bridged two centuries and spanned over six decades. Jane Weston Vauclair (2009), a historian of French culture who has dedicated most of her research to *Charlie Hebdo*, notes the specific "cross-fertilisation" (p. 115) of elements of BD and traditional cartooning. Her later article (Weston Vauclair, 2015, p. 8) elaborates on recent tensions emerging from globalisation and the different ethics that have guided the whole practice of editorial cartooning. Further, her book with co-author David Vauclair (2016) written after the 2015 shooting, tries to explain what *Charlie Hebdo* represented at different points in time in the French satirical landscape, describes the attack and its context, but also touches upon local and global debates, and the different meanings the magazine has acquired since the attack for people among and beyond the local audience. The scholar Yasco Horsman (2020) looks at the place that *Charlie Hebdo* occupies in the French tradition of cartooning and the specific type of humour used in its cartoons. Its historiographic information is also found in Philippe Val's book (2016), where he defends his legacy as editor-in-chief from 1992 to 2009. Such descriptive details are also present in journalist and former *Charlie Hebdo* contributor Caroline Fourest's book (2015). Fourest delves into debates related to freedom of expression and argues for the defence of the right to blaspheme in a secularised society like France. The sociologist and historian Christine Fauré (2016, p. 96) compares *Charlie Hebdo's* content since 1992 with its progenitor *Hara Kiri*<sup>14</sup>, and notes that its earlier version of the magazine hardly featured religious caricatures.

More critical writings of *Charlie Hebdo* also contain information on the different editorial lines taken over the years. Imen Neffati (2021), a historian of modern France and the francophone world, who researched histories of religions and laicity, is critical of Philippe Val's editorship. According to her, under his tenure, *Charlie Hebdo* was biased when reporting on affairs related to Islam. The historian and political activist, Manus McGrogan (2016) also insists on *Charlie's* lasting spirit of provocation using the magazine's mediatic cartoons recurrently featuring religious themes. For Weston Vauclair and Vauclair (2016, p. 111), *Charlie Hebdo's* endurance is evidence of its adaptability to renewed audiences where other satirical newspapers failed and disappeared. The authors remark that the golden age of this form of satire peaked at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the introduction of 1881 legislation guaranteeing freedom of expression and the press, with the popularity of the medium then slowly declining after 1918. They counted 114 anticlerical satirical magazines before WWI (p. 213). This

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<sup>14</sup> The satirical magazine *Hari Kiri* was censored and forced to shut in 1970 after ministerial decision. Most of its editorial team formed the new *Charlie Hebdo*.

informative literature was helpful in grasping the historical importance of this magazine and the indefectible attachment shown by aficionados.

*Charlie Hebdo's* ethos and politics have also been subject of critical inquiry (Weston Vaclair, 2009; 2015; Weston Vaclair and Vaclair, 2016; Horsman, 2020). The early editorial focus was on local events and characterised by the anti-authoritarian and irreverent *bête et méchant* sense of humour, which is a raw type of humour that laughs at everything and for which nothing is sacred. A shift in editorial line became apparent in 1992 with Val's takeover (Weston Vaclair, 2009), and since then *Charlie Hebdo* has directed its attention towards environmental issues and local and international politics. According to Weston Vaclair, Val's editorials reflected his concern over the rise of political Islam post-9/11 and the defence of laicity, and freedom of expression and the press. Nonetheless, the magazine has maintained space for humour and satire when commenting on and interpreting current events in its caricatures. This informative literature is woven into the analysis when discussing the context and process of creation. The thesis contends that the choice of a BD form for *LVM* and the addition of peritextual additions are later signs of the further evolution of the satirical magazine in adaptation to a new context. This literature works towards a better understanding of the evolution of *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial line and of the diversity of viewpoints that existed within the authorial team.

Scholars and authors have also discussed the difference in the ethical guidance of cartooning practice using the philosopher Max Weber's distinction between "ethics of convictions", where caricaturists' choices are informed by their political convictions, and "ethics of responsibility", where caricaturists' choices are guided by the possible consequences of their actions (Weston Vaclair, 2015, p. 9). Weston Vaclair argues that, since the 2015 shooting, there exists a tension between those two types of ethics in the profession. Nonetheless, she asserts that *Charlie Hebdo* continued with "its conviction-based adherence to the values of secular freedom and critiquing all religion without exception" (Weston Vaclair, 2015, p. 13). The media scholar Anne Seurrat (2016, p. 84) analyses the media coverage of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as reported by both the francophone and the anglophone press. She observes differences in newspapers' editorial positions regarding the decision to republish the Danish caricatures<sup>15</sup> of the Prophet in 2006. These choices highlighted the specificities in media ethics but also revealed the diversity of voices within editorial teams. Seurrat claims that neither ethical approach (whereby a practice is guided either by convictions or responsibility) is inherently immoral nor wrong but should be the result of open and free deliberations bound to the place the particular media holds

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<sup>15</sup> Twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet were published in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. This newspaper had commissioned these caricatures as part of an article on freedom of expression and self-censorship.

in its specific mediatic discourse. Thus, an editorial line would also be dependent on the secularisation of a particular society.

The French author Philippe Quinton (2006) questions whether responsible caricature can exist and whether a space for satire is threatened. He believes that a cartoonist's drawing is mostly the result of a balancing act between morality, professional ethics, and what the law permits, and suggests that the consideration of legality has gained prevalence since cartoonists and editors have faced the risks of lawsuits, censorship, and dismissal. Quinton's article, written in 2006, did not consider that fear needs to be factored into the balancing act of today's practices. The climate of uncertainty may have explained the decision to insert warnings into LVM's peritext. He also omits the growing power of opinion on caricature and editorial cartooning.

### Figure 01

Example of Charb's aesthetic register: "L'invention de l'humour", *Charlie Hebdo* cover, no 1058, 2012/09/26.



Note. According to the above cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, which styles itself as a "Journal irresponsible" (an "Irresponsible Newspaper"), humour was invented when pouring oil on fire (from the French expression, "jeter de l'huile sur le feu" for gaslighting).

The above cover (**Figure 01**) illustrates the space occupied by *Charlie Hebdo* in the iconographic satire landscape, and its constant attempt to push the boundaries of what is legally allowed in matters of freedom of expression. On the point of ethics or legality, *Charlie Hebdo* at least considered the legal consequences of its productions, despite its professed irresponsibility and reliance on its political convictions in its practice. Richard Malka has been *Charlie Hebdo's* legal advisor since 1992 (Sadoul, 2013, p. 95, citing *Charlie Hebdo's* caricaturist Luz). The ex-chief editor, Philippe Val (2015, p. 114) describes Malka as their “lawyer, counsel, mediator, buffer, diplomat, friend, in a nutshell, *Charlie's* essential transmission belt”. Indeed, the editorial team sought legal advice for potentially contentious cartoons<sup>16</sup> and its production has always remained within the boundaries of the law. The thesis shows that *LVM's* formal additions are evidence of attention to reception, but also to the legal framework that governs expressions such as caricature.

Scholarly and related literature on *Charlie Hebdo's* 2015 massacre often compares the violent physical act to an attack on freedom of expression and the free press. For example, for the historian Pascal Ory (2015, p. 16), the attack is a historical milestone intended to destroy a satirical newspaper in a modern democracy: “[T]he terrorists’ deed was clearly to ‘kill *Charlie Hebdo*’<sup>17</sup>; the same words were uttered by the terrorists who said they had killed *Charlie*. However, the French philosopher Monique Canto-Sperber (2021, p. 273) states that the caricaturists did not seek to be seen as martyrs of the freedom of expression or of the right to blaspheme but were rather the victims of a religion hijacked by violent ideologues. It is important to note that *Charlie Hebdo* was not the only French newspaper to publish “the Prophet Caricatures”: the mainstream daily *France Soir* also did so but was never targeted. Commentators, including the legal scholar Andras Koltay (2017, p. 224), have compared the massacre to an attempt at eradicating the European culture. Horsman (2020, p. 171) reports the words of Luz, a caricaturist who survived the shooting: “A huge symbolic weight, *that does not exist in our cartoons*<sup>18</sup> and is somewhat beyond us, has been put on our shoulders”. The team always fought against symbols and did not want to become one. Philippe Val (2015, p. 202) talks of a symbolic attack on liberty but reminds us that the Jewish community was also targeted in the following days. The 2015 Paris attack, which lasted three days and had multiple targets, is not merely symbolic for defenders of freedom of expression and the press, it has different meanings for a broad public impacted by the event.

The post-attack hashtag *#Charlie* that spread via social media, notably Twitter, highlights the ambivalence following the 2015 Paris attack. Critics and scholars (Lentin, 2018; Horsman, 2020, p. 168; Kauffmann, 2015/01/10) note mixed support for the magazine despite a widespread condemnation of

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<sup>16</sup> See Leconte and Leconte (2015, *TIMESTAMP*) and Sadoul (2014, p. 46).

<sup>17</sup> My translation. Original: " [L]e geste des terroristes était bien de « tuer *Charlie Hebdo* ». "

<sup>18</sup> Original italicisation.

violence. The slogan was presented as a symbol of freedom of expression and the press. Weston Vauclair and David Vauclair (2016, p. 13) tried to explain this motto as polysemic: originally meant as a sign of solidarity with the victims and/or the values they upheld, it came to signify being part of the grieving process. However, other voices (for example, Todd, 2015; see below critiques) emerged domestically and globally questioning the limits of fundamental liberties, including the right to blasphemy and the right to laugh at everything. It also ignited debates on the place of laicity and Islam in contemporary France. The scholarship's work, especially Weston Vauclair's, analysing *Charlie* as a symbol of liberty and the virality of the hashtag was valuable to this thesis because it often contained relevant details about events leading up to January 2015 and the evolving values and concerns that had already surfaced at the time of *LVM*'s release in 2013. This contextual literature provided insights into how audiences' perceptions evolved over time. This literature helped explain or justify the decision to use a BD media form and implement creative changes, such as the insertion of formal elements introduced in *LVM*. For example, the prefaces clearly outline this BD's objectives to a public averse to religious caricature, which may positively affect reception and mitigate interpretative conflicts.

#### 1.4. The harm principle and conditions of reception

This thesis on a caricatural BD that explores the controversial theme of the Prophet's representation intersects with broader issues of fundamental freedoms; and touches upon the French legal framework that governs and limits freedom of expression. These limits placed on freedom of expression by the French legal framework implicitly acknowledge the potential harm that expression can cause to audiences. The foundational text for freedom of expression is found in Article 11 of the 1789 *Declaration of Man and the Citizen* and the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which still provides guarantees to the practice of caricature as a form of expression. The ethical principle of harm has underpinned both the guarantees afforded to the genre and the legislation that strictly limits BD and cartooning. This limiting principle is enshrined in Article 4 of the 1789 *Declaration* and provides that "liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others". For example, the 1972 *Pleven* law provides circumstances where the state can limit freedom of expression and the press, typically when the expression/caricature incites violence on a person or a group, or discrimination on the basis of religion or other grounds.

Some related legal articles that formed part of the Literature Review provided essential information on the legal French, European, and North American contexts and the way the respective countries

understand fundamental liberties; those articles also gave working definitions of otherwise obscure legalese used in analysing the impact of caricatural images. In particular, the freedom of expression (Ramond, 2011), the guiding principle of harm (Girard, 2016; Harcourt, 1999; 2015), the comparison between French and North American legal traditions' approaches to freedom of expression (Girard, 2016), and the limits imposed by the legislation. Another example of a limit is the 1990 *Gayssot* law which makes it an offence to question or contest crimes against humanity, now extended to the crime of genocide (Gariban, 2006). Other writings (Viennot, 2014; 2015; Gil, 2017) provided the analysis with some insight into caselaw related to religious matters, notably the findings and their judicial reasoning of the *Charlie Hebdo* lawsuits.

The issue of what constitutes "harm to others" has long occupied scholars and authors interested in the relation between fundamental liberties and reception (for example, Ramond, 2013; Girard, 2016; Harcourt, 1999; 2015). Some enquire whether symbolic harm equates to actual harm and violence (Abouddrar, 2021, p. 179; Trench, 2016), while others highlight the absence of consensus on this matter (Canto-Sperber, 2021, p. 229; Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016) or question the legitimacy of self-attested harm (Trench, 2016; Winston, 2012). The argument of the thesis is about reestablishing some balance in the author-audience relationship when looking at the authorial strategy to mitigate claims of harm emerging from representations of Islam in the BD. The growing power of audiences has been a catalyst for change in diversifying caricatural practice in evolving conditions of reception. This new context of creation forces the authors to rethink the way they used semiotic resources (e.g., symbolism, framing, foregrounding, colour, etc.) in their cartooning practice to assert control over readers' perceptions.

The attention to evolving conditions of reception is evident throughout the analysis. Canto-Sperber (2021, p. 235) acknowledges the recent radical transformations that have been framing public discourse on fundamental liberties. Among others, she cites the role played by digital tools and the increasingly multicultural nature of modern societies (p. 284). Regarding exposure to harm and the audience's agency in the spectator-artist relationship, Canto-Sperber remarks that the role of spectators' fantasies is always overlooked, leaving the artist to bear the presumption of guilt (p. 235). She argues that greater access to the internet and social media reveals the ambiguities of freedom of expression: once an ideal to which liberal societies aspired, it now promotes and justifies an aggressive use of speech (p.284).

This issue of the democratisation of speech and harm is relevant to this BD. Before its publication, literary critics and journalists critiqued *LVM* in an attempt to censor the BD. Literary critics for *Safirnews.com* – a French digital newspaper that comments on French and international affairs from

an Arab-Muslim perspective – as well as the Catholic daily newspaper *La Croix* announced *LVM*'s upcoming release and criticised its topic before the BD entered the public domain. When reporting on *LVM*'s publication, those media outlets acted in their legitimate role. However, due to the digital journalistic landscape, it was not only literary critics and journalists who had the capacity to comment on *LVM*. The readers' comments space was problematic in *Safirnews.com*'s article dated 2013/01/02. It showed a contribution attributed to "Juvenal" who denounced a Twitter conversation in Arabic (2013/01/02) that spelled out the "jihadists' suggestions of reprisal" against *LVM*'s authors. "Juvenal" denounced the ill-use of Twitter's comments space for inciting violence. At the same time, *Safirnews.com* acted as an echo chamber as the commentary repeated the list of five suggestions of reprisals, including terrorist attacks on civilians in France and against French expatriates abroad, following the announcement of *LVM*'s release. The epitext, that is, here literary critiques and readers' reviews have been useful throughout the thesis to sense the perception of this topic on religious iconography irrespective of access to the text itself. It helped map out the authors' possible reasoning for varying practices.

*Charlie Hebdo*'s satirical treatment of international events had a viral potential amplified by new technologies. Literature mentioning the new conditions of reception of single-panelled caricature (Duprat and Bihl, 2015, p. 233; Fauré, 2016, p. 94; Quinton, 2006, p. 3) used concepts of globalisation and hyper-mediatisation, which are relied upon in discussions about the international reach of *Charlie Hebdo*'s production. According to Weston Vauclair (2015), besides tensions between the two types of ethics (explored in 1.3.), there also exist tensions between the local and the global reach of *Charlie*'s productions, that is, tensions that emerged from the participation of a French satirical magazine in international politics and debates since 1992. These commentaries supported existing articles' arguments on the changing nature of the conditions of reception and the impact of the internet but did not describe the contributions of BD sequential form and paper-based format in the dissemination process. The thesis' analysis examines the deliberate choice of sequentiality and *LVM* materiality to disrupt circulation dynamics in the present conditions of reception, as the offensive features are embedded and hidden in a long BD, and the covers lack viral elements. This literature showed the link that exists between form, format, and audience's perception, and highlighted the importance of innovation in the practice of caricature.

## 1.5. *Islamogauchisme* and Islamophobia

Charb had a complex relationship with the discourses of *Islamogauchisme* (Islamogauchisme) (Islamogauchisme) and “Islamophobia”, both of which had important impacts on the reception of *LVM*. *Islamogauchisme* (or Islamogauchisme) is a controversial term used in French discourse to describe an alleged alliance between the political left and Islamist ideologies. Whereas Islamophobia refers to prejudice, discrimination, or hostility toward Islam or Muslims, often expressed through stereotypes, exclusion, or policies. Those key concepts intersect in the *Charlie Hebdo* debates, in relation to Charb, who was called *Islamogauchiste* by his editor-in-chief, Philippe Val (internally), but perceived as Islamophobic by part of the audience (externally) for his fierce critique of religious dogma. Charb had been alternatively called an *Islamogauchiste* for allegedly supporting the Palestinian cause (Marlière, 2023, p. 238; Val, 2016, p. 136), and later his production was qualified Islamophobic. In France, both concepts are inscribed in a politically charged society trying to reconcile the defence of secularism with respect for minority groups’ values.

The term *Islamogauchisme* has acquired different connotations over time. According to the sociologist, Pierre-André Taguieff, who coined the term in 2002, “Islamogauchisme” is applied by individuals to the supposed political alliance between far-leftists in the French political spectrum and radical Islam in the name of the Palestinian cause (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2023, p. 253). For the professor of French and European politics, Philippe Marlière (2023), this neologism has three functions: it stirs Islamophobic sentiment, it warns about a so-called threat coming from academia, and it feeds distrust towards intellectuals and conspiracy theories. For the historian of nationalism and race, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2023), the discourse of *Islamogauchisme* sits within a deeper history of racialised conspiracy thinking (p. 250). For Zia-Ebrahimi, its purpose is twofold: it first silences criticism of systemic racism by attributing it to an inner enemy; second, it benefits Israel’s interest and international standing by undermining the Palestinian cause through the branding of young Muslims as antisemitic.

Yet, the term’s early occurrence around the year 2000 needs to be distinguished from its later re-emergence in 2020-2021. In the early 2000s, the term used in association with *Charlie Hebdo* reflected internal divisions that had existed within *Charlie Hebdo*’s editorial team well before *LVM* publication, and has an informative relevance for the analysis of this BD. Marlière (2020) writes that *Charlie Hebdo*’s chief editor Philippe Val used it in his editorials as a trope against the left side of the political spectrum,

and against Charb *in particular*, for his support of the Palestinian cause and his anti-militarism notably at the time of the war in former Yugoslavia<sup>19</sup>.

Whereas the most recent occurrence of the “*islamo-gauchisme*” trope arises from a different political context, related to Samuel Paty’s beheading in October 2020 (Dawes, 2023, p. 228). The murder of this public-school ethics teacher who used caricatures to discuss freedom of the press in his lessons has become to signify an attack on French institutions, here, education and its curriculum, rather than an attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and freedom of expression. This literature is outside the scope of this thesis as only its first occurrence of the term *Islamo-gauchisme* is relevant to my analysis of *LVM*.

In contrast, the concept of Islamophobia features in my analysis as it relates to the reception of *Charlie Hebdo*’s production. The literature discussed below only considered single-panelled caricatures depicting religious themes. *LVM*’s formal aspects, especially the adoption of a sequential form and the additions of abundant peritext, are a response to accusations of Islamophobia. The insertion of BD’s formal elements seeks to clarify authorial intentions, and the targets of the satirical charge could help to dispel claims of anti-Muslim sentiment made against the authors and the magazine. Charb (2015) and Zineb El Rhazoui (2016) addressed recurring accusations of Islamophobia in their respective essays.

There is no clear consensus on the definition of Islamophobia in francophone and anglophone critical discourse. For Simon Dawes (2021, p. 181), a scholar in media theory, the term Islamophobia “captures the othering, suspicion, problematisation and discrimination of an identity ascribed to certain types of people by virtue of a religion they may or may not follow.” As a buzzword, it is used indiscriminately against left-wing secularists defending laicity and right-wing xenophobic identitarians, says Brian Trench (2016, p. 186), a media and communication scholar. For the French scholar Raphael Liogier<sup>20</sup> (in Liogier and Seniger, 2015, p. 150), the sociological and generic definition (p. 151) is used to qualify the rejection of a national group based on characteristics linked to their real or supposed belonging to Islam. For Liogier, Islamophobia as a critical concept used by social sciences to describe daily manifestations has been hijacked by the politico-mediatic field discourse.

Islamophobia is understood as anti-Muslim racism, but assessing racism is fraught with pitfalls as it depends on context, intention, victim’s perception, and sensitivities rather than objective appreciation of reality (Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016, p. 70). This accusation was used against *Charlie Hebdo* to muffle attempts at questioning religious extremism and Islamist violence (El Rhazoui, 2016, p. 20). This claim stems from the pro-Israel stance of chief editor Philippe Val, whose polemic editorials siding

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<sup>19</sup> This is confirmed by the interested parties (Val, 2016, p. 86; Charb’ interview in Sadoul, 2014, p. 52).

<sup>20</sup> Here interviewed by H. Seniger.

with Israel since 1992, left *Charlie's* team and the public divided (Neffati, 2021, p. 282)<sup>21</sup>. Val was mainly concerned about possible lawsuits for alleged antisemitism (Cabu's interview in Sadoul, 2014, p. 12). According to Weston Vauclair and Vauclair (2016, p. 69), most French people have never considered the magazine racist, but readers resented the magazine's perceived drift to the right "with racist tendencies" under Val's stewardship. In *Les dessins de la colère* (2021, p. 88), the art historian Bruno Nassim Aboudrar writes that *Charlie Hebdo's* caricaturists may not be qualified racists (as it would be defamatory, he adds), but the audiences' perception of their production may escape their initial intention, producing polarising effects such as the othering of Muslims within France.

My thesis seeks to demonstrate that Charb and Zineb have used a mediated approach that clarifies their intentions and names their target. In a concerted scholarly article published after the 2015 Paris attack, Hietalahti et al. (2016) argue that free speech should be understood as a social freedom rather than an absolute right to say anything. Since humorous stereotypes bear the risk of essentialising and ultimately othering an ethnic or religious minority, the authors call for a "socially mediated self-realisation of [cartoonists'] art" (Hietalahti et al., 2016, p. 251) that clearly discloses intentions. Hietalahti et al. do not make any difference between *LVM* and other cartoons featuring religious themes.

Other critics overlook the singularity of *LVM* and its attempt at mitigating the interpretative conflicts. Alana Lentin, an Australian scholar working on the critical theorisation of race, racism, and anti-racism, examines the international reaction to the 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, especially in the form of *#JeSuisCharlie*. She underscores the mixed support for the magazine, a point allegedly omitted by the French scholarship and its colour-blind approach to the reaction. Colour-blindness or race-blindness refers to France's official policy that rejects racial and ethnic distinctions, whereby citizens are all individuals equal under the law rather than members of racial, ethnic, or religious groups. She writes that this blind spot used in academic arguments in the French context leaves out the contemporary challenges to the principle of laicity and to the universality of free speech, tensions that intersect with the debates surrounding *Charlie Hebdo*. (Lentin, 2018, p. 50). She argues that "to declare *Charlie Hebdo* opposed to racism does not negate the racist nature of many of its cartoons" (p. 60). For this scholar, the performative effect of the images and the audience perception prevails over the authorial intention (p. 60). The issue related to the use of racist imagery in caricature is relevant to my multimodal analysis.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on Val's bias, see (Val, 2015, p. 126; Charb in Sadoul, 2014, p. 52; Horsman, 2020, p. 173).

The thesis stresses the distinction between using racist material as a sign of adherence to racist ideas and denouncing racism using the same satirical repertoire<sup>22</sup>. Also note that, in *LVM* the charge is directed at a literal reading of ancient texts (as promoted by ideologues), rather than a represented character or the Prophet. Lentin touches upon the use of racist imagery to denounce racism (p. 60), positioning it as a (white) privilege: “However, the use of racism to negate racism can only be a strategy of those for whom racist caricature has no personal purchase” (p. 60). When analysing *Charlie Hebdo’s* caricatures, Lentin fails to address the compliance of the magazine production with the French legislative constraints on freedom of expression and the press (1972 *Pleven* and 1990 *Gayssot*) since freedom is not absolute in France. The single-panelled caricatures discussed by Lentin are, in fact, inscribed in a local or global discussion, whose context is provided in editorials. Further, I argue that *LVM’s* caricatural charge is not directed at a group or even the Prophet, but at a growing appetite for literal reading of sacred texts. Scholar in humour studies, Jessica Milner Davis (2024, p. 36) and Jeanne Favret-Saada (2016, p. 41), an anthropologist who discussed religious polemics, acknowledge that the performativity of racist images is difficult to ascertain as we lack metrics to fully grasp both the effect of images on exposed audiences and the circumstances of such exposure, being deliberate, provoked, or accidental. It is equally difficult to assess recipients’ existing preconceptions of targeted groups when assessing the performativity of any images and the causal link between a racist image and the incitation of violence or discrimination against a group. The thesis examines the formal additions to *LVM* as a deliberate strategy used by the authors to mitigate potential negative perceptions from the audiences.

Among French critics, Olivier Cyran is the most notable figure who questioned the nature of *Charlie Hebdo’s* production, giving weight to the detractors’ claim of fostering social tension. Cyran’s article, published the same year as *LVM* (*Article 11*, 2013/12/5), reads as a settling of scores among ex-colleagues, rather than a convincing piece on the Islamophobic sentiment harboured by *Charlie Hebdo*. An ex-*Charlie Hebdo* contributor, he contends that the magazine has had a growing obsession with Islam since the 9/11 terrorist attack and now punches down at a minority group devoid of political influence.

Regarding the claim of Islamophobia made against *Charlie Hebdo*, both critics and defenders of *Charlie Hebdo* agree that it is inappropriate to label resistance to religious fanaticism as racism or hatred towards a particular group. The president of the French anti-racist association *SOS Racisme*,

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<sup>22</sup> This use of racist repertoire is examined in the case of stand-up comedians by a French legal scholar Thomas Hochmann (2018, p. 44).

Dominique Sopo, spelled out *Charlie's* numerous battles during national identity debates against the stigmatisation of Muslims and non-documented migrants and in favour of the right to vote for foreigners (in *Le Monde*, 2012/09/25). Caroline Fourest, a former journalist at *Charlie Hebdo*, argues that Muslim radicals deliberately misused the term Islamophobic to qualify the magazine as a way to muffle all critique of Islam, its dogma, and excesses (Fourest, 2015, p. 102). Their point is aligned with the French legislation that distinguishes attacks on religion, its institutions, and prophets, from an attack on a religious person. To borrow the words of the science communication, Brian Trench: “[...] accusations of Islamophobia, [is] a charge so wide that it is almost impossible to answer” (2016, p. 186). With *LVM*, Charb and Zineb addressed this claim in an unexpected manner as it represents (proto-)Muslim characters as actors at a specific time (7<sup>th</sup> century), in a specific geography (the Arabic peninsula), and among their human groupings; they are not ‘others’ in a particular setting.

## 1.6. Blasphemy

Besides being perceived as Islamophobic or racist, *Charlie Hebdo's* production depicting representations of Islam and its representatives were also deemed blasphemous. *LVM* is no exception and is often included in the generic “The Prophet’s Caricatures” which are said to transgress a religious prohibition of images of God and the Prophet Muhammad. The analysis shows how *Charlie Hebdo's* authors approach the Prophet’s depictions, justifying their decision using French law, the absence of an expressed ban in the Qur’an, and the existence of Muhammad’s representations in Shia and Ottoman artistic traditions for adorning manuscripts.

Blasphemy means causing an “affront to what is held sacred” (Cumper, 2017, p. 137). The legal scholar Andras Koltay (2017, p. 228) discusses the early English legal definition that provided protection against blasphemy only for Christianity. A blasphemous expression is now understood as being one that defames or insults a religion (its dogmas, figures, and representatives) and offends or insults its followers. The legal author Camille Viennot (2014, p. 55), offers a historical overview of blasphemy laws. Criticised by the Enlightenment philosophers, such laws were first abandoned during the 1789 French Revolution, partly reintroduced during the Restoration, abrogated in 1840, and discarded as an offence by legislators when drafting the limits of the 1881 law on freedom of the press (29 July 1881). Viennot’s article shows that the implementation of blasphemy laws was fraught with obstacles, and its universality is still discussed today.

Debates over *Charlie Hebdo's* religious caricatures intersect with discussions about special protection that should be granted to religions and restrictions needed on the right to blasphemy. Koltay (2017, p.

230) examines diverging views on whether religious convictions, which are not innate or beyond human control, should be treated differently, as they can be seen as matters of choice. The legal author Neville Cox (2017, p. 69) looks at the argument that suggests a link between religions and race: he first distinguishes defamation-of-religion law from legislation against hate speech. He emphasizes that hate speech targets individuals based on immutable characteristics, such as gender, nationality, skin colour, and sexual orientation. The comparison with hate speech may be legitimate for most Muslims whose religion is the primary point of self-identification and the source of discrimination in Western societies. On the issue of granting special protection to religions and reintroducing the crime of blasphemy, one could argue that conflict resolution mechanisms already exist in France. On the one hand, the existing legislation and the religious caricature caselaw are evidence that courts are operating, although slowly. On the other hand, the 'opinion tribunal' (Canto-Sperber, 2020, p. 278) has forced the cartooning profession to vary its practice and pushed for self-censorship.

The free speech researcher Guilhem Gil (2017) considers the claim that France should grant special protection to religious beliefs. His analysis provides a key framework for understanding the French legal stance. For him, this issue was finally settled by the 1881 law on freedom of expression and the press which abolished offenses against religious morality (Gil, 2017, p. 25). This point is confirmed by the 1905 laicity law, inscribed into the French Constitution in 1958. Laicity became the fourth pillar of republican values, a secular 'sacred'. The law states that laicity is the freedom to believe and not believe in a god. For Gil, the 2007 *Charlie Hebdo* case, i.e., the Caricature trial findings, gives the general principles that govern relations between freedom of expression and religion.

[I]n France, which is a secular and pluralistic society, the respect of all beliefs goes hand in hand with the freedom to criticize every religion, [...]. Blasphemy, which offends a divinity or a religion, is not a punishable offence, unlike insults which target an individual or a group of individuals because of their religious affiliation. (2017, p. 41)

The limits to freedom of expression are set by the 1881 law (namely insult, defamation, and hate speech) and further framed by the 1972 *Pleven* and 1990 *Gayssot* laws. No protection is afforded to religions, their figures, and dogmas. But "blasphemy cases" found their way into secularised societies like France and into Western countries' media with the 1989 Rushdie affair and subsequent cases like Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, agrees a wide scholarship<sup>23</sup>. In Eastern countries, the less-

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<sup>23</sup> See, Cumper (2017, p. 139); Koltay (2017, p. 223); Favet-Saada (2016, p. 33); Gonzalez and Kaufmann (2016, p. 47); Fourest (2015, p. 110); Trench (2016, p. 188); Winston (2012, p. 3); Fauré (2016, p. 95).

known cases (including the cases of Mustafa Akkad<sup>24</sup>, Naguib Mahfouz<sup>25</sup>'s cases, and more<sup>26</sup>) are also associated with acts of extreme violence. For Koltay, (2017, p. 224), the tragic death of *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturists who died for exercising a right to speech may have paved the way for a “new approach” and debates on the possible limitations of the right to blasphemy in democratic societies, that includes considerations of the role of an increasing migrant population and the cohabitation of different cultures.

Since blasphemy is not a crime, another terminology has been used to silence cartoonists, as remarked by Charb (2015, p. 17) and Zineb (El Rhazoui, 2016, p. 16). The critical discourse surrounding blasphemy, in the context of freedom of speech and the press, now intersects with discourse of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism as legal constructs to gain legal traction. The legal scholar Camille Viennot (2015, p. XI) decodes how French courts have adjudicated *Charlie Hebdo* publication over time and their flexible approach towards iconographic satire. She notes (2014, p. 56) that another terminology made its way into the caselaw since the 1980s; in order to circumvent the absence of blasphemy offences, aggrieved parties use the ground of “*atteintes aux croyances, symboles, et rites religieux*” (“attack on religious beliefs, symbols, and rites”). Although *Charlie Hebdo* was not sued on the ground of “attack on religious beliefs” for *LVM*, it was nonetheless generally labelled as part of “The Prophet Caricatures”, and the blasphemy discourse was applied to it by critics across the Arabo-Muslim media.

## 1.7. Literature on *Charlie Hebdo*'s single-panelled portraits

Analyses of *Charlie Hebdo*'s single-panelled religious cartoons<sup>27</sup> that illustrate local and international events abound in French and English francophone literature (see below). Those mediatic cartoons were meant for public interest debates and tested the threshold of social tolerance for religious caricatures over time. This review focuses on a much-discussed series of loaded portraits. The comparison between the audience's reception of these cartoons and the reception of *LVM* offers

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<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Akkad, a Syrian American film director was killed in Jordan in 2005, for his 1977 movie's *Al-Risala* or *The Message, Mohammad, Messenger of God* which recounts the life of Muhammad and the early days of Islamic history (Gruber and Shalem, 2014, p. 3; Avon, 2020, p. 107; Naef, 2014, p. 97).

<sup>25</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, an Egyptian author was stabbed in Cairo in 2004. The *Satanic Verses* publication revived the controversy surrounding his allegorical portrayal of God and the Abrahamic faiths in *The Children of the Alley*.

<sup>26</sup> Zineb (2016, p. 60) cites names of victims of apostasy who were either killed or hiding.

<sup>27</sup> Notably Cabu's caricatural portrait of the Prophet on trial in the Caricature Affair and Luz's portrait used in the 2011 controversy and alibi for the firebombing of the headquarters.

important insights into *LVM*'s formal aspects, such as its structure, the clarifying benefits of its peritext, and their effect on circulation dynamics.

*Charlie Hebdo* began depicting the Prophet in single-panelled cartoons before the Caricature Affair<sup>28</sup>. Articles by the BD author Numa Sadoul (2014, p. 24) and the media scholar Manus McGrogan (2016, p. 182) discuss one of the first drawings by *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturist Cabu, which was created in response to a tragic incident involving local Islamists at a beauty contest in Nigeria in 2002 which resulted in numerous deaths. In this image, Cabu's grinning Prophet faced a podium of veiled women likened to sacks of spuds. From the backlash, Cabu became aware of the religious and cultural ban on the Prophet's representation (Sadoul, 2014, p. 24). At the time of the enactment of the 2004 law on banning conspicuous religious signs<sup>29</sup>, polemics linked to depictions of Islam reached new heights, and the difficult application of the law turned out to be a fruitful source of inspiration for cartoonists and caricaturists.

The most investigated and commented<sup>30</sup> cartoons are related to the 2006 Caricature Affair and the global disputes that peaked when a collective of Muslim organisations<sup>31</sup> unsuccessfully sued *Charlie Hebdo*. This occurred after a special issue of *Charlie Hebdo* was dedicated to the reprinting of "The Prophet's Caricatures", previously published in the liberal Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. *Charlie Hebdo* (and other traditional dailies) intended to demonstrate their support for free speech by republishing the Danish caricatures with an additional drawing by Cabu appearing on the issue's cover page. Besides this most (in)famous portrait, literature<sup>32</sup> on post-Caricature-Affair cartoons situated the cartoons in their context of creation demonstrating some elements of comparison about the reception of BD vs. cartoons. However, this literature did not consider the disruptive effects that a BD's structural form could have on its dissemination and its viral potential.

Other mediatic cartoons, meant for public interest debates, followed. In 2011, the front page of the special issue "*Charia Hebdo*" (by cartoonist Luz) meant to illustrate the progress of Islamist parties in

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<sup>28</sup> See the following paragraph for more details. It refers to *Charlie Hebdo*'s republication of the *Jyllands-Posten* caricatures and the addition of Cabu's portrait of the Prophet for a special issue, and the subsequent trial initiated by a collective of Muslim organisations.

<sup>29</sup> The 2004 law banning the visible religious signs and symbols completes and needs to be read in conjunction with the 1905 laicity legislation (see Definitions section). Note that this will be later amended to include the 2010 law on the banning of the *burqa*, *niqab*, i.e., the full facial veil (and more recently, the 2023 law on the wearing of *abayas*, i.e., the loose-fitting long-length mantle, in state-run schools).

<sup>30</sup> For comments and context of productions, see Sifaoui (2006); Weston Vauclair (2009); Klausen (2009); Horsman (2020); Héran (2021); Abouddrar (2021); Sadoul (2014); Favret-Saada (2016).

<sup>31</sup> The court case was filed by the *Grande Mosquée de Paris*, the *Union des organisations islamiques* in France, and the *Ligue islamique mondiale*. The magazine won the case in 2007.

<sup>32</sup> See McGrogan (2016, p. 182) on various religious caricatures representing Islam; Héran (2021, p. 77) on Coco's drawings; Avon (2020, p. 92) on a list of religious caricatures including *LVM*, omitting to note the difference in form and eliciting reasons for such change.

Tunisia and Libya, using a laughing depiction of Muhammad, led to the fire-bombing of *Charlie Hebdo's* headquarters. In 2012, twenty French embassies across the world were preventively closed after the publication of a pornographic representation of the Prophet by another *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturist Coco, purportedly directed at commenting on reactions to the censorship of a Californian amateur movie. By contrast, besides initial reactions upon the announcement of *LVM* imminent release, its post-publication reception was not hostile according to Charb<sup>33</sup> and Luz<sup>34</sup>. Yet, there has been little scholarly research conducted on this production and on *Charlie Hebdo's* choice of BD media before the massacre at the headquarters. The commentaries were useful to gauge the reception of viral caricatural portraits and compare them with *LVM's* circulation dynamics in evolving conditions of reception and the possible relation with the use of a sequential form in *LVM*.

## 1.8. Literature on *LVM*

Despite the attention that scholars and academic writers have given to *Charlie Hebdo's* satirical production, there remains a gap in core literature devoted to the diverse forms employed by the magazine. Specifically, there is limited research on *LVM*<sup>35</sup>. The two notable exceptions comment on *LVM's* pertinence to global conversations about the role of religious caricatures and offer contrasting views: one praises the production (Nouailhat, 2020), while the other criticises and even mocks it (Boespflug, 2013a and 2013b). Given these limitations, the analysis has also been informed by related literature, including newspapers, periodicals, readers' reviews, documentaries, and literary critiques, to complement the existing scholarly and academic literature.

The release of the first part of the Prophet's biography (*LVM1*) was acknowledged by François Boespflug, a Dominican historian of religions and specialist in Christian iconography. He had extensively written about God's (and his prophets') representations found in the Abrahamic religions, but also on religious caricatures. In the forewords of his article (2013a) dedicated to the unsettled question of Muhammad's representation, and his book's introduction (2013b, p. 8), he calls for more information on this matter. For him, the Caricature Affair misled the general public about the blasphemous nature of the Prophet's representation and entrenched the idea of an existing ban.

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<sup>33</sup> Charb's interview : <https://www.caricaturesetcaricature.com/article-vie-de-mahomet-interview-du-dessinateur-charb-117764636.html>

<sup>34</sup> See Luz's interview in Laffeter (2015).

<sup>35</sup> As previously discussed, *LVM* mostly appeared as one among other examples of productions under the umbrella term of "the Prophet Caricatures"; it is cited often in footnotes (e.g., in Bayles, 2014; Darling-Wolfe, 2016; Avon, 2020) with no critical information about the BD.

Despite a cultural hostility towards figurative images and their authors, he agrees with other authors and scholars<sup>36</sup> that there is no explicit ban on the Prophet's representation in the Qur'an. There is evidence of artistic traditions and instances of local tolerance toward images throughout history, particularly during the Ottoman Empire and within the Shi'a tradition. Boespflug's book features twenty images of Muhammad, with his face either fully displayed, veiled or replaced by an empty oval shape. My analysis will discuss these artistic traditions of Muhammad's depictions in Arab-Islamic art as one ground on which the decision by *LVM*'s authors to represent Muhammad rests; this may have paved the way for *LVM*. The different grounds are detailed in *LVM*'s peritext, which could counter claims of intentional provocation against the community.

In his book, Boespflug criticises the first volume of *LVM* which had recently been released. He argues that his field of study—religious history and iconography—required more than a BD to challenge the prevailing belief that a ban exists. He writes,

The scale of the misinformation calls for more than a few scholarly articles scattered across academic journals, and better than a BD, however "serious" it may be or want to be, backed by solid documentation and "lengthy research" into the *sîra*, the chronicle of the Prophet's life: we're thinking in particular of the one published in January 2013 by a tandem formed by the cartoonist Charb and the sociologist Zineb [...] In any case, serious questions, of a haunting and even explosive topic require an appropriate treatment, which the best BD in the world would not be able to provide. (2013b, p. 8)<sup>37</sup>

While this BD may have little value for Boespflug's field of history of religion, my research on *LVM* endeavours to enrich another field – the BD and cartooning field. While the prominent satirical offer that exists in single panels leaves the audience with no sub-text to figure out the context of creation and provides no critical distance with the image, the alternative form of the BD may counteract this. My research also tries to dispel the idea that a ban on Muhammad's representations exists using a popular genre that may reach another public than academia and specialists in the history of religion. The 2013 article and book triggered this research, but throughout the thesis, the thesis analysis referred to François Boespflug's body of work, especially earlier books (2006 and 2011) as they are

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<sup>36</sup> See Avon (2020, p. 94); Clément (1995, p. 14); Al-Alwani (2000-2001, p. 6); Weston Vauclair & Vauclair (2016, p. 223); Chebel in Avon (2010, para 22).

<sup>37</sup> My translation. Original: "L'ampleur de la désinformation réclame plus que quelques articles savants dispersés dans des revues universitaires, et mieux qu'une BD, fût-elle ou se voulût-elle « très sérieuse », adossée à une documentation solide et à de « longues recherches » dans la *sîra*, la chronique de la vie du Prophète : nous pensons en priorité à celle qui a été publiée en janvier 2013 par un tandem formé par le dessinateur Charb et la sociologue Zineb [...] En tout état de cause, les questions graves, et d'une actualité lancinante voire explosive, demandent un traitement approprié, que la meilleure BD du monde ne serait pas en mesure d'assurer. "

commonly cited in BD literature on questions of iconographic representations and caricature: it will be used to confirm points raised and argued by other scholars: Boespflug was cited in Nouailhat (2020; 2015) discussing how Judaism and Islam represent the sacred without using the 'visible'; Avon (2020; 2010) tackled the contested issue of the Prophet's representation; Weston Vauclair and Vauclair (2016, p. 212) and Naef and Elliot (2014, p. 11) commented on European exceptions of its religious caricature tradition since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Seurrat (2008, p. 28) discussed the possible contribution of the Caricature Affair on a better understanding of the relationship between image and religions.

However, François Boespflug's critics (Naef, 2014, p. 33; Hazan, 2015, p. 109) reacted to his comments about the alleged "fear", "ignorance" or "laziness" (Boespflug, 2013b, p. 10)<sup>38</sup> that have engulfed expert francophone scholars, academics, and specialists of Islamic civilisation. In defence of her peers, the specialist in modern and contemporary art in the Arab world and on issues of representations and images in Islam, Sylvia Naef, notes the judgmental tone used in Boespflug's introduction, which, she says, can only promote the othering of Muslims during this caricature crisis. Nonetheless, she concedes that Boespflug's book's content is useful despite imprecisions, lacunas, and his reliance on secondary literature due to his lack of knowledge of Arabic-Asian languages. Moreover, Naef praises his balanced and convincing treatment of the three Abrahamic religions in his earlier book *Caricaturer Dieu? Pouvoirs et dangers de l'image* (2006), also an important reference for this thesis.

Scholar in religious sciences, Olga Hazan, also addresses similar remarks to Boespflug's 2013 book and regrets that Naef's and other authors' work is not featured other than in his work's endnotes. Note that Naef uses Boespflug's 2006 book in her article (Naef and Elliott, 2014), "From Rarity to Profusion (1800 to the Present)".

The analysis was also informed by a second article, which devotes more than a footnote to *LVM*. In "Choc des religions ou choc des représentations? Fractures culturelles et violence des images" (Nouailhat, 2020, paras 56-63), the historian, René Nouailhat analyses part of *LVM*. Nouailhat is the founder of the *Institut de formation à l'étude et l'enseignement des religions* (IFER), a training institute for the study and teaching of religions. He argues that in a class setting, secular public school educators could face increasing challenges with regard to religious images and their reception. This article was published shortly after the murder of Samuel Paty, . The author deemed *LVM* capable of contributing to a critical teaching of religious facts in the present volatile context. He called *LVM* "*un procédé pédagogique*" ("a didactic strategy") for its ability to constrain even reluctant readers or perusers to

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<sup>38</sup> The full quote from Boespflug is, in my translation: "It's as if the subject were taboo. How can this be explained, if not by an amalgamation of preconceptions, aggravated by fear and lack of culture? Is laziness involved too?" Original: "Tout se passe donc comme si ce sujet était tabou. Comment l'expliquer, sinon par une coagulation d'a priori, aggravée par la peur et l'inculture ? La paresse s'en mêle-t-elle aussi?"

critically analyse the story through the peritext and visual elements. For Nouailhat, thanks to its formal aspects, this BD set an example for didactic and interactive material that could be used in public schools for the teaching of religious facts in accordance with French secular educational programs<sup>39</sup>. Nouailhat's article was an important starting point for my analysis and alerted me to the merit of readily available embedded contextualisation that explains the process of creation and elicits the authors' intentions. Nouailhat underscores the polysemic nature of *LVM*, the split between visual and textual elements with each offering a different narrative or level of interpretation. He points to *LVM*'s "precautionary tale" (para 58) dimension about the rise of literalism. I contend this article calls for more initiatives like *LVM*, or any mediated approach applied to cultural production in the education and cultural fields.

During this research, interviews of *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturists were also used for their viewpoints on *LVM*, and the reception given to this BD. They contrasted with external accounts reserved for editorial cartoons that have linked Islam with global debates. One is retrospectively reported by Luz, a *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturist who survived the 2015 terrorist attack. A few days after the attack, he stated: "The funny thing is that we continued caricaturing Muhammad after 2007 [the Caricature Trial]. After the triple controversy in 2007, 2011, and 2012, Charb and Zineb El-Rhazoui went as far as publishing 'The Life of Muhammad' [sic] in two volumes. It didn't cause a stir." (Laffeter, 2017). Charb had made a similar comment in an interview published upon publication of the second volume of the biography, *LVM2*, released in July 2013. For him, the first part of the biography (January 2013), had not caused the expected uproar ([www.caricaturesetcariature.com](http://www.caricaturesetcariature.com), 2013/05/26): "Before the publication of 'The Life of Mohammed' (sic!), there were protests from Iran, Turkey and quite a few more or less radical Muslims. After publication, there was almost complete silence."<sup>40</sup> He added he could not exclude further violence and the instrumentalisation of this BD by social agents for political gains ([www.rts.ch](http://www.rts.ch), 2013/01/02). For both Luz and Charb, *LVM*'s reception was not met with the previous cartoons' hostility. This research looks at the formal aspects that may have contributed to this purported lack of reaction.

Other accounts found in related literature contributed to a better understanding of *LVM*'s mixed reception and comprehension. *LVM*'s critiques appear in Readers' Reviews (*Amazon.com*, *Amazon.fr*, *Goodread.com*, etc.), in BD literary critics' specialised blogs and webzines (*actuabd.com*,

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<sup>39</sup> Since the 18 March 1882 law, confessional (Catholic) teaching has progressively disappeared from public schools. But in the spirit of laicity, which must not exclude any field of knowledge, "religious facts" teaching is part of different subjects such as Literature, History, Philosophy, and the Visual Arts.

<sup>40</sup> My translation. Original: "Avant la publication de la vie de Mahomet, il y a eu des protestations de l'Iran, de la Turquie et de pas mal de musulmans plus ou moins radicaux. Après la sortie, ça a été le silence quasi complet."

*caricaturesetcaricature.com*, etc.), and French daily newspapers' reviews (*www.lemonde.fr*, *www.lacroix.fr*, *www.safirnews.com*) reporting its upcoming publication.

## 2. Contextual and Formal Analysis of *LVM*

This first analytical chapter of the thesis sets out to examine the socio-political context surrounding the publication of *LVM*, the collaboration between Charb and Zineb on *LVM*, the role of its staged release in three phases, the adoption of a BD media form and a factual approach, and the insertion of peritextual documents. By analysing these aspects of the authors' decisions, this chapter intends to reveal the deliberate strategies employed by the authors to retain control over how their publication could be perceived and mitigate misinterpretation of, and controversy around, of their satirical representation of Islam in a volatile climate. This analysis serves as a foundation for the subsequent analysis in Chapter 3 which will further investigate the visual and narrative strategies embedded within this publication.

### 2.1. Factoring in media and audience changes

The first part of this chapter examines the conditions that prevailed in France in the first decade of the 2000s, prompting a change in caricatural practices by *Charlie Hebdo*, a magazine known for its uncompromising style. Here, the focus is on the socio-political environment that provided a productive ground for publishing the unscheduled double special issue of *Charlie Hebdo* dedicated to the life of the Prophet. The authors' profiles are also an indication of a particular moment in the climate surrounding caricature marked by a low tolerance threshold for the genre (Canto-Sperber, 2021, p. 229). Attention is given to the participation of a specialist in Islam, Zineb El-Rhazoui, in the creative process of this BD and the possible rationales for *LVM*'s staged publication and the use of a BD form, and how those tools, form and format were used to assert control over the interpretation of the authors' work. This section discusses the effects of these choices on the circulation's dynamics, considering whether the form had an effect on the virality of the magazine's distribution and global reach. Other formal elements – notably the peritext, such as endnotes – are pivotal in the strategy. They provide the audience with keys for interpreting how polysemic and possibly offensive texts, function. This second part of the chapter examines the role of mediation played by the substantive peritext. *LVM*'s peritext comes in written and hybrid (visual/textual) forms: the written elements are the prefaces, postfaces, endnotes, and chronology, whereas the hybrid elements are the map, the presentation of the succession, and the endpapers.

### 2.1.1. Perception of *Charlie Hebdo* prior to *LVM*'s release

*LVM* was published in the aftermath of the Caricature Affair (2006-2007), its trial (2006-2007) and subsequent mediatic cartoons. The climate these incidents created was a breeding ground for conflicts of interpretation and accusations of punching down on the Muslim community, further marginalising the religious group.

The main accusation against the satirical magazine was that of Islamophobia, to which *Charlie Hebdo* responded. Defending his legacy, Philippe Val, *Charlie Hebdo*'s former head of publication (1992-2009), reminded detractors of *Charlie*'s ethical positions and its political fights. He remarked:

Some of *Charlie*'s commitments made the magazine an occasional ally of a radical, libertarian left: the case of the undocumented aliens, the right to housing to all, the defence of immigrant rights, the constant battle with the FN [the Front National, the French extreme-right party]. (2015, p. 133)<sup>41</sup>

Weston Vauclair and Vauclair (2016, p. 35) also insist on its anticlerical tradition to which, as they put it, one needed to add the fight against racism and antisemitism. They argue (p. 70) that resorting to polysemic cartoons, often perceived as offensive by targeted groups, exposed *Charlie Hebdo* to public and academic critique. The confusion or misjudgement towards the magazine stemmed from *Charlie Hebdo* using a racist register – e.g., traditional stereotyping of Arabs as terrorists – to denounce persistent prejudices. However, this is just the caricaturist's way of showing that they understood offensive references, without adhering to them.

At the time of *LVM*'s release in 2013, Charb was well aware of this recurrent line of criticisms and faced them in his posthumous book-length essay, "*Open Letter: On Blasphemy, Islamophobia, and the True Enemies of Free Expression*", posthumously published in 2015. He asked:

If we suggest that it is okay to make fun of everything except certain aspects of Islam because Muslims are much more sensitive than the rest of the population, isn't that discrimination? Shouldn't we treat the second-largest religion of the world, purported second religion in France, exactly as we treat the first? (Charb, 2016, p. 33).

In addition to Islamophobia, *Charlie Hebdo* was accused of blasphemy by religious groups, including Muslims. This accusation was equally dismissed by Charb, who writes:

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<sup>41</sup> My translation. Original: "Certains engagements de *Charlie* en faisaient un allié occasionnel d'une gauche radicale et libertaire : l'affaires des sans-papiers, le droit au logement, la défense des droits des immigrés, la bagarre permanente avec le FN..."

“Sacred” texts are sacred only to those who believe in them. [...] A believer can blaspheme only to the extent that the idea of blasphemy holds any meaning for him. A nonbeliever, no matter how hard he tries, cannot blaspheme. God is sacred only to those who believe in him. (Charb, 2016, p. 15).

As discussed in 1.6., blasphemy has not been a crime in France since 1789 (Gil, 2017, p. 25).

Charb remarks that alternative words have since been used to replace the crime of blasphemy in France,<sup>42</sup> such as “incitement to hatred/violence against a group,” which are legal constructs meant to attract the full force of the law and make such an offense punishable against the magazine. He adds: “The strategy used by minority group activists masquerading as anti-racists is to pass off blasphemy as Islamophobia and Islamophobia as racism.” (Charb, 2016, p. 16). The reliance on this term is confirmed by legal scholars (Viennot, 2014, p. 56; Gil, 2017, p. 41), and other contributors to *Charlie Hebdo* (Fourest, 2015, p. 96; Zineb, 2016, p. 20). Moreover, the general rule that governs the dynamics between freedom of expression and religion is clearly stated in the 2007 *Charlie Hebdo* ruling (*Caricature Trial*) by the Paris Tribunal of first instance (Gil, 2017, p. 41). It reads as follows:

[I]n France, which is a secular and pluralistic society, the respect of all beliefs goes hand in hand with the freedom to criticize every religion, whatever its denomination, and with the freedom to represent people or objects that are worshipped by others. Blasphemy, which offends a divinity or a religion, is not a punishable offense, unlike insults which target an individual or a group of individuals because of their religious affiliation. (Paris Tribunal of first instance, 22 March 2007 ruling, cited in Gil, 2017, p. 41)

Claims of racism and anti-Muslim sentiment allegedly harboured by *Charlie Hebdo* were researched by two sociologists (Céline Goffette and Jean-François Mignot), and the results were published by the French daily *Le Monde* immediately after the 2015 attack. *Le Monde* is a generalist and independent newspaper and one of the most widely read. Goffette and Mignot researched the targets of *Charlie Hebdo*'s drawings to assess whether the magazine disproportionately caricatured Islam on their covers. The authors intended to challenge the accusations of racism and obsession with Islam. They provided a historical perspective of the themes featured on their front covers (*Les Unes*) that included the period of *LVM*'s publication. This helped me gauge the validity of the Islamophobia claim against the satirical magazine prior to 2013. Goffette and Mignot's research was titled, “No, *Charlie Hebdo* is **not** obsessed with Islam” (my emphasis), then asked: “Who are they mocking? The themes in *Charlie*'s

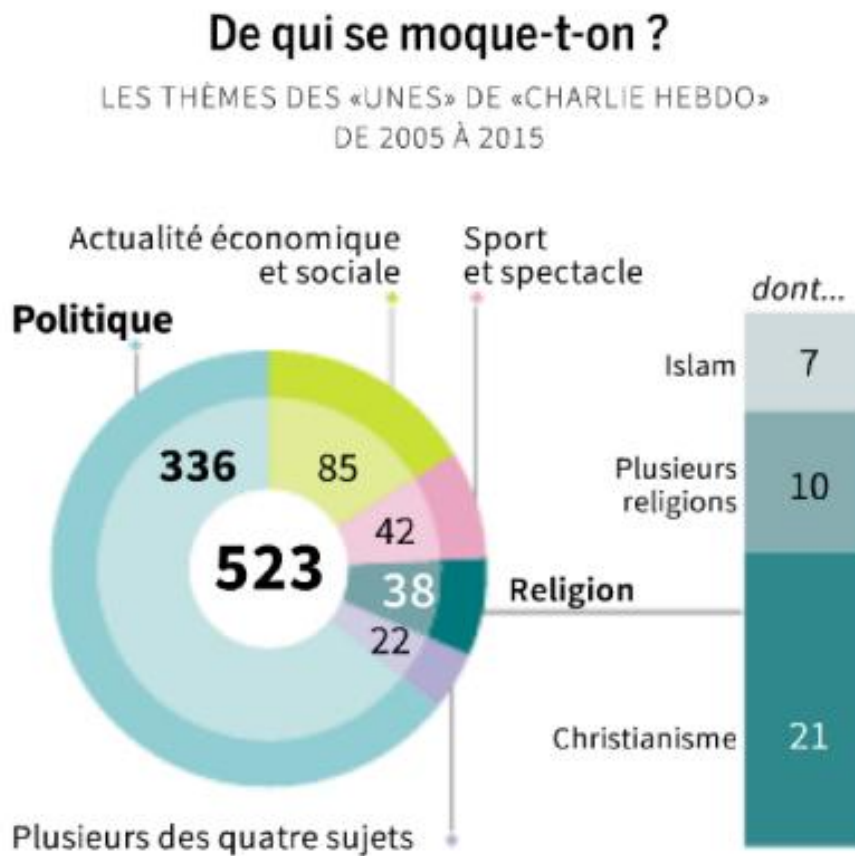
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<sup>42</sup> See also Debray and Leschi (2016, p. 102).

cover pages from 2005 to 2015” (Goffette and Mignot, 2015/02/23). A graph illustrated the wide range of themes tackled by the editorial team and their respective recurrences (see **Figure 02**).

**Figure 02**

*Le Monde* (23/02/2015)



The graph (**Figure 02**) showed that political themes were primarily featured, scoring 336 out of 523 *Charlie's* cover pages, and targeted French politicians, notably the extreme-right party founder. Religious themes amounted to less than 10% and within the *Religion* category, one-fifth were dedicated to Islam. The satirical magazine exploited any contemporary issues and had been mainly sued<sup>43</sup> by the extreme right party and identitarian catholic associations during the 90s, more recently had been sued by Muslim associations.

<sup>43</sup> *Charlie Hebdo* was sued over 40 times since 1992: <https://charliehebdo.fr/pages/proces/>

Further, in Charb's posthumous published essay, he plainly denounces fundamentalism and the complicity of the French media, which, in his opinion, amplified the reactions generated by religious cartoons, instrumentalising them for commercial benefits (p. 20). In a passage that echoes how Charb and Zineb frame their concerns in *LVM*, Charb points to what he considers the real danger in religions: for the authors, the issue resides in the instrumentalization of sacred texts by political agitators.

A text becomes sacred and, ultimately, dangerous only when some fanatic decides to take his bedside reading literally. You have to be really gullible to swallow the foundational texts of any of the great religions word for word, and you'd have to be a true psychopath to try to reproduce their teachings at home. (Charb, 2016, p. 14)

The question of the caricaturists' intention is pivotal to the thesis's argument which underscores that the strategy used in *LVM* could dispel accusations of ill-intent towards Muslims when repeatedly featuring religious themes, in particular Islam, in caricatures.

At the time of *LVM*'s creation, the mediatic and polysemic cartoons had left public opinion divided as to the caricaturists' intent, and the caricature-averse public unwilling to explore beyond the covers on full display in kiosks. Obviously misunderstood, *Charlie Hebdo* had to resort to new strategies for their religious representation in order to assert control over their production's meaning to prevent hostile reception and further accusations of discrimination against Muslims.

### 2.1.2. The collaboration between Charb and Zineb El-Rhazoui

*LVM* was the result of a collaboration between Charb and Zineb el-Rhazoui. Charb was in charge of the illustrations and participated in the elaboration of the text. They both belonged to the cartooning tradition and journalism rather than strictly to the BD genre. Although the making of BD is often collaborative in nature, for the drafting of an authentic narrative, the participation of Zineb, a sociologist of religions, with an academic knowledge of Islam, was essential to give credibility to the publication. Moreover, Zineb openly identified as an atheist of Moroccan descent, a feminist and secular activist for human rights and individual liberties (El-Rhazoui, 2016<sup>44</sup>). As a female commentator of Islam and the Qur'an, she brings a distinctive voice to a contentious field, at a personal risk, within a climate of hostility. Zineb's background did not go unnoticed and was commented upon by dailies that cover current affairs from a Muslim or Arabic perspective in France and abroad (e.g.,

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<sup>44</sup> See also Zineb's *TED Talk* in TEDxKalamata, 2015.

*Safirnews.com*, 2012<sup>45</sup>; *Today's Zaman*, 2013). *Safirnews.com*'s chief editor writes: "Since the announcement [...] of the forthcoming publication of [LVM] on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> December, many people have been wondering who 'Zineb' is, the 'Franco-Moroccan sociologist of religion' that the satirical weekly uses in its foreword to lend credibility to its book."<sup>46</sup>

For *LVM*, Zineb researched authoritative Islamic texts as revealed in her interview in *Revue Internationale* (2013/09/25). She explained that she carefully sourced and annotated any details potentially perceived as anecdotal, provocative, or untrue. Her expertise added authenticity to this rendition of the life of the Prophet. She added 148 endnotes to *LVM* and precise information in the textual elements in bubbles and captions (to be further explored in the following section on the historical approach adopted in *LVM*). She survived the 2015 headquarters attack and has since been under police protection due to receiving death threats; she is considered the most protected woman in France (El-Rhazoui, 2016)<sup>47</sup>.

The second author of *LVM* is Stéphane Charbonnier, aka Charb, who graphically represented Zineb's meticulous research on the Prophet. He was part of the new generation of caricaturists who joined the satirical magazine at its relaunch in 1992 and spent most of his professional career at *Charlie Hebdo* as an in-house caricaturist and occasionally contributed to other specialised BD magazines, such as *Fluide Glaciale*. In 2009, he became its editor-in-chief. Charb received death threats and had been on the kill list of the ISIS website "Inspire" (Baridon and Guédron, 2023, p. 285)<sup>48</sup>. He died in the 2015 headquarters' shooting. He was personally targeted by the terrorists, as made clear in interviews with Coco, a caricaturist who survived the attack, Marika Bret, *Charlie Hebdo*'s head of Human Resources (Leconte and Leconte, 2015, TIMESTAMP).

At the time of the attack, Charb was the then-director of publications and in-house caricaturist, and admittedly more at ease with single cartoons or strips than BD (Sadoul, 2014, p. 38). He was described as a politically situated and active caricaturist (a "*cartooniste engagé*" – p. 35). He had a signature register characterised by aficionados. As underlined in the Literature Review (1.5), he was alternatively labelled "*Islamogauchiste*" by his editor-in-chief (Philippe Val), and later his production was perceived as engendering Islamophobic sentiment. The "*Islamogauchiste*" label was first used internally as a slur by the previous magazine's editor Philippe Val (Lentin, 2019, p. 61<sup>49</sup>) because of Charb's alleged

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<sup>45</sup> As shown by their readers' comments.

<sup>46</sup> My translation. Original: "Depuis l'annonce [...] de la sortie prochaine de [LVM] dimanche 30 décembre, nombreux se demandent qui est 'Zineb', cette « sociologue des religions franco-marocaine » que l'hebdomadaire satirique met en avant dans son avant-propos pour apporter de la crédibilité à son ouvrage. "

<sup>47</sup> See also, Ayad in *Le Monde*, 2020/12/19; 2019/02/12; Deléan in *Mediapart*, 2015/05/15.

<sup>48</sup> On the issue of death threats, see also Charb, 2015, p. 45; Leconte and Leconte, 2015, TIMESTAMP.

<sup>49</sup> See also, Marlière, 2023, p. 238; Neffati, 2021, p. 283; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2023, p. 260; Val, 2015, p. 136.

support of the Palestinian cause. Although, the editorial team agreed on most of the French political current affairs, viewpoints diverged on international issues, notably on the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts (Sadoul, 2014, p. 29).

The accusation of Islamophobia is commonly employed to refer to anti-Muslim racism. Charb's posthumous *Open Letter* (2015, p. 32) insisted on the fact that the caricatural target of *Charlie Hebdo* has never been a believer of any faith but aimed at religion and at any religious representatives of organised faiths yielding influence over their followers. For him, religion is an ideology, a set of ideas that can be criticised in a secular society like France, and without exceptions.

The choice of Zineb and her input in *LVM* shows a desire from *Charlie Hebdo* to be rigorous and scholarly about Islam. The collaboration between Charb and Zineb attests that the magazine paid attention to the public negative perception, notably by educated readers who may question references to sacred texts and publicly comment on the BD. The following section explores how the choice of formats and the three-stage publication strategy impact the authors' ability to control perception over meaning and access to their production.

### 2.1.3. Editorial and material considerations

This section aims to analyse the decisions about formats and staged releases of *LVM* as well as their consequences and possible effects on the reception and access of this controversial production

As discussed earlier, *LVM* was first published in two separate issues of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and later in a book format which can now be found in digital copies. Note that only the book version (*LVM3*) exists online in a digital format and that it does not have all peritextual elements. *Internet Archive* offers a better quality full-text copy in open source, but this online version slightly differs from the paper copy (no preface with the magazine's warnings and stated intentions, no endpapers). Since its uploading on 9 August 2019, it has had only 1695 views (to this date, 18 February 2025) and no reviews were left by readers, which could indicate low viral quality of this sequential format despite the attention-seeking title. However, only the paper copies are analysed below.

The publication of *LVM* in several stages can be likened to serialisation, especially for *LVM1* and *LVM2*, since the authors had advertised the release of the second instalment, and readers were left waiting for the later part of the Prophet's life corresponding to the Medina period. A staged publication<sup>50</sup> and

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<sup>50</sup> Here, the choice of a two-part biography issued six months apart between the magazine copies and three months between *LVM1* and *LVM2*.

strategies of serialisation (i.e., narratives issued in “*feuilletons*” or “instalments”) are not uncommon in the literary or BD industry. Used at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Robert, 2014, para 5), staged publications were a literary long-standing practice to add suspense and retain readership.<sup>51</sup> In the BD field, authors and publishers used serialisation to test the likability of recurring characters, the coherence of the theme, and the storyline. The periodicals industry was also able to spread the cost of the whole story by offering short bites published by specialised magazines<sup>51</sup>. The cost efficiency of this strategy may have informed *Charlie Hebdo*’s choice. Staging release is typically used to reduce costs, and *Charlie Hebdo* was financially embattled: the magazine sold 48000 copies weekly in 2011, among them, 12000 were subscriptions, and their sales figures were not improving (Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016, p. 165). Prior to the 2015 Paris attack, prints amounted to 60000 copies weekly but sold between 20000 to 35000 copies only (Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016, p. 26). The magazine had financial difficulties in 2013 and may have decided to resort to this publication strategy to portion costs.

But the general use of special issues is not only a marketing operation: ; it can also be used in lawsuits to support the case of the embattled satirical magazine. According to the French historian and sociologist Christine Fauré, *Charlie Hebdo* tries to inscribe a production into a “historical and judiciary document” (2016, p. 102<sup>52</sup>) enhancing this BD into a critical document. Ultimately, special editions’ well-circumscribed scope seeks to contribute to specific public-interest discourse, as they focus on particular themes of general interest such as France’s political, religious, and informational conversation. In these special issues (*LVM1* and *LVM2*), *Charlie Hebdo* wanted to partake in the ongoing conversation on the place of the sacred in a secularised society and questioned the literal reading of ancient texts.

At first glance, *LVM3* in a book format resembles a reedition and compilation of *LVM1* and *LVM2*. However, as mentioned above, *LVM3* contains more chapters, each with potentially offensive content, and additional peritext. The authors do not clearly state the rationale for the reedition of *LVM1* and *LVM2* in a book format. Yet, it enabled the authors to add essential peritext to serve their historical ambition. Unlike *LVM1* and *LVM2*, this later version contains, a map and a chronology that define the period (7<sup>th</sup> century) and the geography (Mesopotamia), offering critical distance with the text. The first two issues (*LVM1* and *LVM2*) did not contain those two analytical documents in their peritext, they only had endnotes and prefaces/postfaces that could situate the story in a remote setting.

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<sup>51</sup> For example, specialised BD magazines such as *Métal Hurlant*, *Fluide Glacial*, *Corto*, *À Suivre*, etc. were the common platform to publish series.

<sup>52</sup> For more discussion on the legal value of special issues see Gil (2017, p. 47)

The relation between form and circulation dynamics is significant. The authors' material and formal choices may have had a limiting effect on its circulation internationally. Upon publishing, *LVM1* and *LVM2* in magazine formats were on full display and sold in kiosks and news agencies. They had great local exposure, and their front covers were visible on newsstands to a larger public (notably street pedestrian traffic) and news agencies' general customers. By contrast, the hardcover book edition was available in specialised BD bookshops, whose customers mainly consisted of informed buyers. But, in both cases, the physical copy of this BD did not reach an international audience. Rather, only the announcement of its publication did. *LVM's* story and the potentially harmful content are embedded in the multi-panelled layout, diluted in the long narrative structures, and not immediately obvious when compared to a single-panelled caricature. The materiality and its BD media form may have hindered its global virality.

The staged release strategy, along with the marketing operation of two special issues and the publication of a book, allowed the authors to control reception and make changes accordingly. Its materiality and the choice of a BD form have disruptive effects on its viral circulation. The next subsection will discuss the authorial decision to use a BD media form with long narrative structures rather than a single-panelled caricature, and how it may contribute to the overall authorial strategy of asserting itself over the growing power of reception.

#### 2.1.4. Structural considerations

Sequentiality, which refers to the unfolding of a story across a multi-panel layout has traditionally been the dedicated structure in BD but is relatively unseen in modern caricature. Some scholars (Fauré, 2016, p. 86; Nouailhat, 2020, para 56) have found that the BD form applied to caricature is a new development and an innovation in the cartooning field<sup>53</sup>. In caricature, stretching the narrative throughout a whole BD remains a distinct characteristic used in *caricature de moeurs* (hereafter *CDM*). For Tillier (2015, p. 33), a full-length BD is the preferred form for directing the caricatural charge on prevailing or evolving behaviours and elaborating on the consequences of such changes in a long demonstration. By contrast, single-panelled caricatures are rather suited for targeting people with their biting load using the commonly shared and known repertoire of stereotypes.

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<sup>53</sup> As a reminder, in the Francophone tradition, "*le dessin editorial*" (commonly translated "editorial cartooning") includes the humoristic "*dessin de presse*" ("political cartoons") and caricatures, the latter having three subgenres, "*le portrait-charge*" ("loaded portrait"), "*la caricature de type*" ("stereotype"), and "*la caricature de moeurs*" ("caricature of mores").

*LVM* shares characteristics with *CDM*. *LVM*'s charge is not directed at the Prophet but at an increasing appetite for literal reading promoted by radical Islam and promoters of a true Islam as understood by medieval jurists and theologians. In times of growing intolerance for the genre, the decision to use sequentiality in caricature can be construed as a productive constraint for the perpetuation of the caricature in the case of iconographic satire that repeatedly encroaches on delicate religious territories. The authors' reasoning and the merits of this structural aspect of the BD form need to be explained in terms of added explicitness, ability to fully develop a complex story, and power to affect circulation dynamics.

One of the significant attributes of full-length BD is the space it affords to contextualisation. Discussing *LVM* specifically, Nouailhat (2020, para 56) writes: "BD's *graphic sequences* [emphasis added] open paths for original didactics, images make visible what words attempt to express, and words accompany what images try to translate."<sup>54</sup> One might question the value of explicitness and having more content in a media such as a caricature traditionally based on ellipses. To some extent, long sequences respond to the audience's emerging demand for clarity, a demand increasingly being expressed with regard to other caricature subgenres based on single-panelled cartoons. I argue that with *LVM*, Charb and Zineb showed foresight in 2013, pre-empting the need for clarity. The Swiss cartoonist Patrick Chappatte (2019) recently commented on his readers' request to explain his single-panelled political drawings following the *New York Times*' decision to stop editorial cartooning. For him, iconographic humour requires the audience's active involvement in decoding cartoons that, in essence, contain little text and do not make explicit an author's positioning on a particular issue. In their work, cartoonists exploit shared cultural references about persisting prejudices without necessarily adhering to such preconceived ideas. However, the present trend that promotes contextualisation, sub-texts, and clarification of the author's intent is at odds with the elliptic nature of cartooning, devoid of long textual elements.

*LVM*'s sequential form endeavours to satisfy a requirement for clearer messaging. Its longer form provides space for a play with temporal sequences, for more narrative content in panels, boxes, and textual elements, etc. This is suited to its historical approach to the life of the most important figure in Islam. In *LVM*, the long narrative – a biography – is completed by paratextual features that can contextualise polysemic material to a growing audience not always familiar with the genre. The BD media form is characterised by its slow nature, which impacts production and online circulation. Charb and Zineb needed time to thoroughly research their delicate topic in order to produce an earnest

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<sup>54</sup> My translation. Original: "Les séquences graphiques de bandes dessinées offrent de ce point de vue les chemins d'une didactique originale, les images rendant visible ce qu'essaient de dire les mots, et les mots accompagnent ce qu'essaient de traduire les images."

biography of the Prophet. This process of creation contrasts with the majority of editorial cartooning practices, which require immediate reporting as events unfold (Pétillon, 2006, p. 95) and where practitioners are working with short deadlines. Similarly, a BD form is not best suited to online circulation; the potentially offensive details of its narrative are spread across the long narrative structure and throughout multiple pages. The offensive and attention-grabbing elements of the narrative are not immediately apparent. This constitutes a disruption in online circulation and lessens the virality of the production, limiting the access and reach of this production to a local audience. In opting for a BD form – a media that “slows down current affairs” according to authors (Ringoot, 2014, p. 196; Chute, 2017, p. 28) – Charb and Zineb reduced the risk of viral dissemination of their material.

With such an emotionally charged theme as the caricatural biography of Muhammad, the decision to use sequentiality was strategically appropriate. It allowed more space for clarifying the authors’ intention, offered sufficient length to unroll a biography that covered the entirety of the Prophet’s life, and enabled the authors to contain the BD’s dissemination, limiting its distribution to audiences that may not have grasped the socio-political context of the production.

In the next two sections, I will explore other authorial decisions, such as the use of substantive peritext, and how those decisions relate to the authors’ didactic ambition.

## 2.2. Peritext for a factual approach

Besides the BD form, there are other formal elements that offer keys of interpretation and cultural mediation between the audience and the potentially offensive representations contained in the story. In choosing to represent the Prophet, Charb and Zineb are aware they are transgressing a cultural and religious norm (*LVM1*, Zineb’s preface). Although theologically settled – as I explored in sections 1.6. and 1.7., the Qur’an does not expressly ban Muhammad’s depiction – Zineb notes that the question of his representation still has the power to offend. Moreover, besides the representation of the Prophet Muhammad, the BD also contains sexually explicit scenes and nudity which go against Islamic rules of modesty.

This section will analyse the written and hybrid (i.e., visual/textual) peritextual elements. They all form part of the authors’ toolbox to dispel claims of ill-intention toward the Muslims and possibly mitigate *LVM*’s impact on an audience averse to religious caricatures. Although technically part of the peritext, covers are to be considered in Chapter 4, dedicated to a multimodal analysis.

The following subsection first shows how the substantive peritext can serve the factual approach adopted by *Charlie Hebdo*. The subsequent analysis examines whether an objective method adopted for the historical rendition of the life of the Prophet can neutralise claims of Islamophobia.

### 2.2.1. The factual perspective and endnotes

*LVM* is inscribed in a climate of fear<sup>55</sup> that started with Salman Rushdie's fatwa by the Ayatollah Khomeini and death condemnation in 1989 globalising affairs<sup>56</sup> of blasphemy in Western societies<sup>57</sup> (Cabantous, 2015, p. 273; Favret-Saada, 2016, p. 35). Emotions had run high locally and globally during the Caricature Affair and after the Trial. So, in response to claims of spreading prejudices – channelled by francophone and foreign media – *Charlie Hebdo* tries to use a dispassionate historical approach in *LVM*.

At face value, the BD presents the life of the Prophet in an arguably earnest biography. To possible detractors<sup>58</sup> and to accusations that *LVM* is a provocation, Charb and Zined reply that *LVM* is, in fact, a didactic project that educates the profane among the audience (*LVM1* preface): Muhammad is a central religious figure for the Muslim community and secularists could agree that he was a pivotal actor in human history. As mentioned, Zineb extensively researched authoritative Islamic texts, sourcing, and annotating details potentially perceived as anecdotal, provocative, or untrue. This is evidenced by 148 endnotes which deal with the sources of the episodes recounted in the text (e.g., the Prophet's breastfeeding by multiple wet nurses, *LVM1*, p. 14, referenced in endnote 27). This biography follows Muhammad's footsteps from before he became a historical religious figure into his later life as a religious and political leader. The Prophet has been the subject of 14 centuries of religious interpretations, thus researchers must contend with issues of sources' reliability and authors' partiality. But Zineb states (*Revue Internationale*, 2013/09/25) that nobody has ever tried to use primary sources to deliver the illustrated Prophet's life story in a manner accessible to all.

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<sup>55</sup> For more details on the police protection afforded to the editorial team, see Avon (2010, para 34); Charb (2016, p. 45); Sifaoui (2006, p. 116); Weston Vauclair and Vauclair (2015, p. 168); Zineb (2016, back cover); *Le Monde* (2019/02/12) and Zineb's interview in *Le Monde* (2015/01/09).

<sup>56</sup> On the chain of affairs for blasphemy with a global reach, see also, Fauré (2016, p. 93), Fourest (2015, p. 110), Boespflug (2006, p. 57), and Sifaoui (2006, p. 18).

<sup>57</sup> Other controversies intersecting with blasphemy were reported in the Middle East, such as the Akkad case (see 1.6).

<sup>58</sup> Apart from audiences who do not like *Charlie's* aesthetics, detractors are also literary critics, longtime opposers, viewers taking offense, and peers in the editorial cartooning profession.

To write *LVM*, Zineb studied the Qur'an, the corpus of the prophetic tradition (*hadiths*), and the *sîra* translated from the classic medieval Arabic language into French, presenting translators and researchers with numerous pitfalls. *Hadiths* are Muhammad's words, deeds, or approvals (Marongiu-Perria et al., 2023, p. 129) that form part of the oral tradition that can be traced back to the time of the Prophet. They are commonly understood as a chain of transmission that goes far back to the Prophet's companions (Bencheikh, 2019, p. 49; Boespflug, 2006, p. 195). Organised in collections, some *hadiths* are deemed authentic, but others are apocryphal (unauthenticated). As they gathered the community's consensus, the prophetic tradition progressively became a source of law and faith. Less normative than the *hadiths*, *sîra* contains chronicles reporting the Prophet's contemporary events, milestones, and methodical descriptions of his daily activities, such as his father's wedding, breastfeeding from his wetnurses, and the revelations, forming *LVM*'s significant chapters. *LVM1*' narrative mostly exploits the *sîra* and covers the chronology of his life from birth to age 40, whereas *LVM2* adds *hadiths* to the narrative and follows the Prophet until his death. The prefaces mentioned the use of primary sources ("*les sources mères*", "*ommahât al-massadir*" in Arabic) that helped Zineb write the story, naming the Alepin *sîra* by Ibn Sayyid an-Nâs, the *sîra* by Ibn Hichâm, "*Le Livre des grandes classes*" by Ibn Sâad and "other Islamic sources" (*LVM1* preface).

The endnotes also show references to *hadiths*. Endnotes (see **Figure 03**) appear in both the magazine (*LVM1* and *LVM2*) and book (*LVM3*) formats. Both *LVM1* and *LVM2* (148 endnotes in total) provide citations to external authoritative sources, citing *sîra* and *hadiths*. They serve the historical perspective and give Charb's claims<sup>59</sup> of *LVM* being "authorised by Islam" some legitimacy. The same assertion is made in Zineb's foreword in *LVM1* and by the unsigned *LVM3* postface: "Every anecdote, every phrase put into Muhammad's mouth is annotated and refers to bibliographical references whose authenticity the most rigorous Islamic *ulemas*<sup>60</sup> will not dispute."<sup>61</sup> Zineb described (*Revue Internationale*, 2013/09/25) her painstaking task of "research, translation, compilation and vulgarisation", where every Prophet's deed and word is sourced and referenced in *LVM*'s extensive endnotes. Such a statement needs to be tempered since the reliance on sources other than the Qur'an (i.e., *hadiths* and *sîra*) contravenes a strict Quranist approach for which the Holy Book is the only reference that provides direction. As the depository of the revelation, the Qur'an is said to speak for itself and shall not need interpretations by the tradition (Marongiu-Perria et al., 2023, p. 125). The authors' approach relies on

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<sup>59</sup> Such claims are found in promotion and reception's related literature, such as *Le Point*, 2012/12/30; *RTS*, 2013/01/02; and more.

<sup>60</sup> "*Ulemas*" are scholars of Islamic theology, laws, and religious sciences, experts in interpreting the Qur'an, the *hadiths*, and Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>61</sup> My translation. Original: "Chaque anecdote, chaque phrase mise dans la bouche de Muhammad est annotée, et renvoie à des références bibliographiques dont les plus rigoureux oulémas de l'islam ne contesteront pas l'authenticité."

the persuasive nature of facts that have gathered consensus, for example, the use of a map of the region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a chronology of events commonly found in history books, and personal information on the Prophet's companions. In the authors' views, biographical and historical information are perceived as factual truth beyond dispute and pronounced as such by authoritative voices. Nonetheless, this objective approach is not devoid of shortcomings for a believer who happens to read this BD: it requires the readers' trust that such a method will produce not only knowledge (an earnest biography) but also answer all meaningful questions that a religion can offer. Moreover, there remains a question as to how objective can Charb's artistic (therefore, subjective) depiction of Muhammad be? But, like BD-Reportage authors, I would argue that, short of total objectivity, the authors endeavoured to remain honest throughout the project.

Figure 03

Representative Sample of Endnotes (LVM1, p. 63)

## NOTES

1. La Mecque.
2. Pèlerinage. Selon l'historien égyptien Sayyed Mahmoud al-Qimni (né en 1947), dans son livre *al-Ustûra wa at-Turâth* (« Le mythe et l'héritage »), p. 162, et selon Abû al-Qâsim al-Shahrestâni (1086-1153), dans *Kitâb al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (« Le livre des religions et des sectes »), p. 247, l'étymologie du mot *hajj* vient de *hakk*, l'action de frotter.
3. Jawâd Ali, dans *al-Mufassal fî Adyân al-Arab Qabl al-Islâm* (« Religions des Arabes avant l'islam »), p. 311, *Al-Mufassal fî Târikh al-Arab Qabl al-Islâm* (« Histoire des Arabes avant l'islam »), tome 5, p. 224 et 225, et Abû al-Qâsim al-Zamakhsharî dans *Al-Kashshâf* (« Le révélateur »), p. 475.
4. De l'hébreu *Beth-El*, « maison de Dieu ». Météorite dans laquelle les anciens voyaient la manifestation d'une divinité tombée du ciel. *Beith-El* est le nom donné dans la Genèse à la pierre de Jacob. Les bétyles sont désignés chez de nombreux peuples anciens par « pierres noires », comme la pierre noire de Pessinonte, associée au culte de Cybèle, ou le Lapis Niger de Rome.
5. Sayyed Mahmoud al-Qimni, *al-Ustûra wa at-Turâth* (« Le mythe et l'héritage »), p. 163.
6. Ali ibn Burhân ad-Din al-Halabî (1460-1549), Alep, dans *As-Sira al-Halabiya*, livre du mariage d'Abdullah avec Amina et du puits de Zamzam.
7. *Ibidem*. Roqaya est la sœur de Saraqa ibn Nawfal, moine nestorien et cousin germain de Khadija, première épouse de Muhammad. Il apporta son soutien au prophète au début de la révélation, mais ne se convertit jamais à l'islam et mourut chrétien.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Ibn al-Muhaddith.
10. Territoire de la Grande Syrie (Syrie, Liban, Jordanie et grande Palestine).
11. Communauté, nation.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, « Livre du décès d'Abdullah ».
14. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Aïcha, la « Mère des croyants ».
15. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Ibn Âyidh.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Ibn Abbâs.
18. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Ibn Sâad.
19. *Ibid.*, transmis selon As-Souhayli, d'après al-Wâqidî.
20. Partie orientale de l'Empire sassanide, région située dans le nord-est de l'actuel Iran.
21. *Ibid.* Dans le texte « Iwan de Khosrô ». Élément de l'architecture persane, vaste hall voûté avec une façade rectangulaire ouverte par un grand arc.
22. Khosrô Anushiravan (531-579), roi sassanide.
23. *Ibid.*, transmis selon Kâab al-Ahbâr.
24. *Ibid.* « Livre de son appellation Muhammad », transmis selon Ibn Abbâs.
25. *Ibid.* « Livre de son allaitement ».
26. Abd al-Uzzâ ibn Abd al-Muttalib, dit Abû Lahab, oncle paternel de Muhammad, l'un des plus farouches opposants à l'islam. Il est condamné nommément dans la sourate CXI (111) du Coran (« La corde »): « Que périssent les mains d'Abû Lahab et qu'il périsse lui-même. Toutes ses richesses et tout ce qu'il a acquis ne lui auront servi à rien, lorsqu'il sera, dans un feu aux flammes ardentes, précipité, ainsi que sa femme, la porteuse de fagots, qui sera trainée, une corde rugueuse au cou ». Il est mort en 624.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Nord-est de La Mecque.
29. Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Yahyâ ibn Sayyid an-Nâs (1273-1334), Le Caire, dans *Uyûn al-Athar Fî Fundûn al-Maghâzi wa ach-Chamail wa as-Siyar*, « Nouvelle de l'allaitement de Muhammad ».
30. *Ibid.*
31. Ali ibn Burhân ad-Din al-Halabî (1460-1549), Alep, dans *As-Sira al-Halabiya*, « Livre de son allaitement ».
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Yahyâ ibn Sayyid an-Nâs, *op. cit.*
35. Ali ibn Burhân ad-Din al-Halabî (1460-1549), *op. cit.*
36. Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Yahyâ ibn Sayyid an-Nâs, *op. cit.*
37. Ali ibn Burhân ad-Din al-Halabî, *op. cit.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. Carrefour des caravanes et souk littéraire des Arabes de la période antéislamique, situé à 21 km à l'est de La Mecque. Les tribus s'y arrêtaient après la fermeture de *Souk Okadh* pour y attendre l'ouverture de la saison du *hajj*.
41. Colline de granite de 70 m de hauteur à l'est de La Mecque. Lieu où Muhammad prononça le « Sermon d'adieu » aux musulmans qui l'accompagnèrent dans son dernier pèlerinage. De nos jours, les musulmans s'y arrêtent encore lors du *hajj* pour y passer l'après-midi du neuvième jour du mois de *Dhu al-Hijja* (calendrier de l'Hégire). La présence au mont Arafat est considérée comme le rituel central du *hajj*, sans lequel le pèlerinage est déclaré non valable.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, transmis par al-Wâqidî, selon Ibn Abbas.
47. 250 km au sud de Médine.

The extensive endnotes did not go unnoticed by readers, as shown by Amazon.fr's Customers Reviews, which qualify them as "instructive"<sup>62</sup> or even "boring"<sup>63</sup> by a literary critic (Guillaume Doizy, a historian specialist in caricature, in *www.caricaturesetcaricature.com*). The critiques and readers' comments are relevant to my thesis as they indicate that additional peritext, "boring" or else, is read, perused, and boosts understanding; it may also defuse attacks related to the authors' motives (i.e., that they aimed to foster anti-Muslim racism). Endnotes allow readers to verify the authors' assertions and assist in distinguishing provocative, superfluous, and gratuitous graphic details from factual episodes.

Alongside the formal aspects discussed in the previous section, this historical perspective supported by endnotes and analytical documents, such as a map and chronology, aligns with a mediation strategy that consists of mitigating conflicts of interpretations and creating a critical distance between the audience and the narrative, repositioning the characters – here primo believers and polytheists – in a distant early Islamic or ante-Islamic past. All are supplemental peritextual elements that assist the readers in building historical and geographical knowledge (Gross and Latham, 2017, p. 119) and can dispel doubts as to the authors' ulterior intentions, such as promoting anti-Muslim sentiment. They are considered below.

### 2.2.2. Map, Chronology, and Muhammad's succession

The map, chronology, and Muhammad's succession appear only in *LVM3*. Placed before the start of the narrative, the map (see **Figure 04**) – a supplemental peritextual element – is a drawn illustration of Mesopotamia, the Arabic peninsula around the 7th century. It provides geographical information to the readers, including some topographic details to help them visualise the arid geography of the region and showing the presence of small urban and nomadic communities scattered over a vast area. It uses the traditional French and Arabic denominations of the regions, ancient cities, and tribes. Compared with maps found in authoritative books on the Qur'an (e.g., Ghaleb Bencheikh's 2019, p. 13), *LVM3*'s map has a pedagogic purpose as it contains information relevant to the BD: despite the approximative artistic representation of the region drawn by Charb, it is a didactic tool. This map enhances the general understanding of the story and facilitates the geolocation of various journeys described in the narrative. Thus, it supports a key element of my argument: it favours a geographic

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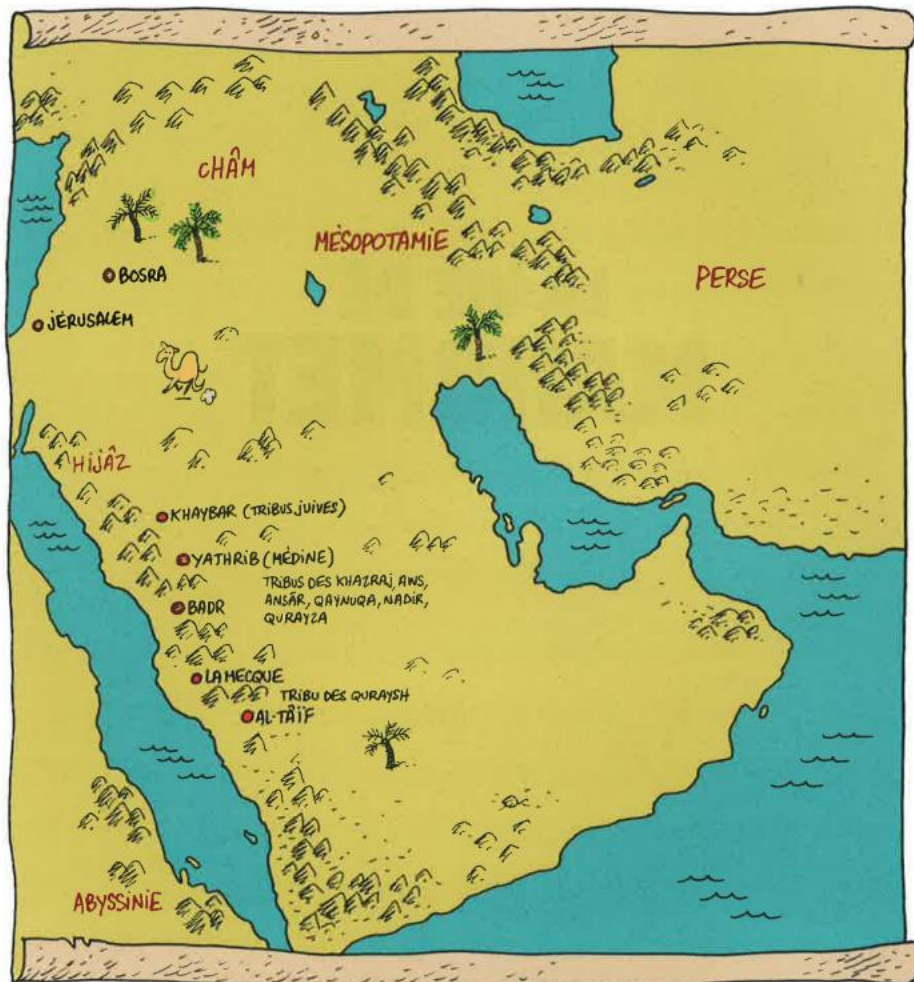
<sup>62</sup> Original: "Ce livre est impressionnant et très instructif". My translation: "This book is impressive and very instructive."

<sup>63</sup> Original: "[...] cette approche pédagogique qui s'avère donc rarement drôle, rarement décalée. On pourrait même dire ennuyeuse". My translation: "[...] this pedagogical approach is rarely funny, rarely quirky. One might even say boring."

contextualisation and immersion into a particular setting and ultimately plays positively on interpretative issues. Because of this, only available in *LVM3*, this document adds cultural legitimacy to *LVM3* and validity to *Charlie Hebdo's* claims of earnestness in the face of expected criticisms.

**Figure 04**

Map (*LVM3*, p. 4)



The short chronology (see **Figure 05**) has also a didactic function: it assists the readers in building contextual and historical knowledge (Gross and Latham, 2017, p. 119) and mirrors other introductory chapters of authoritative books on Islam or the Qur'an (e.g., Bencheikh, 2019, p. 11) which contain similar chronologies of events. *LVM* begins with the same date, 570, as Muhammad's birth, and ends with the Iberic conquest. Differences in entries between this BD and other reference books on the

Prophet may exist due to their respective needs and functions. Like the didactic drawn map discussed above, this factual supplement of the chronology satisfies the authors' ambition to be taken seriously and aligns with the historical approach adopted in the BD. It can also deflect some critiques pointing to the authors' lack of knowledge of the civilisation's history and context.

**Figure 05**

*Chronology (LVM3, p. 155)*

<b>CHRONOLOGIE</b>		
<b>570</b>	Naissance de Muhammad.	
<b>611</b>	Apparition de l'ange Gabriel à Muhammad et début de la Révélation.	
<b>622</b>	Hégire de La Mecque vers Yathrib (Médine).	
<b>629</b>	Pèlerinage de Muhammad à La Mecque.	
<b>630</b>	La Mecque est soumise par les musulmans.	
<b>632</b>	Pèlerinage d'adieu et décès de Muhammad, puis accession d'Abû Bakr au pouvoir.	
<b>634</b>	Décès d'Abû Bakr et accession d'Omar au pouvoir. Conquête de la Syrie, de l'Égypte, de la Palestine et de la Mésopotamie.	155
<b>644</b>	Assassinat d'Omar et accession d'Othmân au pouvoir. Conquête de la Libye et de la Perse.	
<b>656</b>	Assassinat d'Othmân et accession d'Ali au pouvoir. Conquête du Maghreb.	
<b>661</b>	Assassinat d'Ali et naissance de la dynastie omeyyade.	
<b>670</b>	Conquête du Maroc.	
<b>711</b>	Conquête de l'Andalousie.	

The Prophet's succession (see **Figure 06**) is a two-page presentation that mixes textual and visual elements to present the califs who succeeded the Prophet. It contains the califs' biographical details, their relation to the Prophet, their political and religious contributions to the expansion of Islam, and the circumstances of their (often) tragic deaths. Their depiction in four medallions with Charb's artistic

register. They are qualified as “well-guided” for conforming to the Holy Book (Bencheikh, 2019, p. 64, p. 215). The issue of the Prophet’s succession remains sensitive and is briefly referred to, sarcastically, at the end of the *LVM3* narrative part: the authors imply that his companions were too busy arguing about succession that they forgot about the dead Prophet and delayed his burial. This aspect of the narrative is not supported by endnotes. This addition to the peritext is informative about the aftermath of the Prophet’s death, but not necessary for comprehending the narrative. However, it may serve *LVM*’s perception and the authors’ ambition to be taken seriously.

**Figure 06**

*Representative Sample of the Prophet’s Succession (LVM3, p. 156)*

## LES CALIFES BIEN GUIDÉS

De son vivant, Muhammad avait évoqué sa succession dans la sourate<sup>6</sup> *al-Choura* (« la consultation »), où il invite la *oumma*, la communauté des croyants, à désigner ses dirigeants en fonction du mérite et non de l’hérédité.

Quatre califes élus parmi ses proches compagnons ont perpétué ses préceptes après sa disparition.

À l’exception du premier, qui mourut de maladie, ils furent tous assassinés.

**ABÛ BAKR**  
(573-634)



Surnommé *as-Siddiq* (« le Franc ») par Muhammad, il est l’ami intime du prophète et la personne qu’il chérit le plus après son épouse Aïcha, dont il est le père. Notable de Quraysh, il fut parmi les premiers à croire en la révélation et le seul à accompagner l’Honnête dans l’hégire. Il fut le seul à prier devant Muhammad lorsque ce dernier ne fut plus en mesure d’accomplir son rôle d’imam. Élu calife le jour du décès du prophète, il régna deux ans, jusqu’à sa mort, à l’âge de 63 ans.

**OMAR IBN AL-KHATTÂB**  
(579-644)



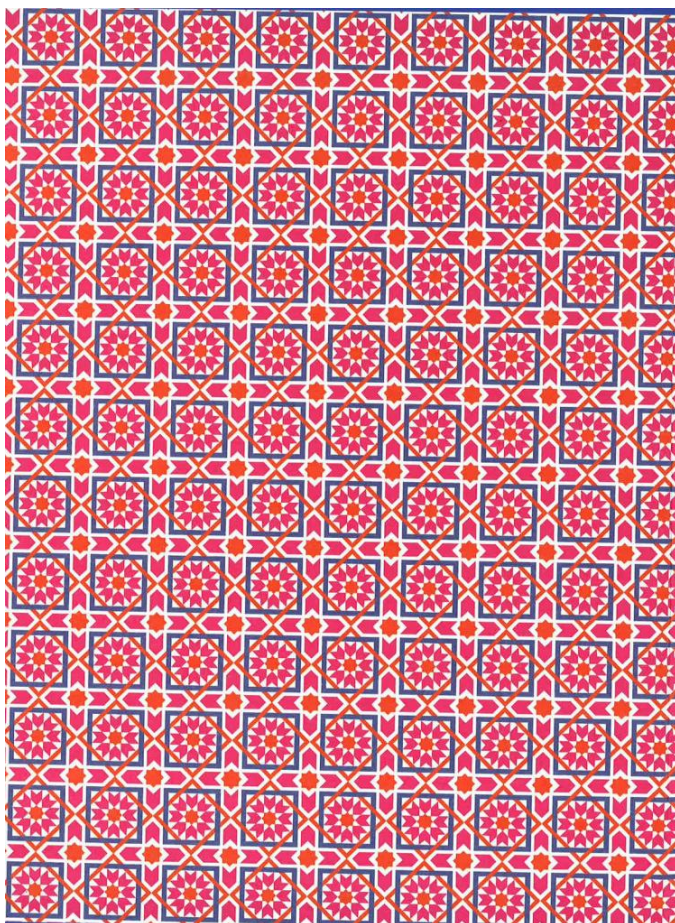
Surnommé *al-Fârîq* (« le Juste »), il est considéré comme l’un des plus grands dirigeants de l’histoire de l’islam. Élu le 23 août 634, il a instauré le calendrier de l’hégire, conquis l’Égypte, la Libye, le Châm, le Khorasan, la Perse, l’Anatolie de l’Est et le sud de l’Arménie. Il vécut indigent et instaura un système social d’aide aux démunis. Il est l’auteur de la célèbre phrase : « Si la misère était un homme, je l’aurais tué. » Il régna dix ans, jusqu’à son assassinat en octobre 644 par les Perses.

### 2.2.3. Endpapers

LVM3 endpapers (see **Figure 07**) are glued to the inside of the front and back book covers. The chosen design displayed on both pages of the endpapers evokes Arab-Islamic art and immediately situates the project into a geographical area. I argue it adds an element of authenticity to the work. The octagonal-shaped pattern fits well with the objective ambition of this BD, and visually, this geometrical marker may provide some scientific status. This element is also a visual marker of a scientific method for its geometrical non-figural design.

**Figure 07**

*Endpapers (LVM3)*



This peritextual element's function is two-fold. On the one hand, as a supplemental element, endpapers contribute to the general understanding of the content (Gross and Latham, 2017, p. 119). On the other hand, endpapers can also contribute to critical thinking (p. 119) as they act as a maker: the non-figural nature of the design, coupled with the *Charlie Hebdo* production, must alert readers

to possible covert meanings. Although the geometrical patterns comply with the ban on religious iconography, its use in a satirical production dedicated to the life of the Prophet would prompt readers to think beyond the endpapers and critically engage with the BD's content. However, it may lead to the questioning of the authors' intent since the choice of geometrical pattern on the endpaper is markedly juxtaposed to the figurative elements, notably the depiction of the Prophet on the front and back covers. Thus, these endpapers function in contrasting ways. They make the book commercially appealing to topically interested readers, toning down the impact of the front and back covers' figurative elements that clash with the ban on religious iconography. However, the design could mislead potential buyers attracted by non-figural patterns associated with Arab-Islamic art. This design is more evocative of the imaginary Orient in the Western eyes than any figurative elements. Therefore, its use or cultural misappropriation could be more – or as much – exposed to criticism. Endpapers are further analysed in the next chapter (using multimodality) as they have different functions.

### 2.3. Eliciting intentionality with prefaces and postfaces

Other peritextual tools, such as written prefaces and postfaces, also have a role in the authorial strategy which consists of clarifying intent and the caricatural target with an attempt to mitigate claims of harm due to interpretative conflicts. In agreement with Genette's theory of paratext, *LVM*'s forewords and postfaces are pivotal in the authors' strategy: they offer interpretative keys to read the text. All three publications include either a preface, a postface, or both. *LVM1* contains a two-page preface by Zineb and a one-page postface by Charb. *LVM2* does not contain a preface but a postface by Charb. *LVM3* has a two-page preface signed by Zineb and a shorter postface, unsigned.

The authors' ambition for the narrative is to didactic and informative. The authorial strategy requires that the peritext be informative and serves as critical tool for dispelling misunderstanding. Both the prefaces seek to inform and educate, as they remind readers what Zineb considers common knowledge, preparing the readers for *LVM1*. The prefaces were originally written and signed by Zineb for *LVM1* and slightly edited for republishing in *LVM3*. Each aspect of the preface highlighted below is relevant to the authorial strategy and forms the grounds on which the authors will find some legal, theological, and cultural legitimacy when drawing the Prophet whose representation, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is still considered taboo for the Muslim community.

The preface (pp. 4-5, *LVM1*) states five grounds for the authors' approach to the BD. The first ground is the French law (p.4, para 2) related to blasphemy. Zineb writes that despite the pressure from interest groups to reinstate laws on blasphemy, transgressions of religious taboos are no crime in France. This implies that religious caricatures are protected by the 1881 legislation on freedom of expression and the press<sup>64</sup>. Second (p. 5, para 3) is the Qur'an's position in matters of the Prophet's representation. Zineb emphasises that the Qur'an is the only source of truth that shall guide all devoted Muslims and that there is no express ban on the Prophet's depiction in the holy text. Third (p. 5, para 3) is the Shia artistic tradition of representation of the Prophet in manuscripts' illustrations which are based on literary descriptions. Fourth (p. 5, para 4) is that *Charlie Hebdo's* production is part of secular France's longstanding tradition of religious caricature, which started with lampooning representatives of the Church. The guarantees afforded to the caricatural expression found in fundamental freedoms are implied in the preface. Fifth (p. 5, para 4) is the historical argument, in which the author argues that Muhammad was not only a Prophet, but also a pivotal figure in human history. Thus, his story needs to be told to a wider public, especially in secular France where public education discusses religion through "matters of religion", a cross-disciplinary treatment, which looks at observable manifestations (such as veiling, celebrations, urban space, and arts) and historical events (such as religious wars and the emergence of the religion).

In the prefaces, Zineb also discusses the methodological approach to the text and the illustrations. The didactic and factual approach to the narrative relies on primary sources, mainly the *sîra*.<sup>65</sup> She underscores that the sources are authenticated and considered credible among the learned community of *ulemas* (p. 4, para 1). The prefaces stressed the earnestness of the didactic endeavour which should not be undermined by the chosen caricatural aesthetic adopted in the visual elements. Zineb states: "Here, Muhammad is not represented, is not caricatured. Charb's character, the little yellow man, is a metaphor." (p. 5, para 2)<sup>66</sup> However, she omits the fact that Charb's character is clearly identified in *LVM's* title, which weakens her argument. Indeed, the Shia artistic tradition uses metaphor or other avoidance devices, such as a white cloud or an empty space, to represent the Prophet. For Zineb, Charb's use of caricatural register should not distract the readers from the legitimacy of the text and its didactic merits.

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<sup>64</sup> The first attempt at abolishing the crime of blasphemy was in 1789; blasphemy law was ultimately repelled in 1881.

<sup>65</sup> The endnotes also contain references to *hadiths*. She adds that she also relied "on other Islamic sources".

<sup>66</sup> My translation. Original : "Ici, Muhammad n'est pas représenté, il n'est pas caricaturé. Son personnage, le petit-bonhomme jaune de Charb, est une métaphore."

A comparison between the magazines' peritext found in *LVM1/LVM2* and the compiled and augmented edition found in *LVM3* reveals some differences. The *LVM3* foreword is signed by Zineb and resembles *LVM1*'s preface. All paragraphs start and end identically, with minor changes justified for the augmented re-edition. However, the written text is carefully drafted, each paragraph providing insight into the authors' intentions, ethical convictions, and adopted approach, all essential for establishing the context of creation and publication.

The most noticeable change is a substantive addition that refers to overseas reception. It points to the threats of actual violence against caricaturists but also comments on the lack of reaction in the Arab-Islamic world after *LVM1*'s release. This addition seems to be motivated by recurrent accusations of provocation, racist intent, or Islamophobia circulating in the press, in scholarly or literary critiques (Héran, 2020; Hietalahti et al., 2016; Logier and Seniguer, 2015; Lentin, 2018; Cyran, 2013) and in readers' commentaries preceding *LVM1*'s publication in newspapers which treat information through a religious lens (*Safirnews.com*, 2012; *La Croix*, 2012), all of which I discussed previously. This new edit to *LVM3*'s preface replaces the reference to the fundamental freedom to caricature and duty to report on events, which may not have been convincing for audiences averse to religious caricature. The original line in *LVM1*'s preface asserts that *LVM* exists, "[b]ecause *Charlie*, a newspaper for cartoonists, has a vocation, a duty to draw, and reserves the right to caricature whoever inspires it"<sup>67</sup> (p. 5, para 2). By contrast, *LVM3*'s preface comments on past disproportionate reactions to cartoons leading to actual violence. On that point, Zineb chose an emotion-laden argument referring to the actual harm and damage inflicted on the headquarters and the editorial team in reaction to the drawings. It reads:

Because it's unacceptable that lives should be threatened because a pen, somewhere on earth, sketches the turban of the prophet. Because the cartoonist who has made irreverence a calling has a duty to push back the limits of censorship where they strangle freedom. By the way, Part 1 of the *Life of Muhammad*, published as a Special Issue of *Charlie Hebdo*, although it caused much ink to flow, did not spill a single drop of blood. Those who kill in Islamabad or Tripoli in the name of the clash of civilizations haven't waited for us to desecrate the sacred before doing their job. So why shouldn't the brush colour the prophet's beard?<sup>68</sup> (pp. 5-6, para 2)

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<sup>67</sup> My translation. Original : "Parce que *Charlie*, journal de dessinateurs, a pour vocation, pour devoir, de dessiner, et se réserve le droit de caricaturer qui l'inspire."

<sup>68</sup> My translation. Original : "Parce qu'il est inacceptable que des vies soient menacées car une plume, quelque part sur terre, esquisse de turban du prophète. Parce que le caricaturiste qui a fait de l'irrévérence un sacerdoce se doit de repousser les limites de la censure là où elles étranglent la liberté. D'ailleurs, le tome 1 de la vie de Mahomet, publiée en hors-série de *Charlie Hebdo*, bien qu'il ait fait couler beaucoup d'encre, n'a pas fait verser une seule goutte de sang. Ceux qui tuent à Islamabad ou à Tripoli au nom du choc des civilisations n'ont pas attendu que l'on profane le sacré pour faire leur besogne. Alors, pourquoi le pinceau ne colorerait-il pas la barbe du prophète? "

Prefaces and postfaces varied throughout *LVM* three-stage publication (January, July, and September) and responded to evolving concerns about reception over the whole year of its distribution. Those written and explicit peritextual elements are indicative of the strategy used to assert control over meaning and possibly perception, as well as mitigate the risk of actual physical and material harm against the caricaturists. Before 2013, actual and material harm faced by the team was palpable but also ascertainable: the authors had already become recipients of online hatred and death threats (Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016, p. 168<sup>69</sup>), and *Charlie Hebdo* suffered material destruction of the headquarters in 2011, justifying a precautionary approach in future publications. The 2015 tragic underestimation of the terrorists' intent validates *LVM*'s editorial team's mediated approach that factored in risk, even though it proved ineffective in the wake of the 2015 Paris attack.

The changes made to the book's preface between *LVM1* and *LVM3* show the attention given to reception by the authors. It also highlights the authors' perception that the hostile reaction to the announcement of *LVM1* release did not stir crowds after its publication. It is not clear whether the authors thought their strategy had been successful or if other factors, such as the absence of viral features in the BD discussed earlier and lack of interest from social agitators, explained this reaction. Forewords and postfaces, as tools for eliciting content and lessening interpretative conflicts, differ from the magazines (*LVM1* and *LVM2*) to the book edition since the narratives' content varies from the original text (in *LVM1* and *LVM2*) to the augmented version in *LVM3*. Chapter 4 discussion will show that *LVM3* preface needed the insistence on disproportionate reactions to caricatures, since *LVM3* additional content includes more nudity and sexually explicit episodes.

The authorial intention to clarify the grounds on which there can be representation of the Prophet comes through clearly through the prefaces and is rather convincing. The grounds form the core condition on which depends the whole project. In so doing, the prefaces attempt to disqualify the accusation that *LVM* is another provocation against Islam and its community of believers. The informative prefaces mainly state facts that are useful for readers to know prior to embarking onto a reading of the text. Those factual statements are the position of the French law on religious caricature, the Qur'an's position on Muhammad's representation, and the artistic exceptions to the ban on religious iconography. The prefaces also use what the anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls the "semiotic ideology" (interviewed by Joignot, *Le Monde*, 2015/12/31), which distinguishes the real thing/person from its representation, claiming that, in Islam, there is no such separation. Zineb's reliance on this distinction could weaken what is otherwise a sound factual basis for representing the

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<sup>69</sup> See also Avon (2010, para 34) and Val (2015, p. 185).

Prophet. The pedagogical ambition of the narrative is also stressed in the prefaces, and so is the methodology adopted during the process of creation of this rendition of the life of the Prophet. Zineb used authenticated chronicles of his life as found in the *sīra* and duly sourced them in endnotes, to add credibility to the claim of seriousness. The visual register uses common avoidance devices to circumvent the unsettled question of Muhammad's representation.

There are three postfaces of *LVM*. They all attempt to pre-empt a hostile reception and aim at neutralising the caricatural content. *LVM1* postface is signed by Charb. He insists on particular points already underscored in the preface, such as the need for more factual information to occupy a space where ideologues' opinions prevail (see back cover, para 1). It insists on the need to educate about an important religious and historical figure, especially in France, where Islam is the second most observed religion (para 1). He also points to the French law that allows the representation of the prophets of any religion. In line with the French legislation, he clarifies the target of *Charlie Hebdo's* caricatures, namely violent fanatics, not believers, and highlights that the caricaturists only use stereotypical features of radical Islamists and terrorists who commit crimes in the name of religion in order to denounce violence (para 1). He repeats the preface's statement that this rendition is based on authenticated sources and that the aesthetic should not distract from the credible text which he qualifies as "devoid of humour" (para 2). However, Charb and Zineb's visual/textual illustration of the life of the Prophet cannot be totally taken seriously: Charb's aesthetic register deflects the readers' gaze away from Zineb's serious text and draws them to the humoristic drawings.

*LVM2* postface is also signed by Charb who clearly states its function since there is no preface to *LVM2*. This is an "*avertissement*" ("trigger warning") that aims to prepare the readers for the possibly offensive narrative, in the case of *LVM*, an illustration of ancient texts (para 2). It rather warns the readers not to take ancient texts too seriously or literally, giving examples such as, not to spit in a child's mouth or not to kill Jews. He urges the readers to use critical thinking, repeating that this is a biography based on authenticated sources, and the content is devoid of humour or "*le second degré*" (irony or sarcasm) (para 3). Charb's semi-comical disclaimer is relevant; as a clear warning, it should not be overlooked by potential buyers or anyone curious about the content. It constitutes an attempt at preparing the audience, who throughout the process maintain their agency when deciding to read or peruse the content. The authors' strategy is rather meant to provide sufficient material to clarify the content and their intent.

As to *LVM's* postface, it is relatively short and partly reads as promotional text. It mentions the innovative nature of this caricatural BD, which used the *sīra* in its didactic pursuit. Like *LVM2*, it contains warnings for both believers and secularists, as both may consider religion taboo either for

religio-cultural reasons or on the grounds of their convictions. The justifications for representing the Prophet are also repeated. This postface does not add much to my argument.

These elaborated and exhaustive written prefaces and postfaces respond to a common critique related to caricaturists' ulterior motives of fostering anti-Muslim sentiment. This critique is encapsulated by Hietalahti et al.<sup>70</sup> who write:

Do cartoonists defend opportunities for socially mediated self-realisation with their art, then? Without knowing the actual intentions of the cartoonists, this question is difficult to answer. It can be safely assumed that some of the artistic work that is included, for example, in *Charlie Hebdo* aims to make a dig at cultural and institutional practices that are clearly unjust. It is equally clear that some of the cartoons aim to shock and irritate without including obvious intentions for genuine constructive critique. (2016, p. 251)

The authors of this critique overlook productions such as *LVM* that offer clarification as to the authors' intention and name the target of their caricatural charge, in this case, those who promote the literal reading of ancient texts. Charb and Zineb attempted to satisfy a contemporary desire for explicitness by inserting analytical documents interacting with the narrative. The authors may have succeeded with an audience who consented to engage with the text and read the peritext.

From the forewords, postfaces, and endnotes in *LVM*, readers can acknowledge the issues of interpretative conflicts and understand the rationale behind the creation of the BD. They can also sense the authors' urge to assert the validity of this project through endnotes and analytical supplements. In agreement with Genette's theory of paratext, *LVM's* forewords and postfaces are pivotal in the authors' strategy: they offer interpretative keys to read the text, but they also play the role of a necessary mediation between the audience and the transgressive way the life of Muhammad is represented in the BD.

The peritextual elements found in *LVM1*, *LVM2*, and *LVM3* made the authors' intentions and approach clearer for attentive and engaged readers, clarifying the caricatural charge's target, and explaining the context of creation. Those tools provide contextualisation and reader-narrative distance to purportedly mitigate *LVM* impact, minimise misinterpretation, and neutralise identification with the represented characters, in the spirit of a mediated perspective.

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<sup>70</sup> See also, Logier and Seniguer, 2015; Lentin, 2018; Neffati, 2021; Cyran in *Article 11*, 2013/12/5.

## 2.4. A mediated approach

One of my thesis' secondary aims is to demonstrate that the authorial approach, with its use of written and hybrid peritextual elements, can be compared to a cultural mediation intending to make the authors' viewpoints more explicit to contemporary and future audiences. It examines how this strategy can inscribe *LVM* in the long term, fending off claims of irrelevance due to changes in the readership. This section seeks to show how cultural mediation has been used in the field of cartooning.

Traditionally, mediation seeks to solve conflicts between people (e.g., mediation in divorce cases or different social groups) or between states (e.g., diplomatic mediation in wartime). It has been a common conflict resolution mechanism in social and political settings. In the cultural field, a mediation strategies address *conflicts of interpretation* issues related to cultural production. For example, in museology, mediation aims to re-contextualise an exhibition for contemporary visitors through the use of tags, frames, name plates, and visitor guides, showing the reflexive potential still held by art pieces. The art historian Bruno Nassim Aboudrar and the specialist in museology François Mairesse (2016) argued that cultural mediation's major challenge would be to bridge gaps existing between cultural production and its audience, lessening the symbolic distance between them. They defined cultural mediation, as

a set of actions aiming, through an intermediary – the mediator, who can be a professional but also an artist, a facilitator or a relative – to put an individual or a group in touch with a cultural or artistic proposal (singular work of art, exhibition, concert, show, etc.), in order to foster its grasp, knowledge, and appreciation. (Aboudrar and Mairesse, 2016, p. 3)<sup>71</sup>

A mediation strategy was recently attempted for the artwork of the deceased Swiss cartoonist Burki (Mathys, 2022/02/24; Baridon et al., 2023, p. 341). Thanks to a tool like artificial intelligence, the bulk of the artist's editorial cartoons have been digitalised to inscribe Burki's work in the long term. Each entry (in that case, each drawing) provides a direct link to *24 Heures*, the Swiss daily newspaper issue that had published the cartoons. The use of digital devices revives the various contexts of publication in order to fully understand Burki's cartoons' ecology and avoid interpretative conflicts. As Emilie

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<sup>71</sup> My translation. Original: "On appelle médiation culturelle un ensemble d'actions visant, par le biais d'un intermédiaire – le médiateur, qui peut être un professionnel mais aussi un artiste, un animateur ou un proche – , à mettre en relation un individu ou un groupe avec une proposition culturelle ou artistique (œuvre d'art singulière, exposition, concert, spectacle, etc.), afin de favoriser son appréhension, sa connaissance et son appréciation."

Mathys writes: "Digitisation offers a true mediation effort, giving younger generations the tools to decipher satire and maintain a critical eye that is more essential than ever."<sup>72</sup> (Mathys, 2022/02/24).

Is cultural mediation the way forward for caricatures? In 2013, the societal tolerance threshold for religious caricature seemed low, domestically and beyond (Ory et al., 2015, p. 19; Chappatte, 2019). In *LVM*, the authors purported to devise a strategy that addressed this shift in acceptance, grasp, and appreciation of the genre. I argue that this mediated approach offers an immediate access to the context of creation and elicits the authors' intentions to any readers engaging with the whole text. The peritext also mitigates the caricatural charge and offers distance between the readers and the text.

## 2.5. Results and Findings

Mediatic attention over polysemic religious cartoons has left public opinion divided over *Charlie Hebdo's* intent when representing Islam in its satirical productions. Accused of harbouring anti-Muslim sentiment, *Charlie Hebdo* varied strategies to regain agency over the meaning of its religious caricatures to prevent negative perception and further accusations of discrimination against Muslims. The informed choice to collaborate with Zineb el-Rhazoui is part of the overall strategy. The collaborative work with a specialist in religions improved the project's perception of rigor and earnestness (Nouailhat, 2020), debunking the recurrent accusations of provocation toward Muslims as it rather promotes a better knowledge of Islam (Doizy, 2013/01/06). However, scholars (Boespflug, 2013a; Avon, 2020), literary critics in local religious daily (*safirnews.com*, 2012/12/31), and overseas press from the Arabo-Islamic zone (Today's Zaman, 2013/01/04) questioned Zineb's credentials and the merits of this collaboration.

Besides being financially sound, the staged publishing strategy, along with a 'special issue' marketing operation, hooked the readers. The use of a staged distribution model enabled the authors to adjust content after each released part (or versions) and to test the audience's tolerance threshold for a contested topic. Further, it teased the readers eager to learn about the emergence of a religion or keen to check how their own tradition is expressed in further instalments or versions. Using a 'special issue' to address this contentious theme enhanced this BD into a critical document relevant to a wider conversation on the relation between the caricature tradition and Islam in a secular society. Moreover, the format change (from magazine to a book edition) provided a sense of cultural legitimacy and

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<sup>72</sup> My translation. Original : "[La numérisation] propose un vrai travail de médiation, offrant aux jeunes générations les outils pour décrypter la satire et conserver un regard critique plus que jamais essentiel."

inscribed this BD into relevance over the long term, as it contextualised the production for future audiences. The book version (*LVM3*) also represented an optimised version of the previous biography (in *LVM1* and *LVM2*) and, thanks to its augmented peritext and documents, the book version offered an opportunity to better situate the narrative in relation to ancient times and to put distance between the Prophet's biography and the reader in an attempt to lessen misinterpretation that may arise from the polysemic content. This altered reedition, with an edited postface and additional chapters, also empowered authors who had time to ascertain that the caricatural targets were clearly stated and that their biography was completed with additional interactive document serving their pedagogical intent.

The findings of this chapter show that the distinctive choice of a BD's long narrative structures in a multi-panel layout fits *LVM*'s function and target: this BD sought to criticise evolving norms rather than to direct its caricatural charge to a particular group. Because of its form, intent, and target, a comparison was made between *LVM* and the caricatural subgenre (*caricature de mœurs*) defined in Tillier's typology (2015). In addition, its full-length BD form provided space for the necessary subtext to polysemic images often construed as blasphemous or offensive to the Muslim community. Due to *LVM*'s provocative nature in the prevalent climate, special attention was given to its potentially viral distribution. In opting for a BD form, the authors reduced the risk of viral dissemination, since the BD form is not suited to online circulation. Its offensive features are spread across the long narrative structure and throughout multiple pages, reducing its dominance in the narrative when compared to a single-panel cartoon. This feature of the BD form impacts its reach, limiting its access to a local audience familiar with the context of creation, even if not necessarily an audience that enjoys *Charlie Hebdo*'s register.

As to the relation between the factual perspective and the decision to insert peritext, such as endnotes, a map, and a chronology, it was found that the factual approach adopted by the authors was well-served by the insertion of such peritextual elements. They helped provide critical distance between the readers and the narrative that pertains to a temporally and geographically distant reality. Endnotes, in particular, were able to provide references that authenticated episodes of the Prophet's life that could have been perceived as merely anecdotal or deliberately provocative. I interpreted these choices as a form of cultural mediation intended to humanise a distant figure and remove emotion in a symbolically charged topic. The analysis of the preface and postface revealed that those additions clarified the authors' intent. Intentions were positively worded in terms of the promotion of knowledge, pedagogy, and fundamental liberties. Yet, it was noted that changes occurred between the versions of *LVM*. *LVM1*'s objectives were didactic, and the peritext was thus informative as to the process of creation emphasising the research process and the legal/theological/cultural grounds on

which they based their claim that representing the Prophet was possible and did not constitute an attack on Islam or its followers, etc.). In *LVM2*, the authors' stated intentions varied as the authors wished to denounce literalism and the risk of a strict reading of ancient texts. Its postface warned that engagement with the whole *LVM* text requires critical distance. Other changes occurred in *LVM3*'s peritext. Despite those variations in the messaging, all prefaces and postfaces, were able to exhaustively state what the satirical magazine stood for, what *LVM*'s objectives were (throughout the year, as they varied from *LVM1* to *LVM2*). By 2013, the magazine had acquired an acute sense of the audience's sensitivities. The volatile climate and decline of tolerance for caricatural material explained the use of peritext in the pursuit of clarity from a cultural mediation perspective.

The entire chapter also explored the tools that enabled authors to maintain agency throughout its distribution phase and possibly at the reception stage. The authors' decisions relate to the appeal for clearer messaging in a society that has undergone media and audience transformations and whose tolerance threshold for religious caricatures may have declined.

### 3. Multimodal Analysis of *LVM*

This analysis aims to evaluate the effectiveness of *LVM*'s authorial strategy, which blends humour with structural and formal elements and a factual approach, focusing on covers and selected panels in *LVM1*, *LVM2*, and *LVM3*. The analysis tests whether *LVM* was successful in countering the claims of Islamophobia and address the sensitive nature of *LVM*'s use of religious iconography. The central argument of this thesis focuses on how *LVM* attempts to reestablish a balance in the relationship between the authors' intentions and the audience's perception. The argument further states that authorial decisions can create an environment that helps mitigate conflicts of interpretation arising from the visual/textual narrative, viewed through the lens of cultural mediation.

Multimodality is here the preferred approach for analysing the covers and visual content of *LVM*. This method allows to decode information that is intentionally embedded in the narrative structures of any image composition. Through this approach, the authors are viewed as agents, and images are 'read' using the available semiotic resources, such as foregrounding, salience, or symbolic attributes. Additionally, multimodality provides a framework for deciphering the perceived messages that arise from polysemic visual storytelling, acknowledging that readers can interpret the text in ways that extend beyond the authors' stated intentions. Since the *LVM* covers function as distinctive devices used by the authors to prime the audience for potentially divisive content, this multimodal analysis distinguishes between the covers and the contents.

The analysis below is in three parts. It first addresses the core issue of religious iconography in Islam and how the authors approached it. The Prophet's representation is a contentious issue considering the ongoing debates surrounding the religio-cultural norms which prohibit his depiction. Here, the analysis examines the way *LVM*'s authors construct their stated argument for representing the Prophet as found in *LVM1*'s and *LVM3*'s prefaces. It also explores the legal, theological, and cultural grounds that form the basis for the use of religious iconography, clarifying the authors' approach to the purported religious ban on images.

The second part of the analysis focuses on covers and evaluate their ability to create an enticing gateway to the story, considering the cultural aversion to the Prophet's representation. Additionally, it discusses how the covers prepare the audience for the content, neutralising the caricatural charge and offering a playful and non-emotional approach to the visual/textual content.

The last part tackles the analysis of selected panels pertaining to the visual/textual narratives. It questions whether the authors' choices of mixing format-related decisions, BD form, peritextual

additions, and a factual approach with a humoristic repertoire are likely to affect claims of provocation or harm emerging from sensitive content.

### 3.1. Judging a BD by its covers

The previous chapter explained the rationale behind incorporating an extensive written peritext. It has shown that the preface and postface assist readers in their understanding of the authors' work, prepare them by providing a context to the story, and sparking their curiosity about this specific type of BD that blends entertainment, information, and history. This section looks now at the role of *LVM*'s covers in preparing the readers for the content. Covers serve as both promotional tools designed to attract potential buyers. They act as a gateway for a broader audience to engage with the text critically, as the packaging itself is encoded with key information and visual cues that convey the essence of the content of the book (Gross and Latham, 2017, p. 119). In *LVM*, the name of the publisher and the Prophet's representation are displayed on the front and back covers, as well as on the book edge. Glancing at the cover is often sufficient for potential consumers and pressure groups such as political commentators and agitators to make a decision as to the content of the publication. In all editions of *LVM*, the main character, Muhammad/*Mahomet*, is clearly identified and appears on the front cover, alongside the names of authors and publishers. The majority of the French public is acquainted with their names, which are indicative of the magazine's type of content and its register; this is also true for a more global audience, particularly since the Caricature Affair.

The pictures and graphics on the cover of *LVM* contribute to the readability of the story and the readers' engagement with the content as they situate the story in a particular setting. *LVM1*'s cover displays a desertic landscape and a camel that suggest the location, and the attributes, such as Muhammad's attire, help identify his cultural and temporal context. Visually, the humoristic register disclosed on the covers is indicative of the authors' intentions to educate or inform in a playful manner. The humour is conveyed by the use of Charb's aesthetic register and his *petit-bonhomme*'s non-realistic features with big noses, big feet, and bulging eyes, as different as possible from the delicate Arab-Islamic art tradition. The images on *LVM*'s covers are meant to work as a "play signal" (Morreall, 2009, p.50) in the triangular relationship made of the cultural product, the audience, and the author. The philosopher John Morreall defines "play signals" as markers that indicate to the viewers that they are about to enter the world of comic storytelling where exaggeration prevails (2009, pp. 46-50). Morreall argues that such markers are required in social interactions to discriminate instances of non-serious zones from serious ones, markers that had evolved from facial expressions

or body language to more sophisticated codes (p. 37). He writes that “[w]hen we switch from a serious to a play mode, we need a way of letting people know that what we are doing and saying is not serious. Otherwise, they may be offended and may even take violent action against us.” (Morreall, 2009, p. 37). For example, on *LVM1*'s cover, young Muhammad is represented on the move, with a characteristic arm action (see **Figure 08**). He is followed by a camel whose eyes are spinning comically. If engaged in and enjoying the process, the participants will experience a cognitive shift when perceiving these “play signals”, begin to accept the playful mode, refrain from responding emotionally to reality, and distance themselves from the story in which they have no role. With the cover of *LVM1*, Charb uses his humoristic register to portray Muhammad's traits and attitude, making the readers aware that this BD is not a devotional book and preparing the audience for a non-serious rendition of the Prophet's life.

### 3.1.1. Overriding a taboo on images

The front covers of traditional BD, for example popular series like *Astérix* and *Tintin*, feature the illustration of the main character of the BD. In the case of *LVM*, a caricatural representation of the main character, here the Prophet, remains a taboo for the Muslim community and the main source of contention surrounding the work. Showing the Prophet's image also defies the ambition to create a humorous space from the onset for members of the audience averse to religious representations.

A close look at the multi-layered argumentation on which the authors' decision to represent the Prophet rests, is needed. Their reasoning is stated in *LVM1* and *LVM3* prefaces; this disclosure is essential to my argument since their strategy aims to clarify their intentions and lessen conflicts that may arise from the potentially offensive content and specific panels. The four-step reasoning to circumvent the ban on images and rests on various grounds: there are legal, theological, and cultural grounds that support their approach, all of which were named in section 2.3.

### 3.1.2. Religious texts and the French law position

Through its covers, this BD enters onto what is now considered the sensitive ground of the sacred in this iconographic – more so caricatural – representation of historical and religious figures. In line with the authorial strategy aiming at spelling out intention, both Zineb’s forewords and Charb’s postfaces referred to the challenge of navigating representation of the Prophet, clarifying for the readers how they addressed the ban on religious iconography that may transgress both a group norm and potentially French legislation.

Zineb writes that the most persistent taboo in the Muslim tradition is based neither in the Qur’an nor the Sunna, that is, the collection of *hadiths*, as neither clearly states a ban on the Prophet’s representation. However, she fails to address where the norm of the ban comes from and why it is culturally entrenched, as she phrases her comments for a BD audience and readers who may want to be entertained and educated about the topic. *LVM* is considered to be blasphemous according to cultural prescriptions or religious doctrine for encroaching on religious iconography since Islam is deemed religiously and culturally *aniconic*. Many authors have discussed the aniconic nature of Islam. For the Iraqi Islamic jurist Taha Jaber Al-Alwani (2000-2001), the Islamic culture is known as the “culture of the Word” rather than of images (p. 2). For the art historian Bruno Nassim Aboudrar (2021), who carefully distinguishes “cultural” aniconism from religious iconoclasm or political vandalism, an aniconic culture or society does not create images and occasionally destroys – partially or completely – the existing ones (p. 125). The French historian of religions and specialist in Christian iconography, François Boespflug (2017, p. 537), defines a tradition, a religion, a culture, a time, an object, or a décor as “aniconic” when it is devoid of figurative images. Relatedly, for the Sunnism specialist Dominique Avon (2020, p. 85), it is preferable to say that Islam is a religious tradition connected with some form of aniconism – rather than a religion that is strictly aniconic – since Sunni scholars have been promoting rules that could make Islam into an iconoclastic or iconophobic religion.

Other scholars discuss the origin of aniconism (Wensinck and Fahd, 1997, cited in Avon, 2020; Naef & Elliott, 2014) and trace the ban on images back to another aniconic religious practice – Judaism and the Decalogue – which states:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them, for I am Yahweh your God, [...] <sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> Translation provided by Wikipedia. Original in Boespflug (2017, p. 39) : "Tu ne te feras pas d’image, ni aucune forme de ce qui est aux cieux là-haut, de ce qui est sur terre en bas, de ce qui est dans les eaux au-dessous de la terre. Tu ne te prosterner pas devant eux et tu ne les serviras pas, car Moi, je suis Yahvé ton Dieu, [...]. "

According to Avon, Islam is suspicious of images that could foster veneration and lead to idolatry (2020, p.94<sup>74</sup>). Yet, as noted above Zineb's statement regarding the Qur'an's lack of explicit ban on representations is supported by Al-Awani and other scholars in Arab and Islamic studies. As Al-Alwani writes: "We will not find within [the Holy Qur'an] a single text that directly addresses the question of whether making or possessing "pictures" and "images" is prohibited" (2000-2001, p. 6). He further says that according to Islamic scholars, the ban is rather to be found in the prophetic sayings (*hadiths*). Similarly, for Avon (2020, p. 96) the Qur'an only contains allusions to images; this led to a greater reliance on the *hadiths* since the prophetic tradition provides explicit references to the ban – even though *hadiths* are part of the oral tradition posterior to the Qur'an and not all deemed authentic (p. 96).<sup>75</sup> Whether the ban on images is "revealed" or not in the Qur'an, the iconic status of God remains very restrictive for Boespflug (2017, p. 54), and the ban on God's and the Prophet's representations is firmly observed, notably among rigorous Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also in other countries where this current of Islam is strictly observed. Charb and Zineb suggest that *LVM*'s historical perspective could operate like a shield to the cultural/religious proscription since, especially in *LVM1*, they depicted the man Muhammad before he became the Prophet. However, to fully reach the objective of mediation that I ascribe to the prefaces, the prefaces and postfaces could have been more explicit as to the origin of the ban, citing some sources for the proscriptive *hadiths* – since there are none in the Qur'an – and adding the reasons for its prevalence in the Sunni tradition.

Charb's *LVM1* postface states that *Charlie Hebdo* can caricature Muhammad, as well as Jesus, Napoleon, or a popular cultural character like Zorro. He refers to the legal framework governing the practice of caricature. This is another ground on which the authors rest their decision to represent the Prophet in an attempt to mitigate conflicts. French and European legislations provide some clarity about religious iconography. An expression such as a caricature that is not strictly forbidden by law – i.e., the 1972 *Pleven* law and the 1990 *Gayssot* law – is therefore permitted. Any breach means that *Charlie Hebdo* will join the existing case law dealing with satire which includes cases of insult to a person or discrimination based on religious beliefs (Viennot, 2014, p. 56; Viennot, 2015, p. V). However, it is obvious from the cover that the BD will focus on a religious and historical figure (*Mahomet* as per the title), not the believers of the faith. For French law, this distinction is crucial as organised faiths, their prophets, representatives, and institutions are not protected by the legislation, only believers (persons) are. *Charlie Hebdo* is characterised as a "universalist, atheist, anticlerical, and

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<sup>74</sup> See also, Redissi, 2023, p. 55 (citing the Islamic author Biruni, who died in 1050) and Boespflug, 2017, p. 48, (citing Quranic prescriptions found in V, 92 + VI, 74 – re. the pre-Islamic idols, and in III, 43 + VII, 133-134 + XXII, 31 + XXV, 3-4 – re. idolatry).

<sup>75</sup> For a similar discussion on the absence of a ban in the Qur'an, see Chebel, 2006 in Avon, 2010; Clément, 1995, p. 14; Weston Vauclair and Vauclair, 2016, p. 223; Boespflug, 2017, p. 23.

secular magazine " (Zineb, *LVM1*'s preface, pp. 5-6) which does not distinguish Islam from other religions (Charb, 2016, p. 33) and led to place this religion within the scope of the caricaturists' critiques.

Moreover, the analysis of this BD's narrative will show that the authors did not represent the characters in a stereotypical manner. From a historical perspective, the characters are situated in their temporal and geographical context, in the pre-Islamic era and at the start of the Islamic civilisation. Moreover, the story represents Muhammad's tribe members, mainly as polytheists and primo believers, not as the harmful stereotype of Muslims as terrorists. As stated in the preface to *LVM1*, the special issues' caricatural target is the literal reading of ancient texts as promoted by ideologues, not the Prophet Muhammad himself.

When visually exaggerating the Prophet's traits, Charb wishes to find critical distance and remain within the legal boundaries and protections afforded to caricaturists by French legislation. Exaggeration is a necessary feature here to show that the viewer is entering a humorous space. In graphic satire cases, a court will almost systematically rule in favour of a caricaturist if the representation contains both an artistic/subjective element, ascertained by the presence of exaggeration and transformation of reality, and humour. This remains the contemporary judicial test. According to Dominique Tricaud (interviewed by the historian of caricature, Laurent Bihl, in Tricaud and Bihl, 2020), the legal advisor for the competing *Siné Hebdo*, the European and French courts are rather lenient with caricaturists, he writes: "But because the protection afforded to satirical artists and caricaturists is precisely that of humour and caricature, which correspond to the exaggeration recognised by case law and which allows them to go very far." (2020, p. 207)<sup>76</sup> The court's flexible approach accorded to caricature is confirmed by Camille Viennot (2015), lecturer in criminal law. She decoded how French courts have approached *Charlie Hebdo* publications over time, notably in the 2007 *Caricature Trial* and talks of "the jesters' right to disrespect" (p. XI).

Charb and Zineb rely on French legislation, the caselaw related to caricature, and the leniency of the court when approaching religious iconography in *LVM*. It is clear from the title that the story focuses on the Prophet of Islam, whose representation is allowed. This legal position is clearly stated in the postfaces of *LVM1* and *LVM3*. The latter reads: "Neither the French legislation nor the Qur'an forbids

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<sup>76</sup> My translation. Original: "Mais parce que les protections de l'artiste satirique ou du caricaturiste, sont précisément l'humour et la caricature qui correspondent à cette exagération que reconnaît la jurisprudence et qui permet d'aller très loin."

[the Prophet's depiction]." <sup>77</sup> Again, some details regarding the fundamental freedom at play and the legal limitations could have added clarity to fully dispel any misunderstanding.

Besides legal grounds and the unsettled question of a religio-cultural ban on the Prophet's depiction, the authors also put forward existing visual and literary traditions of Muhammad's representation that existed in the Arab-Islamic civilisation.

### 3.1.3. The Arts and literary descriptions

As part of the authorial strategy, the prefaces of *LVM1* and *LVM3* reveal an additional justification. In *LVM1*, Zineb asks: "Shiite Muslims have always done what *Charlie* has been condemned to hellfire for. How many Persian illuminations depict a turbaned Mohammed sitting cross-legged, dispensing his teachings?"<sup>78</sup> They inform readers that the BD is aligned with an established artistic tradition that has depicted the Prophet. This information aims to neutralise the caricatural charge and counter claims of Islamophobia for using religious iconography. Since this BD is not meant for an expert public who may want to trace the origins of the ban and get acquainted with the different dynasties that showed signs of tolerance towards representation, Zineb's comment remains succinct but generates critical thinking from readers who decide to engage with the text.

Zineb's allusion is supposed to encapsulate how artistic endeavours navigated around the ban on representation. As stressed above, prescriptive *hadiths* may have given a negative connotation to the image, extending the ban on God's representations to the Prophet's portraits. Avon (2010, para 26) reports that the ban may have emerged during the Umayyad period (661-750). However, as other authors, such as Blair (2016, p. 49) remark, there are exceptions to the restrictive status of religious iconography, found in the Islamic art of Persian and Ottoman illuminations ("*enluminures*")<sup>79</sup>. The Tunisian political scientist Hamadi Redissi (2023, p.25) retraces the aniconic doctrine to the 7<sup>th</sup> century but concedes that aniconism has been out of phase with artistic practice. In the medieval age, an aniconic doctrine was elaborated by jurists between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries that could not prevent the emergence of profane tradition, notably during the Safavid era, conceptualising pictorial art, called

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<sup>77</sup> My translation. Original: "Il paraît qu'il est interdit de le dessiner ... C'est faux. Ni la législation française ni le Coran ne l'empêche. "

<sup>78</sup> My translation. Original: "Ce pour quoi on voue *Charlie* aux flammes de l'enfer, les musulmans chiites le font depuis toujours. Que d'enluminures persanes représentent un Mahomet enturbanné, assis en tailleur et dispensant ses enseignements."

<sup>79</sup> For more literature on *enluminures* and evidence of an artistic tradition see Aboudrar (2021, p. 28), Redissi (2023, p. 59), Al-Alwani (2000-2001, p.24) and Ekhtiar (2014, p. 97).

“the theory of the two calamus<sup>80</sup>”. It was devised by artists and their literate contemporaries who tried to legitimise non-religious art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and recognised the role played by images in the transmission of knowledge outside devotional practice. A metaphor for the written and the pictorial expressions,” the theory of the two calamus” was “a way by which God teaches men about things they ignore”<sup>81</sup> (Redissi, 2023, p. 36).

However, there is an important caveat here. Visual representations in illustrated manuscripts were not meant for the general public but rather for limited viewers – mainly fortunate sponsors. The Islamic scholar Sheila Blair (2016, p. 54) talks of the “more private world of books made in the Persianate lands”. Sylvia Naef (Naef and Elliot<sup>82</sup>, 2014; p. 99) refers to those who have access to the figurative images as “restricted more or less to the wealthy classes”. François Boespflug (2013a, paras 17-18) supports the view that those creations were produced with a particular audience (caliphs and sultans) in mind. Zineb’s comments omit the private nature of those portraits.

In the digital era, religious iconography is more easily shared. Avon (2020, p. 93) writes about the contributions of research engines such as Google images, Bing images ou Qwant, for sharing caricatures. Avon remarks that those digital images defy Islamic jurists now forced to justify exceptions to the bans. He writes:

Sunni jurists agree on the meaning of the text considered to be revealed, the Koran, as well as on references to Hadith. They recognise an *ijma* - a consensus - from past centuries, but by using the method of *qiyas* - analogy - to compare situations, they believe that it is no longer possible to stick to a fundamental prohibition. <sup>83</sup> (Avon, 2020, p. 94)

In modern Arabo-Islamic societies, the aniconic doctrine had to adapt to new modes of visual communication such as photography, television, and cinema and resorted to a fiction *l’ombre captée* (Redissi, 2021, p. 17) which considers that these new forms of art and media do not create reality, they only capture its shadow (Redissi, 2023, p. 17; Avon, 2020, p. 98).

Those exceptions to the ban found in Persian and Ottoman *enluminures* have partly formed Zineb and Charb’s justification for the Prophet’s representation in *LVM*, being used to encourage the readers to

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<sup>80</sup> “Calamus” are reed pens used in calligraphy.

<sup>81</sup> The full quote : “L’art pictural est le pendant de l’art d’écrire, ils sont expressions l’un et l’autre du Calame divin, un moyen par lequel Dieu instruit l’homme des choses qu’il ignore. C’est la théorie des deux calames...”

<sup>82</sup> George Elliott (English translator).

<sup>83</sup> My translation. Original: “[Les juristes sunnites] s’accordent sur la signification du texte considéré comme révélé, le Coran, ainsi que sur les références au Hadith, ils reconnaissent un *ijma* [« un consensus »] des siècles passés, mais en utilisant la méthode du *qiyas* [« analogie »] permettant de comparer des situations, ils estiment qu’il n’est plus possible de se tenir à un interdit fondamental.”

lessen their emotional reaction when faced with a caricatural depiction (Zineb's preface, p. 4). The prefaces to *LVM1* and *LVM3* also evoke a final point that may have given the authors some leeway to challenge the ban on religious iconography. In *LVM1*, Zineb writes: "In the above-mentioned Islamic sources [the Aleppine *sîra* by Ibn Sayyid an-Nâs, the *sîra* by Ibn Hichâm, the Book of the Great Classes by Ibn Sâad, and other Islamic sources], there are detailed descriptions of the Prophet. Tall, white-skinned [...]." (*LVM1*, p. 4)<sup>84</sup> The prefaces only name the chroniclers who reported the literary descriptions of the Prophet. But for the BD's readers' ease, Zineb does not further explain the complex relation that the tradition has with the written description.

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century miniaturists who depicted the Prophet were inspired by literary descriptions when painting Muhammad, remarks Hamadi Redissi (2023). For him (p. 54), the Prophet's physical traits, characteristics, and qualities are well known and have long been described by the 9<sup>th</sup>-century authoritative author Tirmidhi (d. 892). Abouddrar, in *Les dessins de la colère* (2021), analyses emotional reactions to images including to *Charlie Hebdo's* caricatures. He lists numerous descriptions provided by authors contemporary to the Prophet, as transmitted by the *hadiths*, forming a corpus of Muhammad's physiognomy (p. 64). Among others, he mentions Tirmidhi, who compiled ancient descriptions, all contained in his collection known as the "*shama'il*", "the perfections" (p. 56). A description of the prophet by the 10<sup>th</sup> century Persian historian Al-Tabarî stands out:

He was of medium height, neither very tall nor very short. His complexion was pinkish-white; his eyes were black; his hair was thick, shiny, and beautiful. His beard, which encircled his entire face, was well-furnished. The hair on his head was long, shoulder-length, and black. [...]. Between the two shoulders there was a growth the size of a dirhem, surrounded by hair, not sparse, but bushy.<sup>85</sup>

Contemporary scholars (Gruber and Shalem, 2014, p. 5; Gril, 2006, para 17; Redissi, 2023, p. 54) also refer to the *shama'il* as a source of the Prophet's authentic descriptions. Those traits are a starting point used by Charb (*LVM1*, pp. 11-12), notably the black hair, the stocky size, the line of khôl circling the eyes, and the bushy hair on the growth at the level of his shoulder (the latter being the "seal of the prophecy", in Gril, 2006, para 7). From the outset, Zineb's preface carefully transcribes the

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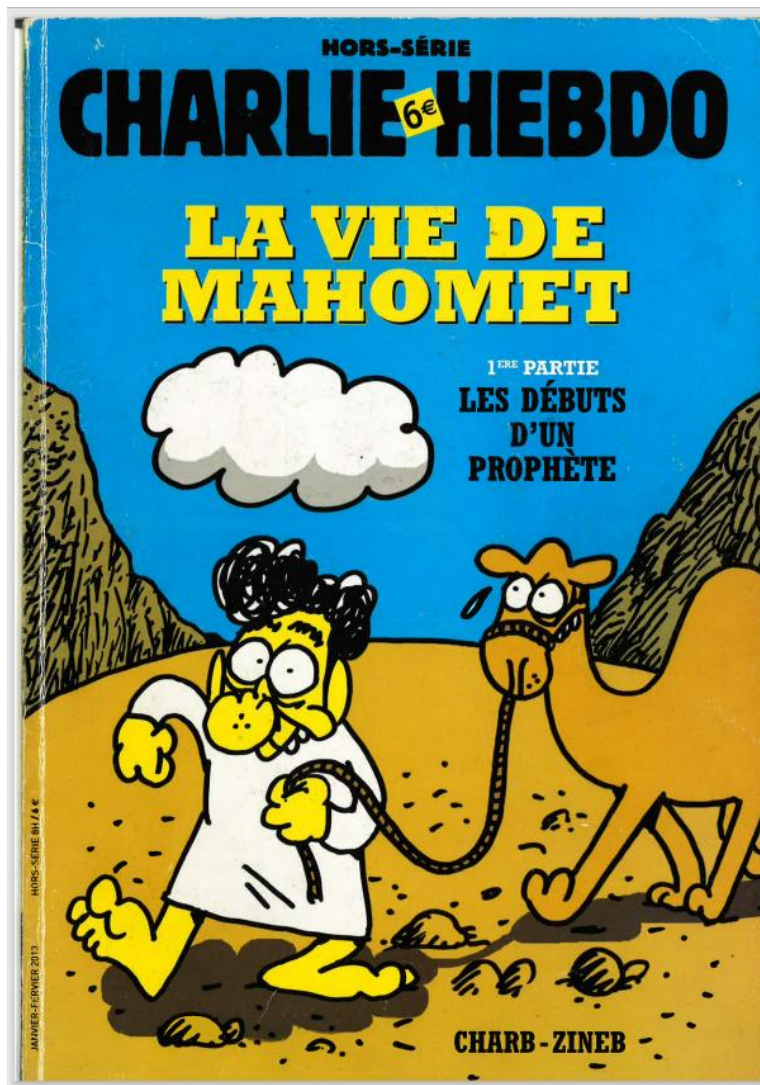
<sup>84</sup> My translation. Original : "Dans les sources islamiques précitées [la *sîra* alépine d'Ibn Sayyid an-Nâs, la *sîra* d'Ibn Hicham, le Livre des grandes classes d'Ibn Sâad, et bien d'autres sources islamiques], il existe des descriptions détaillées du prophète. Grand de taille, blanc de peau [...]." Note that the endnotes also refer to *hadiths*.

<sup>85</sup> My translation. Original: "Il était de taille moyenne, ni très-grand, ni très petit. Son teint était d'un blanc rosé ; ses yeux étaient noirs ; ses cheveux épais, brillants et beaux. Sa barbe, qui entourait tout son visage, était bien fournie. Les cheveux de sa tête étaient longs et lui allaient jusqu'aux épaules ; ils étaient noirs. [...] Entre les deux épaules il avait une excroissance de la grandeur d'un dirhem, entourée de poils, non clairsemés, mais touffus."

Prophet's physical description as provided by multiple Islamic sources in an attempt to dismiss claims of the transgression of a taboo on Muhammad's portrait and inaccuracies as to his description (LVM1, p. 4). On the front cover of LVM1 (see **Figure 08**), the depiction of the prophet partly conforms to the literary description.

**Figure 08**

*LVM1, Magazine Front Cover (January 2013)*



### 3.2. A Multimodal Lens on Covers

This part of the analysis focuses on covers. Despite being a peritextual element, their images contained narrative structures that are better interpreted through a multimodal method. As a gateway to the

story, front and back covers can entice or repel audiences to further engage with LVM, considering the cultural aversion to the Prophet's representation. This section discusses how the covers prepare the audience for the content and offer a non-emotional approach to the visual/textual content from a mediated perspective.

### 3.2.1 LVM1 and LVM2 covers (magazine format)

The visual register used by the authors partly reveals an intent to switch from a serious mode to a playful mode so as to let people know the nature of the cultural production. The starting point is to analyse the choice of Charb's visual register on the covers, namely, the representation of the Prophet by *un petit-bonhomme* as a satisfactory BD's "good character". Graphically drawn with a big nose and big feet, whose stable features are recognisable throughout the story and participate in "*la fidélisation du lectorat*" ("the readers' loyalty to a character"). The link between the human figure and the title is clearly established from the cover, visually identifying the main character as the Prophet that will become a constant signpost throughout the story – and naming him. It shows a foregrounded lead character as a young and stocky man with yellow skin.

By multiplying exaggerated attributes from the covers and later in the story, Charb visually informs the reader that this is a mere representation of the historical figure, only the image of an image, and not the image of Muhammad himself. In LVM, the most recurrent attribute that identifies him as the Prophet is the iridescent white attire (*qamis*, turban, and slippers) graphically defined on the cover, which makes him easy to spot throughout the narrative. The colour symbolism, especially the use of white, serves formal and symbolic purposes: as a specific BD device, it allows readers to identify the main character within crowded panels, and in the case of the Prophet's attire, white symbolises simplicity, cleanness, and faith (Hirsch, 2020, p. 102). It reflects his wisdom and knowledge as expected from a spiritual leader of untarnished character. Charb's illustrations progressively matched the accepted literal description. As time passes and Muhammad ages, the authors provide textual and visual descriptions authenticated in the endnotes or captions. For example, the traits are textually repeated on p. 12 (LVM1, the Prophet's birth) and duly referenced in endnote 17 (transmitted by Ibn Abbas). The visual matching with the *shama'il* starts with LVM2 cover.

Besides being a "good character" the use of Charb's affectionately named *petit-bonhomme*, as early as on the covers, attempts to satisfy legal criteria (exaggeration and humour) and a group concern in steering the magazine away from Muslim stereotypes that foster fear about Muslims. Instead, as explained in an interview *Charlie Hebdo's* caricaturist Luz's interview (cited in Gonzalez and Kaufmann,

2016, p. 48), Charb opts for endearing traits that could encourage closeness between the authors and the readers. In this interview, Luz described the magazine's *petit-bonhomme* as an affectionate and "familiar" character.<sup>86</sup> The covers are used as a tool, a buffer that sets the tone of the BD, before getting to the potentially harmful content. With the use of a device such as the *petit-bonhomme*, the authors endeavour to establish some distance between the reader and sensitive panels contained in the story (what I call *reader-narrative distance*) and, at the same time, achieve closeness with their audience (what I call *reader-author proximity*).

*Reader-narrative distance* is the divide that exists between the readers and the world described in the narrative. Choosing a setting many centuries in the past allows the authors to lessen the charge contained in the topic and redirect the audience's attention to *LVM*'s intended didactic purpose. The desire for *reader-narrative distance* is clear in *LVM1*'s preface where Zineb calls for rationality and critical distance to prevail; she writes: "Here Muhammad is not represented, is not caricatured. Charb's character, the little yellow man, is only a metaphor. Let's be serious, who could pretend that Muhammad was like this, under the traits attributed by the authors?"<sup>87</sup> (*LVM1*, preface, p. 4). In this quote, she also calls for emotions to be set aside, in line with the ethics of humour (Morreall, 2007, pp. 32-33). *Readers-authors proximity* is the sense of closeness that the authors try to establish with the audience using all semiotic resources available, in this case, an avoidance mechanism such as the endearing little man who stands for the Prophet. In so doing, the authors aim to dispel the claim of ill intent, trying to make the audience smile rather than engender hostility.

Alongside Charb's *petit-bonhomme*, the composition of other elements on the cover contains information which may help to prepare the audience to enter this imaginary space of the Prophet's biography and mitigate the emotional reactions when faced with possibly offensive panels in the narrative. To achieve this, the multimodal analysis examines the authors' play with available semiotic modes such as choice of gaze and facial expression, positioning, foregrounding, dynamic process, salience, and vectors to mitigate their impact on audiences. In other words, the analysis deciphers the information intentionally embedded in the image by the authors to channel their viewpoints and lessen the caricatural charge. One should keep in mind that the audience's interpretation can intervene at any stage of the reception, hence the need to examine unintentional messages emerging from the image. This helps interpret cover compositions and establish whether the image on the front page, either favours cognitive disengagement and fosters amusement, or deters members of the

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<sup>86</sup> For an analysis of the role of an affectionate and familiar character, see Gonzalez and Kaufmann (2016, p. 56).

<sup>87</sup> My translation. Original: "Ici, Muhammad n'est pas représenté, il n'est pas caricaturé. Son personnage, le petit bonhomme jaune de Charb, est une métaphore. Soyons sérieux, qui pourrait prétendre que Mahomet était ainsi, sous les traits que lui attribue ce livre ? "

audience from entering the play space, alternatively, whether the image carries a neutral meaning. The authorial strategy is to mitigate claims of harm due to interpretative misunderstanding, and the peritextual elements such as covers, function as a threshold to the story that may affect the readers' decision to further engage with the narrative.

For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p. 113), there is an "interactive dimension" in an image; in other words, the represented characters and the viewers interact through an eyeline that connects them in various ways, in which the choice of gaze produces meaning. The caricaturist uses the image to *do something* to the viewer. On the covers of *LVM1* and *LVM2*, Muhammad stares at the viewers, producing a "demand" to enter into an imaginary relationship with the audience (p. 117). For staunch secularists, Muhammad's welcoming gaze may mean an invitation to open the BD and be surprised by the unusual informative content about a religion unknown to many. For suspicious audiences (accidental viewers, cultural Muslims, religious believers of the faith), the Prophet's smiling face and absence of stereotypical attributes (especially on the *LVM1* cover), may be markers that the magazine is shifting in the way it represents the Prophet, enticing some to proceed with their reading, trust the process of discovery, and be critically engaged with the rest of the narrative.

Apart from this interactive dimension of the cover images, the Prophet's non-threatening facial expression suggests the pursuit of closeness with the readers. Muhammad's unassuming attitude may appeal to secularists interested in the man, a historical figure rather than the spiritual leader. As stressed above, his demeanour contrasts with common stereotypes of Arabs or Muslims found in popular culture productions, who are, as media scholar Jack Shaheen writes, depicted as "brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" or "billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers" (Shaheen, 2003, p. 172, cited in David Feltmate, 2017, p. 199). Humour studies researcher Jessica Milner Davis discusses the construction of stereotypes and their interpretative mechanics, arguing that stereotypes' "arranged artificiality signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience and a lessening of their humanity" (2024, p. 25). If we turn to the authors' stated intentions found in the *LVM1* preface and the *LVM1* and *LVM2* postfaces, they state that the caricatural targets are not the believers, but radical Islam and the promotion of a literal reading of ancient texts. The authors also insist on the didactic nature of *LVM* and its target audience of an uninformed French public. The multimodal analysis of selected panels below shows that the represented characters are not essentialised or dehumanised. Their characters belong to an identified human group whose multi-faceted life and history are recounted in the BD.

The comparison between covers presages changes in the respective narratives. As a reminder, *LVM1* contains the early part of the Prophet's life while still in Mecca, where he is getting progressively

recognised as a spiritual leader, and *LVM2* covers the second part of his life, his arrival to Medina, as the Prophet and later as a warlord. *LVM1*'s cover depicts Muhammad as a man devoid of symbolic attributes, demanding proximity, and approachable by his demeanour. The first part of his life in *LVM1* supports the interpretation of cover's intention which consists of describing the emergence of a new religion and context in which Muhammad was born and raised. In the content, there are illustrations of his birth, breast-feeding, and education, but also his moral qualities. The authors' emphasis on Muhammad's humanity and his historical relevance are pivotal to the factual approach as it leads to a toning down of emotional reactions, detachment, and critical engagement with the narrative. To achieve disengagement and amuse the reader, *LVM1*'s cover functions as a play signal with its humorous style. It works alongside the peritextual documents (preface, chronology, endnotes) – all mediation tools – that prepare the audience for the *LVM1* narrative, as well as consecutive narratives (*LVM2*, *LVM3*), by historicising the life of Muhammad. The artistic choice of placing the emphasis on Muhammad the man, invites the audience to put some distance from the content and adopt a playful and non-emotional approach to life. For Morreall, a change in thought and perception operates in the presence of amusement: "Amusement, by contrast, involves a cognitive and practical disengagement from what is going on around us. We are not serious, not concerned about dangers and opportunities, and not prepared to act." (2018, p. 32) *LVM*'s authors invite the audience to take that side-step into a playful space.

The covers of *LVM2* (see **Figure 09**) show a man in action. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p. 55), there are dynamic processes in the image produced by the unfolding of events or the interactions of different elements within the image. Here, young Muhammad is represented in a dynamic walk and a decisive gesture shown by his free arm. This conforms with existing representations pertaining to the artistic tradition of Persian illustrations (Boespflug, 2017, p. 51). As we learn in the narrative, the Muhammad on the cover is on a messianic mission. Thus, his direct staring at the reader is an attempt to persuade the viewers of his legitimacy as the spiritual leader despite being followed only by a camel in *LVM1* cover.<sup>88</sup> The early suspicion toward Muhammad as God's messenger and the new prophet is confirmed by a previous mufti of Marseille and scholar in religious studies, Soheib Bencheikh (*Le Monde*, 2006/02/10). To illustrate the difficult first years of spreading the new religion, *LVM1*'s cover shows Muhammad crossing the desert, thus, presenting an illustration of the French expression "*la traversée du désert*" ("going through hard times"). However, the artistic choice of central positioning and foregrounding gives him status. This is a response to criticisms of *Charlie Hebdo*'s (in-)famous

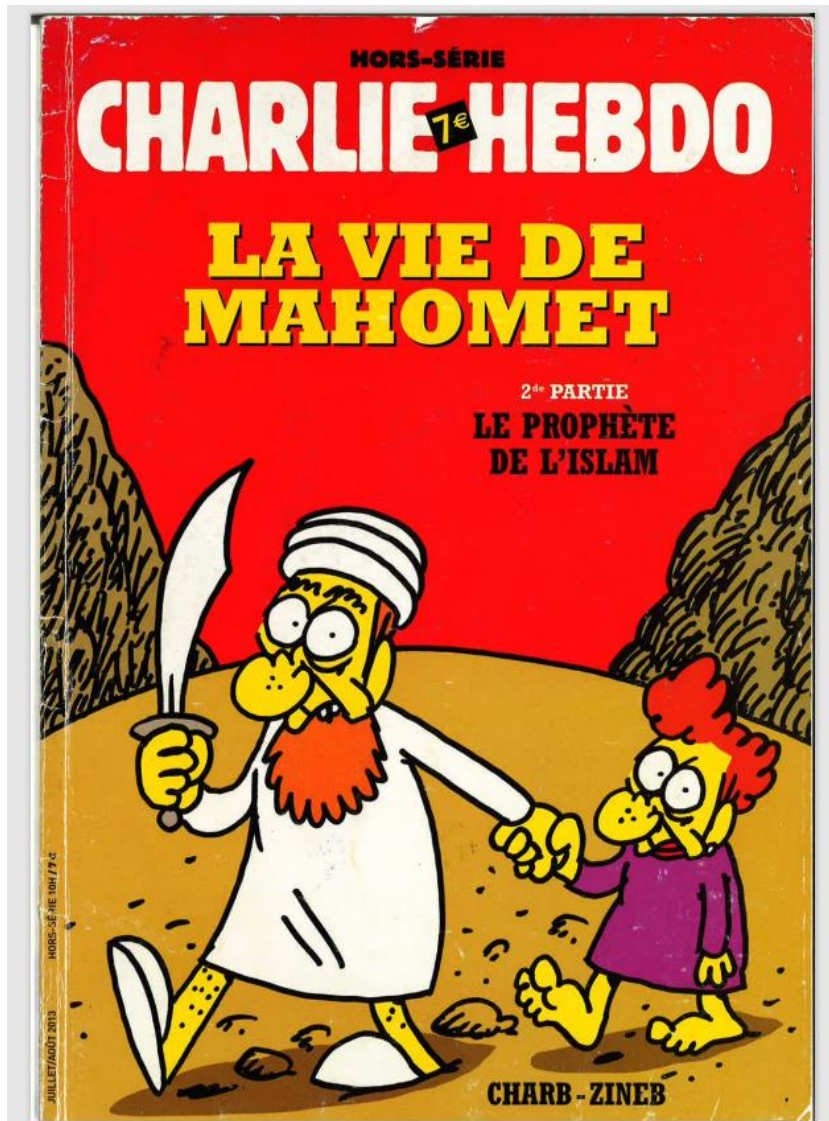
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<sup>88</sup> Textual elements in *LVM2* explicitly mention the difficulties encountered when convincing members of his own family and tribe. Page 8 describes in detail meetings between Muhammad's uncle and the tribe's dignitaries, all polytheists. The latter threatened violence against Muhammad and his protector unless he stopped pretending to be a prophet. This episode is authenticated by endnote 9.

single-panelled disparaging caricatures (Aboudrar, 2021, p. 80; McGrogan, 2016, p. 173), which have been blending with the French far-right nationalist discourse, often perceived as fostering Islamophobic sentiment and igniting cultures wars.

Figure 09

*LVM2, Magazine Front Cover (July 2013)*



There are two other characters on *LVM1* cover, the camel and the cloud, that interact with each other and with the audience. The camel's gaze is directed at a white cloud above Muhammad, drawing the readers' gaze to an aureole or halo-shaped cloud, a sign of Muhammad's destiny and a divine protective presence. The cloud symbolism as an appearance of the angelic or divine is confirmed by

scholars, and similarities are found with ancient people from Mesopotamia who could not use tangible objects to represent their gods. The art historian Jacqueline Basker states that “[b]oth Jesus and Muhammad ascended to heaven in a cloud as a theophany, an appearance of the divine” (2006, p. 111). The cloud appeared in *LVM1* narrative (p. 17, authenticated in endnote 38) when the Prophet’s sister first noticed the cloud over the child’s head.<sup>89</sup>

Avoidance devices such as an aureole-shaped cloud are discussed by scholars (Blair, 2016, p.49; Redissi, 2023, p.65; Boespflug, 2006, p.50), notably to dissimulate the Prophet’s face. The American art historian and professor of Islamic and Asian art, Sheila Blair, discussing a Persian manuscript illustration (see **Figure 10**) notes: “veiled Muhammad astride the miraculous *Buraq*, [...]. In front of them, the archangel Gabriel, identified by a smaller gold aureole, leads the way forward and slightly upward.” (2016, p. 49). Comparisons of different avoidance practices are also described by François Boespflug (2017, pp. 51, 53; 2006, p. 50); when depicting the Prophet, Persian and Ottoman illustrations showed the use of a veil, but also an empty space, or a halo.

## Figure 10

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<sup>89</sup> Its protective nature is further mentioned p. 33 (two clouds ridden by two angels), p. 37 (persistent trail above Muhammad’s head), and p. 47 (the cloud provides shade over Muhammad’s caravan during the crossing of the desert).



FIGURE 10 Page from a manuscript of *Kalila and Dimna* copied at Baghdad in AH 678/1279–1280 CE with illustration showing “The Prophet’s Night Journey” added c. 1385–1395  
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, PARIS: SUPPL. PERS. MS. 376, FOL. 2B

Popular culture productions with explicit and contentious references to religion, notably Islam, have reverted to similar strategies: for example, in *South Park*’s episodes 200 and 201, the Prophet is dressed up in a pirate costume, or a paper bag over his face. The cloud’s symbolism demonstrated Zineb’s knowledge of the Muslim tradition and its exceptions, the weight invested in this symbolic

element, and her acknowledgment of the strict ban on God's representation. True to authoritative texts, Charb may have refrained from drawing God but hinted at a divine or angelic presence when depicting the cloud on the front cover. Note that *LVM* narrative explains the symbolism to readers not familiar with the sacred texts.

Yet, *LVM1*'s cover may misguide some viewers since it hardly contains transgressive elements – apart from his representation. Even that, since the cover depicts Muhammad before revelations is not necessarily transgressive: as a young man, Muhammad was arguably only a historical figure rather than the Islamic authority subject to the ban. The magazine versions were published six months apart, and *LVM1*'s cover probably tried to set a neutral tone at the start, with an uninterrupted blue sky and absence of symbolic attributes, to entice the audience and potentially dull the public's attention as *LVM2* includes sensitive content. So, the image's composition and facial expressions here reveal layers of meanings deliberately embedded by authors or emerging from the readers' process of interpretation: the choice of a direct gaze, non-threatening expression, and absence of harmful popular culture stereotypes (no connotation with violence) disclose the authors' attempt to interact with the viewer and introduce readers-authors proximity; plus the absence of symbolism refers to a distant pre-Islamic past to establish some reader-narrative distance to lessen a possible emotional charge.

By contrast, *LVM2*'s cover reveals additional information (**see Figure 09**). The image on *LVM2* cover shows a mature Muhammad staring at the viewer. At this point in the narrative Muhammad now has religious status and followers. The authors did not draw an obvious smile meant to produce social proximity (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 122), but chose puzzling facial expressions to probably persuade the viewer of the Prophet's unstoppable mission and his uncompromising character. This artistic choice for the second magazine's cover predicts a change of tonal register in the biography, since the narrative covers the Prophet's life as the leader of a community and a warlord.

There are many conspicuous details in the image presaging changes, such as the sword, the characters' orientation, the identity of a second character, and the colours. While they may not be intentional on the part of the authors, they all add meaning easily which may be easily construed as a violent charge by viewers. Firstly, the presence of a sword together with the characters' orientation in the image, can be interpreted as a provocation. Applying Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal method (2020, p. 104), a weapon is the Prophet's new symbolic attribute that has replaced the cloud. The extension of the arm by a sword, as waging a war, can be perceived as tapping into Islamophobic stereotypical references that portray Islam as a threat (Aboudrar, 2021, p. 80; Feltmate, 2017, p. 199; Sifaoui, 2006, p. 30), associating this Abrahamic religion with violence and its believers with terrorists. For Aboudrar

(2021, p. 80), drawings that resort to “(im)moral characteristic” (Aboudrar, 2020, p. 80) and whose racist references have been attributed to Arabs (or Muhammad specifically), are dubious as they follow the iconographic tradition of racist images. Note, however, that a representation of the Prophet with a sword can be found in the US Supreme courtroom frieze; in that case, it symbolised the power of the state and its leader and such symbolism was used for depicting “historical figures who exercised worldly authority” (Al-Alwani, 2000-2001, p. 1, footnote 4). The representation displayed on the frieze and for the public to see was approved in a legal opinion (*fatwa*) by the Islamic legal scholar Taha Jaber al-Alwani (2000-2001, p. 1).

While the second part of the Prophet’s biography touches upon his life as a political leader governing as much as spiritually guiding his people, the visual choice of a sword tones down his religious role and highlights his imperialist intent. However, had the sword been tainted with blood, it could have been construed as a further provocation from the authors. With the adoption of the consensual white colour for the sword, a colour of peace, rather than the ambivalent, even violent red, the authors seek to neutralise the charge to demonstrate their intention to remain non-offensive on *LVM2*’s cover. Thus, despite the tonal difference between both magazines’ covers, the untarnished white blade plays a positive role in the overall perception of the cover of *LVM2*.

Lastly, the change in colour choices from the cover of *LVM1* to that of *LVM2* is indicative of a corresponding change in the respective narratives, and the latter inferences to the Prophet’s participation in bloody internecine wars and civilisation building. When comparing both magazines’ front pages’ colour palettes, *LVM1*’s does not contain emotionally charged colours, limited to white (*qamis* and cloud), blue (sky), and ochre (sand). White refers to light rather than an actual colour in the Islamic tradition (Ifrak, 2023). It is a preferred colour (Hirsch, 2020, p. 102) with a positive connotation of holiness, cleanness, and virginity. The CNRS researcher and codicologist Karim Ifrak who researched the colours that are most discussed in the Qur’an and writes: “*God is light (Nûr)*. He is the source and the symbol of all light whose attributes are beauty, pureness, magnificence, enlightenment, goodness, forgiveness, etc.”<sup>90</sup> (2023, p.22). The setting functions as an essential element in the factual approach as it situates the narrative in a geographical context and its ecology while adding authenticity to this historical rendition of Muhammad’s life. The choice of colours for settings is almost identical in both magazines’ editions, mainly consisting of a sandy Arabian desert and bare rocky hills where the spiritual leader receives the revelations. The dominant blue sky of *LVM1*’s cover contrasts with the red sky on *LVM2*’s cover, another example of a tonal shift between

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<sup>90</sup> My translation. Original: “*Dieu est Lumière (Nûr)*. Il est la source et le symbole de toute lumière dont les attributs sont la beauté, la pureté, la magnificence, le rayonnement, la bonté, la clémence, etc.”

the two covers. For scholars (Ifрак, 2023, p.32; Hirsch, 2020, p.105), red has ambivalent meanings: its positive connotation is associated with vitality, love, passion, and fire; alternatively, it refers to wars and the blood of murdered people. So, the red sky on the cover is in line with parts of the narrative as referring to the expansion of the Islamic civilisation and internecine wars (*LVM2*, p. 63) represented in panels with a red background.

It appears that the authors' caution was applied when factually and literally representing characters and settings, noticeable in *LVM* magazines' editions covers. This is revealed by the absence of religious symbolism on the covers and throughout the narratives. The attention to symbolic (cloud, sword) rather than religious attributes, is in line with the historicity of the text and intends to reflect the Prophet's reality (stated in the prefaces). When it comes to the choice of dress code (veil, *qamis*, turban), this was prevalent in the Arab-Islamic world and predated Islam. They were mainly basic garments – "simple, functional and suitable to the ecology" (Stillmann, 2003, p. 10) – here devoid of typical symbolic information value since worn by primo believers and non-converted to the new faith. For the historian and professor in Central Asian languages, Yehuda Kalfon Stillmann (2003, pp. 8-26), the *izar*, a basic garment (sheet-like wrap), was a men's and women's mantle. Both used the *qamis*, and urban dwellers, more conscious of the *sunna* (Islamic tradition) than rural or nomadic people, may have adapted their attire to their contemporary norms and customs. Women wore head covers to show their good standing as a sign of differentiation (Stillman, 2003, p. 19) or face veil (p. 20). The historical accuracy and informative value intentionally placed in the absence of symbols on the front covers were relevant points that can contribute to a factual, non-emotional rendition of the prophet's life. In doing so, the authors may also seek to distance themselves from the heated issue of the *qamis*/veil that pervaded the mediatic arena since the introduction of the ban on conspicuous religious signs in the 2004 legislation and had been overexploited in previous *Charlie Hebdo's* single-panelled cartoons. By contrast, in *LVM*, contrary to the present time, clothing and accessories are not signs of virtuous observance of Islamic practices. This may be an indication that the magazine was trying to recalibrate its critiques.

Multimodal analysis reveals differences between both covers. There was information embedded in the characters' attire, accessories, and colours. *LVM1* displayed a neutral tone: in this case, an uninterrupted blue sky, no symbolic attribute, a geographically appropriate setting, and the depiction of Muhammad as a young man prior to the revelation and becoming the most venerated figure of Islam in line with a factual approach. However, *LVM2* was more ambiguous. It showed a spiritual leader waving a sword whose symbolism suggests he was on a mission to spread the new religion by any means. On the one hand, the ambivalent red sky can be interpreted negatively for its connotation of wars and aggression. On the other hand, the images on the cover attempt to provide markers of

play signs meant to make the readers smile rather than engender hostility. Here, there is a humorous tone achieved through various features such as the endearing *petit-bonhomme*, big feet, and round nose as distinct from the stereotypical pointy and curved nose used in popular culture productions. The other positively connoted cue is the immaculate sword instead of tainted by red stain. Those visual devices are embedded by the authors to achieve their aims, that is, to lessen the caricatural charge that may arise while reading the story and counter the accusations of anti-Muslim racism or fostering racist sentiment.

While this section has argued that *LVM1* and *LVM2* demonstrate a judicious use of the cover to engender closeness between the authors and the readers, and to mitigate emotional reactions to the narrative content, *LVM3* front and back covers will add layers of complexity. *LVM3* content also questions the value of the cover as an efficient play sign marker and guiding tool in the audience's choice to pursue reading.

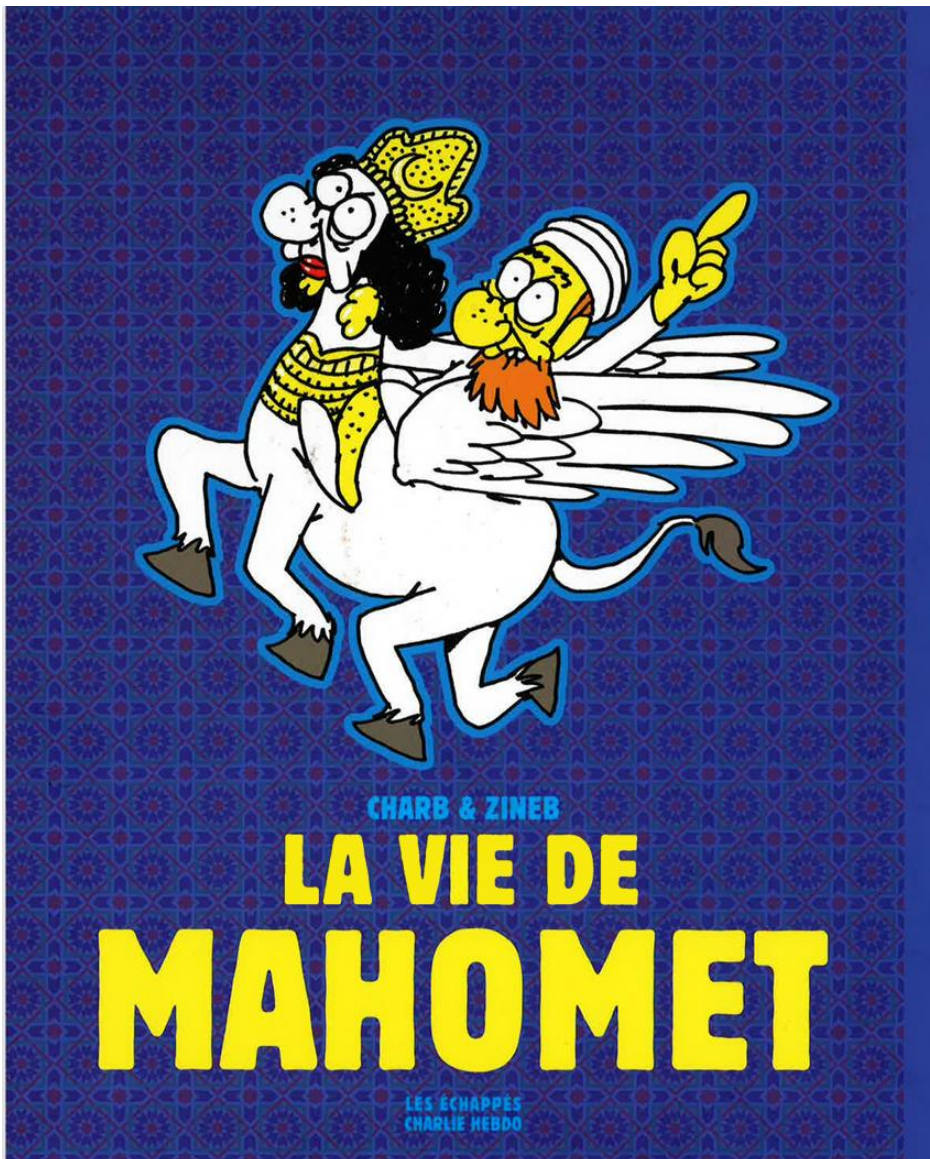
### 3.2.2. The cover of *LVM3*

The hardcovered book edition's cover displays more visual and textual elements than the magazine editions. Besides the images, information value is found in all written peritextual elements on the front (such as title, author, publisher), but also in the book's endpapers. The images on the front and back covers of *LVM3* (see **Figure 11**) evoke an oneiric universe, one of Muhammad's multiple dreams. According to Ifrak (2023, p. 93) and others<sup>91</sup>, the Islamic culture gave dreams a privileged status and religious role often referred to in the Qur'an.

#### Figure 11

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<sup>91</sup> Ifrak's statement (p. 93) is supported by his sources, Ibn Sirin (m.729)'s critical work, *Tafsir al-ahlam (the Interpretation of dreams)*.



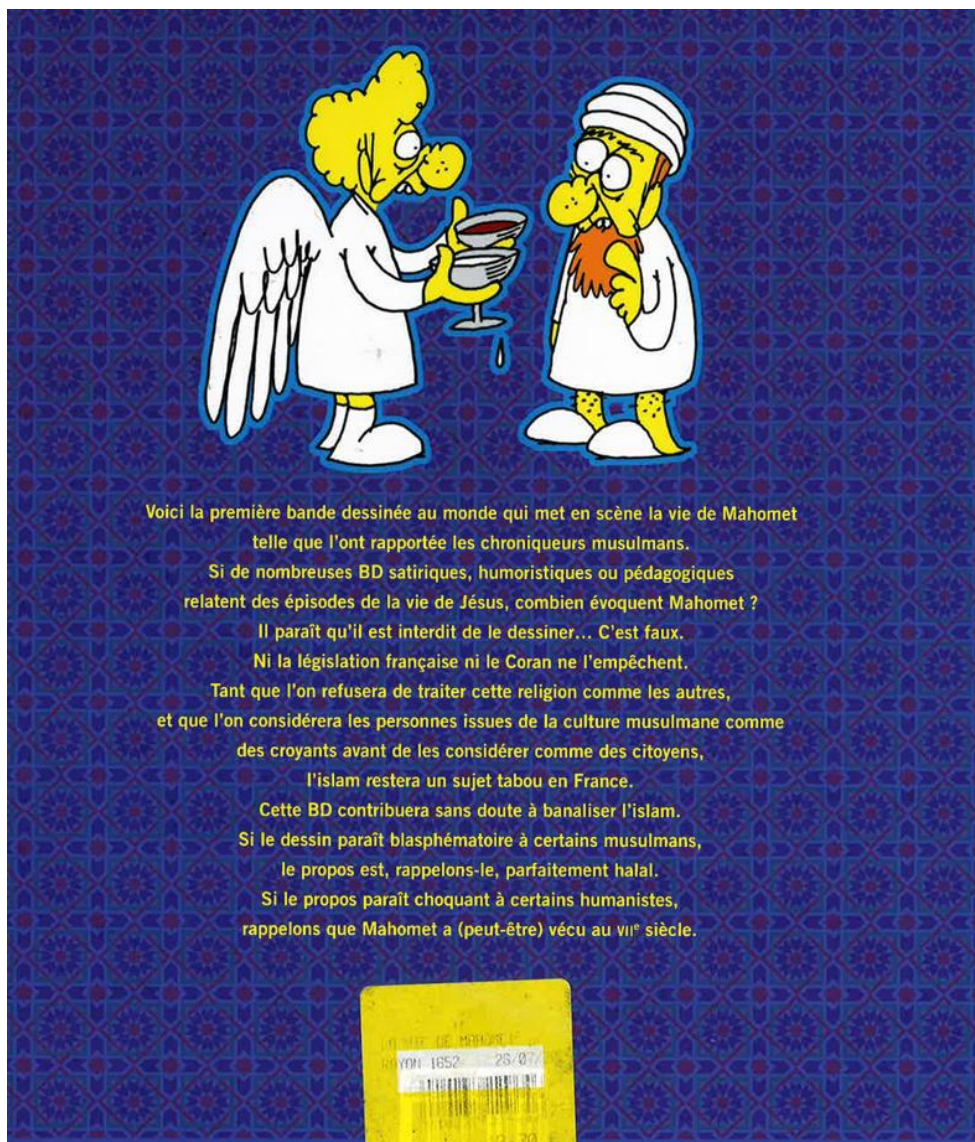
The artistic choice related to the dynamic on the cover and the events that unfold have relevance here as they may be interpreted differently by the audience. *LVM3*'s front cover refers to a revelation, specifically to the Prophet's nocturnal journey to Jerusalem where the Prophet met with archangels of different faiths (*LVM3*, p. 103). Representations of the Prophet riding *Buraq* as he is on this cover can be found in Shia and Ottoman illustrations (see **Figure 10**, *Kalila and Dimna*, in Blair, 2016, p. 49). *Buraq* is described in the text as "the white Pegasus mounted by all the prophets before Him" (*LVM3*, p. 103, in "Nocturnal Journey"). There is no obvious provocation from the authors, other than the transgression of the ban on his depiction. The aged Prophet's characteristics on *LVM2* and *LVM3* are

similar. When crossing the information that emerged from the colours and the compositional dimension of the cover, different interesting points appear. Details from the characters' representations do not seem intentionally disparaging and it showcases Zineb's knowledge of texts. White/light stands out on the violet background: it refers to the Prophet's purity and impeccable character. *Buraq* is an angelic gift offered to the Prophet by the Archangels – hence the use of white. White is only interrupted by a bright yellow for the skin, *Buraq's* adornments, and the book's title. Yellow is predominant in the Qur'anic text and associated with the sun, the light that shines in paradise, gold, and splendour (Ifraik, 2023, p. 41): this is the chosen skin colour for Muhammad and the members of his tribe. This image could be meant to defuse “negative emotions” – to borrow Morreall's terminology (2009, p. 101).

However, on *LVM3* front cover, the compositional placement and orientation taken by the characters point to the left. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p. 181), the information that emerges from the placement of the elements and orientation taken by Pegasus may be interpreted by viewers as a judgment value from the authors, for containing inferences of backwardness. If embedded by the authors, it is a deliberate provocation. Pegasus is flying towards the left, but the vectorial line formed by the Prophet's finger points upwards: it could suggest confusion about the direction his leadership as a warlord has taken him (left/backward and terrestrial pursuit), as opposed to his ideal quest (right/forward and upward, a vertical relation with God). His ambivalence is confirmed by the Franco-Algerian Islamologist Ghaleb Bencheikh (2019, p. 184), who states that Muhammad was, first and foremost, a prophet, God's messenger, and a reluctant empire builder. There is no overt provocation on the front cover, but the events depicted on the back cover may suggest otherwise (see **Figure 12**).

Figure 12

LVM3, Book Back Cover



The back cover image illustrates the end of the nocturnal journey and refers to communion with other prophets – Abraham, Jesus, and Moses (LVM3, p. 105). Here, Muhammad faces Archangel Gabriel, the latter holding two cups. When wisely choosing milk Muhammad prevents his people from leaving the faith and facing the consequences of apostasy (that is, a death sentence). This choice of episode could be construed as a provocation for its reference to the fate reserved for infidels and non-believers. The decision to evoke apostasy on the image may have a negative impact on readership and does contrast with the precautions taken by the authors in previous covers. However, as this episode is explained in the narrative, only an informed viewer or a diligent reader would understand the references to

apostasy and its consequences for non-believers. So, this visual element on a cover may either deter believers well-versed in the sacred texts or be considered informative for readers interested in this biography.

Besides the characters and the represented events, the other important element in both the front and back covers is the background, here in violet colour, with embossed geometrical patterns. They all function as mediating elements that could neutralise the gazes of the members of the audience and persuade them to engage further with the narrative. There are geometric patterns throughout the front and back covers – extended to the endpapers glued to the inside of the cover as explored in Chapter 2, section 2.2.1.

In the case of *LVM*, endpapers offer peritextual content related to the book. The non-figural design choice – dominant in Islamic art – contrasts with the authors' positions on religious iconography and predilection for figurative representation. The design composition comprises octagonal diamond shapes combined with squares superposed squares, all forming octagonal stars. Each diamond contains an eight-petal floral shape commonly found in tiling or a cross-shaped design. The front and back covers are predominantly purple and dark pink. Those patterns are repeated in the glued endpapers, in pink and ochre, on a white background, making the design more salient. However, mixing a floral design with a *cross-shaped* motif may be deliberate since the episode relates to the encounter with prophets of other faiths. If deliberate, it would also be the first time that the authors used dedicated symbols for a religion, in a BD otherwise devoid of religious signs. This pattern forms a celestial canopy for the oneiric universe of the "Nocturnal Journey" to Jerusalem and for the encounter with Archangel Gabriel. The choice of a purple background instead of blue may be explained by the fact that in the Qur'an, there is only one occurrence of blue associated with misfortune and people in distress; plus, in Arab popular culture, blue is used to ward off the devil eye (Ifrah, 2023, p. 96; Hirsch, 2020, p. 108). Blue pigments (lapis-lazuli) were rare and expensive, reserved for prestigious monuments and buildings, hence the few occurrences in ancient sacred books (Ifrah, 2023, p. 35). Charb and Zineb keep this conventional colour for skies. Moreover, for Ifrah, "dreaming in violet" represents upcoming changes in one's sentimental life: "It's definitely an evolution towards more self-assurance, more self-confidence, and more concreteness."<sup>92</sup> (2023, p. 96). This salient colour and the geometrical patterns are an invitation to open the book.

Other important elements in *LVM3*'s front covers are the production written peritext, such as the title, the names of the authors, and the publishers, combined with colours. The title – appearing on the

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<sup>92</sup> My translation. Original: "Il s'agit assurément d'une évolution vers plus d'assurance, de confiance en soi et plus de concret."

front cover and the edge of the book – is in yellow gold. In the ancient tradition of Islamic *enluminures*, golden ink was used to bring out important names. As Ifrak puts it, “[b]esides signs of vocalisation [i.e., additions of vowels] and titles, coloured ink was favoured for highlighting certain words of the [sacred] Text. Most often, copyists used golden or coloured inks to highlight the divine name – Allah – or for the name of the Prophet of Islam.” (2023, p. 73)<sup>93</sup> He adds, “[g]old is the mirror which allows divine light to enlighten universe and engender life.” (Ifrak, 2023, p. 79)<sup>94</sup> The bright yellow used for the *LVM3* title can attract buyers and spark readers’ interest (Gross and Latham, 2017, p. 119). The book’s edge also stands out with its yellow background and contrasting purple title, and the authors’ and publishers’ names in the ambivalent blue. In *LVM3*, like in the magazine covers, there are different dynamics at play that can confuse curious audiences. The association of non-figurative geometrical designs with Muhammad’s representation, plus a neutral front cover that illustrates the Prophet’s dream compared to the back cover referring to apostasy (and its consequences for followers renouncing the faith), may send confusing messages to an informed audience.

### 3.3. What the narrative reveals

So far, all three covers were compared, each preparing the audience for different content in *LVM1*, *LVM2* and *LVM3*. Despite the shifts in their tonal register, the front covers could be construed as neutral and designed to entice rather than repel a potential buyer.

In this section, the analysis tests if the authorial strategy is likely to operate, i.e., whether the mix of peritext, formal elements, historical bias, and carefully crafted covers, can succeed in laying the grounds for a safe and humoristic space that can lessen conflicts of interpretation and the emotional charge. A multimodal method enables reading the narrative’s semiotic resources used by the authors and what they may have deliberately encoded in images to serve their mediated strategy. The multimodal method helps discriminate instances of *Charlie’s* spirit of provocation (entrenching further claims of Islamophobia) from residual ambiguities resulting from the readers’ process of making sense of the story, but not intended at the creation stage.

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<sup>93</sup> My translation. Original: "En dehors des signes de vocalisation et des titres, l’encre de couleur présidait dans la mise en relief de certains mots du Texte. Le plus souvent, il s’agit du nom divin Allah ou celui du prophète de l’islam que le copiste met en valeur à l’aide d’encre d’or ou de couleur."

<sup>94</sup> My translation. Original: "L’or est le miroir par excellence qui permet à la lumière divine de rayonner sur l’univers et de lui donner vie."

The narrative part of this BD consists of visual and textual elements. On the one hand, the illustrated biography of the Prophet presents some challenges for some members of the audience due to its caricatural register and polysemic content emerging from images and bubble speeches. On the other hand, the textual elements of the narratives are devoid of the expected puns and familiar register found in satirical production; the captions and bubbles mainly channel biographic information.

### 3.3.1. Humour and religious iconography.

*LVM* needs to be taken for what it is, a humorous production from a satirical magazine despite its didactic veneer. This is obvious from the covers as they neither resemble scholarly literature nor a devotional book's covers, but rather an invitation to be entertained and possibly informed. The covers can guide the audience in their choice to engage further with the text if readers consent to be amused. In this sense, the covers may function as an effective mediation tool. When reflecting on the impact of satire, the Australian author Robert Phiddian frames the field occupied by this type of production. For him, political satire should provide:

Individuals and societies with a crucial rhetorical space in which to exercise freedom of speech. Very occasionally it changes the world, but more commonly it provides a play space where (if it goes well) truth can be spoken impudently to power and the negative emotions involved in indignation (anger, disgust, contempt, disdain) can be examined cathartically and in relative safety. (2017, p. 259)

The idea of preservation of a play space – and any space for deliberation using such register – is further echoed by a *New Yorker's* magazine author, Adam Gopnik (2016). In the foreword of Charb's essay, Gopnik argues (p. xi) that the realm of imagination provides the necessary release valve and a place for societal debates. He draws a distinct line between acts of imagination (which make the audience uncomfortable with the register they carry, even deemed offensive) and acts of violence (p. xi). *Charlie Hebdo* draws its humour from its early beginnings<sup>95</sup> with "*bête et méchant*"<sup>96</sup> humour – a provocative satirical brand that favours "scatology, sexually explicit material and black humour in general" (Weston Vaclair, 2009, p. 124). This particular brand and post-68s aesthetic is still present in *LVM*. Nonetheless, this BD cannot be qualified as truly comical or funny in the strict BD sense, hence the need for play signs throughout the narratives: "play space" markers (Morreall, 2009, p. 43) inserted

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<sup>95</sup> The original *Charlie Hebdo* that ran from 1969 till it was censored in 1982, first known as Hara-Kiri magazine.

<sup>96</sup> Defined as "first-degree stupidity and nastiness" (Weston Vaclair, 2009, p. 114).

in panels offer a bit of breathing space for all readers unaccustomed to the “*bête et méchant*” type of humour and uncomfortable with the absolutist reading of the freedom of expression practiced by *Charlie Hebdo*.

In *LVM1*, there are representations of the joyful feast to celebrate Muhammad’s return to Mecca as a young boy (*LVM1*, p. 23, see **Figure 13**). The illustration depicts a pagan feast with wine drinking, lamb slaughtering, and a pig destined to the same fate, here chased by a knife. The event is supported by endnote 45. There are also possibly confronting, but incongruous. For example, on page 17 (see **Figure 14**), a panel shows images of people afflicted by deformity or other ills, saved by young Muhammad performing miracles (supported by endnote 37). However, they are intended to make the readers smile, rather than mock the depicted characters. The creative humoristic (visual) repertoire is used to distract the readers: the bright colours used on the abscesses deflect the reader’s gaze and possible hostility away from the presence of pigs defecating on the land (see **Figure 14**). Pork consumption is considered taboo in Islam as unclean according to all Abrahamic religions. So, those gaze-shifting devices are signs of the authors’ attempts to reinstate a “safe space” (Phiddian, 2017, p. 259; Milner Davis, 2024, p. 38), create a “play space” (Morreall, 2009, p. 43), or simply a breathing pause for all readers.

### **Figure 13**

*LVM1*, p. 23. Humour.



23

Figure 14

LVM1, p. 17, panel 1. Humoristic repertoire.



17

Another play marker is found in the Prophet's wink after the first three sensitive pages of graphic nudity (see **Figure 15**). Panels between pages 7 and 9 contain sexual references, but those representations are not totally gratuitous, and references to nudity and sexual intercourses are carefully annotated (e.g., Muhammad's procreation or *LVM1*'s third panel representing the naked

circumambulation around the Kaaba). Such episodes were transmitted by authoritative voices in various sacred texts, as indicated in *LVM1*'s endnotes 2, 3, 5, and 7. At an early point in the narrative, the authors decide to focus on the image of Muhammad as an adult to mark his birth and first appearance in the narrative. To lessen the symbolic charge of his representation, the authors elect not to add a caricatural bite as he is depicted with a smile and wink (*LVM1*, p. 9). This facial expression is meant to signal that the authors wish to remain within the register of humour and enter into a social relationship of proximity with the readers (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 122). The artistic choice of a close shot of the Prophet's face winking at the reader also tries to neutralise previous images of nudity, hurtful for believers of the faith who are accidentally or deliberately exposed to the Prophet's portrait and nude representations that contravene the injunction of modesty, a virtue in Islam.

**Figure 15**

*LVM1*, p. 9. *The Wink: Neutralising Images*



9

The preface and postface have warned readers about the transgressive nature of the content. Peritextual elements serve not only as trigger warnings to inform and dissuade readers from potentially harmful content in the spirit of cultural mediation. *LVM1*'s postface mentions that the narrative is *halal*, that it does not contravene a group norm of consumption – and that those contentious episodes are duly cross-checked using authoritative sources found in the Qur'an, the *hadiths*, and the *sîra*. Those mediation tools provide an alternative way to look at the narrative,

possibly able to add distance between the content and the viewers. Nonetheless, it is unclear that nude scenes of all characters can be neutralised by a wink and a humorous facial expression and be taken as an invitation to play and disengage from the emotionally charged image. The same inconclusive answer stands for the value of the peritext as a mediation tool in cases of representation of the Prophet, in immodest postures.

Another example of a contentious image is the depiction of God. The book edition's additional plates contain a partial representation of God (see chapter entitled "The Five Prayers", pp. 112-113), notably the leg, hands, torso, and the tip of his beard. The episode relates to different encounters between Muhammad and God and the prescription regarding the practice of five prayers. This episode is not supported by duly referenced endnotes. The unresolved issue of iconic representation of the Prophet and the religio-cultural ban of such representations was underscored above. However, there is no doubt as to the absolute ban of Allah/God's representation in Islamic aniconic tradition. This proscription is reiterated by the Tunisian political scientist, Hamadi Redissi who discusses what constitutes a red zone:

At the crossroads of these two temporalities [past and present], "the visible", "the speakable" and "the thinkable" have each been constituted by successive touches from an absolute prohibition, the remainder being negotiable: the figurative representation of God is absolutely taboo, all spaces considered, while what is intolerable in the order of the "speakable" is blasphemy, and, in the order of the thinkable, is unbelief."<sup>97</sup> (2023, p. 16)

Boespflug quotes the Qur'an as the general principle on the ban of God's depiction: "Say: He, God is One! God! The Impenetrable! He does not beget; He is not begotten; nothing is in His likeness."<sup>98</sup> (Sura 152,11, cited in Boespflug, 2006, p. 48). Referring to the Shia tradition, Boespflug mentions exceptions to the ban on the Prophet's images. They include scenes where only the Prophet (not God) is represented by a foot: "In those few scenes, the Prophet is often depicted as a foot, sometimes with visible facial traits and frequently with an empty oval-shaped face devoid of traits." (Boespflug, 2006, p. 50)<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> My translation. Original: "Au croisement de ces deux temporalités, le lisible, le dicible et le pensable se sont constitués chacun par touches successives à partir d'un interdit absolu, le restant étant négociable : est absolument taboue la représentation figurée de Dieu, tous espaces confondus, tandis que ce qui est totalement intolérable dans l'ordre du dicible, c'est le blasphème, et, dans l'ordre du pensable, c'est l'incroyance."

<sup>98</sup> My translation. Original: "Dis: Lui, Dieu est Un! Dieu! L'Impénétrable ! Il n'engendre pas; il n'est pas engendré; rien n'est à sa ressemblance."

<sup>99</sup> My translation. Original: "Dans ces quelques scènes, le Prophète est le plus souvent figuré en pied, parfois avec des traits visibles et fréquemment avec un visage en ovale vide, sans traits."

In *LVM3* and its later additions, Charb and Zineb may have intentionally misguided the readers, using exceptional representations of the Prophet's foot as an authoritative basis for such depiction of God. So, the authors may have deliberately used this confusion to represent God instead and used a humorous BD register (that is, depicting God's big foot and a hairy leg) to avoid taking responsibility for contravening essential theological issues. This is a departure from the original narrative found in *LVM1* and *LVM2*. Here, the authors transgress a religious doctrine, and God's representation seems a gratuitous provocation, unsupported by references to sacred texts in endnotes. Of note, divine presence was previously (carefully) represented symbolically by a cloud (*LVM1*, p. 17), but the authors chose to use body parts in *LVM3* (pp. 112-113), stepping into a sensitive and emotionally laden area that further questions the ability of mediating tools to defuse or lessen the charge.

### 3.3.2. Sexually explicit images

In *Charlie Hebdo* landscape, the idea of what constitutes aesthetic enjoyment contrasts with the non-figurative and refined artistic traditions found in Islam. From religious iconography to graphic representations, *Charlie Hebdo's* register seems far from Islamic art that relies on evocation as part of the practice of the faith.

In the cultural field, the BD theorist and author Thierry Groensteen (2020, p. 494) argues that since the redefinition of BD in the 1980s to include audacious content for an adult readership, nudity has become banalised and lost its transgressive nature. Yet, the close association between nudity, caricatural register, and religion remains problematic. The Islamic scholar Rachid Benzine pinpoints the issue (cited in Avon, 2020): "This absence of the figure of the prophet, the divine figure that cannot be spoken, emerges all of a sudden, as a presence, but moreover as a ridiculed presence." (cited in Avon, 2020, p. 87)<sup>100</sup>

Yet, some of the magazine's loyal readers expect the characteristic visual markers of BD (notably nudity and the grotesque). In *LVM*, the caricaturist delivered in order to stay true to the magazine's style but also to signal that the editorial team does not compromise on its graphic trademark and ethos. Plus, by offering a biography as different as possible from an adulatory hagiography of the Prophet or a devotional book, the author situates *LVM* in the artistic field, keeping the magazine on the safe side of the metaphor and French law.

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<sup>100</sup> My translation. Original: "Cette absence de la figure du prophète, de la figure divine qui ne peut être dite, émerge d'un coup, comme présence, mais en plus comme une présence ridiculisée."

Figure 16

LVM1, p. 11, panel 4: The Description of the Prophecy



11

Among the instances of naked characters in this 130-page biography, most examples of nudity and sexual intercourse scenes are duly referenced in endnotes. **Figure 16** (LVM1, p. 11, panel 4) depicts Muhammad as a nude baby to prove to the reader that his traits match the description of the prophecy. There are also naked breasts in the chapter dedicated to Muhammad's breastfeeding (pp.

14-15), with records that authenticate the episodes (notably “*Livre de l’allaitement*”, “The book on breastfeeding”) referenced in endnotes 25-27 including to emphasize that multiple Bedouin women nursed Muhammad. In this case, depicting nudity is not totally gratuitous but rather reports on this passage of Muhammad’s early life, complying with the *hadiths* and *sîra* that reported scenes of breastfeeding and bodily contact.

The beginning of the biography (in all formats) shows numerous panels with young Muhammad before he became adulated as a religious figure. Among the various avoidance mechanisms used to circumvent the ban on the Prophet’s representation, one consists of using a portrait of Muhammad as a child. Boespflug (2013a) argues that Persian illustrations used images of Muhammad as a baby, child, or adolescent, to overcome the ban (para 12). Charb and Zineb seem aware of this loophole and abundantly use it in the first eleven pages of *LVM1* (*LVM1*, p. 11, panel 4).

It is important to note under this subsection on nudity or lack of covering that, *Charlie Hebdo’s LVM* does not intend to comment on veiling practices (or counter-veiling). *LVM’s* objectives are defined in prefaces and postfaces: this special issue is dedicated to informing the audience about a religion that has been part of France since its colonial endeavour and seeks to denounce literal reading). *LVM* does not contain stereotypical representations; here women are neither caricatured as “devout and modest followers of Islam, subordinated [and] forced to hide their body and sexuality, [nor] as threatening beings whose presence challenges democratic and secular ideals” (Renne, 2013, p. 2). On the contrary, the text features Muhammad’s wives, Khadija and Aïcha, and describes them as strong characters. The BD’s setting is the ante-Islamic period when prescriptive norms of modesty and decency were not written. As mentioned in the previous sections, local cultural practices had adopted the veil, *qamis*, and turban as dress codes which suited the ecology (Stillman, 2003, p. 10). There are gendered norms of decency in Islam that dictate how female modesty (*hashma*<sup>101</sup>) should be lived and whether its manifestation requires the donning of the veil. In present-day societies, veiling responds to various political and religious realities which have historical, social, and gender dimensions (Mahmood, 2005, p. 23). In 2013, debates on female Islamic garments (such as the range of coverings and veils, and the length of the skirts) had become a national obsession pervading the mediatic field<sup>102</sup>. Notably, in *LVM*, the breach of immodesty rules is not gendered since female and male characters are depicted naked. Moreover, the illustrated nudity referred to episodes of the biography and chronicles of the Prophet’s life (*sîra*), so to some extent justified. Thus, *LVM* does not encroach on its

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<sup>101</sup> See Irene Maffi, 2015, p. 146.

<sup>102</sup> Notably since the enactment of the 2004 legislation on the banning of visible religious signs and symbols. This piece of legislation now needs to be read in conjunction with the 1905 law on laicity. Note that this will be later amended to include the 2010 law on banning the *burqa*, *niqab* (i.e., the full facial veil) and more recently, the 2023 law on banning the *abayas* (i.e., the loose-fitting long-length mantle) in state run schools.

contemporary debates on the resurgence of Islamic forms of sociability, such as veiling practice and its visibility as an identity or religious marker.

Besides nudity, there are illustrations of sexual intercourse (another calling card of *Charlie Hebdo's* aesthetic). On this front, there are differences between the magazine's issues and the book which contains added panels. In the magazine format, *LVM1* alludes to such episodes with nudity, and *LVM2* contains one explicit episode, whereas the augmented book edition *LVM3* was an opportunity to enclose additional scenes. In *LVM2*, there is one notable use of *Charlie Hebdo's* landmark "enculade" ("sodomy" in a familiar and vulgar register), an act often represented in its cartoons. François Héran, a French sociologist and pragmatic on matters of freedom of expression, has openly deplored the satirical magazine's "irresponsibility" for its reliance on what he calls "*le registre de l'enculade*" ("the register of sodomy") (2021, p. 152) found in the magazine's single-panelled caricatures when representing believers and representatives of established religion. Héran sees contempt for religious people and a clear intent to humiliate and degrade in *Charlie Hebdo's* approach, therefore questioning the legal distinction between an attack on religion and an attack on believers, the latter only being punishable by law. He argues that there is contempt when the recipient and weakest party in the act incarnates the religion.

There is provocation in all instances of this register as the authors gratuitously indulge in the "*bête et méchant*" register applied to religious themes or figures. Although rare, the representation of sodomy is carefully depicted in the magazine's version. The way the authors show those episodes is worth noting. This occurrence is contained in *LVM2*, p. 7 (and *LVM3*, p.71, see **Figure 17**), in a panel depicting paradise. In the image, the authors call on the popular culture's imagery to depict nudity and promised virgins being chased. In this case, the episode of sodomy was performed by a represented participant, but not the Prophet who remains easily recognisable by its white *qamis* and hennaed hair. The performing character is positioned in the foreground and partly hidden by the right corner of the frame. This detail aims to shock and can only foster more accusations of mockery of the Islamic faith and its followers, that no mediation strategy can fend off. On page 7, Charb's representation of paradise taps into the Muslim satirical arsenal, commonly the Muslim/Islamist/terrorist amalgam references for the prize reserved for martyrdom, or like in this panel, the prize for joining the faith. Ultimately, the decision to place the act beyond the frame can be deemed evidence of precaution by the authors already facing risks of actual harm (e.g., death threats, police protection, headquarters' firebombing), fully aware of the provocation. This detail is almost hidden from the readers' gaze, in the gutter – a space for unbridled imagination to run free.

Figure 17

LVM2, p. 7: Paradise



71

The authorial strategy is here put to the test. Forewords, postfaces, and endnotes prepare the audiences for the emotionally charged content. Those tools warn of possible transgression of religious proscriptions and authenticate episodes where sexual references are expected in accordance with the

religious texts. With the narrative in the magazine format, the authors' strategy was to use the full arsenal of semiotic resources to downplay some sensitive parts: framing, scale, and foregrounding were used to attract or deflect the viewer's gaze, to force the eyes to look away from details or motifs where there is nudity or sex. However, in *LVM3*, Charb does not use those semiotic modes nor refrain from provoking Muslim sensitivity and breaching the rule of modesty. The mediated approach fails to operate with *LVM3*. The latter edition is a clear departure from the "*halal*" version of the Prophet's life as claimed by Charb in *LVM1*'s postface.

### 3.3.3. Selected textual elements

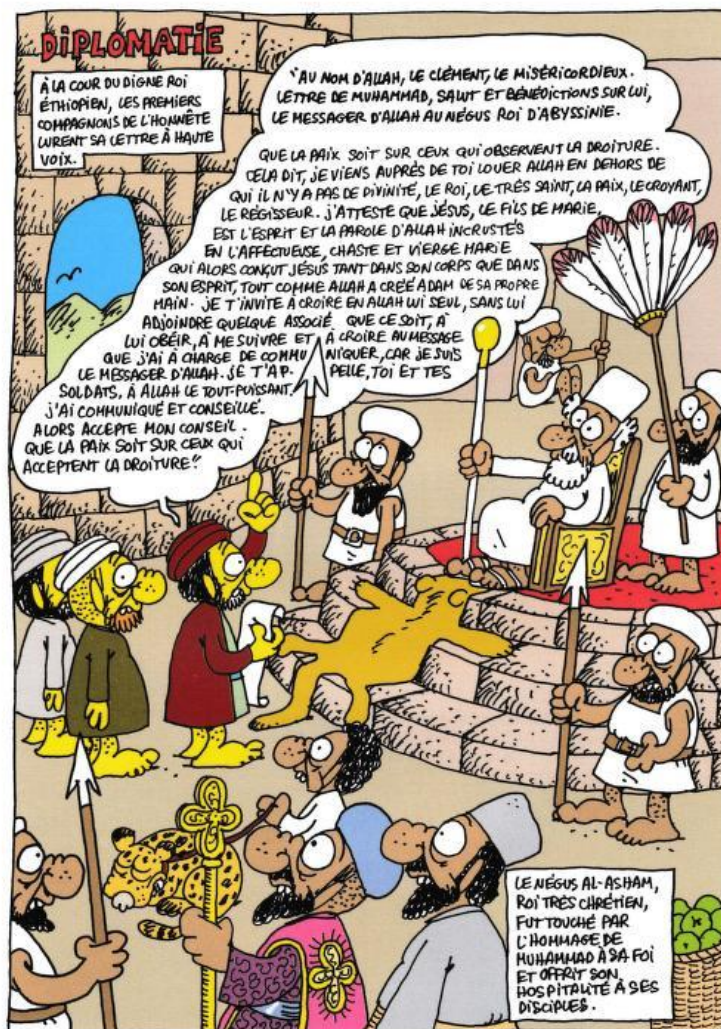
The analysis has so far examined images, leaving aside the textual narrative. Notably, there are hardly any humoristic puns, use of familiar register, or distinctive use of speech bubbles and tails in *LVM*, which are, *per se*, rather unusual for the magazine. There are no real dialogues in speech bubbles, as the characters are partially disembodied, mainly being used as vessels to channel information (biography and references to sacred texts). Hence, the use of long captions for context and, in most cases, one single bubble for dialogue per panel (see **Figure 18**). This lack of creativity in the narrative is in line with a historical approach, and the authors' self-imposed rigor of remaining factual. This plain and objective rendition of the life of the Prophet devoid of artistic digressions also serves the authors' demonstration about the new *literal turn* imposed by the industry, prompted by contemporary sensibilities.

The narrative, which presents a chronological sequence of events, is easy to read and comprehend. It avoids colloquialisms, references to modern events, or shared prejudices. The authors opt for an formal language register, unconventional for BD and caricature more broadly, and resort to the phonetic transcription of Arabic words when citing important places (for example, "*Makkah*" for Mecca, "*Yathrib*" for the town of Medina) and key terms (for example "*risala*" ["message"], "*kuffar*" ["sceptics"] and "*oumma*" ["community of believers"]) to match the authoritative sources. Some words are often used in the francophone zone entering the vernacular language, like "*kuffar*" or "*oumma*". The choice of using the Arabic language also addresses (or speaks to) the current trend of using Arabic as a marker of identity among second and third-generation French people of Arabic descent, who seek religious and cultural identifiers. This employment of a language other than French

could contribute to a better reception of LVM. However, this choice could also be construed as provocation or rather as a mark the irreverence of the *trublions*<sup>103</sup> of this satirical magazine.

Figure 18

LVM2, p. 16 (and LVM3, p. 80), Representative Sample of Textual Elements



The only textual element that stands out is in the Prophet's denomination. There is an inference to the etymological debate on the Prophet's name in French: the albums are titled *La vie de Mahomet*, *Mahomet* being the Frenchified form of the Prophet's name which can be perceived as an offensive

<sup>103</sup> Affectionate way to qualify provocateurs.

colonial atavism. According to some scholars (Boespflug, 2006, p. 204; Abouddrar, 2021, p. 23) *Muhammad* or *Mohammed* would be more respectful to the community of believers. Boespflug clarifies their use: "We adopt, to put it simply, this traditional way of naming him in the West, as do some French Muslims. This is what prevailed in the [Caricature] affair. But it is obviously still better to call him what most Muslims (Mohammed) or Islamologists (Muhammad) call him."<sup>104</sup> (2006, p. 204)

Despite the misleading title, throughout the rest of the story, the *LVM* authors consistently use "Muhammad", complying with the acceptable denomination. The choice of "*Mahomet*" solely for the title can be justified on a marketing basis as it has become the dictionary entry recognized by all French speakers whose usage is difficult to shake off, according to the consensual daily *Le Monde* (Maad and Audureau, 2021). thus, calling the two-part album otherwise may have impacted distribution and literary attention.

### 3.4. Results and Findings

This chapter analysed *LVM* covers and their narratives, using a multimodal method (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) to uncover the intended messages encoded in images by authors. The first part of the chapter looked at the front and back covers across the three different *LVM* productions and the information embedded within images using the authors' repertoire of semiotic resources (author's agency). The analysis demonstrated that the authors had devised a strategy to mitigate claims of harm due to interpretative conflicts. It also highlighted the meaning that may emerge from the visual elements and image compositions as the audience retained agency during the process of interpreting this polysemic narrative that may be perceived as provocative, discriminative, or Islamophobic. The Prophet's depiction remains the main source of contention, encroaching on a cultural and/or religious taboo for the Muslim community. Depicting Muhammad on the cover as an artistic choice challenges the authors' ambition to create a humorous space from the onset to lessen the offensive charge contained in all narrative structures in a mediated approach. To test the authorial strategy and understand how the authors bypass the entrenched taboo on images, the analysis required an exploration of the legal, religious/theological, and cultural grounds upon which the authors based their decision to represent the Prophet: it looked at the French legal position and its expressed

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<sup>104</sup> My translation. Original: "Nous adoptons, pour faire simple, cette manière traditionnelle de l'appeler en Occident, comme le font d'ailleurs certains musulmans français. C'est elle qui a prévalu en cette affaire [des caricatures]. Mais il reste évidemment meilleur de le désigner comme le font la plupart des musulmans (Mohammed) ou les islamologues (Muhammad)."

guarantees to the practice which are only limited by 1972 *Pleven* and 1990 *Gayssot* ; it then discussed the absence of an explicit ban on the image of the Prophet in the Qur'an despite the aniconic nature of Islam and was directed to prescriptive *hadiths* that contain explicit references. There also exist artistic traditions of the Prophet's representations in private manuscripts (in Persian and Ottoman art) meant for adornment rather than devotion. Those representations are based on Muhammad's authenticated literary descriptions – the *shama'il* (as provided by the *hadiths*). Zineb's knowledge of Islam, its foundational texts, and cultural tradition empowered the authors in their decision to depict Muhammad on the covers, and later throughout the narratives.

A multimodal analysis of the three front and back covers revealed different dynamics at play in the images. The authors are full agents during the creative stage when composing the images and graphics on covers. Despite some differences displayed in the covers, the authors encoded rather neutral and consensual information using the different multimodal resources, i.e., playing with choices of gaze, expression, orientation vectors, colours, cultural and symbolic attributes, and more. However, even well-designed image compositions cannot escape interpretation. In its legitimate role, the audience played its part in the triangular relationship that binds the production, the authors, and its readers, which may lead to misinterpretation. Only consenting and informed readers are in a mental framework to enjoy and be amused by the representations, “cognitively disengaged” from the world (Morreall, 2009, pp. 32-33) based on the scanning of the image on the covers, and by the content of the narratives.

A multimodal analysis of the narratives helped test the authorial strategy. It looked at instances where the mediation tools were challenged, that is, where the mix of formal elements and peritext combined with the covers could prepare the audience and mitigate interpretative conflicts. Although nudity and sexual intercourse scenes remain rare throughout the story, there are differences between the magazine and the book versions. Precautionary or avoidance strategies were taken in *LVM1* and *LVM2* using special framing and gutters (semiotic resources) and referencing/endnotes (peritextual documents) when depicting the Prophet in immodest positions. Whereas, in *LVM3*, the viewers were not spared from symbolically offensive content. Yet, when it comes to representations of sexual encounters between the Prophet and his wives, the authors chose to depict episodes that had occurred on a day of “legal fornication”, which benefited from an authoritative reference (endnote 130). Endnotes functioned as mediation tools, as they provided some authenticity to sexually explicit episodes and could protect the authors from claims of symbolic or psychological harm. Yet, the *enculade* register (Héran, 2021) is a gratuitous provocation. The textual elements' analysis showed how the long captions, devoid of creativity, forced the audience to look at visual elements to decode an ambiguous narrative. Ensued a discussion on the Prophet's name: the authors decided to follow

the denomination preferred by Muslims and Islamologists, Muhammad, throughout the narrative, disengaging from the contemporary debates on the appropriate naming.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined a novel authorial strategy for exploring religious representations in the francophone satirical landscape by focusing on *LVM* by Charb and Zineb (2013). It explored how this strategy can defuse conflicts of interpretation by blending the *bande dessinée* (BD) form with a substantive peritext, thereby establishing authorial agency.

The analysis consisted of investigating the different layers of Charb and Zineb's actions taken to regain control over the meaning emerging from their multimodal production, with the aim of fostering a better understanding of religious caricatures. To achieve this, it employed Genette's theory of paratext when analysing prefaces, postfaces, endnotes, and other supplementary documents; these peritextual elements were treated as tools in the authors' strategy and showed they were part of the formal choices made in *Charlie Hebdo's LVM* to clarify authorial intent. Additionally, the analysis drew on Kress and Van Leeuwen's principles of multimodality to decode the semiotic resources in *LVM's* hybrid text. This approach provided insight into the creative process and revealed meaning likely to be perceived by a broader audience. It also compared *LVM's* engagement with religion to the principles of cultural mediation, as both aim to provide readers with tools to contextualise the production and mitigate the satirical bite. This mediated approach offers interesting perspectives for future investigation into the caricature territory. *LVM* was therefore deemed to align with *caricature de mœurs*, as both (*LVM* like all CDM) direct their caricatural critique toward social phenomena rather than individuals.

Existing literature on *Charlie Hebdo* primarily focuses on single-panelled cartoons representing Islam. The scholarly response to the magazine production has been relying on the concept of harm, particularly on offended groups, and analysed the impact on local or global audiences potentially averse to religious caricatures. This body of work also highlighted cartoons' polarising effects such as othering of a religious community and fostering anti-Muslim sentiment within France. However, this innovative approach, which sheds light on the deliberate decision made during the creative process, offers an alternative to research on *Charlie Hebdo's* satirical contributions within the francophone cultural landscape. In summary, the findings reveal complex dynamics regarding the effectiveness of *LVM* as a novel authorial strategy aimed at asserting control over the meaning of religious caricatures and reestablishing a balance between audience interpretation and authors' intention. The 2015 Paris attacks, however, have inevitably influenced how *LVM* is interpreted and how the strategy at work in this BD can be perceived.

It was found that reasserting authorial agency and exerting some control over the meaning throughout the BD was significantly helped by the collaborative nature of this project. The contribution of Zineb, as a specialist in religions, improved the BD's perception of rigor and

earnestness. It challenged the recurring accusations of provocation toward Muslims, as *LVM* instead promoted a better knowledge of Islam. Some scholars, literary reviews in local religious daily, and overseas newspapers from the Arabo-Islamic zone did however questioned Zineb's credentials or the merits of this collaboration.

The analysis of the staging distribution plan showed that this publication operation was not only financially sound but it also played a role of hooking readers, it enabled the authors to adjust content after each released part (or versions) and tested the audience's tolerance threshold for a contested topic, and the likability for the BD. *LVM1* teased the readers eager to learn about the emergence of a religion and the central figure: for example, sceptic readers were able to check how a tradition (or one's own religion) was expressed in further instalments or versions and offer legitimate critique.

In the format-related analysis, it was shown that republishing the complete biography in a book edition was likely to provide a sense of cultural legitimacy and inscribe this BD in the long term. Furthermore, this new augmented version contextualised the story thanks to its supplementary documents; the prefaces and postfaces were able to explicit the context of production for a future audience or the general public in a culturally mediated perspective; its map and chronology gave the opportunity to better situate the narrative into ancient times, pertinent in the process of critical distancing and mitigating misinterpretation, to provide a buffer between the text and the readers. The interactive documents advanced their pedagogical intent, notably the map and chronology. However, *LVM3* postface, immediately available on the back cover, can be seen as not sufficiently efficient for a warning. The later reedition was deemed more provocative as it contained additional sensitive chapters for audiences averse to sexually explicit scenes; those added chapters were devoid of endnotes authenticating such episodes. This explained the edited written peritext to denounce disproportionate violent responses to offensive drawings. In this case, neither the written peritext nor the visual aids were fully able to fend off the caricatural charge; those divisive panels did not help regain control over meaning, nor improve the perception of *Charlie Hebdo*, but could further entrench the sense of anti-Muslim sentiment.

Regarding the authorial decision to adopt a BD form, the analysis revealed that the sequentiality's positive spinoffs were to be found in the temporal space for fulfilling the didactic objective of explaining the most venerated figure of Islam to a wide public, rather than mocking the religion and its followers. Additionally, the multi-panelled layout and the BD's long narrative structures are not suited to online circulation. This formal choice demonstrated the authors' awareness of the potential viral spreading. The BD form, short of entirely dispelling misunderstanding, was nevertheless useful in limiting the reach of this material, restricting its access to a local audience familiar with the context of

creation. Moreover, the choice of long narrative structures fitted *LVM*'s function and target: this BD sought to comment on evolving norms rather than direct its biting critique to individuals. Basing the analysis on *LVM*'s function and target, it can be assumed that *LVM* matches the characteristics of a *caricature de mœurs*.

The analysis of the peritextual additions highlighted the pertinence of having a necessary *audience-narrative* distance for a story that pertains to a temporally and geographically distant reality. Qualified as boring or instructive, endnotes added rigor to the biography, as they were able to authenticate episodes of the Prophet's life, otherwise seen as anecdotal or provocative. When comparing *LVM* project to a mediated strategy, it was found that the availability of critical documents, such as endnotes and visual aids, had the potential to humanise a distant figure and remove emotion in a symbolically charged topic.

The close examination of the written peritextual elements, such as prefaces and postfaces, supported the argument that those additions clarified the authors' intentions. Yet, it was noted that there were differences between the magazine versions. *LVM1*'s objectives were to be didactic, and the peritext was informative as to the process of creation and the legal/theological/cultural grounds on which the authors based their decision to represent the Prophet. In *LVM2* postface, the authors' stated intentions varied: the authors also wished to denounce literalism and lack of critical thinking. Other changes in this written peritext occurred in the book edition. Despite those variations in the messaging, the insertions of all prefaces and postfaces revealed an attempt to regain control over meaning and assert authorial agency. By 2013, the magazine had acquired an acute sense of the audience's sensitivities. Peritext, although an uncommon feature in caricature, is here pivotal for the pursuit of clarity from a cultural mediation perspective.

The examination of the authors' reasoning when bypassing the taboo on religious imagery was a stepping stone for the multimodal analysis. It led to the conclusion that both legal (specifically French law) and cultural (the artistic tradition of representing Muhammad) arguments were convincing and likely to empower the authors in their decision. Prefaces and postfaces clearly outlined the grounds on which the decision rests; those peritextual elements could mitigate the offensive charge of the Prophet's representation from a mediated viewpoint.

A multimodal analysis of selected elements on the three front and back covers revealed different dynamics at play in the images. Despite some differences shown on covers, it was observed that the authors encoded rather neutral and consensual information using the different multimodal resources, i.e., playing with choices of gaze, expression, orientation vectors, colours, cultural and symbolic attributes, and more. However, when interpreting the covers with a view to the audience's perception,

it was noted that only consenting and informed readers would be likely to enjoy and be amused by the representations.

The multimodal analysis of the visual and textual contents solely focused on sensitive panels that could challenge the authors' strategy to use BD form and peritext to mitigate interpretative conflicts. There were differences between the magazine and the book versions. While nudity and sexual intercourse scenes remained rare throughout the original story, notable differences emerged in *LVM3*. In *LVM1* and *LVM2*, avoidance mechanisms were used by the authors, such as special framing and gutters (semiotic resources) and referencing in endnotes (peritextual documents) when depicting the Prophet in the immodest positions. Whereas, in *LVM3*, the viewers faced more symbolically offensive content. Regarding the representations of sexual encounters between the Prophet and his wives, the authors chose to depict episodes that had occurred on a day of "legal fornication" as authenticated in endnote 130; this choice seemed to aim at mitigating interpretative conflicts and neutralising the satirical offense. The endnotes were here used to fend off claims of inauthenticity and dismiss accusations of racist imagery. Nevertheless, the use of the *enculade* register could be viewed as a gratuitous provocation whose symbolic harm was unlikely to be alleviated by peritext. The analysis of a textual element, such as the Prophet's name, showed that the authors opted for a consensual denomination, Muhammad, throughout the narrative, disengaging from the contemporary debates on the appropriate naming. They probably kept the Frenchified version, Mahomet, for the title for promotional reasons.

Ultimately, this study has shown that *LVM* is not merely another "The Prophet Caricature", but a multifaceted work that engages with societal phenomena. By renewing the religious caricature genre and making innovative use of the BD form and peritext, *Charlie Hebdo* has created both a mediated and thought-provoking commentary on the place of religious imagery in contemporary culture and secular societies. The magazine's controversial nature serves as a reminder of the power of satire to initiate meaningful discussions, challenge prevailing or evolving norms, and question the social and political status quo. The role of satire is all the more significant in a contemporary landscape warped by the forces of globalisation, escalating religious tensions, and the debates surrounding secularism in French society. Through this examination, it was shown that *LVM* both actively participates in and shapes the ongoing debates regarding religious caricature and freedom of expression, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges of contemporary France.

The tragic events that befell *Charlie Hebdo* should not obscure earlier initiatives at varying the satirical offer, but rather encourage more research on caricature, exploring inroads into overlooked mixed genres, such as *caricature de moeurs*, or BD genres that include peritext. Exactly ten years after the 2015 Paris attack at the headquarters and five years after the murder of Samuel Paty (15/10/2020), this genre still attracts all kinds of attention from citizens, the media, and governments, and the question of limits of freedom of expression – legal or societal – remains. *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, issued on January 7, 2025, published a poll on freedom of expression. The Jean Jaurès Foundation, a French think tank associated with the Socialist Party, commissioned the IFOP (*Institut français d'opinion public*), a polling and market research firm, to conduct a survey in view of the 10-year commemoration. The survey examined public attachment to fundamental liberties<sup>105</sup>. It found that eight out of ten people (76%) believe in the importance of freedom of expression, including caricature, which represents an improvement of 18 percentage points compared to a 2012 SOFRES poll conducted by a different polling firm. However, there are notable differences within the population: 55% of individuals affiliated with the Muslim faith believe there should be limits on caricature. Additionally, there are generational differences, with one-third of respondents under 35 years old also feeling that there should be limits on this genre. Those latter results call for more scholarly interest in a mediated approach that offers an immediate immersion into the past. Of note, cultural mediation is expected to be adopted in the upcoming permanent exhibition dedicated to the fallen *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturists at “*Maison du Dessin de Presse*” (*Le Monde*, 2015/01/03), foreseen for 2027.

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<sup>105</sup> <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-rapport-des-francais-a-la-liberte-dexpression-a-la-satire-et-aux-dessins-de-presse/>

Figure 19

Charlie Hebdo's Cover, no 1694, (2025/01/07)



Note. "Incredible" ("indestructible").

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