

Bin ich Charlie?: The Response of a Witness Worker in Germany to the "Charlie Hebdo" attacks in Paris

In the hours after the Charlie Hebdo shootings earlier this month, my social media news-feeds were colonized by the *Je suis Charlie* hash-tag. Yours probably were too. I even considered posting it myself. Perhaps you did. But over the next few days, my initial urge to express solidarity with the victims—victims who did not deserve to die for drawing cartoons, no matter how offensive—was tempered by a flood of articles reminding me that *Charlie Hebdo* was in fact quite a racist publication and one that regularly ridiculed not only Muslims, but practitioners of all religions. So while I mourn for Charlie, I am *not* Charlie.

I am not Charlie because while I support the rights of a press that's free to print offensive material, I'm also troubled by the magazine's willful stoking of anti-Muslim sentiment in a continent that is becoming increasingly hostile toward Islam and its adherents. In Germany, where my husband and I work as Mennonite church planters and community builders, Muslims make up about 6 percent of the population. Although they make up a rather small segment of society, Muslims are the source of a disproportionate amount of anxiety among average Germans. A poll conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation think-tank last November found that fifty-seven percent of non-Muslim Germans say that they feel "threatened" by Islam, with forty percent agreeing that they "feel like foreigners in their own country" due to the presence of Muslims. Publications like *Charlie Hebdo* profit from this irrational fear and encourage the further marginalization of the Muslim minority by setting them and their beliefs up as targets for ridicule.

Recent months have seen the rise of the right-wing populist movement PEGIDA, an acronym for "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West." The movement departs from recent populist rhetoric that blamed foreigners more generally or membership in the European Union for Germany's problems. Instead, PEGIDA locates the source of unrest in German society in the growing influence of a religion, Islam, and, by extension, the five million Muslims who call Germany home. For PEGIDA, it is interloping Islam that's changing the face of German society, and not for the better. PEGIDA's leaders pit the country's supposed Islamization against its traditional "Judeo-Christian" values. But one gets the sense that PEGIDA is also suspicious of religion that takes itself too seriously. Christianity is acceptable insofar as it is an expression of authentic German heritage. But PEGIDA's affinity for Christianity stops short of embracing Jesus and his radical call to love its enemies.

In the wake of *Charlie Hebdo*, we as Mennonite Witness Workers in Europe are challenged to persistently re-define for our non-religious friends and neighbors what it means to follow Jesus. We must explain that "Judeo-Christian values" do not include alienating and ridiculing Muslims. We must also resist the urge to position ourselves as "moderates" in relation to the "radicals" whose religious ideology motivates them to commit acts of terror. We too must be extreme in our commitment to loving our neighbors and welcoming the stranger. We must demonstrate with our actions that the solution to radical religious violence is neither tepid traditionalism nor strident secularism, but radically non-violent religion. The cardinal virtues of secularism—freedom, tolerance, irreverence—are incapable of transcending the deep differences

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that divide us and forming genuine community. Only love can do that. Love that enables us to feel the pain of scape-goating suffered by Europe's Muslims and horror at the destruction of the image of God that occurs whenever any human being is murdered. This is the love that Jesus demonstrated in his life and in his death—extreme, radical love in the face of extreme violence.

Jennifer Otto works in partnership with the South German Mennonite Conference (VdM) and Mennonite Church Canada Witness as a church worker and community builder in Mannheim, Germany.