

Media and Violence
Reflections of an Aspiring Peacemaker
by Dr. Rick Love

A Paper Presented at the 6Th Doha Conference on Inter-Faith Dialogue
May 13-14, 2008 Doha, Qatar

I am grateful to the Emir of Qatar and the convenors of the Doha Conference for this opportunity to present a paper on Media and Violence from a Christian perspective.

One could address the issue of media and violence from a number of perspectives. We could explore the many *forms of media* and their impact in the world: newspapers, books, movies, television, internet and such. Or we could explore the *types of violence* conveyed by media: war, domestic abuse, horror stories, criminal cases and their impact on society. While significant, these approaches lack relevance for a conference on inter-faith dialogue.

Instead we will examine this topic from two angles: 1) What are the forms of violence uniquely perpetrated by the religious community, especially Christians, Muslims and Jews? 2) How has the media, especially journalists, covered these forms of violence?

Violence uniquely perpetrated by Christians, Muslims and Jews

When we think of violence around the world a litany of religious violence comes to mind: Muslims vs. Jews in the Middle East, Christians vs. Muslims in Africa, Hindus vs. Muslims in Kashmir, Hindus vs. Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Buddhists vs. Muslims in Thailand, and Muslims vs. Russians in the Caucasus. But we should begin our examination of this topic by seeking to distinguish between violence perpetrated by governments and violence perpetrated specifically by the religious community. In certain contexts governments and the religious community may overlap and indeed mutually reinforce one another. But in many (most?) cases there is a distinct difference between governments and the religious community that must be recognized.

The most obvious but controversial case would be *the War in Iraq*. President Bush is a Christian, but he does not lead a “Christian” nation. The United States affirms a clear separation between church and the state (which is not the case in many countries). While some Christians supported the war, there were many other Christians who tried to intervene and who in fact appealed to the U.S. Government not to attack Iraq. Since then, many Christian leaders continue to speak out against the war and President Bush’s policies.

This illustrates the dynamic that Christians, as well as other religious communities, face in relationship to their own governments.

The supposed “*war on terror*” provides another painful illustration of violence. Although strongly denounced by many Muslims, one religious community, Al Qaeda, has violently attacked both Western countries and Muslim countries: the United States, England, Spain, Indonesia, Morocco, Jordan and Egypt – to name a few.

Governments of both Western and Muslim countries are working against terrorism. I must admit I was taken back when one of my Muslim friends said emphatically, “Our government has been very successful in the war on terrorism. They have killed many terrorists.”

So how should Christians respond to the violence of terrorism? Like any good citizen, Christians should support their governments’ struggle against the inimical menace of terrorism. But being a good citizen does not mean that we blindly follow whatever our government says. For example, as an American Christian I believe that “The War on Terror has damaged democracy at home, militarized society, alienated allies abroad, and created new enemies and terrorists hostile to America and across the world” (Megoran 2007:149)

As followers of Jesus Christ, Christians should work towards peace. ***One way of working towards peace is by reframing or redefining the issues.*** I think the phrase, “war on terror,” is a misnomer. Rather than describe the struggle against terrorism as “war,” I think it is more appropriate to describe it an international crime. If we call it a “war” then civil liberties and human rights can easily be trampled on. If we call it an international crime, then the rule of law and due process is respected. The book, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* says it well:

Seeing it [the war on terror] as a war adds to the international attention that it gets, which is what terrorists seek, and adds to the fear and disruption of life and basic rights and liberties of citizens ... Declaring terrorism an international crime and trying terrorists who are caught in court decreases its hero status among its frustrated constituencies. Identifying terror as a crime requires that actions against terrorist be directed against those responsible for terrorist acts as in police action rather than using the more indiscriminate force as in war. Treating terrorism as a crime brings it under the rule of international law... It has the potential to bridge divisions between the West and Islam by identifying common norms in international law (Stassen 2004: 7).

In addition, Christians should call their government to do justice! One good example of the prophetic role Christians should play is modelled by an American organization, “Evangelicals for Human Rights” (EHR).¹ They have been raised up by God to resist the violent practice of torture perpetrated in the name of national security and the “war on terror” under the present U.S. administration. EHR is mounting a strong campaign against torture that seeks to impact the U.S. government. For example, during the recent

¹ I am presently serving on the Steering Committee for Evangelicals for Human Rights.

Presidential primaries in the U.S. on national T.V., Dr. David Gushee, President of the EHR, personally questioned Barack Obama regarding his view on torture. The goal of EHR is clear: they want to see torture abolished -- by anyone, anywhere, beginning with the United States. (<http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/>).

Perhaps the most typical form of violence perpetrated by religious communities is *the violence of words*. (This is one area where we don't need the governments help and we usually don't face governmental interference!) Words are like weapons, inflicting pain, causing conflict and inciting violence.

What makes the violence of words particularly dangerous is the globalized, interconnected world in which we live. In the past, when leaders in the religious community spoke, it was only heard by their own community. But today our words ricochet around the world.

Perhaps the most powerful example of an interconnected world is the internet search engine known as "Google." Type in a few words about anything and you can get a string of articles and information in seconds. In this "google-ized" world -- virtually every time we try to explain who we are, what we believe, what we do, and why we do it -- our words are likely to reach beyond our primary audience and enter the global marketplace of ideas.

There are many infamous examples of Christians, Muslims and Jews using violent words. I repeat these only to illustrate, not to offend or stir up past hurts. It is difficult for me to even repeat these grievous words, but they powerfully illustrate my point. Here are just a few:

- Televangelist Pat Robertson said some Muslims are "satanic" and planning world domination. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11814608/>
- Arnon Soffer, a Jewish professor said about Palestinians: Those people will become even bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam... So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill." <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1191257273616&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FPrinter>
- Reverend Franklin Graham said Islam is a very evil and a very wicked religion. http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/10/09/america/NA_GEN_US_Christian_Evangelist_Sudan.php
- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be wiped off the map. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/10/26/news/iran.php>

In many cases violent words merely offend, stir-up hatred or cause division. But in other cases they lead to death. For example, the late Baptist Pastor Jerry Falwell called the

Prophet Muhammad a terrorist. The result: In Solapar, India, what started as a protest against Jerry Falwell turned into a deadly riot that killed eight and injured 90.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2323897.stm>

In the cases mentioned above, each person either apologized or tried to explain away what they meant. But the damage was done. Words are powerful.

Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" haunts us (1998). Huntington would not want to say that the clash of civilizations is inevitable. But the way he arranges his evidence and the way he argues leads to these conclusions. Though he writes as a scholar and not a religious leader, nevertheless his words can be construed as violent.

What is the unique act of violence most frequently perpetrated by religious leaders?
The violence of words.

Words have power to heal or to hurt; to bless or to curse; to divide or to bring peace. As the Prophet Solomon teaches ...

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18)

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21)

Jesus the Messiah says:

God blesses those who work for peace (Matthew 5:9)

The Injil (New Testament) commands us:

Pursue peace with everyone (Hebrews 12:14)

We seek to obey these sacred Scriptures at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture's Reconciliation Program where I presently serve. In fact, we are seeking to reframe the Muslim-Christian relationship so it is no longer perceived as a "clash of civilizations." Instead we seek a "dialogue of civilizations" that stresses mutual love, graciously bearing witness to one's faith, and working towards religious freedom.

Media coverage of violence by Muslims, Christians and Jews

I have had my words twisted and wrenched out of context by journalists, as have many of my friends. So it is easy to complain about the media. Surely it is not an overstatement to say that Western media tends to stir up Islamophobia, while Muslim media tends to stir up anti-Americanism and hatred of the West.

So how do we evaluate the media and what can we do about it as religious leaders?

There are two ways to view media coverage of violence. Media *reports* violence and sometimes media *incites* violence. A beauty pageant in Nigeria in 2002 vividly illustrates how media can do both.

The Muslim population of Nigeria - about 50 percent - was vehemently opposed to the event. Lateef Adegbite, Secretary General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic affairs, told the Associated Press that the pageant was "a parade of nudity" disrespectful to the Islamic faith.

So, when given a trigger, the extremists took no delay acting. In ThisDay newspaper, Isioma Daniel wrote an article in which she commented on the pageant. She said, "What would Muhammad think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from among them."

The Muslim population saw this as slander against their prophet. They rose up and stormed through the streets of Kaduna. They burned the ThisDay office and several Christian churches. Christian mobs retaliated, killing Muslims as they went. The fighting lasted for four days.

According to Reuters, when the riot ended; 22 churches and eight mosques were destroyed, more than 200 people were dead, more than 1,100 hospitalized, 12,000 left homeless and the 80 Ms. World contestants left. (Nigeria's beauty pageant ends up ugly By: Will Minton. Posted: 11/25/02. The Pitt News)
<http://media.www.pittnews.com/media/storage/paper879/news/2002/11/25/Opinions/Nigerias.Beauty.Pageant.Ends.Up.Ug>

There is no mono-causal explanation for this violence. Media, Muslims and Christians all played a role in this tragedy. But certainly the weight of blame rests on the two religious communities. Violent words led to violent actions. Both Christians and Muslims failed to respond in non-violent ways. Christians failed to follow the peaceable ways of Jesus.

In the midst of the chronic conflict between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria there are bright spots. One journalist shows how the media can promote peace – by telling the right kind of stories. Here's how a Christian pastor and a Muslim Imam founded the Interfaith Mediation Centre to bring about reconciliation and peace in Kaduna, Nigeria, the very same city that erupted in violence over the beauty pageant.

Pastor James Movel Wuye was born in Kaduna... As a teenager James joined the Christian Association of Nigeria, and at 27 became general secretary of the Youth Wing. When fighting between Christians and Muslims reached Kaduna in 1987, James became the head of a Christian militia. James used Scriptures to justify the violence.

At age 32 a fight broke out between Christians and Muslims over control of a market. The Christians were outnumbered, and 20 of them were killed. James passed out and when he woke up he found that his right arm had been sliced off with a machete.

Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa comes from a long line of Muslim scholars... When the missionaries and British colonialists came to Nigeria, he and other Muslims saw this as an invasion...

In 1987 when religious violence hit Kaduna, Ashafa, like James, became a militia leader. He says, "We planted the seed of genocide, and we used the scripture to do that. In Islam you must fight ...As a leader you create a scenario where this is the only interpretation. But Ashafa's mentor, a Sufi hermit, tried to warn the young man away from violence.

In 1992, Christian militiamen stabbed the hermit to death and threw his body down a well. Ashafa's only mission became revenge: he was going to kill James. Then, one Friday during a sermon, Ashafa's imam told the story of when the Prophet Muhammad had gone to preach at Ta'if, a town about 70 miles southeast of Mecca. Bleeding after being stoned and cast out of town, Muhammad was visited by an angel who asked if he'd like those who mistreated him to be destroyed. Muhammad said no. 'The imam was talking directly to me,' Ashafa said. During the sermon, he began to cry. Next time he met James, he'd forgiven him entirely. To prove it, he went to visit James's sick mother in the hospital.

Slowly the pastor and imam began to work together but James was leery. 'Ashafa carries the psychological mark. I carry the physical and psychological mark,' he said... At a Christian conference in Nigeria... a fellow pastor pulled James aside and said, in almost the same words as the Sufi hermit, 'You can't preach Jesus with hate in your heart.' James said 'That was my real turning point. I came back totally deprogrammed.

For more than a decade now, James and Ashafa have traveled to Nigerian cities and to other countries where Christians and Muslims are fighting. They tell their stories of how they manipulated religious texts to get young people into the streets to shed blood. Both still adhere strictly to the scripture; they just read it more deeply and emphasize different verses."

Sadly, the imam is frequently accused of being a sellout because he associates with Christians. He identifies himself very much as a fundamentalist and sees himself as one who emulates Muhammad. Although he and Pastor James don't discuss it, he also proselytizes among Christians. 'I want James to die as a Muslim, and he wants me to die as a Christian. My Islam is proselytizing. It's about bringing the whole world to Islam.'

Such missionary zeal drives both men, infusing their struggle to rise above their history of conflict . . . Pastor James still believes strongly in absolute and exclusive salvation mandated by the gospel: ‘Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ He still challenges Christians to rely on the strict and literal word, and he’s still uncompromising on fundamental issues of Christianity.
(The Atlantic, March 2008, “God’s Country,” by Eliza Griswold, pages 40-55)

Please note: both Pastor James and Imam Ashafa were zealous to bear witness to their faith AND to make peace! In a conflict zone, the Muslim carried out da’wah, while the Christian evangelized – and yet they remained friends and worked together for peace. I appeal to you my brothers and sisters, to be faithful to your mandate to bear witness to your faith among all peoples. At the same time, I encourage you to look into your own Scriptures and traditions, and from them to teach and preach about peacemaking and reconciliation.

War, violence, conflict and problems are the stuff of media. I realize that the “clash of civilizations” makes better copy for journalists than the “dialogue of civilizations.” But there are noble journalists – men and women of integrity who want to be a positive influence. **I appeal to the media. Don’t just write about bad news and cover the sensational. Find and print those stories that promote peace and enrich society. And I appeal to you religious leaders to build relationships with the noble type of journalists.**

I would like to close with an example and a plea.

On October 13, 2007, 138 Muslim scholars from every corner of the Muslim world, representing every major school of Islamic thought (e.g. Sunni, Shi’i, Sufi, etc.), sent an open letter “to leaders of Christian churches, everywhere.” This noteworthy group of Muslim scholars and clerics maintains that the common ground between Muslims and Christians centers on the commands to love God and to love our neighbor. Proposing this as a basis for dialogue, they invite Christian leaders from around the world to engage with them in discussion that supports the important work of reconciliation. This invitation is referred to as “A Common Word between Us and You” – henceforth “A Common Word” (see www.acommonword.com).

“A Common Word” is viewed by many as the most important interfaith document in nearly half a century, and it opens a noteworthy and potentially unprecedented door of opportunity for substantive dialogue between leading Muslims and Christians. For this reason, the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, along with other members of the Yale Divinity School community, have responded with the publication of “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’” (henceforth “the Yale response”). The Yale response was released several days after “A Common Word,” and it was published as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* on November 13, 2007 over the signatures of approximately 130 prominent Christian leaders and scholars.

This could potentially be one of the most significant Muslim-Christian initiatives in modern history. I hope the media will seek to focus on this positive peacemaking event. I invite them to turn out for the first stage of these dialogues when 100 Muslim leaders and 100 Christian leaders gather at Yale University July 28-31, 2008.

Bibliography

Griswold, Eliza

2008 “*God’s Country*” In *The Atlantic*, Vol 301, Number 2, March edition. Pp 40-55.

Huntington, Samuel P.

1998 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*
London: Touchstone

Kung, Hans

1991 *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*
Wipf & Stock Publishers: Eugene, Oregon

Lindley, Chris and Molly Wall

2006 “*Violent Words’ in a Shrinking World: A Biblical Response*”
A paper presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society
Pasadena, California

Megoran, Nick Solly

2007 *The War on Terror: How Should Christians Respond?*
InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois

Stassen, Glen

2004 *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*
The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, Ohio