How religion functions as a means of social control and change - and its impacts

Introduction

Religion is assumed to have emerged during the Upper Paleolithic with the out-of-Africa diaspora (Kottak, 2018; Balme et al., 2009). It is estimated from recent research into the dynamics of religion that ritual behaviour and belief in Gods who will punish wrong-doers were developed to promote high levels of pro-sociality, cooperation, growth and stabilisation of communities (Norenzayan et al., 2016, cited in Peoples et al. 2016; Atran and Henrich, 2010). This can be considered as the desire for a commonality of belief within communities so that religion may then be defined as whatever system of practices unite many people into a single moral community (whether or not those practices involve belief in any unusual realities) (citing Durkheim, 1912, in Schilbrack, 2022)

In later centuries, many studies of religious events, artifacts, histories, criticisms and milestones offer knowledge of the functions of religion (Cox, 2016; Graham, 2014; Masuzawa, 2005; Smith, 1978). Still, to give one reflection of the essence of how it could be used, for instance, Gibbon (1776) stated in his "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" that: "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by rulers as useful." As implied, rulers can use the belief that ordinary people regard religion as an accurate representation of how they should look at natural events and, with the guidance of religious artefacts, be amenable to control by those who may be deemed as that community's God-appointed representatives.

God's representatives or religious leaders are often then seen to be used to create social control and change. As many religions believe in the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of an unchanging God, social change is often predicated by a people's belief that their religious leader's interpretation of either artefact (such as the Bible) or how their alleged supernatural discourse (usually by prayer or other unprovable revelation) with that God, should, by proxy, be considered as faultless directives (Nissinen, 2020; Ferrero, 2011).

The following discussion will look at some of these directives, whether made directly or indirectly, pointing towards social change being required. It will have a limited scope based only on those related to the major religious organisations; Christians,
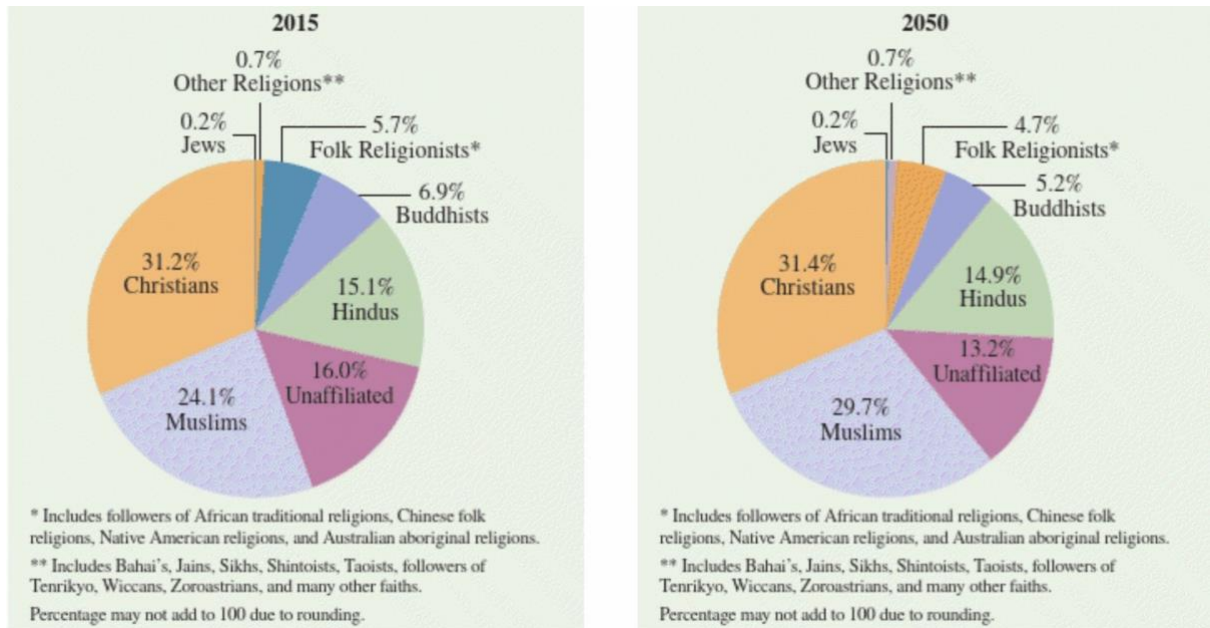
Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Figure 1. Major World Religions by Percentage of World Population, 2015, and Projected for 2050

Source: Kottak, 2018 , p.252. citing data retrieved from the Pew Research Centre, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape" April 5, 2015, viewed January 1 2023, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.usq.edu.au/lib/usq/reader.action?docID=5834111&ppg=270

However, even though many of the rituals and customs of most religions follow similar patterns, such as the incorporation of ceremonies for the blessing of newly born infants, coming-of-age rites of passage, marriage and death, this discussion will restrict itself to ethnographic examples of how social control and change have been, and in some cases still are, directed or supported by their respective leaderships.

Genocide and Religion

Commencing with reference to the Old Testament, there is a divine command from God for Israel to exterminate the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:2,16, 23 as taken from the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, 1964, cited by Versluis (2017). This suggests that modern readers could associate these biblical verses with ethnic cleansing or genocide and that such an authoritative text in Judaism and Christianity could justify violence in the present time. This would be so, but they were not alone; Islam and Buddhism also have their say in this regard; this is visited later in this discussion.

In present times there have been several attempts at these corrosive efforts, evidenced in the Armenian Genocide (1894 - 1920), the Holocaust (1939-1945), Civil War in Sri Lanka (1983 - 2009), Balkan Genocides (1992), and the Rwandan Genocide (1994), but there are others. Further, there is an ongoing desire for extremist groups to eradicate those opposing their radical religious demands together with a slew of dictats from other theocratic regimes.

The Armenian Genocide

The history of this conflict is well presented by Dadrian (1995) and Manukyan (2013), who describe the disparity between the Armenians and the Ottoman Turks; the latter having used religious symbols to mobilise large sections of the population to identify other ethnic groups as threatening. This conflict began because of the perceived monopoly of power by the Armenians in Turkey. The Ottoman government was an Islamic theocracy, a subjugating political organisation maintaining the principle of status discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims to the detriment of the latter. During World War 1, the Ottoman (Turkish/Islamic) government exterminated more than a million Armenian lives; inspired by the Qur'an, where Mohammed commands, "0 ye who believe! fight such of the disbelievers as are near to you and let them find hardness in you, and know that Allah is with the righteous" (Qur'an ix:123). And so they did. This event was/is considered a precedent and precursor of the Holocaust (Dadrian, 1995, p. 401.)

The Holocaust

Citing Bauer (1978), Nazi attitudes to Jews used Christian stereotypes of Jews as symbolic of the devil, and they were considered the incarnation of evil. After all, they were the ones who allegedly crucified Christ; hence this attitude resulted in a pseudo-religion inspired by Christianity. One symbol of this relationship was the inscription of "Gott mit uns" or "God with us" on the belt buckles of the Wehrmacht soldiers during World War 2. The Catholic church provided further support, explaining its anti-semitism in economic terms (Bauer, 1978, p.53). The Catholic clergy continued to support anti-Jewish actions until the end of the War, and between 1941 and 1945, the Nazi Regime exterminated more than six million Jews (Lichtblau, 2013). Much literature has been written regarding this contemptible event, but Kidron (2009) captures its lasting effect on many of its survivors through his exposition of the "lived presence of the past in everyday life".

Civil War in Sri Lanka

In 1949, the majority Sinhalese government deprived Tamils of citizenship and the right to vote, with many Tamils being forcibly repatriated to Tamil Nadu in the Southern part of India. In 1956, exacerbating this marginalisation, Bandaranaike, who became Prime Minister, created the Official Language Act (1956), declaring Sinhalese as the country's official language. Nevertheless, the Tamils were granted some autonomy with administration in the northern and eastern provinces and permitted their language to be used in this context (Rawat, 2012). The Buddhist clergy protested, followed by racial riots, and Bandaranaike withdrew his decision (Rotberg,1999). This made raw again the schism between the two ethnic groups.

In 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was created to establish an independent state for the Tamil people within Sri Lanka. This was also the year that the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was created. Both had similar objectives, but only the latter wished to achieve that goal of independence through peaceful means. Eventually, their party won all seats in Tamil-dominated areas in the 1977 elections. However, this led to anti-Tamil riots, producing hundreds of fatalities (Rawat, 2012). This, in turn, provoked the LTTE to action in 1983, with Buddhist militarism responding (McGilvray, 2006). This eventually produced an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 deaths. Regardless of the ceasefire with an apparent conclusion to the war 26 years later in 2009, between 2011 and 2015, one study has indicated no less than 650 separate attacks on Sri Lankan Muslims instigated by Buddhist extremism and ideologies of nationalism (Morrison, 2020, p.137).

Balkan Genocides

Precluding the existence of earlier angst between communism and the embedded Catholic communities in Yugoslavia, and further incensed by former president Tito, what followed in the Bosnian war, was a conflict in which the political leader Milosevic provoked using religion and religious symbols (Cushman, 2004: Ramet, 2018) and attempted to rehabilitate the Serbian Church to revive Serbian nationalism. However, by then, Yugoslavia had become the four central states of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia, to which Serbian nationalism and its presumed governance had become a different cause for conflict. The Serbian politicians exacerbated the situation by accusing Croatian politicians of genocidal tendencies in a "Vatican - Comintern conspiracy", part of which was "the charge that fundamentalist Islam was

forcing Bosnian Serbs to take flight" (Ramet, 2018, p.27). As a result of the ensuing conflict, between 1992 and 1995, it is estimated that there were 220,000 war-related deaths (Tabeau and Bijak, 2005)

The Rwandan Genocide

In Rwanda before the Colonial Era and through to gaining independence in 1962, ethnic tension was evident between the relatively small population of the Tutsi clan, considered more powerful and capable, compared to the larger population, the more impoverished Hutu. This tension made many Tutsi seek refuge in neighbouring Burundi, Uganda, Zaire and Tanzania (Adisa, 1995). In Uganda, in reaction to the increasing political clout of the Hutu majority population in Rwanda and its marginalisation of the smaller Tutsi population, Tutsi exiles created the Rwandan Patriotic Front in 1988. This led to frequent assaults with deadly outcomes, even using children to perpetrate these atrocities (Barrett, 2019). However, it was not until 1994 when the assassination of the Presidents of Burundi and Rwanda set off massive retaliation in a series of systematic massacres leading to the deaths of approximately 800,000 people, with about 75% of the Tutsi population killed (Reid, 2019). The role played by the Christian community was where Church leaders supported the regime that carried out the genocide. "They not only failed forcefully and effectively to condemn ongoing ethnic scapegoating and violence, but they actively practised ethnic discrimination themselves" (Longman, 2009, pp 306-307).

Other Similar Conflicts

Our history has been and is being constantly punctuated by many religiously fuelled conflicts and aberrations - the Crusades (1096 - 1291); the Spanish Inquisition (1478 - 1834); the Roma Inquisition (1542 - 1700); the Iran-Iraq War (1980 - 1988); and the infamous Afghanistan War (2001 - 2014 - provoked by the September 11, 2001 attack in the USA); the ongoing Syrian Civil War; the Darfur War in Sudan; the Yemeni Civil War (2014 - present); present-day Shariah Court directives against blasphemy and the subjugation of women in Nigeria and Iran respectively; and the list goes on. Each of these also deserves a more detailed discussion about the discrete yet specific reasons for their eruption. However, suffice it to say, similar attributes can be given to each conflict with one commonality - religious differences that either directly provoke or support the antithesis of what two religions, in particular, hold as a divine commandment - "You shall not kill". This is such an irony.

Lesser evils?

In other current events, to which there is little peer-reviewed literature as yet produced for reflection, there has been the effect of a Republican stacking of the Supreme Court in the United States of America with pro-Christian nationalist judges and creating a skewed system whereby, for instance, the 50-year law legalising abortion has been thwarted. This issue, alongside opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage, stem-cell research and the environment, are all matters to which the Christian Right will vote for legislators supporting them. Further to this, according to Scherer (2004), "Many Christian fundamentalists feel that concern for the planet's future is irrelevant because it has no future."

Then, closer to home, Australia has had a well-documented period of its government's recently deposed Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Almond, 2019) following the lead of the former United States President, Donald Trump, dismissing scientific veracity on significant issues, such as of the IPCC special report on global warming (IPCC, 2018). This also can be considered in relation to the effects of a Pentecostal (Christian fundamentalist)-influenced Australian and the desire of Trump in the United States to please their Christian audiences whose support has been considered prime reasons for winning their respective prime ministership and presidency (Robbins, 2015; Foye, 2018; Nortey, 2021).

Conclusion

From humanity's infancy to the present, religion has been used as a tool for what Gibbon (1776) infers is "useful for rulers". This is evident from our histories of world conflicts where religion has been used either as a prime directive for conflict or usefully applied indirectly by defining an ethnicity with a religious code of conduct for one community as superior to that of another community or nation-state. Even so, there is reasonable cause to question whether religious belief is the prime mover or just used to facilitate other vices: greed and the selfish or narcissistic desire for power. After all, it is questionable to many that, for instance, in a more muted sense, pentecostal evangelists honestly believe the gospel they communicate or if it is being used with the clarity of non-belief in their message to buy their next Lear jet. Indeed, there is scope for many ethnographic studies on religious influence and how much sincere belief or bull dust there is in provoking social control and change. Perhaps

many of these studies will find that, as described here, what Hitchens (2008, p.15) wrote, "Religion poisons everything." It certainly appears so.

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