

# VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

E-Newsletter - January 2015

## #JeSuisCharlie: Challenges after the Charlie Hebdo shootings

*Following the gruesome and unjustifiable violence that rocked Paris earlier this month by Islamic extremists, global media attention and discourse quickly focused on the challenges related to extremism, freedom of expression, and the use of violence. Around the world, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie ("I am Charlie") become a visible symbol of solidarity with the victims of the attack, a phrase in support for free speech, and a rallying cry for freedom of self-expression in areas rocked by heartbreaking violence.*

*In response to the attacks in Paris, and without down playing the unacceptable crimes they were, two of our partners have chosen to reflect on some of the challenges the global community now faces. First, Carlos Sanvee of the African Alliance of YMCAs (Kenya), challenges the global community to also remember the gruesome acts of extremist groups outside of the Global North, challenging us in this case to also be in solidarity with the victims of the Nigerian village of Baga. Second, Ranjan Solomon of Badayl Alternatives (India) asks the question of the limits of freedom of expression: are we free to say whatever we want about the "other," even if it is offensive and cruel intentioned? Their thoughts push us to more closely consider how we respond to injustices worldwide.*

### **I Am Charlie: But I Am Profoundly Baga**

*By Carlos Sanvee  
General Secretary, AAYMCA (Kenya)*

I am Baga. I am an African. And it concerns me – all of this madness and mayhem. I am Charlie second to being Baga. Yet the eyes of the world are so focused on the Charlie Hebdo terrorism that the increasing insidious acts of terror in our backyard are being overlooked by even the African citizens and African media. Don't get me wrong, a life lost, Baga or Charlie is a needless loss to me and the world, but ponder these facts with me...

Boko Haram is steadily increasing its grip in West Africa and particularly in Nigeria. Their acts of terror, violence and blood-

shed are seemingly becoming so commonplace they are being overlooked and side-lined in the face of other news.

The Baga incident shows an escalation by Boko Haram the body count is said to be as high as 2,000. Baga town was razed, with most victims being children, women and the elderly who could not run fast enough to avoid the rocket-propelled grenades and assault rifle fire.

Tell me how a death toll of 2,000 equating more or less to 133 Charlie Hebdo attacks is ignored by the world?

And yet we watched our African statesmen marching and mourning amongst the approximately 1.6 million in Paris who turned out in solidarity for the Charlie



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Hebdo attack. Where are the marches in Africa for the Baga massacre? Where are even the public condemnations and editorials of outrage for Baga?

We shout out: This needs to be stopped!

As it is with similar groups, Boko Haram has a strong youth focus. It is the common youth in our society that you and I might know; the 15-20 year old boy or girl next door; the one we may chose to ignore as a common nuisance who is easy prey to these terror groups!

This group of youth is angry; feels alienated and disenfranchised from society. They are not interested in merely talking about their problems and lot in life; they are desperate and burning for an opportunity to take action and change their lives; they believe joining a movement offers economic, social and psychological rewards, an adventure, camaraderie and a heightened sense of identity.

We must arise and offer our younger generation alternatives and choices to develop their identity, and feel engaged without resorting to violence and terror. We call on governments, civil society and private sector to step up youth empowerment initiatives to offer healthy and positive solutions to a generation of young people hungry for acceptance, engagement and change.

We call on our African governments to provide more decisive leadership

in the fight against terror in our continent. Let us show we value the lives of our citizens more, lest we continue to be eclipsed by world events where few lives lost are seemingly more important than thousands in our lands.

Let us join together and show that we are willing to rise up, value ourselves and take care of our young people. How can we expect those outside of Africa to value us if we don't? We must stop Boko Haram – for the sake of our own lives and the legacy we leave for the younger generation and the world.

So yes I am Charlie, provided it is not just for the French Cartoonists, but for all those who are denied the right to express themselves or to simply exist.

I am Charlie yes, but I am profoundly Baga! ■

*Carlos Sanvee can be reached at [carlos@africaymca.org](mailto:carlos@africaymca.org) for questions or comments.*

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### **Freedom of expression too has a price: It's called human dignity**

*By Ranjan Solomon,  
Badayl Alternatives (India)*

An assortment of world leaders assembled in Paris earlier this month to pay tribute to the slain journalists who were killed in a savage at-

tack that left 12 people killed. The victims were all either staff of the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo or security personnel. The newspaper which had become famed for its cartoons regularly ridiculed anyone that seemed a possible object of scorn.

The journalists thought it fit to use their license for 'free speech' to caricature their objects in ways that were often demeaning.

Satire, in itself, has a defined purpose. It seeks to initiate moral or political change in society through the use of critical humor. Satirists believe that humor offers a remedial effect to certain patterns of behaviour. Satirists, however, tend to inflate issues to make a point. Their immediate goal is to entertain and their long term hope is that the message will ideally stick with people beyond mere entertainment value. Certain talk show hosts use satire to ridicule anti-people policies and highlight government contradictions and failures.

Where the Charlie Hebdo staff team entitled to employing satire to drive home a point? Yes and no.

The slayings were a singularly barbaric act of revenge. But many deemed that the newspaper had contemptibly and time after time overstepped the limits to freedom. Its singular aim seemed to be to deride and upset those it did not



agree with.

Critics of Charlie Hebdo have often questioned its extremist stances. USA Today reports how *“In the fall of 2012, Paris police called and urged Stéphane Charbonnier, the editorial director of Charlie Hebdo, to stand down on his plans to publish cartoons of prophet Mohammed in his satirical weekly. Charbonnier, who is also a cartoonist for the newspaper, refused, citing his rights as a journalist and the publication’s ethos of using satire to express its leftist, secular politics.”*

In a subsequent issue of the newspaper, the Prophet Mohammed was coarsely and vulgarly portrayed. The Prophet was seen naked and bent over. The French newspaper Le Figaro condemned Charlie Hebdo’s warned against *“silly provocations.”* Laurent Fabius, the foreign minister, told France Info radio that the decision was like pouring *“oil on the fire”*.

Generally, Muslims are opposed to images of Mohammad and other prophets because of fear that they could lead to idolatry. They worry that statues or images of the prophet could be used as

idols and that people might call upon them to intercede with God which would be against religious law. In the eyes of many Muslims this is blasphemy – the act of showing insult or disrespect to God and religion.

This view is not a universally held view by Muslims. Progressive circles will accept a depiction and even use it to advance that image for spiritual purposes. Yet, the very fact that it brings out anger in an influential and large section of Muslims must make a journalist stop and consider whether caricatures should be used at all.

Still more, journalists should ask: Can caricatures of the Prophet reach limits of crudity and violate the borders of decency.

Charlie Hebdo repeatedly did just that. It said to the world: ‘Be damned with your views’. Even in the wake of the tragedy, it remains defiant. Charlie Hebdo’s lawyer Richard Malka told France Info radio: *“We will not give in. The spirit of ‘I am Charlie’ means the right to blaspheme.”*

Freedom is not about the

right to express whatever comes to mind. It is a pathway to justice and mutual coexistence.

*“Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”* is not about showing contempt for the other. It is about visibly demonstrating intent and ability to dialogue over differences and to find the highest common factors that provide the base for human dignity.

Charlie Hebdo clearly has negotiated human dignity and, instead, replaced it with the right to debase one set of beliefs.

While this doesn’t justify the tragedy that hit Paris, it reminds us that freedom also means respecting human dignity. When that is violated, it can bring out the worst form of reactions. If, nothing else, the murders in Paris, teach us that respect for religious sensitivities and racial divides must govern the limits of freedom of journalism. ■

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