Evil religion?

By Kelly J. Baker
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At CNN's Belief Blog, John Blake offers four warning signs of when religious beliefs become evil. These include absolutism, charismatic leaders, apocalypticism, and the end justifying the means. He notes that "the line between good religion and evil religion is thin, and it's easy to make self-righteous assumptions."

Blake catalogs "evil" religions and their dangerous actions:

- Army of God abortion clinic bombers
- The mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978
- Aum Shinrikyo's sarin gas attack on a Japanese subway station in 1995
- The Roman Catholic Church's sex-abuse scandal

This list is unsurprising. When people label religion "evil," they almost always include Jonestown, Aum Shinrikyo and the Branch Davidians (who are represented here in an image accompanying Blake's article). The common assumption follows that these religious groups can be marked as evil because they are imbricated in violence, death and destruction. We can cluck our tongues sympathetically at the supposedly brainwashed people deluded into joining these movements, and we can rest easier at night by assuming that our religious commitments must be the safe kind.

Moreover, we can hold onto the vision of "healthy religion" that Blake espouses. If only we were versed in these four signs, the argument goes, then maybe these tragedies wouldn't happen.

If only it were this easy. Such an understanding of "evil" religion is predicated on a sense that religion is inherently "good." Blake even writes that "religion is supposed to be a force of good," as if claiming this aloud necessarily makes it so.

This effort to establish the goodness of some religions over the horror of others is nothing new. The history of white supremacy, doomsday groups and terrorism

suggest that Blake's piece lacks a nuanced engagement with the complicated relationships between religion and violence.

Members of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan branded themselves as a particular form of white Protestantism. Klansmen imagined themselves as knights fighting to preserve the American nation from immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and African Americans, and they crafted a white Jesus who would have gladly worn the infamous hood and robes. The burning cross was not for them an object of terror; it reflected the light of Jesus, whose redemptive sacrifice saved humanity. The Klan considered itself to be a religious order, yet the general consensus was that the Klansmen could not be religious because they were also white supremacists.

White supremacy negated the presence of "authentic" religion. Labeling Klan religion as false became a method to claim that religion was by definition not associated with movements that were hateful, dangerous, disreputable or even unsavory.

Marking religion as good or bad might reassure us about our own choices, but it doesn't explain anything about how religion functions in the lives of people. What's more, it often obscures the complicated place of religion in our historical and current worlds. False or true, evil or good—these are normative claims, not analytical ones, and they simplify the fraught complexity of human lives that are often mired in violence.

The Boston Marathon bombs went off 46 minutes before my class on the apocalypse in American culture. We were in the middle of our last unit, a case study of Jonestown. While my class discussed the Peoples Temple's journey from interracial congregation to utopian commune to mass suicide, the media reported what little we knew in Boston.

The specter of current violence made the acts of historical violence more pressing and tangible. How could people do this? Why would they? What does this tell us about humanity? The media firestorm that surrounded Jonestown appeared eerily prescient of the coverage of the bombings. In both cases, people tried to distance horrific events from religion, or to claim that "evil" religion was to blame.

This couldn't be religion if people committed suicide or acts of terrorism. It couldn't be religion if there was harm, brutality and violence. Could it?

The quick and convenient labels “good” and “evil” don’t help us understand the motivations behind either event. As we analyze the Tsarnaev brothers, perhaps we should spend less time labeling them as “evil” and instead try to grasp the complexity of religion’s role in these tragedies, to figure out why humans turn to violent actions. Calling something evil is not analysis; it is dehumanization.

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