# JE SUIS CHARLIE

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Some thoughts on the freedom to offend and be offended and the way in which all religions are implicated in the attacks on Charlie Hebdo. (Cartoon by @davewalker)
**Category:** Observations

I speak French, I've lived in France and I've spent a lot of time browsing for French magazines to read in airports and railway stations, but I don't think I've ever boughtÂ a copy of Charlie Hebdo. It's just not the sort of thing I'd buy. But I'm glad it's available and I mourn the death of the cartoonists and journalists in yesterday's attack.

Described by one commentator as a cross between Private Eye and the Beano, Charlie Hebdo can beÂ unsubtle, controversial and offensive. It also offers a biting critique of people and institutions that need critiquing.Â Charlie didn't just offend Muslims, as this cartoonÂ (warning - it might offend you)Â shows it is pretty much an equal opportunities offender when it comes to religions.

I know that if I read Charlie, I might well be offended by some of its content. So I take the radical step of not buying it. However, I still defend the right of Charlie to publish what they want and perhaps to offend me. After all, I believe and preach some things which many people find offensive.Â If Charlie can't poke fun at people like me, then we have no right to tell others that we believe that they are going about their lives in entirely the wrong way. Christianity needs freedom of speech in order to thrive and as Christians we should be secure enough in our beliefs to handle the inevitable criticism, sarcasm and insults that will come our way. As my friend Dave said on Facebook:

> *The gospel thrives on freedom of speech - even when free speech is used to attack the gospel. Christians are secure about that, God can look after himself. This kind of Islam is not faith but insecurity - apparently, there 'god' cannot handle criticism and needs craven thugs to do his killing for him.#jesuischarlie*

There is a temptation to say that this attack has nothing to do with Islam. After allÂ a number of Muslim leaders have spoken out against the attack. However, we cannot deny that there is a religious aspect to this event and to others like it. That being said, Christians need to face up to the fact that there have been some horrific events committed or covered up in the name of Christ.

This is important. However much moderate Muslims might decry these attacks and however much I would want to be disassociated from the various child-abuse scandals that have hit the church; from the outside, these are seen as religiously motivated. It only took an hour or so after the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo for someÂ commentators to say that all religions are the same, all religions are violent and all religions should be banned. The irony of responding to an attack on free-speech by calling for a ban on religion seems to have escaped some people.

The point is that for much of the time, the wider world does not distinguish between different religions, much less between the different streams of Christianity. We may not like it, but an attack on Parisian newspaper offices by a bunch of Islamic fundamentalists reflects not just on Muslims, but on people of all faiths. The fact that Christianity is often seen to be anti-women, homophobic and generally reactionary plays into this 'all religions are the same, all religions are violent' narrative.

I'm not sure what the answer is. Part of the solution must be for the church to be a life-affirming, counter-cultural and peaceful community which does not fit the stereotype of religion in our society. There is a diversity of views on issues such as the role of women and gay marriage, but these must not be the things that distinguish us. I don't know how many times I've heard people say that real Christianity is not a religion its a relationship with Christ. Well if that's the case, we need to start living as though it were true and not being quite so religious.

We also need to stand up for free speech; to stand up for the right of people to insult us and for our right to offend them. To that end, I'll post a few of the excellent cartoons which have appeared in the wake of yesterday's events below.

Just one more thought; in some ways, freedom of speech is an illusion. We are all caged in by our fallen nature and we are not capable of true freedom of action or expression as long as we are alienated from the one who created us. Ultimately, free speech only belongs to those who have found the liberating truth of Christ.




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