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Letters to the Editors

Re: "We Are All Pro-Life: Re-examining the abortion debate to find common ground"

(PeacePower, Summer '05 • <http://www.calpeacepower.org/0101/abortion.htm>)

Dear editors,

You really ought to read Lakoff's Moral Politics. He describes the liberal and conservative positions on abortion pretty coherently.

Your view that fundamentalist Christians "have respect for the dignity of human life" doesn't square up with their strong support for the death penalty or their strong opposition to "Dignity in Death" ballot measures. Your own use of "dignity" is perhaps wrong. I think you mean "sanctity." There's a big difference. One must recognize that many conservative Christian groups see great sanctity to the life of the unborn child but very little sanctity in the life of the condemned. How do you reconcile these? To be sure, you cannot then say that "the groups all value life and respect it." "Sanctity" places God at the center of the conservative worldview. "Dignity" places Human at the center of the liberal worldview (this was at the heart of the struggle over Terri Schiavo).

Until you recognize this primary distinction, I think you're unlikely to understand why both sides are so entrenched and why some pro-life adherents are willing to commit violence in the name of their beliefs. When a view entails violent action, it can never, must never, be respected. Any dialogue over abortion must begin with an avowed rejection of violence. Your article would have been better to start off from this point.

Sincerely,
Ed Bodine

Dear Ed,

We appreciate your deep respect for life and your insistence upon using peaceful means to advocate one's views.

Your distinction between dignity and sanctity is astute, and we agree that it plays a role in the violence (verbal, physical, and spiritual) that surrounds the abortion debate. Without downplaying the very real conflicts of interests between the parties, the aim of our article was to illustrate that human beings who have intense disagreements can find common ground in alternative areas, and ultimately engage in respectful interactions and shared projects that inspire all.

You may recall that in the article, we featured Search for Common Ground, a non-governmental organization that has played a significant role as a third-party mediator between Pro-Life and Pro-Choice groups. According to Susan Collin Marks of SFCG (whom one of our editors recently met), during one of those mediated meetings, a pro-choice advocate was able to communicate to a pro-life advocate just how much hostility, attacks, and personal criticism hurt her, and how the fear of potential violence against her was so devastating. It was a powerful experience of "making oneself vulnerable" to an "opponent" in an attempt to rehumanize the relationship. The pro-life advocate was stunned to hear how her attitudes and actions had affected the pro-choice woman, and after thoughtful contemplation, made a public commitment to not in any way personally attack the other person.

It is through these kinds of dialogues that violence of all kinds can be overcome, and cooperation and understanding can increase.

For peace,
The Editors

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Dialogue with religious perspectives

I was reading over the letter from Rev. Roger VanDerWerken and the response to Roger in our last issue (Winter 2006). I really like some of the dialogue and think it's really healthy. I will briefly sum up the relevant parts before proceeding with my response. Roger's original letter discussed his perception of the "reality" of evil in the world, the Christian scriptural passage about obeying political authority (1 Ptr. 5.13-14), and the hope that we punish those doing evil while we commend those who do well. Two of our editors responded to his letter by highlighting a common concern for security and peace, but draw attention to the "conditions" of our situation, while suggesting an alternative paradigm and set of methods. In response to the scriptural reference by Roger, they quote Prof. Michael Nagler to argue that Jesus' submission was "intensely subversive," but also that Peter's letter itself was "extreme and arguably counter-Christian."

I wanted to add some thoughts about how to possibly respond to Rev. VanDerWerken's use of scripture without implying that Peter's letter itself may be "counter-Christian." The verse he quotes needs to be taken within the context of the letter it's from as well as the context of the wider Christian scriptures. The letter itself is focused on encouraging Christians to remain faithful even in light of the real possibility of suffering in a hostile environment. The particular section referred to in 1 Peter (5.13-14) refers to Paul's earlier writing in Romans 13 about obeying authorities. Yet, that context is about the new life in Christ that prepares for nonconformity and never to avenge one's self (Rom. 12). Paul calls us to respect these authorities for their role but with a posture of detachment, which at that time meant not participating in their 'worldly powers' or values of war. The new form of life is based on love, Rom. 13.8. In Acts, which is the story of the early Christian communities, it clearly states for us to obey God rather than humans, Acts 5.29. So the interpretation of 1 Peter and Romans 13 gets specified as enduring civil authorities as far as they don't call us to disobey God; and further, these authorities must be legitimately constituted. The practical example Prof. Nagler gives of Jesus not blindly obeying the religious authorities and his subversive submission to Roman authority falls in line with this wider scriptural perspective. Thus, when this wider context is considered it doesn't seem necessary to refer to or explain away the verse or letter as "extreme and arguably counter-Christian." Perhaps it is from a narrow view, but there's a much more fruitful (if not truthful) way of understanding it, especially for dialogue with those who place a high faith value on these scriptures.

Onward in Truth and Love,
Eli Sasaran

The blasphemous cartoons and the larger question

Dear editors,

To comprehend the issue of the blasphemous cartoons properly, we need to see it as an issue of Muslims as a human race as well rather than just focusing on it as an issue of Islamic faith. I do not want to indulge in a debate about whether or not Muslims are a race. What I can see is the fact that they are facing racial bias all across the Western world. The purpose behind the creation and publication of these cartoons was not to attack the

personality of the Prophet; rather the purpose was to challenge Muslims' religious sensibilities. The cartoonists did not try to portray the image of Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Rather, they portrayed their stereotyped image of a Muslim - fanatical, backward and violent. It was an image constructed from Western media reports that portrayed Islam and Muslims only as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban or extremist bearded angry men burning the flags and effigies of Western countries.

This reflects a racial bias similar to the one displayed when an African-American steals something and all black people come under scrutiny, but if a white man steals he is individually held responsible. The same is happening with Muslims now. If Al-Qaida is involved in a terrorist action in one part of the world Muslims all across the globe are required to prove their innocence. How can a Muslim individual take responsibility for the actions of the whole Muslim race?

Many Western governments and people are trying to confuse this issue of racist cartoons with the issue of freedom of speech and press. They are arguing as if freedom of speech is absolute in Western values, without limits. But in theory and practice, there are limits. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which is binding on around 150 nations clearly prohibits all forms of hate speech in article 20: "Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law." Regarding the First Amendment, the US Supreme Court recognized that the government may prohibit some speech that may cause a breach of the peace or cause violence. Even Amnesty International, a longtime advocate of freedom of expression, has called for laws that prohibit "hate speech."

In practice there are several limits on free speech in Western states - and rightly so. American society abhors calling African Americans "black" or "Negro" because they feel offended. Questioning the holocaust or passing any anti-Semitic expression in Germany or Austria results in a jail sentence and anti-Semitism is abhorred throughout the West.

Former President Clinton was quite accurate when he told a conference in Qatar that he feared "anti-Semitism... would be replaced with anti-Islamic prejudice." This prejudice is a result of a total ignorance about Islam and Muslims in Western public opinion. I was amazed at the innocence of a French class fellow when she said, "Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was a good person but he was a violent aggressor." When I enquired what she knew about the Prophet, she said he sanctioned "jihad" which means "holy war waged by Muslims against the infidels." Many people in the West generally believe "jihad" is what Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaida are doing and it is sanctioned by the holy Quran. This image gets further strengthened when they see hundreds of bearded men burning the effigies, flags and embassies of Western countries.

This reflects tremendous mistrust and misunderstanding among Western people about Islam and Muslims. We need an inter-faith and multi-cultural dialogue.

Sincerely,
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