

# Franklin Graham: Are There Limits to Religious Mockery?

The chilling news that two Islamic gunmen had walked into the Paris office of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and systematically executed a dozen people in cold blood quickly reverberated around the world.

The almost surreal hunt, chase and shootout death of the radical militants by the French police played out dramatically in minute-by-minute media coverage.

The streets and squares of Paris were soon filled with more than a million people voicing their heartfelt support and sympathy for the slain designers and editors of *Charlie Hebdo*. Joining them were prominent world leaders who linked arms and walked in unison down the Boulevard Voltaire.

In the emotional aftermath, the questions began. Could this have been prevented by French intelligence? How did these home-grown terrorists become so alienated?

I have a few questions of my own that may lend some additional perspective to the tragic events.

The first may seem somewhat provocative, but it needs to be asked.

Was *Charlie Hebdo* wrong?

*Charlie Hebdo* is a far left weekly that makes its living satirizing and lampooning just about everything in French national life. Virtually no facet of French government, politics or economics is spared.

But there is one particular domain that persistently has been at the bull's-eye of its derisive satire—religion.

Islam and its revered figure Muhammad have been ridiculed often. After one cartoonish cover poking fun at Muhammad in 2012, *Charlie Hebdo's* office was firebombed, prompting the magazine to relocate to another section of Paris.

That didn't stop them from taking irreverent aim at virtually every major religion, including Judaism and Christianity. Cartoons mocking Christ, the Trinity, the Pope and nuns were—and I suppose will remain—standard fare.

Speaking shortly after the brutal attacks, Pope Francis said it was wrong to gratuitously insult religion. "You can't provoke, you can't insult, you can't make fun of the faith of others," he said. "You can't make a toy out of the religions of others ... in freedom of expression there are limits."

Even former French President Jacques Chirac—not noted as a staunch defender of religious liberty—spoke out against the anti-religious bent of *Charlie Hebdo* after a caricature of Muhammad created a huge controversy in 2006.

I fully and completely support freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I also believe we must recognize that this freedom can be abused. Like shouting fire in a theater, certain strains of public expression can have serious consequences.

I'm not sure why *Charlie Hebdo* chose to make religion the primary object of its scorn. Perhaps the magazine simply represents the thought of so many radical, liberal elites who view religion as nothing more than humorous or foolish.

But I do know this: The gunmen who killed a dozen people at *Charlie Hebdo* while shouting "Allahu Akbar!" were not martyrs defending a prophet's honor; they were just murderous Islamic thugs bent on killing innocent people.

Which brings me to another question.

Why do followers of Islam and Christianity react so differently to the public ridicule and mocking of their respective faiths? Christianity has been repeatedly lampooned by *Charlie Hebdo*, but there have been no riots, assassinations or murderous threats.

Here is what I believe is the fundamental distinction: Christianity has a Savior who has been beaten and battered. A Savior who endured the public ridicule and mockery of crowds as He was stripped and hung on a Roman cross for our sins. A Savior who was betrayed and spat upon and who endured shame and derision so that we might be redeemed.

Our God does not need to be defended. He is holy, all-powerful and eternal. He needs no man to protect His honor. He is the sovereign of the universe who does whatever He pleases, and whose counsel and purpose can never be thwarted. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Creator, Sustainer and End of all things. He will have the last word on the Day of Judgment when all men will bow before Him.

No world religion—not Islam, not Buddhism, not Hinduism—knows anything of such a glorious Savior as Jesus. Not even close.

As followers of Christ, we should expect no less. Since our Lord has been so ill-treated, should not His servants anticipate the same kind of contempt? When attacked by our enemies, we pray for them. When ridiculed by our friends or acquaintances, we heap coals on their heads by loving them. When wronged, we never take vengeance into our own hands, but leave the matter squarely with the Lord, knowing He alone will make all things right one day soon.

Weeks after the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, Islamic adherents and militants rioted across a number of countries, most notably in Africa. In the country of Niger, which is predominantly Muslim, more than 60 Christian churches were torched by angry mobs.

Thankfully, no one was hurt or killed, but out of the ashes, a quiet miracle occurred. Some peaceful Muslims came to the aid of the Christians (for which I am thankful), and then something amazing happened.

A number of the Christian pastors came together and forgave those who torched their churches. They extended grace and forgiveness to the perpetrators. The powerful, overcoming love of Jesus Christ was on open display.

Christians are commanded in Scripture to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us, to bless and not retaliate. Christ loved us when we were enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). He sought after us when we were rebellious and dead in our sin (Eph. 2:5).

That's the fundamental, world-changing difference between Christianity and the religions of man.

There is no other Savior besides Him or like Him. He alone is God.

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