INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can we promote both freedom and civility in our communities?

By Douglas Kindschi
Director of Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Much has been written about the terrorist events in Paris, and appropriately, there has been worldwide condemnation of the vicious acts of murder of the cartoonists at the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and the Jewish shoppers at the kosher store.

In previous columns, I have urged that we see this for what it is, namely, criminal acts of persons who have no respect for humanity or for the faith tradition they claim to represent. Muslim leaders around the world also have condemned these acts as totally inconsistent with the teachings of Islam.

But there is one further issue that also needs to be addressed in the extended discussion that has emerged. Pope Francis staunchly defended the freedom of expression, but also suggested that the magazine had gone too far in its insults and ridicule. In a commentary titled "I Am Not Charlie Hebdo," New York Times columnist David Brooks urged that we "maintain standards of civility and respect while at the same time allowing room for those creative and challenging folks who are uninhibited by good manners and taste."

What is the line between free speech and hate speech? Would it be acceptable in America if similar hateful depictions of African-Americans were published on a regular basis? Would similar anti-Semitic provocations be defended? It is of interest that in France, there are strong laws against hate speech, especially racist and anti-Semitic speech or acts. The popular French comedian, Dieudonne, repeatedly has been arrested and convicted for his racist and anti-Semitic speech, including for a controversial Facebook post following the Charlie Hebdo murders.

Many countries in Europe have very strict laws regarding anti-Semitism in the wake of the Holocaust. Hate speech against some is prohibited, but hate cartoons are protected.

Free speech is an important protection against authority, those in power or an oppressive majority. But when it becomes insulting and hateful speech against a minority, one must ask if society's best interests are being served by giving free reign to such acts. France has the largest Muslim minority of any country in Europe, a minority that suffers extremely high rates of unemployment. It already is marginalized and oppressed. Does insult to their religious figures help them in being brought into the larger community as respected members of society?

France has passed laws against Muslim girls wearing the hijab or head scarf in public schools. The same law prohibits Jews wearing the kippah or skullcap and Christians wearing crosses. Evidently such displays of religious identity are considered offensive and must be controlled while vicious, insulting cartoons are somehow sacred. Modest dress, which might imply a religious commitment, is banned, while pornography and vulgar cartoons are protected. If anti-religious speech is given such broad protection, shouldn't the same freedom be given to religious expression?

Am I suggesting we ban all satirical literature or promote laws that prohibit free speech? Not at all, but I am asking why anything that might have religious meaning to a group of citizens must be legislated against. Has free speech become a god at the expense of civility?

Am I excusing murder when someone has been insulted? Absolutely not! But I am suggesting that if we want to build a cohesive and respectful society, we must consider all of our actions. Do they bring people together or are they driving division and hate which often erupts in violence?

Freedom thrives where all persons and their beliefs are respected. Let us build community where diversity is a strength and civility is the norm.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu

Kindschi