

A Message from the Morally Bankrupt: Apologists for Islamofascist Terrorism

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In the days following the horrific massacre at the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, millions of people throughout the world, from a wide variety of backgrounds, expressed both their outrage at the barbarity of the attack and their solidarity with its victims. But there were more than a few who took a very different approach.

Pope Francis, for example, opined that there are limits to freedom of expression and that “One cannot provoke, one cannot insult other people’s faith, one cannot make fun of faith.” This declaration basically excuses the odious behaviour of the perpetrators of the massacre, but it is hardly surprising coming from the supreme head of what is arguably the most obscurantist, most backward and most powerful religious institution on the planet. If the majority of people started to behave like the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*, using a healthy combination of common sense and irreverence to evaluate religious tenets, such as those of the Roman Catholic Church, instead of maintaining an attitude of mindless deference, then the pope would be laughed off of every podium he tried to mount and his authority would be destroyed.

We do however have a duty, in my opinion, to hold others to a higher standard. It is thus with a sense of outrage that I read a recent article by Chris Hedges, entitled “A Message From the Dispossessed.” Hedges, although ostensibly a journalist, goes even further than the pope. While paying lip service to the “evil” nature of the massacre (although note the curious use of the religious term “evil”), Hedges spends a great deal of ink explaining just how badly the murderers must have had their feelings hurt by the magazine’s cartoons; indeed, he goes to such length in this direction that he implicitly justifies the morally repugnant actions of the gunmen.

In doing so, Hedges asserts an astonishing array of misconceptions and falsehoods. His first two sentences alone are outrageous, because in them he states that the attack “was not about free speech” and “not about radical Islam.” Let us be clear: the attack was certainly and indubitably about free speech and, more importantly, about freedom of conscience, i.e. an extremist repudiation of those freedoms. The journalists of *Charlie Hebdo* were executed because they were unabashed atheists and secularists. Their execution was an extra-legal death penalty for the non-crime of “blasphemy.” Furthermore, the attack was certainly and indubitably a religious, Islamic, Muslim atrocity perpetrated in the name of Islam. To deny these facts is to be morally incompetent.

Now I must admit that despite the excesses of Hedges’ recent apology of religious terrorism, I was not greatly surprised. It had come to my attention years ago that he hates atheists and is more than willing to lie in order to propagate that hatred. For example, in an interview with Michael Enright on CBC Radio on March 24th 2008, Hedges accused Christopher Hitchens of racism because he, Hitchens, sometimes criticized the religion known as Islam. (In fact, Hedges practically stated that atheism is equivalent to racism, while falsely intimating that atheists in general endorsed Hitchens’ very controversial support for the invasion of Iraq.) Not only is the accusation baseless, it is absurd, because Islam is not a race, nor is it an ethnicity. If Hitchens were racist, which race or races was he denigrating? Arabs? Persians? Indonesians? (But are not Indonesians of many different ethnicities?) French converts to Islam? Latvian converts?

Hedges’ false accusation against Hitchens illustrates the most egregious, dangerous and dishonest of his numerous falsifications, a deception which is the essential kernel of his recent piece: the deliberate conflation of religion and race. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this intentional confusion of two very different characteristics – one innate (race or ethnicity), the other chosen (belief) – is the flagship strategy used by Islamic

fundamentalists to sow guilt among those who would dare criticize Islamist ideology. How many times must we remind everyone that if it is taboo to criticize an ideology such as Islam, Christianity or Marxism, then freedom of thought is at best compromised and arguably nearly dead. Should criticism of Marxism be dismissed as anti-Semitic Germanophobia? After all, Marx was a German Jew. If Hitchens had criticized Presbyterian theology, would he then be an anti-Scottish racist?

Hedges is the author of a book whose title “I Don’t Believe In Atheists” is a curious manifestation of wishful thinking. Unfortunately for Mr. Hedges, we atheists do indeed exist, although clearly he wishes we did not. If he had written a book entitled “I Don’t Believe In Jews” he would have been instantly vilified as an anti-Semite and his career would have come to a screeching halt. However, hatred of atheists being still socially acceptable, Hedges is safe in the knowledge that his blatant atheophobia will not cause him undue adversity. It is up to us atheists to make sure that that situation changes.

Returning to Hedges’ recent article, let us review its numerous fallacies. Here is a non-exhaustive list:

1. The attack was “not about free speech.” False. The purpose of the attack was to silence journalists who drew innocuous pictures which, for political reasons, displeased fundamentalist extremists and some religious authorities.
2. The attack was “not about radical Islam.” Outrageously false. This is like saying that Ku Klux Klan lynchings were not about racism.
3. The attack was “not about liberty or democracy ... not about the freedom of expression.” False. See (1).
4. The perpetrators acted in solidarity with the “dispossessed.” Really? The Kouachi brothers were jihadists trained and financed by petrodollars from AQAP (*Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*).
5. Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right FN (*Front National*), “has so much in common with the jihadists.” An outrageous exaggeration. To the best of my knowledge, the number of terrorist attacks carried out by the FN against *Charlie Hebdo* or anyone else is zero. And yet, the FN has been the target of the magazine’s cartoonists, and their rendering of Le Pen and her father – see cartoon (c) – was much less flattering than their rendering of Muhammad. See (6).
6. “The cartoons of the Prophet in the Paris-based satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* are offensive and juvenile.” Outrageously false. In general, *Charlie Hebdo*’s original cartoons featuring Muhammad showed him in a sympathetic light. The two most famous are (a) the one published during the Danish cartoon controversy in which a very distraught Muhammad denounces Islamist fundamentalists; and (b) the moving cover of the first issue after the attack, in which Muhammad shows compassion for the victims. Either Hedges has not seen these cartoons, in which case he has no business commenting on them, or he has seen them, in which case he is lying.
7. Hedges compares *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons to cartoons which mock the Holocaust or Jews. This comparison is entirely specious. Anti-semitic cartoons generally denigrate the Jews as an ethnic group and rarely target the religion of Judaism. Once again we have a deliberate conflation of ethnicity/race with belief. Furthermore, as explained in (6) the magazine’s cartoons dealing with Islam are often sympathetic and at most mock the fundamentalist extremists. Hedges’ attempt to paint the magazine with this particular brush is especially disgusting given that the jihadists went on to invade a kosher supermarket and murder several Jewish hostages there.
8. The massacre “did not arise from the Quran or Islam.” Bullshit. The quran contains many passages which incite the faithful to hatred and/or violence against non-believers and against Jews. This provides

a convenient “divine” justification for extremism. Indeed, the reverence for so-called “holy” scripture is one of the most dangerous aspects of all three monotheisms, as Christopher Hitchens so rightly pointed out. Of course the torah and the bible also contain calls for violence and genocide. Indeed, Deuteronomy may be considered the original prescription for holy war, a concept which belongs to all three. See, for example Deut. 7:1-6 or 7:16 or 20:16-18. Perhaps this explains why Hedges, a Christian, is in denial.

The cumulative effect of all these misconceptions, lies and denials is that the reader, if he or she is naïve enough to believe Hedges, is left with the distinct impression that the massacre was in some sense justified and that the cartoonists got what they deserved.

Evidently Hedges does not care about all those countless “heretics” and “blasphemers” executed throughout European history because they challenged some religious despot who had the infinite arrogance to claim divine authority. Apparently he does not care a wit about the legacy of Voltaire and others who fought so hard to stop such atrocities so that we could be free of religious coercion. Hedges claims to be in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed of the Muslim world, but he evidently does not give a damn about journalists and citizens who have endured persecution at the hands of Islamist fanatics in recent years because they dared to express their opinions in the press or in social media. As Ernest Renan observed a century and a half ago, Muslims are the first victims of Islam.

Misconceptions about the nature of *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of Muhammad, misconceptions which are spread both by Hedges and by unscrupulous Muslim clerics, are responsible for a number of violent and deadly incidents such as recent riots in Niger. The solution to the crisis is to publish the cartoons as widely as possible and to encourage objective analysis of them. The dubious notion that images of the “Prophet” are “blasphemous” is what I would call blasphemy-creep. Traditionally, Islam forbids idolatry, i.e. the adoration of images and sculptures of humans and animals. The extension of this tradition to a ban on any and all representations of Muhammad is a convenient tool used by Islamists to manipulate millions of Muslims who have never seen the cartoons. They are told that if they are good Muslims they will behave as if appropriated “offended.” Many obey.

It is true that the cartoons published in *Charlie Hebdo* were and are often – but certainly not always – of a so-called “vulgar” nature, employing sexual themes to ridicule or otherwise skewer various authority figures such as politicians, celebrities or religious leaders. However, as explained above in (6), this has been much less the case when the cartoonists dealt with Muslim figures. Catholicism has been the main brunt of their mockery and this is appropriate given the religious history of France. However, even if images involving Islam had been “vulgar,” that would in no way excuse the actions of the jihadists.

“Vulgarity” – if that is the appropriate word for it – does indeed have a legitimate place in rational debate. It is useful in at least two circumstances: (1) to express intense anger, provided that the anger is justified; and (2) to mock an unhealthy sexual prudery which has harmful consequences for others.

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, it is an understatement to say that both of these conditions are met. Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular are major cesspools of misogyny, homophobia, sexophobia and sexual hypocrisy. Indeed the Vatican is a major purveyor of human misery because it denies women the right to control their own reproduction, and we know that when women gain that control, standards of living rise and everyone benefits. Of course it is not surprising that the Vatican should adopt such a retrograde position, because human poverty and misery (as well as ignorance) are strong correlates of religious faith, so it is in the interest of the Church not to alleviate too much suffering so as not to erode its client base. Given these observations, profound anger is certainly justified. Furthermore, much of the damage done by Catholicism is

directly related to its hostility towards homosexuality, female sexuality (of any orientation) and sexuality in general, so condition (2) is certainly met. So when cartoonists such as those of *Charlie Hebdo* employ sexual imagery to mock and parody Catholic dogma and sensibilities, I say “Bravo!”

However, I prefer not to use vulgarity here because Mr. Hedges’ apology for extremism is beneath that. After reading “A Message From the Dispossessed” I consider that its author must be morally and intellectually bankrupt.

As atheists and secularists, our weapons are words, pens, pencils and keyboards. We must use them to maximum effect to counter the atheophobia which Hedges promotes explicitly and the Islamofascism which he enables and excuses. Hedges must be stopped. Human lives depend upon it.

Links

1. “On Charlie Hebdo Pope Francis is using the wife-beater’s defence,” Polly Toynbee, 16th January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/16/pope-francis-free-speech-charlie-hebdo>
2. “A Message From the Dispossessed,” Chris Hedges, 11th January 2015, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/a-message-from-the-dispossessed/>
3. *The Sunday Edition*, CBC Radio,

Charlie Hebdo cartoons discussed in this article

- (a) “Muhammad overwhelmed by fundamentalists” Muhammad says, “It isn’t easy being liked by idiots...” <https://www.atheologie.ca/images/charlie/953919.jpg>
- (b) “All is forgiven” https://www.atheologie.ca/images/charlie/ch_1178_couverture.jpg
- (c) “Le Pen: The Father, The Daughter, The Holy Ghost” <https://www.atheologie.ca/images/charlie/479966charlotqueant.jpg>

