

What Counts as Violence?

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The March 15 Christchurch mass shooting was an act of pre-meditated, horrific violence. New Zealanders and people around the world were shocked. There is no controversy on how horrible it was, so it should be no surprise at the outpouring of support for the Muslim community in New Zealand and shows of solidarity. Politicians are crawling over each other to show how much they care (which means more votes). The New Zealand government rushed to ban semi-automatic weapons. Other government agencies have also jumped to express their solidarity, thus showing themselves to be caring and responsive.

On the exact same day as the mass shooting, students around the world walked out of school to strike, expressing their outrage at nothing being done about Climate Change. I want to compare societal reactions to the two events, as it highlights our ideas about violence.

Support for the striking students was mixed. Unlike the mass shooting, the idea of students going on strike from school was considered controversial. Many educators and government officials said it would be “wasting good learning time”. The Ministry of Education advised that schools “do not support students attending this event.” The president of the Secondary Principals Association said it would accomplish nothing. Schools said they would mark students as truant – as “unjustifiably absent”. The interesting thing is that students are allowed to miss plenty of school to play rugby – one of the most violent sports there is. In fact, sometimes the entire school is allowed to watch – during class time! The hypocrisy, idiocy and total disregard for life on the planet is impressive for those responsible for “educating” our children.

Now let's look at Climate Change in terms of violence. It increases droughts, wildfires, flooding, storm intensity and frequency, killing off ocean life through ocean acidification, all of which are increasing loss of human and non-human lives, and devastating communities around the world. Many scientists are warning about tipping points and feedback loops, making human extinction ever more probable – in our children's lifetime. Calling Climate Change horrific violence is an understatement. Why isn't there shock and outrage?

And if we speak of Climate Change, we cannot limit ourselves just to the consequences, but also the cause. The mining and extraction and industrial production processes that cause Climate Change are also violent. Mining is nothing less than the stabbing of the Earth and the ripping out of its guts. Indigenous communities must be destroyed and their land stolen so that mining can take place. People are impoverished and then forced at gunpoint to work in mines. Oil drilling, fracking, and tar sands extraction are just as destructive. Factories are just as destructive. They all add millions of tons of toxic chemicals to the land, water and air. The fact is, millions of people have been killed and millions more forced into unimaginable poverty and suffering so that this culture can have its cars, airplanes, computers and Disney World. Life is being wiped off the planet just so that the elite can expand their wealth and power, and some of us can text each other.

To me, this is more than just horrific violence. It demands shock and outrage! Why doesn't the New Zealand government rush to ban oil drilling? To ban fracking? To shut down the most destructive industries?

Even without Climate Change, humans have wiped out half of all wildlife in just the last 40 years. Where is the shock and outrage?

This is in no way saying that we should not be horrified at the Christchurch mass shooting, or any mass shooting. But how can we act surprised or shocked? Our culture is seeped through and

through, in unimaginable violence against the natural world. If we want to stop mass shootings, we have to deal with the root of all this violence: civilisation and the myth that humans are superior to all other life. Capitalism and consumerism just makes it a whole lot worse. The fact is, a “civilised” way of life requires destroying the natural world.

Even our solutions reflect this violent mindset. Solar panels and wind turbines still require mining, factories, toxic chemicals, oil drilling, and the placement of panels and wind turbines across vast expanses of wilderness. Electric cars and bicycles require mining, factories, oil drilling - plus pavement! Pavement is the total smothering and annihilation of life on the ground. Our solutions question nothing. Our solutions are like an alcoholic quitting drinking by taking up cocaine.

We cannot ever hope to live healthy and meaningful lives, until we deal with the violent origins of our culture and the horrific violence unleashed upon the natural world every single day, by our civilisation.

One of the most esteemed professors of Islamic Studies, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, expressed it well:

Many labour under the illusion that only war is evil and that if only it could be averted man could go on peacefully to create paradise on earth. What is forgotten is that in both the state of war and peace man is waging an incessant war upon nature. The official state of war is no more than an occasional outburst of an activity that goes on all the time within the souls of men, in human society, and towards nature. It is no more than a chimerical dream to expect to have peace based upon a state of intense war toward nature and disequilibrium with the cosmic environment. It is only the complete ignorance of what man's relation to nature means that could allow such views to be entertained...

In the end what we can say with all certainty is that there is no peace possible among men unless there is peace and harmony with nature. (Nasr 1967)

Our idea of violence is flawed. Violence against humans begins with violence against the natural world. The violence will only get worse, the mass shootings will continue, and human extinction will come ever closer, until we recognise that our entire way of life is based on violence. We have a choice. We need to look honestly at our entire culture and be shocked and outraged, and then we need the courage to do something about it.

Reference: Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. (1967). *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. George Allen and Unwin.

Joey Moncarz is co-founder and principal of the Deep Green Bush-School in Auckland, New Zealand. The Deep Green Bush-School is a participatory, evolutionary and revolutionary school for ages 5-18. The school website is www.deepgreenbushschool.org. Joey can be reached at deepgreenbushschool@gmail.com