

Bill Rea ? Don?t mock others? faiths

When it comes to writing these pieces, or general conversation for that matter, one topic I am usually very careful about is religion. As I have often stated in this place in the paper, I do not consider myself a religious man. On the other hand, I know very well that there are many people out there who read these words and are very devoted to the faith of their choice, and I respect that. I also respect the fact that faith is largely a matter of choice, and we all have the right to make our own life decisions, and live with them. When it comes to the mainstream religions, there's really very little reason not to respect them, unless one discounts them all. And I neither expect or hope to ever see that happen.

History records that vast amounts of blood have been spilled in squabbles over the appropriate way to proclaim a supreme being, and one has to wonder what these conflicts accomplished. They continue to this day. They have impacted me too. Both my father's parents were born in Northern Ireland, and there were times in recent memory when one faith clashed with another in that land, often violently.

The tolerance of many in this world was tested to a great extent in the last couple of weeks, in light of the terrorist attacks in France. Not surprisingly, my attention was quickly caught by the fact that a newspaper office was the prime target of these attacks, with several people being killed in the process.

While the Citizen is no a satirical publication, which Charlie Hebdo is reputed to be (I have never seen a copy, and am not likely to), we are still able to make people mad. We get our share of snarky emails, phone calls and personal visits, dealing with such things as the stands we've taken on certain issues, the way particular events have been covered, the way the paper is delivered and words that have been misspelled (I have always acknowledged that spelling is not among my strengths). But we have yet to have a group of gun-toting fanatics bust in and open fire. That's a little too much to expect.

I guess I'm a Christian, based on my upbringing (my mother dragged me against my will to Sunday school in the local Anglican church, and I always wondered why Dad was never pressed into such weekly chores). I know there are people calling themselves Christians who do or have done terrible things. I don't condemn my faith because of their actions, and I don't take responsibility for what they do, any more than I expect them to take responsibility for what I do. These are the acts of individuals.

The same can be said when evil is done by people calling themselves Muslims.

More than 30 years ago, when I waited tables in a hotel dining room in Toronto, the place was owned for a time by a Muslim family. I found these people who suddenly were employing my services to be very friendly, sublime and pleasant to work for. True, like any employer, they could be tough when it was required, and sometimes excessively demanding. But they were also very appreciative of people who worked hard, and very harsh with people who were useless.

In other words, they were pretty much like any other people I've worked for over the years.

I learned a lot about respect and acceptance from those people.

Among other things, the experience taught me there are a variety of ways in which to proclaim a supreme being, and such methods vary from person to person. None of them are right or wrong.

I was upset by what went on in France in the last couple of weeks. Among other things, it was all an affront to the concept of freedom of speech and freedom of expression. But like all freedoms, there are limits, and it's up to all of us to respect those limits. One issue that has been raised of late has dealt with cartoons that have been printed in various publications, depicting the Prophet Muhammad, which evidently sparked the attack on Charlie Hebdo. While I'm no expert on Islam, I have read enough to know there are many people in the world who would find such cartoons offensive. For that reason alone, I would never have authorized publishing such a thing.

I know there are many people hollering these days about freedom of speech and expression. I deeply believe in those concepts. I would have no business doing what I do for a living if I didn't.

But these freedoms do not grant anyone the right to be offensive, or obnoxious.

Most of us who make it to adulthood learn to temper what we say to and around other people. We all have the right to speak our minds, but we also understand there's an obligation to be respectful of those who hear us. And most of us have the good sense to apologize when we cross the line.

I thought Pope Francis put it rather well last week. While he was naturally appalled at what had taken place in France, and defended the idea of freedom of expression, he said there are limits as to how far that should go, and mocking the faith of people crosses that line.

?You cannot provoke,? the Pope is quoted as saying. ?You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others. There is a limit.?

The fact these people believed their faith had been insulted certainly did not give them the right to shoot and kill a lot of people, including journalists and police officers. Being obnoxious is not a justification for killing anyone. If it were, my own hit list would consist of several pages.

But the actions of these few fanatics should not change the way the rest of us think.

I've heard a few commentators suggest more cartoons of this nature should be published, partly as a statement of freedom expression, and partly to show these fanatics we won't be intimidated.

Laudable positions, but I don't share them.

As I stated above, if it were up to me, I wouldn't allow such items to be published because it would be needlessly disrespectful to too many people who deserve better. I'm not about to let a couple of extremists change my mind about anything. And as I also stated above, I am not going to make any effort to lay my mitts on a copy of Charlie Hebdo. I wouldn't have bothered with it before these jerks shot up their offices, and I don't want these guys influencing my actions.

The last thing I want is for them to get the idea that they influence my life

