

Qui est Charlie?

Written by Simon Thompson

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SIMON THOMPSON, MAR 6 2015

As we know all too well, on 7 January 2015, two gunmen – Cherif and Said Kouachi – attacked the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing twelve people, including nine of employees and two police officers (one of whom – Ahmed Merabet – was Muslim). At the same time, a third gunman – Amedy Coulibaly – took a number of hostages in the kosher supermarket in the Parisian suburb of Porte de Vincennes. By the end of the siege, the gunmen and four of his hostages were dead.

Charlie Hebdo is a satirical magazine, which was quite well known although not widely read in France – at least until the events earlier this month. It published stories and cartoons critical of a wide variety of groups and individuals in French political life. It had created great controversy in the past, accused on more than one occasion of anti-Semitism, for example. But more recently it has been Muslims rather than Jews which has been a popular target of its satire. In 2011 it published a special issue, called ‘Charia Hebdo’, referring of course to the Shariah, the body of Islamic law. The day before the issue was due to be published, the magazine’s offices were firebombed and destroyed.

There did not appear to be a particular reason for the most recent attacks on the magazine’s offices. The general reason given was that it had published offensive images of the Prophet. For many Muslims, it is forbidden to produce any such images, and of course where these images are intended to be offensive, the insult appears worse.

Immediately after the attacks, the slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’ began to appear everywhere – in shop windows, t-shirts and websites. Other slogans also appearing, including ‘Je suis Ahmed’ – referring to the French Muslim policeman killed in the Kouachi brothers’ attack.

But what did – what do – people mean when they said ‘I am Charlie’?

One possible meaning of this phrase is an expression of outrage at the murderous attacks that the three gunmen carried out. Closely related to this was an expression of unity – that all French citizens, whatever their political views, cultural backgrounds and religious identities – were united against this sort of terrorism.

A third possible meaning is the statement that freedom of expression – including the freedom to insult others’ religious beliefs – is and must be a legally protected right. This meaning is more problematic, I think.

Some commentators have simply said that free speech should have no limits. In fact, it does – and nearly everyone agrees that it should. Very few people would disagree, for example, with laws against libel and slander, against the incitement of violence, and against child pornography.

In this case, it’s not sufficient to say: ‘this speech is protected since all speech is protected’. Not all speech is protected – so the question that must be addressed is this: should particular types of speech be covered by a legal right to freedom of expression or not?

This is a much harder question to answer. And it’s certainly not one that can be reduced to the slogan on a t-shirt.

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