

Minister, Teacher, Author

On bin Laden’s death, words from the real and ideal worlds

A few comments on this week’s On Faith question:

“Is it moral to celebrate a person’s death, even if he is guilty of heinous crimes?”

1 Relief was my first and strongest feeling upon hearing of Osama bin Laden’s death: the necessary man-hunt and execution were over. Then other feelings came upon me. Sadness that our country so often decides that killing is the lesser of two evils, then satisfaction that this time the decision was correct. Gratitude to Obama for his last-week’s decision to chance the risky raid on Osama’s compound. Pride of country (patriotism), that we did something deeply significant, at least symbolically, for the physical safety of our nation and other nations. Thanksgiving to God for the correlation, within the Muslim world, of a victory over violence and the multi-national nonviolent rise of democracy. Guilty grief that this victory over violence had to be itself violent - not what Jesus had in mind when he taught “Blessed are the peace-makers” and “Love your enemies.”

2 Well, did anybody in America *not* have a jumble of feelings? On the realistic right, the dominant moral feeling was, “Justice has been done.” On the idealistic right, “Violence is never the answer.” And, among our few ideological jihadists, rage against America and “the West” increased. I must scowl at these pure-and-simple feelings:

(1) We must become increasingly vigilant facing home-bred, pro-violent Islamism.

(2) To “Violence is never the answer,” I must respond that it often the government’s answer, and “peace” (in the negative sense) is the societal condition usually attained by violence.

(3) To “Justice has been done,” I must say that only the lower justice (such as spoken of in the Bible’s Letter to the Romans, chapter 13) was done; the higher, nonviolent justice (”overcome evil with good” - peace in the positive sense - in the previous chapter) was left untouched.

We Americans believe in the separation of church and state. Romans 12 is “church” in the sense of instructing Christians how to live within the sphere of their decision-making, and there is no place for violence (no “sword”). The next chapter is “state,” how Christians are to live as citizens, in support of civil order (including “sword”). Often, preachers fuse or confuse the two chapters: they need to apply “the separation of church and state” to how they read the Bible.

3 While I’d not participate in the jubilant celebration of anyone’ death, neither would I condemn it. Defeats sadden me. I’ve never publicly rejoiced in the defeat even of any sports-team. Or any defeat in war: Eisenhower smiled at me when he noticed that I was the only one in the crowd not yelling and clapping when he returned home to Kansas after leading the Allies in the defeat of Hitler. But I know that celebrating victories-defeats (the two being inseparable) has a therapeutic, energizing, community-refreshing effect on any people. Celebrate Osama’s execution? My way of being a Christian, a citizen, and a human being says to me both “Don’t participate!” and “Don’t knock it!”

4 I’ll close with the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brilliant German theologian and devout Protestant saint and Nazi martryr, who faced the complexity of obeying Jesus’ commands to love God, your neighbor, yourself, and your enemy.

When Hitler died, Bonhoeffer did not celebrate his death. Killing somebody is worse than celebrating the death, isn’t it? Bonhoeffer became convinced that killing Hitler would be good for Germany (hastening the collapse of Nazism) and the world, so he joined a conspiracy for tyrannicide. But the bomb failed to kill Hitler, who saw to it that Bonhoeffer was hung - which was not long before Hitler’s suicide.

I know no better books to read, on the subject of this week’s On Faith question, than Bonhoeffer’s “Ethics” and his “Letters and Papers from Prison.” His devoutness and courage of spirit, his clarity and morality of mind, and his generosity of soul - his story, his life - can have a bracing, uplifting effect on any open reader. His last words after the noose fell around his neck: “This is the end, the beginning of life.” He tried to kill Hitler, but would not have celebrated Hitler’s death had he succeeded.

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