

Power and Peace

In the last dozen years or so, words like terrorism and phrases like 'the war on terror' have become all too familiar. We know a lot – perhaps more than we want to know – about unspeakable acts of violence and inhumanity in so many places throughout the world. In the face of so much that confronts us from our televisions and newspapers, and in the context of the ways governments and powers around the world have responded, we are challenged to ask and answer profound questions of faith, some of which seem to hold few, if any, satisfying answers.

Our Christian faith is uncompromising in naming its directive toward peace, but how can we speak of peace in the midst of violence and terror-inducing actions? Are some acts of violence-in-response-to-violence justified? What may make some violent activities terrorism, and others rightful resistance, or protection of freedoms? Where is the boundary between the terrorist, the rebel, the freedom-fighter, the peace-maker, and the peace-keeper? When so many of our states and nations worldwide were created out of the crucible of violence and rebellion, are any of us justified in saying our hands are clean?

It is my conviction, along with many people of different faiths, that nothing of the God of any faith is found in acts of violence. Violence of one person to another is a human creation, and not of God, however you may name or conceive of God. The earliest of our Bible stories include acts of violence and murder between the archetypes for all humanity. Think of Cain and Abel, the very first children of humankind.

So how DO we respond to violence and terror in our world? Is further violence for the sake of peace justified? Who decides when, if ever, the path of resistance or even violence is a right path?

A clear and unequivocal response against terrorism seems necessary, but what shape does it take? To be legitimate, surely such a response can only be formed within a larger commitment to peace and everything that goes along with making peace long-lasting. Such peace cannot be based on conquering others, forcing decisions on whole peoples and nations, harming the innocent, or ignoring victims of the abuse of social, economic, physical and military power. In the end, meaningful and lasting peace can only come when nations, peoples, groups, and individuals are truly reconciled with and to one another – that is, when power and resources are equitably shared, when no-one is despised or hated simply for who they are born to be, and when no-one has the power to force another's life-choices.

Undoing centuries and even millennia of some people having power over others is certain to be a long and admittedly daunting task. Dismantling a world order built on power-over instead of power-for is so overwhelming a task it is hard to know where to begin.

Undeniably, though, it is clear that using coercive power – any form of such power – in the 'war on terror' is doomed to fail to create any lasting peace. Human nature guarantees that using such power, even in the well-intentioned sensibility of our responsibility to protect the innocent, will only perpetuate the very inequities out of which acts of violence and terror emerge. Only when accompanied by equal attention and equivalent resources directed toward the very roots out of which violence and hatred emerge may such responses be even remotely justified.

Responses and actions that might truly lead to the equity on which peace may rest must surely include globe-spanning efforts to actually reduce poverty and dismantle the economic ways and systems that support obscene differences between the lives of rich and poor. They must surely address the legacies of arbitrary colonial and post-colonial divisions of tribes, peoples and nations into powerful and less powerful, have and have-not, comfortable and subsistence living conditions. They must surely include the courage to name and overturn generations-long hatreds and prejudices based on nothing more than ethnicity or all the many other sources of we-and-they attitudes. Unfortunately, current national and international responses are all too weak and limited in such long term peace-building and peace-promoting attention.

Equity and generosity in a great many dimensions may have some glimmer of a chance to foster a world of peace, the 'heaven on earth' for which we regularly pray. Power exercised by one group or nation or collaboration over another, without truly substantial efforts to create such equity, will never do so.

