

Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

Science, Religion, and Culture in light of Paris and Charlie Hebdo

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I am terribly discouraged, not just by the senseless violence in Paris, but by the response worldwide to both the publication of content by Charlie Hebdo before the killings and by the mass protests throughout the Islamic world to the bittersweet cover published the week following that tragedy.

As a scientist who has spoken out and written about the incompatibility between the world's major organized religions and the empirical evidence about the universe that science has provided over the past four centuries, I receive many emails from the faithful, from a variety of religious backgrounds. While fanatical fundamentalists have responses that are relatively similar, what is striking to me is the number of letters I get from well-meaning followers of Islam who somehow are convinced that the actual words of the Qur'an actually scientifically anticipated the description of the world that science has produced in the fifteen centuries or so since the book was written. This derives from the notion, which also has been conveyed to me by many, that the book is 'perfect', every word the direct speech of God, and therefore it not only could not have been written by an ordinary mortal, but it can also not be in error in any way.

Perhaps because the Judeo-Christian scriptures are so much older, there has been much more time for theologians in these sects to sensibly acknowledge the facts that the words contained therein must be interpreted as products of the humans who wrote them, and of the time in which they were written. While some zealots still maintain the ludicrous notion that the Earth is 6000 years old, this is not the official doctrine of the leaders of these religions. While they nevertheless maintain the sacred nature of the inspi-

ration for the bible, very few assert the Bible itself is so sacred that it cannot even be discussed intelligently and skeptically by people who would like to better understand that document and their own place in the cosmos.

However, this does not seem to be the case in the Islamic world, and this is what makes the current dilemma so urgent, and what implies that Charlie Hebdo, and other publications that ridicule politicians, sex, and religion with equal force are so important.

Hate speech involves people, not ideas. No idea should be sacred in the modern world. Instead, in order for us to progress as a species, every claim, every idea should be subject to debate, intelligent discussion, and when necessary ridicule. Satire is perhaps one of the most important gifts we have to inspire us to re-examine our own lives and our own ideologies. If every other area of human endeavor is open to ridicule, then certainly so should religion. The notion that a cartoon, which presents an image of a historical figure, is so blasphemous to provoke violence is repugnant to anyone who believes that free and intelligent discourse is the basis of a civilized world.

This means that we need to encourage even ridicule of the sacred Qur'an in the public media. The more frequently and openly this appears, the less threatening it will seem, and the more acceptable it will be for believers to actually intellectually engage rather than emotionally and violently act.

The biggest threat to the peaceful and sustainable progress of human civilization in the 21st century, with challenges ranging from global climate change,

to energy and water shortages, and the oppression of women throughout the world, is a refusal to accept the empirical evidence of reality as a basis for action. Those who feel they know the truth in advance, and therefore cannot even listen to alternative arguments, are not just part of the problem, they *are* the problem.

This is the reason that religion is, in my opinion, on the whole a negative force in the world. In spite of the charity and empathy it may generate among many, because it asserts as true notions that clearly are incompatible with the evidence of reality, it inevitably engenders actions that are irrational. These range from the innocuous to the deadly.

Science has taught us to revel in the idea that we do not understand all there is to know, that cherished notions may in fact be wrong. It teaches us that claiming to know the answers to questions before they have even been asked or explored is folly.

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Some have argued that because ridiculing sacred notions is offensive to believers, it is inappropriate for such ridicule to be carried out in the public sphere. However, we *choose* whether to be offended. An appropriate response is not to condemn the offender but rather to generate intelligent arguments that demonstrate they are wrong. If we shy away from such dialogue for fear of offense, we will never allow those who are offended the opportunity to examine and defend their beliefs. If we shy away from dialogue for fear of reprisal by those who would rather their children not learn about the world out of fear that knowledge will undermine their faith, we have given in to ignorance and repression. *That* should offend us all.

Long live Charlie Hebdo. Long live ridicule. Long live satire. Our culture and our world are the better for them.