

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In responding to religious hate, choose hope over fear



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In recent years, we have witnessed an alarming increase in hate and violence against religious communities and persons.

Usually, it targets groups that are religiously, or racially, not in the majority. It often comes from persons who identify with white supremacy. Our political environment of polarization has led to increased hate talk as well as hate actions, sometimes leading to violence. Fear of those perceived as the “other” often leads to actions against people just because they look different or worship in a different manner. Increased incidents of hate are often against Hispanics and African-Americans as well as against immigrants. We have seen violence against houses of worship and religious institutions.

Recently, these acts of hate have led to violence and death. Just last month, we witnessed a shooter who traveled more than 600 miles to arrive in the border town of El Paso, Texas, just so he could kill Mexicans. He wrote a manifesto expressing his praise for the shooter in Christchurch, New Zealand, who killed 51 worshippers at two mosques.

Earlier this year, on the last day of the Jewish celebration of Passover, a gunman opened fire on 100 worshippers in a synagogue in Poway, California, killing one. The attack happened six months after a mass shooting in Pittsburgh killed 11 at the Tree of Life Synagogue. The shooter, a 46-year-old white man, shouted “All Jews must die!” during the attack.

Black churches also have been the target, including 26 killed at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in 2017. Earlier, Charleston, South Carolina, saw the killing of nine people during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church.

In all of these cases, there has been an outpouring of support and concern for the victims and their families. People from all faith traditions have come together to denounce the killings and express support. The response comes from religious, as well as non-religious, persons who want nothing to do with such expressions of hate. It is often the interfaith community that steps in to organize and promote these memorial events and efforts of support.

The perpetrators of these hate crimes express anti-Semitic and Islamophobic sentiments as well as racial prejudice. They express fear of invasion by people who are not like them. When the neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched on Charlottesville, Virginia, they shouted “Jews will not replace us.”

This tension between racial and religious groups is not new to America. In his recent book, “The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels,” Jon Meacham, New York

Times bestselling author and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, looks back over our history at times when we succeeded in overcoming fear and division. He sees our situation today as another time in the “battle for our better angels.” Division and polarization threatens not only our unity but also our understanding of justice as well as commitment to the common good. The decision to choose the side of the angels, he says, must come from the soul.

Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, desperately wishing to avoid war with the South, concluded his speech with an impassioned plea: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.” He ended with hope for the touch by “the better angels of our nature.”

Meacham sees much of the conflict, both historically and in our current situation, being driven by fear. It is the fear of the other, the immigrant or the person who doesn’t share my ideology. He describes a fear based on an assumption that one’s own opportunity is “dependent on domination over others.” In such situations, the expansion of opportunity for minorities or immigrants must mean a loss of opportunity for themselves. The forces of reaction and self-protection emerge.

As he examines such times in the past, Meacham writes of our finest hours when “the soul of the country manifests itself in an inclination to open our arms rather than to clench our fists; to look out rather than to turn inward, to accept rather than to reject. In so doing, America has grown ever stronger, confident that the choice of light over dark is the means by which we pursue progress.”

Meacham finds hope in the way in which we as a nation have emerged from the dark hours of conflict and found hope. He sees hope as the opposite of fear and writes, “Fear feeds anxiety and produces anger; hope ... breeds optimism and feelings of well-being. Fear is about limits; hope is about growth. Fear casts its eyes warily, even shiftily, across the landscape; hope looks forward, toward the horizon. Fear points at others, assigning blame; hope points ahead, working for a common good. Fear pushes away; hope pulls others closer. Fear divides; hope unifies.”

In our own communities, we must not wait for tragedy to strike in order to come together and express our love of neighbor and even the stranger. Our community needs it; our nation needs it. We must choose hope over fear.

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