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Stephan Brigidi: It's Unethical to Provoke Terrorists

I can readily be counted among the strongest defenders of the First Amendment of the Constitution, guaranteeing free speech, among other liberties inclusive of the freedom of religion. This first law among our Bill of Rights serves as the foundation for all laws that follow in a free society.

Some years ago I served on the board of a local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. At times we were confronted with contentious, hateful speech issues, and found it necessary to defend the rights of those who expressed what many of us found abhorrent. This is part of the price we pay to live in a free and open society.

Free speech has been defended, twisted, and turned upside down on its head, as often reaffirmed by the highest court in the land. The infamous Citizens United case went so far as to find that the First Amendment permits Americans to write checks of unlimited amounts to groups of people that speak out on political matters, even during campaigns. The Supreme Court has also defined corporations and other groups of people as having the same speech rights as individuals. Such expressions of free speech, though difficult to accept, become voices of a free and open society.

Voltaire, the French Enlightenment author, proclaimed the essence of free speech when he was credited for saying, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." The phrase was actually written later by his biographer, but it summed up Voltaire's fierce stand on free speech.

While I can much admire the "Je suis Charlie" proclamations following the murder of a staff at a French satirical publication, I must look at the issue that

caused this tide to flow. The mockery of Islam's prophet in a cartoon was the act of free speech. It then instigated a reaction — the killing of French citizens. The reaction by the killers was clearly outside of the law and not justifiable. But a clever advocate of law might suggest the murders were acts of free speech.

History has shown numerous displays of faith defense. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and many more people of religious beliefs, have been attacked and slaughtered because of expressions of faith, both pro and con. There is no belief like religion that causes amazing and outrageous reactions. Philosophies and politics differences, though potentially explosive, do not even come close to matching the fever caused by religion. Religion, whether born into our DNA or later cultivated, causes the most extreme reactions in people. I do think all people feel extremely protective of their faith, not only Muslims.

I also think that ethics have a role in our expressions. A social conscience or compass should be in place to influence and guide our actions and words. I feel sensitivity should be applied to many of our actions. Religion is personal and private, though we often worship in public places.

Would I have the right to enter a church, mosque, temple, and shout out, "My God is better than your God?" Would such a provocative act be an exercise of religious freedom on my part?

My ethics and conscience require me to show due respect to the rights of those different from me by not demonstrating my difference or contrast in faith. I do not need to criticize someone else's faith by asserting my own as superior, or by mocking another.

Recently, Pope Francis made similar remarks about respect and tolerance. I believe this reformist pope is right on the mark when he talks about sensitivity and respect for others. Why deliberately inflame a situation by attacking another's faith? The consequences can be severe, no doubt, as we have all witnessed.

Let us embrace our freedoms, but act in their expressions with respect, tolerance and sensitivity. Let us execute our freedoms more ethically, and not condemn or provoke for the sake of provocation. Let us assert all due value and understanding in contemplating another's faith.

I am sure the Founding Fathers had respect and even common sense in mind when they penned the Bill of Rights, beginning with the First Amendment, the foundation of all our freedoms.

Stephan Brigidi is an adjunct professor of aesthetics at Roger Williams University.