

Future of Blasphemy in the West

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There have been so many reactions to the massacre at Charlie Hebdo. And yet here is another, so I shall try to say something that differs in some respects from what I have seen so far.

At Charlie Hebdo, a group of well educated and peaceful people make fun of ideas, and in particular the often childish ideas so characteristic of religious belief. This is partly in the almost certainly vain hope that those who hold and promote such ideas will review them in a more critical spirit. But it is also a cry in the dark that may be heard by others, particularly younger people, who have grown suspicious of the dogmas of their elders, but are afraid that they may find themselves alone if they try to escape from them.

I should make clear my own position with respect to all religions, and in fact with respect to all hypotheses about supernatural beings, with or without the paraphernalia of religious ritual and dogma. The best way to put it would be this: I'm not even atheist. If I had to say I was, I would have to list literally billions of ideas I don't adhere to because they are not supported by any real evidence, and because they are so obviously the pure invention of human imagination. So I must openly admit: I have been saying the same things as Charlie for as long as I have been aware of what religion is.

One can understand any religion as a complex of ideas that get spread from person to person, but especially from parent to child. Such spreadable ideas, copied from person to person, from generation to generation, are sometimes called memes. They replicate in suitable minds, as genes, or indeed viruses, replicate in suitable cells. These memes work together in such a way that they can compete with the memplexes of other religions in the cultural world of human beings, a world populated with thousands of such belief systems.

Before going on, I would like to point out that there really is an alternative to simply being a receptacle for a belief system, and it is this: one can work on the hypothesis that all our knowledge is merely hypothesis. As such all our knowledge should be subjected to continued attempts to refute it, either by rational criticism or by experimental test. And of course the above working hypothesis must itself remain open to constant attempts at rebuttal. What we generate in this way, if we are careful enough, and dogged enough about expelling belief, is a vast body of reliable knowledge. This is science.

The world's thousands of religions do indeed compete with one another, as today we see so-called evangelist sects competing with the older sects like

Catholicism and Protestantism in the Americas and Europe, or the Shia and Sunni sects competing in the Middle East. And some forms of competition are of course violent or otherwise extreme, including persecution, terrorisation, and even physical elimination. Indeed, the most striking thing about the history of religions has been their utterly destructive treatment of people with the ‘wrong’ memplex. In Europe, we had the Wars of Religion and the crusades, or simply the butchering of people who came up with new memes, in some cases because they had been engaged in rational thinking!

Physical destruction is of course an effective way for one religion to dominate another. Any religion whose memplex contains a persecution meme, with blasphemy laws that allow or even encourage its members to murder those who say the wrong thing, is likely to do well under the auspices of the Darwinian algorithm that so well describes the dynamics of competition between religions, as it so well describes the dynamics of competing life forms. If you can carry out a genocide of people who do not uphold your own beliefs, then your belief system will, by simple arithmetic, become relatively more successful. And there is the knock-on effect that many more people will be simply terrorised into accepting your set of memes.

It is important to note that this does not require any human manipulation or evil intention or calculation of any kind (and even less so, the design of any superbeing). One just has to be convinced of the persecution meme in one’s own religion. Those who perpetrate these murders and genocides are likely to be perfectly sincere in most cases. They are just doing what is necessary when one’s mind is so infected. We see this kind of killing on a large scale in the Middle East and parts of the African continent today, and it sometimes spills over into Europe and the USA, as we have seen recently.

If we consider the Charlie Hebdo massacre, the first victims were clearly the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly, who were ‘ready to die’. Presumably, since the outcome was inevitable, they must even have wanted to die. One of the memes in their belief system was that they would survive death in some form and then proceed to some very nice place. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of any kind that this is so. And just being convinced of something does not make it true. The most likely hypothesis is that these people simply no longer exist, except of course in the loving memory, and sorrow, of those that knew them. In short, they died for nothing.

But worse, they took others with them. Others who were trying to help them to escape from their madness by asking them to look again, critically, at the way they understood the world. And it is because of this that those of us lucky enough to have escaped or avoided the religion virus have a duty to preach the good word: there are no gods. Our best hypothesis at the present stage of our understanding is that we are just animals living out a life on Earth, then one day ceasing to exist. I say that because there is a truly enormous amount of evidence to support this hypothesis. So much that it is blindingly obvious, while on the other hand, there is simply no evidence whatever for the assertion that there are magical superbeings.

This will convince no one, of course. When you believe, you believe. End

of argument. But in the meantime, what of tolerance, the right to speak our minds, the idea of 'live and let live'? In the West today, many religions live together in great harmony for the main part. They tolerate one another. Why is this? Perhaps it is just that the West is rich. Perhaps also it is because, in Europe in particular, there has been enough killing and the religions here have all evolved sufficiently to temper or drop the persecution meme. Others, people like me who are not even atheists, have been around for a long time too, longer than many would think, and we too have played a role.

So our religions have somehow, finally, taken on board the need for tolerance. It may even be that religions invented this new meme and integrated it into their meme complex, simply because it turned out to be a useful survival factor for all of them. So the religious leaders in Europe and the USA usually (but not always) preach tolerance. They want to be friends with the leaders of other sects, even when in fact they staunchly disagree over their beliefs in many cases. They agree to disagree.

There is also an overwhelming balance of power in countries like France in particular, which reminds religions that they must never overstep the laws of the land. But those religions are there, with their extremists, just waiting for the opportunity to spread themselves, and impose themselves if they get the slightest chance. We see this in France with issues like abortion, equality for women, or indeed homosexuality. Most of the religions we refer to as monotheistic, which seem in their extreme forms to be the most brutal and autocratic, have memes for persecuting homosexual people, and when equality laws are extended, the monotheistic extremists are there to voice their insatiable need to persecute.

In their milder forms, some of the most populous sects like the Anglican Church are even evolving with the wiser and better educated aspects of Western society. For example, they have ceased to victimise women and homosexual people, even allowing them equal positions in their hierarchy. This may lead to the destruction of such sects by other, more virulent ones whose memplexes contain memes for terrorising ordinary folk with talk of hell and damnation.

This is why we need to be vigilant, and we need to support those courageous individuals like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, or the journalists at Charlie Hebdo who are ready to stand up and be counted, at great risk to themselves. I salute them all. But is there any hope that those infected by these mental viruses will themselves aim criticism at the meme complexes that cause so much hatred and evil by simply disarming the critical faculty of those that carry them? If we examine what is now happening across the vast spectrum of Islamic sects, there is reason to be pessimistic.

Consider what Islam actually says about representing Muhammad, since this is the cause of so much debate and violence today. (Think about that, if you have a religion: we are fighting over whether someone can draw a picture! Couldn't you just drop that meme and keep all the good bits of your religion, the ones that obviously bring harmony and happiness to the world of human beings?) I have adapted the following from an analysis on the BBC website.

First consider what the Koran, the holy book of Islam, says. It turns out that there is no specific, or explicit ban in the Koran on images of Allah or the

Prophet Muhammad, either carved, painted, or drawn. There's just one thing in Chapter 42, Verse 11 of the Koran which says: "[Allah is] the originator of the heavens and the earth . . . [there is] nothing like a likeness of Him." According to the BBC source, and reasonably enough it seems to me, this is taken by Muslims to mean that Allah cannot be captured in an image by human hand, such is his beauty and grandeur. That's fine, but then things start to go wrong, because we now reason that to attempt such a thing would be seen as an insult to Allah. And apparently, the same is believed to apply to Muhammad. So here we begin to have a reason for killing people, although naturally it depends what version of this meme you carry.

The BBC source also notes that Chapter 21, Verses 52–54 of the Koran read: "[Abraham] said to his father and his people: 'What are these images to whose worship you cleave?' They said: 'We found our fathers worshipping them.' He said: 'Certainly you have been, you and your fathers, in manifest error.'" And from this arises the Muslim belief that images can give rise to idolatry – that is to say an image, rather than the divine being it symbolises, can become the object of worship and veneration. It would thus be reasonable to discourage members of your sect from going that way. After all, it would then become a new sect, one with idolatry, reducing the numbers in the first, non-idolising sect. Such sects will thus compete, and they do indeed today, over all kinds of similarly trivial issues.

But we cannot just consult the ancient book. There is also something known as Islamic tradition or Hadith, a further source of memes that have evolved over the centuries since the first dogma was laid down. According to this, which is apparently based on the stories of the words and actions of Muhammad and his Companions, images of Allah, Muhammad, and all the major so-called prophets of the Christian and Jewish traditions are all explicitly prohibited. More widely, Islamic tradition has discouraged the figurative depiction of living creatures, especially human beings. Islamic art has therefore tended to be abstract or decorative. But my BBC source notes that Shia Islamic tradition is far less strict on this ban. Reproductions of images of the Prophet Muhammad do exist, mainly produced in 7th Century Persia.

So this is the big issue that means some people will come to kill you if you draw a certain picture. Of course, we are reminded that not every Muslim would go that far. The vast majority of Muslims would describe themselves as moderates. At least, one hopes so. But even some of these moderates are angry, even very angry, because of certain pictures. They work themselves up into a state even though they are moderate. But I ask them this: since it doesn't really matter one way or the other, compared with, say, the problem of finding enough food, water, security, and other basic commodities for people to live their lives in happiness, why not drop this requirement of the memplex? Why not just keep the bits of Islamic teaching that tell you to respect others, to help them, to spread happiness, and so on, which most Muslims quite sincerely assure us are the really important aspects of their religion? Why not just drop a pointless requirement that is causing you so much anger, and even hatred and violence?

Respect is the issue. It has two faces: respect for ideas and respect for

people. The only important one is the second, because the first is hopeless. No Catholic respects the ideas of a Jew or a Muslim. If she did, she would be a Jew or a Muslim. No two people agree on all their ideas. In fact, our having ideas was one of evolution's great ideas. In principle, it allows us to simulate aspects of real life without actually living them. It was mindlessly designed by evolution so that we could avoid injury and death by simply not enacting the bad ideas. And it is a very poor idea among our ideas that we should kill someone just because of . . . an idea.

From what I have said above about all religions, I have no doubt committed much worse than just drawing a picture of Muhammad. I deny that there was anything magical about this person. He was just another human being with good and bad points, even though he certainly marked human history, in both good and bad ways. Of course, my aim is not to make anyone angry. I would like to be on good terms with everyone. But in the same way, as a scientist, I criticise the hypotheses of others, just as I criticise my own. Those others may sometimes be annoyed, but still we correspond or meet, and we argue our point, realising that these are just ideas and that our overall aims are the same: we just wish to understand our world. So by fighting with ideas like this, we are actually working together. Science is the self-correcting result of this huge, cross-cultural aspect of human endeavour, and it has generated a vast body of reliable knowledge. But this works to a large extent because we talk together and, above all, we drop the bad ideas.

Those of us who are not even atheists are certainly not out to anger anyone. But if you tell us we cannot speak our minds, you will find that we are ready to resist. In many parts of the world, including Europe, religious memplexes are no longer the dominant political system, and you'd better believe that we are not ready to see them return to power in Europe. They may coexist and that is all. That was the message of the millions of French people who came out on the streets after what happened to Charlie.