Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

Believe the Terrorists: Religion, Violence, and the Power of Beliefs

Michael Shermer is the Publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, the host of the Skeptics Distinguished Science Lecture Series at Caltech, and a Presidential Fellow at Chapman University. His new book is *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* (Henry Holt, 2015).

Pop quiz: What did the assailants shout after murdering 17 people in Paris in January, 2015, including editors and cartoonists of the satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*?

A. "Moses rocks!"
B. "Jesus saves!"
C. "Vishnu lives!"
D. "Buddha avenged!"
E. "Atheists rule!"
F. "Allahu Akbar!"

That everyone knows the answer is F, and that many of us are afraid to discuss what it means, is indicative of an additional problem we face over and above terrorism: the terror it produces and the unwillingness to acknowledge the cause.

What is the cause? After Paris no one can reasonably argue that the attacks had nothing to do with religion, or that religion was an understudy to the leading actors—politics, economics, and immigration. When the killers decried they were avenging the prophet Muhammad and proclaiming that God is Great, we should take them at their word. They meant what they said, and they said what they meant.

Still, addressing this issue as a problem to be solved instead of an event to be condemned (although condemnation has it's place, as we saw in the days following the massacre, at least in the European press— American media did everything they could to not show the offending covers of Charlie Hebdo or mention the religion of the murderers). In this sense, then, it is too broad a category to finger "religion" as the cause, since that word encompasses so many different institutions and beliefs as to be worthless as a vector in any causal model. Even "religious extremists" as a causal agent doesn't explain the effect we've identified since, for example, Jains are religiously extreme in their belief that all life is sacred to the point of their adherents avoiding causing the death even of insects in their path. But President Obama was negligent when he described the shooters as "violent extremists" because that leaves out the blindingly obvious fact that, as in their own declarations, they perceived their religion to be under attack, and their motives were clearly revenge and justice.

Closer to the mark are "violent religious extremists," although even here there are examples of tiny religious cults that cultivate violence among a handful of followers who either have no access to weapons or who stand out early enough in their development to be identified for observation and deconversion before committing heinous acts. More refined still are "violent religious extremists who believe bad ideas," and if we are to be honest with ourselves there is only one belief system that fits this description, and that is Islam as practiced in many parts of the non-Western world. A few statistics from recent polls makes the point.

According to a 2013 Pew poll the median percentage of Muslims who favor enshrining sharia in South Asia (84%), Southeast Asia (77%), Middle East-North Africa (74%), Sub-Saharan Africa (64%), Southern-Eastern Europe (18%), and Central Asia (12%). These are nontrivial percentages, as are those in another Pew poll that identified these percentag-

es of Muslims who say sharia should be official law: Afghanistan (99%), Iraq (91%), Palestinian territory (89%), Malaysia (86%), Pakistan (84%), Morocco (83%), Bangladesh (82%), Egypt (74%), Indonesia (72%), Jordan (71%), and Tunisia (56%).

How serious are these beliefs? One measure is to what extent Muslims believe that sharia is the revealed word of God, which the Pew pollsters asked followers of Islam in these countries: Jordan (81%), Pakistan (81%), Egypt (75%), Palestinian territory (75%), Afghanistan (73%), Iraq (69%), Kyrgyzstan (69%), Morocco (66%), Tunisia (66%), Bangladesh (65%), and Russia (56%).

Believing that the creator of the universe dictated laws to humans who wrote them down is one thing, but to what extent do Muslims say that sharia should be the law of the land and who favor corporal punishment? The Pew survey found these disturbing percentages: Pakistan (88%), Afghanistan (81%), Palestinian territory (76%), Egypt (70%), Malaysia (66%), Jordan (57%), Iraq (56%), Kyrgyzstan (54%), Lebanon (50%), Bangladesh (50%), Tunisia (44%), Albania (43%), and Russia (39%). If that's not disturbing enough, here are a few of these same countries whose Muslims favor stoning as a punishment for adultery: Pakistan (89%), Afghanistan (85%), Palestinian territory (84%), Egypt (81%), Jordan (67%), Malaysia (60%), Iraq (58%), Bangladesh (55%), and Thailand (51%).

The most disturbing data of all are the percentages of Muslims who believe that anyone who leaves Islam should be executed: South Asia (76%), Middle East-North Africa (56%, Southeast Asia (27%, Central Asia (16%), and Southern-Eastern Europe (13%).

The point of this eye-blurring data dump is that these are nontrivial numbers of people who believe dangerous bad ideas that they think should be the law of the land, and as we have seen over the years in many cases they are willing to commit violence to achieve their goals. This is the elephant in the room that so many people are afraid to look at, and anyone who thinks that it is just a few bad apples who can be identified and targeted for elimination (by de-radicalization or drone) are deluded. When Islamic terrorists shout "Allahu Akbar" and proclaim that they murdered the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* in order to avenge the prophet Muhammad, we should believe them.

The views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not reflect the views of *Science, Religion, and Culture* or its staff.