

By Howard Clark Kee

Around the world as we move toward the close of the second millennium, aggression and violence in the name of religion have become major factors in local and international disputes. This is evident in the former Yugoslavia, Turkey and Iran, in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Manifestations of such aggressive action on the part of American religious groups have become major features in the media. The adherents' belligerent movements range from warfare or insurrection to mass murder and destruction, as in the highly-publicized bombing of the court house in Oklahoma City last year.

Justification for such violent public actions is provided in various religious traditions. Most obvious is the Islamic principle of Jihad, the holy war which champions of the truth of the Quran have claimed they are obligated to carry forward. This is in large measure a response to the warfare launched against Islam by European monarchs in the eleventh century, attacks on what they called the Holy Land with the cross of Christ as the emblem for the aggressive takeover of much of the eastern Mediterranean world. Supporters of the present day rights of Palestinians see analogous attitudes and actions in the incumbent Israeli government. In the United States of America, groups such as the self-styled Aryan Nation and others based in Texas and Idaho have employed weapons of violence and resorted to killing in order to prepare the way which they believe God is opening for them to take control of the nation. Why?

Two different, but complementary factors are operative in the current flourishing of the violent groups and their actions. One crucial element is the imagery of warfare which pervades the Bible. One of the titles of God in the Bible is "Lord of Hosts" (1 Sam 17:45), the latter term meaning "armies." In the prophets these were sometimes depicted as angels or other heavenly beings in the divine presence (Isa 6:1-5). But the rulers of Israel were ranked in terms of their effectiveness in military aggression, as in 1 Sam 18:8: "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands." The later prophets and the apocalyptic literature of Israel depict God and his agents as engaged in the final battle for dominion over the world (Zech 14, Daniel 11:10). Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is the War Scroll, which describes this ultimate defeat of the powers of evil and the triumph of God's plan for His people in the world.

In other Jewish literature, the enemies to be defeated are Satanic agents and demonic powers. In the gospel portraits of Jesus he describes his exorcisms as the struggle with "Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons," (Lk 11:17-22), and hence as a crucial feature of the cosmic contest for control of the world by the establishment of the "kingdom of God". Using the image of God's "finger," as in the characterization of the power that brought the plagues on the Egyptians (Ex 8:16-19), Jesus declares: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (11:20).

Paul describes the struggle being experienced by the members of the followers of Jesus in symbolic terms making the point that neither the weapons nor the opponents are human or physical. What one should seek to destroy are erroneous arguments and proud obstacles which impede God's work in the world (2 Cor 10:3-5). The later New Testament writers, employ this imagery of conflict in more literal terms seeing it as referring to diabolical forces: "The rulers. . .the authorities. . . the cosmic powers of this present darkness. . . the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places" (Eph 6:10-13). In the Revelation to John, the enemy to be defeated in the cosmic battle is an historical entity: the City of Rome, as the center of imperial power across the world (Rev 17:18). The triumph over this diabolical agency is not to be the result of aggressive actions on the part of the people of God, but by the Word of God and the angelic agents (Rev 19:11-21). Thus there is no precedent or scriptural warrant for the violent, conspiratorial plans currently fostered in the name of Christ.

The second aspect of the current surge of violence is the effect on individuals and society of two worldwide forces (1) the nearly universal exposure of previously distinctive societies to the dominant cultural features of western civilization, and (2) the fierce reaction to this for the purpose of preserving separate identity. One sees the former factor in the worldwide garb of bluejeans and tee-shirts, in the fondness for pop music, films and TV. The latter factor is manifest in the belligerent determination to develop and maintain a distinctive and perduring mode of personal identity. The first feature fosters despair about the future of the present civilization, and encourages aggressive action to produce an attractive alternative world. The second feature furnishes the motivation for moving violently in this direction, promoting a sense of achievement at the cosmic level for those who risk their lives in order to bring down the present structures and begin to build the better world which is seen as lying ahead in the near future.

Overlooked in this process is the transforming power potential of such religious traditions as the Jewish-Christian principles of love of neighbor, the divinely-ordained and demonstrated work of reconciliation, and the renewal of diverse humanity. As Abraham was told, "In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed," Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

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