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“Sorry Charlie”

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I changed my mind about today’s column. I started writing a satire in the spirit of Charlie Hebdo that poked fun at the Prophet Muhammad.

I began by writing that what terrorist jihadists need more than a return to the gory days of the Seventh Century is not more theological rigidity or exploding underpants but something very simple: a sense of humor about themselves and their beliefs.

Without that, they will eventually divide and turn on themselves like most other terrorist regimes. France will recall its own Reign of Terror in 1793-1794 that guillotined an estimated 16,500 and murdered another 25,000.

We wouldn’t want these folks to start biting their own tails, now would we?

To invoke Charlie, I set up a scene where the Prophet Mohummy, Ayatollah Al Sneezi and Caliph Bagaladydaddy enter a fund-raising “womanless beauty contest” that I organized for them in Blue Grass.

A womanless beauty contest is a cross-dressing spoof on conventional pageants. Men appear in swim suits, evening gowns and negligees complete with high heels, wigs and make up. They pose and sashay in front of a paying crowd. The grosser the guy and the smaller his bikini, the more likely he is to win approval.

My goal was to get them to lighten up. Their goals differed from mine.

Mohummy wanted to pay Hollywood to make an epic movie of his life and times, starring Seth Rogen. Al Sneezi wanted to buy Snickers-size hydrogen bombs to give to infidel children this Halloween. And Bagaladydaddy wanted to purchase a knife-duller so as to drag out future beheadings.

The three contestants entered our high school gym wearing identical head-to-toe, black burquas to preserve their modesties. The crowd booed.

Then Bagaladydaddy smiled coquettishly and slowly loosened his top button, revealing three more layers. The crowd roared. Wanting the prize money, Mohummy and Al Sneezi matched him tit for tat. The ante was upped and upped again.

You see where this is going.

And then I stopped.

The Charlie Hebdo cartoons that enrage jihadist Muslims are gross, dumb, distasteful and reflect the wit of a 12-year-old boy with whom I have long been familiar.

A few made me laugh; others made me cringe; some made me ask, “Is there a point to this image that I’m too dumb to get?”

Portraying the Prophet Muhammad offends most Muslims, because they believe that Muhammad was a man, not a God, and any image of him would lead to worship of a human being rather than Allah.

One Charlie cartoon shows Muhammad naked and crouching on all fours, with his rump up and his genitals exposed.

(In the spirit of equal adolescent ridicule, another showed the Father, Son and Holy Ghost engaging in sex with each other. Jewish, Christian and Muslim caricatures are shown dividing up the world. Nigerian girls who were raped and impregnated by Boko Haram “soldiers” are shown asking about their welfare allotments, which the French government was cutting—this is a slam against the cuts, not a disparagement of the sex slaves.)

Charlie is a magazine of left-wing, anti-religion atheists. Its content is anti-politician, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-“System,” anti-conventional wisdom, anti-sacred cows, anti-status quo and anti-inhibitions over their views and how they are expressed.

Its editorial style is deliberately confrontational and extremist.

One apparent goal of the magazine is to run content that pushes out the boundaries of permitted expression as far as possible. When anything is allowed to go, everything short of that is comfortably protected.

France and dozens of other countries, including the United States, have laws that prohibit hate speech. Some ban offensive speech, and others ban speech that directly endangers another person or group based on religion, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual preference, nationality and so on.

France abolished blasphemy as a crime in 1791, except in Alsace and Moselle. Blasphemy is defined as insulting, showing contempt or lack of reverence for God, religious persons or sacred things. Charlie is deliberately blasphemous across the religious board.

In 1881, France enacted the Law on the Freedom of the Press, which, while guaranteeing freedom of the press, now prohibits anyone from publicly inciting another to discriminate against, or to hate or harm a person or group for belonging or not belonging, “in fact or in fancy,” to an ethnicity, nation, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or having a handicap.

France also prohibits anyone from publicly defaming or insulting a protected person or group.

Clearly, Charlie Hebdo has defamed and insulted many religions, ethnic groups, non-heterosexuals and races.

French courts have a mixed record of enforcing its prohibition against defamation and insult. They have generally protected ugly and offensive writing when it was directed at politicians, business and certain religions.

But the courts have tried to shield less-powerful racial and religious groups from ridicule. Brigitte Bardot, for example, has been fined five times for remarks against immigrants, the “Islamization of France” and the Muslim method of killing sheep as part of the Eid-al-Adha festival.

Human existence is intrinsically and existentially funny. All of what we do and believe can be joked at—work, politics, families,

relationships, ethnicity, race, nationality, gender, sex and religion, among others.

The Charlie Hebdo brand of religious satire taunts believers through consciously offensive ridicule. A broad definition and defense of a free press do not require the expression of every hateful thought that one can imagine.

It's hard to find any larger point or redeeming social value in some of these cartoons.

Satire need not be funny, but funny satire, I think, makes a point that the people who are being skewered might appreciate. Insult standing alone is naked; it's just mean. When satire makes a larger point, it lifts insult above grade-school teasing and bullying.

French Christians tend to be tolerant of Charlie's taunts; Jews less so; and Muslims less than that. A few ultra-right-wing, ultra-fundamentalist extremists in both Christianity and Judaism could, in my opinion, be so enraged by Charlie-type blasphemy that they, too, would use bombs and guns to stop the ridicule. Atheists, agnostics, secularists and skeptics don't appear to receive equal parody.

I'm sympathetic to the idea that permitted expression need not have redeeming social value, because that term is hard to agree on and apply. I'm sympathetic to permitting hate speech as long as it doesn't harm or endanger its targets. And I'm against governments and institutions imposing speech codes and prohibitions.

On the other hand, I don't think people who are offended have a right to injure or kill a person who has offended them. I don't think Charlie deserved what the gunmen did.

I also think that Charlie could raise the level of its satire without lowering its defense of free expression. I don't expect, however, that Charlie will do this.

The Charlie way of poking at Islam and Muslims pushes more of that community into feeling that "Western" extremists are targeting them in a gratuitously humiliating way.

Charlie-style satire -- done of, by and for non-Muslims-- strengthens the appeal of jihadists who position themselves as defenders of Islam, rather than perpetrators of an extremist cult ideology.

Extreme regimes disintegrate in time owing to their rigidity and oppressiveness. People rebel sooner or later against violence-based dictatorships.

Over-the-top, humiliating cartoon images of Muslims in western publications defeat our dual objectives of marginalizing terror in the name of religion and discrediting jihadist ideas and behaviors. A different satirical approach might be more effective.

That's why I didn't write a spoof this week on a womanless beauty pageant involving a prophet, an ayatollah and a caliph.

But if I had been President, I would have gotten myself to Paris last Sunday and linked arms with those on either side.