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Letters to the Editor

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Dear Editor:

Professor Boyle's paper in the January issue of the Bridgewater Review is a provocative study of the relationships between terrorism and religion. Regrettably, it contains several errors which should be discussed.

First, we engage in a very comforting piece of sophistry when we draw a distinction between terrorism and war. It is difficult to look at the conduct of war in the 20th century and not find multiple examples of terrorism as part of the methods of modern warfare. The rape of Belgium during the opening days of World War I, unrestricted submarine warfare, bombing of the cities of England, Germany, Japan, and China during World War II, the starvation of the Ukrainians by the Soviets during the '30s, the suppression of Berber tribes in Libya by fascist Italy, the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ultimate terrorism of nuclear deterrence all remind us that states have used, and will continue to use, terrorism as a tool to accomplish their political, economic, and territorial goals. The distinction between warfare and terrorism is largely one of formality. Terrorism should be understood to be an undeclared war. Terrorist groups cannot function without financial and logistical support. Arms caches do not accumulate spontaneously. Someone buys arms and arranges the transport of the contraband. The terrorist as a madman with a gun is just not a good model to base our understanding of modern terrorism. States will continue to use it as long as it is a successful method of accomplishing their goals without the risks and costs of a declared war.

Second, very few states choose to present their actions to their citizens and to the world without some degree of whitewash. J.P. Morgan is reported to have said that there are two reasons for everything, a good reason and the real one. Religion is a convenient way to rationalize acts of aggression, especially if the particular religion is one that divides people into believers and infidels. Other rationalizations are racial and political. Again it is not difficult to look at the history of the 20th century and find examples of atrocities committed in the name of racial and/or ideological purity. Indeed, the gulags of this world are filled with the victims of such purges and pogroms. Those of us who were part of the military during the '60s and early '70s can remember the description of the enemy as "gooks" and "slants." It is necessary to dehumanize the victims of aggression long before the act. During wars states engage in this process through propaganda.

Third, Professor Boyle's analysis fails to point out the aspects of religion which are opposed to terrorist actions. This is the most serious error. If his selection of quotations from the Koran is as incomplete as those from the Bible, our Moslem brothers have been done a serious disservice. Indeed, devout Moslems begin each recitation from the Koran with "In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate." The selections from the Old Testament ignore the books of Amos, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah. The first chapter of Amos describes the reasons why God will punish the nations which were the neighbors of Israel—wasteful atrocities, desecration of tombs, genocide, and enslavement. In Habakkuk the cruelties of the Babylonians are condemned (Hab. 2:12). In Jeremiah, Judah is condemned because she has oppressed the poor, widows, the fatherless, and foreigners (Jer. 22:15).

When the New Testament is considered, that message of peace and justice is amplified. Several brief quotations will illustrate the point: "But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44)... "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians—"And the greatest of these is love"—clearly indicates that the Christian Gospel does not sanction violence and terrorism.

The only reason why so-called Christian nations have engaged in religious wars is the appalling ignorance of what is contained in the entire Bible. Only when a people are unaware of the message of peace, reconciliation, and joy that is found in the Gospel can they be manipulated into believing that the Bible sanctions the cruelties that have been committed in its name.

We are all deeply troubled by acts of terrorism. We grieve with the victims; and we are outraged by the impotence that seems to be our lot when such actions take place. Professor Boyle is correct when he points out that the association between terrorist groups and the people that they represent may be one of convenience rather than one of conviction. Working out real solutions to terrorism will be very much like working out real solutions to the problems of domestic crime and violence. Part of the solution is pursuit justice and equality; part of the solution is arrest and punishment; and part of the solution is making such activity unprofitable by establishing restitution to the victims. The entire international community must recognize that no nation is safe, no borders are defensible, and no citizen is safe abroad so long as nations utilize terrorism as a means of pursuing political, diplomatic, or economic ends. To focus our attention on the religious aspects of terrorism is to miss the point that terrorism has become (if it hasn't always been) an article of statecraft. Our challenge is to begin the dialog which will result in the end of terrorism. There is an old Klingon proverb (brought to us via Star Trek) that only a madman fights in a burning house. The end of terrorism will come when we recognize that our house is on fire!

Dick Andrews
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Professor Boyle Replies:

I am grateful to Mr. Andrews for his letter and happy to reply since the whole point of the writing was to stimulate discussion. I am, however, mystified by his use of the word "error" with regard to his first two points. I would agree that terrorism is war even though I would insist that it may be declared as well as undeclared. The PLO and several of the terrorist groups, like Islamic Jihad have openly declared war on Israel, yet we would all agree, I think, that they engage in terrorist tactics. Secondly, I have no quarrel with the statement that religion is used to rationalize acts of aggression, in fact, that implied theme runs throughout the article.

I believe the real problem for Mr. Andrews is the third one, and here I think our differences arise out of a misunderstanding of the point of the piece. I could surely write an article condemning terrorism on religious grounds, citing dozens of biblical passages of the kind he includes in his letter. I could do something of the same with Islam, though with less conviction, perhaps because Islam more clearly draws a distinction between the rights of the believer and the unbeliever. The fact remains that the lines are drawn along religious distinctions, as noted. It pits Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Muslims, Shi'ites and Sunnis against each other. It is no accident that the names of so many of the groups reflect their religious orientation, and it is of paramount importance that we understand how religious rationalizations justify acts of aggression. I ask only that we understand it so we may deal with it, not that we condone terrorism because it is perpetrated by a religious person or because it uses a religious excuse to denigrate or condemn religion, but to indicate how it is used to support heinous activity, often in violation of its own tenets or its usual interpretive expression. I have taken it (perhaps too much?) for granted that terrorism is not the highest and best mode of expression of the religions under question.

Milton L. Boyle, Jr.