

## CRITICIZE RELIGION, NOT PEOPLE

*Frances Widdowson*

Should women be segregated from men in Canada? Does freedom of speech include the right to mock all religions, even if this causes believers great offence?

Until recently, most Canadians would have answered no to the first question and yes to the second. The increasing deference to multiculturalist arguments in Canada, however, has led to less certainty in both responses. How can respect and inclusion be practiced if minorities are criticized for their sexual segregation practices, or their religious beliefs criticized and ridiculed?

These questions have become much more fraught since the mass murder of Muslim worshippers at a mosque in Quebec City. There is now much soul-searching about this violence, and some argue that it was the heated rhetoric in discussions of Islamic beliefs and practices that led to the targeting of the mosque. It was this connection of speech and violence, in fact, which led Quebec's premier Philippe Couillard to make the following comment: "Words can be like knives slashing at people's consciences and we have to be more cognizant of that".

But why should opposition to religious beliefs and practices result in violence toward the people who embrace them? Seeing religion as an ideology means that the *people* who believe are not the problem; instead, it is the irrational and oppressive *ideas* that encourage them to behave in destructive and discriminatory ways. The Koran, for example, asserts that men are in charge of women and disobedient wives should be disciplined by their husbands (Verse 4:34), and the mosque that was attacked in Quebec City unapologetically separates women from men to maintain women's modesty and chastity (a practice that is also present in many other religious traditions). Canadians should criticize these practices, as well as the religious texts that promote them, so as to encourage gender equality and other progressive interactions in all aspects of our society.

This ability to distinguish people from their beliefs and practices is not happening in the current discussions of the mosque killings. The two are being conflated, and so a criticism of Islamic beliefs and practices is perceived as being hostile to those religious victims who have been indoctrinated and choose to follow the dictates of the Koran. While supporters of multiculturalist arguments see this as politically expedient, as it makes people reluctant to voice anti-Islamic sentiment, it actually justifies the killing of believers.

It has been the continuous conflation of beliefs and practices with people—seen most clearly in the accusation that any criticism of Islam is "racist"—that has created a fertile ground for violence against Muslims. Because if religious beliefs are seen as being permanently tied to a particular group of people, what can be done if the beliefs that are held by them have destructive consequences for the society they inhabit? This conflation means that a believer cannot abandon their devotion to a religious text because it is being perceived as an inherent aspect of who they are as a person.

Separating beliefs and practices from the person who holds them will enable us to tackle both of the problems that are increasingly facing us as a society – 1) religious beliefs that are contrary to important values such as freedom of speech and gender equality and 2) the notion that people who hold these beliefs should be ethnically cleansed. People who espouse pernicious beliefs, religious or otherwise, are entitled to all the protections offered to us because of our common humanity. All beliefs, however, should be fearlessly analyzed so that we can try to persuade others to help us create the conditions for a more just and equal society.

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