

Je suis . . .

Phil Jump asks if there in fact a limit on freedom of expression, if so where should that limit lie and who should define it, and concludes that there are no easy answers to the questions that an episode like this raises.

“Je suis Charlie” – before 7th January 2015, had I used that phrase, people would justifiably wonder what on earth I was talking about. Yet in just a few short hours it became a global expression of solidarity and defiance, especially through its *hashtag* version on Twitter. It was of course, in response to the murderous attacks on the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, leading eventually to further bloodshed at a Paris supermarket, that “Je suis Charlie” gave collective voice to that instinctive human reaction of outrage and solidarity with those who were so mercilessly gunned down as they went about their daily work.


For many people of faith, it is a campaign that raises a degree of uncertainty and unease. We are one with those who grieve the lives now lost; we are one in condemning such callous violence, particularly when pursued in the name of religion; we are one in defending freedom of speech and belief. Yet for all we abhor what has happened to the staff of Charlie Hebdo, many would still express discomfort at the level of satire against the religious beliefs of others that it represented.

This episode raises some very real questions about how we defend liberty yet also live with respect for those whose views and beliefs will not be the same as ours. Freedom of religion and religious expression cannot be universally achieved, without there being equal freedom for those who completely oppose our religious views and practices. Is there in fact a limit on such freedom, and if so where should that limit lie and who should define it?

These are difficult questions, and perhaps the genius of “Je suis Charlie” was that it could express clear solidarity while at the same time containing sufficient ambiguity to steer around these troublesome issues. It has been interesting to notice in some of the ensuing media debates, how the Christian tendency to “turn the other cheek” has become interpreted as a failure to take offence at anything which ridicules our own beliefs. If faith in any form is to avoid becoming overtaken by fundamentalism, it seems particularly important to retain that distinction between being deeply offended, and how I then choose to express this.

And while we might ponder the ethical issues that emerge from this story within the philosophical confines of faith and doctrine, it is in their daily work and life that individuals are exposed to their harshest realities. Media outlets were quick to highlight the tragic irony that one of the police officers murdered during the initial attack was himself a Muslim, defending the principle of freedom above the sensibilities of his faith. Journalists would argue that theirs is the task of asking difficult questions, holding the beliefs and ideologies of others

up to scrutiny, in which satire is a legitimate tool. Supermarket staff should be able to provide for the religious needs of one sector of the community, without becoming a potential target for those whose beliefs are different. Each of these in a different way draws together issues of faith and work.

There are no easy answers to the questions that an episode like this raises, and yet I cannot help but notice that at the heart of the global response is a phrase that has defined religious faith for thousands of years. I doubt if it was ever the intention of French artist and music journalist Joachim Roncin, who first coined the phrase, but I AM is the name by which God first describes himself when commissioning Moses to lead his people. Particularly through the Gospel of John, it emerges as a defining element in the identity of Jesus – I am the way . . . I am the gate I am the light of the word . . . and so we could go on. As followers of Jesus, it is important that we wrestle with the complexities of life and faith that our contemporary world throws at us, but our assurance is not found in reaching some all-encompassing solution, but in the simple and profound promise I AM with you always. 



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