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### It's More Than "Just a Cartoon:" Why Muslim People Take Blasphemy So Seriously

When talking about the Charlie Hebdo shooting on January 7, 2015, many people think of the 12 people killed and 11 others injured by two Muslim brothers (The Response). The number many people do not think about is 1.6 billion. That number is roughly how many Muslims that were living across the globe in 2015; that number is how many people had their identity attacked by the cartoons printed in France. That number has grown to approximately 1.8 billion, making Islam the second largest religion followed in the world, behind Christianity (Pew Research). While violent reactions are not a proper response, it is hard not to sympathize with Muslims. A combination of privilege and ignorance on the topic of Islamic faith has lead Western people to not comprehend the real reasons Muslim people are deeply hurt by blasphemy. Westerners tend to think that the depictions of God and Muhammad are what upset Muslims the most, but this interpretation is wrong. Many Muslims are perturbed because they feel as though their identity as followers of Islam is being targeted and the attacks on their identity are purely meant to provoke.

Blasphemy at its core is showing a lack of reverence for something that someone or a group holds sacred. For Islam, this includes the depiction of God. Since Islam is an iconoclastic religion, the anthropomorphication of God is not permitted and Muslims would rather focus on textual scripture describing God instead of depicting Him through images. As time went by, Muslim scholars broadened the lack of depiction to cover Muhammad and other major prophets,

as well (Taub). Charlie Hebdo, a satirical French newspaper, published cartoons depicting Muhammad in a mocking way. These cartoons upset Muslims and they requested for the printing of the cartoons to stop. The newspaper did not stop printing the cartoons, and two Muslims shot up the office of the newspaper. Since then, the newspaper has not stopped producing cartoons depicting Islamist extremism and weaponizing their own faith against them (Charlton). The newspaper does so in the name of free speech; since France contains more Western thinkers, rather than Muslims, the French and other Westerners do not understand how harmful acts of blasphemy, such as the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, are to Muslims.

Many Westerners do not comprehend how important Islam is to Muslims, and major publications such as one by Mustafa Akyol in *The New York Times* titled “Islam’s Problem with Blasphemy” exemplifies the lack of comprehension. This article gaslights followers of Islam and turns attacks on their identity into acceptable behavior. By including wording such as “apparently” and “actual or perceived” (Akyol), the author attempts to downplay the fact that parts of the world attack Islam. This shows a lack of understanding from Westerners about the assaults Muslims are receiving on their religion. Akyol questions the legitimacy of the persecution Muslims face, while also making a small number of Muslims the perpetrators in the situation by using the words “Islamist extremists” (Akyol). Extremist Muslims who are willing to do whatever it takes, including murder, make up a fraction of the entire Muslim population (LaCasse); this wording serves to only place blame within the Muslim community and take attention away from the fact that Muslims are being harassed. A huge point Akyol fails to mention is the difference between extremists and radicals. Roughly one percent of Muslims in Western European countries are at risk of radicalization (LaCasse); this does not mean that they are already radicalized and ready to lead a mass shooting, rather this means there is the

possibility that they might become a “radical” Muslim. Being a radical Muslim could mean that one is advocating for a Sharia legal system, it does not mean that one supports the use of violence (LaCasse). Akyol calls on modern-day Muslim scholars to suppress what he believes to be extremists; the sort of behavior Akyol wants suppressed only happens when a radicalized Muslim happens to find themselves with Muslims that endorse the use of violence (LaCasse). The sweeping generalizations and lack of support that Akyol provides completely diminishes the acts of aggression that Muslims face for standing strong in their faith.

The best way to examine why Muslims aggrandize their faith is to look through the lens of both Jonathan Haidt and Jeffrey Stout. Jonathan Haidt and his Moral Foundations Theory explain how six categories of morals appear to be consistent throughout different cultures, but the ways the cultures construct their virtues, narratives, and institutions on top of the moral foundations differ (Haidt). In situations of the appreciation of their faith, the main foundations to look at are sanctity, loyalty, and care. Situations of blasphemy embody the counterparts of sanctity, loyalty, and care; these counterparts are degradation, betrayal, and harm. The expression of care in Islam comes in a variety of ways; the third pillar of Islam, zakat, embodies the social responsibility that Muslims practice in service of God. Muslims care for one another, and whenever someone attacks one part of their group, it is as if the entire group is being attacked. This is due to the formation of a linkage between care and loyalty. Muslims practice their faith together and see a system within their faith that creates connections with everyone else, so by targeting even one person, you are thereby attacking the entire faith due to the connections made between followers. Whereas every follower does not practice the same exact way, Muslims practice the foundations of the religion in a similar manner. This creates a sense of unity between followers through shared practices and beliefs. A comparison can be drawn to the

way many citizens of the United States feel a sense of patriotism through certain practices, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance and singing the national anthem. Whenever someone commits an act that some see as disrespectful to our country, such as kneeling during the national anthem or refusing to recite the pledge, many Americans feel as though their identity and something they hold as sacred is being attacked. The main difference between these two scenarios is that Muslims are being attacked by those outside of their group, unlike the Americans that are standing against their own government. This only emphasizes how much more detrimental the impacts can be on Muslims; they are not being targeted by fellow followers for reformation purposes, but by outsiders hoping to intentionally harm them. The most critical foundation in this evaluation is sanctity. Muslims see value in living a noble and less carnal life, even attempting to do so while under attack because of their salient identities. Examples that support this include, but are not limited to: regularly going to mosques to worship, washing themselves in a specific order before prayer, and following the Five Pillars of Islam. The Five Pillars of Islam are the testimony of faith, a requirement of five daily prayers, zakat, fasting during Ramadam, and a pilgrimage to Makkah, also known as the Hajj (Kaler et al. 128). Muslims follow the pillars in a specific way to preserve the sanctity of their identity. Before praying, they must wash themselves in a very specific order, they must pray facing the Kaaba, and they must pray on a clean surface free from impurities. For zakat, Muslims must donate at least 2.5% of their acquired wealth to reduce the difference in wealth between the social classes (Kaler et al. 129). Fasting during Ramadan is expected to be completed by all healthy individuals, and through the inclusion of many Muslims, the Islamic faith promotes more social cohesion (Kaler et al. 131). These practices are completed in specific ways and have been completed those ways for centuries; there are very few exceptions about the way the practices

are followed, and there is a set of standards set for all Muslims as seen through the pillars. Blasphemy exemplifies the use of the counterpart foundations to care, loyalty, and sanctity. Blasphemy aims at tearing Muslims down and harming the group through blatantly disrespecting their culture, attempts to make Muslims question the connections they have with one another through demonizing all radicals and pushing an Islamophobic agenda, and takes that which Muslims hold sacred and make a mockery of it, thereby belittling their faith. Western cultures tend to have difficulty with understanding why the Islamic faith is so standardized, which can be attributed to the fact that in many Western cultures “the social order is a moral order, but it’s an individualistic order built up around the protection of individuals and their freedoms” (Haidt 17). Islamic cultures tend to be sociocentric and focus more on the binding foundations that Haidt outlines; this is due to their shared sense of Islamic nationalism and the connections they have amongst each other. Western cultures tend to be more culturally liberal and focus more on the individualizing factors Haidt discusses to promote individual liberties (Gamble).

Due to Western cultures being more culturally liberal, they usually refer to Rawlsian liberalism and his recommendation to use a political consensus (Rawls) when they critique Muslims prioritizing their religion for political decisions. This is why looking at the reasons Muslims find their faith to be salient through Stout’s belief that religion can play a role in politics can effectively show why blasphemy hurts Muslims. Stout states, “it is appropriate to respond to sacred things by celebrating their existence and their excellence” (Stout 15). He develops this point by explaining why cultures should preserve what they find sacred and how this can prove to unify a nation rather than tear it apart. Stout stresses that the inclusion of what one group finds sacred is not meant to completely isolate another group within the same country, but that it should be taken into political consideration due to how important it is to a certain

group of citizens. Muslims base many aspects of their life around their religion, from practicing the five pillars to embodying the lifestyle the Qur'an and Shariah reasoning outline. Their religion is their most salient identity, so it is understandable why they do not fit into Rawlsian liberalism or use Rawls's original position.

Looking at the issue through both the framework of Jeffrey Stout and Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory allows for a better understanding of why Muslims feel devalued by blasphemy and other attacks on their identity and culture. Attacks, such as the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, are blatantly disrespectful as a form to force secular society on a group of people who hold their faith so sacred. This issue is not simply because of the cartoons depicting Muhammad in a mocking way; this issue stems from attacking a group that is already marginalized in France and other areas across the globe. These attacks are similar to racist, homophobic, and sexist slurs. This is a form of oppression, and this is why Muslims are so indignant towards blasphemy.

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