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***“Charlie Hebdo’s True Goal”***  
Paul V.M. Flesher

The Muslim terrorists who murdered the staff at Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical magazine, claimed to be retaliating for the magazine's attacks on Islam and on Muhammad, its founding prophet. Islam was not Charlie Hebdo's only religious target. Jews, Catholics, the Pope and even Jesus were often subjects of the publication's cartoons.

The killings of Charlie Hebdo's staff are horrific, both for the loss of life and for the shockingly appalling way they were carried out. And the “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) phrase brought together the people of France, and indeed people around the world, in mourning, resolution and protest.

But, as David Brooks pointed out in his New York Times piece last week, most of us are not Charlie Hebdo. The satirical publication is widely hated in religious and political circles of all stripes. And before the murders, so few French people read it that it was in serious financial difficulties.

The publication launched rather sophomoric attacks on just about everything that some segment of western society held dear. If you were not offended by something in one issue, wait for the next one. A recent sketch featured the Holy Trinity in an explicitly sexual ménage à trois, while another made fun of gay marriage. Many of its graphic covers could not have been displayed on the magazine shelves of American shops.

But Islam and Catholicism were not Charlie Hebdo's primary target, even when they were the cartoons' subject matter. Jonathan Turley pointed out in his Jan. 8 New York Times essay that the French government, in recent years, has passed legislation that restricts the free speech of French citizens. Charlie Hebdo worked to push back against these new laws.

The new restrictions on speech gained ground in France after the worldwide protests (and deaths, both planned and accidental) over the Muhammad cartoons in 2006. France and other European nations passed a variety of laws restricting anti-religious speech, in part, out of a concern for public safety.

But since then, actress Bridget Bardot has been sentenced for criticizing gays and Muslims in a letter to the French

president, while fashion designer John Galliano was convicted and fined for making anti-Semitic remarks in a café. The “speech police” have gone beyond public speech to monitoring semi-private and private speech here; whether or not you agree with these speakers' views, this is an insidious development.

This situation reminds us of a truth that America's founding fathers recognized: Namely, freedom of religion is linked to freedom of speech, even though speech can be for or against particular religions or religion in general. Our Constitution's First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech.” The free exercise of speech and religion go hand in hand.

Of course, even in America, freedoms are not absolute. The rights of a single individual must be balanced against the rights of every other individual, as well as against the rights of various groups, including religious and ethnic groups, educational institutions, governments and so on. We usually refer to this opposition as the individual vs. society. The question is, where do you set the fulcrum to ensure the correct balance? This is the ongoing debate.

In western countries, where the Enlightenment has freed us, as Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address, for government rule “of the people, by the people, for the people,” we put the fulcrum quite close to the individual side of the bar. To move the balance toward the society end of the scale, as France has done by protecting religious groups from criticism, not only removes freedom of speech about these groups, but freedom of speech within the nation as a whole.

If one group can be protected, then other groups can be protected. It becomes only a matter of legislative whim. The ability to deprive people of their freedom of speech thus strikes at the very heart of democracy and the French value of Liberté.

By its extreme satirization of religions, Charlie Hebdo worked to create a safe place for free speech, where average French citizens could discuss and debate without fear of arrest or accusation. It aimed to re-establish the fulcrum of free speech way over on the side favoring individual rights.

