

Religious fanaticism is the exception, not the rule

Maureen Fiedler | Apr. 23, 2013 NCR Today

Last week, I was watching BBC TV news. They were airing exclusive footage -- about a month old -- from Myanmar, showing Buddhists viciously attacking Muslims and burning their settlement. Even a few Buddhist monks joined in the mayhem.

Buddhism, of course, does not countenance, much less encourage, such actions. And neither does Christianity (as we know) or Judaism or Islam. The core teachings of all the major faith traditions preach some version of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

That's why branding all Muslims or Jews or Christians or Buddhists as terrorists, evil or whatever makes no sense at all. And it's fundamentally unjust. Most of the adherents of these faith traditions do not countenance or use violence as a means of achieving their goals. In fact, they are horrified at bombings like those at the Boston Marathon or actions such as those on 9/11.

But all religious traditions have had their fanatics, and some of them have at times grown into substantial and violent movements like al-Qaida. In Christian history, the Crusades come to mind as well as the century of "religious wars" between Protestants and Catholics in Europe. Granted, other factors and power equations have entered into all these wars, but religious fanaticism has surely fanned the flames of violence.

And so when I heard on the Rachel Maddow Show that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the surviving suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings, said -- under questioning -- that "religious fervor" motivated him and his brother to commit these horrific acts, it fits a pattern that is both ancient and new. What to him is "religious fervor" is to others a "violent religious fanaticism," like the actions of the Buddhists in Myanmar.

All this suggests that such fanaticism is something we need to understand better. How is it that some people come to believe at times that they are so correct in their beliefs that everyone else is not only in error, but has forfeited the right to live? Or that someone else is part of an entity that has done a horrible deed (e.g., the US government's actions in, say, Iraq or Afghanistan) and thus can be killed? And how do those who adhere to religious traditions that teach the golden rule come to twist those traditions into an excuse for violence?

In the search for answers, we might begin by checking out the loopholes in the golden rule in many traditions, the ways in which these same traditions provide frameworks to justify violence and war. When those loopholes get large enough, just about anyone can walk through them with a sword, a gun or a bomb. And unfortunately, they too often do just that.

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