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Doug Bandow: Charlie Hebdo murders

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The real atrocity is religious persecution, not free expression.

The slaughter at the French magazine Charlie Hebdo brought hundreds of thousands of marchers and scores of world leaders onto the streets of Paris. The killings demonstrate how the destructive phenomenon of religious persecution is spreading from Third World dictatorships to First World democracies.

Religious minorities long have faced murder and prison around the world. Now the freedom not to believe by majorities in Western democracies is under attack.

Free expression goes to the very essence of the human person. While good judgment tells us not to express every thought we have, as moral agents responsible for our actions we must be free to assess the world and express ourselves in vibrant public debate. For religion there is no greater affront than to inhibit people's search for the transcendent and liberty to respond, yay or nay, to God's call.

Western governments must protect the liberties of their peoples. That includes not overreacting by expanding the unconstrained powers of the surveillance state, the first response of many officials to terrorism. Even worse is Washington's inclination to bomb, invade, or occupy other nations at will.

Nor should members any group, Muslim or other, be treated as enemies. However, the problem of violent religious intolerance is almost uniquely Muslim.

Christians finally learned to stop killing over spiritual differences. Today Islamic persecution is global. In most countries in which Muslims constitute a majority religious minorities suffer discrimination and persecution.

There is no disguising reality. If you are a Baha'i, Jew, Ahmadi, Christian, Yazidi, Hindu, wrong kind of Muslim, or atheist you likely will find life always difficult and often threatening in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Sudan, Yemen, Maldives, Syria, and others.

Some Muslims point to blowback from promiscuous U.S. intervention. Washington has supported dictators, harmed innocents, and wrecked societies throughout the Islamic world. However, these are acts of a nation state, not a religious faith. And while that behavior might explain (though not justify, since nothing warrants the murder of civilians) attacks on U.S. targets, it does not illuminate why, say, Pakistani mobs burn to death Pakistani Christians.

The thugs who cut down a dozen Charlie Hebdo are the international cousins of those who murder alleged blasphemers and apostates in Muslim nations. Laws against blasphemy once were common in the West and persist in a few nations, but are rarely used. However, blasphemy laws are actively enforced throughout the Muslim world.

Earlier this year the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that victims of the ongoing attack on free expression include people from Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey. Nowhere are blasphemy laws more used and abused than in Pakistan. For instance, wife and mother Asia Bibi currently faces death because she defended her Christian beliefs to fellow berry pickers who were pressuring her to convert to Islam.

In its report on the issue USCIRF explained how the law encourages abuse: “The so-called crime carries the death penalty or life in prison, does not require proof of intent or evidence to be presented after allegations are made, and does not include penalties for false allegations.”

Judges prefer not to hear evidence, since doing so could be construed as blasphemy. A claim usually is sufficient to send someone to prison, making the law a common weapon in personal and business disputes.

Non-Muslims are peculiarly vulnerable. Many people do not reach trial: mobs have killed more than 50 people charged with the offense. And thugs like those who gunned down the Charlie Hebdo staffers have murdered judges who acquitted defendants, attorneys who represented those accused, and politicians who proposed reforming the laws.

Self-censorship toward Islam is evident in many Western nations. But that is not enough for some Muslim states. Governments which persecute their own people have campaigned at the United Nations against the so-called defamation of religion to restrict freedom of expression in lands which their own laws do not reach.

There isn't much Washington can do to protect liberty in other countries, but the U.S. government must insist that the liberties of Americans are non-negotiable and will be defended. More broadly, the Charlie Hebdo murders should remind policymakers that religious liberty is not an afterthought.

A government which refuses to protect individuals in exploring the transcendent is more likely to leave other essential liberties unprotected. People in Muslim-majority nations, where religious persecution today is at its worst, must come to peacefully accept those who believe differently both at home and abroad.

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