

Introduction

It is the tenth of November as we write this on the eightieth anniversary of Kristallnacht. Referred to as the “Night of Broken Glass”, this was the night of November 9-10, 1938, when German Nazis conducted a massive attack on Jewish persons and property. Throughout Germany and Austria, Jewish owned stores and synagogues were seriously damaged by SA paramilitary forces and civilians while authorities looked on without intervening. What is so chilling is that only two weeks ago a lone gunman invaded the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg during Sabbath morning worship killing eleven members of the congregation. The attack was reported to be the most deadly attack on Jews in U.S. history.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported shortly after this incident that hate crimes were up in the USA seventeen percent overall in 2017 with crimes of antisemitism leading the spike. A government report indicated that there were alarming increases in attacks motivated by racial bigotry, religious bias and because of a victim’s sexual orientation. While the report showed a nearly twenty-three percent increase in religious-based hate crimes, those against Jews soared by thirty-seven percent. What is so alarming is that this seems to reflect a serious erosion of our core values as Americans.

Pastor Valerie Gittings of First Baptist Church in Fairmont, West Virginia suggests that religious people may be part of the problem when she says: “It breaks my heart that so many people now equate Christianity with against-ness: that Christians are against gay people, against women in ministry, against Muslims. That’s not the gospel. The gospel is a wonderful and astonishing message of love and compassion for a God who created all of us and would never, ever want someone to be cast out and separated from the community.”

It is said that the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Fear of the other often leads one to hate. And hate can lead one to violence. In the movie “A Wrinkle in Time,” one of the three wise women offers this profound advice: “The powers of darkness want us to fear—for fear turns us to hate which then turns us to violence. And then the darkness has won.” This describes the human story that has been replayed time and again throughout time in acts of prejudice and aggression, hate crimes and war. One of the most horrifying examples is the Jewish holocaust.

A few days following the tragic shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, several clergy of various religious traditions met with civic officials and a rabbi of a Jewish congregation in the Seattle area. These leaders of local faith communities wanted to express their solidarity with their Jewish sister and brothers in light of what happened in Pittsburg. The rabbi told them about “the Talk” that many rabbis traditionally have with their youth prior to their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. Jewish youth learn how German Christians used their religion to justify—or at the very least turned a blind eye to—the persecution and suffering of Jews under the Third Reich (1933-1945) which led to the extermination of eleven million Jews—two thirds of the Jewish population in Europe.

Finding a Way Forward

There is a chilling yet hope-filled photo that has been making its appearance on the internet. It shows a Jewish menorah sitting on the windowsill while outside one can see banners bearing the Nazi swastika draped on buildings. The location is Kiel, Germany and the date 1931. And the caption on the photo proclaims: “Our light will outlast their flag.” This suggests that the light of one’s faith can shine hope in the midst of darkness and perhaps help one find a way out of the darkness. It is our hope that this book can help summon our “better angels” as we seek a way forward to a more just and civil society as citizens and people of faith.

Americans appear to live today within a culture of violence and fear of the other where many are tempted to despair. There is a concern that the country has lost its soul or at least its moral compass. People seem to have lost faith in most institutions, including government and even the Church. Yet faith communities are intended to be agents of transformation and hope. We believe that the Church, the Synagogue and the Mosque all have an important role in the public square and can offer a place for open dialog about basic core values that are found in a variety of religious traditions. We seek to offer a Biblical and inter-religious approach to the question of “how does God intend for us to live well together in the common life?”

We begin this journey together with an analysis of how we arrived at this fragile time in our history. We will look at what we consider the failure of the American Religious Experiment. We then turn to Judeo-Christian scripture and the writings of other faith traditions that reveal common values such as compassion, hospitality, justice, and care of creation. The words of the Prophet Micah offer a guide to what God requires of us in order to live in peace and harmony together. Finally, we suggest that one path forward is to build community through interfaith dialogue. This book is intended to be a guidebook for use in a variety of religious communities (schools, congregations, synagogues, mosques, etc.) in the hope of making a positive difference in our corporate life together.

This Introduction began with words from “The Canticle of Turning” by hymn writer Rory Cooney, based on the Magnificat from Luke 1:46-55. This hymn suggests that the world is about to turn, to undergo transformation. God’s reign of mercy and justice is breaking in. This should strike terror into the hearts of some while others will find solace in the good news. The proud and the mighty are about to be toppled. But for those on the margins, the oppressed, the poor, and the sorrowful, night is nearly over and the dawn is about to break in upon them.

People of faith can help make a difference for good. We can make this world a better place for all to live.

O God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(From the *Book of Common Prayer*)

Rick Rouse and Paul O. Ingram