The Truth About Charlie: One Year after the 7 January Attacks

written by Karima Bennoune | January 8, 2016

Two French Islamist gunmen of Algerian descent entered a newspaper office in Paris a year ago today and gunned down a generation of Europe's greatest political cartoonists – many from an anarchist, anti-racist tradition – along with their co-workers and those protecting them, who also included people of Algerian descent. In case anyone is confused about the politics of this – it was a far right attack on the left.

At first the world reacted with justified horror and a solidarity which is not always forthcoming for the frequently anonymous victims of Islamist slaughter, and which was not often experienced by the Charlie Hebdo staff in previous years when they endured threats and firebombs. However, the backlash began quickly. The truth about Charlie was that many were shockingly equivocal in their reaction to these events.

There was the "I am not Charlie" campaign, promoted by Tariq Ramadan, grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. The meaning of that was clear enough. Those whose ideology helped pave the way for such killings were publicly admitting their lack of solidarity with the victims.

There were outright vilification campaigns suggesting that the cartoonists (or perhaps French people generally) were racists, "Islamophobic" or otherwise had it coming. In California – which by year's end became the site of another Islamist bloodbath – a number of people expressed such views to me, thinking that because I have a Muslim name I would agree. Not long after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, I spoke at a U.S. university event on freedom of expression along with a self-appointed young American spokesperson for "the Muslim community" from the Council on American Islamic Relations – whom I must say I never elected to speak for me. She reviled the 7 January victims to the point where I felt compelled to ask if she understood that they were actually dead. She did not know as I did that just before their murders, the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists were in a heated discussion about terrible socio-economic conditions in the Paris suburbs where much of the Muslim population lives – an injustice which mattered a great deal to them.

Another response was the more sophisticated "I am Ahmed" campaign named for the stalwart French policeman Ahmed Merabet also of Algerian descent who was killed by the Kouachi brothers as they fled the newspaper's offices. Sadly, this was sometimes meant as a rebuttal rather than an amplification of "Je suis Charlie," when in fact people like the murderous Kouachis have been killing Ahmeds around the world for years. Very few have been paying attention to that body count. When they depicted their version of the Prophet Mohamed crying over terrorism, the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists had the courage to take on those carrying out that slaughter while others looked away or were silent.

That is committed anti-racism and solidarity, even if it comes in the shape of a merciless, sometimes disturbing French satirical tradition not always well understood elsewhere – like Mad Magazine with politics.

On this anniversary, we must remember that those who killed Charlie also killed Ahmed and that saying "I am Charlie" is also a way of saying "I am Ahmed," and vice versa. Indeed, opposing the Kouachis of the world is essential to saving those countless people of Muslim heritage and their fellow citizens in the Global South who have been dying in the tens of thousands at the hands of Muslim fundamentalist killers in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Nigeria, Libya and beyond. Ahmed is a synonym for Charlie, not an antonym. That was why so many people of North African descent stood with the 7 January victims.

For example, Ali Dilem, one of Algeria's best political cartoonists joined the Charlie Hebdo team in February out of solidarity. His bold cartoons have lampooned political figures and fundamentalist terrorists for years, earning him jail sentences and countless fatwas. On 7 January 2015, Dilem's cartoon bore the heading: "God is Humour" (in French: "Dieu est humour,"a play on words derived from "Dieu est amour" – "God is Love"). Another of Dilem's cartoons after the 7 January attacks shows a dying figure writing in his own blood on a wall: "the idiots killed me."

I saw a copy of this Dilem heartbreaker hanging atop piles of flowers when I went to pay my respects at the Bataclan theatre in Paris in December.. I stood in the street where a pregnant woman had hung from a windowsill trying to escape the "Islamic State" offensive, and in front of the small club where 89 mainly young people lost their lives at the hands of another group of young Islamist assassins of North African descent. I found my visit doubly poignant because I went with Samia Benkherroubi a former Algerian TV presenter whose own producer, the legendary Aziz Smati, had been shot in 1994 by the Armed Islamic Group, the forerunners of "Islamic State," and is today a paraplegic, but continues his work from his wheelchair. Smati's crime, like Charlie's, was creativity. He produced Algeria's groundbreaking youth music TV show, *Bled Music,* showing the first Rai music videos on TV, which were also controversial at the time.

Outside the bullet-riddled Bataclan, Samia and I laid flowers and mourned together, lamenting that the fundamentalists we have been battling for years are still so much stronger than their civil society opponents. She had written to me after the 13 November attacks to say how deeply saddened she was to see the fundamentalist violence she fled in 1990s Algeria reproducing itself elsewhere. What was especially mystifying to her, was the way in which some on the left tried to use the history of French colonialism as the excuse (or so-called "explanation") for these attacks. The same thing happened after 7 January. Samia wrote that "looking for explanations in colonial history is an injury to all victims of blind terrorism." It also entirely overlooks that Algeria itself lost as many as 200,000 – including many veterans of the liberation struggle – to extremist terrorism in the 1990s, a fact often conveniently forgotten.

The same night that Samia and I paid our respects at the Bataclan, we visited the plaque by the Seine to the victims of the massacre of 17 October 1961 when several hundred Algerian nationalists were slain and thrown into the river by police during a peaceful protest.

We vowed by that memorial not to let their brave memory be misused to justify fundamentalist atrocities, even while keeping their memory alive like those of other victims. For me, this is very personal. My Algerian grandfather Lakhdar Bennoune died defeating French colonialism. His death is part of an historic injustice which still demands real accounting – but is no justification whatsoever for the lamentable Kouachis who would have said he was not a true martyr because he died fighting for a republic rather than an "Islamic State".

All of this complexity seems to have been lost on the authors and signatories of the petition against the granting of the PEN Freedom of Expression Courage award to the Charlie Hebdo staff signed by a group of mainly Western intellectuals in the name of anti-racism. They wanted to make clear that they were not Charlie. They claimed solidarity with Ahmed. They presumed to know what the Ahmeds of the world think (and that they think alike) whileoverlooking the contemporary politics of the Muslim majority regions of the world. They regretted the killing, but clearly didn't understand it.

The petition's authors presumed a) that French Muslims were mostly devout, and b) that this meant they could not stomach satirical drawings – two huge and highly inaccurate presumptions. This was a recurring theme after 7 January – that all Muslims and all people of Muslim heritage were offended by the publication of cartoons (whether they liked the cartoons or not). It is not at all clear how assuming that 1.5 billion people have no sense of humor (and no politics) is

anything other than patronizing.

Meanwhile, the campaign to support the presentation of the PEN award to Charlie Hebdo was led by Salman Rushdie, who is of Muslim heritage, and whose name is derived from a great 12th century Andalusian Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd who likely would not have been terribly troubled by provocative cartoons, and whose own books on philosophy and theology were burned by Muslim fundamentalists while his Christian followers were slain by the Inquisition.

So, we must remember that January 7, 2015 was one in a long line of far right attacks on creativity, and part of a history of fundamentalist assaults against artists and intellectuals who have defied them. And, sadly, it was only one of the first armed Islamist salvos of 2015 which will be remembered as the year of endless, expanding jihad. Charlies and Ahmeds, Ceciles and Samiras died in many regions of the world at the hands of those seeking a free ticket to paradise.

In 2015, Muslim fundamentalists would go on to target Pakistani arts promoters, Iraqi women lawyers and teachers and most of the country's minorities, Syrian archaeologists, a Kosher grocery store in France, an event about freedom of expression in Denmark, Afghan airports, Tunisia's national museum, countless Shiite mosques everywhere, minarets, a Beirut shopping district, a Sousse beach, Nigerian markets, a Kenyan University, and a Russian airplane carrying families home from vacation. Grave crimes, crimes against humanity, war crimes, even genocide, in some cases. Afterwards we were all assaulted verbally both by some on the left who tried to excuse the perpetrators or minimize their crimes in defiance of the facts, and some on the right who sought to lump all Muslims in with those perpetrators notwithstanding how many Muslims have died at their hands and how many have opposed them.

With all of this bloodletting and intolerance, why is it important to remember the Charlie Hebdo attack and its victims? Algerians I have interviewed about the country's "dark decade" of 1990s fundamentalist violence have often told me about the debates regarding the motives behind fundamentalist killings. In the beginning, people tried to explain away the targeting – "oh, he was a policeman, he we was an atheist, she was a communist," until the terrorists began killing Every(wo)man and it seemed inexplicable. Grassroots solidarity with less popular or controversial victims was crucial but sometimes harder to come by, something which their assassins knew only too well. A muted response to what happened to the cops and the communists only emboldened the so-called Warriors of God to attack others.

So, a year later, remembering the Charlie Hebdo attack, and paying tribute to its victims, are critical aspects of the ongoing struggle against Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. Likewise, remembering that many Muslims and people of Muslim heritage have spoken up in defense of Charlie Hebdo and against fundamentalist violence (and have died in that violence) is a key way of fighting the racism and discrimination against Muslims which also burgeoned in 2015. The truth about Charlie is that in the year since the attacks we have often forgotten all of these things.

So today, in memory of Charb, Cabu, Wolinksi, Tignous, Bernard Maris, Honoré, Elsa Cayat, Mustapha Ourad, Frédéric Boisseau, Michel Renaud, and the police officers Franck Brinsolaro and Ahmed Merabet who were killed exactly a year ago, and all those who died at the hands of Islamist terrorists in 2015, I say simply, "I am still Charlie." It is a battle cry in the ongoing campaign against fundamentalist violence and the ideas that motivate it, which is one of the defining human rights struggles of 2016. That is perhaps the most important truth about Charlie.