

REPRINT

Many Paths

the monthly journal of

CRES — multi-faith community resource for exploring spirituality through civic involvement, teaching, consulting, and writing

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Kansas City's Resource for Interfaith Understanding

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REPRINT — lead article in our 12-page monthly journal

Religion — The Terrorists' Best Weapon

Recently I was asked by my own Rotary club to speak about the relationship between terrorism and religion. I could think of no better title than "Religion: The Terrorists' Best Weapon." I expressed dismay that the arena of faith, to which my career has been dedicated, is also the arena from which violence often emerges.

The specific religion doesn't seem to matter, although the monotheistic traditions appear more likely to produce the kind of self-righteousness that supports harming innocent people to advance a political cause cloaked in the language faith. Protestant and Catholic terrorists in Northern Ireland, the Israeli and Palestinian violence in the "Holy Land," the attacks on New York, Madrid, and London in the name of Islam, are recent examples of an ancient theme.

In the Hebrew Bible, Numbers 31, God commands the children of Israel to burn villages, kill all the animals and the men, and slaughter the women — but spare young virgins to be enjoyed by the terrorists. Similar divine commands are recorded in Joshua 6, Judges 21, Deuteronomy 20, and elsewhere. We don't often read this stuff, but it's there in Scripture to justify today's terrorist as it was the warrant for the Crusades. When God tells Abraham to kill his own son, and as some later theologians explained it, the Christian God



required the cruel death of His own Son to avenge His anger at the whole of humankind for their sins, metaphors of violence become latent in faith, and potentially lethal.

An aside about Christian history. Early Christians opposed war and capital punishment. They would not serve under arms or even become

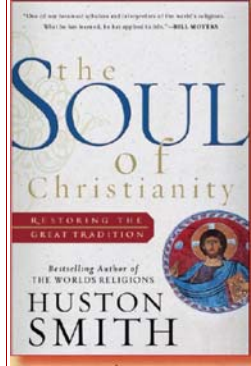
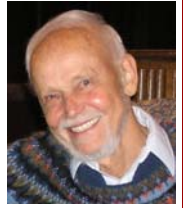
judges for trials where the punishment might be death. Like many early Christians, Marcion refused to accept the Hebrew scriptures, in part because of their portrayal of a god of war. But Constantine converted to Christianity, according to Bishop Eusebius, because he envisioned a cross in the sky with the legend, "By this conquer." He considered himself God's man, and just as the Christian martyrs died for the faith, now he would kill for it.

Augustine, a brilliant theologian who distorted common sense to justify his shadow side, said war is permitted only when sponsored by the state for peace and justice, and developed the "just war" theory, which presumed that one side must be good and the other evil. But the Crusades legitimized war — "Holy War" — sponsored not by the government but by the Church itself. This is not the place to rehearse the horrors of the religious wars of Europe, but today's man of God¹ sees our side as righteous and the other as evil, and the media permit us little opportunity to see if we might in any way have provoked the evil to manifest. Tony Blair calls such an inquiry an "obscenity."

The Dean of World Religions

HUSTON SMITH

in conversation with
VERN BARNET



Smith, now 86, wrote the classic text on world religions and was the subject of a 5-hour PBS special. His latest book discloses his own faith. He speaks with wit and charm.

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All seats \$9 advance / \$12 door
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Opening hearts and minds and doors

Many Paths essays introduce readers to aspects of specific faiths, compare and contrast how the various faiths regard particular topics, or present material those of any spiritual path may find helpful.

05.07.8



The concept of Holy War is not Islamic; war in Islam may in some circumstances be necessary but it is never holy, despite prejudiced media translations of *jihad*. Christians developed the idea. The crusaders, for example, exulted in massacre as a triumph of Christianity. One eyewitness, noting piles of Jewish and Muslim heads, hands and feet, wrote that

in the Temple and the Porch of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.

The Crusades are such a shameful example that thinking people hesitate to speak “Crusade” in modern contexts. (Oops! Billy Graham used the term.)

Specific passages in the Qur’an, removed from their historical context, have been used to justify violence, and modern Islam is troubled not only by the terrorism of Osama bin Laden, but also by distortions of Islamic law² in Iran’s taking American civilians as hostages, sending of children into combat, and its death judgment without trial against Salman Rushdie. Saudi Arabia’s oppression of ordinary women, vicious religious intolerance, and homophobic homophobia poorly represents the historic freedoms and generosity by which Islam should be known.

The American attack on Iraq, a nation we armed, that offered us no threat and was closer to democratic values than Saudi Arabia which we protect, is widely seen in the Muslim world as the work of an avowedly Christian president. Bush’s political indebtedness to colonizing Is-

raeli and corrupt Saudi governments further discredits America’s profession of Christianity in the eyes of many Muslims. Indeed, as experts on the PBS News Hour recently agreed, the American footprint in what has been considered Muslim lands, the administration’s lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian difficulty, and the Iraq war are the three chief reasons terrorists have multiplied.

There is no doubt that religion is used to justify violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic and environmental exploitation. And it makes me, a clergyman, feel a bit dirty to be allocating this space for this discussion. But until we take the timbers out of our own eyes, we will be unable to see how to remove the mote in others’ eyes.

As destructive as religion can be, the search for meaning in life, which is one way of describing religion, cannot and should not be expunged. Religion reaches for transcendence, significance, ultimate meaning — for unity or alliance with something larger than oneself. Terrorism is a demonic form of, and response to, our over-secularistic³ world which offers illusion and fragmentation, not transcendence. The urge for meaning leads to the suicide-bomber’s death for others as part of a cosmic drama. The task is to re-center religion on experiences of the holy—what atheists might call the awesome. Our work is to reveal, especially in difficulty, the awesome power and majesty of love. —VB

“With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things — that takes religion.”

—Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg

Conditions Ripe for Religious Terrorism

1. Absolutistic religious conviction; relativism eschewed.
2. Ordinary means are perceived to be useless to solve extraordinary problems.
3. Belief that one is personally called to violate the usual norms of faith because the situation is extreme.
4. Approbation and support from others.
5. Belief that one’s act contributes to the realization of God’s plan and gives the actor a sense of participating in a cause larger than oneself. —VB

Notes about Terrorism

¹While most of us are now focused on foreign terrorism, Christian Identity and other groups continue in our own county. With the growth of the radical religious Right, abetted by the current administration led by a professed Christian man of God which in many unseemly ways has entangled religious institutions and government, we should be concerned about increasing intolerance and even fanaticism, with targets including not just abortion clinics and individuals like Matthew Shepard but also those, including religious groups, who uplift justice and equality.

²While religious law governing the political realm is understandable in Islamic history, the idea of a divinely revealed law is not suitable for a multifaith democracy. Christians like US

Representative Ernest Istook (R-OK) and Judge Roy Moore (of the Ten Commandments case), not to mention countless pastors, want the state to implement governance based on their views of specific religious law instead of shared values.

³The glossary at the bottom of our web home page, www.cres.org, describes “secular” as fragmented, partial, divided, unrelated; the profane.” Of course the term has many definitions, including application to “clergy who serve parishes” rather than residing in monasteries, and its honored use to describe the separation of political and religious governments in understanding the US Constitution.

Here we use the term theologically to criticize societies that seem to have no overarching purpose or connection to a Power or Process beyond itself. Super-secularism is marked by special interest groups, intense focus on self-worth

(measured by status, wealth, or power), and alienation from a sense of common good. Thus the President’s call for an “ownership society” is, theologically, a secular assault on the holy by dividing us through possessiveness, selfishness, and greed. It suggests that these are better than the responsibilities of relationships.

Our government is not run on behalf of the commonweal but rather for the NRA, the defense contractors, the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, oil companies, and media/entertainment conglomerates (which is why our news is so distorted.) The Religious Right is another such group leading us to secular theocracy.

Religious institutions in our society are themselves often secularized. Fundamentalism arises when a society becomes so secular that the transcendent cannot be discerned and the culture offers no direction to discover it. The encounter of world religions may offer directions and renewal.