

## Muslims: The first victims of terrorism

*By Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers*

A recent study suggests that the large majority of deaths related to al-Qaida violence have in fact been Muslims and not Westerners, as it is commonly assumed. This is poor comfort for those who mourn the loss of loved ones in the Paris attacks; however, it is a point well to consider when tempted to demonise all Muslims for the heinous actions of the few. To characterise all Muslims as violent – indeed, to characterise all Muslims as *anything* – is itself an indefensible ignorance. The Muslim world is simply too vast and too diverse to issue such pronouncements.

It is also disingenuous for non-Muslim commentators and political figures to declare what is 'true Islam' and what is not. Muslims themselves cannot reach a consensus opinion on the subject, let alone outsiders looking in, however informed they may consider themselves to be.

Instead, particular attention must be focused on protecting the rights of Muslims. Anti-Muslim sentiment runs high in times like these. Muslims become 'the first victims of terrorism, fanaticism and intolerance,' said French President François Hollande, because the public backlash is strong and the urge to scapegoat hard to resist. In such an environment, it is crucial that the rights of Muslims be defended as vigorously as the rights of anyone else in our societies. It would be a grave error to roll back precious values of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* in the face of insecurity and fear. These values inspire envy in the hearts of many people the world over, including many in predominantly Muslim countries.

What is clear at this time is that a thoroughgoing debate on the nature and limits of free speech is urgently needed. Sadly, that debate has been waiting to be had well before gunmen rained down death on the staff of Charlie Hebdo. The French media has long provoked negativity toward religious believers of all sorts. Government policies intrude into citizens' rights to practise their faith freely. Now scores of arrests are being made of people who have expressed sympathy for what occurred in Paris.

Such comments are indeed odious; however, one can obviously question the double standard that is at work when a government defends the right of cartoonists to critique a religion while at the same time it prosecutes statements that are equally injurious to other religious believers.

Muslims may indeed be the first victims of Islamist-inspired terrorist violence. But unless we bring an unflinching commitment to the principles that undergird our democratic societies – like justice, fairness and the due process of law – we all become victims.