
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

Britain's culture, history and educational system all shape our assumptions regarding the place of religion and violent conflict in human experience and the relationship between the two. Thus, any attempt to develop a nuanced understanding of this complex issue has to start with an awareness of the assumptions we in the UK already hold.

When it comes to religion, we have a tendency to think that it is an issue of personal belief, mostly concerning personal morality and life after death. Thus, we see religious institutions and figures as ministers to such personal matters and often feel uneasy when religious figures make public on social issues. In fact, we feel uneasy talking about religion and personal beliefs in politics. Famously, Alistair Campbell interrupted an interview with Tony Blair that touched on the latter's religious beliefs with the assertion "we don't do God". Thus, it is puzzling for many of us to see how politicians in the US, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia cannot conduct politics without references to religious beliefs and often need to demonstrate an image of personal piety.

In contrast, when we step back from our UK context and take a look at the world and history of Homo sapiens, we see a fundamental role played by religion that captures not just personal space but social and political spaces too.

Religion is ultimately about providing meaning to a world that seems chaotic and disorderly. What lie at the core of religious belief systems are answers to questions such as, "who are we?", "why are we here?", "what is happening around us?", "how shall we live?" and "what gives us hope for a better, safer future?". These are deeply social and political questions as well as personal. Thus, all societies and all state structures and political ideologies try to answer the same questions. Yet, with their transcendental reference points, hope in the face of immediate chaos and the strong social bonds and solidarities they create, religions arguably play a much more powerful role than ethnic, religious or political visions. That is why often religion (both as law and a unifying force in communities) can assume a central role in the re-creation of order in some failed states.

When it comes to violent conflict, there is a common tendency to think that the 'other' is always more violent or evil than 'us'. Yet, human history reveals a sobering reality: under certain conditions, human beings deploy violence for a wide range of reasons. These range from personal gratification to assertion of interests, protection of resources and one's own life and country and the advancement of a political cause. The ever-present violent potential of human beings is hidden from the eyesight of the general public by the modern nation state that monopolises the use of force through its professional organisations such as police forces or the armed services. Yet, any condition of chaos or collapse in the rule of law is almost always followed by violence. There is a direct link between criminal violence in our cities and 'jihadis' claiming to be fighting imaginary cosmic causes. In fact, a substantial proportion of radicalised youths joining religious extremists



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Thus, if one starts from erroneous assumptions regarding religion and the human potential for violence, it is an easy mistake to think that religion is to blame for many violent conflicts around the world. The place of religion in some forms of violence cannot be denied, but the critical question is what exactly that place is. When we look at anthropological studies on the emergence of religions, an interesting insight emerges into sacrificial ceremonies, which represented the very early emergence of religion in human history. Almost all of these followed violent conflicts (to ease them and appease opponents), or after violent natural incidents (with the hope of preventing their repeat). It seems likely that religions emerged from human experience of the extraordinary and as a response to violence and disorder.

The role of religion in providing meaning is exactly why it is always present in human violence. It shows itself as a legitimisation, since the deployment of violence remains contrary to the instincts of healthy human beings and their societal norms, such as self-preservation and not harming others. An enemy needs to be dehumanised before they can be dealt with, and often, dehumanisation goes through religious imageries of the 'evil' qualities of the enemy and why they are somewhat less human and why morality can be suspended when dealing with them. This is why religion often serves as an identity marker between different communities, since it serves as the most visible and timeless difference between them.

Religion shows itself as an ideology providing an alternative universe, where fairness and morality is re-established amidst chaos. Thus, in failed states religious extremist networks

emerge with a powerful appeal, or Islamists emerge as a viable option in the face of corrupt and abusive secular powers ruling poor countries. In fact, demands for Sharia are often loud and clear in protests against corrupt and brutal rule by authoritarian states. What that signifies for Muslim protesters is not the medieval punishments imposed by some schools of Sharia law, but instead the demand for a system that upholds fairness, justice and moral order.

Religions serve as the most basic form of welfare systems and civil society and thus they play a strong role in weak states and ungoverned spaces as they offer help, solidarity, education, and platforms to find spouses and jobs. Religious places of worship are often the only form of social gathering that remains free under authoritarian regimes. Thus, they emerge as powerful political platforms both for opposition and for those in power to communicate messages, obtain recruits and seek support. Violent clashes therefore emerge after religious gatherings, or people are recruited for violence from such networks.

Religion also serves as a memory carrier for a community. Almost all commemorations of past violence are religious in nature. This is certainly the case for us in the UK, as our war memorials, ceremonies and the language we use all have a deep religious heritage behind them. Thus, religion glues a community together in commemoration. This brings a redemptive quality to past grievances in the form of reconciliation, healing and forgiveness, but they might also enable new conflicts to emerge and old cleavages to remain. In fact, while conflicts do not start for religious reasons, once they assume religious characteristics and justifications, they last

longer and positions become more entrenched. If you believe you are fighting a cosmic war that you cannot lose since God is with you, even if reality contradicts that belief and you are set to lose, you can maintain an apocalyptic hope of a divine intervention that will turn the outcome in your ultimate victory.

What is often missed in discussions of religion and violent conflict is how exposure to violence shapes religions, and forces them to accommodate practices that often contradict orthodox theological convictions. Thus, one can see Christian militias causing havoc, as was seen in the cases of the Central African Republic and Lebanon, while the Gospel of Christ preaches of turning the other cheek and reconciliation. Similarly, Buddhist monks have been involved in the killing of Muslims and other religious groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar in full contradiction to their own religious traditions and calling as monks and priests. Likewise, there have been Catholic clergy who have been found guilty of actively partaking in killings during the Rwandan genocide. Thus, there is often a gap between tenets of faith and the actions of people of faith in the context of violent conflict. Often, theology follows actions and is shaped by it, rather than theological beliefs resulting in those actions.

Therefore, religion remains an important aspect of violent conflicts in the world. Depending on the local context, local religions and the influence of local religious actors, the way in which religion has an impact on violence can be different. Religion is ultimately ambivalent about violence and peace: it can be seen both as a powerful force bringing reconciliation or it can be seen as a brutal enabler of mass atrocities.

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