IN SUMMER 2008, A UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA STUDENT NAMED Webster Cook removed a communion wafer from Catholic Mass and took it home with him—according to one news report, holding it "hostage." Cook seems to have been unhappy about the fact that his state-sponsored university funded religious groups; he also claimed he simply wanted to show the wafer to a friend. But as the Eucharist is one of the seven sacraments in the teaching of the Catholic Church and considered the literal presence of Christ, his action outraged many Catholics, sparking a flurry of media coverage and even, apparently, some death threats. As the controversy escalated, Cook soon returned the wafer in a Ziploc bag. There things might have ended, had the popular atheist science blogger and University of Minnesota professor Paul Zachary ("PZ") Myers not gotten involved.

Myers was staggered and disgusted by all the hoopla over a "frackin cracker." So on his widely read weblog Pharyngula, he asked if anyone out there could "score me some consecrated communion wafers?" and promised, in return, "profound disrespect and heinous cracker abuse, all photographed and presented here on the web." Whether he was initially joking or not, before long the matter became quite serious, and Myers—himself now under fire from Catholics—carried out the deed:

I wasn't going to make any major investment of time, money, or effort in treating these dabs of unpleasantness as they deserve, because all they deserve is casual disposal. However, inspired by an old woodcut of Jews stabbing the host, I thought of a simple, quick thing to do: I pierced it [the Eucharist] with a rusty nail (I hope Jesus's tetanus shots are up to date). And then I simply threw it in the trash, followed by the classic, decorative items of trash cans everywhere, old coffee-grounds and a banana peel. My apologies to those who hoped for more, but the worst I can do is show my unconcerned contempt.

Accompanying these words, a photograph of the "Great Desecration" appeared on Myers's blog, showing that along with the trashed Eucharist, he had also disposed of pages from the Qur'an and Richard Dawkins's best-selling 2006 book, The God Delusion—just to prove nothing is sacred. Myers's public desecration generated a global outcry. The Catholic League historically demanded that the University of Minnesota take disciplinary action, and threatening e-mails arrived in droves. Legally, of course, Myers was exercising his freedom of expression. He should not have been disciplined, and thankfully wasn't.

Nonetheless, Myers's actions were incredibly destructive and unnecessary. He's a very public figure: His blog often draws over two million page views per month. It was dubbed the top science blog by Nature magazine in 2006 and appears on the ScienceBlogs.com network; its author also writes for the popular-science magazine Seed, whose motto is "Science Is Culture." Yet Myers's assault on religious symbols considered sacred by a great many Americans and people around the world does nothing to promote scientific literacy; rather, it sets the cause backward by exacerbating tensions between the scientific community and many American Christians. To religious fundamentalists, who already nourish plenty of suspicion toward mainstream science—and who promote the false and pernicious idea that the faithful can't accept such core scientific findings as evolution—Myers is a walking, blogging justification for their confusion and misdirected antipathy. Religious moderates will scarcely be more receptive: The Catholic Church (whose sacrament Myers defiled) is not even opposed to evolution (which Myers teaches). If episodes like the "Great Desecration" succeed at anything, it will be the fostering of greater alienation and divisiveness between two groups that have had more than enough battles over the centuries—scientists and religious believers.

Myers is certainly not alone. In recent years a large number of "New Atheist" voices have arisen, a movement that originated in significant part in response to the religiously driven massacre committed by al Qaeda on September 11, 2001. The writers Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett are generally considered the "big four" (or if you prefer, the "four horsemen") of new atheism. They're hardly a monolithic group—Harris in fact rejects the atheist label. But the broad tenor of the movement they've impelled is clear: It is confrontational. It believes religious faith should not be benignly tolerated but, rather, should be countered, exposed, and intellectually devastated.

The most outspoken New Atheists publicly eviscerate believers, call them delusional and irrational ("demented fuckwits," as Myers put it in the Webster Cook case), and in some cases do not spare more liberal religionists, or even more conciliatory
fellow scientists and atheists, from withering denunciation. Sam Harris questions the very notion of tolerating religious moderates; he thinks they merely enable extremists. For Richard Dawkins, meanwhile, those who do not criticize religion but still want to defend the teaching of good science in schools fall into the "Neville Chamberlain school of evolutionists" and the "appeasement lobby."

[7] If the goal is to create an America more friendly toward science and reason, the combativeness of the New Atheists is strongly counterproductive. If anything, they work in ironic combination with their dire enemies, the anti-science conservative Christians who populate the creation science and intelligent design movements, to ensure we'll continue to be polarized over subjects like the teaching of evolution when we don't have to be. America is a very religious nation, and if forced to choose between faith and science, vast numbers of Americans will select the former. The New Atheists err in insisting that such a choice needs to be made. Atheism is not the logically inevitable outcome of scientific reasoning, any more than intelligent design is a necessary corollary of religious faith. A great many scientists believe in God with no sense of internal contradiction, just as many religious believers accept evolution as the correct theory to explain the development, diversity, and interrelatedness of life on Earth. The New Atheists, like the fundamentalists they so despise, are setting up a false dichotomy that can only damage the cause of scientific literacy for generations to come. It threatens to leave science itself caught in the middle between extremes, unable to find cover in a destructive, seemingly unending culture war.

[8] Of course, the New Atheists aren't the origin of the cleft between religious and scientific culture in America—they're more like a reaction to it. They're responding to a tension that has pervaded American history and that broke out openly and perhaps most dramatically during the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial." Ever since evangelicals reemerged as a political force in the 1970s, faith and science have been pitted against each other repeatedly in controversies over topics ranging from abortion to stem cell research to the teaching of evolution in American schools. The emergence of the highly organized intelligent design movement in the 1990s, as well as the excruciatingly anti-science presidency of George W. Bush, precipitated a new wave of attention to the fissure between science and faith in America.

[9] Meanwhile, there's no question that America's scientific community is far more secular in outlook than the rest of the nation. A 2007 study revealed that whereas 52 percent of scientists at twenty-one leading U.S. academic institutions claimed to have no religious affiliation, that was true of just 14 percent of the broader U.S. public. And whereas 14 percent of Americans self-identify as "evangelical" or "fundamentalist," fewer than 2 percent of the surveyed scientists did.

[10] This divergence of assumptions manifests itself in what is by far the most religiously contested scientific issue in the United States, the teaching of evolution. On this subject, many scientists have a strong and almost instinctual inclination to exhaustively refute the claims made by creationists of various stripes: They feel compelled to show why they're wrong, how they misrepresent science, that they violate scientific canons and norms, and so on. Accordingly, the claims of so-called scientific creationism—that the earth is no more than 10,000 years old; that its geological features, such as the fossil record and the Grand Canyon, were carved by Noah's flood; that humans coexisted with dinosaurs; and so on—have been wholly dismantled by scientific experts. The same goes for various claims made by the newer intelligent design movement, such as the assertion that certain cellular components are "irreducibly complex," and therefore suggest the hand of an intelligent designer (God).

[11] The scientific case for rejecting such bad science (or non-science) is indisputable. But that doesn't make it persuasive to creationists or other religiously motivated evolution skeptics. Although anti-evolutionist leaders may dress up many of their claims in scientific trappings, the vast majority of their followers aren't really operating on that level, to the continual befuddlement of some scientists, who keep laying out the facts but seeing no one swayed who wasn't already on the pro-evolution side. "The appeal of creationism is emotional, not scientific," writes Kenneth Miller, a Roman Catholic biologist, leading evolution defender, and author of Finding Darwin's God. Creationists are driven to attack evolution because they fear it will undermine their religious culture, which for many is the essential organizing principle of their lives and the lives of their children. Abrasive atheism can only exacerbate this anxiety and reinforce the misimpression that scientific inquiry leads inevitably to the erosion of religion and values.
[12] This observation doesn't make those religious conservatives who reject science, who constantly battle over the teaching of evolution, a bunch of innocents—far from it. They do their devastating part to keep our culture from embracing science as it should. But it does put the community of science on notice that whatever external problems we face, we're also troubling our own house. To further the cause of scientific literacy, we need a different, and far more sympathetic, approach, one that's deeply sensitive to the millions of religious believers among our citizenry.

[13] Fortunately, this prescription isn't merely political or strategic; it's substantive and entirely based on reason. For it turns out that the New Atheists are quite incorrect about the relationship between science and religion on multiple levels, from the historical to the philosophical. Not only are they causing a great deal of divisiveness, but they're doing so on the basis of what are, at best, questionable premises. At a recent conference at City College in New York City, an audience member asked a panel of Nobel laureates whether a true scientist could also believe in God. Chemist Herbert Hauptman answered with a definitive "No!"—reasoning that quality science and supernatural beliefs are irreconcilable and adding that such beliefs are "damaging to the well-being of the human race." Yet historical scholarship on the complex interactions between science and religion contradicts Hauptman's simplistic assertion. A great many leading lights of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment—Nicolaus Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle—were distinctly religious and viewed science as a better means of understanding God's creation and the laws governing it.

[14] And thus while science and faith are not mutually exclusive, it's certainly fair to say the two have posed tremendous challenges for each other over the course of history. Beginning with the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, extending through the cultural thunderclap that was the publication of On the Origin of Species in 1859 and up to the present day, science has continually usurped terrain previously occupied by Christianity. It has established its own intellectual independence and cultural authority; it has triumphed repeatedly with factual claims about the world and the workings of nature. Many scripturally based "scientific" assertions—the statement in Psalm 104:5 that "Thou didst set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken" or in Ecclesiastes 1:5 that "the sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises," to name a few—have been undermined by science and become impossible for critically thinking people to take literally.

[15] Increasingly, an awe-inspiring phenomenon like lightning—once assumed to be divinely impelled—was recognized to be a natural occurrence. This new understanding, in turn, suggested how to protect human structures from its ravages—and thus Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod. The Darwinian revolution further advanced this trend of desacralizing nature. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and especially in England, many thinkers still looked to the natural world for "scientific" evidence of divine handiwork. Yet Darwin devastatingly unseated the idea that living things provide evidence of the divine; instead, a directionless process acting over long periods of time—natural selection—could account for the diversity of life as well as the adaptive efficiency of its organs and organisms. Species hadn't been created at fixed moments in time by an intelligent agent, and their identities weren't static. They did not constitute the obvious evidence for God's existence that so many had assumed; once again, religion would have to retreat in the face of scientific advance.

[16] The Darwinian revolution, and the considerable religious resistance it triggered, certainly upped the intensity level for conflicts between science and religion. But again, that does not mean acceptance of evolution and belief in God are incompatible. Even at the time, many religious thinkers had no problem adapting to Darwin's ideas. Darwin personally struggled with the science-religion question in his own life, torn between his devoutly Christian wife, Emma, and anti-clerical combatants like his brawling disciple, Thomas Henry Huxley. But he was clear about the nature of science: "The more we know of the fixed laws of nature," he wrote in his Autobiography, "the more incredible do miracles become."

[17] Yet religion has come a long way, too: The history of world religions is one of continuous adaptation, not only to science but to many other developments as well. Large numbers of religious people today reject the idea that the Bible must be read literally and every word accepted as eternally true, or that the Ten Commandments represent a complete prescription of ethical behavior. Hordes of believers worldwide are able to reconcile ancient faiths with modern developments that range from the emergence of feminism, to changing understandings of human rights, to racial equality, and yes, to scientific progress as well. This is not to deny that science has posed considerable challenges for the Judeo-Christian tradition; it is simply to say that there are a wide variety of potential responses to these challenges . . .
[18] Modern science relies on the systematic collection of data through observation and experimentation, the development of theories to organize and explain this evidence, and the use of professional institutions and norms such as peer review to subject claims to scrutiny and ultimately (it is hoped) develop reliable knowledge. A core principle underlying this approach is something called "methodological naturalism," which stipulates that scientific hypotheses are tested and explained solely by reference to natural causes and events.

[19] The critical point is that such naturalism, being merely methodological in nature, is not a claim about the fundamental reality of the world. And it certainly is not atheism. Rather, it's simply a rule that is justified on pragmatic grounds by the dramatic success it has facilitated in the application of scientific knowledge to real-world situations. Anti-evolutionists have long sought to slander the scientific enterprise by claiming it's inherently atheistic, but in so doing, they misunderstand both the history and the philosophy of science. Or as Pennock amusingly puts it: "Science is godless in the same way that plumbing is godless." But much like anti-evolutionists do, the New Atheists often seek to collapse the distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism. In The God Delusion, for instance, Richard Dawkins makes the dubious claim that the existence of God is, as he puts it, "unequivocally a scientific question." Quite a lot of philosophers—and scientists—would disagree. It is one thing to say that scientific norms and practices preclude ascribing any explanatory force to God in, say, the functioning of DNA. It's quite another to claim science can in some way resolve the debate over God's existence. In rejecting God or any other supernatural entity, Dawkins is taking a philosophical position. He has every right to it, of course. But to pretend that there is something inherent in science that requires him to do so is an intellectual error at best—and at worst, a nasty bullying tactic.

[20] The reassuring fact is that despite the shrill battles between the anti-science fundamentalists and the New Atheists in recent years, most Americans seem to understand that science and religion are perfectly compatible. A 2006 study sponsored by the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative of the Center for American Progress found that 80 percent of respondents agree that "faith and science can and should coexist" . . . Long before Richard Dawkins was denigrating "the weakness of the religious mind" (as he does in The God Delusion), Carl Sagan subjected all the standard arguments for God's existence to strong scrutiny in his 1985 lecture series, "The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God." Sagan himself was not convinced by any of them; he remained agnostic. But he also treated the subject of religion respectfully and acknowledged its many benign and helpful functions. And he called for humility, and for mutual respect, as a precondition to dialogue.

[21] Now more than ever, we need to heed this lesson, end the current polarization, and restore a broader sense of compatibility between science and religion. There's no time to waste: In the coming years, we're likely to see many scientific discoveries that raise troubling ethical questions and spark new conflicts. Neuroscience, for instance, is providing an increasingly naturalistic picture of human consciousness, as brain imaging has led some to suggest we are nothing more than electrical impulses and proteins. This reductionist perspective will, assuredly, challenge fundamentalist religion and widely held notions about humanity—free will, the concept of the soul. In fact, it's already happening: As we completed this chapter, New Scientist magazine ran an article, entitled "Creationists Declare War over the Brain," detailing how the arguments of intelligent design are now being imported into the neuroscience arena to challenge the idea that we're just matter in motion.

Fareed Zakaria
Blasphemy and the Law of Fanatics
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[1] As they went on their rampage, the men who killed 12 people in Paris this week yelled that they had “avenged the prophet.” They followed in the path of other terrorists who have bombed newspaper offices, stabbed a filmmaker and killed writers and translators, all to mete out what they believe is the proper Koranic punishment for blasphemy. But in fact, the Koran prescribes no punishment for blasphemy. Like so many of the most fanatical and violent aspects of Islamic terrorism today, the idea that Islam requires that insults against the prophet Muhammad be met with violence is a creation of politicians and clerics to serve a political agenda.
One holy book is deeply concerned with blasphemy: the Bible. In the Old Testament, blasphemy and blasphemers are condemned and prescribed harsh punishment. The best-known passage on this is Leviticus 24:16: “Anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.” By contrast, the word blasphemy appears nowhere in the Koran. (Nor, incidentally, does the Koran anywhere forbid creating images of Muhammad, though there are commentaries and traditions — “hadith” — that do, to guard against idol worship.)

Somebody forgot to tell the terrorists. But the gruesome and bloody belief the jihadis have adopted is all too common in the Muslim world, even among so-called moderate Muslims — that blasphemy and apostasy are grievous crimes against Islam and should be punished fiercely. Many Muslim-majority countries have laws against blasphemy and apostasy — and in some places, they are enforced. Pakistan is now the poster child for the anti-blasphemy campaign gone wild. In March, at least 14 people were on death row in that country, and 19 were serving life sentences, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The owner of the country’s largest media group has been sentenced to 26 years in prison because one of his channels broadcast a devotional song about Muhammad’s daughter while reenacting a wedding. (Really.) And Pakistan is not alone. Bangladesh, Malaysia, Egypt, Turkey and Sudan have all used blasphemy laws to jail and harass people.

The Pakistani case is instructive, because its extreme version of anti-blasphemy law is relatively recent and a product of politics. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan’s president during the late 1970s and 1980s, wanted to marginalize the democratic and liberal opposition, and he embraced Islamic fundamentalists, no matter how extreme. He passed a series of laws Islamizing Pakistan, including a law that recommended the death penalty or life imprisonment for insulting Muhammad in any way. When governments try to curry favor with fanatics, eventually the fanatics take the law into their own hands. Jihadis have killed dozens of people whom they accuse of blasphemy . . .

We should fight terrorism. But we should also fight the source of the problem. It’s not enough for Muslim leaders to condemn people who kill those they consider as blasphemers if their own governments endorse the idea of punishing blasphemy at the very same time. The U.S. religious freedom commission and the U.N. Human Rights Committee have both declared that blasphemy laws violate universal human rights because they violate freedom of speech and expression. They are correct. In Muslim-majority countries, no one dares to dial back these laws. In Western countries, no one confronts allies on these issues. Blasphemy is not a purely domestic matter. It now sits on the bloody crossroad between radical Islamists and Western societies. It cannot be avoided anymore. Western politicians, Muslim leaders and intellectuals everywhere should point out that blasphemy is something that does not exist in the Koran and should not exist in the modern world.

Blasphemy and racism are not moral equivalents

By David Bernstein


In blog posts, Facebook comments, conversations, and so on, I’ve noticed a false equivalency popping up, in the form of the following questions: would people be defending Charlie Hebdo as strongly, or insisting that newspapers should reprint its illustrations, if the magazine had published anti-Semitic caricatures? After all, isn’t anti-Islamic blasphemy just as offensive to Moslems as anti-Semitism is to others? And how can we defend the magazine for publishing blasphemy when it also fired a cartoonist for refusing to apologize after drawing an anti-Semitic cartoon? Doesn’t this show it was just “anti-Moslem?”

I don’t, and we shouldn’t, judge speech by how offensive it is to those who choose to be offended, but by whether its content is logically and morally sound. And when it comes to content, expressions of racism (of which anti-Semitism is a variant) is not morally or logically equivalent to blasphemy. Expressing hatred for members of a group because of the ethnic group they were born into is evil; we (in the U.S., at least) tolerate it because we think it’s better than trusting the government decide what to censor and what not to censor as “racist”, not because we think it has inherent value.
Christian fish people put on their cars) against its critics: can endorse "Islam expressions of racist hostility toward various groups. If both are legally protected, it's wrong to treat them as morally equivalent. I expect that some readers will accuse me of adopting this position just so I can endorse "Islam-bashing." So I've reprinted part of a post from 2003 in which I defended the "Darwin Fish" (a satire of the Christian fish people put on their cars) against its critics:

I've received quite a few emails about the Darwin Fish, mostly to the effect that it takes a sacred Christian symbol and profanes it, and how would I like it if someone took a sacred Jewish symbol and profaned it. I don't quite see it that way.