

Editorial: I am Charlie, I am Jewish, I am ...

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Baptists, of all people, are qualified—and should be motivated—to speak words of peace, reconciliation and encouragement to the religious divisions plaguing our world. Disenfranchisement is part of our DNA. We support free speech and free expression. We value religious liberty.

And, if we're consistent, we will champion freedom and protection for the world's underdogs.



Editor Marv Knox After Islamic extremists massacred a dozen journalists at the headquarters of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, 1.5 million supporters [marched in the streets of Paris](#), many carrying signs stating, “*Je suis Charlie*”—“I am Charlie.” An additional 1.8 million marchers assembled across France, and uncounted others protested around the world.

The slayings—which Muslim imams throughout the West condemned—shocked the world’s sensibilities. Their wantonness seemed calculated to silence not only a satirical periodical, but also critics of Islam and its prophet, Muhammad.

The violence bruised a nerve wherever people value free speech. In the United States, where the First Amendment provides press protection, the

attack on *Charlie Hebdo* seemed incomprehensible. Even people of faith who would be offended by the magazine's profane parodies of world religions identified with the fallen journalists. "I am Charlie," they proclaimed.

The pain of contrast rocked Jews, particularly in France and Israel, when the outpouring of sympathy for the slain journalists [failed to embrace](#) four Jews murdered two days later in a kosher grocery store, also in Paris. Where were the "*Je suis Juif*"—"I am Jewish"—signs?

Attacks on Muslims in retaliation

Meanwhile, [attacks on Muslims](#)—particularly in France—escalated in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. So, people who had nothing to do with the jihadists who killed innocent victims became victims themselves. For some French, and apparently others elsewhere, two wrongs do, indeed, make a right.

In Africa, the leader of the Nigerian Baptist Convention [castigated others](#) for ignoring the slaughter of Christians by the militant Islamist force Boko Haram. Thousands of Christian Nigerians have died at the hands of the group, best known for kidnapping 276 schoolgirls last year.

In the United States, interfaith controversy erupted at Duke University. Administrators announced plans to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer from the bell tower of Duke Chapel, in the heart of the once-Methodist campus. Following a deluge of protests, the university recanted, and the call to prayer is transmitted over a small speaker just outside the chapel.

These events have little in common and everything in common. They took place on three continents. They involve Muslims as both perpetrators and victims. They touch Christians and Jews and, in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, atheists, too.

Increasing religious fractiousness

And they illustrate the world's increasing religious fractiousness.

As *New York Times* columnist [Thomas Friedman notes](#), Islamic radicalism has become a significant, intractable force in the 21st century. Friedman argues against diluting its horror with euphemisms, such as calling it “violent extremism” devoid of Islam. He also notes radical Islamists do not represent nearly all Muslims. He builds a case for jihadists' ties to specific regions. He advocates speaking clearly and candidly when we talk about Islamic radicalism's threat to world peace.

And that's where Baptists can do our part, beginning in our own corner of the world. Mostly, we will speak to our own friends and neighbors. Occasionally, we will speak to our communities. Sometimes, we will speak to larger audiences and myriad religious groups. We can contribute to every forum.

Baptists who know their history understand religious persecution. Our forebears suffered for faith in England and in the American colonies. Some died martyrs' deaths for refusing to baptize their infants. Some, including Baptist co-founder Thomas Helwys, languished in prison for declaring the soul free from tyranny of the state. Baptists in early America suffered scorn, condemnation and imprisonment for refusing to register with the government to preach the gospel.

Baptists have advocated for religious liberty. But we have not hoarded it.

During the colonial era, Roger Williams, who founded the first Baptist church in America in Providence, established Rhode Island as a bastion of “soul liberty” for all people. “I commend that man—whether Jew, or Turk, or Papist, or whoever—that steers no otherwise than his conscience dares,” Williams declared.

In the early years of this nation, Virginia Baptist pastor John Leland convinced his friend James Madison to write the religion clauses into the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Baptists ‘champions of liberty’

In the last century, the great Baptist statesman, and pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, George W. Truett championed religious liberty for all people, regardless of faith. On May 16, 1920, Truett stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol and declared: “Baptists have one consistent record concerning liberty throughout all their long and eventful history. They have never been a party to oppression of conscience. They have forever been the unwavering champions of liberty, both religious and civil. Their contention now, is and has been, and, please God, must ever be, that it is the natural and fundamental and infeasible right of every human being to worship God or not, according to the dictates of his conscience. ... Our contention is not for mere toleration, but for absolute liberty.”

Now, as much as ever, Baptist voices must cry out for religious liberty—not just for ourselves, but for all people.

In our contentious society, Baptists must support both the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment. Baptists witness the persecution of Christians around the world, and we must sacrifice to guarantee their freedom to worship and their essential safety.

But we dare not hoard liberty. If Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, Zoroastrians and atheists are not free everywhere, our task is not done.

Certainly, we must contend with those who would silence all religion. We have shown ourselves quick to oppose those who would silence Christianity. But we likewise must contend for the peaceful worship of others. In the 21st century, that means standing with Muslims to ensure

their right to worship, too.