

Moral courage or moral cowardice?

Karen Donahue, RSM

In a recent article posted on his blogsite, *Popular Resistance*, Mazin Qumsiyeh, professor of biology at Bethlehem University and founder and volunteer director of the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS), said that Palestine has become one of the defining moral tests of our era. He observes that “history rarely asks ordinary people to perform extraordinary acts. More often, it presents simple moral choices: to tell the truth or remain silent, to defend the vulnerable or look away, to challenge injustice or accommodate it.”

He contrasts moral courage and moral cowardice and notes that “moral courage is not the absence of fear. Rather, it is the willingness to act ethically despite fear, inconvenience, social pressure, or personal cost.” Moral cowardice, on the other hand, “is the decision to subordinate conscience to comfort, career, ideology, or conformity.”

Professor Qumsiyeh places Palestine within the historical context of other liberation struggles, including the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, labor rights, civil rights movements, decolonization struggles, and the defeat of apartheid in South Africa. All of these efforts “depended on individuals willing to challenge prevailing systems of power. They faced ridicule, imprisonment, professional ostracism, violence, or worse. Yet history now remembers them not as radicals but as pioneers of justice.”

“Ultimately, the struggle between moral courage and moral cowardice is not fundamentally about Palestine. It is about humanity. Palestine simply magnifies dilemmas that exist everywhere: whether power is constrained by ethics, whether truth prevails over propaganda, whether empathy extends beyond tribal boundaries, and whether ordinary people choose conscience over convenience.”

“The lesson is timeless. Future generations will undoubtedly examine this period as historians now examine slavery, colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and other systems of institutionalized injustice. They will ask what people knew, what they chose to believe, what they did, and what they failed to do. They will recognize that some individuals—Palestinian, Israeli, and international—demonstrated remarkable moral courage by defending universal human dignity despite enormous pressure. They will also recognize that many others, through silence, indifference, rationalization, or active participation, allowed preventable suffering to continue.”