

“Je Suis Charlie!” . . . and Then?

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"Cut me down, Darth, and I will become more powerful than you can ever imagine." Upon saying that, Obi Wan Kenobi turns off his light saber. Darth Vader slices him in two. The remainder of *Star Wars'* first movie proves the accuracy of Obi Wan's prediction. But only because the previously fearful, whining and self-preoccupied Luke Skywalker grows to trust his mentor's efforts to make Luke "a Jedi like (his) father."

George Lucas' mythic tale communicates . . . as myths always intend . . . *perennial* truths.

In Paris, on January 7, 2015, well-trained gunmen invaded the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 persons including the magazine's editor. Within hours, enormous crowds poured into the streets and squares of Paris chanting "*Je suis Charlie!*" ("I am Charlie!") as a sign of solidarity with those who love freedom . . . people who sometimes use their freedom to satire those who are freedom's active enemies, as well as those who are the passive enablers of its demise.

Je suis Charlie! I stand with them.

As an ordinary citizen . . . a Christian, as it happens . . . and particularly as one who pursues satire as something of a calling . . . not to stand with *Charlie* is, first, to acquiesce to fear; and, second, to a *fear-based constriction of liberty* such as self-imposed censorship. That is precisely the intended outcome of those who practice terrorism as a strategy. It must be resisted with a resounding, "No!"

Je suis Charlie!

That is, *first of all*, what needs to be proclaimed: solidarity with those who are murdered for exercising freedom's right to speak. It matters not . . . not now, not ever . . . that quite often, apparently, *Charlie Hebdo's* satire exceeded lampoon and became obscene, sacrilegious, and deeply . . . even destructively . . . offensive. It was all that, and not only to the (presumably "fundamentalist" Muslim) gunmen. The magazine was offensive to most politicians and people of religious faith the world around.

No matter. In the context of a murderous assault on freedom, there is just one good response:

Je suis Charlie!

And yet . . . that is not the last word. It is but the beginning.

There is another word that needs to be spoken. It is *not* addressed to those others. It is best addressed *to us* . . . to those of us who would speak . . . whether in the manner of dry academic analysis, or florid over-the-top satire. It is a word that comes as a challenge . . . a question posed . . . and to those of us who claim some flavor of Christian faith, it may come echoing the Word itself. It might be phrased as this: "*To what end?*"

To what end do we speak . . . or write . . . or compose . . . or paint . . . or dance . . . or draw . . . or make love . . . or even drive?

Sensationalism sells. It gets a lot of traffic on your website. It might be a shorter path to your coveted 15 minutes of

fame. It can earn you a footnote in an obscure tome of history. Maybe even a paragraph . . . a chapter, even.

These aims, and others like them, represent a seduction of our spirit. They are driven by the ego rather than by the *Imago Dei* . . . or Real Self . . . or Self (with a capital "S"). Choose your preferred metaphor.

To what end? The ego, as absolutely essential as it is, serves a primarily reactive, defensive function. It secures our needs for food, shelter, others, etc. But it is hard-wired into the "fight-or-flight-or-freeze" part of our brains that, evolutionarily, is concerned with protecting ourselves from *physical* threats.

The gunmen who murdered members of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff were driven by ego-bound, defensive, reactive tactics meant to eliminate, *not a physical threat, but an intellectual one*. Thus, it was "uncivilized." For theirs was the primitive, physically-acting-out-the-rage temper tantrum of a young child who has not yet learned to activate a different part of the brain . . . which alone can put words to needs, and emotions, and plead its case.

That neurological development and the habit of activating it . . . which must be both taught and learned . . . is called "civilization." Parents who constantly give in to the temper tantrums of their toddler do little to "civilize" their child. Their refusal to do so bends the culture of their family toward a very uncivilized "red in tooth and claw."

Je suis Charlie! That is the cry of those who wish to support civilization.

But so, equally, is the question, "*To what end?*"

The answer we give to that question in our speaking, writing, and behaving is equally determinative of the up-building or tearing down of civilization.

As an active expression of my freedom . . . and not out of fear . . . I freely choose to guide what I do with my freedom toward certain ends. Long ago a Jew who came to be called "Paul" reflected on his freedom and wrote: "For me, all things are lawful . . . but not all things are helpful." Indeed.

So today and every day, I will refuse to give in to Luke Skywalker's initial fear, whining, and self-preoccupation. I will, instead, cry out "*Je suis Charlie!*" And then I will answer the question, "*To what end?*" in a very Jedi sort of way.

The end I wish to pursue is that the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, and the satire of my websites might challenge, inspire, provocatively educate and heal . . . so that at least my very tiny corner of the world might become a bit more compassionate, just, merciful, and hospitable . . . even toward enemies.