

Christian Perspectives

This week we are hearing more positive news from around the world. A group of Canadian physicists have built a powerful telescope and launched it high into the atmosphere over Antarctica. They are hoping not only to look into deep space but also into the past of the universe as light reaching us now has been travelling for eons from the extremities of space. Science has used the term 'big bang' to describe the beginning of the universe. Christians believe a creator God is the 'intelligent design' behind all we see and know. We share this belief with many other world religions. As members of western society we also have a strong democratic sense that we are free to choose how we approach and follow that which we see as divine 'to a point'. The recent events in Paris demonstrate that point. We feel horrified and shaken by the violence that unfolded in Paris not only because we abhor violence but because we see terrorism as crossing a line between what we can accept and what we see as violation of the rights of other human beings.

We cannot fathom how apparent misinterpretations of scripture can breed such hatred and violence. The vast majority of people of Muslim faith share that sense of incredulity with us. But after shock and disgust wear off a little, I think we have to, in humility, look at our own history as Christians. We have to acknowledge that there are periods of time when every religion or way of approaching God, falls far short of the ideal of peaceful co-existence that is a core virtue of faith in a creator God.

The early Christian era was a struggle of different religious ideologies that led to much blood shed. Since Christians were the persecuted ones, our sympathy is all with the martyrs. At a point in history the balance of power shifted. Again, because we live in a democracy that allows people to make up their own minds about their faith, we tend to assume everyone who makes the decision to follow Jesus Christ does so out of a sense of seeking or of being called. Regrettably, coercion has often been a part of conversion in the history of Christianity. A succession of Roman emperors persecuted Christians but when the Emperor Constantine adopted the Christian faith, he made Christianity the state religion and persecuted those who resisted.

History teaches us something about the Crusades. With the rise of Islam, the response of the western Christian world was to mount expeditions to drive Islam out of the Holy Land. We have no idea how many innocent women and children were brutalized by this or how many peaceful men were compelled to go to war. Choice was not an option.

In the middle ages, Christianity was rocked by the periods of inquisition. Theologians, religious orders and political leaders (often one and the same) focussed on the notion of purity and holiness within an exclusive group rather than love for all in God's creation. Jews, adherents of Islam, and those presumed to be wayward Christians were subjected to torture until they professed the faith and were forcibly baptised. In the history of Britain, Roman Catholics were persecuted during the Reformation and Puritans were persecuted under Stewart rule until Oliver Cromwell and the rebellion. Then the Puritans persecuted other denominations until the Restoration when some sects escaped to the Americas in the hope of being able to continue their practices in peace.

Violence committed in the name of religion in the past and today is at odds with the central values of Christianity expressed in the words of Christ, 'love God and love your neighbour.' It also stands against our modern view that human life is of great worth, as indeed Christ also taught. This may be why we like to think there has been genuine progress in civilization since barbaric times. Religious violence in the middle ages may have been the norm. Similar violence in the name of religion in today's world seems much more jarring, inappropriate and out of place.

I have no clear conclusions to draw from thinking about these examples of the worst of human behaviour except to say we still have very far to go to say that human beings are civilized. It is hard not to be discouraged about the state of the world and its future. Now more than ever we are called to live the message of Christ to love God and to love our neighbour; to do all that we can to be faithful to that call on a small scale believing that ultimately love is stronger than hate; to quote a well-known hymn, 'though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.'

By Rev. Stephanie Pellow