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Towards ICCS 2022

Repairing the World: Faith Against Online Hate

By Yudit Greenberg

SYNOPSIS

In a world of instant communication and social media, the ease with which hate, and bias spread compels us to rethink our approach in education and community learning. It is important for the state, educators, and religious actors to actively involve themselves in anticipating the different means in which this hatred is expressed, educating people, and developing preventive measures to protect faith communities in every country.

COMMENTARY

THE TOPIC of faith and online hate raises several thoughts and questions, particularly as a scholar of comparative religion, Jewish Studies, and inter-religious studies teaching at an American college. For about two decades, my work has revolved around writing and teaching about love in religion.

I have been addressing topics such as filial love, friendship, community, divine love, “love of neighbour,” and “love of stranger,” as these are taught and interpreted in several traditions and cross-cultural contexts. As a scholar of religion, how would I then respond to news of increased hate crimes and violence in the United States and other countries around the globe?

Prejudice and Antisemitism

In the aftermath of the recent [terrorist attack on a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas](#) in the US during their weekly sabbath services, the FBI, police, and the media studied

the facts to decide whether the attack was an [antisemitic hate](#) crime or a random terrorist act. The FBI ultimately concluded that it was an antisemitic incident. Yet, questions remained, particularly how could an attack on Jews in a synagogue be anything but an expression of hate against Jews?

Investigations revealed that the single perpetrator of the crime had been radicalised and was steeped in the classic tropes of antisemitism that have existed for millennia but remain updated: “Jews control the media, Jews control the banks, Jews killed Jesus, Jews were behind 9/11, Jews were responsible for the Black Plague, and are responsible for Covid”.

Those who buy into these tropes, looking to blame the Jews for all their problems, are often susceptible to other baseless hatreds, including racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual ones.

Guarded Communities: Feeling Unsafe in US & Europe

Given the recent increase of antisemitic attacks on individuals and synagogues, especially since the [2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh](#), being Jewish in the US and Europe now feels unsafe.

While the front doors of the churches in the same neighbourhood as the Colleyville synagogue remain wide open to invite the stranger, the Colleyville synagogue must close its front doors, and worshippers can only enter their house of worship through a guarded side door. As with most synagogues around the world, its worshippers must pass through gates, barriers, and armed guards to reach their sanctuary.

A bright light in this dark space of extremist ideologies, violence, and hate is the persistent work of religious leaders who are committed to inter-religious cooperation and dialogue and who publicly condemn abhorrent acts of hate and violence against individual victims and minority groups.

In the immediate aftermath of the Colleyville attack, many local, national, and international faith groups and individuals expressed solidarity with the Colleyville Jewish community, condemned the attack, and those who may have helped the perpetrator.

Role of Scholars

I respond to hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and other groups by continuing to teach my undergraduates about the wisdom of love and compassion that is embedded in all religions, and at the same time to wrestle with ancient sacred texts that paradoxically promote biases and prejudices, contradicting their own ethical values and stance towards others.

Contemporary scholars of biblical studies for example, deconstruct and problematise our sacred stories and employ new categories of analysis such as terror, trauma, intersectionality, ethnicity, and racism, as they provide our students with current lenses by which to understand and appreciate the double-sword legacy of religions, while reflecting our current reality and moral duties.

I draw on two examples of feminist biblical scholarship who identify and confront violence and hatred in the Bible. Phyllis Trible, a pioneering figure who published her [*Texts of Terror*](#) in 1984, and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker who recently published their edited volume [*Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence*](#).

What is striking about juxtaposing such feminist biblical scholarship and current acts of hate and violence against individuals and groups is the term “terror”.

Texts, language, stories, and actions terrorise and traumatise. Such scholarship and such acts exemplify to the inter-religious community of scholars and activists our moral imperative to remain vigilant and courageous, to stand as individuals and together and confront the pandemic of hate and violence while also remaining honest about inherent biases in our traditions as we work together towards healing.

Empowering Education

What can be done by faith-based organisations, NGOs, and governments to manage and control the prevalence of online hate more effectively? I believe that these institutions should commit to an increase of resources and programmes to educate about and address the evils and dangers of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of biases against minorities. Introducing educational materials in secular and religious schools’ curricula is an important step.

Finally, meetings such as the [*International Conferences on Cohesive Societies*](#) under the auspices of Singapore’s President Madam Halimah Yacob provide an international forum to disseminate the latest scholarship and activism that inspire us and continue our work towards *Tikkun Olam* — the Jewish concept for repairing our world.

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