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1-15-2015

## Were the Terror Attacks in Paris Motivated by Radical Islam?

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### Recommended Citation

Roth, Donald, "Were the Terror Attacks in Paris Motivated by Radical Islam?" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 108. [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/108](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/108)

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# Were the Terror Attacks in Paris Motivated by Radical Islam?

## **Abstract**

"Were the terror attacks in Paris motivated by radical Islam? In an interview published on January 13 by the *Weekly Standard*, White House press secretary Josh Earnest explained why the Obama Administration is intentionally distancing itself from French Prime Minister Manuel Valls' statement that France is "at war against terrorism and radical Islam." This logic used by Mr. Earnest to support this rhetorical decision is deeply problematic."

Posting about the Obama administration's reaction to the recent terrorism attack in Paris from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/were-the-terror-attacks-in-paris-motivated-by-radical-islam/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, Islam, Paris, Obama administration, terrorism, Charlie Hebdo

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# Were the Terror Attacks in Paris motivated by radical Islam?

 [all in allthings.org/were-the-terror-attacks-in-paris-motivated-by-radical-islam/](http://allthings.org/were-the-terror-attacks-in-paris-motivated-by-radical-islam/)

Donald Roth

In [an interview](#) published on January 13 by the Weekly Standard, White House press secretary Josh Earnest explained why the Obama Administration is intentionally distancing itself from French Prime Minister Manuel Valls' statement that France is "at war against terrorism and radical Islam." While willing to call the attackers "terrorists," Mr. Earnest went into great detail about why the Administration is choosing to avoid the "radical Islam" label.

I understand the basic impulse behind this decision. The idea is not to legitimize the acts of violent extremists by referencing their religious beliefs or using the word "war," two statements that seem to implicitly adopt the jihadist worldview of a grand struggle between true Islam and the rest of the world. Further, avoiding association of the Islamic religion with the word "radical" or "terrorist" helps to limit any overinclusive implication that all Muslims are terrorists. These are fair points, and there is much to agree with in them; however, the logic that Mr. Earnest uses to support this rhetorical decision is deeply problematic.

## Careful Definition

Mr. Earnest goes to great length to avoid associating the attackers with the religious character of the beliefs that motivated their actions, saying "[W]e have not chosen to use that label ("radical Islam") because it doesn't seem to accurately describe what had happened."

Instead, he characterizes the terrorists' actions as follows: "These terrorists are individuals who would like to cloak themselves in the veil of a particular religion." Mr. Earnest elaborates by saying the terrorists, "... tried to invoke their own distorted deviant view of Islam to try to justify [their actions]. And I think that is completely illegitimate. And what we should do is we should call it what it is. And it's an act of terror, and it's one that we roundly condemn."

It seems then that while the terrorists tried to invoke even their distorted view of Islam, the Administration's approach is to deny the legitimacy of this invocation, "...based on the fact that the religious leaders of that religion have roundly condemned their actions, those religious leaders have indicated that their actions are entirely inconsistent with Islam."

## Problematic Logic

Coming as an official position of the President of the United States of America, I find the logic of this argument worrying for two principle reasons: First, it adopts a view of the scope of religious action that a religion might inspire, and second, it argues that any action that falls outside of this scope is therefore not motivated by religion but by something else, presumably in this case the violent impulses of the individuals involved.

The wording is important here. Rather than assert the fact that many Muslim leaders find the terrorist's actions to be inconsistent with Islam, the Administration is taking a positive stance as to what falls within the scope of the orthodoxy (orthopraxy if we're being picky) of the religion. In doing so, the Obama Administration is necessarily being choosy about who counts as a "religious leader," since there are quite

a few imams within the Salafi movement of Islam who would hesitate to call these actions “entirely inconsistent with Islam.”

The problem with the Administration taking any sort of stance on what counts as within the scope of a religion becomes more apparent with the next step of the logic of Mr. Earnest’s statement. By saying the terrorists “would like to” or “try to” invoke religion to justify their actions, Mr. Earnest implies that they can’t do this. In other words, because these individual’s actions are inconsistent with Islam, they cannot fairly claim to have been motivated by it.

### **Troubling Implications**

The worrying aspect of the Administration’s whole line of thinking is that it represents the government making positive assertions about the subjective motivations and objective character of a person’s actions. In the United States, we generally respect people’s right to believe whatever they want. The law does regulate and even punish people for the actions they take based on their beliefs, but, particularly with regulation, actions motivated by certain beliefs are more protected than others. This is especially true when it comes to religion, the free exercise of which is guaranteed by the Constitution.

The problem then is that by defining what is or is not motivated by religious belief, the Administration is seemingly claiming to be able to define the boundaries of what falls into that more protected class of religiously-motivated action. I won’t play the fear-monger here, but the reasons for why this is troublesome may be apparent. If a disfavored group’s actions or profession is motivated by a minority religious belief, then suppressing that group is much easier if the government can simply strip their religious character away.

Ultimately, there is no need to adopt this troublesome logic. Had these acts occurred on U.S. soil, the persons responsible could have been punished regardless of their religious motivations. There’s no doubt that such actions reflect badly on those who claim the same religious affiliation, and there’s no doubt that this guilt by association is generally unfair or inaccurate, but the government does not need to weigh in on the rhetorical fight to clear a religion’s reputation.

There is no doubt that the terrorists’ actions in Paris were reprehensible, and there are good reasons not to use language that could build up a “Muslim = terrorist” association. However, it seems to me to be both factually inaccurate and intellectually dangerous to deny the religious character of their motivations. Religious belief is a fundamental motivator of human action, and we should not deny its importance, even if that makes it more difficult to wrestle with its implications.

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