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VIEWPOINT

Educational Activism: A post 9/11 reflection

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ON September 11, after doing some yoga, our nephew went to work. He was on the 105th floor of the World Trade Center, in the first building, when the plane hit the towers. Gopal was thirty two and loved music. In the months that followed, as our family grieves we are also trying to understand what is going on. Confronting hatred and violence which goes on in the name of religion, one becomes acutely sensitized to their linkage in particular religious traditions.

Recently, on a research trip to Cambodia, I spent several days at Angkor Wat. The long south wall of this temple, which had originally been dedicated to Vishnu, has carvings of King Suryavarman II (12th century) holding court, an impressive march past of his soldiers, and the pleasures and pains of heaven and hell. The signs of violence are not just in the bas reliefs—there are other palpable reminders of them in this temple which was turned into a Buddhist one several centuries ago. Near the

entrance, we see a huge standing icon of Vishnu with eight arms. His head, however, has been decapitated and replaced with the head of a smiling Buddha; an effort to deny the existence of a Hindu deity in a Buddhist universe. At various points in the temple, we see evidence of recent Khmer Rouge occupation. As I gazed at the beheaded Vishnu who now sported a Buddha-head, my mind drifted other destroyed icons—the Bamiyan Buddhas I would never see; icons destroyed by intolerance, just as this head had been sliced away. And some Muslims, those who blew away the Bamiyan Buddhas, remember the Crusades like it was in the last century.

Within a few seconds, I had gone from the sight of the soldiers on the sculptures and the beheaded Vishnu to a free association of intolerance and fanaticism. It is easy, as I did here, to relativize hatred. This, perhaps, has been the easiest path for many of us in the last few months. We draw parallels on many topics from many

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traditions—we can talk about the shaheed, the martyrs by drawing parallels to the martyrdom in Central America or to notions of patriotism. To the searching questions on Islam and jihad, scholars tend to dip into history and point out that hatred and intolerance has not been the territory of any one religion. We can even list various instances, supporting texts, and relevant contexts. In doing so, we move ourselves from the pain and suffering wrought by acts of hatred into the area of intellectual discourse and analysis. Are we, by such comparisons, diffusing the blame, absolving ourselves of guilt? We as scholars, have the gift of insight made possible by academic distance but run the risk of being distanced from and being blind to ethical queries and the stark grief brought about by acts of violence in the many parts of the world. Every person who dies in this violence leaves behind loved ones who are devastated by the loss and who may never recover from the loss of a mother, a son, a brother, a spouse, or a nephew.

Relativizing hatred and violence is a good tool for starting discussions. So is the discussion of whether something is “real Islam” or “real Christianity” or the “real Hinduism.” I forget the number of times I have heard this form of distancing in the recent past. After 9/11, a few scholars said that the acts were not connected with Islam and not even with religion. It is, as most of us realize, quite a task to search for and identify a “real” Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism, recognize it, and then say confidently that a particular action was *not* real Islam or any other religion. When a few thousands, or, in some cases, even a few million people believe that what they believe in is not only the “real Islam” but that it is the *only* form of interpreting one’s religion, should we not as scholars and/ or as participants of a religious tradition try to understand ourselves and our neighbors?

In my classes, our discussions went in the direction of founding myths and inspirational stories which laud the

narratives of religious conflict and valorize martyrdom. Recognizing these stories, trying to understand their historical contexts, and their ability to energize people to hurt, maim, and kill in the name of a people, a religion, a God is a painful experience especially if one wants to call one’s religion as one of peace; it is simpler and easier to be in denial or demonize the other.

Problematizing intolerance in world religions and academic distancing is certainly to be recommended as good strategies at crucial points in classroom discussions. As educators, we can ask if we have a larger dharma, one that extends beyond our immediate research and beyond our immediate teaching. Perhaps the greatest dangers to peace are apathy and ignorance. We, who have had academic training in the study of the Hindu and Christian traditions and are in the business of *vidya dana*, are in the unique position to extend the scope of the gift of education in whatever ways we can. This is the time, if any, to come out of our comfort zones, make new alliances, and be proactive in sharing educational resources. Can there not be such an initiative as startling in its dynamics as the Marshall plan after the second world war? An educational initiative through which the peace-loving people of each tradition can take responsibility to reach within and without in our families, communities, in our towns, in our nations? Exclusivism, in terms of shutting out the other, demonizing the other, has to be countered with uncompromising honesty, knowledge, and compassion. This is the *active* part of the non-violent struggle—to persuade ourselves, and then the hearts and minds of millions of individuals, social groups, and institutions to take social and political action which will effect the necessary changes. We need moderate voices to speak up against hatred; to speak up and actively educate where it is needed most. This includes education on religion, culture, political situations, social conditions; the honesty and courage to admit

where we have individually or collectively acted with hate and in haste. We need to educate our national and local leaders, our policy makers, we need to educate our neighbors, the members of our faith tradition here and around the world, and above all, we need to educate ourselves. Maybe it will save a life, maybe it will spare a family from untold grief, maybe it will lead to peace in the community, in the village, in the world.

And one can still learn so many lessons from history. At its heyday, when Angkor was rising, Hindu kings and queens regularly endowed to and sponsored temples and *asramas* for the followers of Vishnu, Shiva, and the Buddha. Later on, Preah

Khan, a Buddhist temple built by the Mahayana devotee Jayavarman VII (12th century), was constructed such that it has a stupa in the middle, a giant linga in the west side, and shrines to Vishnu on the north side. In south India, kings gave land for Muslim dargahs; the tomb of Shahul Hamid in Nagore, rests on such a piece of land given by the king of Tanjore. Thousands of such examples can be cited; and yet, we forget them in times of violence. It is these stories we can remember, these that should become part of our archetypes; not just the founding narratives of war and violence.

Society for Hindu-Christian Studies Annual Meeting

Friday, November 22, 2002

Saturday, November 23, 2002

at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion/

Society of Biblical Literature

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Panel Discussions on "Negotiating Multiple Religious, Ethnic, and Political Identities in the Contemporary ISKCON Membership" and

"Hindu and Christian Worship: Parallels, Differences, Appropriations" as well as the Annual Business Meeting.

Both parts are open to all who are interested.

Contact: Rachel McDermott at rmcdermo@barnard.edu or see

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