



Discussion Guide

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Welcome to the *YES!* Discussion Guide Series

We're delighted that you've decided to take up some of the issues explored in YES! magazine in your class or discussion group. When people gather in groups to talk with mutual respect and caring about the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change. The staff of YES! magazine has prepared this guide to help you get started. We hope you'll find it useful.

We've posted selected articles from YES! on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You're welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 1-800-937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

Can Love Save the World?

Since September 11, the question we'd set out to address in this issue—Can Love Save the World?—has taken on a life-and-death urgency, amid the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the bombing of Afghanistan, the curtailing of our freedoms in the name of security, and the fear of biological and nuclear warfare. Can love save this broken world? We need an answer.

In this issue of *YES!* we take a hard look at the deepest, most persistent challenge we face as human beings—dealing peacefully with our differences. From its earliest days, our history as a species has been marked by wars—holy wars, wars of conquest, just wars, and wars-to-end-wars, and most recently, a war against terrorism. Have we grown more peaceful over our 3,000 years of recorded history? Hardly. Historian Eric Hobsbawm calls the 20th century “the age of total war” and comments that “the growing brutality and inhumanity of the twentieth century is difficult to explain,” but that there is no serious doubt about “this rising curve of barbarism after 1914.”

What do we make of this? Can we change directions? Can love change our world?

“It's a good question,” *YES!* associate editor Sheldon Ito writes. “A necessary question if we ever hope to live peaceably on this planet. But make no mistake about it, a dangerous question if we're serious, because it may demand everything we have and then, in the end, reveal us for who we truly are.”

Are we ready to answer this dangerous question? We encourage you to read the following articles to prepare for this discussion:

Walter Wink, “Can Love Save the World?” 12–15

Jamal Rahman, “Heart of a Muslim,” 16–19

Samuel Oliner, “Ordinary Heroes,” 30–33

Wendell Berry, “The Failure of War,” 48–50

Walden Bello, “In the Eyes of the World,” 51–52

Can Love Save the World?

Walter Wink explains the surprising meaning of Jesus' advice, “If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” to illustrate that Jesus was advocating defiance, not passive submission. Ask your group to reenact this advice—gently! Person A, using the right hand only, demonstrates that a blow to B's right cheek can only be made as a backhanded slap.



Participant B turns the other cheek. After seeing this reenactment, do you think that Wink's interpretation of Jesus' advice seems reasonable?

Wink, describing Jesus' advice, gives us two other examples where intolerable situations are met with neither servile submission nor violent confrontation. Can you think of a real-life example where a "third" way proved successful? Think of your own life and conflicts with family, schoolmates, or others, as well as historical conflicts within and outside of America.

Walter Wink notes that his colleague, Michael Kelly, is unable to point to many successes for the "fight" option in the last two decades. What wars do you think have been successful? Do you think that modern wars can still be successful?

Ask the group to pick an intolerable situation they'd like to address and to devise a "third-way" strategy for change. (This might be a homework assignment in preparation for the next meeting.)

Heart of a Muslim

Gandhi said it is everyone's duty to study at least one faith other than their own. You might want to give your members a chance to test their own basic knowledge of Islam with this quiz. Or you might prefer to run through this list of basic facts and ask members to comment on whether the answer matched their preconceptions.

1. Where is Islam practiced?
2. What percentage of Americans are Muslim (that is, practitioners of Islam)?
3. What percentage of Muslims are Arabic?
4. How many Gods does Islam recognize?
5. Who are the major prophets of Islam?
6. What is the meaning of *jihad*?

Answers: 1. All over the world. One fifth of the world population is Muslim. 2. Around 1.5 percent (or less, some sources say). 3. Ten percent. 4. One. 5. Among others: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, & Muhammad. 6. *Jihad* means "striving." In its primary sense, it is an inner striving, within the self to rid it from debased inclinations and exercise constancy and perseverance in achieving a higher moral standard. *Sources:* <http://islam.about.com> <http://islamicity.com/education/>; and www.religioustolerance.org

What beliefs and practices does Islam share with Christianity, Judaism, or whatever religion you are most familiar with?

What do you think of when you hear the phrase Islamic fundamentalist? Do Islamic fundamentalists bear any resemblance to Christian fundamentalists? Today many people talk of bringing spirituality into the workplace or into our schools. What are the potential benefits of reintegrating spirituality into our lives? The dangers?

Jamal Rahman writes: "September 11 is not just about Islamic extremists who must be found and destroyed. It is far more important than that. It is a tragedy that has become a turning point—an amazing opportunity for awareness, compassion, community and the end of politics-as-usual. On that grim day, we were catapulted, against our will, across a new threshold of consciousness. Now we must make a bold leap forward, adopting new ways of thinking and being, or risk falling back into old, lethal patterns. I am confident we shall make the leap, led by courageous, creative, and compassionate individuals and communities in America."

How has September 11th changed you? Do you spend more time with family and loved ones? Are you more compassionate? Do you think differently about your community or about American and world politics? Describe some of the actions we can take as individuals and as a nation to make this bold leap forward.

The Failure of War

Wendell Berry writes: "Apologists for war will insist that war answers the problem of national self-defense. But the doubter, in reply, will ask to what extent the cost even of a successful war of national defense—in life, money, material, foods, health, and (inevitably) freedom—may amount to a national defeat." Ask your group to identify the costs of war in each of these categories. How might you or people you know have to bear the costs of a war? What might you gain from war?

Though many religions forbid killing, some have defined exceptions known as *just wars*. What circumstances would make a war just in your opinion? Force successful in teaching enemies (individuals, gangs, nations) a lesson? Do you agree with Berry that “acts of violence committed in ‘justice’ or in affirmation of ‘rights’ or in defense of ‘peace’ do not end violence. They prepare and justify its continuation”? What about the old adage that you have to stand up to a bully?

Charles Schultz said that security was a warm puppy. Ronald Reagan advocated the space-based Strategic Defense Initiative, as does George W. Bush. What makes you feel safe? In the post-9/11/01 era, what could make us safe? What would be the costs of these security measures—in life, money, material, foods, health, and freedom? Are these costs worthwhile?

Berry writes: “It seems only reasonable, only sane, to suppose that a gigantic program of preparedness for a national defense should be founded first of all, upon a principle of national and even regional economic independence.” What is the connection between economic independence and national defense? Would we feel safer if we (individually, as a community, as a nation) were economically independent?

Ordinary Heroes

Sam Oliner, a Jew who was rescued during the Holocaust by a Catholic family, is now a sociologist who studies the phenomenon of selflessness (altruism). In “Ordinary Heroes” he points out that millions of people regularly give their time, their money and their lives to help others, without any prospect of a reward. Some of these people, like Mother Teresa and Albert Schweitzer, become our heroes. Others we call names—“do-gooders” or “Pollyannas” or “tree huggers.” What’s the difference for you between a hero and a do-gooder? What is it about the people we label as do-gooders or about their ideas that we are really objecting to?

In belittling or dismissing a person’s altruistic ideas, two of the most common and most effective terms are “naive” and “idealistic.” Do you have ideas or beliefs that are commonly labeled naive or idealistic? Please share them with your group. What ideas can you think of that were once labeled naive or Pollyannish but are now generally accepted?

The same sort of name-calling is often directed at visions of a better world. For example, Geoff Parish, a columnist for the *Seattle Weekly*, once dismissed a political candidate whose platform called for creating a more just, compassionate, sustainable world with a single word, “Yuucck!” Why might people be turned off by this platform? How might we address this problem?

On the other hand, one of the biggest compliments our mainstream culture can bestow is “realistic.” Describe some ideas that are labeled realistic in our society. Can you draw any conclusions about what we think is realistic? What’s so realistic about them? Do they have a history of working?

In the Eyes of the World

We Americans generally see ourselves as champions of democracy and human rights. So we’re astonished to learn, as we did on September 11, that others don’t see us that way. What is your own sense of America’s role in the world community? Has your image of America changed lately? What role would you like to see us play?

Philippine scholar and activist Walden Bello argues that America’s atomic raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed 210,000 people, were not acts of war but acts of terrorism because they were aimed at civilian targets. The allied air campaign against Germany and Japan that resulted in the firestorms in Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo was also terrorism, he argues, as well as US bombing campaigns in Korea and Indochina. Do you agree that these war time campaigns were terrorist acts? Why or why not? What’s your definition of terrorism?

One person’s “terrorist” is usually another person’s “freedom fighter.” For example, Nelson Mandela, now widely regarded as a hero, was once labeled a terrorist. Can Osama bin Laden be viewed as a freedom fighter? Why or why not? In his article, “Hear t of a Muslim,” Jamal Rahman asks if we can find it within ourselves to extend a hearing to Osama bin Laden. Is there anything to be gained by listening to Osama bin Laden? Are there reasons not to?



Bello suggests that terrorists will continue to find an army of willing recruits among the poor, desperate people of the world until the US rethinks two pillars of its foreign policy: 1) its habit of subordinating the interests of the people of the Middle East to America's need for access to their oil and 2) its blind support for Israel. Do you agree with his assessment of the problem? In arguing that our policies cause people to turn to terrorism, is Bello unfairly shifting the blame for the tragedy of September 11 from the attackers to their victims?

Bello also points out that "while we may condemn terrorist acts—as we must, strongly—it is another thing to expect desperate people not to adopt them." Is he right? If so, what are the implications of that fact for our policy in dealing with those who attack civilian populations?

Bello says the solution to terrorism is for the United States to "substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting arrangements that will promote equity, justice, and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples. Any other way leads to endless war." Do you agree with his analysis? Is it "realistic"? Do you believe Bello's right when he says any other way leads to endless war? What evidence have you observed?

We welcome feedback on your experience in using our discussion guides. Email comments to DiscussionGuides@futurenet.org.

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