

In a world of competing ideologies, let us come together through personal interaction, affirming difference as a strength and respecting every person's right to live and flourish.

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

When religious communities become targets of violence



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Why is religion often a factor in increasingly common acts of mass shootings?

On July 28, at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in California, a 19-year-old killed three people and injured 15 others. Among the dead were two children, ages 6 and 13. The FBI, investigating this shooting as an act of domestic terrorism, noted that the shooter, a reader of anti-Semitic literature, left a list of religious organizations and other targets.

Less than a week later, another young shooter, 21, traveled more than 600 miles to El Paso, Texas, and killed 22 people and wounded more. His target, a border city with a majority of Hispanic residents, was carefully chosen, as explained in his hate-filled manifesto sent out online just minutes prior to his act of violence. In it, he talks about the "Hispanic invasion of Texas" and warns that foreigners are replacing white people. He also indicated his support for the Christchurch shooter in New Zealand.

The Christchurch shooter's 74-page manifesto, titled "The Great Replacement," was sent out to more than 30 people as well as to the media, prior to his violent acts at two mosques killing 51 people and injuring dozens more. In his manifesto, he praises the genocide of Muslims during the Bosnian War, cites a Norwegian anti-Muslim terrorist's 2011 act of killing 77, and praises those who promote white identity.

And, just last weekend, another terrorist began firing on a mosque in Norway but was overpowered by one of the worshipers before the gunman killed anyone.

Earlier this year in April, a shooter entered a synagogue on the last day of the Jewish holiday of Passover in Poway, California, killing one and injuring others, including the rabbi. He likely would have killed more, except his semi-automatic rifle jammed or malfunctioned.

Last October, a shooter entered the Tree of Life Synagogue near Pittsburgh, killing 11 and injuring more. He was heard shouting, "I just want to kill Jews."

In February last year, the Parkland, Florida, school shooter killed 17. He had hurled slurs on social media against blacks and Muslims, and he had ties to white supremacists.

We could continue by pointing to the 2015 killing of eight during prayer at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina.

And, in 2012, a white supremacist gunman entered the Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six before killing himself.

Why is religion combined with racism such a prominent feature in so many of these mass killings?

There are many other questions to ask in light of the recent killing. What is the role of violent video games? Is it a mental health issue? What about gun laws and political rhetoric? Is the media contributing by publicizing the shooters and the manifestos they write and circulate? What is the role of social media?

The discussion and debates will go on, but some things seem to emerge from the studies and analyses that have taken place. It has repeatedly been shown that there is no evidence of a link between

video games and violent acts. Furthermore, many other countries have large video game markets but very little gun violence.

It might seem that anyone who kills has a mental problem but, again, the link is not established, and there is little evidence of a mental-illness diagnosis of the perpetrators.

The role of media publicizing the killer and his manifesto is also debated. Some argue it is important to expose the killer and his ideology as expressed in his statements, saying that sunlight is a disinfectant.

University of Syracuse professor and media scholar Whitney Phillips counters this argument, writing, "What sunlight mostly does is help things grow." She argues that the publicity helps spread the killer's ideology and encourages a network of disillusioned racists.

It is noteworthy that New Zealand officials and media refused to use the name or picture of the person who killed so many in the two mosques.

Given the references in the manifestos from the killers, it is clear that they follow previous acts of violence and racism discussed in social media. While it is often stated that they acted alone, they are not alone in the social media world. It is becoming an international phenomenon — from Norway to New Zealand to El Paso, the connections are there. Communication in the media and online has an impact.

It is also clear that racism often gets expressed against religious communities. While the gunmen might be acting alone at the time of the killing, it is noteworthy that it is communities of people who are attacked. It is churches, mosques, synagogues and gurdwaras that are attacked. When people come together to worship or celebrate, it is an affront to some who see them as different. But they also see them in community — an experience that these "loners" may not themselves have. Could it be that the coming together in community is a threat to these shooters?

Furthermore, religious people not only come together personally, they share a different ideology. They talk of loving the stranger; they see all people as children of God. They teach doing what is right and just. This is not to say that all religious communities practice these values — there are unfortunately exceptions — but, for the most part, these are the values promoted.

Is it perhaps their hatred of these communal values, and their resentment at feeling excluded from these communities, that stokes the killers' rage?

Religious people are not alone in promoting these values, but they do form communities that support one another and teach the values through understanding scriptures, sharing common stories and providing practices and liturgies that reinforce the teaching.

The increasing commitment to interfaith understanding is also a way to work against the separatism that tempts all groups. We are learning more about respecting our differences while affirming our commitment to the common good.

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