Reflections on Religion, Violence, and World Peace[1]
Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.

A few recent events brought once again to my attention the issue of the role of religion in world affairs, especially in relation to violence and extremism.

In October of 2006 I was one of the keynote speakers at the plenary session of a professional workshop on families in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and in my remarks I offered examples of religious principles conducive to positive relationships in families. Once the three keynote speeches of the plenary session were concluded, the chair opened the session for comments and questions from the audience. At one point a gentleman in the audience started criticizing one of the other speakers. Then he turned to me specifically and started accusing religions in general for all the violence and extremism in the world.

About a month later, an interview with British songwriter Sir Elton John was made public, in which he stated: "*From my point of view I would ban religion completely, even though there are some wonderful things about it. I love the idea of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the beautiful stories about it ... But the reality is that organised religion doesn't seem to work. It turns people into hateful lemmings and it's not really compassionate.*"[2]

In my opinion these two quotations should be understood as symptoms of a growing frustration that people everywhere may be feeling not just about the widespread violence and extremism in the world, but especially about the seemingly apathetic approach traditional religious denominations have undertaken to deal with this problem.

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[1] Short remarks delivered at the induction ceremony of Brigham Young University-Hawaii's chapter of Phi Kappa Phi, on November 28, 2006

[2] The Observer Music Monthly, Sunday November 12, 2006 - http://observer.guardian.co.uk/omm/story/0,,1942193,00.html

Of course, I disagree with the idea that religion is responsible for the violence and extremism we see in the world today. Extremists of all sorts in the world have often "hijacked" religion, that is, used it as an excuse, to try to legitimate their violent agendas.

This has nothing to do with Islam per se. We should keep in mind that even within Christianity there have been extremist groups. For example, the campaign of terror in Northern Ireland that lasted from the 1960's until the late 1990's, with bombings and political assassinations was perpetrated by Christians—some Catholic, others Protestant. No reasonable person in those decades would have blamed either the Catholic or the Anglican churches for the IRA or other Irish paramilitary organizations' acts of violence.

In the United States of America there are white supremacist groups of all kinds who are in many cases practicing Protestants, and often they attempt to use the Bible to justify their racist views. No reasonable person would blame the Bible or Christian Protestantism as a whole because of such misconstruction of the Christian message.

Centuries-Old Issues

Extremism may be conceived as the attempt of ethnic or political groups to advance their agendas through radical discourses or even violence. Groups may resort to these tactics after efforts to advance their agendas through non-violent methods have been repeatedly unfruitful. Such agendas may include attempts to restore social or political orders from previous centuries, or to avenge wrongs perpetrated in earlier times.

In the first case, we see attempts—especially in the Islamic world—to establish theocratic regimes, such as in the case of Iran. Latter-day Saints should not find it difficult to understand this concept. In my view, the Shiite Ayatollahs are trying to restore the kingdom of God based

on their interpretations and understanding of what the kingdom should be like. The problem, in my view, is that establishing such kingdom always required direct revelation through living prophets, not just adherence to prescriptions found in religious texts. Without direct and continuous present-day divine revelation, such efforts will likely produce tensions and eventually conflict with the "outside" world.

The other case—those groups attempting to avenge wrongs of old times—are pursuing an effort that will likely only produce frustration due to its impracticality. Let me illustrate that with a personal example.

I am a Brazilian citizen descending from African slaves (I don't know from which countries—maybe Ethiopia, or Angola, or Guinea) and Portuguese slaveholders. It is possible that my existence today may be the result of a Portuguese slaveholder's sexual abuse of one of my African grandmothers at some point in the last 200 or 300 years. Should I, in 2006, rant against that former colonial power and advocate war against Portugal for its sponsorship of slavery in centuries past? That would be stupid! Or, taking another example, Spanish conquistadors some 500 years ago were responsible for the pillage of great pre-Columbian civilizations in Mexico, Peru, and other nations in Central and South America. Would it be reasonable for any Latin American nation to declare war against Spain today in order to avenge those wrongs of centuries ago?

Yes, mistakes were made by colonial powers through the centuries, but there is not much one can do about them today. One cannot fight a medieval war in the 21st century. We cannot change the past, and hijacking religion to try to validate a violent agenda of vengeance in the present will not help correct anything, and this misuse of religion is plainly wrong.

New Enemy, New Approaches

As we consider extremist groups that now resort to terror tactics to further their agendas, we find rampant hatred at the root of their actions. Therefore, we can say that the real enemy of peace in the early 21st century is the spread of ideologies founded on hatred.

This is no longer a matter of identifying terrorist organizations or extremist groups. It may very well be said that Al-Qaeda has evolved into more of a "shared concept" than simply a loosely-connected network of terrorists. The expression we hear on newscasts "an operative with links to Al-Qaeda" may be reinterpreted to mean someone who has adopted Al-Qaeda's rhetoric and/or its violent modus operandi without having any concrete connection with that organization. I suppose that people in a number of countries around the world cheer for Osama Bin Laden just because of his now almost legendary status—similar to how Fidel Castro is applauded in leftist circles in Latin America—as the proverbial underdog who stood up against the historical colonial powers and survived to laugh about it.

Fighting a "shared concept" is not as simple as fighting another nation. There are no traditional armies and no traditional battles, because attacks will be perpetrated by "lone wolves" acting without any centralized command and no direction. Incidentally, I am tired of seeing in newscasts the same video footage of an alleged Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. I doubt those camps might still exist. And yet, like Timothy McVeigh in the United States, bombings and other deadly violent attacks can be perpetrated by people with little more than an internet connection, a credit card, and lot of hatred. The enemy of this new era is someone who can be virtually "invisible" among the multitudes of any major city in the world. No conventional army can be effective against this type of enemy.

The traditional approach has been to refuse negotiations with terrorists and to try to "root them out" using conventional armies with automatic weapons and "smart bombs." But bombing entire neighborhoods in the hopes of destroying these "lone wolves" is inefficient and problematic. A permanent escalation of bloodshed is the only likely outcome, since many innocents are killed in such traditional attacks. And then, the siblings of those killed will attempt to avenge those deaths, and when they themselves are killed, other relatives will take upon themselves the avenging duty, and so on. No traditional military operation can stop this escalation of hatred and violence. And the arbitrary killing of civilian populations in pre-emptive strikes is morally indefensible.

Unfortunately, the nature of the modern conflict—deadly attacks perpetrated by "lone wolves"—dictates that adherence to 20th century policies will leave no room for 21st century solutions.

A new approach would necessarily include more direct personal contact with peoples in regions of the world prone to such problems, more dialogue, more bridges of understanding, all leading to negotiated solutions that may bring a certain degree of general peace to the world. The only other alternative—a morally indefensible alternative, I should stress—would take us from retaliatory act to retaliatory act, in an ever increasing escalation of disproportional retaliatory acts until we would find ourselves destroying villages, cities, entire regions, and eventually entire nations—mindlessly committing unforgivable crimes against humanity in the name of national defense with the conscience of a 15-year-old playing a violent video game.

The conflict in Northern Ireland seems to have been resolved through a negotiated solution. In Western Asia (a.k.a. Middle East) Egypt and Jordan ceased decades-old hostilities

against Israel by means of negotiated solutions. Likewise, I wonder whether negotiation may be the solution to many of the current predicaments.

The Role of Religion in the Peace Process

For most of the recorded history of the world, technology did not allow most of the world population to travel more than a few miles from their birthplaces during their lifetime. Today, international travel has reached proportions unimaginable just half a century ago. With this ability to travel comes closer interaction among nations and cultures, with the consequent clash of cultures, beliefs, and worldviews. When most of the world population lived in isolation, exclusivist discourses could be the norm, since most "outsiders" would never hear them anyway. But now that interaction with nations and cultures is a daily affair in cyberspace, competing worldviews are readily available, and peaceful coexistence has become more difficult.

In my speech at BYU-Hawaii's 2005 Convocation, I discussed a few aspects of the role of religion in promoting peace. At that occasion I said: "… the world needs is a power more overwhelming than military prowess, more compelling than political rhetoric. A power strong enough to permanently suppress the seeds of violence and hatred that reside in the human heart."[3]

As a powerful force in shaping people's lives, religious organizations must unite their efforts in addressing world problems. Traditionally most denominations have looked "inward," that is, they seem to be primarily concerned with the welfare of their local congregations and not with the world at large—a "someone-else-will-take-care-of-that" approach to world predicaments. Therefore, while moderates take care of their respective flocks, who is minding

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[3] Martins, Marcus H., "An Inevitable Paradox: Establishing a 'Peaceable Habitation' in a Violent World." Brigham Young University-Hawaii, Annual University Convocation, September 8, 2005.

the rest of the planet? In the absence of anyone else, the extremists seem to have taken charge of that.

So, I am arguing that Latter-day Saints must unite with other major religious communities—Muslims, Buddhists, Traditional Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, etc.—and together address issues that have truly global implications. That will require on the part of the LDS community worldwide an interesting exercise in balancing their faith in direct revelation and genuine divine authority with the need to dialogue with other philosophies which also claim historical divine sponsorship. It certainly can be done. It will require a more refined exercise of priesthood leadership. Consider these insights taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith:

> "[We] are looked upon by God as though we were in eternity. God dwells in eternity, and does not view things as we do."[4]

> "[While] one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard ... We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family ..."[5]

For me, these statements suggest a simple formula for engagement in civil dialogue with other religions, without compromising our beliefs. We must really see all others as true brothers and sisters, and regardless of their beliefs or even their opinions or feelings about us, work with them until peace is either achieved or its path made clear for other people to follow. True

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[4]   *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.356 - April 7, 1844
[5]   *TPJS*, p.218 - April 15, 1842

national leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and others have

exemplified that kind of refined leadership. Until the Savior Jesus Christ returns and establishes

his millennial kingdom, that's how we must proceed as well.

But engaging in dialogue with other religions is not all there is to it. Once major

religious groups have united in the effort of establishing peace, they will need to try to bring the

terrorists themselves into the dialogue. In the Book of Mormon we find the response of the

Lamanites converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ when they confronted a terrorist organization

of their time—the Gadianton Robbers:

> "And it came to pass that the Lamanites did hunt the band of robbers of
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> Gadianton; and they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them,
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> insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites."[6]

I have been asking myself these difficult questions: Would I be willing to talk face-to-

face with Osama Bin Laden and his associates? Would I be willing to boldly declare to them the

testimony of Enoch concerning God's grief with the bloodshed in the world?[7] The general

expectation might be that these men would reject such testimony. But even harder questions for

us would be: What if these men would accept the testimony and express a desire to make a

covenant of peace with the rest of the world? Would I be willing to forgive them and enter into a

covenant of peace?

Again, the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

> "[We] have the revelation of Jesus, and the knowledge within us is sufficient ... to
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> give universal peace to all mankind ... Other attempts to promote universal peace and
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> happiness in the human family have proved abortive; every effort has failed; every plan

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6   The Book of Mormon, Helaman 6:37
7   The Pearl of Great Price, Moses 7:28, 32-37

and design has fallen to the ground; it needs the wisdom of God, the intelligence of God, and the power of God to accomplish this."[8]

We cannot change the past; all we have is the power to determine how we are going to live in the present, and to teach our children and grandchildren to live in peace, and use whatever influence we have with others to invite them to live in peace. If we adopt a passive conduct, and do nothing, thus allowing things to continue to escalate continually, the world may eventually become an almost irredeemable hell. If that ever happens, I fear, God will have little mercy on us.

Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of Religious Education
Brigham Young University-Hawaii
E-mail: martinsm@byuh.edu
Phone: (1-808) 293-3643
Web: http://w2.byuh.edu/academics/religion/martins.htm

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[8]   *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp.392; 252