

Freedom to Blaspheme and Freedom to Hate

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Civil libertarians the world over are mourning the deaths of 12 people killed by alleged extremists in Paris. Gunmen attacked the offices of the Charlie Hebdo newspaper, a “satirical” publication known for carrying cartoons that allegedly ridiculed the Prophet Muhammad, among other things.

Predictably, many in the media and other observers are expressing fears about a supposed “clash of civilizations” between militant Muslims and the ostensibly fair and democratic West. Moreover, we are force-fed the obligatory condemnation of the boogie man of “political correctness.” However, the situation is more complex than many imagine.

First and foremost, without the freedom to blaspheme, true freedom of speech and expression cannot be achieved. Moreover, these freedoms must always take precedence over the protection of the sensibilities of offended religious people. True liberty means that religious fanatics must develop thicker skins. There really is no freedom to not be offended by satirists or anyone else.

However, there is a corresponding right of offended groups to peacefully protest against those that have given them offense - including the use of boycotts and other strategies. It must always be remembered, though, that resorting to violence to intimidate or harm those that have given offense is always wrong, and must be met with harsh punishment from legal authorities.

The problem is that this is not the end of the discussion. For example, Charlie Hedbo - a supposedly leftist publication - has long been known to carry material that many progressives consider to be sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic. Yet many progressives are supporting Charlie Hedbo without any reservations. Some powerful organizations have given large sums of money to keep the publication going. Many have blindly adopted the slogan “Je suis Charlie,” or I am Charlie.

I could not in good conscience go that far. I am not Charlie, nor would I ever want to be. On the contrary, I criticize the Charlies of the world in much the same way that I criticize al-Qaida and other religious extremists, though the religious extremists are obviously, by far, worse than their bigoted offenders.

Many people fail to understand that though satire and other forms of humor have been used effectively to combat bigotry and oppression, they have also been used to *further* bigotry and oppression. Sadly, this is how satire has been used by Charlie Hedbo and others.

Indeed, in recent years, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hostility has grown in France, Germany and other Western nations. Right-wing groups have worked to further marginalize Muslims throughout Europe. As examples, they have destroyed mosques, tried to enforce dress codes against Muslims and targeted Muslim women in the streets with verbal and physical harassment.

Where should humanists and other civil libertarians stand on this issue? Opposition to bigotry is at least just as much a value among humanists as the freedom to blaspheme, antagonize, and even express hate. Why should humanists feel in any way obligated to defend Charlie Hedbo’s right to express hate without condemning the hate itself? As someone once said, just because you have the right to do it doesn’t mean it’s *right* to do it. Should not humanists stand with those Muslims that oppose extremism, i.e. the majority of them? Furthermore, while humanists should steadfastly defend the right to blaspheme, why should they join forces with the likes of Charlie Hedbo, give them money, or support them in other ways?

This situation is even more complicated by the fact that many humanists criticize Sikivu Hutchinson and other non-theistic activists by disparagingly referring to them as social justice warriors. For these critics, advocacy of social justice should have no prominent role in organized humanism. That would include social justice for marginalized religious minorities. However, if humanism runs from social justice altogether, how would that make it any better than progressive religion like that of Martin Luther King?

For humanists, defending the right to blaspheme is the easy, knee-jerk reaction. However, what is not so easy is understanding how Islamophobic blasphemy fits into the overall context of Western exceptionalism, the demonization of the other and the marginalization and alienation of Muslims. The sad fact is that, though we often feel compelled to take sides, sometimes, there are no good sides.

This is not the first time that bigoted European cartoonists have intentionally offended Muslims. The best known example was in 2006, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* carried cartoons offensive to Muslims - including one with Muhammad with a bomb on top of his head.

What many did not know is that *Jyllands-Posten* saw itself as a conservative Christian publication and decided against publishing cartoons that one of its editors felt would offend Christians. Even worse, the newspaper allegedly had connections to German and Italian fascists. Yet, many humanists blindly supported the Danish publisher's right to blaspheme without issuing any corresponding denunciation of its bigotry.

Humanists are going to have to wake up on this issue. If we are going to defend someone's right to express hate, we have to at least denounce the hate.