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Charlie Hebdo - More Than a Deadly Assault on Speech

Make no mistake. The Paris attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was not only about death, terror and free speech. It was also an attack on freedom of religion -- and not just in France.

Most commentators have been talking about the obvious. This horrific act of violence was a testament to hate that is unacceptable. It was a menacing moment punctuated by more terror today, and an attack on free speech. They condemn the assault on a frequently offensive, satirical periodical that targets anything -- including diverse religions and beliefs sacred to millions. And they denounce it as an attack on freedom of expression. Though much of *Charlie Hebdo*'s content was deeply disturbing and disrespectful to many, the commentators are right. It was indeed an attack on free speech. But it was also an assault on the right to believe as we will.

It is important to understand *Charlie Hebdo* in this light. We now know what happened. Violent extremists slaughtered 12 people in the name of religion apparently to punish them for their depiction of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad. This is terrifying, and it is intended to be so. But it has consequences beyond the tragic deaths and the affront to free speech.

As the freedom to say what you think -- even when it is offensive and horrifies others -- is chilled, we lose more than our right to speak our minds. When fear keeps us from speaking freely and forthrightly, our ability to pursue truth and real justice whether in France or elsewhere is hobbled. Freedom of expression does not stand in isolation. It is also the foundation for other freedoms, including the right to believe what you want and to practice your faith (or lack of faith).

Think of it this way. At the heart of many religious traditions are text, scriptures and guidance that communicate faith through the written word -- a form of speech. People not only read those texts but they talk about them, they debate them, they share ideas. At times, they come together to share them, in meditation, prayer or reflection. As a community, they speak words in unison or read them silently together, reflecting on their lives, families and what lies beyond.

For many, those readings, shared conversations, and convenings are core to their religious practice and beliefs. So, when violent extremists target speech, they are also targeting religion and our freedom to believe differently from them. As the fears of the people in France spread throughout Europe, to the U.S. and well beyond, we risk stifling both speech and our religious traditions.

That's why all the people who are standing together around the world, proclaiming "*I am Charlie!*" are so important. Even though many view the ways *Charlie Hebdo* exercised its right to speak as disrespectful and satirical, they are still making a powerful statement of defiance. One that supports the foundation of true freedom -- the freedom to think, speak and believe freely and differently from those around us. That's why we should all stand with them. I therefore close by taking my own advice. *I am Charlie!*

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