

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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James Holmes, the Aurora Massacre and the Nature of Evil

Since the fall, physical violence against fellow human beings has been a given (see Genesis 4). There is probably no greater evidence of human rebellion against God's moral law than the premeditated killing of humans. War, state terrorism and premeditated murder have characterized human history. But the causation of violence against humans is difficult. It is correct to argue that all human violence is due to sin but that does not solve much nor, for most, does it satisfy as an explanation; nor does it bring much comfort. Many people attempt to attribute human violence to the economy, to poverty, to living conditions, etc. But, in one sense, none of these explanations truly answers the question of why. The murder of human beings—either individually or in a mass-murder setting—is perplexing and difficult to explain. For example, consider these statistics: The homicide rate in the United States in the early 1990s was at about 10 per 100,000 people; today it is half that! But mass murder, what we saw in Aurora, for example, has had no corresponding decline. Between 1976 and 2010, the US experienced 645 mass-murder events—killings with at least four victims. The total killed during this period was 2,949. To explain mass murder, there is no correlation with any causal factor (e.g., the economy, law enforcement strategies, poverty levels, education, etc.). Reporter Joel Achenbach writes that “Many killing sprees are driven by grudges or a desire for revenge. The victims are bosses, co-workers, family members or fellow students, as was the case at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Columbine High School in 1999. Some attacks are driven by a political ideology and can be properly described as terrorism.”

But the individual murder rate in Chicago seems to be bucking the national trend of decline; it is rising. So far in this July alone, there have been 27 people murdered in the windy city—twice as many as were killed in Aurora, Colorado. In fact, last July there were 55 murders in Chicago! For that reason, Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* writes: “Why are we not shocked and outraged at this daily violence? If we were, would it do any good? What would it do to our psyches to be aware and outraged every day? Maybe we have no psychological choice but to move the violence to the subliminal regions. But then along comes a mass shooting, and we are aware, if only briefly, how much violence and fear of violence we live with daily.” Each one of us in America lives with fear; that is why we have security systems, locks on our doors and security guards and police officers in banks, malls, schools, even grocery stores. Galli writes that “We put a veneer of civility over all this, so that it is attended to with decorum and, well, fun! How many sentimental trinkets are available for our key rings, the very symbol of violence we are trying to keep at bay? But these shootings remind us that we very much live in a world as ‘red in tooth and claw’ as ever.”

So let's consider the tragedy and atrocity of 24-year old James Holmes. Clad in body armor and armed with several guns, Holmes killed 12 people and wounded 58 in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, which was showing the movie, “The Dark Knight Rises.” In his one court appearance,

with his hair dyed a weird orange, he sat there, looking groggy and dazed, and said nothing. If this is confirmed, he told the police, “I am the Joker” (a figure in the Batman story), which might explain his hair color. Was he living out the Batman movie as the Joker? He also had booby-trapped his apartment with explosives and had a timer in his apartment set to play loud “techno-music.” Holmes has no known criminal history and was a graduate student, studying for a Ph.D. in neuroscience at the University of Colorado at Denver. But he flunked an important oral exam, which would have enabled him to proceed with the program. This was apparently the first time he ever faced academic failure. For most of us it is impossible to conceive of someone such as James Holmes, who did something so horrific. Hence, we refer to him as a “monster” or declare that he must be mentally ill. Perceptively, Galli concludes that “we label them to suggest they are not like us, for we could never do such a thing. But of course we could; the routinization of murder under Stalin and Hitler, among other regimes, suggests that any of us can be enlisted to wipe out fellow human beings, doing so with routine efficiency. Death camps are run by everyday people like us just doing their jobs.” So, we long for explanations of such evil, and we quickly come to understand that there is no educational, or psychological and certainly no political solution to evil. Galli concludes correctly that “there is no solution or explanation for evil. Evil is fundamentally irrational; it simply cannot be grasped by means of our intellectual categories. Evil is the very denial of rationality, because it is a rebellion against the Logos, the very principle of the good, the true and the beautiful who created and sustains the universe.” We therefore cannot “explain” Aurora, or James Holmes, or Columbine, or Hitler, Stalin and Mao, for that matter. And there are no simple solutions to prevent such a horror from occurring again. A better educational system, more counseling centers or a series of new congressional laws will not protect us.

What then can we say? What then is our source of comfort? There are three fundamental theological principles that we know. They do not completely explain James Holmes or any other mass murderer, but they do provide doctrinal bricks on which we can build a foundation that brings some degree of comfort and offers a starting point for intelligent praying:

1. Jeremiah 17:9 states that “The [human] heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick [wicked], who can understand it?” The irrationality of evil is basic to the human condition, until it is redeemed and transformed by Jesus Christ. The most technologically sophisticated, best educated and wealthiest century in human history up to that point in time (the 20th century) was also the century of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot and Charles Manson.
2. God established His world with certain basic institutions that are to restrain the human propensity for evil—the family and the state. The family is to train, equip and provide the framework for discipline—i.e., to restrain evil. If it is not working very well, then neither will its restraining influence be felt. The state, according to Romans 13:1-7, is to principally promote justice and restrain evil. When it is not working very well, it will not perform this basic role so central to civilized society. In addition, the church has an important restraining influence as well. As the church acts as salt it preserves culture from further deterioration and decline. As it serves its function as light, it exposes evil for what it is (see Matthew 5:13-16). Further, if I am correct in my understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:7, the Holy

Spirit also restrains evil. Hence, God has indeed built into His world restraining forces of evil—what grace!

3. The cross of Jesus Christ and His completed work through His resurrection are God's answer and final solution to evil. In short, Jesus became a victim of the most horrific evil imaginable in order to eradicate evil from this world. Theologian Albert Mohler likes to quote Henri Blocher, who wrote: "Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. The maneuver is utterly unprecedented. No more complete victory could be imagined. God responds in the indirect way that is perfectly suited to the ambiguity of evil. He entraps the deceiver in his own wiles. Evil, like a judoist, takes advantage of the power of good, which it perverts; the Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent." In short, to bring people to Jesus, even in the midst of national grieving, is to bring them to the Ultimate Solution for evil. May God in His grace enable us to do just that.

See Joel Achenbach in the *Washington Post* (24 July 2012); Mark Galli, www.christianitytoday.com (25 July 2012); and Albert Mohler, "The Dark Night in Denver," www.albertmohler.com (25 July 2012).