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Values of Western Society Play a Role in Terrorism

Abstract

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Values of Western society play a role in terrorism

The recent deaths of secularist French Charlie Hebdo staffers, Jordanian Muslim pilot Moaz al-Kassasbeh and American Christian aid worker Kayla Mueller, followed this week by the killing of three Muslim students by a self-described “atheist minister” in North Carolina and the executions of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya, are the latest in a litany of heartbreak tied to the Middle-East. By themselves, they seem little more than senseless tragedies, but when viewed as pieces to a larger puzzle, they can speak volumes to us.

The militant Islamists tied to the Charlie Hebdo slaughter were summarily and appropriately gunned down by French police. This was followed by a brief show of solidarity in the Paris Unity Rally, but the United States was quickly criticized for not sending someone of higher rank than an ambassador — and our president publicly apologized.

But far more damaging attacks by militant Muslims have killed thousands of innocent people with little or no White House acknowledgment or public outcry. Unfortunately, it took gruesome executions (Moaz and the beheadings that preceded his death), the loss of “one of our own” (Kayla), and assaults on freedom of speech (Hebdo) to galvanize public opinion.

Why does the West seem helpless as Muslims, Christians and Jews all over the Middle East are killed by Muslim extremists? Nearly 1 million Christians have fled Iraq since Saddam was ousted. In Syria, ISIS spray-painted Christian homes with the Farsi letter “n,” identifying their occupants as targets for extremist looters, arsonists, rapists and killers. According to the Nigeria Social Violence Dataset, Boko-Haram-inspired violence in that country has led to the deaths of at least 5,000 innocent people in the past five years, and six times this number over the past 15 years. And World Watch Monitor reports that the post-attack issue of Charlie Hebdo sparked fatal rampages and the damage or burning of as many as 70 churches in Niger, as well as violent protests in Pakistan, Algiers and Jordan.

Terrorist actions are inexcusable, but we must recognize that some of this violence is fallout from Western decadence and arrogance. Charlie Hebdo’s mockery of Mohammed goes back many years, including issues that portrayed him in demeaning or pornographic poses. American men and women abused Muslim men in the Abu Ghraib prison and the U.S. military burned Korans. The French ban the burka but protect the right to public nudity. And recreational sex and “Fifty Shades of Grey” “mommy porn” invades homes worldwide via the American-invented Internet, TV and movies. Extremist Muslims respond by countering this arrogant cultural assault (against which they have no power) with the primary power available to them — physical violence.

Together, these incidents reveal something important. Our differing reactions to the Hebdo and Nigerian atrocities hint that we might value the right to insult more than we value justice for voiceless victims. Our inability to constrain in-your-face sexuality exposes our near-worship of

freedom of expression. And our response to ISIS primarily with remote-controlled drones and bombs (costing approximately \$750,000 per strike) reveals our trust in technology and riches.

Our secular bias is also implicated in the historical roots of these problems. The West redrew borders and cavorted with unsavory dictators like the Shah of Iran, Saddam, Mubarak and Assad because they held out the promise of maintaining secular political and economic structures, while marginalizing or controlling the more divisive expressions of Islam.

More recently we placed our bets on democracy — another safely secular option — and got the likes of Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. We seem not to have grasped that things like freedom of speech and expression, and democracy, although necessary for human flourishing, are not sufficient. Without changed hearts and congruent underlying values (including a modicum of restraint on our part), our strategies not only fail to contain terrorists but make it very difficult for moderate Muslims to side with us. Political and military actions are important. But would that we had nurtured a public square that distinguishes and respects both religious and political authority, closer to what exists in places like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, or Senegal, where Islamic parties seem far less angry than ISIS and Boko Haram.

We owe it to victims of terrorists to augment political and military strategies with an open discussion about cultural and religious change in both the Muslim world and in the West. A good place to start is for both Charley Hebdo fans to committed Western secularists to accept that a naive aid worker may understand things that they do not. One could almost hear the words of the apostle Paul in Kayla Mueller's final letter from captivity: "Let no unwholesome words come out of your mouth, except that which is useful for building others up, according to their needs." She pointed to a better way forward with her life and death: faith courage, love of neighbor, love of stranger, forgiveness, humility, and sacrifice.

These are fundamentally religious concepts that motivated both Kayla and many of the brave soldiers who have risked life and limb for Middle Easterners whom they've never met. We can only wish that Muslims, Christians and secularists everywhere will be moved enough by these latest senseless deaths to consider a new course of action.