

Standing with Ahmed

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The January 7 attack at *Charlie Hebdo*'s office targeted satirists who lampooned Islam, while the January 9 attack at a kosher grocery store targeted Jews. The three-day death toll in Paris also included police officers and a maintenance worker. These individuals and their loved ones are the primary victims of these horrifying and indefensible acts.

This is also a major setback, however, for French Muslims. In the aftermath of the shootings, mosques have been vandalized with gunfire, bombs, and even pig heads. Meanwhile, some commentators associate the attacks with Islam generally, or suggest that Muslims have been too slow or too timid in their condemnation. In reality, the murders were swiftly denounced by a wide spectrum of Muslim leaders—everyone from the Arab League to the French Council of the Muslim Faith and the Union of Islamic Organizations of France.

Those who believe Islam is inherently violent may simply dismiss such statements as insincere. But this fails to take seriously the position French Muslims are in. They have much to lose from violence done in Islam's name. Juan Cole, an American commentator on the Mideast, writes that violent extremists hope to get non-Muslim French "to be beastly to ethnic Muslims" so they can create "a common political identity around grievance against discrimination." From the extremists' perspective, a backlash that targets all Muslims isn't an unfortunate by-product; it's part of the point. It plays right into their dualistic worldview: Islam versus secularism, purity versus freedom, East versus West.

These are false dualities, and French Muslims are caught in the middle of them. France has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe; it also has a fiercely secular political and cultural tradition. And while French secularism is, of course, not a violent ideology, it isn't always a tolerant one, either. Hostile attitudes toward religion are common—especially when that religion is Islam. According to a 2014 poll, 27 percent of French people say they don't like Muslims.

After the shootings at *Charlie Hebdo*, the phrase “I am Charlie” spread quickly in the streets and on social media. When it came out that the dead included Muslim police officer Ahmed Merabet, “I am Ahmed” emerged as well. “Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture,” said Twitter user Dyab Abou Jahjah, who invoked Ahmed's name, “and I died defending his right to do so.”

We don't have to choose between standing with victims of violence and standing with religious minorities. As American Christians, however, “I am Ahmed” may be a more significant claim to make than “I am Charlie.” As part of the majority faith in a pluralistic culture, we may relate more readily to France's secularists than to its Muslims or to its Jews, who are threatened by further violence. But we are called to solidarity with marginalized people.