

Don't let Charlie Hebdo attackers paint the world black and white

By **MOHAN J. DUTTA**
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THE heartbreaking attacks on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris stand as reminders of the spectre of intolerance that we are experiencing across the globe.

The attacks, however, also stand as reminders of the increasing polarisation of spaces of conversation the world over.

While many frame the attacks on Charlie Hebdo – a satirical weekly magazine that lampoons politicians and religious figures from Prophet Muhammad to the Pope – within the language of free speech, conversations on the deadly episode that killed 12 need to also address the value of denigrating the faith of a minority community that already feels disenfranchised.

That the profane images of the Prophet can be so offensive to a cross-section of disaffected youth in Western societies speaks more to the level of disenfranchisement experienced by the youth in these societies than to the fundamental nature of violence within a particular faith community.

The attacks stand as important reminders of the marginalisation of immigrant communities in the West, evoking the angst felt by those who endure assaults on their dignity within these communities, and point to the effectiveness of radicalised narratives in offering a symbol of dignity to disaffected youth within these societies.

In discourses emanating from the West, the attacks have been framed in the clichéd “Clash of Civilisations” narrative, positioning the Islamic world in opposition to the liberty-loving West, where freedom of speech is supposedly a protected fundamental value.

Shows of support for freedom

of speech have poured in from the world over, including a march for liberty on the streets of Paris, attended by many a world leader with a controversial record on the question of free speech.

But proclamations of the sanctity of free speech are not only far removed from the actual practices of free speech in Western societies, they also foreclose the possibilities of dialogue and conversation.

It bears repeating that many Western nation-states themselves have fairly contradictory records on the freedom-of-speech question.

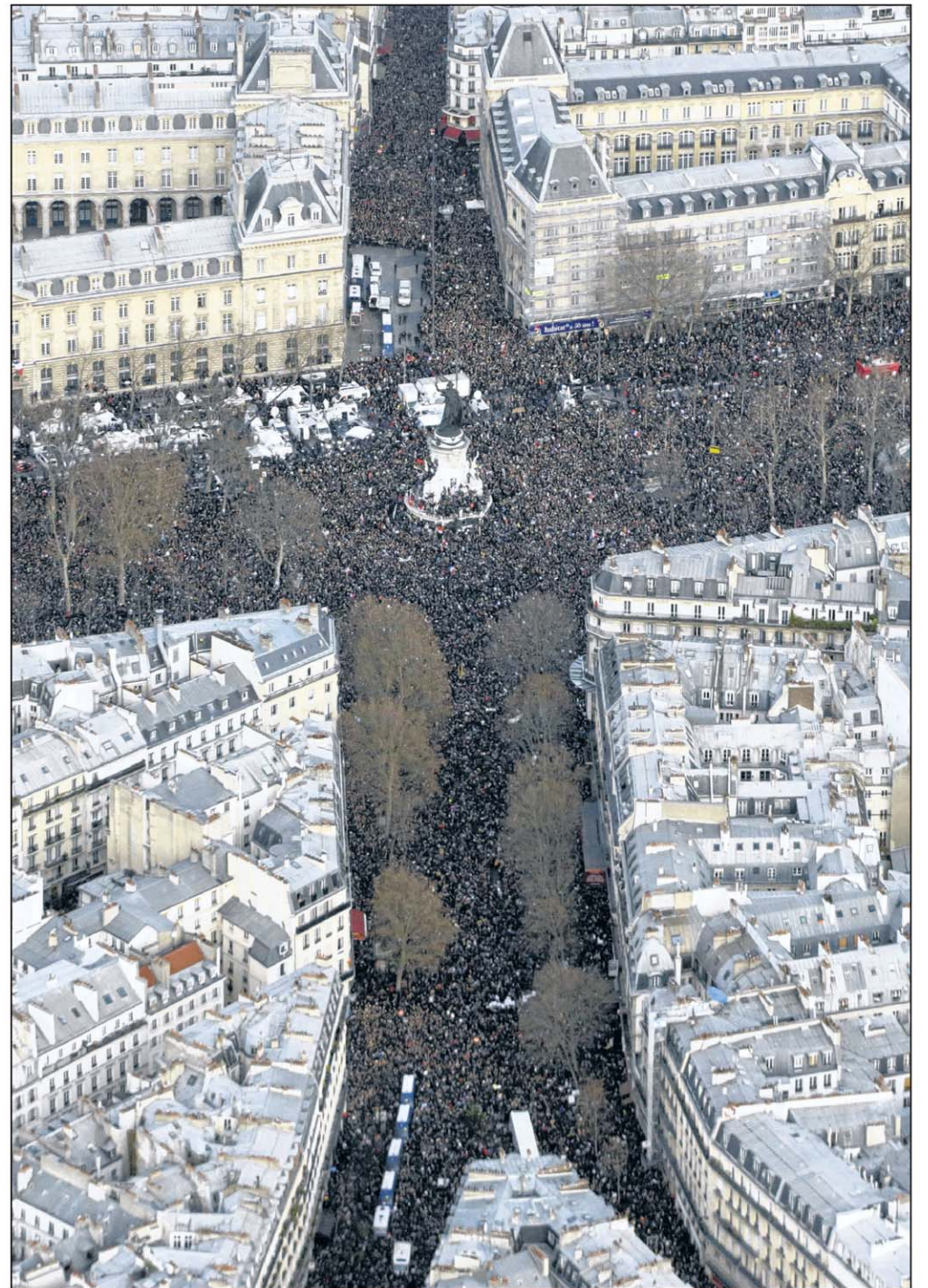
The United States, Britain and France, three nation-states that actively deploy the “freedom of speech” branding strategy, have fairly chequered records in protecting various forms of speech.

In France, it is a crime to publicly deny the official version of the history of the Holocaust. Or consider the ban on pro-Palestine demonstrations in France in July last year amid the Israeli attack on Gaza.

It is against this backdrop of the “Clash of Civilisations” narrative that some call upon Muslims the world over to apologise for the Charlie Hebdo attacks. The attacks are used as excuses for mainstream Western discourse to dig deep into Islamic culture, as if some in-depth study of Islamic culture would shed light on to the seemingly deep-rooted violence in Islam.

Such narratives, however, divide and disenfranchise people, creating a binary to offer a simplistic view of the world that paints the world in stark white and black.

It breaks my heart to see my Muslim friends, students and colleagues spread in various corners of the globe feel like they have to hold their heads in shame for their faith. The level of Islamophobia in public actions and intel-



In the wake of the attacks in France, shows of support for freedom of speech have poured in from the world over, including a march for liberty on the streets of Paris (above). PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

lectual discourse is astounding, reflected in the burning of mosques in France, and the Rupert Murdoch tweet “Maybe most Moslems peaceful, but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible.” (He apologised subsequently.)

Somehow, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Al-Qaeda have become the tropes for justifying this hatred directed towards Muslims in public discourse.

This is, I believe, a valuable moment when we stand up for the right of diverse peoples across the globe to practise their faith without feeling harassed or threatened for it.

Now is a time for dialogue and introspection.

The power to prevent attacks, like the Charlie Hebdo attacks, in our collective futures lies in our collective commitment to nurturing spaces where differences are

celebrated, instead of putting down certain faith communities by applying a faulty and inconsistent yardstick drawn over generalisations about free speech, tradition versus modernity, and the West versus the rest.

Rather than let the Charlie Hebdo attacks continue the cycle of hatred driven by simple binaries, now is the time to build bridges and explore common points for conversations.

The world is a multi-hued one; a person can be both French and Muslim; and societies can champion free speech while proscribing limits to it. The more we see this, the less relevant and significant the Charlie Hebdo attackers become.

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