INTERROGATING HEALTHY CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

The need to turn an enemy into an adversary is an ethical obligation. I try to show that this obligation has multiple religious and philosophical resources. The ethical imperative also requires us to not overstate and magnify any problem at hand to the point that it becomes insurmountable and enmity becomes an end in itself. I do ask the question whether Springs thinks of Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest by taking the knee at football games as an instance of healthy conflict. Are the terms peace and healthy conflict perhaps not better viewed as allegories for the interrogation of the human condition? Perhaps healthy conflict remains a series of questions rather than concrete outcomes.

KEYWORDS: *conflict, Qur'ān, beauty, other, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Colin Kaepernick*

Turning an enemy into a friend is a moral teaching that stems from the legends made popular by the alchemists of the human soul—feats performed by mythical gods, ancient prophets, saints and mystics--are accounts moderns view with skeptical eyes. Yet, morality tales—whether those of Ram and Sita, Antigone, or the *Arabian Nights*—provide sufficient grist for the ethical mills of modern philosophers to offer their profound meditations and insights about the human condition.

Jason Springs invites the readers of *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society* to a much more difficult task: building a relationship with your enemy, and turning her into an adversary by using your moral imagination to confront seemingly intransigent forms of conflict and intolerance (2018, 8, 16). I found this insight to resonate with a verse in the Qur'ān that says: "Repel evil with beauty: if you do so, then the one who is your sworn enemy will become your trusted friend. But this is a gift given only to those who can persevere and those who are endowed with a good fortune" (Q 23:96). Several elements, among them "beauty," are what Springs would identify as the fountainhead of the moral imagination.

It does not require a great intellectual feat to grasp the good and just elements in life that enable humans to pursue wellbeing and human flourishing. Yet, the poetics of the Qur'ān's invitation requires us to ask a range of questions as to what perseverance means, and what good fortune is? Is it something that one can acquire through effort and acquisition, or is it akin to luck? Is it a combination of both? Is this invitation a normative and imperative commandment or is it a description in hindsight of those celebratory success stories of prophetic and saintly victories?

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Springs adopts a wide range of strategies, philosophies, insights and critical questions in order to adjudicate healthy conflict, which is the central theme of his book. Sometimes a critical philosophical question can help one get to the bottom of things. Yet, even "if one does not have to philosophize, one still has to philosophize (to say it and think it)," the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida said, quoting a saying usually attributed to Aristotle, who also added: "One always has to philosophize" (Derrida 1978, 152). Exploring and deploying a multitude of questions as resources to resolve or lower the tempo of conflict requires wisdom and ethical practice. *Healthy Conflict* has many redeeming features which reflect such wisdom, but in this essay, I would like to focus on two points. First, I address the overall philosophy, method, and theory Springs adopts by engaging a few issues he discusses, namely Islamophobia, and moral imagination and relationship-building. Second, I consider one recent public conflict: the ongoing and as-yet underxamined conflict surrounding football quarterback Colin Kaepernick, particularly the punishments he has had to endure for his display, during football games, of acts of solidarity for the black victims of police violence in America.

1. Springs's Method and Theory

Springs invites the reader, as part of his multifaceted method and theory, to cultivate the virtues of the moral imagination as they emanate from literature, to pay attention to inward-looking forms of discursivity, and to appreciate the prophetic imagination while at the same time warning us to be weary of the excessive ecstasy of the prophetic imagination. As if this was not already a tall order, he further urges us to also be alert to the agonistic character of transformation in all its dimensions. Do all this, he proposes, without ignoring what your gut tells you to do. Well, perhaps one's intuitions (the gut) have something to do with one's agonism. If anything, modernity bequeathed us its choicest agonism: "Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half," wrote John Milton (1966, 164) of this dark and distressing aspect of the modern human predicament. Realizing the Herculean task at hand, Springs's goal is to provide us with the intellectual and moral resources to attain a modicum of success in social and political transformation. Crystallizing his goal with a surfeit of realism blended with compassion and idealism, Springs describes his project as an effort to "bring one's adversary to her senses, rather than to her knees" (2018, 267). I found this expression to be key to understanding his book.

Drawing on elements of Derrida's reading of Emanuel Levinas's book, *Totality and Infinity*, I am able to hear what Springs is trying to say about bringing the adversary to her senses and not to annihilate her. Hegel wrote of hearing as a form of contemplation which in turn is more than sight, while for Levinas the face "expresses itself, offering itself in person . . . 'the thing in itself expresses itself'" (Derrida 1978, 101, quoting Levinas 1969, 181). In Springs's writings I am hearing echoes of Levinas, who wants us to hear the different kinds of conflict raging around and within us, and to discern the multiple forms of war, including

the violent and murderous kind, for which we ought to have a diagnosis, which we call the ethical. The ethical in Levinas's view is not the encounter with the other but rather a "call to responsibility for the other before apperception and feeling," writes Annabel Herzog (2019, 474). It is not the ontological encounter with the other through reason and experience, but rather something more primordial: the ethical in the face of the Other.

Only politics can foresee war, writes Levinas, and it is politics that devises the arts to win the war at every turn. Hence, politics is tied to the very exercise of reason (Levinas 1969, 21). Therefore, politics mediates the ethical, which Levinas also sometimes calls justice. Thus war, for Levinas, becomes the "face," which, as previously mentioned, is a metonym for responsibility for the Other. Levinas's notion of God keeps the most intense and unending form of violence at bay, for in his view, without God the horrors of true immorality will become the unfathomable order. Graciously, this is not the enduring state of human affairs, but occasionally we see glimpses of the horrors of war. Derrida, in his reading of Levinas, writes (1978, 107): "In other words, in a world where the face would be fully respected (as that which is not of this world), there no longer would be war. In a world where the face no longer would be absolutely respected, where there no longer would be a face, there would be no more cause for war." But as we know, there are wars and thus, for Derrida (1978, 107), "God, therefore, is implicated in war." And God's "name too," he adds (1978, 107), "like the name of peace, is a function within the system of war, the only system whose basis permits us to speak, the only system whose language may ever be spoken. With or without God, there would be no war. War supposes and excludes God. We can have a relation to God only within such a system." Conflict supposes a relation with God, according to Levinas, and it is in this condition that one has to contemplate the mandates of both ethics and responsibility to the Other.

In multiple instances Springs develops a discrete question of investigation, a complex analytical profile, and then offers carefully crafted resolutions to his key questions. And, if a resolution or engagement is not in sight, then he poses more questions for us to ponder. What I like most is that there is no rush to judgment in difficult matters, but rather agonistic wrestling which is not only a feature of modernity but also a sensitive approach to the ethical.

2. Springs on Islamophobia in Europe and the US

"Intrigue" is an interesting word in Levinas's vocabulary, meaning "that to which one belongs without having the privileged position of the contemplating subject" (Levinas 2000, 198). I want to frame my engagement with Springs as an ethical intrigue involving the displacement of the concept of experience, yet it is a situation that requires ethical reflection. Springs' treatment of Islamophobia in Europe and North America is multilayered. Dealing with the symptoms and emotional features of racism or Islamophobia is one kind of engagement. Springs engages in a detailed examination of the actions of Muslim subjects, in these two

theaters. In most of the public debates centered on Islam and Muslims, the Muslim subjects are reified as the "putatively inassimilable 'Other'," he writes, who are then scapegoated through various forms of Islamophobia (Springs 2018, 272). One important insight Springs offers is about the effects stemming from the anti-Islam industry which is supported by large sums of money. I should specifically point out the alliance between Christian evangelicals, who are aligned to a messianic view of the world, and the state of Israel. Joining this coalition paradoxically, by their activities, are white nationalists who have escalated their violence against Muslims. For reasons of sensationalism and to boost ratings, a cross-section of the media and culture industry—from filmmakers to cultural icons—have declared it open season to dehumanize Muslims and issue all kinds of libels against Islam.

Springs offers an illuminating insight and observes that "isolating and branding pronounced instances of anti-Muslim rhetoric, activism and terrorism as 'Islamophobic' risks obscuring subtler forms of anti-Muslim chauvinism that engender exclusion, inequality, and humiliation" (Springs 2018, 272). On the face of it, one may be surprised to read that Springs is reluctant to label acts of exclusion, humiliation, and inequality impacting persons with a Muslim identity as an expression of "Islamophobia." But on careful exploration he reasons that societies in North America and Europe do have laws and norms that ought to protect Muslims against the "effects" of Islamophobia since these societies have espoused norms of tolerance, religious pluralism and civic forms of nationalism. These vocabularies should be made effective in order to combat the nefarious effects of Islamophobia. The reason he is reluctant to use what, I would term, the "nuclear option" of Islamophobia, is that the latter "may actually perpetuate subtler varieties of the very stigmatization and exclusion that this moniker aims to oppose" (Springs 2018, 273). Springs makes a compelling argument in *Healthy Conflict* of how the "structural manifestation and cultural legitimations of religiously rooted inequality, exclusion, and humiliation" might not only be obscured if such acts were termed as Islamophobic, but also how such a move might truncate the opportunities for healthy and solvable conflict for which real solutions are available. Indirectly, he is saying that calling bias and prejudice "Islamophobia" risks creating greater barriers between communities that can otherwise be crossed.

Springs identifies one case study in the analysis by the French anthropologist Emmanuel Terray of the prohibition of headscarves in French public schools that made global headlines in recent years. While the majority of French institutions and a large sector of the political elites celebrated French republican values against the "Muslim schoolgirl menace," Terray points out how the new law excludes women, a sector of French society, by effectively banning headscarves. Springs is critical of Terray for his "surface-level" diagnosis of pervasive societal ills as a "widespread Islamophobia," because he believes that such an approach to the conflict is reductionistic. He reminds us that Terray fails to consider France's civilizing mission, its colonial history, its use of the labor of colonized people, as well as France's unique conception of secularism—all factors that when examined in a complex manner could amount to charges of French racism, argues Springs. If

Terray's diagnosis of the root causes had involved some complexity, then his analysis could facilitate the promotion of a healthy conflict. Springs's main complaint is that the label of Islamophobia "pathologizes forms of prejudice and intolerance, rendering them [i.e. Muslims] irrational" (Springs 2018, 277). The reaction of France's Muslim communities to the headscarf ban, according to Terray, was that of communities that were unable to find within themselves the means or energy to confront the challenge and they are thus tempted to adopt a defensive ploy. Finding the situation insurmountable, the Muslim communities of France, according to Terray, respond with words and symbols that provide a sense of relief once it names the bias and prejudice as "Islamophobia." Here Terray and Springs are most likely to be on the same side since both would advocate that Muslim communities need to address the structural and historical causes of their marginalization and prejudice in a critical fashion. Emotive responses in the heat of the moment might fulfill a certain psychological function, but they do not address the structural problems.

Springs similarly diagnoses the Danish cartoon controversy over the portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad in unflattering images, which prompted global Muslim protests in early 2006. Focusing on these highly mediatized exhibitions of angry, and sometimes violent, Muslim reactions to blasphemy, as Springs points out, suppress the multiple opportunities that Muslim communities took to engage in reasoned discourse with a variety of media institutions and government representatives, although these initiatives were often spurned by officialdom. In the US context, the bitterly divisive national controversy over a planned Islamic Center three blocks from the World Trade Center, the scene of one of the September 11 attacks claimed by al-Qaida terrorists, is a saga that Springs describes as a breakdown of civic nationalism and tolerance. He enlists a range of authors from Martha Nussbaum and Robert Putnam to Eboo Patel, who offer careful diagnoses as to why the American recipe of the melting pot does not fully work for Muslims in America. And yet, an articulation of the reasons why it is that Muslims are not included awaits further inquiry.

In his description, Springs continuously points to how poorly formulated descriptions of a conflict situation suppress or occlude important features, but in the end the closest he comes to offering a breakthrough is when he proposes that healthy conflict requires relationship-building. But he is also sufficiently candid to acknowledge this is a desideratum that is hard to achieve since the inconvenient factors of race and culture militate against Muslims in Europe and America. First, he pleads for the interrogation of the various vocabularies of civic nationalism and then calls for their revitalization in order to sustain solidarities in support of "crucibles of meaningful conflict" (Springs 2018, 302). Springs proposes that the first step is to recognize the dangers when the melting pot is boiling over with anti-Muslim sentiment, to which I would add the eruption of sporadic antisemitic and anti-immigrant violence and other hatreds that occur with greater frequency, coupled with legislation banning Muslim immigration from selected countries and facilitating easy immigration of white persons to the United States. I am

wondering why in this context Springs does not see value in the role of prophetic voices to call out the offence. Elsewhere he cautiously hails the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in national conflict. For if, as he proposes, constructive forms of resistance are needed, then such resistance is hardly going to be realized in benign and procedural ways which seem to be the thrust of the "Islamophobia, American Style" chapter (Springs 2018, 272–310). The pursuit of identity innovation does require a modicum of symbolic violence and the best way dispossessed groups can rescript their identities is to engage in the contestation over power that prophetic voices facilitate.

3. Moral Imagination and Relationship-Building

One thread in *Healthy Conflict* advocates storytelling, together with the deployment of the moral imagination, as Springs's intervention in peace studies. Of course, we cannot make as many imaginative leaps in the context of political conflict as we can in a legend or a tale, but the imagination remains crucial. Springs says we need to experiment in new forms of imaginative and moral storytelling that will burrow to the heart of the structures and systems that sustain us in our search for meaningful political and social transformation. He sounds convinced that narrative could at some point poke holes in discredited structures, or perhaps contribute to their collapse. I am reminded of the way the Spanish poet, playwright and theatre director Frederico García Lorca described the power of the imagination. "For me, imagination is synonymous with aptitude for discovery," Lorca wrote. "But the imagination is limited by reality . . . The imagination hovers over reason the way fragrance hovers over a flower, without detaching itself from the petals, wafted on the breeze but tied, always, to the ineffable center of its origin" (Maurer 2004, 154–55). I am wondering what would have been the outcome if the prophets—ancient and modern—used more imagination and engaged in less hectoring, whether this might have contributed to more effective transformation.

The theological imagination of the Bible's injunction to turn the other cheek, or the Qur'an's invitation to repel evil with beauty, when combined with imagination more generally makes some tough demands on the human soul and our subjectivity. Imagination of all stripes invites one to show magnanimity and possess the ability to see beyond the immediate and surface realities. Performing in the shadow of the imagination is an extremely difficult act to maintain in life. In any conflict—minor or major—there is often hurt and pain. To overcome, rationalize and adjudicate that pain is extremely difficult: ask the petitioners at truth and reconciliation commissions in Chile and South Africa or other conciliatory tribunals. More than the physical pain, it is the personal, spiritual and moral hurt that is more difficult to treat. Here I am reminded of a line in the 1992 film *Hoffa*. Some commonsensical wisdom is verbalized by Jack Nicholson starring as the union boss Jimmy Hoffa, who utters these memorable lines: "A real grievance can be resolved; differences can be resolved. But an imaginary hurt, a slight—that motherfucker gonna hate you 'til the day he dies" (Englade 1992, 63). Hurt by an enemy

can be rationalized. But hurt by a fellow citizen or a neighbor who turns on you with a machete (Rwanda), with guns and bombs (Iraq and Syria), hurt exercised in a ballet-box (anti-minaret/anti-Muslim referenda in Switzerland), or anti-Muslim legislation in France and the USA—all these acts nurse the kinds of wounds to which Hoffa signaled. Some impatient young Muslims from Europe and America have converted these hurts and exclusions into spectacles of violence when they serve as ISIS's foot soldiers in the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, or as knife-wielding terrorists and suicide bombers in European cities and elsewhere.

Conflict is not always from without; often it stems from within. Muslim communities over time have experienced internal conflict and the most sensitive minds among them have decades ago expressed concern about such dangerous symptoms. One such figure was the pre-partition Indian poet Shakil Badayūnī (1916–1970) who wrote in a voice filled with wisdom, prudence and beauty, one that one wishes the ISIS foot soldiers can hear: "My aspiration is so high, I do not fear the burning coals left by adversaries. I do indeed tremble at the fire of the rose, dreading its blaze will torch the entire garden" (Badayūnī 1986, 96, translation mine).

It is easy to avoid the embers of the burning coal, but hard to escape the furnace shrouded by the roses. One thing Springs's book made me ponder was the extent to which conflict is about our inner demons and related to our subjectivities. Yet he does not lose sight of the demons in the structure. Throughout the book his laser-like attention is focused on the underlying structure of the phenomenon of the varieties of conflict. But I wonder if structure is everything and what are the limitations of such an otherwise useful concept. Theoretically, Springs is very skillful in his elaboration of the shape of structure as dynamic, not wooden. There is good reason why Springs's appropriation of structure is different from the early Foucault: the latter was often reductive, while Springs resists reduction. Lazy pluralism, linguistic modeling that claims everyone is part of the same Abrahamic or some other inclusive meme, denying the specificities of facts and history, or, returning to the patent American nationalistic slogans are not the things that move Springs. Key to relationship-building is to identify the structures of violence, to unveil hidden tendencies and examine psychological fears and anxieties in order to create the conditions for "more constructive and more just responses" (Springs 2018, 302). While I am unable to disagree with the productive portrayal of structure, I do have a concern whether we do not place too much reliance on it.

The task Springs poses is a deeply challenging one; it requires work on the inside, in the human soul. He asks us to develop an ability and a skill-set to enter into difficult conversations with odious people. Even the term "odious," I am sure Springs will say, will at least psychologically impair my ability to enter into relationship-building with my adversary. What if my enemy wishes to remain an enemy and not become an adversary? For remaining an enemy allows one to exercise forms of absolute power. It is not advantageous for the enemy to turn into an adversary and surrender power. What would motivate the enemy into becoming an adversary? What are the incentives? Would it be self-interest and mutually assured survival (MAS)? Can one count the elements of MAS among some of the

advantages of relationship-building? In the all-out enemy model, we have mutually assured destruction, MAD. How do we account for the risk involved when viewing the enemy as an adversary, but the gesture goes unreciprocated from the other side? What if the enemy is like a demon, it just cannot in the foreseeable future become an adversary? Or should even a demon be viewed as an Other in the Levinasian sense, in which I have to forgo my ego and see my face in the face of the demon?

4. The Case of Colin Kaepernick's Peaceful Protest

Healthy Conflict prompted me to think of the campaign started by the football quarterback Colin Kaepernick, whose kneeling during the singing of the national anthem cost him his job in the National Football League (NFL). Kaepernick and the NFL continue to be mired in controversy about the prospects of his job. Is it possible to think of Kaepernick's protest as an exercise in relationship-building? Given the negative reaction to Kaepernick on the part of a sizeable part of the national football-watching audience, what kind of conclusions can we reach about empathy for human suffering inside the US? Is it possible that Kaepernick's attempt to make an adversary out of an 'enemy' (some police individuals and police brutality) through peaceful protest, turned him into a demonic figure deserving to be marginalized and excluded due to his political protest? What are the ambivalences and challenges of relationship-building? What could Kaepernick have done or better, or what can he do differently, in order to transform what Springs calls "the social structure of our society" into a healthy conflict zone?

One way of thinking about Kaepernick's campaign through a reading of Derrida is to imagine his act of protest as initiating an ethical relation. The ethical relation is a religious relation, not *a* religion "but *the* religion" according to Derrida (1978, 96). I think of Kaepernick's use of symbolic language, bending the knee at football games—in itself a prayerful posture, at a moment when the national anthem as the sacred secular hymn of the republic is performed. Derrida's reading of Levinas helps me think of Kaepernick going face to face with the Other by means of his act of kneeling, his expression, his stare into the camera and by means of his speech in protest. In doing so he puts a distance between himself and all totalizing discourses and he interrupts those totalizing forces. His entire performance amounts to millions of spectators also participating in his spectacle, but due to his kneeling he is separate from all others. This is what Derrida would call "being-together as separation" which "precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community" (1978, 95).

The real interrogation is the question about existence which Derrida names as the "total question." A "total question" writes Derrida in Levinas's shadow, is if we listen closely to "a distress and denuding, a supplication, a demanding prayer addressed to a freedom, that is, to a commandment: the only possible ethical imperative, the only incarnated nonviolence in that it is respect for the other" (Derrida 1978, 96). These words were providentially written for Kaepernick and

the discriminated Muslim subject and all those who are subject to prejudice and bias just because they exist and exist as different. Derrida hears Levinas and avoids the ontological question, about being and its link to an interrogation of knowledge which is called "a theoretical interrogation." For Levinas, ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power with its inhuman universality. But as a total question about existence Kaepernick's ethical-political language summons him to prayerfully bend his knee in supplication to the God or conscience of America, inviting everyone to pay attention to the tenets of the Declaration of Independence, which states: "all [wo]men are created free" and "endowed with unalienable rights." The black football player, the new Muslim citizen or immigrant, the emancipated Blackamerican Muslim, and all aggrieved subjects turn to the philosophical beginning (*archē*) of the republic where they transpose the beginning into an ethical command (Derrida 1978, 97). Kaepernick's demanding prayer is to invoke what Derrida calls a freedom or commandment: "respect." Respect is the secular version of the religious commandment: thou shalt not kill. We are reminded that "respect" for the other is an "incarnated nonviolence" (Derrida 1978, 96).

Derrida invites us to think about "transcendence beyond negativity." If anything, Kaepernick reaches for a transcendence beyond negativity only to be confronted by the ontological violence of "American-ness" or being "American," all terms that are freighted with metaphysical violence. Philosophically "transcendence beyond negativity" ought to resonate with Springs's underlying philosophy of peace. Curiously in Levinas' words, this transcendence "institutes language, where neither the no nor the yes is the first word" (1969, 42); for Derrida, this transcendence always appears as an interrogation (1978, 96). It is precisely the interrogation that Kaepernick performs which is deemed to be subversive. In this act of questioning, Kaepernick summons America to confess its sins or its complicity at the altar of its holiest secular eucharist: football. Therein lies the rub; that his gesture created such outrage among even those deemed "moderate" Americans. He was not only denied his freedom of expression but also denied his right to earn an income. So, while I tried to offer a deconstructionist reading of Kaepernick's actions in terms of ethics, my question for Jason Springs still remains. Did Kaepernick violate the boundaries of healthy conflict?

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