

Relationship between religion and violence



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How synonymous is religion and violence? In today's world, violent religious fanaticism has become undistinguishable with traditional religion, which has evoked polarising perspectives. A cursory glance almost any period of history suggests the “connections between religion and violence are not new, nor easily untangled”[1]. In recent years, terrorist attacks by religiously motivated people have led to an identification of violence with religion, including, but not limited to, the attacks of 9/11, the 2015 Paris attacks, or many other recent acts of terrorism that have been committed all over the world. This identification of violence with religion strengthens a widespread bias against religion in the Western world, as well as exacerbates the notion that religion is a primary engine in igniting conflict throughout the modern world.[2]. The English-speaking academic world has been inundated by books and articles “attempting to explain why religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence.”[3] Many will be familiar with, for example, a Christian rhetoric that emphasizes the religion's concern for peace and justice, and thus people will perceive the nexus between Christianity, or any peace mongering religion for that matter, and violence as puzzling, and one that calls for explanation.[4]

The world's two most populous religions – Christianity and Islam – claim to be holy religions, believing that their traditions are first hand truths that God has messaged and requires everyone to welcome these revelations. To what extent should it endure opposition by a different religion? These religions were, and still are, missionary religions, and by that definition they feel entitled to promote their religion to those who do not already worship it, as religion tasked with bringing God's teachings throughout the world “faces

the question of how to deal with people who refuse to accept it[5].”

Throughout their histories, “ Christianity and Islam have been intolerant of other religions, often of each other, even to the point of violence”[6].

Ultimately, the potential for bigotry lies in the foundation of religions that say their truths derive from divine intervention. For them, denying or “ doubting this truth is extremely dangerous, both for nonbelievers and for believers, who may well be misled by the denials and doubts of nonbelievers.”[7] Given these assumptions, it can be logical, in these circumstances, to mistakenly believe extreme steps are necessary to eliminate both foreign beliefs and non-believers. Christianity, throughout its timeline, has an extensive past of such prejudice, including the “ persecution of Jews, crusades against Muslims, and the Thirty Years’ War,”[8] wars that devastated the lives of millions. This destruction did, however, instigate a passage toward tolerance towards nations that began to understand the folly of attempting to enforce their religions upon others, with many Christians in modern times embracing acceptance. A small amount of Muslim nations does display prominent, and often rare, acceptance towards other religions; however, there is still a majority of Muslim countries — including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran— who uphold harsh restrictions on non-Muslim beliefs and practices, and “ although many Muslims think God’s will requires tolerance of false religious views,”[9] numerous do not.

Additionally, religions are very effective at binding people together into groups. This capacity is what likely made religions incredibly useful for overcoming cooperation challenges in our past. But this same capacity, fusing an individual to their group, can lead to violence when people are

willing to sacrifice their own interest for the good of the group. Groupishness alone is not enough to lead to violence, though it can cultivate hostility towards other rival groups. When combined with other aspects of religion, such as the need to sacrifice for one's religion, or a commitment to one individual religious belief and not others, these can have dangerous consequences. The significance of groupishness within the religion and violence affiliation is especially apparent the people who strongly endorse the coalitional aspects of religion are also the ones most likely to support violence by making people more willing to sacrifice their moral compass or even their lives for the good of the group.

Coalitional aspects of religion were related to support for martyrdom, but devotional aspects were not. Dr Jeremy Ginges has conducted multiple studies working to unravel the relationship between religion and violence. One of their more important techniques is to separate devotional aspects of religion, exemplified by personal prayer, from coalitional aspects of religion, exemplified by attendance at religious services. By parsing these two facets of religiosity, these researchers found that only the coalitional aspects are related to things like condoning suicide martyrdom or general outgroup hostility. Frequency of devotional prayer was unrelated, or in the case of Muslims in Indonesia was negatively related to condoning violence. This relationship between coalitional aspects of religion and violence is not just correlational either- in one study they found that priming individuals with thoughts about religion as a group lead to more support for intergroup violence.

Conversely, it could be suggested that “religious violence” could be more conceptually misleading than it would be to talk about “violence involving religion.” Whereas the former can refer to a type of violence that is interweaved with religious motives, the latter implicitly sanctions that “human violence is the broader category and that sometimes religious considerations can be involved in that, among others.”[10] Religion is often a presence in warfare, but it’s not the source. Other causes could be political and economic, struggles for power, hegemony, wealth, or to gain territory. Leaders who pursue authority or wealth frequently attempt to use religion to ascertain their own goals, while “it is religion that most often calls us away from warfare toward peace.”[11] Karen Armstrong, in her novel ‘Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence,’ pens that the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and the Quran each arose in an agricultural society with powerful property-owners dehumanising farmers while also warring amongst themselves over land. In this age, religion was not the deeply private matter it would become for those in modern times, but rather something that permeated across all facets of society, and thus religion dominated everybody’s life, and through this, “a counterbalance to the warrior code also developed”. The leaders of most religions began to have equal power to the upper-class citizens, and thereby grew up societies protesting the violence that was epidemic to agrarian society at the time. As the “great confessional faiths came of age, all understood themselves as ultimately devoted to peace, equality, and reconciliation, whatever the acts of violence perpetrated in their name.”[12]

Indeed, human nature is, of course, varied and violence differs between individuals, but certainly the “ social and political environment one inhabits can encourage or discourage those with violent tendencies”[13]. It can be that a person’s beliefs, be it their opinions or principles or spiritual views, that have stimulated the development of extreme behaviours, trusting that their “ belief is so powerful and right that ordinary social norms, such as avoiding violence and killing, do not apply”[14]. These strong beliefs, rather than the affiliation with a particular religion, may not be the primary catalyst to the instigation of violent tendencies, but they can add fuel to the flames that exist within a person anyway.[15]

Moreover, Keith Ward, author of ‘ Is Religion Dangerous?’, suggests that it is impossible to give a satisfactory universal definition of religion, and from that “ it is not religion that causes intolerance. It is intolerance that uses religion.” Ward proposes that any assembled human movement or organisation can be tarnished, and that the corruptions of religion are less harmful than the corruptions of secular ideologies, such as communism, whereby “ the leaders of such movements [are] using moral and religious language as a cloak for evil and irreligious ends.”[16]Ward alleges that “ it is not religion that causes Islamic terrorism. It is a version of Islam that has been corrupted.” Furthermore, data from academic David Myers, citing surveys by the National Opinion Research Centre, concluded that spiritually dedicated individuals are twice as likely to report being “ very happy” than non-religiously devoted people[17]. Myers reports that in over 200 social studies, “ high religiousness predicts a rather lower risk of depression and drug abuse and fewer suicide attempts, and more reports of satisfaction with

life and a sense of well-being,”[18]which serves interestingly explore the notion on how violence and religion may not be as bound together as what it seems.

Ultimately, from very nature of religion, it is far too simplistic to believe that religion is the sole instigator for conflict in the modern world, rather it is through human nature of intolerance and a mob mentality thought groupishness that exacerbates violence towards others. Religion, by itself, only serves to be emblematic of a scrap goat of the current world’s problems. Of course, to assume that there are those who’s vehement belief in their religion do not contribute to the acts of terror that has spread across the world today would be imprudent, but these acts are committed by the minority of most religions, awhile the majority seek to promote peace, acceptance and bliss.

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