

FAITH PERSPECTIVES

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Faith Perspectives: All hate crimes are political. Our response must be, too

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FILE - In this Saturday, Oct. 27, 2018, file photo, bullet holes can be seen in a shattered window as FBI and other law enforcement investigate the scene of a deadly shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue on in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh. A team of rabbis and volunteers has gone into the Tree of Life synagogue to gather up blood and other remains from the victims of the shooting rampage, in keeping with Jewish law that says the entire body must be buried. (Andrew Stein/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette via AP, File)

In George Orwell's "1984," the totalitarian government of Oceania plans annual "Hate Weeks," orgies of orchestrated hatred directing citizens to detest the enemy of the moment. The Party uses public miseducation campaigns (including the promotion of fake "atrocities" allegedly performed by the state's enemies) and propagandist art to ensure that citizens look to the government for protection and know where to direct their rage.

Last month, the United States had its own version of Hate Week: A white man gunned down two African-Americans after explicitly declaring his intention to kill black people and black people only; mail bombs were sent to numerous

Democratic politicians, liberal public figures and representatives of the mainstream media; and a man killed 11 people at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in perhaps the worst act of anti-semitic violence in U.S. history.

These events were not orchestrated by the government, like the Hate Week of Orwell's "1984." But acts of hatred perpetrated by individual citizens serve a similar political purpose: They indicate who is to be considered low in society's esteem, who deserves to be "punished," whose lives are expendable.

Hate crimes affect more than just the individuals targeted: Because the crimes victimize people because of their membership in a group, and not for their individual actions, the actions attempt to demean and diminish the entire group.

If black people in Kentucky can be targeted just for being black, so can all black people be targeted. So too, all members of the press and all Jewish people.

These acts were designed to reassert the supremacy of white people, of gentiles and of political conservatives. Like Orwell's Hate Week, these acts aim to teach people whom we are "supposed" to hate, and exactly what we are "supposed" to do to them. They are therefore, like all hate crimes, political: They separate the polis into those on the top, who are rightful members of the political community, and those on the bottom, who are "invaders" and "undesirables" who must be removed for the safety and comfort of everybody else.

The political nature of hatred is particularly salient now, at a time when President Donald Trump and his administration openly espouse bigoted policies and attitudes, and encourage violence against both political enemies and targeted groups.

The political rallies in which he delights (even as he is supposed to govern) are filled with language designed to heighten the supposed threat "real Americans" face from this litany of "outsider" groups, and he has at multiple rallies explicitly endorsed political violence. These are the tactics of Oceania transported to America, and as we witness an increase in hate violence on these shores, we would be foolish to ignore the political cesspit that is spawning it.

Yet the political aspect of hate violence is often overlooked, particularly when people come together to respond to it.

It is extremely tempting and completely understandable that when a community is scared and hurting it should reach for “unity,” bringing together people of different political perspectives to demonstrate cooperation against hate.

This satisfies the immediate emotional needs of the participants, but it misses the opportunity to build an effective political movement that might push back against the conditions that encourage hate terrorism in the first place. A political “unity” in response to atrocities born of hate is a temporary balm, not a route to healing.

What would a truly effective response to hatred look like? It must be honest and uncompromising. Confronting hatred in our communities requires us to recognize that “we” are not all “in this together,” because some of “us” commit hate crimes, while others explicitly or tacitly endorse the attitudes that motivate them.

Let us be honest, instead. Let us acknowledge that hate is now an integral part of the campaigning strategy of the president and of the party he leads. Let us start exacting a political toll on politicians who support this hateful president and his party. Let us forgo false unity and pursue genuine solidarity, building a political movement to change the conditions that promote hateful violence such as we saw last month.

Otherwise, we are not confronting hatred — we are ignoring it.

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