

The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear

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“The enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but it is fear.”

Mahatma Gandhi

“Do not be afraid. We live in a time when this biblical refrain cannot be repeated too often. . . . Among all the things the church has to say to the world today, this may be the most important.”

Scott Bader-Saye

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Preface

In this book, I am making a case that I hope will move all of us to action. Contemporary American society is saturated with fear, fear that is often out of proportion to the actual threats we face. Such excessive fearfulness leads to attacks on the wrong targets and to the misdirecting of finite public resources. It turns suspicion into a virtue, thus making it harder to interact constructively with others.

What I am arguing is that the major world religions all warn about the dangers of excessive fear. Religions as different as Islam and Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism, Judaism and Hinduism teach ways of overcoming fear, or at least of putting it in proper perspective. This means that people of faith have an important word to say to a fearful culture. And it is my fervent hope that we who are people of faith will increasingly make this witness together.

This book is not intended as a study of comparative religion—although I have tried to make my descriptions of the various traditions, while necessarily brief, as accurate and sympathetic as possible. Nor is this intended as a sociological analysis of contemporary America—although I hope readers will recognize a significant trait of this society in my depiction of it. Rather, this is a call, issued by a professing Christian, to inter-faith engagement in the United States. The prevalence of fear

is a hazard to our public health about which people of religious faith need to speak out.

I have written this book, for better or worse, during a US presidential campaign marked by a great deal of fear-tinged rhetoric and public anger toward those who are “other”—often an expression of deep-rooted fear. Given the ideological passions of this historical moment, I have little doubt that this book will be read by some as politically partisan, especially since one presidential candidate in particular painted a fearful picture of the contemporary world.

So it needs to be said as clearly as possible: Fear-mongering is by no means limited to one political party, and neither major US party has a monopoly on how to reduce public anxiety. My intent is not to disparage political parties but to rouse religious communities. We need to relearn our teachings about fear and to make these teachings known, alongside neighbors who adhere to other faiths. That itself would be a counterwitness to persons and parties in this country who are apprehensive about welcoming those who are different.

I want to thank all those persons in Missouri, Oklahoma, Washington, and California who heard my presentations of research on this topic. Your questions and comments were an important part of the writing process. My special thanks go to Imam Sayed Moustafa al-Qazwini, Imam Taha Hassane, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Rabbi Steve Gutow, and Dr. David Scott for contributing to my knowledge of religious traditions other than my own. Of course, any deficiencies in my description of these religions are entirely my own.

This book is dedicated to my granddaughter, Amala, whose name means “pure” in Sanskrit and “hope” in Arabic. May her name increasingly describe the world in which she grows and blossoms.

Introduction

Fear as Blessing and Threat

In March of 2011, the House Homeland Security Committee, chaired by Rep. Peter King of New York, launched the first of its hearings into the “extent of radicalization in the American Muslim community and that community’s response.” In the weeks preceding the hearings, Rep. King had repeatedly declared that “85 percent of the mosques in this country are controlled by Islamic fundamentalists”—“radicals” who constitute “an enemy living amongst us”—and that US Muslims have not done nearly enough to help law enforcement officials identify and stop potential terrorists.¹

Such claims had already been refuted by, among others, FBI director Robert Mueller, who in 2008 told the House Judiciary Committee that “99.9 percent of American Muslims . . . are every bit as patriotic as anybody else in this room, and that many of our cases are the result of cooperation from the Muslim community in the United States.”² This last point was corroborated by a Duke University study that concluded that “the largest single source of initial information” in helping prevent terrorist attacks was members of the Muslim community.³ Reporters have determined that Rep. King’s assertions were

based on an unsubstantiated comment made by one person at a State Department forum in 1999.

I was in the room in the Cannon House Office Building for the opening of these hearings, and, as general secretary of the National Council of Churches, was one of several religious leaders to speak at a subsequent press conference. Together we deplored the focus on a single religious community. After all, as one colleague pointed out, the deadliest act of terrorism on American soil prior to 9/11 (if you don't count the decimation of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and the murderous actions of such groups as the KKK) was the bombing in Oklahoma City perpetrated by a European American who was raised Roman Catholic. Together we protested that representatives of the country's most prominent Muslim organizations were not invited to testify at the hearing.

What struck me most forcefully, however, was that leaders from a wide range of religions—Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Unitarians, Christians—all noted how fear was driving this process. Domestic terrorism is a real threat, I said at the press conference, but when fear dominates our public decision making, it leads us to focus on easy, surrogate targets rather than on real, complex problems. (This is, unfortunately, true of other nations as well. In Switzerland, for example, a needed debate on immigration and national character got sidetracked by legislation banning the building of minarets.⁴) Furthermore, I argued, these fear-driven congressional hearings stoke unwarranted suspicion in the American public (“If Congress is investigating, there must be good reason”), which, in turn, increases the level of anxiety among US Muslims. My colleagues and I agreed that such excessive, cumulative fearfulness is dangerous, not only to the Islamic community, but to America as a whole. And it is contrary to the core teachings of our religions.

A Complex Topic

Fear has a legitimate, even vital, role to play in human society. Indeed, without this elemental alarm system, our ancestors

would not have survived, and we would not be warned of potential dangers or sufficiently motivated to address them. Fear can move us to marshal our resources in the face of crisis; and there *are* real crises, genuine threats, in this obviously troubled world. As I write this, there are certainly good reasons why religious minorities in Iraq and Syria or school children in northern Nigeria or residents of low-lying Pacific islands would be afraid.

A basic premise of this book, however, is that fear, when it becomes excessive or misdirected, is itself dangerous. It can lead us to misperceive the world around us and can undermine our willingness to interact constructively with others. In the words of President Obama, “Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are different, or lead us to try to get some sinister ‘other’ under control. Alternatively, fear can lead us to succumb to despair or paralysis or cynicism. Fear can feed our more selfish impulses, and erode the bonds of community. . . . [I]t can be contagious, spreading through societies, and through nations. And if we let it consume us, the consequences of that fear can be worse than any outward threat.”⁵

Martin Luther King Jr., a man who lived with daily threat, said it memorably: “Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us. Normal fear motivates us to improve our individual and collective welfare; abnormal fear constantly poisons and distorts our inner lives.”⁶ I saw clearly at the congressional hearing how fear has the potential to turn people against their neighbors, corroding the trust and interdependence on which society depends. There are times of crisis when fear can unite a community; but history teaches that more often it divides.

Having said this, I want to underscore that fear is a complex topic. Part of that complexity is on full display in the highly acclaimed book by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. Growing up in Baltimore, writes Coates,

the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. . . . To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape,

and disease. The nakedness was not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect us.⁷

Often this fear is transmuted into rage—“violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire”⁸—which compounds the threat to others in the black community. According to a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 1976 and 2005, the homicide rate was 4.8 per 100,000 for white Americans, but a stomach-turning 36.9 for blacks!⁹ In some neighborhoods in this nation, fear is endemic, part of a cycle that has its roots in a history of systemic oppression.

As a white Christian man born in the United States who is not poor, I have not faced a daily fear of gang violence or deportation. I have not known the fear that comes from the danger of sexual assault. I have not seen my religion treated as a public threat. I have not felt the gnawing insecurity of having to decide between spending money for food or medical insurance. So it is not for me, or others like me, to dismiss as illegitimate or destructive these fears that many Americans live with every day. What I do want to suggest, however, is that oppressive, discriminatory actions are themselves often born of fear—as we have seen, for example, in the killings of unarmed black men by fearful white police. Even worse, fear is a tool regularly used by those with power to keep others down. “[T]o be forced to live in fear,” says Coates, “[is] a great injustice.”¹⁰ In this book, I want to call our attention to the fear that causes others to be afraid.

This book does not break new ground in identifying fear as a dominant theme in the public life of contemporary America. Several scholars have written persuasively about “the culture of fear” in this country, and I will draw extensively on their work, especially in chapter 1. Some of these scholars contend that the United States is more fearful in this era than in many previous ones; others maintain that what we are witnessing today is

simply the continuation of entrenched cultural patterns. I will leave that for them to debate. My concern is to emphasize that fear, here and now, is often misdirected (as in the congressional hearing) and that, in the nation as a whole, the level of fear is out of sync with our actual situation. For example, surveys taken over the past two decades consistently show that, while crime rates are falling dramatically, the fear of crime is high and generally rising. It is an indication, as many have noted, that the country is in the grip of a collective apprehension that can distort public priorities and decision making, to the great detriment of many of its citizens.

What may be new is my contention that religions, at their best, have not only a word of comfort for those who are afraid, but also a word of challenge for those who manipulate fear to their own advantage or who succumb to such manipulation. People of faith are by no means the only ones who know that fear can be hazardous to social well-being, but they (we) do have, I believe, a vital role to play in naming and responding to the problem.

This argument may seem counterintuitive to some, since religion and fear often seem to go hand in hand. Bertrand Russell, in his famous critique of religion, makes two points that are difficult to refute: (1) Religious belief, for many people, is motivated by a fear of forces beyond their control, including illness and death. "It is partly," writes Russell, "the terror of the unknown and partly . . . the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes."¹¹ (2) Religion also engenders fear when it teaches divine punishment for sinful behavior, both in this life and the next. The language of Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" ("You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it") may no longer be in fashion, but the underlying theology still has a hold on many believers and continues to be used as a motivation for religious conversion. Christianity, in particular, also has an apocalyptic strand that forecasts a terrifying end to

the world itself—a belief that proved astonishingly popular in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The connection between religion and fear seems particularly apparent in an era when fundamentalist religion captures the headlines. Nearly all of the major world religions have their fundamentalist wings; and fundamentalism, whatever its veneer, is the religious form of the world's anxiety. It draws lines, to keep its identity secure by keeping others out. It responds to anxiety by demanding certainty, which leaves no room to consider views at variance with its own. It adopts a mindset of scarcity (if you win, I lose) and thus assumes that the goal is to defeat or convert those who are "other." There is no doubt that many fearful things have been done, and are being done today, in the name of religion seen through such a lens.¹²

I don't mean to suggest, however, that fear of others is associated only with fundamentalism. Polls in the United States show that churchgoers in general are more likely than the public as a whole to favor restrictions on civil liberties and immigration and to countenance the use of torture in the name of promoting security.¹³ My argument, therefore, is more prescriptive than descriptive. I am convinced that the major world religions can be—and should be—a bulwark against obsessive, excessive fear. I have no desire to harmonize religious teachings; differences are often as interesting and important as similarities. But I hope to demonstrate in chapters 2 and 3 that people of faith—including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Bahá'ís, and Sikhs—when true to their central traditions, all affirm Gandhi's insight that "the enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but it is fear"—because fear is so often the root of hatred.

The responses to fear in these various religions, while by no means identical, all seek to put fear in proper perspective, even to overcome it, by seeking security only in God or in freedom from worldly attachments. In chapter 5, I will make the case that people of faith, for all of their differences, should together challenge the assumptions of a fearful culture.

In short, this book is a call to religious renewal—trust in the Holy One, in Ultimate Reality, should be an antidote to fear in human society, not a cause of it—and a call to interfaith collaboration. Together we have a word for a time such as this!

Fear and Anxiety

Throughout this book, “fear” and “anxiety” will at times be used interchangeably. There is, however, an important distinction between them: “fear” is generally used in connection with a specific, immediate, objective threat, while “anxiety” is used when the threat is more anticipated than immediate, more generalized than specific, more subjective (an inner state) than objective and external. Anxiety received increased attention in the first half of the twentieth century because of its use in the vocabulary of the psychological sciences. The term became nearly ubiquitous with the publication of W. H. Auden’s famous poem “The Age of Anxiety” in 1947, followed by Leonard Bernstein’s symphony of the same name (1949) and Rollo May’s best-selling book *The Meaning of Anxiety* in 1950.

This distinction between anxiety and fear is not always easy to maintain. Terrorism, for example, may be an imminent fear in one place or time, but a generalized, nonspecific anxiety at another. The distinction becomes useful, however, when we realize, in the words of theologian Paul Tillich, that “[a]nxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met by courage.”¹⁴ To say it another way, people have difficulty living with unspecified anxiety; and so they look for a definite object of their fear—a group, a person, a movement—that can be analyzed, attacked, or avoided. As the congressional hearings indicate, a somewhat amorphous anxiety regarding terrorism can become focused in the fear of Muslims. A free-floating anxiety over the changing demographics of US society finds outlet in a fear of immigrants and refugees—Mexicans and Central Americans at one moment, Middle Easterners at another.

This, some argue, helps explain the current prevalence of

fear language. Others contend that the real source of the present culture of fear is those groups in American society—the media, politicians, corporations—that profit from it. We will make further mention of such theories in the next chapter.

I will end this introduction by returning to a paradox hinted at above: fearful people make others afraid! The French scholar Dominique Moïsi, in his insightful look at this country, suggests that “there is one America united by fear and another united by the fear of fear.”¹⁵ Surveys indicate, for example, that roughly 40 percent of Americans report having a gun in their home, usually for reasons of personal security, while equal numbers find that statistic downright scary. Similarly, a nation that fearfully prizes military security above other priorities, including civil rights, makes me and many others afraid for its future.

The greatest paradox, however, would be if the effect of this book were to add fear to the list of things to be afraid of! My purpose is not to make readers afraid of fear. It is, rather, a call to action, especially for people of religious faith. We have resources in our sacred traditions that can counter the fear that is so rampant in contemporary America—if only we will identify and use them.