

Guest Editorial

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

On Terrorism and Blasphemy

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Preamble: I fully empathize with the intense anger of devout Muslims when their revered Prophet is caricatured in cartoons or otherwise satirized. A Hindu or Christian would be similarly offended if one of their sacred figures were treated likewise. The following piece is not to condone any real or perceived disrespect implicit in the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, but to analyze this very difficult situation as dispassionately as possible. I trust my Muslim readers will take it in that spirit.

Terrorism

The term terrorism usually refers to any act (pre-determined and/or methodical) whose goal is to frighten and possibly kill people. Invading soldiers over the ages have terrorized innocent civilians in many regions of the world. Governments have terrorized their own people, the most glaring instance was in post-Revolutionary France during the Reign of Terror. On the other hand disgruntled, oppressed, and frustrated citizens (Irish Catholics, Algerian Muslims, Sri Lankan Tamils, etc.) have terrorized people and governments for various causes. There has also been terrorism by the majority on the minority in communities and nations: for example, Jews in Nazi Germany, Kurds in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Blacks in South Africa. In recent years a new kind of terrorism has been emerging in *which individuals or groups attack and murder innocent civilians in another country.*

Most terrorism of this last kind is instigated by political frustration, economic marginalization, anger when one's group is attacked by militarily more powerful nations, or hatred for another culture, religion, or civilization. Many of the current terrorist attacks by some Muslim groups against the West are related to rage over Palestine and what is perceived as the West's unswerving partiality towards Israel, past support of the Shah of Iran, exploitation of oil from the Middle East, the Iraq War, 9/11 retaliation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, etc. They are not all acts prompted by

religious fanaticism or belief in God. The mindless Boko Haram savagery is an aberration and affront to modern Islam, rather than a sane aspect of it.

Terrorism and religion

Acts of terrorism have been committed in the modern world by people of all faiths: Protestant Germans, Irish Catholics, Sri Lankan Hindus, Israeli Jews, Burmese Buddhists, Japanese Shintos, Stalinist atheists, and Chinese Confucians, for example. However, because in recent years (since 9/11) a great many such acts in Europe and America have been perpetrated by Muslims one tends to associate all terrorism with Islam, and even more grievously, Islam with terrorism. True, there are beliefs to the effect that anyone who kills a real or imagined enemy of Islam, proclaiming the greatness of his God giving his or her own life in the process will become a martyr, and that martyrs receive special carnal pleasures in Paradise. Some misguided terrorists are propelled by this conviction. But the vast number of God fearing Muslims (as also Christians, Jews, Hindus and others) are not guided in their everyday life or political deeds by such beliefs and hopes.

Unfortunately, many perpetrators of political terrorism have been loudly proclaiming their allegiance to the Islamic God and Prophet, prior to committing murder and mayhem. In this way they invariably associate their action with a great religion. Even when

people are sympathetic to their cause, the overwhelming majority of their co-religionists condemn terrorist behavior, overtly or in their hearts, all the more so because many victims are fellow Muslims. Many practicing Muslims and religious leaders have been tirelessly explaining that Islam neither instigates nor condones ruthless violence of any kind. Many of them sincerely lament that terrorists have high jacked their religion and brought ignominy to it when, in fact, Islam (as the very name suggests) is a Religion of Peace. Nevertheless, the sad fact remains that in many parts of the world, like ugly Americans of another era, Muslims have come to be regarded with suspicion, sometimes even with anger, derision, and hate as a result of the growing number of terrorists from their religion. Islamophobia is an unwarranted fear and mindless hatred of all Muslims on the basis of a growing number of Muslim terrorists of recent decades. Corresponding generic hatred and fear of the West is prevalent and propagated in the Islamic world. No one has invented the word *occidentophobia* for this.

It is difficult to deny that when an outsider reads through the scriptures of many religions, one finds instigation for violence there. The Holy Books contain many passages which would persuade any objective reader that the God of those books is angry, vengeful, and hateful. But it is also a fact that in those same scriptures, there are countless inducements for love, mercy, charity, compassion, and other worthy virtues. Millions of ardent followers of all religions are peaceful, kind, and loving. In former centuries, some theologians wrote harshly and critically about other religions. But in our own times most religious leaders and scriptural interpreters have evolved beyond such traditional modes. They are generally inclined to preach tolerance and respect for others. Also, irrespective of what sermonizers say and theologians write, millions of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Baha'is and others interact as friends and live in peace in all the continents of the world.

It is about time the world learns to view terrorism in non-religious terms. It is urgent and important to consider terrorism in political and occasionally misguided religious frameworks, and dissociate the name of any religion from terrorist atrocities, no matter from which religious tradition the criminals come. It must be remembered and often repeated that there are terrorists and pacifists, preachers of love and hate-mongers in all religious traditions.

Blasphemy

One important feature of Abrahamic religions is the notion of blasphemy. Traditionally the term meant any expression of insult, disbelief, or lack of respect, through word or deed, towards God, scripture, or any thing or person considered sacred in the tradition. In all three Abrahamic religions individuals who engage in blasphemy were/are liable for severe punishment. The punishment for blasphemy and heresy ranged in ancient times from imprisonment and torture to exile, burning at the stake and execution. Thousands of Christians were victims of blasphemy/heresy laws during the Middle Ages. It was only in mid-seventeenth century that this ceased in Christendom. In the twenty-first century blasphemy laws are in force only in Islamic countries.

There are three kinds of blasphemy. The first may be called *internal blasphemy*. Here the laws against blasphemy are applicable only to members of the faith. Indeed, from ancient times up until the close of the twentieth century, *only members affiliated to the faith system in question were subject to its blasphemy laws*. Thus the Catholic Church would not/could not charge a Muslim or any Non-Catholic with blasphemy. An imam would not charge a Hindu with blasphemy.

The second kind of blasphemy may be called *intrusive blasphemy*. Here, followers of a religion demand that all the people in the world follow their blasphemy laws. Thus, today Islam not only takes blasphemy laws seriously (which it has every right to do), but it has also exported it beyond its borders. Now, *even Non-Muslims are subject to Islamic blasphemy laws in Non-Muslim countries*. This is an extremely dangerous development and is the root cause of current explosive tensions. In Western countries today, making fun of certain aspects of any religion can be done with impunity, except Islam. At this point it appears as if the West has very little choice on the matter.

The third type of blasphemy, though it is not called as such, is secular blasphemy. Secular blasphemy consists in desecrating, disparaging, or treating in an offensive way the constitution, symbols, monuments, and flag of a country. Burning a country's flag is an act of secular blasphemy. This has been done many times with the flags of secular countries – deservedly or not – by Muslims.

Free speech

The etymological meaning of blasphemy is *offensive/insulting speech*. Therefore the laws against blasphemy restrict what one can *say* or *write*. This is why blasphemy laws impinge on free speech. One of the great achievements of eighteenth/nineteenth century European Enlightenment was the freedom, in principle, that citizens gained to say, write, and print what they thought and felt on any issue. This freedom, like Galilean-Newtonian science, was something entirely new in humanity's long history. In the view of many, it is no less precious. In fact, science and freedom of thought are interrelated. Implicit in the scientific framework is the conviction that no truth is absolute and no single person, book, or institution is an ultimate authority or repository of truth. One respects authorities for their expertise, but one does not worship them. This implies that no human being is sacred to the point of deserving subservience and adulation by one and all. One should not be afraid of saying what one thinks or feels about an individual, book, symbol, or idea. The essence of all this is that in a non-religious secular framework the thinking mind is unshackled from chains that threateningly control people's thoughts. In free countries today one is not punished for speaking out or publishing something against a religious tenet, personage, doctrine, or belief. This framework is drastically different from traditional religious ones. It is very difficult for religiously constrained people in theocracies or for people who are sympathetic to theocracies to understand this. It is also impossible for religiously emancipated peoples who are enjoying full freedom to revert to the blasphemy mindset, even more so when it is being enforced by immigrants who have come away from theocracies in search of a better life in the West. Christian and Jews in the West have accepted the ridiculing of their beliefs by secular humanists, humorists, and cartoonists. However, a good number of Muslim citizens in Western countries, certainly not all, not only refuse to abide by the sacred secular law of free thought and speech. Some of them cause terror when a fellow citizen commits blasphemy against their religion.

It took centuries for Christians in the Western world to become secular; it may not take a few more centuries for Muslims to become fully secular. There are many European and American Muslims who are already secular at heart. Most of them are educated and have respectable jobs. Some of them write books and

give informative lectures on the greatness of Islam. There are probably many secular-minded Muslims in theocratic Islamic countries, and educated Muslim women who are against the gender-discriminatory religion-based laws in their countries. Most of them are deeply religious in their private lives, but secular and enlightened when it comes to social, moral, and political issues. It is important that we recognize that as in Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, in Islam too there is an enormously broad range to thinkers, from the extremely conservative to the extremely liberal.

Sensitivity to the other

It is sometimes argued that no matter what one's own views on religious matters are, one should be respectful of the feelings of others when one speaks or writes on religious matters. In other words, one should not offend the religious sensitivities of other people. This is certainly an honorable and worthy position to take. Most people all over the world generally follow this principle. There will surely be peace and harmony in the world if there is mutual respect among the followers of various religions.

Hate speech is preaching or instigating hate against a person or group or race. Free speech certainly does not give one license for hate speech. But not all will agree that ridiculing what seems to some as a silly idea, or satirizing what one regards as a pernicious proposition that is taking root within one's nation or society constitutes hate speech.

The crucial point is that one should not be forced to respect every doctrine of every religion through threats, punishments, and violence. It is true that there are many sublime truths, perspectives, and ethical principles in Islam, as in all religions. There are also elements in Islam, as in all religions, that in the view of some do not deserve respect and reverence in the twenty-first century. It is to these aspects that cartoonists and commentators refer. Respect and reverence must be earned, not to be extracted like a tax you have to pay for something you don't really care for. It should not to be demanded through threats, pleas of victimhood, flag-burnings, and terrorist massacres.

In the context of sensitivity to others, it is not always pointed out that those who demand respect for their religion often fail to give respect to other religions. Many ardent Christians proclaim that the only path

to salvation is through surrender to Christ. Every day millions of Muslims proclaim loudly – even in countries where the majority are Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, or atheists – that there is no God but Allah. These are commendable expressions of their faith, but they are also deeply offensive to millions of Non-Christians and Non-Muslims, since it is an explicit insult to the God(s) that others worship. The insinuation is that the God that Hindus worship is a false God. This insult is a blatant lack of the sensitivity to others that one demands for oneself. This scorn for the Hindu God prompted the destruction of many temples in India in past centuries, as of the magnificent Buddha statue in Afghanistan a few years ago.

Long range prospects

Millions of people in the Islamic world believe that the West has launched a war against Islam. They ignore the fact that atheists and secular Christians in the West have been equally sarcastic and disrespectful of what they regard rightly or wrongly as untenable absurdities and inappropriate values in Christianity. What is ignored, forgotten, or not understood by many thinking and unthinking Muslims alike is that the Paris march was to affirm the right of free speech, and not to denigrate Islam.

The biggest challenge and fear for the secular West is that the kind of (Christian) ecclesiastical terror from which it had freed itself only recently is now being slowly replaced by an imported theocratic terror of the same kind. In the twentieth century, whether some people like it or not, in all secular democracies as well as in China, there are millions of Muslims who

are recognized as legitimate citizens. How or whether the West will persuade them to accept and respect its secular framework, no one really knows.

Two things may happen: For the sake of peace, physical security, and trade interests, the West could accommodate to the new reality and put a legal curb on satirizing Islam as an exceptional religion.

Or, in due course, there may occur a fundamental transformation in the framework of Islam which will rid itself of blasphemy laws, allow free thought, cease deriding and persecuting Unbelievers, and foster respect for other religions. At his point this may seem very unlikely, but one never knows how history will unfold itself. One should remember the great Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages, such as Averroës, who were bold and secular, logical and scientific in original ways. A charismatic leader (man or woman) could emerge in the Islamic world to bring greater glory to a religion from which once arose thinkers, scholars, architects, mathematicians, astronomers, and chemists who served as a catalyst for the emergence of modern science. After all, according to one Hadith the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) is said to have declared that “the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”

Let us hope and pray that all religions and sects, all nations and groups, recognizing humans as children of the same Creator or as the end products of the same natural forces, will work towards social, economic, and political justice without which there will never be planetary peace.

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.