

Reflections on Charlie Hebdo.

30th January 2015

Now that some time has passed since the terrorist slaughter in Paris we have all had time to reflect on what it means to us individually and collectively and moreover, what our response should be. Wearing a badge declaiming, “Je suis Charlie” is fine but, if we really are Charlie then we must find the courage to do what Charlie did and to publish the cartoons. Each one of us can now publish on social media and we have a responsibility so to do. Not to do so plays into the hands of these monsters by giving in to their threats. We should be demonstrating our resolute support for free speech. In my view this is much more important than pandering to the sensibilities of people, who if they are offended, should not be part of our free society. Moderate Muslims should be robust enough to accept the lampooning of their prophet – the rest can go to hell.

I would like to hear more from Muslim Imams and leaders. Have they told their followers that those responsible will not only miss out on their rendezvous with virgins but also go straight to hell? Assassins should be denied burial in sacred ground. Silence or weak condemnation suggest approval as does mentioning offenses against the prophet or the deaths of Muslims in Syria or Israel in the same breath. Nothing less than absolute and unqualified condemnation will suffice.

The pusillanimous and equivocal responses to the fatwa against Salman Rushdie demonstrated how little we in Britain were prepared to do to stand-up for free speech and to a death threat to one of our citizens by the leader of another country. It is the first duty of government to protect its citizens – that forms the basis of the social contract. Police protection, a new identity and a temporary cooling of diplomatic relations were simply not enough. We all had an opportunity then to express our outrage and we failed the test.

This time, we need to do something radical to stem this Islamist poison before it infects more young people. This time actions must speak louder than words.

The Press must do more than condemn, it should re-print the offending cartoons as an expression of genuine solidarity with those who died in Paris. The perpetrators were trying to silence a slight to the prophet and the Muslim religion; their supporters must be shown that what they did has had the opposite effect, that it emboldens the Press to become more

aggressive in its defence of the right to free speech by promulgating the offensive material ten thousand fold.

At national level parliament must take action to stop fundamentalists and their apologists from influencing malleable young minds in school and in places of worship. Clearly de-radicalisation programs, while well intentioned, fall well short of what is needed.

A bill should be introduced that makes swearing to the principles of our liberal society mandatory for all school masters, university lecturers, governors of educational bodies, ministers of religion and those in charge of mosques. This new “Test Act” would also be imposed on all MPs and public employees, applicants for UK citizenship and those applying for visas to the UK. Those refusing to swear should be barred from working with or preaching to young people.

The text should state the signatory’s acceptance of the freedom of the Press and the public to criticise, lampoon or insult any religion. It should include the right of anyone to change religion or become apostate. To give the text force it should be sworn on the Koran or other holy book and be prominently displayed in the schools and mosques of the signatories.

It could be said that this might, as did the original Test Acts, force people underground and induce some to swear false statements but pupils and worshippers will be able to see the signed statement prominently displayed in their classroom or mosque.

MPs might reflect on the encouragement given to religious extremists by the ill-advised Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 that makes “inciting hatred against a person on the grounds of their religion” a criminal offence and therefore, in the eyes of some Muslims, justifying punishment according to Sharia law. This Act should be repealed immediately.

The Act makes the error of confusing and aligning race and religion. If the two are the same how then is Salman Rushdie an atheist or the white fugitive terrorist, Samantha Lewthwaite, a Muslim? This act runs counter to the enlightenment principle that religion is the voluntary assumption of a set of beliefs and not an innate quality received at birth. You can’t change your race – even if Michael Jackson thought he could – but you can abjure the religion into which you were born; perhaps many more should do so.

We would do well to pay close heed to the words of that brave lady, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has chosen the courageous and principled path of apostasy to challenge the tenets of her birth religion of Islam and in particular its denigration of women. She has already expressed approval for many of the proposals in this article by saying, “Tolerance of intolerance is cowardice.”

Finally, we should reflect on the inherent unpleasantness of many religious texts, especially the Koran. The Muslim religion was born out of violent conquest and clearly provides for the stoning of women taken in adultery and the killing of gay men not to mention death for apostates. Perhaps the time has come for both Christian and Jew to reject the hate-speak of Leviticus on the same grounds and consign its incitements to murder to the dustbin of history.

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