

## Guest Editorial

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

## The Paris Attacks: A Moderate Liberal-Atheist Perspective

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Much has been written about the terrorist attack on the satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo*, which took place on 7 January 2015. Some of the commentary has been insightful, some full of pious platitudes about defense of free speech by sources with not exactly a stellar record in that department, and some of it has ranged from the woefully uninformed to the downright awful. It is, therefore, with some recalcitrance that I write these lines, particularly because I'm coming to the issue from what I feel is an increasingly rare point of view: that of a moderate liberal atheist.

Let me begin by stating what I think ought to be obvious but apparently isn't, judging from some of the above mentioned commentary. First, deadly violence against the expression of political ideas, regardless of the content of such ideas, and irrespective of the ideological matrix of the attackers, is utterly unacceptable, period. Second, it is an undeniable fact that the attack was perpetrated by deranged people who saw themselves as defenders of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., as Muslims. Third, it is also true that *Charlie Hebdo* is pretty much an equal opportunity offender: Christians, Jews, and others are regularly lampooned in its pages, and yet the two attacks the paper suffered (the other one was a fire-bombing in 2011) were both perpetrated by Muslims. Fourth, it is equally an undeniable fact, however — and this is where the common narrative begins to break down — that the majority of terrorist actions in the US and Europe in recent times have *not* been perpetrated by Islamists, but are usually of political or ethnic origin (including stemming from regional separatist movements in Europe, and by fundamentalist Christians opposed to abortion in the US) [1]. Fifth, and I may stand corrected by scholars who know more about this than I do, contra popular

opinion — apparently and ironically both inside and outside the Muslim world — the Quran actually says something quite different than standardly assumed about how the faithful should react to blasphemy: not by killing the blasphemer, but by engage him with understanding and kindness [2] (then again, I'm also aware through my familiarity with the Judeo-Christian tradition that one can simply pick and choose whichever quote in one's Scriptures fits one's goals and go with it, but that does not invalidate my point, I think). Lastly, it is simply both Scripturally and historically highly inaccurate to claim, as so many of my fellow atheists (especially the "New" variety) do that Islam is a particularly violent religion: the Ottoman empire was one of the most tolerant places were to live in Europe for centuries [3], Christian and Jewish people have slaughtered plenty of innocents of other faiths across the centuries [4], and the Old Testament is just as nasty in terms of what it counsels people of faith to do as anything that can be found in any other sacred text [5].

Assuming the six points above, which I acknowledge can, and should, be debated, where does that leave us in terms of *Charlie Hebdo* and — more broadly — of the entire (alleged) "clash of civilizations" we have been experiencing since the turn of the millennium? I think we need a change of narrative, from all parties: media, politicians (obviously), religious people and atheists alike. It ought to be blindingly clear to anyone with a modicum of familiarity with history, politics and basic psychology that the problem is not Islam *per se*, and it is not "religion" broadly construed (an incredibly amorphous category, if there ever was one). And I say this as an atheist who does think that the world would be better off with less faith and more

reason in it.

To begin with, here are a couple of things that we should *not* talk about, because they are not the problem, and actually represent dangerous red herrings. First, were the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons offensive? Hell yes. Moreover, several of those I have actually looked at seemed to me to be neither particularly funny nor insightful (due to my lack of humor, I'm sure), and certainly not the best satire I've come across in my life. Nonetheless, this is an entirely irrelevant issue: satire is *by definition* offensive to someone, but it is also one of the crucial pillars of any vibrant democracy since the American and French revolutions. It is fundamental to the existence of what Karl Popper referred to as the "open society," [6] i.e., any multicultural society where people of varied faiths, moralities and political opinions have elected to live together. The right to express opinions that may be offensive to others is simply something that not only should not be questioned (unlike what, unfortunately, Pope Francis recently did in the wake of the Paris attack [7]), all of us should actually engage in efforts to expanding it into a universal human right.

Second, although the perpetrators of this and other recent heinous acts were Muslims and saw themselves as defenders of the faith, that is not the proper focus. The problem is, rather, caused by a highly complex and volatile combination of perceived (and often real) powerlessness, ideological indoctrination by religious and political authorities in Muslim countries to serve their own purposes, lack of education (in the broad, "liberal" sense of the term), and of course resentment toward past and current forms of colonialism and imperialism. None of these factors are specific to Islam, and they certainly do not affect only the religious. While it is undeniably the case that — at this particular historical juncture — it is Muslim countries that tend to lag behind much of the rest of the world both politically and in terms of freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and women's rights, history easily teaches us that this has nothing to do with Islam *per se*, and logic demands that we therefore stop looking for solutions by demonizing that particular faith.

What *should* we, instead, talk about? I suggest a division of (critical) labor of sorts. Roughly speaking, we in the secular West need to back off a bit from dismissive verbal assaults on Islam, and instead engage in a more nuanced indirect push toward facilitating

internal discussion and cultural change within the Muslim world. It is a basic principle of psychology that people rarely respond to outside threats and denunciation by changing their minds; on the contrary, they usually retrench in their behavioral patterns. But if their minds are exposed to "friendly" (intellectual) fire from within, the chances for long lasting change improve significantly. This is a minor version of the same principle according to which one cannot force nations to become democracies by bombing the hell out of them, but one can, and ought, to do a lot of cultural and economic work to make that change happen organically. Arguably the most positive thing the West can do is to consistently help moderate Muslim voices to be heard by giving them a platform at every opportunity.

The second thing that the secular West ought to do is to stop being so darn hypocritical about its own credentials. While European countries, the US, and several places in the non-Western world (e.g., Japan) indeed arguably are the best examples of democratic societies that the world has seen to date, they are still rife with inequality, discrimination, violence, political and religious opportunism, and a number of other maladies that require constant soul searching, not to mention a significant downgrade of the "we are the best" mantra so mindlessly repeated especially by American media and politicians. Holier than thou attitudes do not help constructive dialogue.

On the other side of the divide, however, moderate and progressive forces within the Islamic world, both religious and secular, really ought to do much, much better than what they have been able to do so far (and yes, I am aware that there is vibrant internal criticism within Islamic countries, which usually does not get much press in the West. In conjunction with this latest episode it was very good to see a lot of public protests by Muslims loudly declaring that the attackers did not represent them). They need to regularly and strongly and repeatedly condemn any violent action done in their name, and they need to seek all the international, and yes, even just Western, support they can get to overthrow or change the awful regimes that we find in places like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Iran, Niger, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen, to name just the major ones. And let us not forget the significant sliding back recently experienced by Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The above recipe is neither glamorous nor will it yield rapid results — which is why it is not going to be popular with politicians, the media, or even a number of my fellow atheists. However, that is the way humanity has progressed over centuries and millennia: ideas keep being challenged, the discourse widens, and much energy, time, resources and even blood are necessary for change, without any guarantee that that change will last if we do not keep up our vigilance and resolve. The French revolution was a beautiful moment in human history, but it was immediately followed by the Reign of Terror. The American revolution was another one, and yet that country was established on a combination of slavery and genocide. The world is a complicated place, and human beings are its most complicated component to have evolved yet. But we have indubitably made not just material, but also moral progress over the millennia, and I don't see why we should stop now.

## Endnotes

[1] For instance, according to [a report by the European law-enforcement agency Europol](#), in 2013 there were 152 terrorist attacks within the Union, 2 of which were labelled as religiously motivated. [The US State Department reported](#) that Jewish settlers committed a whopping 399 acts of terror against Palestinian residents, though of course we never hear the phrase “Jewish terrorist.” And [according to the FBI](#) 94% of attacks on US soil between 1980 and 2015 were committed by non-Muslims. All of this ought to be enough to make one pause before talking about modern terrorism in Muslim-only terms. (For other examples of relevant statistics and an insightful commentary, see: “Are All Terrorists Muslims? It's Not Even Close” by Dean Obeidallah, *The Daily Beast*, 14 January 2015; also the well reasoned editorial by Nicholas Kristoff in the *New York Times*: “Is Islam to Blame for the Shooting at Charlie Hebdo in Paris?” published on 7 January 2015.)

[2] According to yet another good commentary by Fareed Zakaria in *The Washington Post* (8 January 2015): “Islamic scholar Maulana Wahiduddin Khan has pointed out that ‘there are more than 200 verses in the Koran, which reveal that the contemporar-

ies of the prophets repeatedly perpetrated the same act, which is now called ‘blasphemy or abuse of the Prophet’ ... but nowhere does the Koran prescribe the punishment of lashes, or death, or any other physical punishment.’ On several occasions, Muhammad treated people who ridiculed him and his teachings with understanding and kindness. ‘In Islam,’ Khan says, ‘blasphemy is a subject of intellectual discussion rather than a subject of physical punishment.’”

[3] See, for instance: *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, by Karen Barkey, Cambridge University Press, 2008. Also: *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, by Daniel Goffman, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[4] See, for instance: *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, by Michael Gaddis, University of California Press, 2005. And of course any reputable source on internecine wars among Christian sects during the Middle Ages, on the various anti-Muslim Crusades, and on the horrors of colonialism, beginning with the genocide of Central and South American indigenous populations.

[5] See, for instance: *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*, by Eric A. Seibert, Fortress Press, 2009. Also: “Violence and the Old Testament” by Peet Van Dyk, *Old Testament Essays* 16:96-112.

[6] *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, by Karl Popper, Princeton University Press, 2013 (originally published in 1945).

[7] According to Alexandra Topping in *The Guardian*, 15 January 2015, Pope Francis said that “One cannot provoke, one cannot insult other people's faith, one cannot make fun of faith. ... There is a limit. ... If my good friend Dr Gasparri says a curse word against my mother, he can expect a punch. It's normal. It's normal.” It may be normal, but it ought not to be acceptable, and certainly not to be condoned by the highest spiritual authority for 2.2 billion people worldwide. Am I the only one finding the image of a Pope punching a friend over a comment about his mother deeply disturbing?

**The views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not reflect the views of *Science, Religion, and Culture* or its staff.**