

Islamism and democracy seen as a 'war of the gods'?

By William Gairdner



'I'd rather die standing, than live on my knees.'

That 2012 statement by Stéphane Charbonnier, editor of the satirical French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, was a compelling battle cry, and the tragic murder of him, his staffers, and two policemen in Paris on Jan. 7 guaranteed its place in the modern democratic liturgy. He was willing to die a martyr for the sacred principle of 'free speech,' and he did.

The flurry of media response has been anguished and, it must be said, ambivalent as to what should be our response. So although there is no doubt we are engaged in a war of terror, it may be time to risk some deeper questions. Such as: Do we adequately understand the theological roots of Islamism, let alone those of democracy? Is it really true that free speech is one of our sacred and 'fundamental' principles? And if so, why do we charge citizens with 'hate crimes' for speaking freely against such things as abortion, gay marriage, and multiculturalism, yet so passionately defend their right to ridicule Mohammad? The clash of principles voiced on both sides suggests we are engaged in a modern version of a very old confrontation between two incompatible theologies: a sacred religion called 'Islamism,' and a secular belief system we nonetheless consider sacred, called 'democracy.'

A poster carried in the million-plus march in Paris said it all: 'Our freedom is greater than your faith.' It's a war of gods.

Democracy now has very little to do with the old Judeo-Christian God, and even less to do with God's will. Indeed, we insist on the 'separation' of democratic life from God and religion. But it has everything to do with co-opting the full force of God's will and repackaging it as a pure and sacred 'will of the people.' Indeed, during its early modern period, the right to democracy was everywhere defended in the phrase *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* ('the voice of the people is the voice of God?'). Freedom, for us, means following the god of our own will. The right we call 'free speech' is an indispensable aspect of that freedom, for the reason that if the people cannot speak freely, they cannot express their sacred will.

Islamists, too, believe in a God of pure Will, but in this case the reference is directly to the divine Will of a God who is wholly remote from the will of the people. The mere suggestion that the voice of a pure and absolute God can be expressed or decided by the vulgar, forever imperfect voice of 'the people' is, for Islamists, a horrendously blasphemous notion; the will of God can never be decided by votes. So freedom, for Islamists, means following the will of God, not our own will. And that is why it will be forever impossible to fuse doctrinaire Islam with democracy.

The fundamentalism with which we are now engaged is sourced in a radical form of Islam that is similar in its strict literalism to the dogmatic Reformation Christianity that arose in the 16th century, in the sense that Islamists yearn to live every detail of life according to the Book. A little study of the work of writers such as Sayyid Qutb, and Hassan Al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) will make these distinctions between an ordinary Muslim and an Islamist clear.

They are distinctions that make the idea of 'dialogue' with Islamism a lost cause, for it is their unshakeable conviction that the word of God cannot be disputed or changed. As David P. Goldman relates in *How Civilizations Die* (2011), Christianity has been able to survive two millennia of very challenging Biblical criticism because the Gospels, however revered, are still only human reports of Revelation. For Christians, the actual Revelation, is Jesus Christ himself, and no criticism can touch a sincere faith in Him. For Islam, however, the Qur'an 'believed to have been dictated by the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammad in the 7th century'

is the only actual revelatory event, and so ?to question any statement of the Qur'an ... amounts to apostasy.? As one scholar cited by Goldman relates tellingly: ?For Muslims, the Qur'an can be compared to Christ: Christ is the Word of God made flesh, while the Qur'an ... is the word ?made paper.?' Accordingly, writes Goldman, unlike the interpretive work of the Catholic Magisterium, or the Oral Torah of Judaism, there is simply ?no human agency with the authority to interpret the text? and that is why Islamists meet any attempt to alter or criticize the Qur'an with ?rage and doubt? ? and violence.

Seen in this light, the rage and doubt of western journalists in defence of ?humour? as an anti-totalitarian weapon, or of ?freedom of the press as one of the core values of western democracy,? is clearly theological. I am not defending either side at the moment, and certainly not excusing violence of any kind. I am just trying to understand the ideological and theological motives of both sides. And I think it goes something like this: With our cartoons and the like we have attacked the God of Islam. So they attack the God of Democracy. We hold the sacred right of free speech higher than their god. They hold the sacred duty to defend God higher than free speech. So what is the difference between 10,000 people chanting ?I am Charlie? (faith in free speech is the greatest), and 10,000 people chanting ?Allahu Akbar? (faith in God is the greatest)?

The obvious difference is the violence. For the Islamist, however, there is a similarity but not a parity of violence. They see our violence against the God of Islamism perpetrated directly in their homelands by a half-century of western invasions of nations like Iraq and Afghanistan, and indirectly in their private lives by the internet, sexual licence, unrestrained materialism, and especially ? excuse the phrase ? by the sacred secularism of the West. As true believers they cannot invade us with armies in response. So their violence against the god of democracy is in the form of isolated acts of terror in the streets, offices, and public spaces of Paris, New York, Ottawa, and Jerusalem.

It will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to deal with the threat of Islamist violence adequately until we clearly recognize that we are in the midst of a war of opposing gods just as dramatic, and theologically-rooted on both sides as any of the ancient wars of the gods depicted by historians, or, more to the point at hand ? by the historians of the Crusades.

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