

A Tragic Intolerance for the Diversity that Scientists Enjoy Every Day

I am sad for the world, because I know that the horrendous tragedy of September 11 did not have to happen. I know this because as a scientist, I am part of a community that is arguably race, religion, nationality, and gender blind. Of course there is squabbling, infighting, and even some backstabbing; we are human. But I have always been very proud to belong to a profession in which open-minded people of myriad backgrounds can discuss issues and problems logically, and usually without bias. When my children were small, I used to tell them that working in my laboratory was like being at the United Nations—such is the diversity that most of us enjoy. It is a great tragedy that the world at large cannot share the mutual respect, joy of discovery, and peace that we take for granted in our workplaces.

It seems that these heinous crimes were perpetrated by fanatics who perverted religion into terrorism. That any religious teaching could be the source of evil is a sad commentary on human civilization, since the moral and ethical codes common to most of the civilized world were born in their words. Science and religion are both constructs for understanding the world around us. It is said that the difference between them is that religion starts with certainty and tends toward doubt, whereas science starts with doubt and tends toward certainty. I think humankind needs both religious and scientific truth. Science is neutral and amoral; there is neither good nor bad, just scientific truth. We must turn to Religion and



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Humanism for morality and ethics. We may understand scientifically that lions improve the quality of the zebra herd by picking off the lame and the unfit, but our human values have condemned any civilization that has dared to apply such eugenic mechanisms to our race.

My dictionary defines a fanatic as a “person with extreme and uncritical enthusiasm or zeal, as in religion or politics.” A person may be fanatical about a good cause (although as a scientist, I find the “uncritical” part to be significant as well as disturbing). Normally, a fanatic’s

activities are of no import to people outside their folds. However, if adherents of such groups are given the proper indoctrination of hatred and intolerance, terrorism may follow. Fanatics, of any stripe, are the same—all are certain they are right. There is no room for debate, logic, or discourse. To me, it is very simple. Fanaticism, when borne of hatred and ignorance, is the enemy.

As scientists, we can be proud that we aspire to be above such conduct, but so can the vast majority of the inhabitants of this planet. Therefore, we must do more than pat ourselves on the back. We must use our influence, in all of our countries, at the local and national levels, to promote peaceful and meaningful solutions to the world’s problems. We must establish strong and lasting connections between our scientific communities and our nations’ governing bodies. We should strive to behave like scientists, but also listen to the spiritual voice within each of us. I do not have a solution for terrorism and the resultant mayhem and destruction. Eventually, we may be able to prevent acts of terrorism, but it will be harder to extinguish the hatred and radicalism that foment them. I am not hopeful for a short-term solution. Let us hope that we can make steady progress toward a long-term solution, however, by trying to bring some level of hope, prosperity, understanding, and peace to all nations.

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