

Religion and Violence

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

September 12, 2021

Fr. Tony Davis

Twenty years ago, this nation experienced one of its greatest moments of suffering. On September 11, 2001, Americans were stunned at the events that unfolded that day in what we thought was an otherwise safe nation. Thousands lost their lives and many more were scarred from this traumatic experience. May God bless all those who lost their lives, including the first responders, on 9/11.

One of the sad lessons from 9/11 is that religion can be used to do violence. Religious extremists carried out the terrorist attacks and continue to terrorize people today, as we saw a few weeks ago when our troops left Afghanistan. Many of these terrorists are so set in their ways that it is difficult to reason with them. They believe that they are literally following the will of God, even though they clearly lack empathy for their fellow human beings.

Before thinking that violence is just an issue for one particular religion, however, we must acknowledge that it is an issue for every religion. In today's Gospel, Jesus predicted that it would be the Jewish religious leaders - the chief priests, elders, and scribes- who would put him to death. In our own Christian history, we know that we have initiated crusades and wars. We have imposed our way of life on others and wiped-out whole populations. Using religion to do violence is a temptation for all of us. In our zeal for God and our religions, we can get too carried away.

Religions in themselves are fundamentally non-violent. They are about life, meaning, and eternity. Any violence in them comes from the human side, not the divine side. This is especially true in all of our sacred books, which are a mixture of the human and the divine. Religious historian Karen Armstrong, in her 'Charter for Compassion,' properly wrote that religions need "to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate." (*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, 7) Again, violence is from the human side, not the divine. Even if there are passages in our sacred books that favor violence, as Armstrong says, keep reading. The context will help explain why. We will see that the violent passages are minor in comparison with the overall message God is giving us.

As religious people, all of us have the obligation to reflect upon the ways we have let violence into our practice of religion.

Violence in religion isn't just about extreme acts of terrorism on a global scale. It is also about our hurtful words, self-righteous actions, and hatred of others who are different. Can I recognize violence wherever it is to be found, including in my own religion?

On this 9/11 weekend, we pray that the words 'religion' and 'violence' may lose their association with each other. We pray for the conversion of terrorists, the lives that were lost 20 years ago, the families of the victims, and most importantly, that we may root out the violence that is still within each one of our religions.