

“The God of War”

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“Lord, how numerous are my enemies! How many there are who rise against me, how many who say of me, ‘He will not find safety in God!’

But you, Lord, are a shield to cover me... You strike all my foes across the face; you break the teeth of the wicked...” Psalm 3 (excerpts)

Psalm 17: 1-2 “Lord, hear my plea for justice, give heed to my cry; listen to the prayer from my lips, for they are innocent of all deceit. Let your judgment be given in my favor; let your eyes discern what is right.”

“Arise, Lord, confront them and bring them down. Save my life from the wicked; make an end of them with your sword. With your hand, Lord, make an end of them; thrust them out of this world from among the living.” Psalm 17: 13-14 (excerpts).

“May your weapons be strong to drive away the attackers, may your arms be powerful enough to check the foes, let your army be glorious, not the evil-doer” (Hinduism's Rig Veda 1-39:2).

“Whoever fights in the cause of God, then gets killed or attains victory, we will surely grant him a great recompense” (Koran 4:74).

In the ancient battle between the Greeks and the Trojans (from Homer's *Iliad*) Zeus called together the gods, saying to the assembled deities in reference to the growing battle, “I care for them, even though they die. Even so, I will stay in the crevice of Olympus and sit and watch and take my pleasure. The rest of you can go out among the Greeks and Trojans and help whichever side you please.” And so they did. The gods looked upon the battle and decided whom they would give aid to. Homer's tale continues,

“In this way the gods prompted the two armies to clash in combat. Strife exploded in each camp. Such was the force of the gods in collision.”

Looking at Scripture and ancient tales it appears that religion and war are inexorably connected. That God is a God of war, of vengeance. But whose side is God on? For the ancient Greeks and Romans there were plenty of gods to go around. Every side could have divine aid and support. Of course some gods were more powerful than others, but there was always the chance that some deity would come to offer blessing and provision.

In the modern era, in the western world, we have no such pantheon of deities to call upon. For those who believe in God there is only one, and it appears that many people are trying to claim God as their own guide and protector.

“The will of God prevails.” Spoke Abraham Lincoln, “In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, but one must be wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time.” And this is precisely the problem. How can peoples of different faiths call upon God (and among the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims it is the same God) to be on their side and not the other?

“Man is [a] religious animal...” writes Mark Twain, “He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn’t straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother’s path to happiness and heaven.”

James Hillman in his book *A Terrible Love of War* agrees with Twain’s assessment. And yet takes it one step further. Hillman believes that because the act of

war, “in the name of a higher cause and [is] blessed by ministers of several faiths – all drive home the conclusion that ‘war is religion.’ Yet” he continues, “that conclusion provides little for fresh thought. We need to pass beyond what we know to imagining what we may not want to know.

“‘War is religion’ takes us only half way. Beyond is a far graver proposition: ‘Religion is war.’”

Hillman suggests that because religion demands belief, “encodes a particular story as the revelation of a particular god’s own word of immortal truth to a historical human in a specific place at a specific moment. The revelation of this truth to Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and Gautama too, are set down in books, which then, themselves, take on the sacredness of truth.”

He goes on to argue that belief is the central component of religion and because of that we come to war. Hillman points to the idea of Bertrand Russell that says ‘a content is to be believed when it causes us to move.’ Hillman puts forth the idea that because “we act our beliefs; do because we believe.” He states that this drive that belief gives us to act it out in the world is what leads one to war. For if your belief is strong then the strength and conviction with which you hold your belief will cause you then to take greater action. He suggests that when “claims of any divinity...of a people, a class, a race, or a nation is believed to be the prime reality, truth, goodness and power, it will fight against claims of all others...” Hillman believes that it is our religious beliefs that propel us to use violence to quell the claims of another deity’s divinity, supremacy and power.

Maj. John P. Conway disagrees however. In his article from the Army Professional Papers archive he writes, “Religion is often introduced to justify actions and

motivate the masses. While this may be truly endemic of a misguided worldview of one's religion, it is never the less a true statement regarding the human condition. Justifiable or not, religion motivates. Religion, as a motivator and catalyst to garner popular support for waging war, may or may not be rooted in justifiable purpose. Most times, it can be argued that religion may play a key and significant role in the conduct of warfare on a psychological and cultural level, but is it the cause of warfare? Do nations, states and kingdoms wage war over religion? Is religion a primary cause of conflict between governments?" Maj. Conway argues that though religion can play a significant role in warfare, "Economics, power, influence and trade are the true causes. Causes that hold firm regardless of the religion factor."

Mike Wooldridge, author of a BBC article entitled "Can Religion be Blamed for War," agrees with Maj. Conway. Wooldridge argues that religion is used as a tool to disguise politics, desire to control resources and the attaining of strategic land. Wooldridge writes, "To some extent, the nature of a war is in the eye of the beholder... Leaders use differences over faith as a way of sowing hatred and mobilizing support for political wars."

But what about those faiths or the people within all faith traditions that claim their faith that demands non-violent resolution to conflict and difference? Is it that they just aren't listening to their god's call to ensure his or her supremacy? Is it that they are not truly faithful? Is it that they are refusing to engage on the battle ground and so are implying that their deity is so powerful that to war or to use their god as a tool of war is beneath their god?

So how is it that there are those who believe, as does Hillman, God and religion is the cause of war, and those like Maj. Conway and Mike Wooldridge, that God and religion are the tools of war, and then those who believe that God wants no part of war at all? Who is right? Are any of them right?

I think we can all agree that religion and the name of God is certainly used to justify war and that many have claimed God's support and allegiance for their cause. It probably wouldn't take much to convince us that there are those who use their religious beliefs as the foundation for warring against others, that they believe in the preeminence and power of their God and that they must bend all others to that belief. And I know that many of us would agree that God, the Holy, would prefer war not be necessary and that possibly war is against God's essential nature. But that still leaves us with how can all these be right?

What is it you believe about war? How is it your faith shapes your ideas about war? This is no easy question and it has no easy answer. We may adamantly believe the current war in Iraq is wrong, but what about Darfur? Is military action against those perpetrating genocide called for or would that be wrong? What about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, is non-violence or war the right action there? What about the atrocities of World War II? What does our Unitarian Universalist tradition tell us of war and the role our faith plays in war?

Unfortunately, I have no clean-cut answers for you. Our tradition calls us to rely on our individual conscience, the conscience of our religious communities and finally the conscience of our larger tradition to find answers to life's most perplexing questions. We hold both the belief in the worth and dignity of all living beings alongside the belief in

justice. Regrettably the dignity of all and justice do not always call for the same action to meet the needs of both. Abiding by the tenet that all life is sacred does not always then ensure justice and committing to a way of justice cannot always ensure the sacredness of life.

I cannot tell you when and where and in which circumstances, if ever, war is necessary and right. That is something we must wrestle with in our hearts and together. What I do know is that being a person of faith calls us to live our convictions and risk being wrong. We may not be able to put an end to the warring of humanity, but we can choose to not let our faith become an instrument of war. We can claim the truth our faith has given us and fight against the evil of other's actions rather than the evil of difference. For our tradition, unlike many others, says that God is on all our sides, that the Holy does not choose one person or people above others, and that we have no special claim to divine truth, and above all to remember the humanity we afford others reflects our own.

“The handbook of the strategist has said: do not invite the fight, accept it instead,” wrote Lao – Tzu, “better a foot behind than an inch too far ahead, which means: look a [person] straight in the face and make no move, roll up your sleeve and clench no fist, open your hand and show no weapon, bare your breast and find no foe. But as long as there be a foe, value [them] respect [them], measure [them], be humble toward [them]; let [them] not strip from you, however strong [they] be, compassion, the one wealth which can afford [them].”