Guest Editorial

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

Islam, Violence and the Religious Mind

John Teehan, Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion, Hofstra University

The terrible events in Paris brought, once again, the threat of Islamic radicalism to the foreground of public consciousness. Such attacks, of course, raise vital questions of public safety and the costs we are willing to pay for that safety. They also raise questions of how to understand the complex conditions that give rise to such events—and the conditions for such events are always complex, even when facile "explanations" are readily available, i.e. the violent nature of Islam, their hatred of Western freedom, etc. A consistent element in many such explanations is a pronouncement on the nature of religion, in general, with some, predictably, placing the blame for such hate-filled acts squarely on religion:

> Religion, a mediaeval form of unreason, when combined with modern weaponry becomes a real threat to our freedoms…and we see the tragic consequences in Paris today[1]. Salman Rushdie

and those seeking to exonerate religion, entirely:

> This is not…a war against religion or between religions–it is not anything on religion… [The terror attacks] should never be seen as a war of religion … for religion … or on religion[2]. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

There were of course more sophisticated and nuanced analyses, for example, from Chris Hedges. But even Hedges brackets the role of religion/Islam in the attacks:

> It was not about radical Islam….It was a harbinger of an emerging dystopia where the wretched of the earth, deprived of resources to survive, devoid of hope, brutally controlled…lash out in nihilistic fury[3].

While I believe that Hedges here, and throughout his response, is very much on the mark in regard to the social-economic conditions that underlie these acts, to eliminate Islam from the equation (if that is what is implied) is to miss an important aspect of the story.

Islam, and more generally, religion, is indeed legitimately implicated in examples of so-called religious violence—it is part of the explanatory story. However, it is only part of the story, and in many, perhaps most cases, it is not the fundamental part of the story—and I believe this applies to the Paris attacks. That this can be denied in such diverse ways is partly due to the lack of a more nuanced understanding of religion in public discussions. No religion speaks with a single voice: within every religion there is a voice of compassion, and mercy, and social justice; and within every religion there is a voice of intolerance, and judgment, and violence. These voices are perhaps harder to discern in certain religious traditions, but in the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) they cry out from the very pages of their sacred texts—and those with ears to listen will hear. Proponents of a particular tradition may naturally strive to delegitimize the harsher voice of their religion, and that is a morally noble effort that should be applauded, as a political move. But from a critical stance – that is, from a position outside of a commitment to any one reading of a religious tradition – there are no grounds for designating any one expression of a religion as the authentic or true version. This is true not only of Islam, which is seen as a decentralized religion, but also of Catholicism, which is seen as the paradigm of a centralized, hierarchical religion. There are numerous Catholic groups throughout the world that self-identify as Catholic while rejecting the authority of the Vatican. The Vatican may claim that these are not true Catholics but that is a sectarian argument, and can

Smith & Franklin Academic Publishing Corporation

only be affirmed by taking sides in a sectarian dispute.

This understanding of religion undermines apologetic attempts to free religion from the taint of violence by claiming those acts to be a perversion of the true religion. However, it also undermines the position of religion's harshest critics who assert that "religion poisons everything." The voice of compassion and love is as true a voice of Islam (and Judaism and Christianity) as is any voice of hatred (also found in Judaism and Christianity). The question at hand, then, is not which is the true voice of Islam, but which is the voice given expression at a particular moment, and what are the conditions which lead that voice to speak? And equally significant, what are the conditions that stifle other voices?

In trying to answer these questions even those with a more nuanced understanding of religion can go off track. Chris Hedges shifts our focus from radical Islam to the socio-economic and political conditions that fuel the rage that explodes in the sort of lethal violence witnessed in Paris. I believe Hedges is absolutely correct in identifying those social conditions as the source of the rage; but to imply that Islam was not a factor is a mistake. That suggests we can tease out religion and religious motivations from social, or political, or economic factors; that we can treat religion as a self-contained phenomenon that can be isolated from these other factors. Interestingly, Islam is often assailed for not recognizing the distinction between church and state, between religious concerns and secular concerns; and it is thereby castigated as somehow primitive or medieval. However, the conception of religion as something self-contained that can be cordoned off from other elements of society is itself a modern, and distinctly Western, notion. It is not one any non-Western religious tradition would recognize, and is not one that any Western religion would have accepted prior to the 18th century Enlightenment. Indeed, it is not one, protests to the contrary notwithstanding, many Western Christian churches accept even today.

So, to claim that the violence perpetrated by a Muslim, or Christian, or Jew, has its roots in social/economic/political conditions will almost always be true, but that truth does not entail that the religion did not have a causal role to play, as well. The fact that this point is overlooked (although it may at times simply be de-emphasized) stems, I believe, from a failure to appreciate the moral workings of our religious mind.

To be clear, I am not concerned here with questions of the sanity of the assailants, or of their state of mind when they acted, but rather with the ways in which cognitive processes that generate moral judgments, and which underlie acts of both violence and of compassion, are intricately connected with religion. To further define this focus, I am not interested, per se, in looking at how or whether religions promote or condemn violence, nor am I addressing the question of whether morality requires religion. What we to need to consider are the ways religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals are processed and how that cognitive processing can contribute to violence.

Over the past twenty years or so there have been major strides in developing an understanding of religion grounded in an evolution-based cognitive science. From this perspective, religious beliefs, such as the belief in god(s) (and spirits, demons, ghosts, etc.) are natural outcomes of the workings of the evolved human brain as it seeks to impose a meaningful order on the environment, in the service of human survival and reproductive pursuits. It is not that these are ideas we "make up" in order to explain the unexplainable, but rather they are means through which we perceive our world. To use a simplistic example, it is not that we hear thunder and then speculate that some super-being must be angry, it is that *we perceive the event* as the expression of anger or threat from some agent. Humans are naturally predisposed to perceive the action of agents behind events in the world. But it is not only agency-detection; studies reveal that humans are "teleologically promiscuous," readily interpreting experiences in terms of purpose and meaning. In sum, this research argues that humans are naturally predisposed to interpret the world in ways that we would recognize as "religious." Religion comes naturally and intuitively to humans; and religions, as cultural systems, are not simply cultural constructs but are built out of these evolved cognitive-emotional intuitions.

This cognitive-evolutionary approach also draws attention to the key role religion has played in the development of human society. Religion, as a shared system of beliefs and values, functioned to bind groups into cohesive, morally-bounded communities as increasing social size and complexity began to strain a moral psychology that evolved to function in relatively small, homogenous social units—the world of our

hunter-gather ancestors. Religion, as a socially shared symbolic system, fulfilled this function in two basic ways. One was by promoting shared belief in a god(s) who sanctifies the values of the group and serves as an enforcer of the moral contract. However, in order for this moral function of religion to be effective it is necessary that everyone in the group share in this system, and indeed signaling that one is committed to the group's religion becomes a defining marker that one belongs to the in-group—and it is here that we come to a central nexus of religion and morality.

Human morality evolved as an in-group adaptation—it is a means of fostering pro-social behavior that enabled the group to survive and thrive. Part of surviving and thriving often involved competition, at times lethal competition, with other human groups. This has inscribed a deep bias in our moral psychology—a bias for our in-group, with a resulting bias against, or at least a decreased moral sensitivity to, the out-group. There is an impressive wealth of scientific evidence that supports the species-wide presence and compelling nature of this bias. It is not that we make conscious discriminatory judgments about "the Other" but rather that we do not even implicitly perceive the Other with the same moral sensibility. We also now understand that our compassion toward the needs of others, our moral concern for their well-being, our moral evaluation of their behavior, involves the activation of the brain's empathy system; the consequent to this is that anything that inhibits that activation paves the way for moral indifference, and thereby for cruelty and violence—and recent studies reveal that the brain's empathy systems are sensitively tuned to in-group/out-group distinctions. Religion, as it became the symbolic expression of our moral intuitions, inherited this morally conflicted system—and this understanding can help us to make sense of conflicting religious voices.

As religion came to serve this social role, it faced a tension—to extend the boundaries of the moral community and expand the recognition of who is our neighbor (i.e. fellow in-group member), while also securing the boundaries of the group, and thereby necessarily defining the Other (i.e. an out-group). Religious moral traditions are shaped by this dual function, which is why we find exhortations to "love thy neighbor as thyself" alongside warnings about "the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" for those who do not conform to the norms of group identity.

So, how does all of this help us make sense of the role of religion in the Paris attacks? Humans are not rational actors, making decisions in order to maximize some cost/benefit analysis. Cognitive science reveals that much of our behavior and moral thinking is structured by and motivated by pre-conscious cognitive processes and emotional commitments. We have a deep need to feel connected to something larger than ourselves, rooted in our need to be part of an in-group. The in-group/community is cognitively imbued with moral significance and meaning. To be rejected by the group is, in evolutionary terms, an existential threat, and so the psychology we have inherited is sensitively attuned to such concerns, and we are powerfully motivated to respond to them. One response to such a threat is to seek to better conform to groups norms, another is to reject the group and switch membership, i.e. come to identify with another group that can provide the psychic benefits denied by the established group.

Now let's return to Chris Hedges's analysis that the Paris attacks were carried out by "the wretched of the earth, deprived of resources to survive, devoid of hope, brutally controlled…[who] lash out in nihilistic fury." This seems to me a fair assessment of the actors in this, and many other acts of "home-grown terrorism." Individuals who are marginalized in society, institutionally disempowered, who feel culturally oppressed, and with little real hope of significant improvement in these conditions, have no real bond with the larger society; find no moral significance to their lives as members of this group; feel no moral respect from the group. On a cognitive level these conditions will be processed as rejection by the in-group, which can certainly spur "nihilistic fury"—but that is not the only option, or the cognitively favored option. The cognitively natural response is to reconstitute the categories of in-group and out-group, and that seems to be what happened with the Paris assailants. Their fury was not nihilistic, in fact we can recognize it as a moral rage, lashing out at the newly defined out-group, i.e. Western capitalist society. They were not seeking to burn down society because nothing matters; they were fighting for a different moral ideal, a different moral community that came to matter deeply: Islam.

This does not mean, however, that Islam was responsible for this attack; or that the assailants were moved

Smith & Franklin Academic Publishing Corporation www.smithandfranklin.com

by some new found, spiritual zeal. Rejected by one group, and finding that group morally empty, they had available another group that provided a moral polestar, that imbued their lives, and their deaths, with moral significance and which offered a narrative to make sense of all their struggles and failures. This narrative takes those struggles and sufferings, those values and aspirations, out of the merely personal and temporal realm. It provides a sacred context that shields the actor from the pull of doubt, and deems compromise a sin. That is not what Islam does in any unique way, it is what all religions do; it was, we can say, what religion was designed to do. So, it is incorrect to say that there is a problem with Islam, without also implicating Judaism and Christianity as well. Yet, Islam is involved in the causal story. This is clear when we consider the very specific target of the attacks: *Charlie Hebdo*.

The explicit motivation for the attack was to punish those at the magazine who had insulted the prophet Muhammad; and we know that satirical representations of the Prophet had set off violent attacks prior to this event. Why? Why are Muslims so sensitive? Why don't they have a sense of humor? You don't see Jews and Christians killing people who publically insult their religion — isn't this a problem with Islam?

Of course, the first thing to say about this line of criticism is that a violent response to perceived blasphemy is not the Islamic response—it is a response from among the diverse voices within Islam, and a spectacular response designed to be heard, and to drown out other voices of Islam (if we were even open to hearing those voices). And with regard to Christians and Jews not responding violently to religious insults, we must recognize that in contemporary Western society Jews and Christians do not have to be violent to vent their anger and defend their religions—there are socially acceptable means for them to do so. In France, we see that there are laws to impose severe penalties on those who cross the line in insulting Jews. Just days after an historic rally defending the right of *Charlie Hebdo* to insult Muslims, French authorities arrested a comedian for expressing anti-Semitic views—there was no reason for Jews to show up at the comedian's performance and kill him in order to silence that voice. By reacting differently to insults to Jews and insults to Muslims, the French send a clear message to Muslims as to their in-group status.

Christianity, as we know, has a long and sordid history of using violence to suppress heretical thought and dissension. But given the dominance of Christianity in the modern Western world, and the prominence of Christians in positions of power, an insulted Christian today need not lash out violently in response to perceived attacks on its group. In the U.S. we see Christian groups seeking to protect and defend their insulted values through legislative strategies on a variety of issues, e.g., gay marriage and abortion. This, nevertheless, has not prevented some Christian extremists from taking violent measures against, say, abortion clinics and doctors; and we should not overlook that a Christian voice is often given expression in numerous white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups—should this be taken as evidence of a problem with Christianity?

Still, we may wonder why something as apparently innocuous, albeit insulting and puerile, as the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons would provoke such a violent response from any part of the Muslim community. Here we need to recognize protecting the image of the Prophet as a signal of commitment to the moral community. As I noted, signaling commitment to the religion of your group is processed as commitment to the group itself, and establishes one as a trustworthy social partner. It is the way religion extends the moral boundary of the group. What we also know about signaling is the costlier the signal, the more reliable the signal, and the more social status for the signaler. Satirizing the Prophet is not processed as an expression of free speech by Muslims, it is processed as a rejection of the Muslim community, a moral "othering" of Muslims. It casts Muslims outside the bounds of the group, and beyond the extent of moral consideration. On an implicit, cognitive level, such insults represent existential dangers—they demand a response. If a society does not provide a release valve for the moral outrage engendered by such threats, then it is inevitable that the pressure of that rage will find some other means of release.

Still we cannot deny that Islam is so often involved in acts of terroristic violence that grab the world's attention—does that not say something about Islam? Yes and no. In terms of "no" we need to be aware of our very selective attention to acts of terrorism and its sources. A study of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil over the past thirty years shows that 94% were carried out by non-Muslims[4]. And by far, the most common victims of "Islamic terrorism" are Muslims living in largely Muslim countries, which clearly points to the

violence being primarily about internal political conflicts rather than religious or cultural clashes. We have to ask just how much a moral bias toward Islam as out-group shapes our perception of these events and their relative danger to Western societies (and how such biased perceptions may be politically manipulated).

Still, Islam does assume a role in many acts of violence at this moment in history. Islam today, just as Christianity in the waning years of the Roman Empire, represents a moral worldview that stands in stark contrast to the dominant, and dominating worldview of Western society, and as such it presents a deeply attractive alternative for the disempowered and disrespected, who find no meaning and little hope in that established worldview. These acts of anti-social violence are not the result of specific Islamic teachings, but rather specific Islamic teachings give meaning and purpose to individuals no longer able to find a voice in their world.

None of this should be taken to deny that there are serious moral and political concerns with many of the ways Islam is expressed in the world today; in terms of the treatment of women, oppression of dissent, sectarian intolerance; political authoritarianism; religious absolutism. These are real problems that need to be called out, resisted and addressed, but can any of these problems be laid solely or even distinctively at the door of Islam? Are there not equivalent Christian, and Jewish, and Hindu, and even Buddhist examples of such concerns?

Also, this should certainly not be taken as justifying these acts of terror and violence that destroy lives, devastate families, undermine communities, and which bring out some of the worst in human nature, on all sides of the issue—there is no justification for that. This has been an attempt to understand, not to exonerate, or to blame. We need to have a more complete grasp of the explanatory case, of the causal story, if we have any hope of effectively, and morally responsibly, responding. To put all of this on Islam, or radical Islam, or religious extremists, is a simplistic move that may bring a comforting sense of control ("we know who to blame!"), as well as a stroking our own sense of moral superiority, but it leaves us ill-equipped to deal with the actual problems—and leaves us blind to how our present political-economic system creates the conditions for such problems. However, to deny the role of Islam, as a religious system of meaning-making and identity formation, leaves out an important element in our understanding of the dynamics of violence.

Endnotes

(1) http://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/salman-rushdie-condemns-attack-on-charlie-hebdo/ accessed 1/15/15
(2) http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/01/09/un-secretary-general-french-terror-not-religious-war-just-criminality/ accessed 1/15/12
(3) http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/a_message_from_the_dispossessed_20150111
(4) http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2013/05/muslims-only-carried-out-2-5-percent-of-terrorist-attacks-on-u-s-soil-between-1970-and-2012.html

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

Smith & Franklin Academic Publishing Corporation