

“Religion and Violence”
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 February 10, 2008

Ever since September 11, 2001, Americans, and many others, have been struggling with the question of religion and violence. Does religion create violence or do people use religion for purposes of violence, or is it a little bit of both, or maybe something else entirely. Two weeks ago I attended the 38th Trinity Institute National Theological Conference entitled “Religion and Violence: Untangling the Roots of Conflict.” I listened to lectures on this topic by three famous speakers; James Cone, Susannah Heschel, and Tariq Ramadan. This was a conference of interfaith dialogue and probing challenge to American history, human history, and individual faith. Among the topics they discussed were the violence of white power in Christianity, systematic violence, the problems of cheap grace and easily satisfied religious liberals, the relationship between intimacy and violence, the human attraction to violence, and the necessity for humility in religious faith.

James Cone is a well known black liberationist and Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Seminary (Megan Joiner has taken classes with him). Professor Cone was born in a small, poor Arkansas town in 1939 and grew up in the local AME church. At the age of 16 he was called into ministry, and during his years in seminary between 1958 and 1964 he struggled with the fact that “I studied Christian faith and not one word was said about civil rights.”

Cone grew up in a society with white only signs while listening to the Christian message of “love thy neighbor.” He burned under this unspoken theological contradiction that began with white violence and black suffering (As he puts it) and ended in the deadly violence of lynching. Today Cone says that the “crucifixion was a first century lynching. The cross and crucifixion need to talk to one another so that death is not the last word.” Cone insists that if Christians can’t identify with the victims of lynching, they can’t identify with the cross, and are therefore, not real Christians. The inherent and unexamined “white power” within Christianity undermines Christianity and supports Christian violence.

Without condoning violence, Cone names systems of American violence, like racism, that often go unseen, unspoken, [and unchallenged by religion]. He says “Injustice itself is violent. They [the white and rich community] call what we [the black and poor community] do about that [riots] violence. They don’t call the problem violence. It’s silly to talk about ending violence until we end the social systems that cause violence. We don’t even recognize the social systems and they are the most violent.”

Consider the unconstitutional use of property tax funding of local schools, like we have here in Ohio, which allows rich communities to have access to multiple in-depth programs, while rural or urban schools with lower taxes regularly cut programs of all

kinds. Systematic violence. Consider American prisons which are both overcrowded and offer little in the way of restorative justice or education that mainstreams convicted criminals back into society in a healthy way.

Most inmates released from jail receive a bus pass; that is it. Nothing in the way of food or a place to live. What would you do if you got off the bus without money, had no food and no place to live? Systematic violence. The punishment should be served in prison, not when inmates are released or else we just inflict more violence on our society. Consider unaffordable health care which leaves millions uninsured. Consider American military intervention in questionable places for questionable reasons. If America is in Iraq for purposes of oil procurement for American corporate interests, is this not also systematic violence?

Cone quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. who said “America is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” Are we that different forty years later? Cone noted that Martin Luther King, Jr. warned that God was going to call America to account for violence in Vietnam and the ghetto.

Cone largely focused on systematic violence in America that has been supported by unexamined views of Christianity – views that enabled Americans for centuries to both disregard suffering and oppression and feel good about personal salvation. Cone was equally critical of whites and blacks who preach “cheap grace.” [DEFINE CHEAP GRACE – faith alone or feel good]. He noted that many black preachers are “well trained in the art of proclamation. They are prosperity preachers. Nothing can ease police brutality or injustice in the criminal justice system.” For Cone a sustainable Christian faith is “hope carved out of resistance from what is real, [including] real violence. Hope carved out of optimism is not genuine hope.” Likewise I think he would say that Christianity carved out of violence is not real Christianity. Christianity stands with Jesus on the cross and any oppressed, suffering person, whether children who can’t get a good education or inmates who are not given opportunities to succeed on release.

The next speaker, Susannah Heschel, continued the critique of “cheap grace,” particularly the cheap grace found within liberal religion (of which we as Unitarian Universalists are a part). Heschel noted that today “we are overly excited to speak about fundamentalism.” In her opinion the study of religion needs to include the story of Western European colonialization. She notes that European colonizers incorrectly perceived local, indigenous people as primitive and irrational – an intellectual prejudice that disregarded human difference and dignity and led to violence and suffering.

Colonizers spoke of indigenous people as “primitive” which also came to mean uneducated, ignorant, simple, expendable, and unworthy. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries Africans were considered primitive and this is part of the reason the world engaged in slavery. Of course slavery had existed long before then, but “primitive” was a justification used at the time to ignore the human dignity of Africans. Heschel notes that today the word “fundamentalist” has replaced the word “primitive.”

Heschel believes that there exists a myth of liberal religion; that it is “sophisticated and more ethical” and she notes that it is “one of the most self-serving fantasies that we have concocted.” She explains that religious liberals ignore prophetic dissent because it is uncomfortable. In Cone’s words, at times religious liberals ignore systematic violence because it is more comfortable to do so. Cheap grace is always available so why concern ourselves with oppression? Religious liberals are not more

ethical because we tend to be more educated. We still have ignorance and weakness. Heschel notes that the German Christians who became Nazis were liberal Christians, and that the conservative Christians, (neo-orthodox like Karl Barth) resisted the Nazis.

Heschel has a fascinating background as well. Her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel came from a prominent European rabbinic family. He fled during the Holocaust and settled in the United States, temporarily here in Cincinnati to work at HUC before moving to a more conservative Jewish institution in New York City. He was active in the civil rights movement long before other whites [Jewish and non-Jewish] joined and was a personal friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was also a noted theologian and prolific writer. Susannah Heschel was born in 1952, came of age in an Orthodox, pietistic, socially active home, and today specializes in Jewish Christian dialogue and is a professor at Dartmouth College.

Her father, Abraham Heschel was an Orthodox Jew and white, yet during the 1950s and 1960s, and under the express disapproval of his colleagues, he crossed race and religious lines to befriend Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who actually helped restore his confidence in Christianity (which had been destroyed during the systematic violence of the Holocaust).

Susannah Heschel asked then “Does violence come out of religion or is religion used to justify violence?” This is a question I have been asking myself for the past six years. She began by noting that “intimacy is at the heart of violence” and that violence begins at home. As an example she noted that the most dangerous place for a woman in the United States is in her home. This sentiment was echoed by the next speaker, Muslim professor Tariq Ramadan. I had never heard someone say this so plainly, that violence happens within intimacy, with people and issues that we know and care about; whether it is land, ideas about God or family and salvation. Violence is an eruption of our deepest care.

Susannah Heschel explained that hate is not the opposite of love. Rather, hate and love are cousins. Apathy, not caring, is the opposite of both love and hate. I agree with her here. So I was interested in her idea that violence comes out of caring and relation, and perhaps passion out of control. Yet Heschel ironically was a strong advocate for passion within religion. She saw this as good. This surprised the moderator and audience members who thought of passion as “irrational.” As an explanation she told a story about the agony her father felt after he heard about the Mai Li Massacre. She explained that his passion did not make him irrational; it made him act for change.

She explained, “My father went to a protest and a journalist asked him, ‘Why are you here and not in a synagogue?’ Her father replied ‘I am here because I can not pray. Every time I open a prayer book I see children burning from napalm.’” Later in explaining how he was eventually able to pray he said “The troubles of others comes into my heart and makes a scar and I show God the scar when I pray.” I thought this was extraordinary, her father’s honest expression of personal faith and action in the face of ridicule by his colleagues and others. And his expression came from his passion, passion, as she notes, guided by wisdom and expedience. One would see this as hope carved out of resistance from what is real, including violence. I don’t have an answer about the role of passion in religion, but I think it is useful to play with it as an idea that can be both beneficial and harmful and to consider what role your religious passion plays at different times.

If violence happens in intimacy with the things we most care and have passion about, does religion cause violence or is religion used to justify human violence. Heschel noted that “religion does not magically keep people humane” and she used the example of the scapegoat, a story told in *Leviticus 16* of the Hebrew Bible to explore how deep and primal violence is within people and groups. This is a very troubling question.

In *Leviticus 16* the scapegoat is sent out into the wilderness on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to send the sins of the Israelites out from amongst them. Heschel leaned towards an understanding that religion is used to justify human violence; that the potential for violence is prior to religion, although people and groups use religion to quietly promote their own violence. She said “unless one learns to relish the taste of Sabbath one will not know peace.”

Her question of violence in religion was taken up again by the last speaker, Tariq Ramadan. Ramadan also has a fascinating background. His grandfather founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a very complex Muslim organization that in general attempted to remove colonial rule and restore social programs, but that also periodically engaged in violence and assassination. Since the 1970s the Muslim Brotherhood has relinquished violence and Ramadan’s grandfather did not support violence within the organization (although he was assassinated). However, one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s greatest revolutionary thinkers from the 1960s taught Osama bin Laden in Saudi Arabia, so you see the complexity.

Tariq Ramadan was born in exile in Switzerland. He is multi-lingual and studied philosophy, social sciences, and literature. He is on the faculty at Oxford and temporarily served on the faculty at Notre Dame until his visa was denied (was still not able to attend conference in US four years later) due to questions about financial donations he has made to groups deemed to be terrorist organizations. Interestingly his donations were made and ended prior to the United States identifying the groups as terrorist so Ramadan asks “How could I know they were terrorists if the United States government did not know?” Ramadan writes about Islam in modernity and Europe and I predict he will be one of the most influential Islamic writers and scholars of this century (*Time* voted him one of 100 Innovators for the 21st Century).

Ramadan insists that “we have to master our own violence.” Ramadan is religiously liberal, very devout, intimidatingly well-educated, and consistent. He extends and modernizes his grandfather’s message, and in many ways is like a bridge between the West and Islam. Ramadan believes that the first act of faith is one of humility. He explains “I need God. I can’t get it all – intellectual, spiritual, and cultural humility. We are responsible for getting inner peace.” I agree with him, and I find so few religious people who display humility. Ramadan insists that we “indulge in violence because of a lack of something at the very beginning [of our faith], humility.” He explains “You can be the first promoter of violence if you don’t check yourself. No one gets a degree in spirituality. When you come close to God you understand you have a long way to go.”

Ramadan believes that humble education and self improvement are vital and that religious education should teach self reformation. He explains “If we want peace we must promote education which is the first human right [I think his grandfather was a teacher]. It gives dignity and dignity gives justice and justice gives peace . . . It is sad that Islamic society does not put more money into education . . . We have to be very strong to promote justice to prevent violence.”

I heard in his ideas a return to the thoughts of James Cone; that injustice is violent and leads to violence. I agree with Ramadan (and Gandhi for that matter who said the same thing) that there will be no peace without justice, so in my social justice efforts I attempt to work for justice, a humbling experience in and of itself. Ramadan, like Heschel, believes that peace starts at home (like violence). He said “There is no point speaking of Africa if there is no peace, justice, and equality in our own society.” He advocated for an intra-community Muslim dialogue, which I also believe is essential so that the multiplicity of Islamic views stay in relation with one another. Perhaps most interesting was his response to literal interpretations of the Koran. He said “The Koran offers multiple interpretations. No religious compulsion is possible. God would have made everyone Muslim if he wanted. It is not for you to tolerate difference, but to respect it.”

I left the conference with more questions than answers, and a wider view of religion and violence than I had previously considered. I echo Ramadan’s assessment that no one gets a degree in spirituality. The closer we come to the problems, the farther we realize we have to go. I was, however, inspired that religious faith, with education and self reformation (the Cone, Heschel, Ramadan way rather than the way of fundamentalism or cheap grace) is a positive thing, that it can be a motivator for action, respect, and social change.

My current opinion is that religion, like democracy, can be used for violence, or championed in the name of violence. But religion, like democracy, cannot sustain the weight of violence. It is an unbearable weight and I am beginning to believe, a fundamental human attraction. Ramadan said “Torture is never acceptable. It is against human dignity and human dignity is not negotiable.” This is a religious voice that I recognize. As much as scripture may describe or justifies violence, (such as the story of the scapegoat) I see a larger story of humans and human writers trying to understand personal and societal violence. I do not see the will of God in violence.

I am a theist and I believe in God as a positive life force in the universe, not all powerful, but always present. Salvation was the middle aged African American man I saw on Tuesday, during the pouring rain, give his umbrella to the white woman in the wheel chair with her companion because he had a hat and she had none and they had far to go. But this salvation was a personal choice, a responsible human choice, loving instead of hating, sharing instead of hoarding or hitting. We live in systems of violence and every day make choices of personal and systematic violence. What will you choose? Abraham Heschel could not pray because he saw dying children, and when he could pray again he showed God the scar on his heart. Hope comes not for ignoring the scar, but from bearing/baring it and choosing again to live in love.

