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— **Europe in Islamophobia's grip?**

# France: The Charlie Hebdo murders — Europe in Islamophobia's grip?

Monday 26 January 2015, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2015).

More than two weeks on, the debate on the barbaric killings of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists and the freedom of expression has become a conversation across time-zones and political, cultural and legal divides. This is probably the first time that such a debate is taking place in a world connected by Facebook, Twitter and U-Tube.

The initial shock, which produced the knee-jerk “Je suis Charlie” (“I am Charlie”) response, has evolved into a less one-sided reaction, as many people are asking questions about the content of the cartoons which lampoon Islam, and are interrogating the assertion, “you’re either with *Charlie Hebdo*, or you’re with the terrorists”, which is reminiscent of US President Bush’s reaction to 9/11.

Even more serious doubts are being raised about the argument that the attack wasn’t calculated, premeditated murder, or akin to other recent acts of terrorism; rather, it was an assault on “Western values”, “European freedom”, on “democracy itself”; the targets could have been “you and me”; so all freedom-lovers must proudly declare “I am Charlie”.

This is utter nonsense. The attackers, the Algerian-French Kouachi brothers, executed a well-planned operation, called out the names of the weekly’s cartoonists and killed them for what they self-avowedly had drawn or written. The brothers were—wrongly—“avenging” an alleged “insult” to the Holy Prophet. Al-Qaeda has since claimed responsibility for planning the attack.

The cartoonists’ murder must be strongly and unequivocally condemned as a horrible crime. But it’s impossible to deny that most of the cartoons pertaining to Islam and Muslims which recently appeared in *Charlie Hebdo* were meant to lampoon, insult and provoke.

Defending free speech of course means defending speech you don’t agree with. However, those who demanded that the Fourth Estate publish the Charlie cartoons as a litmus test of its commitment to freedom were being hypocritical. They had every right to show solidarity with the victims by re-posting the cartoons, but they must respect the right of others not to do so because they find them aesthetically revolting, bigoted or incendiary.

Those who defend *Charlie Hebdo* say it has a history of lampooning all religions, including Christianity (although rarely Judaism), that fiercely irreverent satire is part of the French cultural tradition, and that many Charlie cartoonists came from the secular Left. This defence is at least partially valid. France does have a tradition of irreverence towards authority and savage humour—as anyone acquainted with French society, culture and the media would know.

The Charlie cartoonists started out as leftists. But some of them evolved in a rightward direction. They didn’t savagely attack recent Western interventions in the Arab world, or lampoon the European leaders who participated in them or supported them; some of these leaders knowingly practised “extraordinary rendition” of terror suspects to US authorities who would torture them. Yet, overall, Charlie played a progressive anti-establishment role for long years.

However, in the recent past, Charlie's vitriol was reserved overwhelmingly for Islam. This shows poor judgment in a situation where Muslims are a marginalised and stigmatised minority, which faces great discrimination in relation to the power-wielding White Christian majority. Some Charlie caricatures primarily stereotyped Muslims as North Africans-West Asians (although they account for only one-quarter of the world's Muslims) and reinforced racist prejudices.

A large number of French-speaking youth of Arab origin have been radicalised since 9/11 by the excesses that came with the "war on terror", including the barbarity of Abu Ghraib. *The New York Times* has just reported at length on how the marijuana-smoking Kouachi brothers were first radicalised by Abu Ghraib, and later by the Western interventions in Syria and Libya, which left these societies worse off than they were earlier under dictators.

This doesn't justify, extenuate or condone the Charlie attack, but places it in its historical context. The conflict today is not between Islam and Western democracy, so much as between two rival ideologies/forces contending for global domination: the American-led "war on terror" in the name of democracy, and second, terror in the name of Islam. The West has the upper hand in this. President Francois Hollande used the attack to build up the conflict's pro-Western front.

In Europe, the anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic Far Right is going from strength to strength, as is starkly evident in France, Germany and Britain. Under threat is not the freedom of expression of the majority, but the security of the religious minorities when they see #KillAllMuslims trending on Twitter, and the media promoting Islamophobia in the name of "European values".

It's time Western Europe, which sees itself as the birthplace and the highest embodiment of secularism, asked itself how much separation it has really achieved between religion and politics, not only in the state, but in society. A few points are in order.

In England, voluntary-aided schools run by religious communities can receive 85 percent of their funding from the state. About 6,700 Church-run schools get it, but fewer than 10 Muslim-run schools do. In "strictly secular" France, one-fifth of all pupils go to religious community-run (mainly Catholic) schools, four-fifths of whose funding comes from the state.

In Germany, public funding is available to Christian schools, and since the War, to Jewish schools too. But in France and Germany, not a single school run by Muslims is funded by the state. [\[1\]](#)

Again, all the faith-related national holidays in these countries are the holy days of one religion, Christianity. In most old, established European universities, the nomenclature of academic terms is derived from Christian beliefs and practices.

Many European countries don't allow Muslims to build mosques in convenient locations or to wear headscarves. Some don't permit ritual (halal) slaughtering. In Denmark, Muslims find it difficult to bury their dead since the Lutheran Church owns all the cemeteries. Muslims must either send their dead back to their "home countries" or negotiate their burial with local pastors in lands formerly reserved for non-believers in a limited number of cemeteries.

There has long existed a social compact in Western European countries, based on Christian culture and practices. Jews, who were held in contempt for centuries, have been accommodated into it since the War, but Muslims are still excluded.

Take the ghettoised Muslim-majority suburbs of Paris, where school-dropout rates are 36 percent and youth unemployment runs at 40 percent, four times the national average. Credible surveys show that people living here who apply for jobs have a much poorer chance of landing one than those living in the inner city with Christian names, regardless of qualification, merit or experience.

Many Europeans are unaware of the discrimination their Muslims fellow-citizens suffer. Worse, they see Muslims as overrunning their societies. Recently, Fox-TV quoted an “expert” saying that Birmingham (UK) has become a “no-go” area for non-Muslims. In reality, only 22 percent of its population is Muslim. US politician Bobby Jindal has since made a similar assertion about Europe.

Such dangerous scare-mongering apart, many Europeans grossly overestimate the proportion of Muslims in their populations, says a Pew Research-Bertelsmann Foundation survey, quoted in *The Economist*. [2]

Muslims account for 7.5 percent of the French population. But in popular perception, they account for 31 percent. The respective percentages are 5 and 21 for Britain, 6 and 19 for Germany, 2 and 16 for Spain, and 4 and 20 for Italy. This reality-perception disconnect indicates serious paranoia.

Even more frightening, a clear majority of French, (East) German, Spanish, Swedish and Swiss people believe that “Islam is not compatible with the West”—presumably because it’s not open or democratic enough. The percentage in France, which has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, is 56; and in Britain only slightly lower, at 47. In Spain, it’s an alarming 65.

These are the same societies that encouraged immigration in the past because their populations were shrinking or getting too old to work. In most cases, the immigrants are “here” (in Europe) because Europeans had colonies “there”.

Yet, many European countries, including France, have laws that criminalise Holocaust denial, but none that prohibit the celebration or whitewashing of their own brutal record as colonisers who killed many more people than the six million Jews that Hitler butchered, unforgiveable as that was.

These double standards and hypocrisies should be candidly discussed to draw some lessons, come to terms with the past, and deal wisely with the present and future. But these are precisely the issues that are erased from public debate whenever the question of religious fanaticism or extremism leading to violence or terrorism arises in episodes like *Charlie Hebdo*. The response is, invariably, to assert the superiority of “Western values” and Europe’s “secular culture”, and suppress rights through measures like a draconian French-style Patriot Act.

This vicious cycle must end. Instead of marching with the likes of Israel’s Binyamin Netanyahu, Western leaders and the public ought to reflect seriously on how to break the cycle through non-discrimination, fairness and justice for all.

**Praful Bidwai**

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**P.S.**

\* The Daily Star. 12:00 AM, January 25, 2015 / LAST MODIFIED: 01:53 AM, March 08, 2015:  
<http://www.thedailystar.net/europe-in-islamophobias-grip-61498>

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php>

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## Footnotes

[1] Friends from Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF) have pointed out that two of the approximately 20 Muslim-run schools in France do receive state funding: one in Lille and the other in Lyons, “only partially” in the second case. The Lille school was recently ranked at the top in France.

[2] [www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/01/daily-chart-2](http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/01/daily-chart-2)