

I Am Not Charlie

Pr Les Ackie

Since the tragic events surrounding the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo offices unfolded, heated debates have filled news reports, radio programmes and social media regarding an appropriate response to the terrorist attacks and where to draw the line on freedom of speech. I felt moved to address these issues partly to reconcile my own internal tensions. On the one hand there is the natural sympathy for the bereaved and a desire to rage against the perpetrators of this heinous crime. On the other hand, there is the aversion to support the cause of an organisation who have historically poured scorn and ridicule on every section of society, including Christianity. I struggle with the view attributed to Voltaire that, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Freedom of speech is a great privilege which should be protected, but it was never designed to be a license to abuse. Human dignity should influence how we balance conflicting rights and values.

The publication of the special edition of Charlie Hebdo depicting a weeping Prophet Mohammed has upped the ante and further polarised opinions in the debate over freedom of speech. The decision to publish is an understandably emotional reaction of defiance, especially by those who have been directly affected by the Charlie Hebdo atrocities. For people who suffer loss in such tragic circumstances, it is natural for grief to turn to anger and to seek an avenue through which to vent feelings.

It is also understandable that people might wish to direct their ire toward a religion that is perceived to spawn the kind of followers who felt justified to snatch the life from the defenceless. However, in any attempt to assert our rights and deliver a defiant response in the face of heartless injustice, we must be careful that innocents are not caught in the cross fire.

It is highly unlikely that the position of those who embrace the ideologies of the Paris assassins will be softened by the swathe of public response to the killings and the assault on freedom of speech. It is more likely that they will become even more emboldened and self-justified in their jihad against secularism. However, countless numbers of Muslims who abhor the Paris slaughter will bear the insult inherent in this public disregard for religious sensibilities.

It is easy to take the position that one little cartoon is no big deal, but the issue is about what the cartoon represents. A country's flag is just a piece of cloth, but burning a country's flag will predictably cause deep offence because of what the flag represents. To publish an image fully knowing that it will offend is reckless and irresponsible if there is no moral benefit to be derived.

Obviously there will be times when we must express views which we know will not be well received. When Jesus told Peter, "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23), He knew that His words would sting. However, even when we legitimately oppose the views of others, we have a biblical mandate to, "speak the truth in love." We

are also counselled that, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves” (Romans 12:17-19).

If the motive is simply to hurt the ones who have hurt us, then we would do well to heed the counsel, “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves - one for yourself.” If we are serious about the need to foster community, then we should avoid causing unnecessary offence. I have seen some of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons lampooning not only Islam, but Christianity and religion in general. I found them crude and highly offensive. Freedom of speech is not such a sacred cow that it gives us the right to say anything we want with no regard to the affront it will cause. It is argued that the magazine’s targets are ‘fair game’ and that the publishers should not be criticised because everybody gets the same treatment. However, it is a strange argument that justifies wrongdoing because everybody suffers.

There are higher values to which we ought to aspire. Values articulated in the true definition of love in Galatians 5 and 1 Corinthians 13. The ‘love chapter’ begins by stressing that we may speak great words, but if they are devoid of love they are just noise. We may hold up freedom of speech as a sign of a healthy society, but according to the Bible, if our words do not enhance our capacity to love others, they are worthless. In fact, they may be worse than worthless because Solomon informs us that death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21). It is not the freedom to speak that is important, it is what we choose to say and our motive for saying it that determines value.

The first chapter of Corinthians also informs us that love is not rude, is not self-seeking and does not rejoice in iniquity (1 Corinthians 13:5-6). It appears to me that the Charlie Hebdo’s publications fall way short of this ideal. I mention this simply to point out that before we align ourselves with any cause, we need to know the values for which it stands.

It is very easy for us to stand in judgement over those who do not share our values, but before we do so we should bear in mind the Native American adage, “Do not judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins”. No self-respecting faith or value system should teach us to lie down and roll over in the face of intimidation, but neither should it give us permission to render evil for evil. While we should weep with those who weep and stand against oppression in all its forms, violating human decency should never be a part of our armoury to combat evil. Freedom of speech is a vital tenet of a free society, but just because we can, it does not mean that we should. I cannot help but suspect that in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack, while some are legitimately seeking to defend their freedom in the best way they know how, others are using this tragedy as an opportunity to launch an assault on Islam in particular and religion in general.

Thousands have marched in protest under the banner “Je suis Charlie”. I wonder how many would march to defend the freedom of faith groups to share their beliefs. If freedom of speech is sacrosanct then it must apply to all or none at all. Ironically, one of the most powerful comments to come out of the Hebdo affair is one that echoes Voltaire’s assertion. It relates to Ahmed Merabet, the Muslim policeman who was slain in the street. Banners read, “I am not Charlie . . . I am

Ahmed the dead cop. Charlie disrespected me and ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so.”

Our hearts must go out to all those who grieve. It is right that we should be angry about such a callous waste of life by those who are motivated by warped ideologies and fear-driven hatred. However, how we choose to respond says more about us than it does about them. Regardless of how we feel about other people and their views, when we fail to respect the dignity of others, we diminish ourselves. We are counselled to resist, “returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9).