

Religion and Our Response to Violence

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(On February 13, the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University hosted a panel on “Religion and our response to violence,” to which I was invited; this essay is an edited and amended version of my talk.)

When I was invited to participate in this panel, I was warned that the other panelists would all be religious leaders but that it would be good to get a political perspective on the issues as well. Actually, I can’t imagine talking about religion or violence without also talking about relationships of power, which is what politics is really all about. And, I also think it’s fitting that the only panelist who isn’t a religious leader is a Muslim, since Islam doesn’t ordain a clergy, or a class of professional interpreters of sacred knowledge.

I’m going to use my time to reflect on some pressing political issues because I feel we shouldn’t lose sight of the *political* nature of these issues even if, in the end, we choose to respond to them from within our own specific *religious* traditions.

How we use words and frame issues also shapes how we think about, or resolve, those issues which is why I want to start my talk by examining the title of the panel. At first sight, “Religion and our response to violence” seems quite open-ended but when I started writing my talk, I realized that the word “response” was not entirely appropriate. It’s true that people are trying to figure out how to respond to the violence against the US on 9/11, but it’s also equally true that the US is gearing up to commit some massive and unjustified violence of its own against the Iraqi people pretty soon.

It also isn’t unreasonable or unpatriotic to view 9/11 itself as constituting a response of sorts to certain US foreign policies. This isn’t to justify 9/11, as many people think, but to offer a more rational explanation of it than the two that currently are popular in the US: on the one hand, Mr. Bush’s allegation that “they did this because they are evil,” and, on the other, the Christian fundamentalist claim that God is punishing us because we live with evil in our midst. But not everything can be reduced to a fight of good vs. evil and nor are entire nations only good or only evil. It is more reasonable to argue that violence breeds violence and that much of the ongoing violence is a consequence of abuses of power by the US.

I know it’s unpopular to say this, but the US doesn’t always exercise its enormous power for good in the international arena. In fact, it’s questionable if such overwhelming power can *ever* be an agent of good. Every child knows the cliché that absolute power corrupts absolutely which is why the US political and legal systems provide checks and balances that protect people against arbitrary abuses of power. But, when it comes to global politics, people are willing to believe that unchecked US hegemony is good for the world. I believe we need to rethink this idea and also to realize that we aren’t just passive victims of violence but we also often initiate it.

Most people, of course, feel that since they've done no harm to others directly that they have nothing to do with the mess the world is in. But many of these same people see no problem with wanting Muslims to be accountable for one another, or regarding all Muslims as potential terrorists after 9/11. But, one can't have it both ways! And while it is unjust and illogical to condemn a billion people for the actions of a tiny minority, it *is* legitimate to argue that in democracies people bear a responsibility for their country's policies, even and perhaps specially, if they don't do anything to protest unjust policies. In fact, such disregard and inaction free the US from political and moral constraints, because if its own citizens won't pressure it to do the right thing, who will?

I have argued in other forums that American disregard for and disconnect from the world is a function of a sense of their own exceptionalism which keeps them from experiencing being part of a larger world. And, I've also said that one can't live knowledgeably, ethically, or safely with people if one doesn't understand them or know in what ways one may be connected to or beholden to them, or, equally importantly, what forms of violence one may have done to them, directly or indirectly, knowingly or unwittingly.

Here I'd like to make a few points about violence itself. I think there's a tendency to view US violence as necessary, righteous, provoked, and proportionate while viewing the violence of others as barbaric, unjust, disproportionate, and gratuitous. Also, many people don't see the violence of poverty, oppression, unequal distribution of wealth, and racial or sexual discrimination and nor do they realize that inaction and apathy, and even non-violence, can sometimes constitute violence. And, lastly, there is a tendency to valorize American victims of violence over everyone else because of the racist belief that American lives are worth more than those of others.

I haven't spoken so far about how I cope with being a Muslim in the US today. Frankly, I occupy a very fragile and hazardous space because, to some people, I'm the antichrist and to others, an anti-Semite simply because I *am* a Muslim. And for speaking up against certain US policies, I have been attacked savagely in both the local and the national press. But I am equally opposed to violent and misogynistic interpretations of Islam by some Muslims and I have been just as critical of these Muslims as I have been of US policies.

The Qur'an calls upon believers to be witnesses for justice, even if it be against themselves and so even though I feel totally alienated by official politics in the US, I also wish to be such a witness, whatever the costs to myself.