

Sketch of Impromptu Response During Plenary Session
Family Strengthening Workshop - Empowering the Family in Challenging Times¹
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Background & Setting:

Once the three speeches of the plenary session at the opening of the workshop were concluded, the chair, Dato' Ghazali Bin Dato' Yusoff (vice chairman of the National Council of Welfare and Social Development Malaysia) opened the session for comments and questions from the audience. At one point a gentleman in the audience (whose name and organizational affiliation I unfortunately forgot to obtain, but he mentioned his Sri Lankan ancestry) started ranting against one of the other speakers (Dr. Rahmattullah Khan bin Abdul Wahab Khan, a Muslim of Indian descent). Then turned to me specifically and very likely because in my speech I had quoted teachings from my church, he started accusing religions in general for all the violence and extremism in the world. The following is a sketch of my impromptu response, but since this is based on my partial memory of the event after 48 hours, it probably contains a few additions and omissions. But I tried my best to preserve the original intent of my response.

Sketch of the Impromptu Response:

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 to try to legitimate their violent agendas.

This has nothing to do with Islam per se. When discussing this matter I often remind my students that even within Christianity there have been extremist groups. For example, the IRA (Irish Republican Army) implemented a campaign of terror that lasted decades, with bombings and assassinations in Northern Ireland and England. And the members of the IRA were predominantly staunch Catholics. No reasonable person in those decades would have blamed the Catholic Church for the IRA's 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

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Bible or Christian Protestantism as a whole because of such misconstruction of the Christian message.

Allow me to offer 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 due to a Portuguese slaveholder's sexual abuse or rape of one of my African ancient grandmothers at some point in the last 200 or 300 years. Should I, in 2006, rant against Portugal and say "I will never speak the Portuguese language again."? Or should I advocate war against Portugal for its sponsorship of slavery in centuries past? That would be stupid! Or, in 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? And what about the Crusades in the Middle Ages?

Yes, mistakes were made through the centuries, but there is nothing we can do about them. We cannot change the past, and hijacking religion to try to validate a violent agenda of vengeance in the present is inappropriate. It's a misuse of religion.

I cannot change the past; all I have is the power to determine how I am going to live in the present. I will teach my children and grandchildren to live in peace. As a religion professor at Brigham Young University – Hawaii, I will teach my students to live in peace. As an ordained bishop in my church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (although at this time I am not presiding any congregations, I still hold the ordained office), I will use whatever influence I have with others to invite others to live in peace.

I look at you in this audience, and I don't see Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, or Christians—I see my brothers and sisters, whom I hope will consider me their friend.

I know I can't do much about the violence and extremism that occur out in the world. All I can do is establish peace in my family, teach others to do the same, and hope that they will teach yet more people.

Thank you.