

Stop Blaming France for the War Radical Islam Started

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In 1905, sociologist Max Weber posited that the economic inequalities between Germany's Protestants and Catholics arose from a fundamental difference in values. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he described Protestantism's high esteem for effort and austerity, and its general encouragement of hard work and prudent savings. This, Weber argued, explained the discrepancies in the rates of capital accumulation and overall prosperity between the religious groups. But whether one adheres to the Weberian reading of Protestantism or not, it remains difficult to deny the hypothesis underlying it: beliefs matter, and they have a decisive influence on human actions.

Materialism vs. Subjectivism

Up until the nineteenth century, this idea had been widely agreed upon. It had led Enlightenment thinkers to subordinate the fight against oppression to the fight against obscurantism. In his *Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations*, Voltaire noted that human history had been continuously disfigured by superstition “until philosophy finally came to enlighten men.”

This “subjectivist” conception of history—which cast the beliefs of individuals as the main engine behind the human adventure—gave way to a “materialist” understanding that relegated the influence of beliefs and ideas to a secondary, subordinate status, without autonomous influence and wholly dependent on the political, economic, and natural circumstances that preceded them.

The most prominent theorist behind this materialist reading of history was Karl Marx, for whom ideologies were but a consequence of socioeconomic competition and class struggle. But Marx held no monopoly on this thinking. The same general conception of history inspired the liberal industrialists, who saw economic progress as a necessary—and probably sufficient—precondition for moral progress.

The architects of the Marshall Plan were similarly disposed toward this philosophy and believed that saving Europe from economic misery would suffice to defeat the threat of socialism there. As the United States emerged as the leading world power, American strategists were so convinced that prosperity conferred immunity to leftist doctrine that they were blind to its increasing appeal among their own population.

The Problem of Radical Islam

Unfortunately, materialist prejudice also clouds our perception of other phenomena—Islamic terrorism, for example. France has become a regular target of such attacks. On October 16, 2020, a history teacher named Samuel Paty was beheaded for showing his teenage students two of the famous Charlie Hebdo cartoons during a class on freedom of expression. Thirteen days later, three Christians were murdered in Nice. These murders are but the most recent in a long list of political crimes, and the grief at them just the latest in a series of national bereavements.

These killings have established a climate of terror that weighs on free thinkers. Since the deadly 2015 attack on satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Islamist organizations have called continually for the murders of the remaining editorial staff. These journalists must now work from a secret location lest the work of the Kouachi brothers be finished by others. The most public critics of radical Islam, such as journalists Zineb El Razoui and Mohammed Sifaoui, lawyer Richard Malka, and Imam Hassen Chalghoumi, must now live under constant police protection.

This threat also hangs over ordinary citizens. In early 2020, a French teenager named Mila rose to prominence following her virulent criticism of Islam on social media. She was forced to move to a new school amid a barrage of death threats. The public is far from indifferent to the oppressive mood and debates conflicting theories in a struggle to make sense of an unbearable situation. The myriad motivations they cited for the ongoing violence include France's military interventions, its colonial past, its racism, its Islamophobia, the insufficient social mobility of its minorities, its authoritarian secular tradition, and the vulgarity of its cartoonists. But whatever the grievance of the moment, all the criminal reprisals seem to be committed in the name of a single religion. Despite this fact, many still refuse to assign blame.

A Francocentric Analysis

The sins of this blinkered attitude do not arise solely from overindulgence in historical materialism. The denialism also has roots in a Francocentric indifference to global issues. In 2019, the Foundation for Political Innovation, a French think tank, published a comprehensive study of Islamist terrorism between 1979 and 2019. Among its revelations was the fact that the majority of Islamist attacks are committed in Muslim countries. Since there are more Islamists in Islamic countries than in Western countries, this might not be a surprise, but it highlights that even in those nations there exist Islamists aggrieved that nothing is “Muslim enough.”

Those for whom the French system resides at the origin of Islamist terrorism are curiously silent regarding the global scope of the phenomenon. Note the paradox in this stance shaped by postcolonial theory. On the one hand, they reject a Eurocentric reading of history. On the other, they remain convinced that the West is history's only driving force, as if other civilizations and ideologies were incapable of formulating their own political agendas, as if “reacting” to the West were the only thing they were capable of.

And yet on November 11, more than fifty people were beheaded in Mozambique. On November 28, at least 110 civilians were executed in Nigeria, probably by the Boko Haram sect. On November 2, four people were killed in Austria, which, it should be remembered, is a neutral country. Switzerland, which shares a similar tradition of neutrality, is also the target of attempted attacks and home to Islamist cells. Countries as diverse as Ireland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden send Islamist fighters to Iraq and Syria. While no society is entirely free of imperial stains on its past, it is difficult to attribute Islamic anger to alleged Swiss, Irish, Norwegian,

Danish, or Swedish imperialism, or to the unjust domination of the Muslim world by sub-Saharan Africa.

Vocal critics of the French system persist despite these facts. In an article published in the journal *Foreign Policy*, Mustafa Akyol bemoans the tendency of French secularism to ban religious signs from the public space rather than accommodating them, arguing that it is too authoritarian. Moreover, while France proclaims freedom of conscience and expression for all, its legislation prescribes penalties for insulting national symbols. According to Akyol, these inconsistencies in the application of the freedom of conscience partly explain Muslim mistrust of liberal values. He uses the example of his own country of origin, Turkey, to show how the export of French secularism to the Muslim world has been counterproductive.

Naturally, the French secular tradition, tarnished as it is by its Jacobin past, should be as open to criticism as any institution. And no doubt France would benefit from adopting a more liberal interpretation of secularism. But criticizing the French model is one thing. Attributing barbaric behavior to it is quite another. Once again, the materialist argument that Islamist violence is the result of French imperfections fails to convince.

Not Everyone Celebrates the Killing of Innocent People in Response to Real or Perceived Injustice

It should be noted that different individuals may react in different ways to identical circumstances. Mustafa Akyol is right to remind us, citing the work of historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, that French Enlightenment thought has a more contentious relationship with religions than does Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment thought, which seeks harmony between faith, reason, and freedom. But in starting from this observation, he might well have asked whether French Catholics ever decapitated journalists or anticlerical professors in reaction to the expulsions of congregations that took place in 1880 and at the beginning of the twentieth century. These were times when the French state sent police officers to dislodge, *manu militari*, the personnel of monasteries not recognized by the administration. He might concede that these were far more serious infringements of religious freedom than the vexatious measures taken against the full veil, which affected not so much all Muslims as a handful of extremists.

Let us consider more examples. Antinationalists do not feel the need to destroy public buildings in reaction to the ban on insulting national symbols. African Americans have long suffered legal racism, but Martin Luther King did not ask them to kill teachers. France has a fraught colonial past in Asia, yet its Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian minorities somehow do not present a risk of terrorism. European Jews were the subjects of an industrialized genocide. We hear nothing from them resembling the proclamation of the former prime minister of Malaysia, who bestowed on Muslims the right to kill millions of French people for the crimes of their ancestors. And while Christians in most Muslim countries suffer crueler repressions than the banning of the *burqa*, they refrain from terrorist acts despite the persecution of their faith.

One may concede that France is not liberal enough when it comes to religion, that its system fails to integrate certain minorities, and that its history has a dark side (as does every country's). Still, there are many ways to react to the shortcomings of a political system. Some people kill over mere drawings. Others "turn the other cheek" to their executioners, meek to a fault. Still others militate peacefully in favor of improvements of the political system in question. The diversity of

these reactions to an unsatisfactory situation mirrors the diversity in the values that animate people.

Intellectuals who persist in the denial of ideology as a relevant factor in the explanation of terrorism do not understand that their very attitude is sufficient to contradict their materialistic explanations. Indeed, if values have no influence on how we perceive and react to injustice, how do we explain that some people denounce Islamist aggression while others excuse it?

It Is Not the French System Islamists Hate So Much as Freedom Itself

Critics of French secularism accuse it of radicalizing the Muslim world, but their materialist explanation exploits a double standard. It never occurs to the detractors of the French secular tradition to explain its mistrust of certain Islamic symbols as a reaction to injustices committed in the name of Islam.

Even setting aside the attacks by extremists, we must still admit that Muslim countries are far from shining examples with regard to civil liberties. It is a good bet that the French would view the *burqa* more enthusiastically if Islam were more accepting of freedom and gender equality.

In a paper for the Cato Institute, Mustafa Akyol acknowledges the catastrophic standards of the Muslim world with respect to civil liberties, women's rights, and the freedoms of religion, association, and expression. Contrast this with James McAuley's *Washington Post* article implying that Islamist violence must represent a French exception since the practice of Islam remains "peaceful" everywhere else.

The reality is that the rights and freedoms enjoyed by French Muslims positively dwarf those of both their coreligionists and non-Muslims in countries where Islam reigns supreme. Curiously, this fact is rarely mentioned, either by Muslim leaders around the world or by their supporters. The severity of their criticisms of French inadequacies is matched by their indifference to Islamist oppression.

As the news of Samuel Paty's beheading spread around the globe, some parts of the Muslim world sent messages of sympathy to France. One might have expected some clear support of civil liberties to confirm the sincerity of this compassion. Instead, many Muslim nations saw demonstrations against the cartoons, and campaigns to boycott French products in response to President Emmanuel Macron's reaffirmation that the freedom to criticize all religions is nonnegotiable. Worse still, some senior Muslim leaders, including the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, greeted the event with an escalation of their campaign against liberty, calling for international legislation to criminalize criticism of Islam.

Meanwhile, China's Communist dictatorship, engaged in a genocide against the Uighurs, sleeps soundly. The Muslim world has nothing to say about China's crimes, save occasionally to support them. Let us, therefore, stop pretending that Islamists are concerned about France's peccadilloes. What really drives their recruits is the clash of their civilization against open societies, of which France is symbolic due to its history, traditions, and cultural influence.

One must grant them that no peaceful coexistence is possible between freedom of expression and censorship administered in the name of a supposedly benevolent and merciful God, just as there

could be no peaceful coexistence between liberal capitalism and communism during the Cold War. These are irreconcilable universalisms.

Not All Beliefs and Ideologies Are Compatible with the Enlightenment

The Muslim world bridled at Macron's assertion that Islam was "in crisis all over the world," but considering the facts reviewed above, one wonders whether his choice of words may be too indulgent. He seems to suggest that the oppressions committed in the name of Islam have no theological basis, that the religion has been "hijacked," as he put it in his interview with *Al Jazeera*, and need only be purged of its deviant interpretations in order to return to the golden age when it cultivated freedom, equality, and tolerance.

There are multiple reasons to be skeptical of this hopeful narrative. The Koran, it is claimed, is eternal, uncreated and immutable, the word of God, verbatim. This book proclaims that every human is born Muslim by default, with any deviance a *post hoc* betrayal of this condition. It contains far too many explicit commands to fight the unbelievers for us to reduce Islamist violence to a simple question of interpretation. And its Prophet, the paragon of man, was not just a preacher; he was also a political and military leader who committed all the brutal excesses once seen as proper to that office. These essential traits explain the persistence of despotic institutions in the Muslim world into the information age.

When one points out these realities, there is always someone ready to observe that Islamic civilization has no monopoly on historical violence. No doubt, human nature being what it is, oppression, intolerance, and war were part of our original condition. It is likely inappropriate to condemn the abuses of Mohammed in a time when such violence was the norm. Nonetheless, we may observe that Christ—whom Muslims also regard as a prophet—seems somehow to have achieved a more peaceful existence in times no less troubled, even to the point of sacrificing himself before the Roman oppressor. This constitutes further proof that circumstances do not explain everything.

Still, it is not enough simply to assert that all societies have committed atrocities. One must reflect on why some have become more liberal, tolerant, and secular while others persist in oppression.

Mustafa Akyol reduces the great divergence between the Christian West and the Islamic world to an accident of history, a simple question of human interpretation. He elides the fact that the interpretation of a doctrine may be constrained by the doctrine itself. Why have tolerance, freedom, and secularism found more support and success in the Christian world than in the Islamic one? This question cannot be answered without dispelling the common error of comparing biblical and Koranic texts. The Koran does not have the same status in Muslim theology as the Bible has in Christian theology. In the latter, the divine word is embodied less by the book and more in the person of Christ.

Even if one doubts the divine character of Christ, one must grant that his teachings are more easily reconciled with secularism than the Koranic prescriptions, which comprise tax regulations and glorifications of the actions of a political leader. Jesus, for his part, distinguished between what was God's responsibility and what was Caesar's. And in doing so, he laid the cultural groundwork for secularism. This is the sense from which philosopher Marcel Gauchet observes that Christianity is "the religion of Man's exit from religion." Not to say that religion has

deserted the nations of Christian culture, but it has generally ceased to be the organizing principle of politics within Western civilization.

That freedom of conscience has found more purchase in the West than in the Islamic world finds part of its explanation in the same theological differences. A “messiah” who spreads his ideas through the conversion of hearts has a more peaceful mien than a “prophet” who communicates from the head of an army.

Of course, numerous misdeeds have also been committed in the name of Christianity, including by the highest authorities supposed to embody it. This led philosopher Frédéric Lenoir to say that Christianity had dug its own grave “by transmitting to Mankind a message (that of Christ) that relentlessly condemned its own institutional practices.” These abuses confirm that humans are quite depraved enough to distort even the most pacific values for criminal purposes. This observation extends to secular philosophies as well. For example, Europeans justified colonization in the name of human rights, yet it would be ridiculous to label human rights as imperialist principles, for it was also in the name of a universal—and therefore more rigorous—reading of human rights that anti-imperialist movements rose up against the colonial powers.

And so it follows that all doctrines can inspire oppression. But while some oppressions arise from the subversion of these doctrines, others are the result of their consistent application. The European vanguard of tolerance and freedom obviously thought that “Christian” oppressions belonged in the first category, so they did not feel the need to renounce their faith in order to defend their liberal values.

Gregory of Nyssa condemned slavery as early as the fourth century AD in the name of an authentic reading of the precepts of Christ; Francisco de Vitoria and Domingo de Soto, two eminent members of the Salamanca school, denounced the forced conversion of Native Americans by Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century; Étienne de La Boétie published works against absolutism; and Pierre Bayle, Montesquieu, and John Locke laid the foundations for tolerance and pluralism. The fact that their ideas eventually triumphed, if after a long process of ideological maturation, is a further sign of the compatibility of liberal values with the Christian religion.

Conversely, the Islamic counterparts of Bayle, Locke, and Montesquieu had more difficulty in their own lands. The figure of Averroes does not refute this observation. Though the West may owe him a deep intellectual debt for his commentaries on Aristotle, the grand qadi of Córdoba was no paragon of tolerance when he prescribed the murder of heretics. That he ranks as the most “liberal” and “rationalist” figure produced by Islam across fourteen centuries represents a serious challenge to defenders of an Islam of the Enlightenment. Moreover, the rationalist aspects of his thought drew their inspiration more from Greek philosophy than from Islamic theology, which may explain why Averroes found more purchase in Europe than in the Muslim world, where he faded into obscurity.

What to Do about Islam?

To say that Islam has little affinity for pluralism does not imply that all professed Muslims are criminals. It is important to emphasize that here in France, the vast majority of avowed Muslims are peaceful. I myself come from a family that identifies as Muslim. That I remain alive despite my public apostasy is proof that one can claim to adhere to the Koran and Mohammed’s

teachings while remaining tolerant. Note, however, that “tolerant Muslims” are referred to as “moderates.” The need to specify that the virtue of Islam resides in its moderation is a tacit admission of its authoritarian essence. Montesquieu made this observation three centuries ago, writing in *The Spirit of Laws* that “the Mohammedan religion, which speaks only of the sword, still acts on men with the destructive spirit that founded it.” In other words, Islam is peaceful to the extent that it is less Islamic. When tolerance reigns in the heart of a professed Muslim, it is in spite of their religion, and not because of it. This is a form of apostasy that generally goes unacknowledged.

Many are tempted to deny this in order to avoid confronting the moderate Muslims who are sincerely convinced of the peaceful nature of their faith. In his interview with *Al Jazeera*, Macron condemned calls for violence from the Muslim world with an appeal to the basis of the Islamic faith: “I have never viewed Islam as legitimizing, or fostering, the recourse to violence of any kind.” This pretense that the nature of Islam is peaceful not only deprives our societies of the means to understand the origins of the authoritarian behavior we disapprove of, but it is also a risky strategy. Certainly, it may rally moderate Muslims to a more liberal reading of their religion. But on the flip side, it allows Islam to evade cogent criticism while it continues to spread. This delights the hard-liners convinced that the victory of radicalism over moderation is inevitable, whatever the ideology in question.

On a strictly intellectual level, the call for ideological moderation is always a source of instability and contradiction. It conflicts with the quest for coherence that animates all sincere souls. This is why proponents of freedom during the Cold War put their efforts into deconstructing Marxism-Leninism rather than using intellectual contortions to convince its followers that it was compatible with constitutional democracy.

The end of Islamist violence therefore depends on when Muslims realize that they need to adopt more peaceful beliefs. This is indeed a plea for apostasy. Muslims who claim to be horrified by the crimes committed in the name of their religion must ask themselves this question: Can a benevolent and merciful god really be what he claims to be when the strict application of his commandments leads reliably to so much grief?

Alas, far too few people are willing to aid them in this ideological battle. Relativists believe that humans rooted in their culture are impervious to the contributions of external civilizations. This claim was also made by opponents of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. They forget that Western peoples have built themselves up by challenging retrograde traditions, and by regularly drawing inspiration from cultures other than their own. Before the Christian era, freedom and tolerance were foreign concepts to Europeans. They practiced religions that we would describe as barbaric today, that required human sacrifices. If these Europeans were able to transcend their early religions, it surely follows that those who adhere to Islam today are possessed of the same faculty.

Nevertheless, too many Westerners still believe Muslims incapable of escaping their religion to access the liberal and universal values that have pacified modern societies, and that we should give up hope for any move away from the faith so deeply ingrained in them by their immediate social environment—as if their minds were condemned to remain prisoners of this authoritarian ideology and any engagement in sincere conversation with them simply a waste of time.

Too often, this condescending argument disguises a sense of superiority. This infantilization of Muslims is even more contemptuous than colonial arrogance, which at least was betting on the universal capacity of humans to progress toward modernity. The struggle against Islamist oppression will not depend solely on the rhetorical talents of Islam's critics. It will also hinge on the ability of non-Muslims to treat their fellow human beings as endowed with the same critical spirit they themselves possess, in short, to treat them as equals.