



Perfect Storm

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We are experiencing the perfect storm for violence between Jews and Muslims in Israel/Palestine. It's the convergence of certain factors in religion, which when combined with the particular political impasse there cause many religious Muslims and Jews to see the conflict as religious, existential and life-threatening. This encourages a high tolerance for brutality in the name of religion, which then heightens the perception of impending destruction – which in turn encourages increased brutality.

Religions function like complex organisms. The cells of their bodies are the believers, tied together through the arteries of communities and sinews of shared ritual. Their muscles are movements of common cause, their brain a complex neural mix of theologies and counter-theologies, and their heart the center of moral vision. Like all organisms, religions seek homeostasis. Left to themselves, they pursue positive relations with their environments; they seek a state of peace.

Religions contain within them different vectors of religious thought and action. When undisturbed, the dominant vectors strive for meaning and balance with nature by providing for the physical needs of the body and the spiritual needs of the soul. With these needs met, believers care for the full environment in which they live. They act out the religious imperative by feeding the hungry and serving the needy both within and outside of the community of believers. This in turn radiates the expectation that humanity and nature can live together in harmony. In other words, religions are equipped and are eager to expend great spiritual, physical and material effort to bring real peace to all humankind.

But religions can also feel threatened. When the threat is perceived as serious, they react by promoting a different set of vectors that also convey authentic religious thought and action. These vectors support defensive actions, such as lashing out against perceived enemies through invective and verbal attack. When the threat is considered life-threatening, religions can unleash all their resources against it. History has shown how religious communities that feel threatened can engage in unthinkable brutality.

But feelings are not always an accurate assessment of reality. Sometimes an organism misperceives a threat and then endangers itself by reacting foolishly. Sometimes, in fact, an organism can err by aggravating a real but non-lethal hazard into a fatal deathtrap.

This is what we see happening these past weeks in Israel/Palestine. The essential conflict there is one over competing expressions of nationalism, neither of which accepts the legitimacy of the other. Nationalism exists in the world of politics where all things are negotiable. But the conflict has morphed over the years into one that is increasingly defined as religious, existential and absolute. This unfortunate development has infiltrated the political discourse on both sides even among those who are not religious. It leaves virtually no room for negotiation.

For the sake of their own survival, both sides must reconsider how they define their grievances. Classifying the conflict as existential makes it absolute, provoking and threatening horrible destruction. Re-evaluating the meaning of the conflict can move it toward something that is resolvable.

The political, social, cultural and counter-cultural leaders on both sides need to reconsider the narratives that they have created. They need to bring their communities back to a less threatening discourse. That requires re-summoning the traditional vectors of religious thought common to both Judaism and Islam which seek homeostasis and value dynamic relations with the Other. Such a move can bring the discussion around to enable positive problem-solving.

The confluence of events in this perfect storm will eventually pass. It will then be up to those on the ground to make the necessary repairs in order to stay afloat. That will require giving up certain dogmatic absolutes and accepting the reality that life requires negotiation.

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