

What circumstances lead to religious violence?

Introduction

The expression “religious violence” implies violence provoked by religion. But is this so? Does violence stem from religious edicts, or is it an excuse hiding behind more insidious motives? This essay aims to assist in answering this question by discussing the substance of both words, religion and violence. It will then spotlight why those two words appear together. They appear, after all, oxymoronic, like an “original copy”. From an everyday perspective, religion is undoubtedly a social ritual with a benevolent and loving God as its prime mover, yet violence is the antithesis of love. To clarify why the expression “religious violence” has become in everyday use, we shall discuss historical situations that would appear to justify its being. To start our journey, we shall discuss the definitions and perceptions of religion and violence and how one has been tied to the other, and then we shall consider two case histories to see how this is reflected.

Religion

Much has been written to crystallise the meaning of religion. Still, as Horton (1960) has suggested, the first of the three types of working definitions, then current, is:

covering an area of human activity which lacks sharply delineated boundaries; where such a point of view prevails, the reader is simply asked to accept as religious any phenomena which the author happens to select for treatment (p.201)

A second type suggests that “Religion is a class of metaphorical statements”, and the third is that “Religion is the belief in the supernatural” (ibid. p.201). Regardless, however, these definitions have been embellished since that date; for instance, one commentator (Ozturk, 2023) refers to religion as a “Soft power” that, although having been considered on paper as separated from the State and political discussions, it appears not to be so. As Ozturk (2023) observes:

There is one indisputable fact: religion has re-emerged on the world stage, not only playing a decisive role in different ways in many contexts but also acting as an important tool for many actors, both state and non-state. For some, religion is power. Religion is not, however, an example of potential ‘hard’ power, such as military resources or financial instruments. On the contrary, religion is soft power, as culture, history, and other normative structures are (p.135).

Power is to be gained community-wide and personally by adherence to religious exercise. Wearing the cloak of religion or, for some, accepting God into their invisible being (a soul?) may convince them that, by default, God is on their side, and it can create the consideration by them that they now are also “all-knowing” and convincing themselves of being correct in their other thoughts. This conviction, of course, also describes arrogance and pride. Furthermore, megalomaniacal attitudes may develop, such as that which led Jim Jones to encourage the mass suicide of 900 of his congregation in Guyana (Judge, 1993) and the deaths of 76 at the WACO tragedy led by David Koresh (Shaw, 2009).

Many religious people profess to follow the edicts of the one true God. Theirs. And that may be where the rub is—or at least one of them. Like every human being we may know, many religions are different, yet also, in many ways, the same. Externally, most of us are blessed with four limbs,

two eyes and other necessary anatomical features. Internally, we also all have the same organic requirements to sustain life. However, mentally, we tend to have a range of differences and similarities with those around us. This may be like being in a family growing up and adopting the parents' values or involvement with a group of people with similar interests. If one likes scuba diving, they probably won't spend their spare time playing rugby.

In the same way, it would be unlikely that they would, as Muslims, attend a Catholic Mass or, as Catholics, worship at a Mosque. These are seldom choices made deliberately after a study of options—many will lapse into choosing a religion (or faith) to follow due to associating with their surrounding communities and loved ones (Fraser, 2016). When a choice is made, individuals immerse themselves in its rituals and writings and observe its sacred customs. Extrapolating this individual's commitment to their larger community or social group and the ensuing contradictions that may occur, Leach (1954) observed that:

Since any social system, however stable and balanced it may be, contains opposing factions, there are bound to be different myths to validate the particular rights of different groups of people. ... Myth and ritual is a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights, and status are expressed, but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony.

That is where we can see the possibility of religion, faith, beliefs and its myths and symbols mutating into something that may metamorphose into something of an opposite nature – the antithesis of the reliance on a loving God: disharmony and violence.

Violence

A simple but concise definition of violence by the Cambridge Dictionary (2022) is “actions or words that are intended to hurt people:” endorsed by the American Dictionary (2022), which defines it as “extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage”.

However, at least as far as the Christian religion commands in Romans 13:8-10 (Open Bible, 2023) and in contrast to this situation:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Similarly, these sentiments are reflected in virtually every religious faith. One of the primary issues discussed and averred to be essential by the Parliament of the World’s Religions is “Commitment to a Culture of Non-violence and Respect for Life (Global Ethic, 2023). But are the believers concurring on these principles not fooling themselves when they also, by belief in the God–inspired substance of their holy books, also subscribe to other contradicting statements in their very same texts?

For instance, in the Christian Bible, Matthews and Gibson (2005) suggest that the “New Testament texts might depict God, and God’s people, as peaceful, violent, or both”. Another visual representation of this paradox is in the clip from the television programme “West Wing”, where Martin Sheen plays the part of President Josiah Bartlett. The script goes as follows:

President Josiah Bartlet: Good. I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination.

Dr Jenna Jacobs: I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr President. The Bible does.

President Josiah Bartlet: Yes, it does. Leviticus.

Dr Jenna Jacobs: 18:22.

President Josiah Bartlet: Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, and always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff Leo McGarry insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself, or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important 'cause we've got a lot of sports fans in this town: Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you?

(West Wing 2000)

This narrative highlights the real-life discord that can be brought about by cherry-picking verses from holy texts that may suit a description not necessarily wholly to divine wisdom but the otherwise inhumanity of man following less-than-divine agendas, like some purported by political persuaders. This perversion of intent would also reflect Durkheim's studies (Ballard, 2023), arguing that social problems emanate from social factors other than the divine. Religion serves "a social purpose, an emotional ritual by means of playing on emotions. Society has everything necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in people's minds" (ibid.), particularly efforts to achieve political objectives.

So how do these contradictions arise in a more magnified sense to create such violent events as genocide, or at best, constant conflict when given the appearance of religion being its initiator? (Bartov, 2010). Is it religion or those who use religion to arouse these foul objectives? Let us look at two examples of these actions and where religion fits in either as a driver, an excuse given by the drivers of another agenda, or both. The worst-case scenario that damages populations and where religion is vilified as its principal cause is genocide, and this is what we shall reflect on.

Genocide.

Genocide has been defined by the United States Holocaust Museum (2023) as:

An internationally recognised crime where acts are committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

These acts fall into five categories:

1. Killing members of the group
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

This was essentially produced as a summation of the actions in the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, and it is a reflection on similar descriptions of events related to other genocidal activities, such as those that occurred, for instance, in Armenia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, where religion also appeared to play a significant role.

In answering what happened, much literature has been produced investigating religion's role in these terrible affairs, but once again, has

religion been the driver or scapegoat? Looking at two of these historical scenarios, we shall briefly review religion's relation to the Holocaust in Europe (1939-1945) and then in the more recent Rwandan massacre.

The Holocaust

It is commonly known that approximately six million Jews were exterminated by Hitler's Nazi Regime. Many tales have been told of their despicable activities (UN News, 2022; Hollander, 2021), and many are related to the complicity of the Christian churches with the German military (Erickson, 2012; Moody, 2020; Struckmeyer, 2020). A classic example is Gerhard Kittel, a Professor of Evangelical Theology and the New Testament at the University of Tübingen. His radical beliefs on the Jewish people as the historical enemy of Christianity and German culture advocated stripping the citizenship of German Jews and removal from all critical professions such as medicine and law (Erickson, 1977). Kittel and "many of his Christian contemporaries believed that the modern, secularising world threatened to destroy the traditional, Christian, German culture they loved" (Erickson, 2001). Further, he [Kittel]:

consciously opposed the Enlightenment's main political and cultural ideals, and he was anti-modern. He also saw in National Socialist rhetoric an opposition to modern values and practices, and this attracted him to the party (p.65)

Two of Kittel's contemporaries, Hirsch and Althaus, were professors of systematic theology. They shared his thoughts and "viewed with regret modern, urban, democratic society, using terms like "corruption,"

“decomposition,” and “moral decadence” to describe it” (ibid. p.67). This triad of religious authoritarians agreed with Hitler’s antisemitic policies and influenced much of Germany’s population.

However, other situations place a different reflection on some of the religious fraternities opposed to this position at that time. To consolidate the belief in the Christian correctness of the war effort, chaplains were appointed to the German military after a questionable selection procedure ensuring their conformity to Party ideals. Those selected primarily became “eyewitnesses to genocide, and secondly, their presence helped create an illusion of normalcy and morality for the killers” (Moody, 2020; Bergen, 2001, p.124). Nevertheless, there are several examples of “courageous behaviour against Nazi atrocities” (ibid, p. 130). Reporting these events is scant as it is assumed that such information would lead to a negative outcome for the recorder. Even so, many Christian chaplains, with what little power they possessed, did resist.

Rwanda

The prime objective of establishing Christian missions in Rwanda was to convert the population to Christianity. However, its priority was to do so with those who appeared to be political authorities, and in achieving this, emphasised the benefit of the New Testament command in 1 Peter 2:13-15, to which the population would then be urged to:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right, you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

The argument was clear that if they were to adopt the Christian religion, subservience to those in authority was urged and adopted, making rule over the population a choice of belief and not necessarily of force. This 'soft power' used in this manner was seen as advantageous for the church, and as Longman (1997) observes, "The idea that gaining the support of state leaders assures the smooth functioning of the church thus becoming accepted doctrine for Catholic leaders in Rwanda" (p.142). But at that time, the Tutsi minority were the ruling elite. Still, the progressive priests "helped raise the consciousness among the Hutu masses of their exploitation, and in the late 1950s, ethnic tensions increased sharply" (ibid.143). Vail (1996) also suggests that the early missionaries, in their efforts to create written languages for African communities, were instrumental in creating "cultural identities through their specification of "custom" and "tradition" which then created inelastic boundaries strengthening the growth of stereotypes of 'the other'". These stereotypical conceptions became the "primary ideological justification for genocide" (Longman 1997, p.147).

In the years leading up to this horrific situation, although the Catholic hierarchy appears to have supported President Habyarimana's existing autocracy, many clergies worked with human rights groups to urge political reform and ease tensions. Catholic Bishops of Kabgayi and Nyundo publicly denounced ethnic unrest and government maltreatment of its opposition. However, it is significant that the clergy members who had profited from the existing situation remained silent. The tension evolved between tribal identities, not the extremist fervour of opposing religious belief systems. This tension was evidenced in many labelled practising

Catholics who overrode their beliefs and became physically involved in the merciless killing of their fellow Rwandans (ibid. 154).

In 1994, President Habyarimana was killed. This triggered a more violent change, and so it began. “The United Nations estimates that 800,000 Rwandans were brutally slaughtered by fellow citizens in a state-led genocide targeting the Tutsi ethnic group. About 75% of the Tutsi population was killed” (Reid, 2019).

Conclusion

Many often-read religious texts such as the Holy Bible, Koran, Talmud and Bhagavad Gita for spiritual guidance. Still, many interpretations of verse or parts of the narratives are often read differently due to apparent contradictions; this often leads to “cherry-picking” of those parts that may suit the agenda of a person wishing to use religion to support their future decisions, often referred to as “confirmation bias” (Nickerson, 1998). This use of religious expression helps the confirmation bias of the communicator. It is probably why violence is sometimes attributed to religion and the creation of the seemingly oxymoronic phrase of “religious violence”, which is not the primary message of any sacred text.

Often heard in many commercial contexts, particularly in the arguments posed by marketers to sell their clients’ products, is the aphorism that “Perception is reality” (Taylor, 2019). In other words, if presented well, that product will give the buyers’ perception of being the answer to their needs. From a political point of view, a message consistently given could become the public’s reality, just like a cherry-picked verse from a sacred script, such

as 1 Peter 2:13-15 (Open Bible, 2023), being constantly repeated out of context and in support of a political regime.

We have seen this in these two histories of genocide just reviewed and probably reflected in most, if not others, that we already know. So, is religion in the driving seat of the war machine? Or was the engineer who built the machine and chose religion as the driver? One would tend to choose the latter, with religion being forced to conform at gunpoint or, more subtly, appealed to and finally agreeing with apparently similar objectives as the engineer. In the NAZI Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, many religious authoritarians were in synchronicity with the political regime's desire to maintain a status quo and retain power. Religious leaders may have unwittingly laid the bedrock for defining ethnic tribalism in their early efforts to establish written language and histories. In doing so, they have assisted in a regime's future directives. Still, it is the leaders of those ethnic groups, who are responsible for provoking violence. Religion did not instigate it; regarding these horrific scenarios, it has been given by-proxy blame for them. Those who hold and possess absolute power are responsible for these extremes of inhumanity towards their brothers and sisters. Religion has a positive and necessary part to play in society; it can bring people together and impress on all that the most powerful element in this world is love, not hate (Gould, 2014).

But the very desire of the profane to attain and retain power is the culprit killer.

Absolute power does, indeed, corrupt absolutely.

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