

Teaching about Terrorism and War

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In teaching about terrorism and war, we have to help our students get behind the events to the causes and possible remedies. Here is one approach. In my Religious Studies classes I ask my students this question: What are the perceptions about American culture which frustrate Osama bin Laden? Then we generate these answers:

- . Individualism, which neglects the common good in forming consciences.
- . Moral relativism, which says nothing can be known for certain, so all competing values are equal. Human life is no more valuable than a new car or television set.
- . Stress on instant gratification of all desires and impulses, fostered by mass media which promote consumerism.

We discuss how followers of Osama bin Laden—and many Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other religions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—feel that everything they hold precious and dear is collapsing around them under the onslaught of American media and the American military-industrial complex. They are terrified by this. As a fundamentalist, Osama bin Laden cannot distinguish between essentials and accidentals, between core and peripheral values. Everything is equally important. Terrorized himself, he lashes out at us and wants us to suffer, to be as terrorized as he is.

We then discuss possible remedies. Bombing may drive the terrorists underground but does not get at the root causes of the terrorism. If Osama bin Laden is killed, others will arise to carry on the struggle. Anti-American demonstrations all over the world dramatize this. Millions of people feel threatened by our culture. Despairing, they feel they have nothing more to lose but their lives, and they might as well make a dying statement to get people's attention. This same attitude is found within American borders, in the Oklahoma City bombings, in the mass suicides of Jim Jones' followers. It is important to distinguish between victims and targets of both terrorists and Mafiosi: they victimize a few to terrorize and paralyze a much broader population. Allowing thugs to influence our behavior hands them the power to set our agenda. We must punish crime but not panic—as did the army in Chile and Argentina and the Tutsis in Rwanda.

Lashing back at terrorists just intensifies their fears. Fear is only overcome by love. Love breaks the cycle of violence. Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye blinds the world." He was right. The vengeance embodied in the Treaty of Versailles led 20 years later to the rise of fascism. The generosity shown by Americans after World War II led to 50 years and more of peace. Retaliation does not work. Love does. Not just any kind of love, of course. Some forms of love are perceived as smothering or patronizing or humiliating, as attempts to control. That intensifies anger and fear. Genuine love begins with respect for the dignity and insights of others.

Our challenge is: How do we reduce fears by love? How can we show love to terrorized people? Students generate responses: Listen. Share their concerns and let them see it. Ask their help. Offer to help them. Act. Then talk about common values shared by all. Individuals can do this.

Beyond such discussion, teachers and students can do more. Commercial media often manipulate, creating artificial needs, proposing superficial satisfaction, and relying on bad news to foster anxiety and heighten needs. We can make our classrooms and learning projects countercultural, exploring how to replace false values with true ones, a materialistic outlook with a spiritual one, selfishness with generosity. We can tell good news in good ways, like telling stories with pithy punch lines like Jesus and Paul, and we can use drama to explore life's mysteries. We can use the Internet, with its interactive and graphics capability, to engage people's imaginations so that they become willing participants, thus intensifying the sense of community and counteracting selfish individualism. In this way, we can broaden understanding about friends, family, neighborhood, city, nation and the whole world.

And we can do more. Through thought-provoking study, we can provide formation and transformation as we expand awareness of the needs and wants of oneself and others and awareness of how to satisfy those needs: what works, what doesn't. Better still, we can relativize various needs as one becomes aware of the importance of others. Building more interaction into our teaching, from question-and-answer to group discussion to chatrooms, invites people to enter into thoughtful dialogue with each other. More effective communication, with better content and values, is the best way to prevent terrorism and war.