

Je Suis Charlie

Islamic terrorists once again have shown their savage cruelty to those critical of the religion of Islam and its founder the Prophet Muhammad. In broad daylight on Wednesday January 7, 2015 three masked and hooded gunmen armed with Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers murdered 12 people, 10 journalists and two police officers, in the Paris headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (CH). Central Paris was the scene of what President François Hollande rightly called “an act of exceptional barbarism.”

The act was evidently well planned and executed because it took place at a moment when the staff of the magazine had assembled for its weekly editorial meeting and thus the editor, Stéphane Charbonnier (known as Charb), writers and cartoonists presented a target to be murdered.

Two aspects of the murderous action are particularly disturbing. One is the fact that the gunmen are reported to have spoken perfect French. The nightmare of homegrown Islamic terrorists has been feared since the knowledge that Muslims from a number of countries were going to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS). That nightmare has apparently become reality in the streets of Central Paris. (The latest news is that all three perpetrators now in custody, Saïd Kouachi, Sherif Kouachi, and Hamid Mourai, are French-born citizens of Algerian descent.) Witnesses to the action heard the gunmen shout, “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad,” and “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great) as they murdered their victims.

Already, French police authorities have thwarted planned Islamist attacks. The threat of similar terrorist attacks, with the same motivation, being carried out in European countries and in the U.S. must be taken more seriously than it has.

The other, more general issue, is that of the appropriate degree of freedom of speech and action to be used regarding political and cultural matters, and in responding, intellectually as well as physically, to challenges against democratic societies. The U.S. was confronted with this problem in December 2014 when a number of cinema chains cancelled the showing of the film *The Interview* in what they thought were the interests of security.

The magazine *Charlie Hebdo* has been frequently involved in this general problem. Since the late 18th century, France has had the tradition of satirical journals and sheets. At one point they concentrated on Marie Antoinette and the French royal family, on sexual peccadillos and corruption. Now they embrace the unlimited wider fields of politics, religion, and commerce. CH, left wing and anti-religious, satirizes everyone, irrespective of race, religion, ideology, or gender. Its comic strips, cartoons, and caricatures have included Pope Benedict (on February 13, 2013), nuns and Jews as well as Muslims, and political and cultural personalities.

But it is the last, the satire about Muslims, particularly the Prophet, that has caused problems for the journal and caused it to be put on the list issued by al-Qaeda of those Wanted Dead or Alive for Crimes against Islam. The editor and cartoonist Charbonnier who was killed on January 7, had been threatened with death, as had his staff, and he had lived with police protection since 2011. He refused to give in to threats, saying he preferred to die rather than live on his knees. Ironically, his own last drawing of a terrorist, last week, was accompanied with a script, "Still no attack in France. Wait! We have until the end of January to send best wishes."

CH has been a striking force of freedom, playful in its ridiculing of the world, if sometimes bordering on the obscene. It realized its publication was not for all tastes, but that was the price paid for freedom. In recent weeks it

has presented cartoons of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS, giving greetings for the New Year. It featured on its cover a comic strip about Michel Houellebecq, the successful French author, whose new novel *Soumission* (Submission) portrays a scenario of France in 2022 with a Muslim president, who had won the election in a second round runoff against Marine Le Pen. That president would turn France and the rest of the European Union, Turkey, and North African countries into Islamic lands.

All this is not new. In 2006 the journal had reprinted the cartoons of Muhammad, originally published in the Danish *Jyllands-Posten*, that Muslims found so offensive that they threatened the life of the Danish editor, Flemming Rose. CH was taken to court by a Muslim group in February 2007 on a charge of insulting Muslims. At the time, President Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande expressed their support for CH and freedom of expression.

In 2011, CH published a special edition, purportedly edited by the Prophet, titled *Charia Hebdo*, with a text that included the warning, "100 lashes if you don't die laughing." As a result the CH office was firebombed and it had to move to new quarters.

In September 2012, CH published cartoons and a video ridiculing the Prophet and Muslims. The essential question rose then as it has now. Is freedom of press too much of a provocation? At the time some French leaders were careful. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius remarked that strong emotions had been awakened in many Muslim countries by the publications. He asked "Is it really sensible or intelligent to pour oil on the fire?" In similar fashion, Jean-Marc Ayrault, then prime minister, issues a statement that "In the current climate, the prime minister wishes to stress his disapproval of all excess and calls on everyone to behave responsibly." So did the Obama Administration. In September 2012 the White House "had questions about the judgment of

publishing something like this ...the images would be deeply offensive to many and have the potential to be inflammatory,”

Today, French leaders are more understanding and more assertive. President Hollande has forthrightly called the January 7 attack a terrorist act, an act against liberty of expression. He declared that France should not give in to fear of subversion or submission. His position is to be applauded and supported in the answer to the question of how to deal with violence committed in the name of religion without being accused of “Islamophobia,” or of victimizing all Muslim communities.

The Islamist threat is not simply one to carry out criminal acts, it is one of continuing war against the West. This entails instilling fear, the kind that Hollande has discounted; preventing freedom of expression about Islam and Muslim figures by absurd allegations of “defamation;” and propounding an ideology of the true faith that should be embraced and implemented in Sharia law and by a Caliphate.

Understanding of the general problem, if belated, has come from a gifted Syrian journalist, Mazen Darwish, who was awarded the 2014 PEN/Pinter International Writer of Courage Award, but who since February 2012 has been in the Adra prison in Syria, having been charged with “publicizing terrorist acts.” In a text smuggled out of prison he referred to the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of Iran, in February 1989 to assassinate Salman Rushdie because of his book, *The Satanic Verses*. Darwish wrote that the Arab world had committed an unforgivable sin when it responded with indifference to the calls for Rushdie’s death.

The words of Darwish are a warning to the West as well as to the Arab world: “we are today paying the high, blood-soaked price of that collusion (in the fatwa) and finding ourselves the main victims of the obscurantist ideology now infiltrating our homes and our cities.” French leaders have now made clear

that opinion must prevail and not be countered with violence. Every individual in democratic countries should agree with this and now be a Charlie.

First published in the