

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
From *YouthWorker Journal* and YouthWorker.com

Speaking Freely

Comedy Outlets Attacked by Groups that Don't Like the Joke

By Paul Asay

What Happened:

Two armed gunmen stormed the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical newspaper similar to *The Onion*, and killed 12 people on Jan. 7. Eleven others were injured in the attack.

The paper is well known for its frequent depictions of the Islamic prophet Muhammed, often making fun of him and Islam. Of course, any visual depiction of Muhammed is thought to be sacrilegious for Muslims, and the attacks likely were retaliation for *Charlie Hebdo*'s lack of Islamic piety. The two main gunmen were shouting "Allah Akbar," Arabic for "God is great," when they attacked the offices. The gunmen later were killed by police.

It certainly isn't the first time some Muslims have taken issue with how Muhammed or their faith has been portrayed by someone. Several years ago, a Danish cartoonist sparked angry protests for showing Muhammed in a cartoon. Shortly thereafter, the Comedy Central show "South Park" satirized the whole episode and included a depiction of Mohammed. Comedy Central refused to air the cartoon.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks came on the heels of the weird story of *The Interview*—a comedy starring Seth Rogen and James Franco that hinged on an assassination attempt of Kim Jong-un, leader of the notoriously reclusive communist country of North Korea.

A group called "The Guardians of Peace," thought by the U.S. Government to be North Korean, threatened to attack theaters showing *The Interview*, leading distributor Sony temporarily to pull the movie. *The Interview* eventually was released in theaters and online after many critics were angry that an outside group would try to censor free speech.

Talk About It:

Freedom of speech is obviously one of the United States' most hallowed values. We live in a society where folks are allowed to say almost anything they like. Many European countries follow suit, but that's not the case in many other societies. Do you think people who sometimes say outrageous things for a living—including comics—have a responsibility to be sensitive to other cultures? Other countries?

Sensitivity aside, it's heinously wrong to kill people or threaten to kill people because you don't like what someone says or the way to say it. Over-reaction isn't just a matter of international politics. To a much smaller degree, it can happen in our lives, too. Have you

ever been involved in a fight that was sparked by a joke? Have you ever been the victim of someone over-reacting? Have you ever over-reacted? What did you do to help make things better?

Is free speech important? Why? In your own life, do you think it's more important to be truthful or sensitive to others? Is it possible to do both most of the time?

What the Bible Says:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

“These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord” (Zech. 8:16-17).

“...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph.4:15-16).

Paul Asay has written for The Washington Post, Christianity Today, Beliefnet.com and The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. He writes about culture for PluggedIn and wrote the Batman book, God on the Streets of Gotham (Tyndale). He recently collaborated with Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, on his book The Good Dad. He lives in Colorado Springs with wife, Wendy, and his two children. Check out his entertainment blog at Patheos.com/blogs/WatchingGod or follow him on Twitter@AsayPaul.