

Religion and Violence

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Each year Americans observe September 11th to memorialize over 3,000 victims who lost their lives in dramatic acts of religious violence. One can easily dismiss 9/11 as the deranged lunacy of a few sociopaths, but, truthfully, religion has always had a fascinating and flirtatious relationship with violence. Needless to say, Islam is not the only religion with a violent past. All the other global religions have shed their share of blood.

Recent examples of religious violence abound: David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, the Aum Shrinko cult's poisonous gassing of a Tokyo subway, and the assassination of peace-seeking Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an angry Jewish fundamentalist, to name just a few. This article will examine this relationship, specifically those factors that increase the likelihood that a religion will employ violence. Let us, however, first turn to two historical—even foundational—examples of religious violence.

Religious violence birthed our Christian faith. Throughout the Gospels, the embittered Jewish elite conspired to destroy Jesus and his emerging movement. With inside help, the chief priests, elders, and scribes captured Jesus and charged him with blasphemy and treason. Their plan succeeded (however short-lived) and Jesus was tried and crucified. Regardless of the

theological import of Christ's death, Jesus was a victim of religious violence plain and simple.

The beginning of Moravian history also reflects religious violence. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Jan Hus called for reform in the Catholic Church, railing against its rigidity on indulgences and other practices. Searching for loyalty among its clergy and theologians, the Catholic Church sought to squelch Hus' dissent, eventually excommunicating him. Hus, however, would not remain silent and continued his rebuke of the Church. In 1414, he was invited to defend his beliefs in front of the Council of Constance. There he was arrested, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake the following year.

With these historical and contemporary examples and daily news reports in mind, investigations into the relationship between religion and violence are vital. Over the last decade scholars have begun to examine this intricate relationship, but the tragic events of September 11, 2001, brought this scholarship to the forefront of religious studies. This new and emerging discipline explores a range of questions. For example, and most simply, is religion inherently violent? If not, what turns religious adherents violent? Do our sacred texts cause or reinforce a violent worldview? Now more than ever, these questions, and many more, need to be answered, for in an era of

increased globalization, an understanding of how religion can become violent is integral for a future of peace in our world.

Although there are various approaches to studying the relationship of religion and violence—each with positive contributions—this study will investigate factors that increase the likelihood that a religion will become violent. The factored approach is best exemplified in Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).¹ By surveying recent scholarship on this subject, this article will propose six factors that contribute to religious violence and will expose their form and function. Importantly, the presence of one or more of these characteristics *does not necessarily* produce a violent religion, but the presence of these factors *does drastically increase* the likelihood that a religion will employ violent means. A religion employing all of the six following factors can be peaceful, while, theoretically, a religion employing only one of the factors could become violent.

Let me first define the term ‘violence’ for better reader understanding. In general, scholars have had difficulty defining this term. Should the word be used to connote physical harm, or something larger, wider, and deeper? Use of a wider definition tends to dominate religious studies, and one definition in particular has been cited repeatedly.²

In *Religion and Violence*, Robert McAfee Brown maintains:

The basic overall definition of violence

[is the] *violation of personhood*. While such a denial or violation can involve the physical destruction of personhood in ways that are obvious, personhood can also be violated in ways that are not obvious at all, except by the victim. There can be “violation of personhood” quite apart from the doing of physical harm.³

Because this definition encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, linguistic, and systemic notions of violence, it possesses a great utility for this work.

Factors Increasing the Likelihood a Religion Will Become Violent

An examination into the relationship of religion and violence should appropriate many or all of the approaches footnoted earlier. Due to the scope of the paper, however, I will only use one approach in this paper. Surveying the various approaches to religious violence by theorists of religion allows one to extract several common denominators. Indebted to Kimball and Juergensmeyer, I will utilize the factored approach to religion and violence, re-shaping their factors from themes and common denominators within all of the approaches. These factors will also be re-shaped to include scholarship from biblical studies and sociology of religion.

Outside Agitation

Violence does not happen in a vacuum. Perhaps the most obvious characteristic for a violent religion is the threat—whether real or perceived—that outside agents or forces are oppressing or marginalizing a religious community. Whether it is through political,

religious, and/or economic imperialism, one group feels pushed to the margins of the larger society. Said differently, forces outside the boundaries of the religious community endanger the values and livelihood of that community.

When a religious group is subject to outside agitation, the experience has psychological ramifications. Outside agitation can lead to feelings of alienation and humiliation within the context of the larger society.⁴ When the values of a religious community are under attack, the group, sometimes violently, asserts its cultural validity. It is human nature to assert dignity and personhood in the face of oppression. Similarly, violence resulting from external pressure expresses the desire for cultural legitimacy and social empowerment.⁵ The purpose of this violence then is for the larger society to recognize the value of the oppressed religious community and for the latter itself to feel worthy within the larger society.

Dualistic Thought

Dualism posits two distinct states of reality, where each state is irreducible to the other. Certain dualisms pervade our Western conscience. There is a material realm, distinct and separate from an immaterial realm. There is the body, and there is the spirit. Light and darkness, right and wrong, purity and impurity, sacred and profane, and good and evil also connote opposing metaphysical realities.

When a religion employs dualisms, there are no shades of gray. By viewing the world in two distinct realities, people, entities, and substances are inevitably divided by an either/or criterion.

Transcendence above these categories is highly improbable, often impossible. While this neat packaging requires little cognitive effort, its implications are profound, and the logic quickly becomes dangerous. Without appreciation for the complexities and ambiguities of life—without a holistic understanding of reality—people and things are consigned to exclusive categories.

The exclusivity of these groups can turn violent when one is viewed as better than the other: male is better than female; straight is better than gay; the West is better than the East. By placing people and groups into diametrically opposed categories, one creates a hierarchy of values, where one category is striven for, and the other is repressed or oppressed. When groups of people are assigned to dualistic categories, the violation of personhood is nearly inevitable.

Apocalypticism

Closely related to dualistic thinking is apocalypticism. While dualistic thought divides reality into good and evil, apocalyptic thought envisions the cosmic struggle between good and evil, decided by an ultimate battle. This cosmic struggle ushers in a new end-time reality. As John Hall summarizes, apocalyptic orientation “posits a final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil—a conflict that leads to the destruction of the existing temporal order and the arrival of a new ‘timeless’ era of ‘heaven on earth.’”⁶

Mark Juergensmeyer explains the logic of violent apocalypticism. The cosmic struggle is played out in history and realizable in human terms. Believers have to identify personally

and internally with the cosmic struggle. Accordingly, the cosmic struggle continues in the present and currently happens on the social plane. The struggle is at a point of crisis, and there is uncertainty in its outcome; if one knew the outcome, response would be unnecessary.⁷ On this point, Charles Selengut would rightly dissent with Juergensmeyer, because some groups, certain that good will ultimately prevail, try to usher in the apocalypse.⁸ Finally, according to Juergensmeyer, acts of violence have a cosmic meaning. The response of the people can sway the tide of the cosmic struggle and ultimately establish a new and good world order.⁹

Demonization of the Other

I know who I am, and I know that you are not me; you are Other. As such, Othering is necessary for self-definition. Naturally, Othering happens on individual, communal, and national levels. Othering becomes violent, however, when the dignity and respect for the Other is trampled. Religious language that dehumanizes and demonizes the Other may lead to or support the use of violence.

A violent religion demonizes its opponents to create a different class of humanity, one more easily attackable. Alastair Hunter provides an excellent definition of demonization: “a process of alienation of the other which permits us to treat them with a kind of inhumanity which would be shocking were it to be found *within* our respective groups.”¹⁰ The projection of inhumanity creates a double standard, one in which the ingroup can treat (and vilify) the

outgroup in a manner too deplorable for usage on other members of the ingroup.

Demonizing the Other is inextricably linked to dualistic and apocalyptic thought. As Saldarini states, “Demonization of the other quickly divides a society into the righteous and the wicked, the true citizens and the traitors, the godly and the satanic... From this violence flows.”¹¹ Demonization of the Other then requires language that divides the world into two cosmically opposed groups; the ingroup is Good and the outgroup embodies Evil. Because of dualistic and apocalyptic influences, this language also is without nuance, polarizing, absolutizing, and without shades of gray: “‘They,’ the establishment, are the sources of all evil, in vivid contrast to ‘us,’ the freedom fighters, consumed by righteous rage.”¹² Accordingly, this language does not encourage love, acceptance, or toleration, as it is impossible to respect and associate with agents of evil.¹³

Certainty of Interpretation

Truth claims are central to the tenets of any faith, without which, religion becomes a cacophony of disparate ideas. While truth claims focus the direction of a person’s faith, even truth claims are open to interpretation. Without the dialogue over the meaning of truth, religion can become dangerous. As Charles Kimball perceptively states:

While truth claims are the essential ingredients of religion, they are also the points at which divergent interpretations arise. When particular understandings become rigidly fixed and uncritically appropriated as absolute

truths, well-meaning people can and often do paint themselves into a corner from which they must assume a defensive or even offensive posture.¹⁴ Absolute truth claims, or certainty of interpretation, quickly divides the world into right and wrong, truth and evil.

When the certainty of interpretation of sacred texts is absolute, those who disagree are incorrect, a short step away from being evil. John Collins, while examining the violence of the Christian Bible states, “The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation.”¹⁵ This degree of certitude stems from a belief in the divine revelation of sacred texts. If a sacred text is transmitted by God, the text has absolute authority, and this authority and certainty of interpretation draws a line in the sand:

... historically people have appealed to the Bible precisely because of its presumed divine authority, which gives an aura of certitude to any position it can be shown to support ... And here, I would suggest, is the most basic connection between the Bible and violence, more basic than any command or teaching it contains.¹⁶

Oliver McTernan would add, “Exclusive claims on truth have given rise either to high boundaries that have marginalized outsiders or to aggressive attempts to impose those beliefs on unwilling neighbors.”¹⁷ Needless to say, this is a potentially dangerous position to be in.

Hierocratic Domination

Religious movements have generally been started by the actions and guidance of a charismatic leader. When a leader demands steadfast loyalty or blind obedience, however, the propensity towards violence is greater. This final factor then is created by two component parts: charismatic leadership and steadfast loyalty. I combine them here utilizing Hall’s label of “hierocratic domination,” or the dominating rule by the clergy or priesthood.¹⁸

According to Thomas Robbins, movements that employ highly apocalyptic and dualistic worldviews are often characterized by “markedly *charismatic* styles of leadership.”¹⁹ Coupled with this violent worldview, Robbins argues that a charismatic leadership style usually is devoid of checks and balances. As such, the leader has an unhealthy amount of authority over the religious community:

Charismatic leadership has been said to be intrinsically *precarious* by virtue of the absence of both institutionalized restraints on the willfulness of the leader and institutionalized supports to sustain and stabilize the leader’s authority. ... [T]he charismatic leader may be both empowered and pushed into deviant behavior.²⁰

Because of the skewed authority or monopolistic control of the religious leader, Hall argues that hierocratic domination exerts “a kind of ‘psychic coercion’” over his/her religious community.²¹

The other part of hierocratic domination is the steadfast loyalty given to the charismatic

leader by the religious community. Kimball opines that an authentic religion encourages religious adherents to struggle and wrestle with the mystery of experience and life. However, a religion becomes potentially dangerous, “when individual believers abdicate personal responsibility and yield to the authority of a charismatic leader...”²² In this unhealthy system, the religious leader is venerated, elevated to a higher human status. A result of this veneration is the unrestricted power and control granted to the leader. The uncritical acceptance of the actions and ideas of the religious leader also points towards hierocratic domination.²³

Conclusion

Everyday we turn on the news and hear stories of Muslim suicide bombers, and we remember, for example, newscasts of abortion clinic bombings by Christian extremists during the late 1990s. In grade school we learned the lessons of the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. Truth be told, religion can be hurtful, if not outright dangerous. We know that religion tries to offer hands in the form of friendship and love, but, often times, it offers hands in the form of fists.

If a religion is violent, one or more of the following factors are present. First, pressure—real or perceived—from outside the religious community increases the likelihood that a religion will respond violently. The use of dualistic and apocalyptic thinking also heightens the tendency towards violence. Violence may result when a religion both demonizes its opponents and is absolutely

certain of their interpretation of scripture and tradition. Finally, the presence of a charismatic authority that demands steadfast loyalty should warn religious adherents of the propensity towards violence.

In Matthew 10:34, Jesus states that he “did not come for peace, but a sword.” How do we learn not to take this passage literally? Here, I have offered six factors that increase the likelihood that a religion will employ violent means. (I must emphatically reiterate that the presence of one or more of these factors does not necessarily mean a religion is violent.) When we recognize the presence of one or more of these factors within our community, we must reflect and be critical of the potential consequences. Are we violating anyone’s personhood? Are the implications of our beliefs violent?

Let us learn not to cast stones.

Endnotes

¹ See also Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). Due to the scope of this discussion, I will only use the factored approach here. Other scholars do approach the question of the relationship between religion and violence differently. Rene Girard understands this relationship in terms of sacrifice, mimetic desire, and scapegoating. See Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). For a social identity approach, see Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The

- University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a scarce resource approach, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005). Finally, for a typological approach, see Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003). Importantly, an examination into the relationship of religion and violence should appropriate many or all of the approaches defined here.
- ² C.A.J. Coady catalogues the ambiguous usages of the term ‘violence’ in scholarship and offers three prominent usages of the term. See C. A. J. Coady, “The Idea of Violence,” in *Violence and Its Alternatives: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Manfred Steger and Nancy Lind (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 24.
- ³ Robert M. Brown, *Religion and Violence*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 7, emphasis in the original. Philip Tite and his mentor, Michel Desjardins, both employ this definition in their work. See Philip L. Tite, *Conceiving Peace and Violence: A New Testament Legacy* (Dallas: The University Press of America, Inc., 2004), 38; Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 3.
- ⁴ Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
- ⁵ Thomas Robbins, “Religious Movements and Violence; A Friendly Critique of the Interpretive Approach” *Nova Religio* 1, no. 1 (1997): 25. See also Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 190-218.
- ⁶ John R. Hall, “Religion and Violence: Social Process in Comparative Studies,” in *A Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 372.
- ⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David Rapoport (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 185-190.
- ⁸ Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 98-111.
- ⁹ Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” 185-190.
- ¹⁰ Alastair G. Hunger, “(De)Nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification for Discrimination” in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, ed. By Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (London, England: T&T Clark International, 2003), 93. Emphasis in original.
- ¹¹ Anthony J. Saldarini, “Demonization and polemics,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 3 (1997), p. 335-340.
- ¹² Jerrold M. Post, “Terrorist psycho-logic: Terrorist behavior as a product of psychological forces” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 25.
- ¹³ Wayne A. Meeks, “Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness,” *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2000): 465-467.
- ¹⁴ Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 46.
- ¹⁵ John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 32-33.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 32.
- ¹⁷ Oliver McTernan, *Violence In God’s Name: Religion in an Age of Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 133.

¹⁸ Hall, "Religion and Violence," 368.

¹⁹ Robbins, "Religious Movements and Violence," 14.

²⁰ Ibid, 24.

²¹ Hall, "Religion and Violence," 368.

²² Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 72.

²³ Ibid, 82-85.

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Responses

Bill Gramley

Lumpkin's article in this issue clearly describes six basic reasons why religious groups or churches have gotten involved in supporting war and violence. But there is one aspect of this that needs to be highlighted. It is the fact that the church, as such, does not engage in war. It simply supports and justifies the wars and violence that nation states perpetuate. This means that many followers of the Christian faith give greater loyalty to "the nation" or what we call patriotism than they do to the nonviolent example and teachings of Jesus Christ.

One of the earliest creeds of the Church was the statement that "Jesus is Lord." Many Christians really believed that and sacrificed their lives during periods of persecution rather than deny the lordship of Jesus Christ. Some believers refused to bear arms. They simply did not buy into the practices and ambitions of the society or empire in which they lived.

And there were various times in the history of the Moravian Church when members refused

to bear arms. For some years in the colonial era of America the Moravians established villages of peace in Ohio for the Native Americans in an effort to get these people to forsake fighting. The Moravians at that time believed that the teachings of Jesus took precedent over the policies of the warring powers. In short, there was something about faith in Jesus that implied a different lifestyle and attitude.

This was also true much earlier in Moravian history when the Brethren of the Ancient Unity actually lived by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. While they were somewhat separated from the state, they did live by an alternative form of daily life in contrast to the usual violence and power plays of the state.

Certainly in the 20th and 21st centuries most churches, including the Moravian Church, have given unthinking consent to the belligerent foreign policies of our national government. The exceptions have been the Quakers, Church of the Brethren, and Mennonites. Those policies are mostly in favor of using threat, subversion,