



Religious intolerance is never welcome

By Kaimipono Wenger

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A Christian organization in San Diego recently distributed anti-Islamic fliers just outside of Clairemont High School. The handouts contained a variety of cherry-picked passages from Islamic holy texts (including the Koran and hadiths, as well as Shia scripture), claiming that Mohammed was a sexual deviant, that Muslims are inherently violent and that Muslims cannot be trusted. They also urged readers not to trust our Muslim neighbors at the Islamic Center.

Free speech is a cherished right in the United States and court decisions in California have affirmed speech rights for even obnoxious and offensive groups like skinheads or Nazis. Under current case law, it is likely that the particular method used to distribute anti-Islamic fliers in Clairemont (handing them out on the sidewalk) complies with constitutional mandates. But while this kind of speech may be constitutional, it is also an obnoxious and shortsighted exercise in religious intolerance.

The holy texts of each of the major religions contain many problematic passages. One could just as easily note that the Christian Bible contains passages endorsing genocide (1 Samuel 15) and infanticide (Psalm 137), that Jesus claimed to bring war rather than peace (Matthew 10:34), that God killed early Christians for disobedience (Acts 5:1-5), and that Paul commanded women to be silent (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

This is not to engage in contests of “my holy book is better than yours.” Rather, the point is that each of these ancient books is a complex collection of myth and oral history, parable and allegory, mixed with poetry, tribal history and millennia-old social norms and instructions. Each contains numerous passages which can be taken out of context. Let him whose holy book is without moral problems cast the first stone.

Like the Bible and other religious texts, the Koran also contains passages of peace, reverence and surpassing beauty. For instance, one well-known verse states that killing one individual is the same as killing all of humanity (5:32). This verse has been cited by dozens of prominent Muslim religious leaders worldwide, in statements strongly condemning terrorism and violence.

Every major religious group struggles to balance sometimes oppressive historical accounts with modern principles of democratic pluralism. Christianity has certainly had its share of violent and racist moments, ranging from the Inquisition, to the extermination of Native Americans, to the endorsement of slavery by important Christian leaders like Benjamin Morgan Palmer.

None of the major religious faiths is inherently violent. Rather, people are violent – and violent people have sometimes used the tenets of religious faith to justify their violence. This is true whether the violent fanatic is named Osama bin Laden or is named David Koresh, who used Christian scripture to justify abuse of women and girls.

Life is short. Let's use our limited time on Earth not to tear down the faith of others, but draw on our faith to build bridges of love, friendship and understanding. After all, isn't there a verse somewhere about peacemakers?

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