



#JESUISAHMED

By Abdallah Schleifer



Abdallah Schliefer is a Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a regular columnist for Al Arabiya News. He is Professor Emeritus of the American University of Cairo's Kamal Adham Center for Television Journalism, which he founded in 1985.

I would have stood in the rain in Paris if I had been there, carrying a sign to affirm that "I am Ahmed," the French Muslim policeman of Algerian descent killed by the terrorists who had just massacred the leading editors and cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo. Ahmed Merabet's death was recorded by street camera -- he had been wounded in an apparent exchange of fire, and then lying there on the street disarmed and with his hands up, he was quite consciously finished off by one of the killers.

And I would stand in the rain carrying a sign "Death to Islamist Terrorists," reaffirming what I had [written on an earlier occasion](#) that this is a war that the Muslims should and must lead, a war waged in the streets and alleys of Europe as well as in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Egypt and Yemen.

And it is a war in which the overwhelming number of civilian victims of Islamist terrorists happen to be Muslims -- be they Pakistani schoolchildren, or the more than a thousand Iraqi Army soldiers who had surrendered to ISIS and then, identified as Shia, executed with a bullet to the head gangland style, or the dozens of Sufi sheikhs murdered in Chechnya, in Syria and in Iraq.

So I denounce the massacre of the men of Charlie Hebo -- but I will not tweet or carry a sign reading "Je suis Charlie." For I am not.

I do not "mock all religions" as declared with pride by Charlie Hebdo, and in the few issues I have read over the years, I have found its treatment of all religions -- and in particular Catholicism and Islam -- ranging from disgusting to offensive to at best infantile. That seems to be a sort of French left-wing trope.

For there are two very, very separate issues here, and in the fury about this cold-blooded massacre they have been mingled together. The only link between the two is the issue of free expression. To their credit, when in 2012 the French authorities were prepared to disperse a demonstration outside of the offices of Charlie Hebdo, the same chief editor who was murdered earlier this month told the authorities to let the demonstrators be, saying "if we demand the right of free expression for ourselves, how can we deny it to them."

But the right to free expression is limited in one manner or another in all the countries whose media and citizens have not just condemned this massacre but have embraced Charlie Hebdo as some sort of unalloyed citadel of journalism. We have laws against libel -- now qualified if pursued, as intentional libel. According to Webster's dictionary libel is -- "a written or oral defamatory statement or representation that conveys an unjustly unfavorable impression" (i.e., the Danish cartoon of the Prophet wearing a bomb on top of his head as his turban and reprinted with joy by Charlie Hebdo), or "the publication of blasphemous, treasonable, seditious or

obscene writings or pictures” (i.e., the Charlie Hebdo cartoon -- reported by a Hebdo-friendly American columnist who sees offensiveness as a necessary virtue -- of a Pope holding a condom above his head).

For those unfamiliar with Catholic ritual, this is an obscene parody of Catholic belief and specifically the practice of elevating the Host -- the priest holding up above his head a consecrated wafer so transformed, according to Catholic belief, that its substance contains the Real Presence of God. One of Salman Rushdie’s characters in his novel *The Satanic Verses*, noted quite astutely that only the Believer can recognize blasphemy, and for those who are neither Catholic nor familiar with fundamental Catholic belief, it may be difficult to perceive that cartoon as a super-offensive piece of blasphemy.

In the U.K., there is a law against blasphemy, but limited only to blasphemy against the sacred or divine as perceived by the Church of England. The law has not been put to test for many years which might be just as well, given how terribly misused an anti-blasphemy law has been applied in Pakistan. But then again, Pakistan, like so many other Muslim countries is now going through the equivalent of Europe’s ferocious Wars of Religion centuries ago.

As for France, to deny the Holocaust in print is a criminal act, punishable with imprisonment. In Germany to publish praise of Hitler and his Nazi party is a criminal offense. And because we in the contemporary (and by-and-large militantly secular) West are haunted by the memory of Hitler and the Holocaust, this sort of legislation is all quite understandable and not to be condemned. But not so with Charlie Hebdo’s blasphemy against the God of Catholicism and the Prophet of Islam.

Perhaps what most illuminates the prevailing confusion between condemning horrendous murder and embracing Charlie Hebdo’s status of at worst a case of “necessary offensiveness” is to be found in U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s comment. Moving beyond condemnation of the massacre, he went on to praise France as the founding home of democracy. But the American Revolution preceded the French Revolution by eighteen years and its early achievements consisted of competing candidates for public office; a constitution that required the separation of powers of the state and forbid the designation by government of an Established Church. For in a society in which several competing Christian denominations were dominant (and even established) in the thirteen separate states that were to form the United States, an Established Church would have threatened both freedom of religion and a successful Union.

In contrast, the French Revolution had among its early achievements dictatorship, the guillotine for those opposed to whatever clique at the moment held power (hmm, beheadings!!!), an official denial of the existence of God and of course the suppression of the Catholic Church and seizure of its property.

But there is also another message in all of this -- and that is for the Muslims of Europe and America. As pointed out by Hussein Ibish in his recent column in *The National*, Muslims must realize: “The fact is that for all of its calculated offence, Charlie Hebdo did not attack or compromise the ability of French Muslims to function successfully in their own society. It is not obnoxious and freewheeling satire but terrorist atrocities that really and devastatingly promote Islamophobia in France and around the world.”

So whoever Islamist terrorists may murder, it is the Muslims who are the inevitable victims of this terror and we must treat that terrorism not simply as something to denounce -- which nearly all leading Muslim religious scholars have been doing endlessly so for the past decade or two -- but we must fight it in every way imaginable.