

The Challenge of Theoterrorism

by [Paul Cliteur](#) (May 2013)

“Military fervor on behalf of faith has disappeared. Its only souvenirs are the marble effigies of crusading knights, reposing in the silent crypts of churches on their tombs,” writes John William Draper (1811-1882) in his *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874).¹ Writing on the pernicious influence that religion had exerted on scientific progress, Draper thought this belonged to the past. Draper would have looked with astonishment at book titles we are so familiar with nowadays: *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (2011),² *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (2003),³ *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2003),⁴ *Making War in the Name of God* (2007)⁵ and *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).⁵

He would be greatly surprised when he learned that nowadays the “military fervor” he spoke of seems to be in deadly conflict with freedom of speech, especially in the context of Islamist terrorism.

Part of the definition of terrorism (not only Islamist terrorism but terrorism in general) is that it has a goal. One of the aims of contemporary terrorism seems to be the annihilation of one of the core principles of liberal

democratic societies: the freedom of speech.

The politico-religious ideologies that target free speech go under a number of different names. "Fundamentalism," "extremism," "radicalism" – and these are only a few of the epithets that are used in the scholarly literature and political discourse on the subject. The most popular label is "extremism." Although this term is current, I am reluctant to use it because it is too vague to be useful (there are many kinds of extremist behavior after all). A better term is "terrorism" perhaps, because this is used in legislation and scholarly literature. But even "terrorism" has many forms. The most remarkable development of the last decades is the resurgence of *religious* terrorism, or what one may also call "theoterrorism."

Theoterrorism is the type of terrorism that legitimizes violence by referring to "God." The theoterrorist thinks and claims that the violence he exerts on the nation-state is done "in the name of God."

Arguably, the theoterrorist may be *wrong* in thinking he is a divinely appointed angel of vengeance. But it is perfectly possible not to enter into a discussion with theoterrorists or religious believers on whether or not the terrorist *is right* in his convictions. This would require an excursion into the philosophy of religion and theology that is unnecessary for someone interested in the social significance of theoterrorism. For an understanding of our contemporary world it may be more fruitful not to approach religion from a believer's perspective, but from the angle of the social scientist who simply analyzes what other people think. In this case: what the religious terrorist thinks. What one may do is *try to understand* how his worldview is constructed.

Many people are reluctant to engage in this kind of research. They are concerned with something quite different: protecting religious minorities from discrimination and the "stereotyping

of their religion.” Or they have the ambition to explain why the essence of Judaism, Christianity or Islam is averse to violence.⁷ I fully recognize the importance of that type of commentary from a believers perspective. But it is not the kind of approach that makes it possible to understand the theoterrorist challenge. I fear these well-meaning people are dangerously mistaken. The greatest contribution you can make to the peaceful coexistence of people of good will is to make a *fair assessment* of the role religion plays in contemporary terrorism, and not to suppress or censor people who dare to address this issue.

This requires an open and honest analysis of the material before us. It is uninhibited scholarly discussion and scientific research that is important. If you turn fact-based analyses into a taboo, the discussion will go underground (as happens in contemporary societies). Discrimination, the making of scapegoats, the development of *Feindbilder*; *these things proliferate in a society that fails to openly address the issues. It is for this reason that it is important to not shy away from the use of terms like “religious terrorism” or “theoterrorism.”*

The term “theoterrorism” (and not the more general term “religious terrorism”) is used because the terrorism we are confronted with nowadays is terrorism based on an idea of the “theistic god.” That is: “God” with a capital “g” or monotheism.⁸

Free speech not absolute

Now let me also say something about some misunderstandings that may arise (and unfortunately: *will* arise, a wistful author predicts) within any discussion on free speech nowadays. Anyone who is concerned about free speech in the contemporary world does not proclaim freedom of speech to be

“absolute.” Freedom of speech or the freedom of expression is not unlimited, not even in the most tolerant countries. But in general we may say that the right to read, criticize, satirize, ridicule and mock even the most sacred symbols and icons of faith, has become commonplace since the secularization process of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Especially freethinkers, agnostics, and atheists, but also liberal religious believers have struggled for that right.⁹ After the Second World War it was enshrined in many nation states’ constitutions and in treaty law.

This right is no longer uncontested. There are two tendencies to be discerned in the most recent developments. On the one hand we see the religious terrorists (“theoterrorists”) trying to intimidate, threaten and even kill authors and artists like Salman Rushdie or Kurt Westergaard (or their publishers and translators). On the other hand we see an embattled and confused political and intellectual elite that is not quite sure how to deal with this new situation.

In the late summer of 2012 the world was in turmoil over a new wave of violent protests against a film, posted on YouTube by an American citizen of Egyptian descent, on the life of Mohammed. The American ambassador in Libya, Chris Stevens (1960-2012), was killed, allegedly in response to this satirical movie. The situation reminded us of the days when the British government struggled with a fatwa against British author Salman Rushdie, issued by the Islamist cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, and of the days when the Danish government had to deal with violent protests over twelve cartoons published in a Danish newspaper. Finally, the U.S. government was also confronted with delicate policy questions on how to deal with fanatics inspired by a totally different worldview than that expressed in the American Constitution. After the British, Danish and Dutch authorities, now the U.S. authorities also face perplexing quandaries regarding the defense of civil liberties.

What to do? Should we try to appease this conflict by invoking “respect” and “dialogue” towards each other’s convictions? But what if the other party demands no less than the reintroduction of blasphemy laws and the silencing of all religious criticism? And this not only in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia, but also in democracies like the Netherlands, the United States, France and Great Britain. Are these negotiable options? Can we make accommodations by relinquishing our most sacred principles? Or would this send the wrong message to the theoterrorists, who will then only up the ante and demand not only a ban on cartoons, works of art, plays and novels, but also the censure of historical treatises?

And how to deal with western citizens, intellectuals, artists and newspaper editors who simply do not want to comply with the new rules of self-censorship? What if a Quran-burning pastor invokes the First Amendment? If a novelist does not want to accommodate the demands of the pious radicals? If a publishing house is reluctant to give in to threats and continues to publish a controversial book? What if newspapers do not exercise self-censorship and publish cartoons the way they have always done?

These important policy questions have loomed over us at least since the Rushdie Affair (1989)¹⁰ and the Cartoon Affair (2005),¹¹ but now they have become more manifest; become universal, so to say. And they have reached the United States of America.

Since the riots in the Middle East and the killing of the American ambassador in Benghazi (Libya) in September 2012, reportedly caused, as said, by the publication of the trailer of a satirical film, *Innocence of Muslims*, the situation has changed. Now the United States has its own “cartoon crisis” (or rather “movie crisis”, or “YouTube crisis”, or whatever you want to call it). Egyptian president Morsi (b. 1951) of the Muslim Brotherhood strongly condemned the “provocations”

in the film and urged president Obama (b. 1961) to “put an end to such behavior”.¹² But is what an Islamist means by “putting an end to such behavior” not basically the abolition of the First Amendment? And can an American president do that? Western governments do their utmost to interpret these demands in terms of “respect” and “tolerance.” Public intellectuals say “the world doesn’t love the First Amendment,” implying that we had better stop believing in the universality of human rights.¹³ “Americans need to learn that the rest of the world – and not just Muslims – see no sense in the First Amendment”, they say.¹⁴ But why stop at the First Amendment? It is not clear that fundamentalists also advocate punishing homosexuals? And adulterous wives? And why not simply “accept” that the Taliban wants to stone a 14-year-old girl because she advocates the right to education for females living in Pakistan or Afghanistan?¹⁵

Western political leaders like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton try to assure violent crowds demonstrating in front of American embassies that the films posted on the internet do not reflect their country’s official view of the prophet, as Dutch prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende and former Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen did before them. The makers of offensive cartoons, mocking films, provocative novels and incendiary works of art, they say, represent a highly personal view, not that of the state. This is how western politicians justify themselves to foreign heads of state who openly assert that the west does not have its population under control so long as it does not repudiate the fundamental right to freedom of speech.

But does the west’s defense do the trick? In Afghanistan, the Taliban claimed that the movie satirizing the prophet was made with the *permission* of the U.S. government. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (b. 1947) denies this, but according to the radicals she evades the issue. By using the word “permission”

they mean that the First Amendment of the American Constitution prohibits the government from interfering with free expression.¹⁶ Does that not, they ask, make the American government – at least partly – responsible for the atrocious attacks on their holy icons? Why don't the U.S. and other western countries that condone the vilification of religious symbols *change* their constitutions? Why not bring their legislation in accordance with sharia law? Apparently they are unwilling, are they not? So as long as the western countries persist in their assault on Islamic sacred symbols, Muslims are not only mandated but religiously and morally obligated to take revenge in the name of Allah, so the theoterrorists contend.

“Military fervor on behalf of faith” has not disappeared, as Draper thought at the end of the nineteenth century. It is back on the agenda. And the experience of the past two decades has taught us that liberal democracies cannot come to a resolution of this matter by ignoring the issue or giving evasive answers.

[1] Draper, John William, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, D. Appleton and Company, New York 1897 (1874), p. v.

[2] Toft, Monica, Philpott, Daniel, Shah, Timothy Samuel, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, W.W. Norton's Company, New York and London 2011.

[3] Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jack, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg 2003.

[4] Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Third Edition, Revised and

Updated, University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles/London 2003.

[5] Catherwood, Christopher, *Making War in the Name of God*, Citadel Press, Kensington Publishing Corp., New York 2007.

[6] Hitchens, Christopher, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Twelve, New York, Boston 2007.

[7] That seems to be a preoccupation of former prime minister Tony Blair of Great-Britain, who became a Catholic but also a religious apologist. See: Griffiths, Rudyard, ed., *Hitchens vs. Blair: Be it resolved Religion is a Force for Good in the World*, The Munk Debate on Religion, 26 November 2010, Anansi, Toronto 2011. Or one may think of Karen Armstrong, see: Armstrong, Karen, "Think Again: God", in: *Foreign Policy*, November 2009, pp. 55-60.

[8] Grayling, A.C. *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, p. 69.

[9] A key figure is Thomas Paine. See his: Paine, Thomas, *The Age of Reason*, 1794, in: Thomas Paine, *Collected Writings*, The Library of America, New York 1995, pp. 665-885. Great proclamations of the principle of free speech and free research are: Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1977 (1859) and Clifford, W.K., "The Ethics of Belief", in: *Contemporary Review*, 1876/77, pp. 289-309, also in: *Lectures and Essays*, Vol. II, ed. L. Stephen & F. Pollock, Macmillan, London 1879, pp. 177-212.

[10] See for Rushdie's own account: Rushdie, Salman, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, Jonathan Cape, London 2012.

[11] See on this: Westergaard, Kurt, and Lykkegaard, John, *Kurt Westergaard: The Man behind the Mohammed Cartoon*, Mine Erindringer, Tilst, Denmark 2012.

[12] Lekic, Slobodan, "Egypt Protests: Mohamed Morsi Says

Embassies Will Be Protected", in: *Huffpost World*, 13 September 2012.

[13] Posner, Eric, "The World Doesn't Love the First Amendment", in: *Slate*, 25 September 2012.

[14] Posner, Ibid.

[15] Yousuf, Hani, and Dumalao, Janelle, "Taliban vows to kill Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani peace activist, if she survives attack", in: *Huff Post Religion*, 13 October 2012.

[16] Basu, Moni, & Watkins, Tom, "Staff and crew of film that ridiculed Muslims say they were 'grossly misled'", in: CNN 13 September 2012: "In Afghanistan, the Taliban charged that the movie was made with the permission of the U.S. government. The First Amendment prohibits the government from interfering with free expression."

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