



Taking Offense

Free to
Believe

BRIEFING

Summer 2015

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Cover illustration: Post-tragedy cover of Charlie Hebdo

In the Shade of Sayyid Qutb



Peter Colwell ponders religious ideology and secular culture

The attack on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and its aftermath raised once again questions of the extent to which a religious meta-narrative can exist and flourish in a secular or pluralist context. But the questions about limits to freedom of speech, the right of religious people not to be offended and the shape of religious people's response were not new and have surfaced many times since the beginnings of the enlightenment, with the Satanic Verses controversy one of the more recent examples.

At the heart of the Charlie Hebdo incident is a much wider debate as to the place of Islam both in Western society and the wider global context. More precisely the matter concerns Islamism – the belief that Islam offers a political as well as a theological commentary and framework – enters into dialogue with Western society.

The alleged clash between the West and Islamist ideology is often assumed to begin with the 9/11 attacks on the United States, but its foundations are much older than commonly thought.

In 1949 the Muslim writer Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) was sent to the United States by the Nasser administration in Egypt, with the hope that exposure to Western culture might dampen his enthusiasm for Islamic radicalism. In fact it had the precise opposite effect. On the Atlantic sea crossing he observed with horror the tactics of Christian missionaries on board, and whilst in the USA he viewed the Christianity which he encountered with contempt: “Nobody goes to church as often as Americans do...yet no-one is as distant as they are from the spiritual aspects of religion.”

He observed that Churches compete for congregations much in the same way that theatres competed for audiences. He records his disapproval when, at a church dance, he observed men and women dancing together in close contact! This echoes his revulsion at the conduct of some women when he first arrived in Cairo as a young man. More broadly he gained a disdain for aspects of American culture, such as jazz. This experience was to prove seminal for Qutb.

The Muslim Brotherhood

In 1951, following his return to Egypt, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood which was to become a major turning point in his thinking. The Muslim Brotherhood had been founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, formed to struggle against foreign domination of Islamic lands but in time it saw its focus shifting to oppose regimes it deemed un-Islamic. Qutb's involvement with the Brotherhood was so momentous for him that he would later comment “I was born in 1951” and would often refer to his ‘conversion’ to Islam. From this point he began to develop his own thinking, a blend of classical Islam and aspects of the European fascist movements with which he had become familiar. He was to become one of the foremost Islamist thinkers whose writings have become hugely influential with Islamist and Jihadi intellectuals and activists.

Qutb's spiritual transformation from moderate to radical has also become a model for the lives of subsequent radicals who see the West as the primary enemy, and Western allies in the Muslim world as a block to Islam fulfilling its true destiny.

We might ponder why it was that Qutb, well-educated, knowledgeable about Western literature and philosophy, and who as a young man shared many of the liberal beliefs of Europeans, was to become one of the most influential anti-Western, Islamist writers? In fact this is a question that has been asked of so many Islamists who have resorted to murder in recent decades, and it is in part why Qutb remains a highly relevant figure for understanding some of the background and ideology to some of the events, of which Charlie Hebdo is but one. Qutb's life – his secular background, exposure to the West, struggles with a secular Muslim leader and eventual radicalization – make him a seminal figure for the Islamist movement.

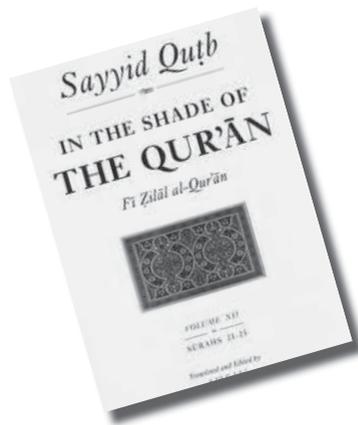
Qutb believed that Western hegemony was coming to an end, not simply because of a loss of political and military power, but because it had been deprived of the “life giving values which once enabled it to become the leader of humanity.” Although Qutb had a high regard for many aspects of Western culture, particularly in the field of literature, art and philosophy, he rejected modernity because it negated the sovereignty of God. In his writings he connects the health and influence of a civilization with morality and high culture. His own view of the past was essentially a nostalgic one: both in terms of his image of a Western society of high culture, and of a former Islamic world. At the same time his view of the contemporary world was one of moral degradation that was doomed to collapse. A new world leadership would emerge, he believed, that would preserve all that was good in European culture whilst providing a positive view of human destiny. Only Islam, he believed, could provide this new leadership.

A change of world view

Qutb believed that the Qur'an was the basis of a totalizing philosophy that would transform the way in which people viewed the world. Thus Islam was as much a political ideology as a spiritual religion. However Qutb did not believe that Islam should be approached in an intellectual or analytical way but rather be an ‘instinctive way of reality’. In Qutb's view it was necessary to engineer a change in the world view of every Muslim and every Muslim community – a transformation similar to that experienced by the first Muslim communities of Mecca and Medina.

The West is not innocuous. It was a civilization that was once noble but had gone astray and should no longer be emulated. It existed in a state of ignorance (jahiliyya). It was against this that the Prophet Muhammad struggled, and Qutb saw the struggles of his own lifetime with Arab nationalism as another such battle with jahiliyya. In fact this is often described in terms of a cosmic recapitulation of the struggles of the first Muslim communities under Muhammad's leadership.

In order for a transformation of the world order to come about Muslims must struggle against the forces of jahiliyya so that Islam might be the dominant view of reality. This would involve the replacement of 'man-made laws' with shariah and the overthrow of political systems which put such laws in place. This struggle (jihad) is not simply a means by which Islam would become the dominant view of reality,



but it is also vital if Islam is to survive at all, as the forces of jahiliyya seek to undermine and destroy Islam. He felt strongly that it was not only the intention of the West but also of many governments in the Islamic world, to undermine and destroy Islam. Thus there is an obligation placed upon all Muslims to engage in jihad against the forces of jahiliyya. Furthermore it is the responsibility of every Muslim to protect the true believer and to ensure that they do not stray from the religion. He further insists that Muslims must be given the freedom to spread Islam and thus it is justifiable to fight against any system or regime which obstructs this. Those Muslims who insist that jihad can

only resort to force as a means of self-defence, he calls “spiritual and intellectual defeatists”.

Forces of ignorance

As far as other faiths are concerned, particularly Judaism and Christianity, they are equated with these forces of ignorance. When Qutb discusses particular parts of the Qur’an where these two faiths are featured, he sees Muhammad’s struggles with them as archetypal, and sees a kind of historical recapitulation in each generation where the Muslim community struggles against the forces of ignorance. For his own time this equated to the Christian “crusader” West and Israeli Zionism.

Having therefore overcome the forces of jahiliyya the true Islamic society will emerge. This is a society where humanity lives in harmony with the divine. Qutb likewise looks to the creation of an Islamic state but (and of particular interest in the current context of the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) he rejects the recreation of the ancient caliphate as an unrealistic goal. Such an Islamic State would create true freedom for the individual, within an Islamic community which is ‘one body’.

Qutb remains a critical figure for understanding some of the current ideological frameworks in which radicalized Muslims operate and why debate concerning freedom of speech, interfaith dialogue and social cohesion are operating in a different intellectual sphere. But whilst we may see where the areas of debate, or even clash, might be with Western political secularism, there is also a vigorous debate that is ongoing within Islam itself. What are some of these voices saying?

The renowned Tunisian scholar Mohammed Talbi challenges Qutb’s view that Islam contains a political theory, denying that Islam has any intrinsic political principles. He rejects the view that the Qur’an offers any political ‘blueprint’ for society and instead suggests that Islam is a revealed system of belief, piety and worship, with no polity. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Muslim scholar Nucholish Madjid believes that the concept of an “Islamic state” is a distortion of a properly proportional relationship between state and religion. He even goes on to challenge notions of exclusivism with Islam, suggesting that the meaning of the

word “Islam” (submission) can equally be applied to other faiths too.

Meanwhile Neal Robinson doubts whether jahiliyya is as central to Islam as Qutb suggests which, he points out, only appears in the Qur’an four times yet is central to Qutb’s analysis of the relationship between the Muslim community and ‘the other’. He is critical of Qutb’s use of the term al-harakat al-islamiyya (the ‘Islamic movement’) which never appears in the Qur’an and points us to Ali Abd al-Raziq, an Egyptian judge, who in 1925 argued that it was not part of Mohammed’s mission to found an Islamic state and that the caliphate, far from representing an ‘Islamic golden age’ was in fact the source of much evil and corruption.

The heart of the matter

These matters go to the very heart of so much that is happening at the present time. The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, whilst not an exact manifestation of what Qutb imagined, nonetheless represents much (and more besides) that he hoped for. Yet contemporary events such as Charlie Hebdo, whilst illustrating how Qutb’s ideology has become so powerful and convincing for many who embrace Islamism, nonetheless uncovers just how much it has travelled away from the more quietist and less overtly political versions of Islam that were once the norm, and in many places, still are.

So is it possible for devoutly religious people (of any faith) to deny any separation between things sacred and things secular, between things spiritual and things temporal? Bernard Lewis, the London-born, American historian of Islam and the Middle East offers us this observation:

“In pre-western Islam, there were not two powers but one, and the question of separation, therefore, could not arise...It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then under the influence of Western ideas and institutions, that new words were found...to express the idea of the secular.”

An analysis that echoes something of the European Christian story.

Peter Colwell is Deputy General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

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Relationships, not dogma

Former Church and Society Secretary **Peter Brain**
considers some of the barriers to dialogue...

It is very rare that people of different faiths - or different understandings of a shared faith - get down to the point where they seriously discuss deep differences. Sadly most of what passes for engagement is done in caricature, such that the old Jewish saw comes to mind: 'that God you don't believe in I don't believe in either'. This certainly applies in most supposed encounters between believers and unbelievers where the prevailing superficiality has contributed greatly to the mood of opposition (or ridicule) across the media, including the so-called social media. In any specific dialogue the primary respect should be for the other person and for their beliefs only insofar as the other person who holds them regards them as part of themselves. So my first point is that at the level of fundamental disagreement a chance encounter or a casual conversation will not do justice to either party, still less to their beliefs.

The next step is to develop a relationship such that authentic dialogue is possible. Jonathan Sacks coined the phrase 'side by side and face to face' and this has stuck with me as an excellent guide to building any relationship with 'the other', not just an inter-faith agenda. To begin with partnership around a common task (or even enemy) is surely the key. Who was it said that humanity will only unite when the Martians arrive! Only partnership side by side in a common agenda will generate trust. And trust is the pre-requisite of dialogue and respect. [Incidentally - though not relevant here - this

also explains why 'Life and Work' ecumenism is possible and 'Faith and Order' ecumenism is not!] The kind of dialogue which breaks through superficiality and misrepresentation is built on partnership. I recall as a Manchester church leader



standing 'side by side' with leaders of several faiths as we visited a Jewish cemetery which had been desecrated; such solidarity strengthened our links and, hopefully, the willingness of faith communities to follow our example.

Strong or weak tolerance

But supposing there is a real dialogue. I recall David Sheppard's careful distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' tolerance; he was scathing about the latter. There are sticking points and there are openings for re-interpretation and there may even be changes of mind but quite properly that is rare. What is the aim of such conversations? At their best there is a common commitment to allowing the other into your mind and heart. When I was a newly-ordained young minister in Birmingham I was invited to join an inter-faith discussion group, extremely rare in the 1960s. I recall that for me the outcome, as well as listening for the first time to people wise in other faiths, was a sense of understanding my own faith far better! That is how I have judged the authenticity of any dialogue since. (Q: Evangelism should be a Hegelian enterprise - discuss!)

Incidentally, in the specific case of Charlie Hebdo which has prompted this issue of 'Briefing' there was no interest on either side in engaging in dialogue, certainly not on the part of the cartoonists (you may gather 'Je ne suis pas Charlie'). But more generally, authentic dialogue will be an engagement of persons, of heart and of mind, of attitudes as well as dogma. It will probably not be in the public arena, in the point-scoring atmosphere of winning and losing. What matters most to the participants must be allowed to come across in a way that suits the proponents best in a context of respect.

I was invited to consider what might be the sticking point(s) for us Christians. So take, for example, the most distinctive Christian statements of belief, affirmation of the Incarnation or the Blessed Trinity. First off, self-evidently every statement purporting to describe (let alone define) God is by definition imperfect, both incomplete and inaccurate. But we need a little history too. The first Christian centuries were dominated by what we now call 'classical' (Graeco-Roman) thought-forms

and language. It was inevitable that Christian doctrine would be articulated in such terms in that philosophical context. Terms such as 'logos,' 'person,' 'nature' and the rest, undeniably necessary to engage with that culture, either mean nothing or something very different to us. I recite the ancient creeds in solidarity with my predecessors, not because they make sense. [Actually that is how I sing many hymns too!] If I wish to interpret what I believe as a Christian, I must find fresh language - and of course many, many Christians have done just that, thank God. Historically the emergence of agreed credal statements on the Trinity followed centuries of agonising over the Incarnation. That asymmetry of time and effort still applies.

The bottom line

One can reflect imaginatively on belief in God as Creator (God beyond us) and as Spirit (God within us or around us) and find many nodding heads among people of other faiths. But the worship of Jesus ('a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks') is as ever the sticking point, whether as the 'third person' in a Trinity or in more contemporary language. For us Christians that will always be the 'bottom line'. But my point here is not to do the Christology but that by the time you reach the heart of the matter in a genuine dialogue situation, the parties involved will have surely warmed to the sincerity of each other and will be trying to stand in each other's shoes. Then the relationship 'face to face' will be possible and constructive for each party, and the ongoing work 'side by side' be that much more effective.

My sad and rather obvious conclusion is this: fundamentalism of any kind (including that of the libertarians at Charlie Hebdo) will never achieve dialogue if by dialogue is meant an encounter seeking to clarify the truth - and clarify it for all parties. Fundamentalism is essentially self-righteous. If we wish to give expression to our beliefs then we must start with relationships not with dogma. Answer the questioner even if you cannot answer the question. And when it comes to commending the faith all we can do - and what an ask! - is to live out what we believe and trust that it will carry weight. At the risk of reverting to preaching mode, what you are shouts so loud I can't hear what you say (© Ralph Waldo Emerson). □

A Verse to Religion

*The way we construct Christianity
Can drive anyone to insanity.
Instead of hierarchies
And other malarkies,
Let's find the divine in humanity.*

*When discord and strife are reported
And peaceful existence is thwarted
The Quran and the Bible
Can both become tribal
And weapons of war when distorted.*

*Competing religions aren't needed,
With statements dogmatic and creeded.
Life's too short a smidgeon
To spend on religion;
'Love your neighbour' must always be heeded.*

Chris Avis

Can we trust religion?

Martin Camroux is no longer sure...

When I was minister of a Church in London we were often approached by black majority churches wanting to use our premises for worship. If we could we said yes, but sometimes we said, “no”. Once we were approached by a church which was charismatic in worship style and theology, fundamentalist, preached prosperity theology, was strongly anti-gay, had an all male leadership, spoke in tongues and practised exorcisms. This seemed a step too far. The refusal was not well-received. “We have been looking on your web-site and it says you are open-minded and inclusive. How can you reconcile that to saying, no to us?”

The challenge was fundamental. Religious tolerance came out of the Enlightenment. For years Catholics and Protestants had fought each other throughout Europe, each convinced that it had the truth, each seeking the power to impose it.

Eventually people realised that instead of saying, “Religious convictions are important, therefore everyone should have the correct ones,” you could draw a different conclusion. “Religious convictions are important; therefore everyone should have the right to live according to his or her beliefs.” In other words tolerance was born when people with strong beliefs recognised that others who disagreed with them also had strong beliefs and they too should have, as far as possible, the right to live by them.

Today I believe this kind of tolerance is not enough. I personally believe that religious diversity is part of God’s providential plan and that what God wants from us, from Christian



followers of God's Son, is not only tolerance, but respect for those of other faith traditions and understanding and respect for their faith. I am more and more sure that no church has a monopoly on truth, no church has the right to claim exclusiveness, no church has the right to claim the total approval of God.

What I do not believe however is that all religious beliefs are equally valuable, or equally true, so it really doesn't matter what you believe. For a start, religions differ on matters of truth – and one must therefore make choices. Christianity and Islam, for example, have significant congruities but are fundamentally at odds on the significance of Jesus. Was he, in some sense, God? Did he die on the cross? One cannot believe both possibilities. Many fundamentalists deny the doctrine of evolution arguing for what they call “intelligent design”. This is either true or it is not.

Even more significantly the current repugnant evil of Isis is a reminder of how dangerous and immoral religion can be. Christianity too has masqueraded ignorance as knowledge, defended bigotry and promoted intolerance. Religious believers are too frequently evasive about this. After the attack on the World Trade Centre a message appeared on the walls of the Presbyterian College in Montreal in the form of a huge piece of graffiti which simply said,

RELIGION KILLS

Sadly that is true. From book burning to witch burning to people burning religion has a chequered history, generating much evil as well as much good. Pascal may even be right when he says “People never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction”.

Sometimes the line needs to be drawn. Tolerance does not mean that you tolerate the intolerable or do not feel anger at the exclusion and maltreatment of others. Such tolerance slips easily into indifference or worse. As Ogden Nash says:

“Sometimes with secret pride I sigh, To think how tolerant am I; Then wonder which is really mine: Tolerance or a rubber spine?”

Swaying Grasses

Green grasses with grey-brown seed-heads.
Munched by grey-brown donkey;
A forest of different grasses
Spattered with golden buttercup flowers,
Swaying under the gentle breeze,
Quivering and dancing beneath
A blue but cloud-flecked sky
And bathed in warm summer sunshine.

Pigeons coo in distant trees,
Breaking the potent silence
And two crows fly
Toward the distant misty hills;
All is peaceful, quiet and calm,
Yet there is active growth
As trees and grass and insects
Draw nourishment from fertile soil.

New creation, hour by hour;
God, ever active
Beneath the noisy world,
Undergirding all that is,
Gently healing damaged earth
And broken human lives -
Creating and restoring,
With loving skill, His precious world.

Beryl Chatfield

A heady Subject

Brian King offers some personal thoughts on the recent FTB Reading Group

Terry Eagleton's book *Reason, Faith and Revolution* was a heady subject for the Reading Group at Windermere, so we were glad to have David Peel (former Principal of Northern College) lead us. The book originated from lectures that Eagleton had delivered, so the style of writing had a challenging character with some vivid expression. Eagleton is better known as a professor of literature and does not pretend to be a theologian. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are dealt with in devastating fashion, their views neatly combined as "Ditchkins". The books headings are The Scum of the Earth, Revolution Betrayed, Faith and Reason, Culture and Barbarism.

Many of Ditchkins statements had some truth in them, but they had more misconceptions of Christian theology and what God is and how God is often perceived. God is often portrayed as a separate entity and a mega manufacturer whereas God is what sustains all things in being by his love, that God is the reason that there is something rather than nothing; the only image of Him is in human beings.

Then who was Jesus? The book described Jesus as being "a cross between a hippy and a guerrilla fighter" "appears to do no work". The morality he preached being "extravagant and reckless". We had lots to think about.

David Peel picked out parts of the book 'threads' for us to think about and to tease out the meanings, but if we strayed into other matters that did not matter. The reports from the different groups were fascinating in their variety and from what emerged. We hope that some of those that had some deep insights will be reproduced and circulated.

Reason is not enough

The final chapter of the book showed that religious faith does not require faith in a supreme being. Reason by itself is not enough; it needs love, faith and trust, orientation.

As this was the first Reading Group that I had attended I found it very helpful. It involved my re-reading the book twice and many passages

three and four times, each time and after hearing others' views more illuminating. It gave me clarity, development and confirmation of long held thoughts so it was a good to be with stimulating friends with open minds.

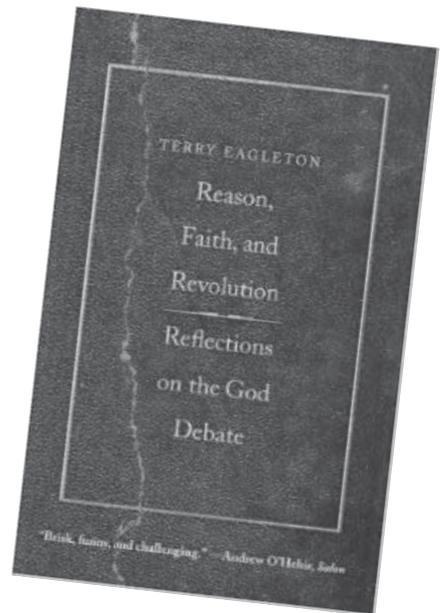
The following particularly struck me with a better understanding:

1. The Trinity: "God" being indefinable – everywhere, in all people; the Holy Spirit's importance to which we need to be open and receptive avoiding being slaves to scripture; that Jesus was human, a Jew and so extraordinary with his influence, so providing us with an idea of God never previously revealed.
2. Pan-entheism – a new word for me that would seem to be an excellent description that seemed to find general acceptance as against Pantheism.
3. Anawim: another new word for me that describes Jesus' aims being unlike the wishy-washy meek and mild image often portrayed,
4. Paul's "sins of the flesh" not the meaning often accepted, but referring more to violence, exploitation, etc than to sexual deviation.

My summary of an early report mentioned a "climb up Mount Eagleton" that some found hard going, but we "enjoyed the sweeping views across the Ditchkins with some merriment".

Altogether a rewarding time, being together we got a lot more out of the book than we would have done reading it by ourselves.

As a result of these few days I feel happier about my doubts and convictions and am now better equipped to articulate my ideas of what the Christian faith might be about.



Go ahead - offend me

David Lawrence offers a personal opinion on the question of religious satire

Satire thrives in the gap that exists between promise and reality. Political satire feeds on the gap between the glittering promises of the rulers and the more drab reality of the ruled. It purports to be anti-establishment and sometimes changes things. More often, it gives its mainly middle-class audience a smug feeling of having 'seen through' politicians and their wives – before faithfully trooping out to perform their civic duty of re-electing the same people to maintain the same system. Laughing at satire is a poor substitute for genuine political involvement, which is why the best market for political cartoons is the very politicians they depict.

But there is another form of satire which is far more hurtful as far as its targets are concerned, namely religious satire.

Religious red lines

Religious people make absolute claims – all of them, to a greater or lesser extent. For some, those claims are detailed and factual, such as that God was born in human form on a particular night in the village of Bethlehem or that the angel Gabriel dictated God's words to Mohammed over a period of years. The more liberal among us may smile indulgently at what we describe as fundamentalist interpretations but we have our own red lines. At the very least, most of us hold that good is better than bad and that in some sense people 'ought', or maybe even are in some sense designed, to be good. Among Christians, the red lines around what is 'true' are represented for some by the literal words of the Bible, for others it is the more limited territory represented by the words of one or other of the creeds. But even among the most 'progressive' Christians, some of whom appear to make no 'factual' claims whatsoever, there are few who would decline to take part in an act of confession and repentance which recognized that they had 'fallen short' of a standard which is in some mysterious way a given fact of life.

More than that, religious people claim to a greater or lesser extent that at least some of their absolutes apply not simply to themselves but to

all others, regardless of whether those others share the same belief. For some religious people that means that non-believers (and probably many believers, too) are going to hell. For others it merely means that not all the definitions of right and wrong are culturally defined – some are incumbent on all human beings. And if you question that last assertion, ask yourself whether you believe that the statement “child abuse is wrong” is something that people can take or leave, according to their own feelings or culture.

Taken together, this makes religion the perfect target for satire. Every religious person falls short, to some extent, of their personal profession of what is right and wrong, of what should be done and what shouldn't. More than that, the vast majority of religious people also fall short of the

“ It is a very poor comic who cannot make a joke out of the gulf between what religious people proclaim and the way they live out their lives. ”

standard they claim is incumbent not just on themselves but on all people. Most of us religious people are more or less hypocrites, holding up a standard of love and humility that we fulfil ourselves only imperfectly.

This is meat and drink to the satirist. Not only are the people who preach about love often visibly some of the least loving, and those who praise humility often some of the most self-righteous, the satirist also knows that it absolutely enrages people outside the faith community to be told they ‘ought’ to behave in certain ways by people who apparently cannot see the log in their own eye. It is a very poor comic who cannot make a joke out of the gulf between what religious people proclaim and the way they live out their lives.

Should we, as more or less religious people, object? Satire can hurt – and hurt badly. Do we have a right to object on our own behalf – a right not

to be offended? Do we have a right to object on behalf of others – a particular minority, for instance?

I can only offer a personal opinion, though a deeply held one, that we have no such right. More than that, I believe that religious satire is essential for the health of society and even for the health of religion.

When it comes to society, the plain historical fact (and the current reality in many parts of the world) is that when religious claims go unchallenged and un-ridiculed, they inevitably lead to the undermining of human rights, beginning with the right to freedom of expression and ending with the right to life itself. It begins with being careful what you say, progresses through being careful what you do and ends in doing what you are told or facing the consequences. Like fire, the great religions can be wonderful servants to society, but they can equally be terrifying masters.

Mind the gap

And what of religious communities themselves? When they go unchallenged and un-ridiculed, are they not inevitably in danger of becoming self-satisfied and self-righteous? Can there be anything more disastrous for the long-term health of a religious movement than to be unaware of (or refusing to see) the gulf between what they say and what they do.

It is often precisely at the point that a particular failing becomes a public joke that the process of dealing with it begins. As a former denominational press officer, how I wish that the gulf between the churches' profession and the reality of clergy child abuse had long ago been the subject of the widespread, forensic and vicious satire which would have stripped away the false mystique which was the foundation of a conspiracy of silence across the denominations. Laughter gives both religious communities and the wider society the permission to look a sacred cow in the mouth, to mix a metaphor. It is laughter that helps us all to 'mind the gap' between profession and performance.

To venture on to dangerous ground, are there many who believe that the Muslim community could not benefit from pondering what the rest of society is saying to them in the form of cartoon images associating the

Prophet with symbols of violence and oppression? Does the blasphemy consist of such images or the reality to which they refer, which is the frequent perversion of a great religion into a repressive, violent and sectarian force for evil, reminiscent of some of the worst excesses in the history (and present) of Christendom?

Like many religious people, I sometimes find satirical attacks on my faith and its institutions uncomfortable. I have silently squirmed in my seat in many a comedy club while the rest of the audience laughed at our failings and idiosyncrasies. Many's the time I have wanted to call out that the comment wasn't fair but satire doesn't have to be fair, it has to be funny.

The right to offend religious people is vital if society is to remain free. And religious people would do well to remember that if what we say is what we do, the jokes will eventually fall silent.



Cartoonist and LGBT activist Mike Ritter died in 2014

ILLUMINATION & TRANSFORMATION

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 - Silence after late evening worship until after breakfast next morning

We hope we may see ourselves in a different and more life-living way, as Richard Rohr suggests in *Falling Upwards*, by finding some of the stepping stones in our lives that enable us to grow spiritually.

Peter Varney has worked as a hospital counsellor, chaplain and spiritual director. In retirement he is exploring the spirituality of art. He is a Quaker and Anglican priest.

Zam Walker is a URC minister in Greenock and a member of the Iona Community. Her interests encompass body theology, assumptions we bring to interpreting life and the bible, and the use of multimedia in worship and creativity.

All are welcome, wherever you are on your journey. The cost for the four days will be £230 (or £250 for an ensuite room, if available). If you would like to book please send a deposit of £25 to Tim Richards, Orchard View, Townsend, Curry Rivel, Langport, Somerset TA 10 OHT richardstim@hotmail.com

PLEASE NOTE THE NUMBER OF PLACES LEFT FOR THIS IS NOW LIMITED

Freedom of Thought and Expression

When Briefing approached the British Humanist Association for a view on freedom of expression and the rights of religious people to declare certain subjects off-limits, they pointed us to the text of the declaration on freedom of thought and expression made by the World Humanist Conference at its meeting in Oxford in 2014.

All around the world and at all times, it is freedom of thought and freedom of expression that have proved the most essential conditions for human flourishing, but every generation must face new threats to these fundamental freedoms. Knowing this, we maintain:

The right to freedom of thought and belief is one and the same right for all. The human right articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and elaborated elsewhere is and should be a single right, indivisible, protecting the dignity and freedom of all people by protecting their right to their personal beliefs, whatever those beliefs, religious or non-religious. As Article 7 of the Declaration says, 'All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.'

The right to believe (or not)

No one anywhere should ever be forced into or out of a belief. Freedom of thought implies the right to develop, hold, examine and manifest our beliefs without coercion, and to express opinions and a worldview whether religious or non-religious, without fear of coercion. It includes the right to change our views or to reject beliefs previously held, or previously ascribed. Pressure to conform to ideologies of the state or to doctrines of religion is a tyranny. Laws that prescribe or criminalise beliefs contravene human dignity and must be abolished. Every citizen of every state has the right to demand the repeal of such laws, and all states should support those, wherever they are, who demand that their social freedoms and personal liberty be upheld.

The right to freedom of expression is global in its scope. The human right articulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights includes the right to ‘seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’. No parochial nationalism or state insecurity should prevent the global human community from fulfilling the promise of our new technologies, our mass media, our social media, and our personal access to transnational networks. States should invest adequate resources to allow their citizens’ participation in this global conversation.

A right not to be offended?

There is no right not to be offended, or not to hear contrary opinions. Respect for people’s freedom of belief does not imply any duty or requirement to respect those beliefs. The expression of opposition to any beliefs, including in the form of satire, ridicule or condemnation in all media and forms is vital to critical discourse and any restraint that is exercised in this expression must be in accordance with article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The best response to the expression of a view we disagree with is to reply to it. Violence and censorship are never legitimate responses. All laws that criminalise language on grounds of ‘blasphemy’ or of offence to beliefs and values impede human freedom and should be abolished.

States must not restrict thought and expression merely to protect the government from criticism. States that criminalise criticism of government policies or officials as treasonous or seditious, or as threats to security, are not “strong governments” championing the best interests of the public, but censorious bullies exercising tyranny in their own

Three days of talks, debates and workshops about freedom of thought and expression featuring:

 Jim Al-Khalili	 Joan Bakewell	 Richard Dawkins	 A C Grayling	 PZ Myers
 Taslima Nasrin	 Phillip Pullman	 Wole Soyinka	 Peter Tatchell	

WORLD HUMANIST CONGRESS 2014 OXFORD

interests. States should ensure in the law of the land, in their education systems, and in the conduct of their national life generally, that freedom of thought and expression are actively promoted and pursued to the real benefit of every member of society.

Freedom of belief is absolute but the freedom to act on a belief is not. As responsible members of a community we accept that our freedom to act must sometimes be restricted, if and only if our actions would undermine the rights and freedoms of others. Freedom of belief cannot legitimise overriding the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law. These balances can be hard to strike but with a focus on freedom and human dignity, we believe legislators and judiciaries can strike them in a progressive manner.

We assert the principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and secularism as providing the firmest foundation for the development of open societies where freedom of thought and expression will be protected and promoted.

We commit ourselves in all our work to uphold and promote existing rights to freedom of thought and expression within the international human rights framework and to resist national and international restrictions on the right of individuals to think for themselves freely and to openly express their views without fear.

We urge each of our member organizations and humanists worldwide to uphold these values in their own lives; to promote in their communities greater public understanding of the rights to freedom of thought and freedom of expression for all; to urge their governments to promote these values; and to join with humanists and others globally in defending and advancing them to the benefit of all humanity.

“ There is no right not to be offended
or not to hear contrary opinions. ”

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