

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can one be a militant for peace and justice?



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A seminary student once asked me, "Why do some people read the Bible and find reason to kill, while others read the same Bible and find reason to love?"

This is the basic question that R. Scott Appleby asked when he and University of Chicago historian Martin Marty co-directed the multiyear "Fundamentalism Project," funded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and co-edited the resulting five-volume report published in the 1990s.

In Appleby's book "The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation," he explores how religion and violence are related. As the title suggests, there is an ambivalence in how these two are connected. For Appleby, it is too simplistic to say that religion by nature leads to violence, but it is also naive to dismiss religious extremists as merely bad people who have no connection to a religious tradition. Throughout the world and through the centuries, he writes, there have been "inquisitions, crusades, pogroms and wars conducted in the name of God." At the same time, we must "appreciate the profoundly humane and humanizing attributes of religion and the moral constraints it imposes on intolerant and violent behavior."

The relationship is complex, and in describing it, Appleby uses the ambivalent

term "militant." In hearing this word one might immediately think in terms of violent action or even military force.

Yet the term is also used to describe someone who believes very strongly about a cause and is active in bringing about political or social change. One can be a militant feminist or a militant on the issue of global warming. It reflects an intense commitment to a cause or bold action in pursuit of a goal. For Appleby, the term can also be used to describe the religious person who vigorously pursues peace, is actively working for a just cause, even willing to risk one's life in the effort.

DIFFERENT KIND OF MILITANT

The extremist is militant, but the peacemaker can also be militant in dedication to the cause. According to Appleby, "Both types 'go to extremes' of self-sacrifice in devotion to the sacred; both claim to be 'radical,' or rooted in ways they distinguish themselves from people not motivated by religious commitments. ... Yet the peacemaker renounces violence as an acceptable extreme ... and restricts the war against oppressors and injustice to noncoercive means. The extremist, by contrast, exalts violence as a religious prerogative or even as a spiritual imperative in the quest for justice."

From a 2011 lecture at Vanderbilt University, Appleby asks: "How can the adherents of same religious traditions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Bud-

dhisim or Mormonism ... even those who live in the same political cultural contexts, how can some of those believers embrace both deadly violence, while others embrace non-violent sacrifice for peace?"

Each religion is not a monolith, Appleby argues. There is not one Christianity, or one Islam, or one Judaism or Hinduism. All are complex even as individuals in each tradition are complex. There is ambiguity in religion in spite of the human desire for certainty. The gap between what it is to be a finite human and the experience of ultimate reality can be overwhelming. We can approach it as mystery and accept the ambiguity, or we can create false gods in the need for certainty.

Appleby argues not for a weakened religion, but a stronger religion that generates the type of militant that takes bold and committed action toward justice. He quotes Bishop Desmond Tutu: "Any person of faith has no real option. In the face of injustice and oppression it is to disobey God not to stand up in opposition to that injustice and oppression. ... It must galvanize participants with a zeal to be active protectors of the rights of people." Militancy combined with justice is the proper response of the person of faith who is consumed by the divine imperative.

In the famous words of Pope Paul VI, "If you want peace, work for justice." This is the road for the fervent, committed, dedicated, militant peacemaker.

The Hebrew Scriptures present the choice before us: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses: therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Appleby, who previously served as the director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace, is currently the dean of the Keough School of Global Affairs and professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. We have the privilege of hearing him at the annual Interfaith Consortium Conference on Nov. 8 at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids.

In the "ambivalence of the sacred," we must choose the direction that our religious commitments will take us. Let us choose life, acceptance of the other, love of neighbor, and peace through justice.

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If you go

Interfaith Consortium Conference

- ▶ "Can Religions Collaborate for the Common Good"
- ▶ noon to 8:30 p.m., Wednesday, Nov. 8.
- ▶ Aquinas College, Grand Rapids
- ▶ Details and free registration at: interfaith-understanding.org