

r. scot miller's statement of violence and Quaker living

My statement on violence is representative of my own views, and not of the individuals who live, work, or enjoy products from the Sandhill farm. I would never dare to speak on behalf of another regarding violence, and even though Sandhill originated and is maintained as a project anchored in the justice and peace-making witness of the Religious Society of Friends (Hicksite), I certainly do not speak on behalf of any Friends or the Society.

Violence is indeed a fact of life, and it is a necessary law of the natural world. However, humans, whom I believe are prone to violence as a reaction rather than a reflexive behavior, can choose to reject violence as an option for peace-making, the pursuit of justice, social political change, and quite often, our human diet. This high regard for non-violent problem-solving occurs despite facts of nature and, for those who choose not to use violence to defend themselves or innocent and marginalized persons, it could be considered by some or many to lack moral vision.

Despite the nature of the earth and the cosmos and the violence of its origin, or the violence between the first brothers in the biblical account, I suggest that kenotic non-violence is moral because it is the position of a deeply held faith. In the history of Friends, war has been part of the behavior of many. Quakers were not originally non-violent. A great many fought in the New Model Army until Cromwell banned all Friends from service because of their agitation for dissenting religious and political views. Friends publicly stated commitment to pacifism and rejection of violence began only when confronted with an anti-monarchy assignation plot. Since 1661, most to many Friends have committed themselves to refusing to fight.

The context is important in understanding the Quaker witness to public refusal to engage in wars and fighting. But it should be known that by 1661, a majority of Friends had already considered and been convinced that Jesus, our inward Light and the Word of God, rejected violence, instead giving up his privilege and choosing intentionally a life of community and service as the response to Roman occupation of Judea. These Friends chose pacifism because they believed it to be Christ-like, and God ordained. The moral defense of non-violence and the rejection of the violent defense of innocence constitutes a moral vision because it is a vision of faith. Non-violence require sacrifice. If one values their privileged social or economic status above messianic emptying and servanthood, it ceases to be a non-violence of faith. It becomes an ethic of self-righteousness. The state monopoly on violence inserts itself into the defense of non-violent persons as a unfortunate aspect of the public interest.

Non-violence is only moral as an ethic of faith when voluntary sacrifice and service to others is the prioritized praxis. This is the meaning of the messianic call to carry one's cross if they want to choose a life of discipleship. It must be a voluntary choice, and there must be an acknowledgment of the possibility that one could be seriously injured or killed when acting non-violently in pursuit of justice and the Kingdom of God.

I cannot morally claim to be non-violent, though I believe Jesus commands us to do so. I will not fight, nor take oaths to the state, the Constitution, nor in law-courts. I am often challenged because I often work closely with very violent people, or people who have been so traumatized by violence in their lives, including in combat, that their suffering is due to victimization. I must stop the cycle of making victims in pursuit of socio-economic power and white supremacist social norms.

The reason I claim that I cannot be non-violent is two-fold. One, I have had to coercively control the movements of individuals to protect myself and others from a dangerous person who posed an immediate threat. I don't throw punches, I don't carry weapons, and I am willing to take a beating for someone else. I have committed to such acts numerous times working in my professional field (substance abuse). But I also cannot claim to be non-violent because God commands that if we eat meat, we must kill it. Meat is, in fact, murder. It is not something I struggle with – eating animals I raise, care for and about, and then kill. I struggle with the fact that I do not like killing. It bothers me to end the life of a living thing, though I value the benefits of killing to feed my family and others. This is not a conundrum nor is it an inconsistency. Because I willingly kill living things for food, I practice intentional violence that provides for us.

I'd like you to consider the moral value of meat-eating if you join us at the farm. When God expressed to Peter in a vision that no food is unclean – God told Peter to “Kill and eat.” If one is not willing to engage in the violence of killing for food, or observe this sacrificial process, it seems to me an ethic of privilege. But Friends, if we eat meat, we have blood on our hands.

This leads to queries about a stance of non-violence and voluntary sacrifice. Meat is, for me and others, an acceptable form of violence in which we need not get our hands dirty, is the same as asking police officers to engage in difficult situations or threats to yourself and property. Police have the privilege of employing violence and sometimes do so in an unjust manner. Do we value the things in our home more than individuals or thieves who would “break in and steal.”? Do we enjoy the products we consume that are made by wage-slave or enslaved persons who cannot leave their employment? Do Friends benefit from the monopoly assumed by the state concerning the just or unjust distribution of violence and punishment? Does one pay federal taxes that pay for war and preparation for war.

The American economy is largely one of arms sales and military technology. Do we regularly engage with and assume the privilege and benefits of capitalism, state capitalism, and armed policing? These are just some questions for those who claim non-violence. Certainly, I believe that Christ's commandment to love both neighbor and enemy is intended for those claiming discipleship. It is an easy thing to claim, when you have the privilege of economic stability, a political voice, and the right skin-tone. Voluntary sacrifice is accepting conviction when it comes regarding certain privileges and benefits that are available to us only because of the threat of coercive violence upon producers or the poor. If you claim to be a person of the people of the Book, I hope we find ways to continue this conversation about intentionality and discipleship. The farm is a perfect place to become cognizant of what the spilling of blood means.