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Casualties in the war over ideals

by Michael Gerson

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau;

Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain!

You throw the sand against the wind,

And the wind blows it back again.

[William Blake](#) expressed the proper attitude of religious people toward satirical blasphemy. Those who believe they hold an eternal truth about the nature and destiny of the universe cannot find a cartoon or novel to be genuinely threatening. The Parthenon or the Great Pyramid is not destroyed by some graffiti scrawled on its base. Equanimity is one manifestation of mature faith.

The discrediting of religion is usually an inside job — often by religious people who allow their faith to be exploited in pursuit of someone else's ideological agenda. Think of the “German Christians” who applauded Adolf Hitler's rise in the 1930s. “Our Protestant churches have welcomed the turning point of 1933,” said [one Lutheran theologian](#), “as a gift and miracle of God.” What vulgar anti-religious satire, what urine-soaked crucifix, could possibly be more damaging than this?

The [killings at Rue Nicolas Appert](#) are part of a similar story: the exploitation of religious passions for political ends. This is what separates Islam from violent Islamism (or whatever term one applies to the political ideology that inspires the killing of cartoonists and the Islamic State's reign of terror). Some Islamists have a history of using blasphemy — real or imagined — to cultivate grievances and motivate political violence. “The phenomenon of outrage over insults to Islam and its final prophet is a function of modern-era politics,” [Husain Haqqani](#), Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States, has explained. “It started during Western colonial rule, with Muslim politicians seeking issues to mobilize their constituents. Secular leaders focused on opposing foreign domination, and Islamists emerged to claim that Islam is not merely a religion but also a political ideology. Threats to the faith became a rallying cry for the Islamists, who sought wedge issues to define their political agenda.”

The appeal of homicidal wedge politics is small in comparison with Islam but large enough to result in a serious global challenge. People who are weary of security measures, government surveillance, drone strikes and proxy wars sometimes complain of “overreaction” to this danger. Until the next attack comes. Free nations face a long-term threat that gathers in jihadist hot spots, targets global capitals, inspires sympathetic murder and uses all the tools of modernity to attack modernity. Murders in the London subway, or on commuter trains in Madrid, or at a French satirical newspaper are shared losses. They cause shared mourning.

In this very real war, the United States, France and other great democracies stand for a set of values, including a commitment to free expression that covers blasphemy. This principle, unlike rules relating to obscenity or incitement to violence, is unqualified. Government cannot be granted the right to restrict blasphemy because it should not be granted the right to define orthodoxy. Permitting legal space for blasphemy is inherent to free expression and to freedom of religion, which also means freedom for the rudely irreligious.

There is no “but.” There is an “and.” While the protection of blasphemy is required by democratic values, it does not exhaust those values. Civility is also an important democratic virtue. Our ideal of democracy is not an endless cable television shouting match. It is a free society in which citizens have a decent regard for the rights and views of others. This requires a measure of self-restraint, something we teach to our children as tolerance and manners. And such self-restraint is not self-censorship; it is respect. A free country should unapologetically defend the right to jeer and taunt. This does not require everyone in a free country to find jeering and taunting admirable.

These distinctions are relevant to the broader fight against Islamism. It is important, first, to separate this violent political ideology from the faith of Islam, which an overwhelming majority of adherents find to be a source of comfort and compassion. It is also important to clarify the contending alternatives in a great struggle. It is not Islamism against the Christian West. And it is not Islamism against the secular West. The United States is animated by a vision of democratic pluralism that is fully compatible with strong religious belief, fully committed to free expression — and fully prepared to defend its ideals against fanatics.