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Looking through the crosshairs

John Dear | Jan. 20, 2011 On the Road to Peace

When Sarah Palin -- a possible Republican presidential candidate -- displayed on her Web site a national map covered with crosshairs from rifle scopes marking the politicians she would like to eliminate, she was, to my mind, showing us the way we see one another -- as targets.

That may sound harsh, but I think she put a mirror up to our violence. We rarely see people as human beings.

Instead, we put people in categories, judge them by our warped cultural standards, and label them with all sorts of epithets, such as "alien," "illegal" or "enemy." Before long, we declare them expendable.

When Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and other teachers of violence broadcast their hate, and speak nonchalantly of killing Michael Moore and Julian Assange, they urge us to see human beings as expendable targets.

The sick young man who shot and killed people at the Tucson, Ariz., Safeway last week was simply acting on that demonic talk, on the lack of vision that leads to death. He joined the global killing spree.

Many insightful articles have been written about the Tucson shootings (such as pieces by Paul Krugman [1] and Frank Rich [2] in *The New York Times*, and Arlene Goldbard [3] of the Shalom Center). I've been trying to take in the big picture, and that has led me to ponder Sarah Palin's crosshairs as symbolic of our dire spiritual state.

Too many of us see life through the sites of a gun. There are more handguns than people in the United States, and sales of the shooter's Glock 19 have soared since the killings [4]. A week after the killings, the Tucson gun show has gone on as scheduled. Business is back to normal, and the latest round of violence will soon be forgotten.

Seeing others through the crosshairs has become routine, a way of life institutionalized to an unparalleled extent over a century of killing that left over 100 million dead from war.

President Obama and his warmakers, it must be said, look through the crosshairs to bomb children in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. As former Attorney General Ramsey Clark testified at our recent trial for protesting drones [5] at Creech Air Force base, the U.S. now engages regularly in extrajudicial murder -- political assassination through unmanned drones as a method of resolving international conflict. At Creech, young trained operators look through the crosshairs. (I'll be back in Las Vegas court next week to hear the verdict from our trial, and if I have to make a statement, I will plead for an end to these drones.)

On death row, we look at human beings as targets to be killed. On our inner city streets and national borders, we look at others as targets to be killed. But at the Pentagon and our 730 military bases around the world, we look upon entire nations as targets to be killed. And at Los Alamos, we see the whole planet through the crosshairs, and willingly prepare the nuclear destruction of humanity.

All of this has become normal, acceptable, legal, mundane even. We have grown used to seeing one another

through the crosshairs of our weapons, as Sarah Palin, Barack Obama and George W. Bush do. This profound spiritual crisis will lead to more deaths unless together we try a different point of view.

Last week, I drove across the country with a Jesuit friend and stopped in Memphis to say a prayer at the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by government officials in 1968. I thought of all the guns aimed at him, the eyes that looked at him through crosshairs, the official hate that made him a target. While I was there, a Pentagon spokesperson announced that Dr. King would surely support the U.S. war in Afghanistan [6]. It's as if they're still trying to kill him by dragging him into their work of war.

Dr. King was one of the rare exceptions who could see clearly. He did not look at anyone through crosshairs. Because of that clarity of vision, he could see beyond racism, poverty, war and nuclear weapons into a new world of peace, justice and equality. He knew that new world required the boundary of nonviolence, so he urged us as a people to become nonviolent. That is the way out of our spiritual nightmare, he said.

As we drove from Washington, D.C. to New Mexico, we were shocked by the violent billboards dotting the landscape, announcing "Guns! Guns! Guns!" or an upcoming gun show. Between military bases we also noticed the signs announcing "Jesus Is Lord." At one gas station, we saw dozens of hunting and military hats for sale with slogans that read, "Proud of my guns" and "Jesus Is Lord." One seemed to go with the other.

Do some of us think Jesus died for some of us so we can own guns, eliminate those we do not like and be the world's superpower? That's like saying Dr. King would support the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Let me state the obvious: Jesus did not see people through the crosshairs. He saw no one as a target, as beyond redemption, as expendable, as worthy of condemnation. His nonviolent vision was clear: he saw every human being as a child of the God of love and peace. With that astonishing clarity, he called us to follow him on the path of nonviolent love and peace, to see others through his eyes of nonviolence, to love even our enemies, and to spread that field of nonviolence far and wide.

Of course, for that clear-sighted vision of humanity and the action he took in response, he himself was targeted by the empire and executed. But he rose and continues to lead us on that path of peace and nonviolence.

I grieve for all those shot and injured in Tucson, but I'm not surprised at this violence. We are very sick, blinded by our addiction to violence. Violence is a contagion afflicting the entire planet. It is a common plague brought on by a demonic spirit of fear, anger and greed which dehumanizes us to forget that we are loved by the God of peace and created to be children of the God of peace.

So I connect the Tucson shootings with all those shot and injured in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, on our borders, in our cities, on our death rows, as well as in Oklahoma City, 9/11, Virginia Tech, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Hiroshima. From this broad perspective, all of us, including Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, are victims of violence. None of us can see straight. All of us are sick. All of us need to return to the God of peace who wants to love us, heal us and disarm us.

Dr. King and Gandhi learned from Jesus that we need to make nonviolence a way of life if we want to end the killings, be healed, and resolve conflict peacefully. Few heed their call, but their example remains. The media ignores this nonviolent alternative. But it's shocking how few priests, bishops, ministers or church leaders accept and teach the nonviolence of Jesus.

We need legislation to ban handguns, as well as drones, electric chairs, Trident Submarines and nuclear weapons. But at a deeper level, we need a global conversion to Jesus' nonviolence so that we will put down our guns, stop looking at one another through crosshairs, recognize each other as sister and brother, clean up the planet and start feeding, educating, and healing one another.

Recently, in Phoenix, Ariz., I saw this kind of change begin. For an entire day, I spoke to a crowded church about the lessons of nonviolence from Jesus to St. Francis. The room was energized, people were excited, and our closing prayer service sent us forth to be instruments of Christ's peace. Afterwards, a man approached and asked, "Are you saying that Jesus and Francis would not want me to keep my arsenal of guns and bullets, that they would want me to get rid of them and love and serve others instead?" I looked at him incredulously, for I had spent the entire day saying just that. "Yes, of course," I answered. "Well, I promise to throw all my guns and bullets in a pit and bury them in concrete if you tell me to do so." I told him to do that. He e-mailed the next day to say that his weapons were destroyed and he felt much freer and happier.

The nonviolent Jesus sees us with the eyes of compassionate, nonviolent love. He wants us to see one another, not through the crosshairs of a gun, but through the cross, the lens of nonviolence, and so to get rid of our guns, recognize one another as sisters and brothers, and live in the peace of nonviolence.

If you believe in a God of peace, this invitation makes sense. From our hate talk to our drones and nuclear weapons, our violence is not working. It doesn't make us happier, safer or secure. It destroys us at every level. Jesus' movement of nonviolence offers a viable alternative. It's the one political campaign left worth joining.

Let's pray that we all will put down our guns, love one another more and more as sisters and brothers, and learn to see clearly through Christ's visionary nonviolence.

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To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. Next week, John will join the Creech 14 in the Las Vegas courthouse for the judge?s verdict. Next month, he will give a keynote speech at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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Links:

[1] http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/08/assassination-attempt-in-arizona/
[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/opinion/16rich.html?_r=2&src=ISMR_HP_LO_MST_FB
[3] http://arlenegoldbard.com/2011/01/11/baseless-hatred-baseless-love/
[4] http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-11/glock-pistol-sales-surge-in-aftermath-of-shooting-of-arizona-s-giffords.html
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