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When religions stop using hate words, politics will too

Bill Tammeus | Feb. 9, 2011 A small c catholic

In the sad, volatile weeks since the Tucson massacre [1], nearly every accusation possible has been made about the presence of vitriol in our political discourse and about the sources of its many constituent toxins.

I say ?nearly? because so far I?ve heard almost no one from a religious background acknowledge that religion itself -- both in its sacred writ and in the inability of its adherents to restrain their know-it-all pronouncements -- may well be the most egregious sinner when it comes to language that promotes violent dissent.

It?s time that all people of faith stand in the dock and admit guilt on this count -- and then resolve to try to fix things.

The group of men from my church with whom I?ve met weekly for breakfast, Bible study and prayer for three decades has been reading the angry prophet Jeremiah, and the very week of the Tucson shootings we heard these words from chapter 19:

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ?Behold, I will bring such a catastrophe on this place, that whoever hears of it, his ears will tingle.?and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their lives; their corpses I will give as meat for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth.?

Nice, Lord. Thanks for your help in ratcheting down the rhetoric, in holding back your indignation, in silencing the voice of revenge.

Oh, I know there are other lessons to be drawn from that passage and that it?s unfair to think we can plug today?s news in to any particular scriptural text we happen upon. But the reality is that such language can -- and sometimes does -- become warrant for us to employ intemperate words against those who wrong us by disagreeing with us. The history of religious pronouncements is, in many ways, a vast collection of fire and brimstone, and because such words presume to reflect the mind of God they become inordinately influential.

After all, if the Lord of hosts can pitch a hissy fit, surely we can, too.

Examples abound, but as a Presbyterian let me look first to the theological father of Presbyterians, the Swiss reformer John Calvin [2] -- a brilliant mind who nonetheless was so certain of his own rectitude and of the depravity of the Roman Catholic Church that he declared the pope himself to be the anti-Christ, saying in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion [3]*: ??we regard the Roman Pontiff as the leader and standard-bearer of that wicked and abominable kingdom.?

Similarly, in 1543, the founder of the Protestant Reformation [4], Martin Luther [5], issued a treatise called ?On the Jews and Their Lies [6]? -- in which he advocated the burning of synagogues. Jews, he said, should be ?forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray and to teach publicly among us and in our country.?

This is the language of violence. This is what author James Carroll once labeled ?a homiletic massacre.?

More recent faith-based slanders and libels can be paraded out, too, against blacks; women; gays and lesbians; Muslims -- a nearly endless list of targets. The list of religious leaders and their adherents who hurl this furious rubbish would, over the centuries, constitute a who?s-who of religion.

And we wonder why politicians engage in this trash talk. Religion often sets a model for the secular world.

What of religious voices of reason, compassion, hope and love? Yes, of course, they can be heard, too. And must be heard. And will be heard, in the end.

But such soothing voices have a lamentable and bloody history to overcome. Maybe if people of faith stood up and acknowledged this sad history others would listen and, finally, words of hate machine-gunned into an already wounded world could be silenced in favor of words that heal.

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