

Religion and Violence: Various Perspectives

Terrorist attacks claiming religious justification, especially the September 11, 2001, destruction of the Twin Towers and the more recent barbarous acts of ISIS, have generated a vast and diverse literature on the general topic of religion and violence. Risking oversimplification of an extremely complex question, we can distinguish at least four different positions prominent in the ongoing discussion.

Religion is inherently violent. The European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century blamed post-Reformation strife, including the Thirty Years' War, (1618-1648), which killed about 35% of the population of central Europe, on the enduring hostility between Catholics and Protestants. Referring to religious leaders, Voltaire claimed that "those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." The influential modern critics of religion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre) held the common view that religion is essentially dehumanizing, thwarting healthy personal development and impeding progress toward a more just and peaceful world. They helped create an intellectual climate in the contemporary western world where many people simply assume that religion is the major cause of wars and violence.

The notion that religion is essentially violent has been repeated more recently by the "new atheists." The Oxford socio-biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, in his book *The God Delusion*, highlights passages in the Old Testament which present God as a jealous, wrathful tyrant who slaughters Egyptians and commands the Israelites to engage in ethnic cleansing and genocide against the inhabitants of the promised land. Biblical religion is violent because the God of the Old Testament is, among other things, "a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive blood thirsty ethnic cleanser," and a "capriciously malevolent bully."

Although Dawkins has good things to say about Jesus, "one of the great ethical innovators of history," especially in the non-violent teachings of his groundbreaking Sermon on the Mount, he portrays the God of the New Testament as "vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent." Instead of just forgiving people for their sins, this God demands the horrible suffering of the innocent Jesus to atone for the sins of the guilty. For Dawkins, this understanding of the atonement helps create a climate for interpreting the whole biblical tradition as inherently violent.

Religions have texts and traditions that can be selectively retrieved to justify violence. Christians, for instance, have used Gospel verses to justify the persecution of Jews. Today, the Islamic State, commonly called ISIS, stands as a particularly abhorrent example of this approach, as journalist Graeme Wood has demonstrated in the March 2015 *Atlantic* article "What ISIS Really Wants." Drawing on the Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel and other experts, Wood makes the case that the ISIS leaders are remarkably serious about a literal retrieval of early Islamic texts that legitimate conquests, slavery, beheadings, converting infidels, taxing non-believers, and that promote the establishment of an authentic caliphate with the complete imposition of Sharia law in its penal and social welfare aspects. According to Wood, the religion practiced by ISIS "derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam." Their decisions, laws and propaganda often refer to "the Prophetic methodology," which means a strict adherence to the teaching and practice of Muhammad himself. Wood offers a striking example of ISIS religious literalism. After capturing a group of Yazidis, an ancient Kurdish sect that incorporates elements of Islam, the government convened a group of Islamic scholars to determine if the Yazidis are apostate Muslims, and thus marked for death, or are pagans subject to enslavement.

The June 29, 2014, establishment of the Islamic State as a caliphate, led by caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has immense implications: ISIS is now, by choice, in a permanent state of isolation from all other countries and cannot make permanent peace treaties with any nation; the caliph must wage offensive jihad at least once a year; all Muslims have an obligation to support the caliphate and those who fail to pledge allegiance to it are considered apostates subject to death; the caliphate has an obligation to expand its territorial conquests by war if necessary; the state must impose Sharia penal law, including death for apostasy, stoning for adultery and mutilation for theft.

ISIS ideology has an apocalyptic dimension which expects the end of the world to come soon, accompanied by decisive battles between true believers and infidels. The leaders and many of their recruits see themselves as God's instruments in bringing about the final victory of Islam over ungodly forces. They are ready to die not only to gain happiness in the next life, but also to further Allah's cause in the world. The leaders want to draw the United States into a land war in Iraq and Syria, setting up a final decisive battle with victory assured by God.

Graeme Wood's important article helps us understand the way ISIS leaders have selectively appropriated violent teachings and practices from the early traditions of Islam, while ignoring the more peaceful passages.

Religion is not the major cause of the wars and violence that have plagued the human race historically and in the present. This is the thesis of the religious historian Karen Armstrong, developed in her over 500 page book *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. Given the dangerous combination of globalization and tribal polarization operative today, Armstrong believes it is vitally important to determine more accurately the actual role of religion in world history. She is especially interested in countering what the American scholar William Cavanaugh calls “the myth of religious violence,” which assumes that the world religions, especially the monotheistic faiths Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are the major causes of wars and violent conflicts. Examining the cause of major conflicts, such as Joshua’s conquest of the promised land, Islamic expansion, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the European Wars of Religion, the World Wars, and contemporary terrorism, Armstrong argues that economic and political factors have played a greater role than religious motivations. She reminds us that modern secular regimes, which claimed to free people from the dehumanizing constraints of religion, have often been ruthless proponents of violence, as happened, for example, in the French Revolution and under Communist governments. Even in conflicts seemingly based on religious differences, as in Northern Ireland, it can be argued that political and economic factors played a greater role in the strife and violence.

Ever since the 9/11 terrorist attack on U.S. soil, Armstrong has been especially active in defending Islam against the charge that it is an essentially violent religion. She credits the prophet Muhammad with pacifying strife-torn Arabia, sometimes through defensive battles, but especially by “an ingenious and inspiring campaign of nonviolence.” She places violent verses of the Quran in context. For example, the passage: “Slay enemies wherever you find them” (4:89) comes from a time of vicious tribal warfare in Arabia when chieftains were not expected to spare survivors after battle, and is followed by the exhortation: “Thus, if they let you be, and do not make war on you, and offer you peace, God does not allow you to harm them” (4:90). Armstrong sees in the Quran restraints on violence: self-defense is the only legitimate justification for war; Muslims must not begin hostilities (2:190); it can be meritorious to forgo revenge in a spirit of charity (5:45); hostilities should stop as soon as the enemy sues for peace (2:192-3); and “there must be no coercion in matters of faith” (2:256).

Based on her interpretation of the Quran, Karen Armstrong insists that Muslims who advocate suicide bombing and the massacre of innocent citizens fundamentally distort their religious tradition by ignoring the more compassionate teachings of Islam and amplifying the violent passages of the Quran taken out of context.

Armstrong detects in every major religion this same tendency on the part of a small percentage of believers to employ aggressive tactics, selectively retrieved from their tradition, to preserve their religious identity, threatened by the modern secular world. She encourages the vast majority of believers in each religious tradition to repudiate those who choose the path of violence and to show by example that religion is not inherently violent.

Religion can foster justice and peace while helping to curb war and violence. This positive contribution to the humanization of our world is made by ordinary believers who live the best of their religious tradition on a daily basis and who promote dialogue and collaboration to create a more harmonious world. Individuals do this in various ways: for example, befriending a person of another tradition; challenging prejudicial and stereotypical comments in ordinary conversation; and participating in local interfaith groups.

In the last decade, leaders of religious traditions have publicly rejected violence and promoted peace. For instance, at the end of the 2007 Ramadan fast, 138 Muslim scholars and leaders sent a letter to Pope Benedict, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Christian leaders entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” which called for dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims based on our common commitment to loving the one God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The letter is a remarkable achievement in itself for the Muslim community, which has no unifying leader like a Pope or Patriarch. It has great historical significance as the first collaborative outreach in the 1,400-year history shared by Christians and Muslims. The opening paragraph indicates the practical importance of the letter: there can be no peace in the world without justice and peace between Christians and Muslims, who together constitute well over half of the world’s population.

The substantive argument of the document is that Muslims share with Christians a commitment to love God and neighbor, making this dual command the solid basis for ongoing dialogue and constructive collaboration between the two traditions. Near the end of the letter, the Muslim leaders address those who “relish conflict and destruction” for its own sake or as a tactical strategy, insisting that “our very souls are at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony.” This historic initiative, with its condemnation of violence, deserves more attention and new efforts to implement its constructive proposals.

Pope Francis, who has impressed the world with his authentic simplicity and compassionate care for the poor, has used his moral authority to promote peace. In 2014, he brought together Palestinian and Israeli leaders, Mahmood Abbas and Shimon Peres, for a meeting that included a joint prayer for peace. In his 2015 Easter message to the world, the pope called for peace in the troubled spots on the earth, including Syria, Iraq, Africa, Venezuela, and Ukraine. He prayed for “an end to all war and every conflict, whether great or small, ancient or recent.” During his 2014 visit to Albania, Francis explicitly condemned the use of religion to justify violent actions against human dignity: “Let no one consider themselves to be the ‘armor’ of God while planning and carrying out acts

of violence and oppression.” Because of his position and popularity, Pope Francis is an important example of the power of religion to promote peace and limit violence.

Distinguishing these four positions helps us understand the current discussion, but it remains abstract and needs further clarification. Religion, considered in itself, is an abstraction, a notion devoid of context, a mental construct without clear meaning. To attribute choice, preference or motivation to religion is to fall into what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” or “reification.” With this in mind, it is not logical to claim “Islam is violent” or “Christianity is peaceful.” The reality is more complex and nuanced.

We gain greater clarity by reflecting on real believers who appropriate and live a particular religious tradition with various degrees of understanding and commitment. Although each believer has a distinctive outlook on peace and violence, it is possible to make some generalizations. All believers are influenced by social, cultural, political, and economic factors that affect attitudes toward violence. For some, their faith is the most important factor, while for others, secular considerations are decisive. For example, there are American Christians who believe the cross is judge of the flag, and there are Christian Americans who act as though their allegiance to country trumps their religious beliefs.

The vast majority of believers who are faithful to their religious tradition oppose rape, slavery, torture, and the killing of innocent people. Most Muslims, for example, abhor the barbarous tactics employed by the Islamic State.

In all the world religions, we find some believers who are pacifists, opposed to all types of war and violence. There are Confucian, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups committed to non-violent solutions to world problems: for example, Pax Christi, a Christian faith-based study and action group with non-violence as a core commitment; the Jewish Peace Fellowship, committed to abolish war and promote non-violent solutions; and the Muslim Peace Fellowship, dedicated to the theory and practice of Islamic non-violence.

A small percentage of believers justify violence by selectively retrieving supportive texts from their tradition, while ignoring more peaceful teachings. Christians, for example, justified the Inquisition by emphasizing exclusive biblical verses that contradict the general thrust of the Gospel. Leaders of the Islamic State privilege texts and traditions that promote violence over those that forbid aggression and coercion.

Some believers have a more enlightened understanding of their faith that allows them to interpret violent passages in the light of the whole tradition. Christians, for example, who recognize that the God who sent his Son to save the world cannot possibly be responsible for genocide, do not take literally Old Testament passages that attribute violent commands to Yahweh.

Committed believers are in the best position to curb the violent tendencies in their own tradition. It is up to American Christians to challenge the Christian Americans who place no moral restraints on U.S. drone strikes. By the same token, it is up to mainstream Muslims to challenge militant extremism claiming Islamic justification. American military might is not going to defeat ISIS, nor are Christians the best ones to blunt the propaganda of the Islamic State. Faithful Muslims, by fidelity to the pillars of their faith, can challenge ISIS ideology. Muslim scholars can correct its one-sided violent interpretation of the Islamic tradition. Muslim leaders can find creative ways to counter its recruiting strategies. Muslim countries can contain its military advances.

As Christian believers, we should stand by our Muslim brothers and sisters in the epic battle against militant extremism, gratefully celebrating their efforts to reject violence and ready to collaborate in promoting peace.