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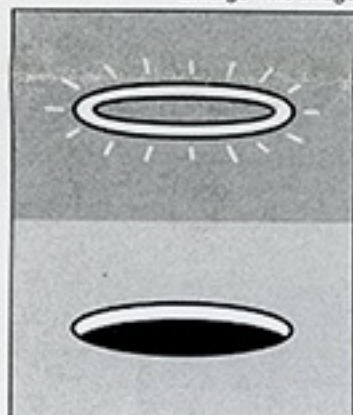
OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Defenders of the Faith

By SLAVOJ ZIZEK

Published: March 12, 2006

London

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centuries, we have been told that without religion we are no more than egotistic animals fighting for our share, our only morality that of a pack of wolves; only religion, it is said, can elevate us to a higher spiritual level. Today, when religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurances that Christian or Muslim or Hindu fundamentalists are only

abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow. What about restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies and perhaps our only chance for peace?

More than a century ago, in "The Brothers Karamazov" and

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other works. Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers of godless moral nihilism, arguing in essence that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted. The French philosopher André Glucksmann even applied Dostoyevsky's critique of godless nihilism to 9/11, as the title of his book, "Dostoyevsky in Manhattan," suggests.

This argument couldn't have been more wrong: the lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders, is permitted — at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and considerations. In short, fundamentalists have become no different than the "godless" Stalinist Communists, to whom everything was permitted since they perceived themselves as direct instruments of their divinity, the Historical Necessity of Progress Toward Communism.

During the Seventh Crusade, led by St. Louis, Yves le Breton reported how he once encountered an old woman who wandered down the street with a dish full of fire in her right hand and a bowl full of water in her left hand. Asked why she carried the two bowls, she answered that with the fire she would burn up Paradise until nothing remained of it, and with the water she would put out the fires of Hell until nothing remained of them: "Because I want no one to do good in order to receive the reward of Paradise, or from fear of Hell; but solely out of love for God." Today, this properly Christian ethical stance survives mostly in atheism.

Fundamentalists do what they perceive as good deeds in order to fulfill God's will and to earn salvation; atheists do them simply because it is the right thing to do. Is this also not our most elementary experience of morality? When I do a good deed, I do so not with an eye toward gaining God's favor; I do it because if I did not, I could not look at myself in the mirror. A moral deed is by definition its own reward. David Hume, a believer, made this point in a very poignant way, when he wrote that the only way to show true respect for God is to act morally while ignoring God's existence.

Two years ago, Europeans were debating whether the preamble of the European Constitution should mention Christianity as a key component of the European legacy. As

usual, a compromise was worked out, a reference in general terms to the "religious inheritance" of Europe. But where was modern Europe's most precious legacy, that of atheism?

What makes modern Europe unique is that it is the first and only civilization in which atheism is a fully legitimate option, not an obstacle to any public post.

Atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for, not least because it creates a safe public space for believers. Consider the debate that raged in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, my home country, as the constitutional controversy simmered: should Muslims (mostly immigrant workers from the old Yugoslav republics) be allowed to build a mosque? While conservatives opposed the mosque for cultural, political and even architectural reasons, the liberal weekly journal Mladina was consistently outspoken in its support for the mosque, in keeping with its concern for the rights of those from other former Yugoslav republics.

Not surprisingly, given its liberal attitudes, Mladina was also one of the few Slovenian publications to reprint the infamous caricatures of Muhammad. And, conversely, those who displayed the greatest "understanding" for the violent Muslim protests those cartoons caused were also the ones who regularly expressed their concern for the fate of Christianity in Europe.

These weird alliances confront Europe's Muslims with a difficult choice: the only political force that does not reduce them to second-class citizens and allows them the space to express their religious identity are the "godless" atheist liberals, while those closest to their religious social practice, their Christian mirror-image, are their greatest political enemies. The paradox is that Muslims' only real allies are not those who first published the caricatures for shock value, but those who, in support of the ideal of freedom of expression, reprinted them.

While a true atheist has no need to boost his own stance by provoking believers with blasphemy, he also refuses to reduce the problem of the Muhammad caricatures to one of respect for other's beliefs. Respect for other's beliefs as the highest value can mean only one of two things: either we treat the other in a patronizing way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist

stance of multiple "regimes of truth," disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth.

What, however, about submitting Islam — together with all other religions — to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless, critical analysis? This, and only this, is the way to show a true respect for Muslims: to treat them as serious adults responsible for their beliefs.

Slavoj Žižek, the international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, is the author, most recently, of "The Parallax View."

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