

6 Report

Killing in the Name of God: Addressing Religiously Inspired Violence

Robin Gill

Foreword by Nick Spencer





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Report

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Robin Gill



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Foreword

Professor Robin Gill makes it clear, in the opening chapter of this essay, that we – public, media and academics alike – talk about religion and violence a great deal, and apparently a great deal more than we used to. Talking about a topic does not necessarily entail having clear and easily comprehensible views on it, however.

As part of our project on religion and violence, we commissioned the polling company ComRes to investigate what the British public thinks about the topic, testing their perceptions of eight statements about the interrelationship between the two.¹ The results were as instructive as they were unclear.

In the first instance, the population did not, as a rule, think that religions were *inherently* violent, only 32% agreeing with that statement (and only 8% agreeing strongly) compared to 55% who disagreed. Men, older respondents, people from social grades C2 and DE and non-believers were more disposed to seeing an inherent connection between the two, but the difference was rarely huge. Conversely, however, nearly half the adult population (47%) agreed with the strong statement that 'The world would be a more peaceful place if no one was religious', a figure that rose to over half for men and people aged 35-54, and to over 60% among religious 'nones'. Only religious respondents themselves tended to disagree on balance with this statement. So: religions are not inherently violent but for many the world would be a better place if no one was religious.

Or take, as a second example, the fact that a clear majority of people – 61% – agreed that 'The teachings of religions are essentially peaceful'. Religious believers were (predictably) highly inclined to agree with this, but even 'nones' were on

balance in agreement (50% agreeing vs. 37% disagreeing). And yet, in spite of the essential peacefulness of religions' teaching, one of the clearest findings from our survey was that a significant majority of respondents felt that 'Most of the wars in world history have been caused by religions'. A remarkable 70% of people agreed with this (29% agreeing strongly) compared with a mere 21% disagreeing. Only in minority religious sub-groups, where the sample size is too low to allow for any significance, was the balance of opinion different. If we're sure about anything (and we're not sure about much in this area), it seems that we are confident that history's violence was religious violence.

So: religions are not inherently violent but for many the world would be a better place if no one was religious, and the teachings of religions are essentially peaceful although they have been responsible for most of the wars in history.

If this is confusing, it may be because the public seems to be aware of the many complex and confusing factors within this whole debate. Religions comprise of their teachers and their followers, their ethics and their contexts. Thus, the single clearest finding from our survey was that people believed overwhelmingly that 'It is religious extremists, not religions themselves, that are violent'. Over four in five – 81% – of respondents agreed with this statement, with only 12% disagreeing. Similarly, if less powerfully, nearly two thirds of people – 64% – agreed that 'Most religious violence is really about other things, like politics, socio-economic issues, or Western foreign policy', rising to nearly three quarters of minority religious respondents (73%).

In other words '*religion and violence*' is rarely, monochromatically, about religion, as if that were a

self-evident term (it isn't). It is about the people, some of them extremely nasty, who claim to follow a religion and use it for violent ends, and the economic, political and nationalist causes with which it is often inextricably linked.

This is emphatically not to say that religion in itself – its practices, loyalties, scriptures and even ethics – has nothing to do with violence. Whatever else this survey tells us, it does not tell us that people think this whole religion and violence issue is *really* about something else. They don't. Rather, the polling about 'religion and violence' is complex and unclear in part because people recognise that 'religion and violence' is invariably about 'religion and violence and...', when the 'and' is followed by issues of loyalty, ethics, ethnicity, politics, textual interpretation, geography, economics, or any other number of factors.

This is why this essay by Christian ethicist Robin Gill is so helpful. Gill recognises that this is a complex terrain, and that any sweeping statements about religion and violence are problematic. He, like the Great British public, recognises that there is an issue here that needs addressing, which is precisely what he does in his careful reading of various religious texts of violence in chapter 4. But he also understands that this isn't just about how people read their scriptures, turning Holy Texts into Unholy Subtexts. It's about human nature, and tribalism, and ideologies, and extremists. To understand religion and violence properly, one has to understand a great deal more than just religion and violence.


It is our hope that this essay will not only add to the wider understanding of religion and violence but that, by doing so, will enable a richer and more measured debate about these issues than has often been the case of late and, crucially if

ambitiously, it will contribute to a culture in which such links as there are between religion and violence are slowly unwound and abandoned. An entirely post-violent human future may be a dream of utopians who pay little attention to the deep fault lines within human nature, but a future in which the best of human aspirations is no longer hijacked to justify the worst of human actions should be within our grasp.

Nick Spencer

Research Director, Theos

- 1 Specifically, ComRes interviewed 2,042 GB adults online between 6th and 7th June 2018. Data were weighted to be demographically representative of all British adults aged 18+. The eight statements were: 'Religions are inherently violent', 'The teachings of religions are essentially peaceful', 'Most religious violence is really about other things, like politics, socio-economic issues, or Western foreign policy', 'It is religious extremists, not religions themselves, that are violent', 'Most of the wars in world history have been caused by religions', 'On balance, religions are much more peaceful today than violent', 'The world would be a more peaceful place if no one was religious', 'The world would be a more peaceful place if no one believed in God'.



Executive summary

This essay into religiously inspired violence begins with two key questions:

1. Is religiously inspired violence on the rise?
2. Does religious commitment inherently cause war and violence?

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, it is certainly the case that both journalists and academics have paid increased attention to religiously inspired violence. However, whether such attention reflects an overall rise in violence is harder to answer.

Recent instances of violence appear to be set in a broader context of long-term decline in homicide, brutal forms of punishment, and the proportion of people killed in warfare within the West (although that remains a contentious claim). If this is so, it makes any potential rise in religious violence more shocking, although the numbers involved show that religiously inspired violence pales into insignificance when compared with the numbers killed in state, civil and ethnic wars over recent decades.

In response to the second question, some make the blunt claims that religion inherently causes violence and that without religion there would be far less violence. However, most serious scholars today maintain that neither “religion” nor “violence” is a single thing. Rather, they are complex entities and it is often difficult to disentangle religious factors involved in particular political contexts. Moreover it is beyond dispute that some of the most brutal and homicidal political leaders in the 20th century were avowedly anti-religious. The idea that “religion”, however that is understood, inherently causes violence is unsustainable.

Such a conclusion notwithstanding, it remains true that the religiously inspired violence over recent years, most obviously seen in 9/11 and subsequent Islamist killings and tortures, is still deeply shocking and does need to be addressed seriously. In response to this, the essay turns to two further questions:


3. How might we understand religiously inspired violence better?
4. What can we do to reduce such violence?

Chapter 3 goes beyond the simplistic “religion causes violence” claim to engage with the significant recent scholarship on the relationship between the two. Focusing on the Abrahamic faiths within that academic literature, the chapter draws out a number of key factors – the faiths’ pacific self-understanding; the “disconnect” between messages of peace and the deployment of violent images within religious traditions; the faiths’ fateful “intertwining [of] clerical authority with political powers”; and their subsequent grappling with the legitimacy of violence – in order to illustrate the complex, contested and evolving relationship between the Abrahamic faiths and violence.

That noted, a – perhaps the – key factor in all this is that the holy scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (as well as other faiths) do have some texts that appear to justify violence. These are the focus of chapter 4, which explores some of the more challenging examples from each of the Abrahamic religions, and argues that it is by reading these texts in context that a more peaceful, consistent (with the rest of the scriptures) and representative message is discernible in them.

In reality, Jews and Christians have long contextualised some of the more violent verses in Deuteronomy and the Gospels. Some Muslim scholars are also now attempting to do something similar, especially with the ninth chapter of the Qur'an, which appears especially to motivate some Islamist extremists to act violently. In this vein, the final chapter looks at how scholars, religious leaders and others can build on and develop that process, calling for a 'new ecumenism', based upon mutual understanding rather than doctrinal agreement, between leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths.

While some theologians have already begun this task, at a local level, rabbis, imams and priests/ministers have also increasingly witnessed together against acts of religiously inspired violence. In addition, theologians and religious leaders are beginning to work together on ethical issues, acknowledging their differences and also searching for points of convergence, in such a way that further defuses the risk of religiously inspired violence.

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Introduction

The 21st century faces a serious problem of religiously inspired violence. Islamist or Jihadist terror attacks have blighted many Western **and** Muslim countries since 9/11. Those perpetrating them have frequently invoked the name of Allah as they slaughtered innocent strangers. Open copies of the Qur'an have been found among their possessions. There are many reports of recently enhanced religious fervour, face-to-face or online contact with radical imams, and hatred of non-Muslims or of Muslims with different beliefs to their own.

Among the British this religiously inspired violence has brought back bad memories of the sectarian violence exported from Northern Ireland in the previous generation. Recent Islamist attacks in London and Manchester have even mimicked earlier IRA attacks, albeit with the crucial difference that the latter were seldom if ever suicide attacks. In both instances, however, civilians were attacked indiscriminately, and in both, religious sectarian divisions were apparent.

Of course, the roots of Islamist inspired violence go back well before the 21st century. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was critical. Few political experts predicted it. Most assumed that Iran under the Shah of Persia would be content to remain a liberal, increasingly affluent, secularised country, where Islam informed only private behaviour not public policy. With hindsight it is obvious that these experts failed to spot the latent power of radical Islam and the widespread resentment of Western colonialism. Even after the 1979 Revolution, there were many predictions that this would be a short-term “fundamentalist” change and that theocratic rule would swiftly lose its appeal to the Iranian people. Four decades later it looks anything but short-term.

Similarly, the strong Catholic convictions of some members of the IRA when they were bombing mainland Britain evoked other long memories of the religiously inspired violence that marred Tudor England and featured egregiously in the Spanish Inquisition. Religiously inspired violence is not new – as the Jews of Europe have known only too well.

For much of the 20th century, religions were seen by many Western intellectuals as spent and largely irrelevant forces. Some dismissed them as simply meaningless, whereas others considered them as meaningful to people only in their private lives. Few thought religions had any significant role in public life other than within purely symbolic civic ceremonies such as coronations and presidential inaugurations. Religions were being edged out of public life into private life and then becoming less and less relevant even there. The collapse of regular churchgoing in much of Britain, Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand seemed to confirm this trend.

The deliberate destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001 by highly educated and apparently pious Muslim pilots ran sharply counter to these assumptions. These were people who had trained in the West and had experienced the benefits of secular culture. Yet they were prepared to kill themselves and thousands of others in the name of God. This was deeply shocking at many levels. It was not supposed to happen in a largely secular society. It was not supposed to happen in a society where religious belief lacked social significance. And it was not supposed to happen within a faith tradition that sharply condemned suicide.

With numerous terror attacks upon civilians by committed Islamists or Jihadists (either term will be used here without distinction) in Paris, London, Manchester, Nice,

Stockholm, Barcelona and many other places in the West, public perception of religions has rapidly changed. Worldwide there have also been other shocking examples of religiously inspired violence, such as Hindu violence against non-Hindus in parts of India or Buddhist attacks on Muslims in Myanmar and Thailand. Far from being regarded as epiphenomenal or disappearing, strong religious commitments are now frequently seen as dangerous and far too prevalent. Perhaps society would be much safer and morally better without any religions at all.

In much the same way that neither “religion” nor “violence” are watertight terms (as I shall note below), “religiously inspired violence” is not an incontrovertible phrase, and is capable of being interpreted in different ways. For the purposes of this essay, I understand it to mean serious physical harm caused by religious adherents in the name of their religion and as a direct result of their interpretation of their sacred texts or leaders’ teachings. Issues of politics, ethnicity, culture, inequality, and injustice, as well as personal and psychological motivations are typically mixed up in “religiously inspired violence”, to the extent that some people prefer to see “religiously inspired” violence as primarily political or ethnic. This essay does not seek to disentangle these interpretations – an impossible task that would need to be done on a case-by-case basis: Were ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland religious or socio-political? Was the Spanish Civil War political or religious? etc. Rather, it assumes that, if there is a widespread claim that a conflict is religiously inspired, it at least merits attention in a discussion of religiously inspired violence.

In the chapters that follow I will give an ambivalent answer to the question of whether or not religiously inspired

violence is on the rise but a more robust response to the blunt claim that religious commitment inherently causes war and violence.

There is clear evidence about an increase in concern about religiously inspired violence. There is also justified concern that the suicidal activities of some Islamists are both on the rise and very difficult to counter, let alone eliminate. That is in itself deeply worrying. At the same time there is other evidence that seems to suggest that, since the Middle Ages, violence as a whole has declined in the West. This may be why current Islamist violence is so shocking in Britain, Europe and North America.

There is also clear evidence that some wars and acts of violence have indeed been religiously inspired. Yet it is disingenuous to argue from that evidence that religious commitment inherently causes war and violence. Not only is it possible to argue exactly the opposite – namely that religious commitment has been a major factor in promoting peace – but there is plenty of evidence of mass killings by purely secular regimes. Some of the most brutal 20th century political leaders were deeply anti-religious and determined to eliminate religious organisations.

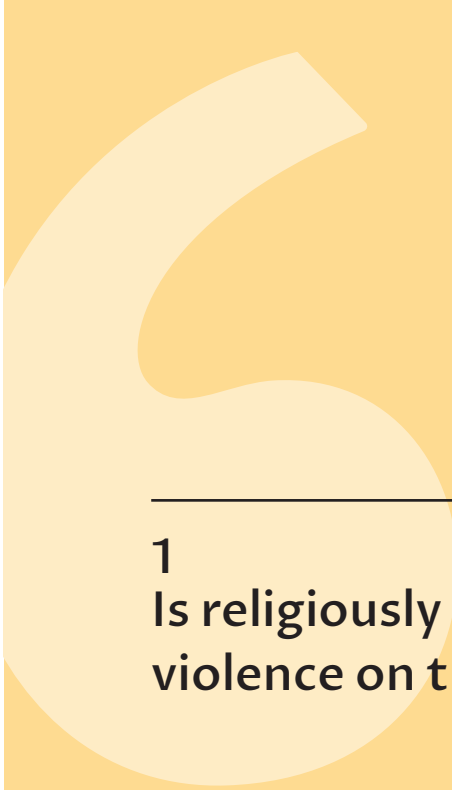
However much that is the case, a problem remains. Religiously inspired suicide-killers are deeply shocking to most people – religious and non-religious alike. They can poison everything religious. In the light of that, the rest of this study will address the issues of why it is that religious extremists kill themselves and others in the name of God and what might be done to dissuade others from doing so.

There have recently been a number of significant and scholarly studies of religiously inspired violence. An overview

of these studies suggests that one of the key issues to emerge is that the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (as well as other religious traditions that are beyond the scope of this study) do have some texts that appear to justify violence. These texts need to be addressed honestly and carefully by both religious and non-religious people. Some secular polemicists have fanned the flames by claiming that, on the basis of these texts, all forms of religious faith are inherently violent. Equally, some religious people have tried to deny that their scriptures do contain texts of this nature. Crude exaggerations can be found on both sides of this divide – exaggerations that show little or no awareness of recent scholarship.

My final task is to suggest ways that religiously inspired violence might be countered. First and foremost is the task of helping faithful Jews, Christians and Muslims to contextualise their violent texts and to set them into a broader frame of peace-making – a frame that lies at the heart of each of their scriptures.

Then there is the practical task of fostering greater cooperation and mutual understanding, despite important doctrinal differences, between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Britain today. There are already encouraging signs that this is beginning to happen at both local and national levels, but more needs to be done. This is what I call 'new ecumenism'. In the 20th century much effort went into fostering better and much-needed understanding and cooperation between Christian denominations. In the 21st century we need to extend this effort. This is a task that should be given urgent priority by religious leaders within all three Abrahamic faiths.



1
**Is religiously inspired
violence on the rise?**

There is good evidence to show that concern about religiously inspired violence has increased since 9/11. Two areas where this increase in concern can be shown with some accuracy are newspapers and scholarly publications. Neither of these proves that religiously inspired violence is actually on the rise. Yet they do at least suggest that many journalists and religious studies specialists have reached the conclusion that it is.

Popular concern about religiously inspired violence

One way of trying to trace changes in public perceptions is through media studies. Over four weeks in 1969, I recorded daily the proportion of total newspaper space given to religious issues in eight English editions of British newspapers. Aware from my training in the sociology of religion that the term “religion” was highly contested, I opted for an institutional understanding of “religious issues”, namely “items referring explicitly to religious institutions, their functionaries, or their central transcendent beliefs”. In addition, I distinguished between “hostile” and “non-hostile” items on the basis of what these institutions themselves might deem to be hostile or non-hostile. I repeated this research over four weeks in 1990 and again in 2011, using exactly the same recording method and definitions.

What emerged from this research is that between 1969 and 1990 the overall religious content of the newspapers declined from 0.8 per cent to 0.6 per cent (about the same space in the tabloids as they gave to horoscopes). In the left-wing *Guardian* it halved, remaining constant only in the right-wing *Telegraph*. There was also a decline in published letters on religious topics (from 4.5 per to 3.2 per cent of overall letters). “Hostile” items also declined from 18 per cent to 16 per cent of all space given

to religious items, rising only in *The Mail* and *The Sun* (with their focus particularly upon errant clergy).

However, between 1990 and 2011 a radically different pattern emerged. The overall religious content of the newspapers increased to 0.7 per cent (in a period when the overall size of newspapers also increased considerably) and the “hostile” items increased to 29 per cent of all space given to religious items. The single most important feature leading to these two changes was that Muslim extremists were given considerable attention in all of the tabloids and in some of the broadsheets. *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* showed both an overall increase in attention to religious issues and an increase in hostile items, as did the *Express* and the *Daily Mail*. However *The Sun* and *The Star* showed a very sharp increase only of hostile items. There was little or no evidence that the newspapers had increased their interest in Christianity.

Compared with the other six newspapers in 2011, both *The Times* and *The Independent* seemed go to considerable lengths to avoid identifying extremists as being “Muslim” in their headlines and photo captions. Attention was given in many newspapers to the trial of extremists who had publicly burned poppies on Remembrance Day. *The Times* reported the trial but avoided headlining the fact that they were Muslims. *The Independent* did identify them as Muslims on one occasion but gave the item little space, as did *The Times* when reporting that some Muslim schools were teaching hate and violence. *The Times* also had occasional, but very fleeting, mentions of Christian priests who had been suspended or jailed for sexual crimes.

In its 2011 religious coverage, *The Times* gave considerable space to the murder of the Catholic politician, Shabaz Bhatti,

in Pakistan, including a full-page article by the Archbishop of Canterbury on the issue. Again it was careful to avoid religiously hostile comments. The Times was also the only newspaper to cover at length Anglicans becoming Roman Catholics under a new papal dispensation. It had a full-page interview with Dame Julia Neuberger who had recently been appointed Senior Rabbi of the West London Synagogue. Every Saturday it also had a Credo piece. Letters in The Times in 2011 included items debating gay marriages being conducted in churches, Jewish women being able to say the Kaddish, St George's Day, and the Quaker founder George Fox. None were about Muslim extremism. Nor were they in The Independent. Here letters included, instead, discussions of the merits and demerits of hospital chaplains, Catholic schools, the religious question in the Population Census, the cost of the Pope's recent visit, women bishops, and bishops in the House of Lords. The full results of my three surveys can be found in my book *Theology in a Social Context: Sociological Theology*.¹ Interestingly a single-point survey done independently at the same time reached very similar conclusions.²

Scholarly concern about religiously inspired violence

Scholarly concerns about religious extremism have followed a similar path. In the 1980s there was a series of studies of "fundamentalism" across different religions. Among these Lionel Caplan's collection *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism* was particularly important. There was much debate about whether fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism, or something else, was the appropriate term to use. Yet what was noticed in the wake of the Iranian Revolution was that there seemed to be affinities between, say, the Jewish movement of Gush Umunim with its nationalist slogan "The Land of Israel, for the People of Israel", right-wing Protestants

in Northern Ireland and in parts of the United States, and Muslim militant nationalists. They all tended to have literalist and selective convictions gleaned from their sacred scriptures and were at considerable odds with their own more moderate co-religionists. That noted, these fundamentalists did not all resort to violence, and violence was not a central concern of all of these studies of fundamentalism.

Two features of fundamentalism were increasingly seen as crucial. They both go back to the original source of the term “fundamentalism”, namely the twelve American Baptist booklets published between 1910 and 1915 entitled *The Fundamentals*. These booklets sought to defend a literal reading of the Bible and to counter what the authors saw as the dangers of modernity. They argued that returning to a literal reading of the Bible was essential if the evils of modern society were to be challenged effectively. Scriptural inerrancy and counterculture went hand-in-hand in these booklets. Those studying fundamentalism across different religions saw similar features within them. Of course, it was now the Muslim Qur’an, or the Jewish Torah (i.e. the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), or the Sikh Guru Granth Sahib, and not just the Christian Bible that was regarded as inerrant. However, for fundamentalists in each of these faiths, inerrant holy writings were typically seen as the way to counter the evils of modernity.

Neither of these features – scriptural literalism or counterculture – was intrinsically linked by most scholars at the time to violence. Up until the 1970s and the birth of the political movement termed *The Moral Majority*, many American Protestant fundamentalists were relatively apolitical. They were less concerned about changing society than they were about converting individuals to their own faith. Once they

had converted a majority of Americans then, and only then, might they see changes in American society at large. Peaceful conversion was preferred to militant political opposition. Personal salvation rather than political change was their priority.

Scholarly books also began to appear on the global rise of Islam in the modern world. In 1985 the veteran anthropologist Ernest Gellner edited a collection entitled *Islamic Dilemmas: Reformers, Nationalists and Industrialization*. In the same year R Hrair Dekmejian produced *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* and Roy Mottahedeh produced *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, scholars were now paying attention to resurgent Islam.

Two Western scholars, Bernard Lewis and Olivier Roy, were especially important in mapping not just the rise of Islam in the modern world, but also its increasing militancy and globalisation. Roy did this in his *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* and Lewis, especially, in his *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. Impressively, Lewis had earlier been one of the very few scholars to predict the Iranian Revolution. Writing a quarter of a century later in his *The Crisis of Islam* he argued:

There are several forms of Islamic extremism current in the present time. The best known are the subversive radicalism of Al-Qai'da and other groups that resemble it all over the Muslim world; the pre-emptive fundamentalism of the Saudi establishment; and the institutionalized revolution of the ruling Iranian hierarchy. All of these are, in a sense, Islamic in origin, but some of them have deviated very far from their origins. All of these extremist groups sanctify their action through pious

references to Islamic texts, notably the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet, and all three claim to represent a truer, purer, and more authentic Islam than that currently practiced by the vast majority of Muslims and endorsed by most though not all religious leadership. They are, however, highly selective in their choice and interpretation of sacred texts.³

After the shocking destruction of civilian life in 9/11 it is hardly surprising that a new scholarly focus emerged specifically upon religiously inspired violence. It was evident that the pilots who committed this atrocity were radicalised Muslims. They were not themselves poor or ill-educated – caricatures sometimes associated with fundamentalism. Rather the opposite. Yet apparently they did see themselves as following (their interpretation of) the Qur'an in their acts of deliberate suicidal violence.

Three major collections are particularly significant for showing the rise in scholarly concern following 9/11 about religiously inspired violence: Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson's *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* – with nine of its chapters reproduced in their *Violence and the World's Religious Traditions*, Andrew Murphy's *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, and James Lewis' *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*.



Religious studies specialists (like journalists) have since 9/11 become more attentive to religiously inspired violence in many parts of the world and across many different religious faiths.

The next chapter returns to these collections since they offer many clues about why some religious extremists have now become so violent. However, for the moment what they

provide is abundant evidence that religious studies specialists (like journalists) have since 9/11 become more attentive to religiously inspired violence in many parts of the world and across many different religious faiths.

Becoming more or less violent?

In his influential book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, the Harvard psychologist Stephen Pinker suggests an ingenious way of calculating whether or not violence around the world is on the increase or the decrease. He uses a mass of statistics taken over time to argue that homicide rates have radically declined over the last six hundred years (once they are compared as a percentage of contemporary populations), as have barbarous forms of punishment and torture. In addition he argues that “the most destructive eruptions of the past half millennium were fuelled...by ideologies, such as religion, revolution, nationalism, fascism, and communism”.⁴ For him it is the “civilizing process” of the secular Enlightenment that has been responsible for this radical change.

Just to give a flavour of his detailed argument, he reproduces statistics suggesting that homicide rates dropped from 110 (out of 100,000 people) per year in Oxford in the 14th century to just one per 100,000 in London in the mid-20th century – with similar drops in Italy and Germany and (starting in the 17th century) in New England in America. Over the same period, punishments for those breaking the law also became gradually less violent, capital punishment was either abolished or, in the United States, declined in frequency, and the slave trade and then slavery itself were made illegal. He sees all of this as a product of Western Enlightenment.

He is aware, though, that “the 20th century would seem to be an insult to the very suggestion that violence has declined

over the course of history”, especially since it is “commonly labelled the most violent century in history, its first half saw a cascade of world wars, civil wars, and genocides”.⁵ Yet he argues that, even if it is acknowledged that some 15 million people were killed in the First World War and 55 million in the Second World War, there are three reasons for disbelieving that the 20th century was indeed the most violent century in history:

The first is that the second half of the 20th century was very much more peaceful than the first half, so the violent deaths in the two halves of the century need to be balanced out. The second is that the total world population was hugely larger in the 20th century than in any previous centuries, so in proportional terms other centuries had higher death rates per capita from wars. And the third is that, the more recent atrocities and disasters are, the more likely their significance is to be exaggerated. Given all of this he rates the Second World War as ninth and the First World War as only 16th in terms of the worst global atrocities. In comparison, the Lushan Revolt in the 8th century ranks first, the Mongol Conquests in the 13th century second, and the Middle Eastern slave trade third.

An obvious conclusion can be reached from this (a conclusion that Pinker himself tends to avoid), namely that recent suicide attacks by Islamists hardly deserve a mention at all in terms of global atrocities over the last 1300 years. At the very most, we are talking about considerably less than a quarter of a million deaths out of a worldwide population of 7.6 billion. With the world population still rising rapidly we can expect that this loss through Islamist extremism will be replaced easily within three years. A cynic might conclude this is a mere pin-prick in population terms.

Again, if the 55 million deaths caused by the Second World War rank only ninth in Pinker's list of atrocities, the five million Jews who were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust will be well, well down the list of global atrocities. And, given the increase in world population between the 1940s and the 1990s, the one million or so slaughtered in the Rwandan massacre will be less than a tenth as significant as the comparatively "insignificant" Nazi Holocaust!

In short, this statistical way of comparing atrocities takes no account of their relative brutality or of their capacity to evoke contemporary moral outrage. One has only to think of the five young people murdered by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley to realise that. Just five people murdered out of a British population of sixty million scarcely rates at all in purely statistical terms – yet these five sadistic killings still haunt and shock people half a century later. Here Stephen Pinker, who readily admits that his historical global statistics are not always very reliable, is less than helpful.

Calculating the prevalence of religiously inspired violence also faces a similar problem to calculating the prevalence of some rare diseases. We cannot always be sure whether these diseases are actually increasing or whether doctors are just getting better at diagnosing and then reporting them. Rates of suicide also present complications, since much depends upon cultural biases about whether an otherwise unexplained death is or is not recorded as a suicide. Nevertheless in all of these contexts – religiously inspired violence, diseases or suicides – a serious problem remains that needs to be addressed.

Whatever the worldwide prevalence of religiously inspired violence, it is shocking to many (perhaps most) people in the West that persons of faith today decide that it is their


religious duty to kill themselves while deliberately killing innocent civilians. Westerners have heard about something similar happening in distant war situations – such as the Japanese kamikaze pilots during the Second World War or Tamil Tiger suicide-bombers more recently in Sri Lanka – but it is unusual and deeply shocking in peace-time Britain, Europe or the United States. This specific Western form of religiously inspired violence is clearly increasing through imitation at the moment, and it is deeply worrying – even though it kills nowhere near as many people as the two World Wars.

Conclusion

There is evidence that Western journalists and academics alike are now paying more attention to religiously inspired violence. Previously many of them tended to marginalise the significance of religious factors in the modern world. Compared with other global atrocities, the numbers killed by Islamist extremists since 9/11 are, in purely statistical terms, relatively insignificant. However, in moral terms, Islamist suicide killers in the West – using aeroplanes, explosives and now vehicles – have understandably proved deeply shocking in Britain, Europe and the United States.

So the question, put very crudely, now becomes “does religion actually cause violence?” Pinker backs off from giving a straightforward answer to this question – aware perhaps that the so-called new atheists have received academic scorn for claiming that it does. Nonetheless, as can be seen from the quotation above, he does tend to elide “ideology” with religious and Marxist convictions, seeing both as implicated in many instances of violence. This will be addressed next.

- 1 Robin Gill, *Theology in a Social Context: Sociological Theology* Volume 1 (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012) chapter 11.
- 2 Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred*. (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).
- 3 Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House. 2004) p. 138.
- 4 Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (Allen Lane, 2011) p. 815.
- 5 *Ibid*, p. 229.



2
**Does religion inherently
cause war and violence?**

After 9/11 and many subsequent acts of egregious, and apparently religiously inspired, violence, the blunt claim that religion inevitably causes war and violence is not at all surprising. A similar claim was made previously about acts of violence between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Violent texts and acts of violence can be found within many religious traditions. Chapter 4 examines violent texts in the Torah, New Testament and Qur'an in some detail. However, anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Hindu Bhagavad Gita – a text that deeply inspired both Mohandas Gandhi and Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the atomic bomb – will be aware that it is set within the warlike epic Mahabharata. And, if they have seen Martin Scorsese's harrowing film *Silence*, they will be aware that 17th century Buddhism in Japan was far from pacific. Examples of religiously inspired violence are worldwide. The following is a list of places where one highly respected religious studies scholar finds that "religions are deeply involved in many of the long-running and apparently insoluble conflicts around the world": Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo and the Balkans, Chechnya and Dagestan, Palestine/Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Xizang/Tibet, Xinjiang/Uighur, the Punjab, Sri Lanka, Myanmar/Burma, Nigeria, Sudan and Darfur, Somalia and Eritrea.¹

It does not seem to be very difficult to make out a case that religion inevitably causes war and violence.

Religion or religions?

The first point that anyone trained in theology or religious studies would notice about this blunt claim is that it uses the singular word "religion". She will also know that the scholarly

task of defining “religion” has proved extremely elusive for well over a century.

Sociologists of religion sometimes distinguish between substantive and functional definitions of religion. Substantive definitions tend to focus upon distinctive beliefs held in common across different forms of religion, for example a belief in sacred being(s) or objects, or more broadly a belief in some transcendent realm or state. In contrast, functional definitions focus more upon what different forms of religion do: they provide systems of meaning and purpose for individuals; they encourage people to worship or meditate; they bind people into moral communities; and/or they motivate people to act altruistically.

This is not simply a theoretical debate, it has practical importance as well. The way that we define religion has an effect upon what we do or do not count as being religious. For example, the long-running debate about secularisation (often understood as religious decline) within the sociology of religion is affected strongly by different definitions of religion. Following a substantive definition, secularisation is often seen as involving a loss of distinctively religious belief within the modern world. So a decline in belief in God or sacred objects, or in the existence of eternal life or a cycle of rebirth, could all count as evidence of secularisation. However, following a functional definition, secularisation appears to be more ambiguous, since even ideologies that deny being religious themselves (such as classical Marxism) may still generate systems of meaning and purpose, moral communities and altruistic action. Even football, it is sometimes claimed (perhaps frivolously), can act as a religion in this second sense.

One important way of attempting to bypass this problem was championed by the pioneer of modern religious studies in Britain, the late Ninian Smart.² He argued that different forms of religion typically have a number of dimensions in common: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritualistic, experiential, institutional and material. Jewish scriptures, traditions and practices, for example, have all of these dimensions. A doctrinal dimension based upon a commitment to one God, mythology going back to Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses, and extensive ethical precepts and ritual prescriptions are all enshrined within the Torah, together with experiential, institutional and material dimensions long established within different branches of Judaism. The same could be claimed for Christianity and Islam.

Yet within these religions there are still some groups (such as Quakers) that resist the doctrinal and mythological dimensions, emphasising instead the ethical (as do Confucians). Within some oral, tribal communities (especially those that are nomadic) the institutional dimension can be difficult to identify (as it can within some mystical traditions) as well as clear boundaries between the religious and the secular. Smart was well aware of these differences, so he did not claim that every religious tradition needed to have every dimension. Most do but some do not.

Family resemblance theory has been used to explain this point. The Green family, say, has a number of highly distinctive features: a tendency to be militant vegans; pencil thin bodies; enormous brains; spectacular eye-sight; truly remarkable hearing; dazzling blond hair; and very sharp teeth. Unfortunately no single member of the Green family has every one of these features and no single feature is held by every one of the Greens. So some Greens are militant vegans

with pencil thin bodies, some have enormous brains and spectacular eyesight, some have truly remarkable hearing and dazzling blond hair, and others just have very sharp teeth. There is no single distinctive feature to distinguish a Green from a non-Green. The highly distinctive features are variously spread among the Greens and serve to differentiate them from everyone else. Just to spot a couple of these features in a stranger is sufficient to trigger the thought: “This could a Green.”

So far so good. But the problem is that we already know (or think we know) who the members of the Green family are and it is on the basis of this prior knowledge that we can identify their highly distinctive features. Whereas, if we are really trying to establish an objective way of identifying different forms of religion, we should not start with a presumption of prior knowledge. The problem is further compounded by not knowing which dimensions that all forms of religion must have. How many dimensions must be absent before it is decided that something is not after all a religion? Can we be sure, for example, that football is not a form of religion (despite its obvious lack of a doctrinal dimension)?

As a result, scholars in this area of study today increasingly tend to avoid the singular “religion” and prefer, instead, the plural “religions” or “faith traditions”.³ Of course, this does not resolve the awkward problem of definition – the adjective “religious” remains ambiguous – but it does suggest that those people who generalise about “organised religion” or claim that “religion poisons everything” are engaging in caricature not scholarship.⁴

Do only religions cause wars?

Having teased apart the concepts of “religion” and “religions”, we can then explore a second weakness with the sweeping associations of religion(s) with violence; namely, whether religions are uniquely violent.

It is not obvious that either of the World Wars that blighted the 20th Century were directly caused by religious factors. As already noted, set into the broader context of these two wars, localised Islamist or Jihadist murders today, although deeply shameful and disturbing, are very small scale. In addition, of the four dictators in the 20th Century most responsible for killing millions and millions of people (including their own citizens) – Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and Hitler – three were committed atheists and Hitler’s religious beliefs were by no means conventional.

Looking just at these appalling dictators it might be more plausible to argue that the radical secularity of three of them freed them from moral scruples about mass murder, than that their particular religious backgrounds (Stalin, for example, had been a highly reluctant seminarian) were somehow responsible – or, even more tendentiously, that Stalin’s, Mao Zedong’s and Pol Pot’s forms of Marxism were *really* religious, despite their explicit denials that this was so. Or, in the instance of Hitler, that it was his deep resentment about defeat in the First World War that inspired him to provoke the Second World War and then to initiate the Holocaust, rather than his idiosyncratic mixture of pagan and Catholic beliefs.

The murderous Spanish Civil War well illustrates the difficulty, mentioned in the introduction, of disentangling, for example, political and nationalist motivations from specifically religious ones. Visiting churches in Andalusia today one soon

discovers memorials to the many priests and monks who were murdered by the republicans. There are also many stories about the graves of monks and nuns being desecrated and their corpses being paraded and ridiculed, in addition to churches being defaced. Anti-clericalism was a strong feature of republican sentiments and is still not absent from Spain today. In turn, Franco manifestly fostered the support of the Catholic hierarchy (much to their embarrassment today) and publicised his own Catholic piety, reputedly keeping the finger of St Teresa of Avila by his bedside (today, ironically, it is on display in a tourist shop at Avila).

Was this a religiously inspired war or rather a civil war compounded by ideological divisions between Fascism and Marxism and with Franco cynically exploiting the Catholic Church? In the Basque region, for example, Franco was prepared to murder those Catholic priests who opposed him. His love for the Catholic Church was, at best, selective and, in turn, the love of the Catholic hierarchy for him soon turned into a very mixed blessing.

This problem of disaggregating such evidence is evident throughout the ambitious *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion and War*. The editor, Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, admits at the outset that:

The terms religion and war are left unanalyzed and undefined here. To do otherwise would involve us in a number of unsettled and contested issues far beyond the scope of this volume. There is no generally agreed-upon or unequivocal definition either of religion or war... Many contemporary scholars of religion... argue that any attempt to define religion will be tainted by the values and biases of a particular point of view, secular or religious. Others argue that the concept of religion itself is neither

intelligible nor valid. Similarly, war is hardly a value-neutral concept. It can be taken as a legal or moral category applicable to only certain entities - nation-states - under particular conditions. All else is criminality on a mass scale.⁵

In view of the problem of definition already mentioned this is unsurprising. However, it does give the encyclopedia some very obvious difficulties. For example, the blurb claims that: "Some of the worst wars in history have been fought over religious ideology: the Crusades, the European Wars of Religion, or the twentieth century genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia are but a few examples". What is surprising about this sentence is the inclusion of the genocide in Rwanda, which is usually thought to have resulted from sharp tribal differences and resentments between the Hutus and Tutsis rather than from religious ideology in this predominantly Catholic and Anglican country. The actual entry in the text on Rwanda accuses various Christian leaders there either of complicity (including one of the Anglican bishops) in the brutal killings in 1994 or, more commonly, of doing too little too late to stop these killings. It also mentions the deep embarrassment of the Vatican at the behaviour of some Catholic Rwandans. This is shameful but self-evidently not the same as demonstrating that the genocide itself was a product of religious ideology.

Claims that religions are uniquely or even particularly violent are, then, deeply problematic. One much quoted 2008 survey of 1,763 recorded wars through history found only 123 to be "religious in nature",⁶ and the 20th century alone provides numerous examples of horrendously violent conflicts that were, at most, tangentially religious and more usually either non- or sometimes anti-religious in nature. Just as the elision of "religions" into "religion" is overly-simplistic, so is the exclusive association of religion and violence.

Are religions inherently violent?

Having disambiguated “religion” and “religions”, and exposed the idea that religions were somehow uniquely violent in a way that other ideologies – whether ethnic, nationalist, political, or secular – were not, we can also tackle the question of whether religions are *inherently* violent.

Claims about the inherency of religiously inspired violence often come in same breath as those of its uniqueness. Although such accusations cannot be summarily dismissed – later chapters of this essay explore in detail the violence of certain scriptures and their capacity to inspire hostility – the straightforward assumption of inherency is no more convincing than that of religions being uniquely violent.

The *Times* columnist David Aaronovitch illustrates this point well. Aaronovitch has been caustic at times about religious belief in any form and makes no secret of his own secularity. However, following the death of the Moroccan Imam Abdelbaki Es Satty, who radicalised young men in the small Catalan town of Ripoll, who then murdered tourists in Barcelona in August 2017, Aaronovitch made a strong call for “moderate Muslims” to be helped.⁷ He now maintains that Islam is not “intrinsicly hostile to western values”. And he points to the relatives of the young men in Ripoll publicly demonstrating against their actions and holding placards that proclaim, “We are Muslims, not terrorists”.

Aaronovitch warns against casting “an entire global religion and its billions of adherents as, a priori, adversaries; that says that it is in the nature of the faith that Islam must be hostile to the rest of us, and we to it.” He writes about his recent experience of sharing a platform with secular Muslims whom he commends. But he also commends the work of

an active imam who now works as a prison chaplain and is attempting to deradicalise young Muslim prisoners, and another imam who is campaigning against forced marriage. He concludes that this is:

Something that makes an El Satty more difficult to imagine. And that helps foster an Islam which turns the tightrope, bit by bit, into a broad avenue, wide enough to stroll down arm-in-arm. Now, shall we help him and the others, for the moment in a minority, or by our fearfulness and hostility hinder them?

The mere fact that millions – indeed billions – of religious believers do not perpetrate violent acts, in the name of their faith, scriptures or leaders, should undermine (to put it mildly) the idea that religions are inherently violent. The “We are Muslims, not terrorists” message of which Aaronovitch speaks could be replicated, globally, and across many religions.

More problematically, however, the lazy assumption that “religion” is inherently violent risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as imperiously informing self-evidently peaceful people that their beliefs are *inherently* violent is not a way to encourage their peace.



Recognising the potential for violence within religious ideologies is not to grant the claim that religions are uniquely or inherently violent, let alone that “religion” is.

None of this is to deny that there are the seeds of potential violence in religious scriptures which need careful and contextual reading in order to defuse. This essay will turn to a number of these in chapter 4 by way of illustration of how this may be done.

However, recognising the potential for violence within

religious ideologies is not to grant the claim that religions are uniquely or inherently violent, let alone that “religion” is. Such are the claims, not of careful and objective study, but of polemic and propaganda.

Conclusion

The sweeping claim that “religion inherently causes war and violence” is easy to make but hard to justify. After the egregious attacks upon civilian populations across the Western world following 9/11, this claim understandably may well have popular resonance. But it depends upon a concept of “religion” as a single entity that has now lost credibility among scholars within religious studies. It is also exceedingly difficult to justify in historical terms. And it hinders serious attempts to distinguish between those forms of religious belief and practice that have dangerous effects and those that may counter them and should therefore be encouraged. In all of these ways it is deeply unhelpful. Yet as a spur for further and more scholarly research it has had a significant function. It is time now to turn to this research on possible connections between religions, war and violence and to learn from it.

- 1 John Bowker, *Why Religions Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) p. 9.
- 2 Ninian Smart. *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 3 Bowker, *Why Religions Matter* (2015).
- 4 William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 5 Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion and War* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004) p. xiii.
- 6 See Louise Ridley, 'Does Religion Cause War... And Do Atheists Have Something To Answer For?' *Huffington Post*, 18 November 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/14/religions-war-cause-responsible-evidence_n_6156878.html Accessed 29 August 2017.
- 7 David Aaronovitch, 'Moderate Muslims need help from all of us', *The Times*, 24 August 2017, p. 27.



3

Understanding religiously inspired violence better

What can be learned from more dispassionate analyses of religiously inspired violence? Among religious studies specialists there is now widespread acceptance that “religion” is not a single phenomenon, that the term “fundamentalism” can be misleading, and that it is often difficult to distinguish between the religious, political and cultural motives of those who commit acts of “terrorism” (another disputed term). This is difficult terrain. Clear-cut, unambiguous research findings are unlikely to be agreed by serious scholars in this area. Yet some patterns do emerge.

An excellent guide to this research can be found in the three substantial collections mentioned earlier: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*.¹ What is particularly noticeable about these collections is that, in contrast to the new atheists, they studiously avoid making strident claims about religiously inspired violence. They show an awareness from the outset that the terms “religion” and “violence” carry an array of complex meanings.

Another collection, which ironically claims to be “scientific”, is more questionable.

Steve Clarke, Russell Powell and Julian Savulescu’s collection *Religion, Intolerance and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation* is largely written by evolutionary anthropologists, experimental psychologists and analytical philosophers, and reaches the broad conclusion that:

While there may be circumstances under which religion promotes intolerance and discord within social groups, it generally promotes social cohesion within particular groups; and while there may be circumstances under which religion promotes

tolerance and harmony between social groups, it generally promotes intolerance and hostility between differing social groups.²

The trouble with this conclusion (as the theologian Nigel Biggar points out in the book's appendix) is that it does assume that "religion" is a single phenomenon and that it is therefore appropriate to use the phrase "it generally promotes..." This is precisely the sort of claim that also drives the theologian William T Cavanaugh wild.³ What is obvious as well about this collection, in contrast to the other three, is that it lacks the specialist input of religious studies scholars across a wide range of religious traditions. Like-minded scholars within evolutionary anthropology, experimental psychology and analytical philosophy may well be able to reach broad agreement about what "religion generally promotes". Specialist scholars in religious studies – working separately with ancient texts in several different languages and with radically different conceptual frameworks – are frankly most unlikely to reach any such agreement.

With his extraordinary knowledge and linguistic skills John Bowker is able to reach only the following conclusion in his book *Why Religions Matter*:

We need to understand religions better, not just because they can be terrifyingly evil and destructive in what they do but also because they are the context in which the finest and ultimately most important possibilities in life are opened up before us – certainly the most far-reaching achievements of mind and spirit, but also of God and Enlightenment as well. And that is what I have called the paradox of religions: religions are such bad news only because they are such good news. Religions are the vehicle delivering into human life and history the greatest possible

*Treasure, truth and delight, and for that reason people (or at least some people) would rather die than lose or betray them. If necessary, and particularly if a religion demands it, people will not simply be defensive; they will take the fight to those whom they perceive to be the enemy.*⁴

The only generalised comments that Mark Juergensmeyer and his colleagues make explicitly in their Introduction are about just how widespread violence is, in different forms, within both the practice and ancient texts of religious traditions around the world. Given both that this is the focus of their collection and that contributors were all instructed to make this their focus too, this observation is hardly surprising. It is also present implicitly within the other two collections. Andrew Murphy's collection, however, has one important difference – he adds two contributions on non-violence and peace-building at the end of his collection. And James Lewis' collection differs by focusing specifically upon “terrorism” rather than “violence”, while recognising at the outset that:

Terrorism is not an objective phenomenon that we recognise in the same way that we recognise, let us say, conch shells on the beach. At a very basic level, like religion, there is so much variability among the different conflicts that give rise to the incidents of political violence which we label “terrorism” that it might be better to talk in terms of terrorisms, in the plural. Additionally, the very term carries with it a sense of condemnation, as “something the bad guys do”. In other words, the term is inherently subjective, as reflected in the familiar expression, “one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter”.⁵

All three of these collections use a wide range of academic perspectives (much wider than that of Clarke and

his colleagues) realising that they add to the complexity of understanding religiously inspired violence in the modern world. However, Mark Juergensmeyer and his colleagues do add this telling observation:

Adherents of most religious traditions almost universally regard their own faith as pacifistic, one that abhors violence and proclaims reconciliation among foes. Perhaps they are right, since the overwhelming message of scriptural writings and prophetic voices is that of love, peace, and harmony. Yet both historians and keen observers also see another side. They point to the legends of war, sacrifice, and martyrdom that cling to the histories of all the great religious traditions.⁶

They argue that there is a “disconnect between these two points of view” which raises the following questions:

Is violence peripheral to the religious imagination or at its core? Is it religion that promotes violence or some other social or natural factor? Is religion ever distinguishable from those factors? Some argue that the great religious traditions, because of their long histories of intertwining clerical authority with political powers, are more inclined to violence than are local ones. Yet sources for local religions, collected often at the crossroad between tradition and modernity, also report many forms of ritualized violence, such as assault sorceries, martial initiations, and pre-battle sacrifices. What is the link between religion and violence and how profound is it?

The editors never arrive at a single answer to any of these questions. However, the underlying ideas – first, that there is a “disconnect” between messages of peace and the deployment of violent images within the great religious traditions; and second, that such traditions have “long histories of intertwining clerical authority with political powers” – are

especially relevant to violence within the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Understanding violence within Abrahamic faiths

“Adherents of most religious traditions almost universally regard their own faith as pacifistic.” Does this claim apply to the three Abrahamic faiths? Arguably it does.

The Jewish Torah opens with two overlapping mythological stories about creation and Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. Human violence begins only after their expulsion from this garden. Repeated covenants with God made to Noah, Abraham and then Moses hold the prospect of peaceful existence in a land “flowing with milk and honey”. The Hebrew prophets, especially Isaiah and Micah, long for a time when human beings and even animals will live together in peace. Despite an abundance of war-like texts, some of which are cited in the next chapter, there is a strong message of peace running through the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

The Christian Gospels and Epistles have many references to peace and peace-making. There are commands to love your neighbours as yourselves, to turn the other cheek, and even to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The way of the cross, a preparedness to suffer for their faith, is the path for Christians, rather than killing in the name of God. The earliest Christian writers all appear to have assumed that active participation in war was not compatible with Christian faith.

The earliest chapters of the Qur’an, those written in Mecca, before the Prophet and his followers fled to Medina, generally appear to be peace-loving. God is seen throughout the Qur’an as all-compassionate and all-merciful. There are

frequent commands within the Qur'an and Hadith for Muslims to be charitable and hospitable to strangers. It was only Muslims' experience of persecution, their flight to Medina and then their expulsion from there, that persuaded them to take up arms.

Each of these sketches, of course, needs to be qualified – they are just sketches – but they contain enough truth to persuade many Jews, Christians and Muslims alike that theirs is in origin a pacific faith and that it is only subsequent political pressures that introduced more war-like features. In their purest form each can be viewed as essentially peace-loving. Why did this change?

The most obvious answer lies (as Juergensmeyer and his colleagues quaintly articulate) in “their long histories of intertwining clerical authority with political powers”. More than half a century ago the veteran church historian Roland Bainton summarised the dilemma for early Christianity as follows: “the age of persecution down to the time of Constantine was the age of pacifism to the degree that during this period no Christian author to our knowledge approved of Christian participation in battle”, but “the accession of Constantine [as Emperor] terminated the pacifist period in church history.”⁸ From Constantine in the fourth century onwards, Christian pacifism became the preserve of only a minority of Christians within churches and of a minority of sectarian movements within Christianity, such as Amish Mennonites, Anabaptists and Brethren today. Once Christianity became an accepted religion of political states, seemingly it could no longer espouse thoroughgoing pacifism.

Naturally Bainton's claim has been tested and qualified many times over. There may well have been Christian

soldiers, or soldiers who became Christians (echoing the Roman centurion in the Gospels), long before the fourth century. There were also significant differences between the thoroughgoing pacifism of, say, the theologian Tertullian (c.160-220) and the more state-friendly pacifism of the theologian Origen (c.185-254). The latter was particularly concerned to refute the charge that Christian pacifism was undermining the Roman state – insisting, instead, that Christians could support those engaged in battle to defend the state through their prayers, albeit without becoming active soldiers themselves.

Yet, having made such qualifications, a sharp contrast still remains. In the fourth century Bishop Ambrose and then Augustine of Hippo forsook earlier Christian pacifism in favour of a distinction (borrowed from Cicero) between “just” and “unjust” warfare and, from this point onwards, most forms of Christianity radically changed.

In *A Textbook of Christian Ethics* I set out a number of key texts from Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and others that reflect this radical change and the many dilemmas that it has generated within Christian ethics and, more widely, within the ethics of war and peace.⁹ Augustine’s emphasis upon “just authority”, for example, continues to present Just War theorists with unavoidable dilemmas, especially on whether or not the United Nations today constitutes such an authority (a particular point of contention in the Iraq War). Subsequent Just War principles such as “proportionality” and “discrimination” also continue to generate dilemmas, as does the principle that for a war to be justified all peaceful means must have been exhausted (a point of contention in the Falklands crisis). This is not the place here to set out the history of Just War ethics. It is sufficient to note only that the development of Just War theory

within the West has been intimately connected with Christian thought.

Some Christian theologians have argued that this intimate connection has been a grave error for churches. Churches should, they believe, have retained the thoroughgoing pacifism of Tertullian since this represents the “true” position of the New Testament. By allying themselves with the (dubiously Christian) Constantine and subsequent political leaders, Christians have betrayed their heritage and distorted their faith.

This, however, is not the position that most Christian theologians have adopted, especially after the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. When writing the first edition of *A Textbook of Christian Ethics* in the early 1980s I was very conscious that the discipline still had not come to terms properly with Christian complicity in a European culture that led to the murder of millions of Jews in the 1940s. Since I was brought up in Golders Green in London in the 1950s, with a father who worked closely with a Jewish medical colleague who had escaped Germany just before the Holocaust, and with school friends whose families had done the same, Christian anti-Semitism was a matter of personal affront to me.

The sociological research of Charles Glock and Rodney Stark and the theological research of Rosemary Radcliffe Ruether, Gregory Baum and Charlotte Klein all convinced me to include anti-Semitic texts by Aquinas and Luther in my Textbook in the belief that Christian complicity needs to be recognised before it can be corrected.¹⁰ It also led me reluctantly to abandon my youthful Christian pacifism. The non-violent compliance of millions of German Jewish civilians had done nothing to stop their systematic and brutal

destruction. Peaceful means had truly been exhausted. Human evil against the innocent and on such scale seemed to demand more than non-violent opposition.

Faced with systematic and brutal human evil it seems likely that many followers of almost any religious faith that espouses compassion may reach a similar conclusion. Despite the heroic examples of religiously inspired non-violence of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama, many (perhaps most) followers remain convinced that the use of violence to protect the innocent is a moral requirement. Those passengers, for example, who attacked the Al-Qai'da-inspired staff on the fourth 9/11 flight were following a moral requirement to protect the innocent.

Just War traditions attempt to limit that requirement, and to constrain brutish emotions, but not to avoid violence when it is deployed to protect the innocent. Arguably this is what Augustine tried to achieve in “justifying” warfare at a time of considerable unrest in the Roman Empire. As Bishop of Hippo, which although in North Africa was still within the Roman Empire, he saw threats against the innocent all around. As he was dying the Vandals were already surrounding the town (which they soon burned) having already tortured and murdered two of his fellow bishops. As a fierce defender of Catholic Christianity he was also a staunch polemicist, writing detailed attacks upon theological positions that he considered to be heretical. And against one “heretical” group, the Donatists, he seems to have crossed a line – supporting their violent suppression by the army. Tellingly, violence to protect the innocent slipped into violent religious coercion – perhaps because he believed that the Donatists were themselves harming the innocent.

One way or another, and sometimes with considerable ambiguity, constrained and tightly regulated violence has been justified in many religious traditions, even within some otherwise peaceful forms of Buddhism.

Unjustified violence within religious extremism

Following 9/11 many violent religious and secular extremists have deliberately flouted Just War principles – targeting innocent civilians, torturing and brutally murdering prisoners, using violence to enforce religious conformity, and disdaining peaceful means of resolving conflicts.

The pilots who crashed into the Twin Towers on 9/11 clearly and deliberately targeted civilians, killing over two thousand office workers (some of them fellow Muslims) in addition to their own passengers and hundreds of fire-fighters and police. Even if they considered this to be a justified act of retaliation against what they saw as Western anti-Muslim aggression, it was clearly an indiscriminate act of killing. Although arguably (at least from the pilots' perspective) the Pentagon was a military target; the Twin Towers clearly were not. If the pilots acted under legitimate authority (as Just War principles require) it was authority based upon Al-Qai'da's interpretation of the Qur'an. If they deemed their action to be proportionate (as Just War principles also require) they might have argued that Western aggression had already caused the death of many Muslims. What they could not have claimed credibly is that their action was discriminate.

This lack of discrimination has been a feature of numerous other recent suicide bombings, many religiously inspired but some not. Several researchers in this area mention that the non-religious Tamil Tigers paved the way for Al-Qai'da and then Isis by deploying suicide-bombers. In addition, it is

mentioned that the location and civilian-targeting Isis-inspired attacks within recent months closely matched some of the (non-suicidal) IRA bombings in London and Manchester in the 1980s.

Another feature of Al-Qai'da and Isis fighters that breaches Just War principles is their deliberate use of civilian populations as “shields” to deter attacks upon themselves. These human shields have often been fellow-Muslims innocently caught up in the fighting, including many children. So, not only do these fighters use indiscriminate violence themselves, they also engineer situations in which their opponents’ actions risk becoming indiscriminate. At the same time, they use terror to force civilian populations under their control to conform to their understanding of Sharia law, ruthlessly executing those who do not conform (as the IRA did similarly in parts of Northern Ireland that were under their control in the 1980s).

The treatment of hostages (or “prisoners”) by Isis has also been seen as morally repugnant by most commentators. Following the atrocities of World War II, Geneva Conventions have condemned both hostage-taking and the maltreatment of prisoners, and yet both have been rife under Isis. Videos of the public torture and execution of prisoners/hostages have been widely circulated by Isis – videos that clearly show breaches of Geneva Conventions. Similar videos have been shown of the torture and execution of Muslims who breached the Isis understanding of Sharia law. Violent religious coercion in the modern world has been taken to shocking levels of brutality.

Of course, it is often argued that parallels for these actions can be seen in Catholic Christianity during the Spanish Inquisition or, earlier, in the Crusades, as well as in historic

witch-trials within Protestant Christianity. It is important to remember that unjustifiable violence is not a monopoly of some Muslim extremists, or indeed a monopoly of religious adherents (as noted earlier, Stalin's, Mao Zedong's or Pol Pot's prolific violence against their own citizens is obvious counter-evidence). Barbarity is not just a medieval phenomenon. It distorted the 20th century and now, with movements such as Al-Qai'da and Isis, it has continued in the 21st century. Wherever it is to be found, barbarity is still barbarity. Just War principles were designed and adopted by nations and faith groups alike in order to eliminate this barbarity.

Conclusion

The research reviewed in this chapter does not provide any easy answers to questions about the origins or causes of religiously inspired violence in the world today. However, what it does suggest is that specialists in religious studies have been able to trace important connections within and between different religious traditions. Above all, this research tends to emphasise that context is highly important. In order to understand some of the more violent texts within Judaism, Christianity and Islam (the task of the next chapter) their context and their relation to peace-making texts is key.

- 1 Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Andrew Murphy (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and James Lewis, *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
- 2 Steve Clarke, Russell Powell and Julian Savulescu (eds.), *Religion, Intolerance and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. v.
- 3 See Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009).
- 4 Bowker, *Why Religions Matter* (2015) p. 42.
- 5 Lewis, *Religion and Terrorism* (2017) p. 3.
- 6 Juergensmeyer et al, *Religion and Violence* (2006) pp. 2-3.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (New York: Abingdon, 1960) p. 66.
- 9 Robin Gill. *A Textbook of Christian Ethics 4th edition*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 10 Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) Rosemary Radcliffe Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974), Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975) and Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).



4

Violent texts in context

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you – and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy... You shall devour all the peoples that the Lord your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity; you shall not serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you... Moreover, the Lord your God will send the pestilence against them, until even the survivors and the fugitives are destroyed. (Deuteronomy 7.1-2, 16, 20)

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God. If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? (Deuteronomy 20.16-19)

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11.15-17)

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.
Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10.34-37)*

Whenever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post. (Sura 9.5)

Fight those people of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice [dana], until they pay the tax [jizya] and agree to submit [wahu] saghirun]. (Sura 9.29)

Believers, why, when it is said to you, "Go and fight in God's way," do you feel weighed down to the ground? Do you prefer this world to the life to come? How small the enjoyment of this world is, compared with the life to come! If you do not go out and fight, God will punish you severely and put others in your place, but you cannot harm Him in any way: God has power over all things. (Sura 9.38-39)

The Christian theologian Gregory A Boyd's *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God* gives the first two texts from the Torah (the most holy part of the Bible for Jews) as examples of God commanding genocide and enemy hatred. They raise

particular problems for Jews and Christians alike, as Boyd is well aware. Yet he encourages his “readers to honestly wrestle with Scriptures’ violent portraits of God”.¹ The next two texts quoted above are from the Gospels recording the apparently violent action and words of Jesus. And the final three texts come from the chapter (or sura) in the Qur’an that has particularly inspired violent Islamists, known in Arabic as sura At-Tawba.

Reading through the whole of the Bible (twice) as a pious early teenager, I was shocked by some of the more gruesome passages that I inevitably encountered and was also bewildered by other passages that were simply contradictory. At that stage I had never met anyone who believed in the literal inerrancy of every sentence in the Bible. Nor had I discovered scholarly historical-critical commentaries on the Bible. So finding a book on the various sources that lay behind the Torah was personally liberating. At last I could see why there

were inconsistencies between these sources and why some of the more gruesome sources might have resulted from contexts of severe persecution. In short, it taught me to treat the Bible with intelligence and not simply with faith.

It is not for me to tell faithful Jews how they should read the Torah, or faithful Muslims how they should read the Qur’an. But I can say how, as a Christian, I have come to read the New Testament and the Old Testament and let others say how they might similarly read the Qur’an



Without intelligence, faith can too easily become blind and fanatical. Without honesty, it is too easy to read into scripture what one wishes to be there. Without context, scripture can too easily be turned into a weapon with which to attack others.

or the Torah and Hebrew Bible. My hope is that all people of faith will learn to read their scriptures intelligently, honestly and in context. Without intelligence, faith can too easily become blind and fanatical. Without honesty, it is too easy to read into scripture what one wishes to be there. Without context, scripture can too easily be turned into a weapon with which to attack others.

Violence in Deuteronomy

The violence expressed in Deuteronomy (and elsewhere in the Torah, Joshua and 1 Samuel) has troubled Jewish and Christian theologians alike since at least the time of Augustine of Hippo. It was the sort of brutal commands expressed in Deuteronomy 7 (“you must utterly destroy them”) and 20 (“You shall annihilate them”) that held Augustine back for a while from a full commitment to Christian faith in the 4th century. The same commands – known as the “ban” or, in Hebrew, herem – are also cited frequently by secular polemicists in the 21st century. Read at face value, herem does appear to have given the people of ancient Israel permission to commit genocide against their enemies. If herem is then extended into the modern world, it might even appear that people who two generations ago were decimated by the Nazi Holocaust, are thereby permitted to commit genocide on their present-day neighbours.

Unsurprisingly, there has long been considerable discussion among Jewish and Christian theologians about what herem really means in context and whether or not it can legitimately be taken out of context and applied universally.

Most commentators conclude that the primary concern of herem was the purity of worship and community within Israel. Their source within Deuteronomy (known as D) was

deeply concerned about preventing idolatry, believing that it was idolatry – carried by the different peoples of Canaan – that would bring about the destruction of Israel. For D the annihilation of idolatry was the primary aim of herem: the annihilation of the peoples of Canaan was a means to this end but not its primary aim. The Greek rather than Hebrew version of Deuteronomy (New Testament writers tended to use this Greek version) brings this out more clearly – sometimes using a word meaning “curse” rather than “annihilate” – as does the occasional use of herem elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible simply for sacrificial animals “devoted” to God (e.g. Leviticus 26.29) and the use in Arabic of harim for a devoted household space for women.

On this understanding, the concept of herem is clearly complex and context dependent. The great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides concluded that, in context, herem applied to Canaanites was not absolute. Most historians today view it as an aspiration of D and (thank goodness) not a depiction of actual practice, and few if any Jews today regard it as an excuse for genocide.

Of course, the two Deuteronomy texts cited here remain morally problematic. To most people in the West today it is unthinkable that anyone should aspire to annihilate neighbours as a means to protect their own purity – that being almost exactly what Hitler attempted to do in order to keep the so-called Aryan race pure. Perhaps Islamists today have something similar in mind.

Jonathan Sacks does not dwell upon herem in his influential book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. In addition, he avoids historical-criticism and conforms to the traditional Jewish belief that Moses wrote

the whole of Deuteronomy along with the rest of the Torah. Nevertheless what he does do, significantly, is to set Deuteronomy into a broader and much more positive context:

Deuteronomy...is the book that contains the great command that defines Judaism as a religion of love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might (Deut. 6:5)." It contains the most important inter-human command: "Love the stranger for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt (Deut. 10:19)." Deuteronomy contains the word "love" more than any other of the Mosaic books. That is not surprising. Moses had spoken about love before, most famously in the command, "Love your neighbour as yourself (Lev.19.18)." Abrahamic monotheism was the first moral system to be based not on justice and reciprocity - do for others what you would like them to do for you - but on love. What is really unexpected is what he says about hate: "Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land (Deut. 23:7)". This is very unexpected... The Egyptians had enslaved the Israelites.²

Sacks offers an important corrective here – an exclusive focus upon herem texts within the Torah distorts its wider message about God’s love for us and our duty of love towards each other.

Violence in the Gospels

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10.34)

Considered in isolation this does appear to be strange teaching by Jesus. After all, earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, in the so-called Sermon on the Mount, Jesus praised peacemakers and the persecuted and not the warlike:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5.9-12)

In the same chapter Jesus taught his followers not to resist evil with physical violence and even to distance themselves from Old Testament texts that seem to support reciprocal violence:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5.38-41)

More than that, and most difficult of all, is the command of Jesus to love not just your neighbour but your enemy:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5.43-44)

At face value again, there does seem to be a stark contradiction here, with the peace-making in Matthew 5 clashing badly with the sword in Matthew 10.

Yet the sword here, once put into context, soon loses its warlike connections. The careful reader will spot that Luke's

Gospel omits the sword altogether in a slightly different version of the saying: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12.51). On this understanding, the sword is the instrument that divides rather than kills. So following Jesus results in family divisions not religiously inspired violence.

That, of course, still leaves a problem. Other parts of the Gospels – such as Luke’s parable of the Prodigal Son or John’s account of Jesus caring for his mother as he was dying on the cross – depict compassion within families. Here, in contrast, are serious family divisions.

Context again is crucial. In both Matthew and Luke the family divisions depicted clearly allude to the Book of Micah in the Old Testament:

*Put no trust in a friend,
 have no confidence in a loved one;
 guard the doors of your mouth
 from her who lies in your embrace;
 for the son treats the father with contempt,
 the daughter rises up against her mother,
 the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
 your enemies are members of your own household.
 But as for me, I will look to the Lord,
 I will wait for the God of my salvation;
 my God will hear me. (Micah 7.5-7)*

Manifestly this is not a commendation of family divisions but a recognition that, in times of deep distress, such divisions occur. Many scholars believe that Micah contains a mixture of passages dating from before, during, and just after the traumatic and enforced exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. Some of these passages, as here, reflect deep divisions, but

others (such as the final sentence in this quotation) look beyond these divisions. Most famous of the latter is the much-quoted verse (shared with Isaiah 2.4): “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 4.3).

Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels, as well as Mark’s prior gospel, were all written at a time when early Christians believed that the end of the world was near. In that context it is not surprising that they saw resonances with the Book of Micah, with its heady mixture of woe, despair and hope. For them the radical teachings of Jesus resonated powerfully with Micah.

But what about the story of Jesus physically driving out the money-changers and sellers from the temple in Jerusalem? Surely this does promote religiously inspired violence. Granted that this act did not actually lead to any human deaths (although it has sometimes been used to justify Christian militarism) it nevertheless does seem to show that Jesus’ passionate moral outrage led him, on at least this occasion, to an act of physical violence. What is more, this act of physical violence is described in all four Gospels, providing evidence that it might indeed accurately represent the historical Jesus. And Jesus’ denunciation of these money-changers and sellers as “a den of robbers” is hardly polite.

Anger does seem to have been a significant part of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels and a variety of Greek words are used to depict this anger. One of these words (*aganakteo*) is sometimes translated as Jesus being “indignant”. Another more forceful word (*embrimaomai*) has the root meaning of “snorting like a horse” and is occasionally used of Jesus but

more typically of those around him (for example, when the disciples “scold” the woman who poured expensive ointment on Jesus’ head in Mark 14.5). An even stronger word (*orge*) is characteristically used of the “wrath” to come, but in one passage (Mark 3.5) is applied directly to Jesus. In their accounts of the same story (where Jesus defies the authorities in a synagogue by healing on the Sabbath) Matthew and Luke both avoid this strong and defiant word despite their usual dependence upon Mark.

It is not just these words that indicate Jesus’ anger. As in the story of the cleansing of the Temple, there are also the terms of abuse that Jesus levelled at his opponents. The charge of people being “hypocrites” (*hypokritai*) occurs some seventeen times in Mark, Matthew and Luke and nowhere else in the New Testament. With just one marginal exception this charge is made directly by Jesus against supposedly religious people and, especially, against their religious leaders. There can be little doubt that Jesus spoke and acted passionately.³

So is this evidence that Jesus’ was himself committed to religiously inspired violence?

A surface reading of Mark’s account of the cleansing of the Temple might suggest this, especially with Jesus overturning “the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves” and prohibiting “anyone to carry anything through the temple”. The only detail about physical “violence” that Luke keeps here is that Jesus “began to drive out those who were selling things there” (Luke 19.45). In contrast, John’s depiction apparently increases the violence beyond even Mark with Jesus “making a whip of cords” and “pouring out the coins of money-changers” (John 2.15).

Yet it would be just that – a surface reading. With a bit more thought it is obvious that Jesus' actions were indeed passionate but essentially symbolic. To construe them as acts of physical violence against people resulting from passionate moral outrage may be as mistaken as treating the abiding insult of shoe-throwing in some Mediterranean countries as an act of physical violence. In both cases it is more reasonable to depict them as purely symbolic acts of (doubtless strongly felt and much resented) protest. Even the whip, in John's account, was used to drive out sheep and cattle, rather than people, from the Temple. All of the actions depicted (somewhat differently) in the four Gospels hardly amount to anything more than symbolic action because manifestly they cannot have effected any permanent results.

Passionate anger on the part of Jesus especially against injustice and religious hypocrisy – undoubtedly. Invocations to love neighbours and even enemies and to follow the way of the cross – just as clear. But no commitment even to reciprocal violence, let alone to violence used to promote religious faith.

Violence in the Qur'an

What can be learned from this contextual understanding of the Bible that might be applied by thoughtful Muslims to the Qur'an? The Muslim scholar Nayla Tabbara offers some important help here in her contribution to the joint book that she wrote with Fadi Daou for the World Council of Churches, namely *Divine Hospitality: A Christian-Muslim Conversation*.

This delightful book, first written in French and Arabic, originated with an article written by Fadi Daou, a Lebanese Maronite priest, followed by an unexpected and positive response from Nayla Tabbara, herself a Muslim Sunni scholar.

They planned the book together and ecumenically during Ramadan in a Christian monastery.

Daou has clearly been much influenced by the openness of the Second Vatican Council to Islam and Judaism, and Tabbara by those Muslim scholars who argue that the Qur'an emphatically does not represent a God-fearing Jew or Christian as an unbeliever. While both are aware that Christianity and Islam have at times been imperialistic and highly particularistic, they argue that the Gospels and the Qur'an can legitimately be interpreted as being essentially inclusive. Daou points to the Synoptic stories of Jesus praising the faith of a Roman centurion and a Canaanite-Syrian woman, as well the Samaritan woman in John. From this he argues that "the attitude of Jesus Christ toward others...is larger than an inclusivist approach to religious diversity, and it represents a respect and admiration for the faith of others in its own right".⁴ Tabbara suggests that once the Qur'an is read chronologically rather than sequentially, three different phases can be seen in its understanding of the "outsider":

[T]he Qur'anic relationship to the religions of the Book goes through three phases: an initial appeal based on a religion of Abraham, followed by a phase where the reality of schism and vicissitudes attending mutual relationships are confronted, and finally a celebration of fellowship and of communion in works done for God despite the challenge of irreducible difference. It is as if the appeal is for us to see, finally, that there is ghab (mystery) in the divergence. Human beings are unable to grasp this at the lower level, but through contemplation, looking from where we are in the "here and now" toward the world to come, the challenge can be transformed into a source of grace.⁵

Without denying their theological differences as a Christian and Muslim, they have a common aspiration to dialogue creatively and eirenicly, as well as to teach young Muslims and Christians together in their Adyan Foundation in Beirut. They admirably combine theology and action in a context of complex and dangerous religious divisions.

Nayla Tabbara approaches the ninth chapter of the Qur'an cautiously. She is well aware that the so-called "verse of the sword" (9.29) is deeply problematic:

Extremists of yesterday and today claim that this one verse abrogates all the other verses which mention the people of the Book and of which the tone is openness, recognition, and promise of salvation. For these extremists, this one verse abrogates in this way a quarter of the Qur'an.⁶

This verse and the rest of the sura clearly belongs to her middle phase of "schism and vicissitudes", that is to say when early Islam was expelled from Mecca to an increasingly warlike situation in Medina. However, in more detail she argues:

Historically, the circumstance of the revelation of this verse is not clear. Most of the sources attach it to a projected battle, at Tabuk in Syria, with Christian tribes, a battle which in fact did not take place according to the same sources. The sources add, however, that [the] chief of the Christians in Syria paid a tribute to the Muslims, which became his jizya. If we put these sources aside, the obvious and contextual sense of the verse would rather correspond to the conflicts between Muslims and Jews in Medina. However, whatever the historic circumstances relating to the verse, the problem is that this verse, which belongs to a specific context, has been "universalized" by some Muslims, sometimes in the first part of it, i.e., the appeal to fight, but mainly in the second part, the jizya. The latter has been understood as a tax

which must be paid by the people of the Book to the Muslim authorities, when the verse itself indicates that it more likely refers to the kind of spoils of war to be paid by the vanquished to the vanquisher.⁷

There are two crucial points in her analysis here, both of which resonate strikingly with the critical understanding of many Jewish and Christian scholars when approaching some of the more gruesome texts in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The first is to try to understand the text within its specific context. The second is to be sceptical of those who “for ideological reasons” (her words) variously claim that the text can be universalized to fit any polemical context.

Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Professor of Islamic Studies at SOAS, London University, and himself a practising Muslim, also approaches this text cautiously (albeit giving a rather different interpretation of *jizya* than Tabbara’s). It is his translation that is used here and throughout this chapter:

Fight those people of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice [dana], until they pay the tax [jizya] and agree to submit [wa hum saghirun]. (Sura 9.29)

Unusually he has three footnotes for this one verse, corresponding to each of the Arabic words used here. Firstly, he explains that *dana* can be variously understood as obey, behave or follow a way of life or religion. Secondly, he explains that *jizya* means “payment in return”:

In return for the protection of the Muslim state with all the accruing benefits and exemption from military service... This tax was levied only on able-bodied free men who could afford it, and

monks were exempted. The amount was generally low (e.g. one dinar per year).⁸

Finally, he says that, although in the past *wa hum saghirun* was generally understood to mean that “they should be humiliated when paying”, now “it is clear that from the context that they were unwilling to pay, and the clause simply means that they should submit to paying this tax”.⁹ All of these contextual points undermine ideologues seeking to impose some universalized, polemical meaning upon this verse.

Like Tabbara, Haleem notes that the ninth sura is Medinan. Echoing Roland Bainton, he sees this phase of Islam as crucial for understanding context:

The Muslims were no longer the persecuted minority but an established community with the Prophet as its leader, the Qur’an begins to introduce laws to govern the Muslim community with regard to marriage, commerce, and finance, international relations, war and peace”.¹⁰

He also notes, as many others have, that “this is the only sura not to begin with the formula ‘In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy’”. He adds elliptically: “there is an opinion that suras 8 and 9 are in fact just one sura”. An alternative explanation, perhaps, is that this absence might be a deliberate warning to tread carefully with this sura.

One point that Haleem does not discuss in a footnote on this highly significant sura is that the Arabic word *jihad* appears just five verses before “the verse of the sword”. In a context of the Islamist/Jihadist appropriation of this whole chapter and of the term *jihad* itself, this is not without political significance. The term occurs just four times within the Qur’an (all of them, significantly, texts from Medina) and Haleem

translates it literally on each occasion as “struggle” and not as “armed struggle”. Yet, read by an Islamist/Jihadist intent upon religiously inspired violence, jihad does indeed signify nothing less than armed struggle.

For both of these Muslim scholars the Qur’an is regarded as authoritative. Nevertheless they also insist upon the importance of paying careful attention to the historical context of a specific sura and its verses within the Qur’an. And both are aware that there is a long and varied process of Islamic interpretation of specific verses within the Qur’an.

In broad terms many observant Jewish and Christian, as well as some Muslim, theologians today share a similar perspective in relation to their own scriptures. Western scholars typically pay close attention to the historical context and ongoing process of interpretation of scriptures that they may still regard as authoritative and holy within their respective traditions. And they tend to be suspicious of literalists (whether secular or religious) who quote scriptural texts dogmatically with little or no awareness of their context or interpretation.

Conclusion

Nicolai Sinai, Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford, envisages a step beyond placing the Qur’an into context – namely using historical-criticism to understand it better:

To read scripture historically-critically is to systematically suspend the question of its truth, coherence, and contemporary relevance, to be attentive to inconsistencies and redundancies within scripture, as well as between scripture and later beliefs; and to account for the textual phenomena thus observed by means of historical models, which often include complicated

redactional processes... Although it would be easy to compile a martyr's memorial of the historical-critical study of scripture, the proposition that a religious commitment to the Bible or the Qur'an is compatible with the historical-critical approach, and may even have important things to learn from it – a conviction expressed not only by Christian theologians, but also, for instance, by the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) – should therefore not be lightly dismissed.¹¹

Not all faithful Muslims (or traditionalist Jews with the Torah) will yet be able to take this step. However, difficult verses remain within the Jewish and Christian Bibles as well as within the Muslim Qur'an. Read naively out of context these verses can be interpreted as supporting violence. Modern


historical-critical scholarship and ongoing processes of interpretation could help practising Jews, Christians and Muslims alike to avoid some of the violent appropriations of these verses that have vitiated the twenty-first century.

Understanding better how difficult texts first emerged, and how they have been appropriated subsequently by religious extremists, can be a liberating experience for followers of all three Abrahamic faiths as well as for followers of non-Abrahamic faiths.



Read naively out of context these verses can be interpreted as supporting violence. Modern historical-critical scholarship and ongoing processes of interpretation could help practising Jews, Christians and Muslims alike to avoid some of the violent appropriations of these verses that have vitiated the twenty-first century.

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- 1 Gregory A Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God Volume 1* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress 2017) p. 4.
 - 2 Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015) p. 239.
 - 3 Robin Gill, *Moral Passion and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
 - 4 Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara, *Divine Hospitality: A Christian-Muslim Conversation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2017) p. 17.
 - 5 Ibid. p. 101.
 - 6 Ibid. p. 88.
 - 7 Ibid. pp. 88-89.
 - 8 Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005).
 - 9 Ibid. p.118.
 - 10 Ibid. p. xviii.
 - 11 Nicolai Sinai, 'Historical-Critical Readings of the Abrahamic Scripture' in Adam J Silverstein, Guy G Strousma, and Moshe Blidstein (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 223.



5 A New Ecumenism

We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanising force it has been at its best: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the moral responsibility of the rich for the poor, the commands to love the neighbour and stranger, the insistence on peaceful means of conflict resolution and respectful listening to the other side of a case, forgiving the injuries of the past and focusing instead on building a future in which the children of the world, of all colours, faith and races, can live together in grace and peace. These are the ideals on which Jews, Christians and Muslims can converge, widening their embrace to include those of other faiths and none. – Jonathan Sacks¹

It is to God we turn for all our needs, for God is always the ultimate refuge. If the structural context implicit in the devotional vocabulary of Christianity is different from that of Islam, the practical obligation to show care and hospitality remains the same. I would contend that offering hospitality [especially to the stranger] as a way of imitating the divine, as well as being obedient to God, is embedded in the rich vocabulary of charity, generosity, mercy and compassion which permeates the entire Qur'an. – Mona Siddiqui²

Christian theologies dealing with the Abrahamic religions can be worked out through retrieval of scriptures, traditions, and histories, engagement with God, church, and world, rigorous and imaginative thinking, and many modes of expression, all informed both by dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and others and also by contributions from relevant academic disciplines. Among the many practices that can contribute to such dialogue, special attention has been paid to Scriptural Reasoning, in which study and discussion of the scriptures and interpretative traditions of the three religions takes place. The embracing goal is one that all three Abrahamic religions, together with most other religions

and philosophies, desire: a habitable wisdom for our time. – David Ford³.

Three influential spokespeople: a former Chief Rabbi, a Professor of Islamic Theology and a former Regius Professor of Divinity respectively. All three have done much to create a climate of dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims. At a time of deep anxiety about religiously inspired violence they separately and together have made powerful and much needed contributions. All three herald a 'new ecumenism' that is emerging within theology.

Ecumenism between Abrahamic faiths

For much of the 20th century mainline Christian denominations were engaged in ecumenical discussions and sometimes unions. In 1910, the World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh with some 1,200 representatives from Reformed and Anglican Churches. In 1947, the Church of South India – including Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists – was formed, followed shortly afterwards by the formation of the World Council of Churches. In Britain, different branches of Methodists and Presbyterians formed internal unions in the first half of the century, followed by the formation of the Presbyterian/Congregationalist United Reformed Church in the second half of the century, and with the Church of England very nearly forming a national union with Methodists. Despite the failure of the latter, Methodist and Anglican churches at a local level have combined or just worked closely together in many parts of England. And in 1992, the Porvoo Common Statement established full communion between Anglicans and Lutherans across fifteen North European countries.

In addition there were numerous theological discussions between Catholic (following Vatican II), Orthodox, Anglican and Reformed theologians and church leaders, especially in the second half of the century. Theological departments within universities across Britain became distinctly more ecumenical and at a local level clergy across denominations formed fraternals that included both Catholic and Anglican priests alongside Reformed ministers. International agreements on specific theological issues also became more common, as well as local witness on issues of justice.

Major differences, of course, still remain between Christian denominations in Britain and elsewhere, as well as strong internal debates and divisions on ethical issues such as sexuality. Christian ecumenism has a long way to go and may never reach anything remotely resembling a United Church that combines Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Reformed denominations. Yet it has already achieved much.

Now, however, a new task has emerged in the 21st century – namely, addressing religiously inspired violence. This is the ‘new ecumenism’. Beyond the honest recognition of fault-lines in their different scriptures (the subject of the previous chapter) some now recognise an urgent need for leaders and theologians in the three Abrahamic faiths to engage in this ‘new ecumenism’ – a form of ecumenism, this time not concerned with physical unity or even with the resolution of abiding doctrinal differences, but with greater mutual understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Theological ecumenism within Abrahamic faiths

Jonathan Sacks was an early champion of the concept of Abrahamic faiths. He first established a national reputation with his 1990 Reith Lectures, published as *The Persistence of*

Faith. In these he argued strongly against the claims of secular pluralism. He noted that religious communities – whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic – are often expected to abandon their distinctiveness in the modern world in the name of some higher humanism. He, instead, sought to defend an understanding of orthodoxy as a mid-path between liberalism and fundamentalism:

For the past century religion has been embattled and defensive. This has led to the two religious stances most common in the modern world, a diffuse liberalism on the one hand, sanctifying secular trends after the event; and a reactive extremism on the other, willing us back into a golden age that neither was nor will be again. The two live by their sibling rivalries, each seeing the other as the main threat to salvation.⁴

In contrast, he maintained that

Faith persists and in persisting allows us to build a world more human than one in which [people], nations or economic systems have become gods. Twenty years ago it seemed as if religion had run its course in the modern world. Today a more considered view would be that its story has hardly yet begun.⁵

In Faith in the Future, he returned to these themes and applied them in a very practical way to some of the dilemmas of the late 20th century – one parent families, the loss of community, urban despair, lawlessness, the loss of collective traditions and myths. Above all, he argued that we are losing hope – hope in the future – hope which “is born and has its being in the context of family, community and religious faith”.⁶

In Not in God’s Name he has continued his critique of Western secular individualism, moral relativism and religious fundamentalism, albeit now adding a critique of religious and

secular violence – arguing that it has roots in three aspects of human thinking and behaviour: dualism, scapegoating, and sibling rivalry. Dualists divide the world into “children of light” and “children of darkness”, “us” and “them”, “good” and “evil”. Secular Stalinists did this as much in the past as do religious Islamists in the present – dehumanising and then murdering those who differ from themselves. Scapegoating has affected Jews for much of their history and sibling rivalry, he admits, has often disfigured relationships between different members of the three Abrahamic faiths. Yet, beyond dualism, scapegoating and sibling rivalry, he sees a place in the modern world for Abrahamic monotheism to be a humanising voice. Hence the quotation at the top of this chapter.

Mona Siddiqui at Edinburgh University has now become a leading theological voice for an Islam that seeks to build bridges with Christian and Jewish theologians. And David Ford at Cambridge University pioneered the process of Scriptural Reading with his Muslim and Jewish colleagues – studying their respective scriptures together in Hebrew, Greek and Arabic and mutually learning from each other.

Two other similar ventures are worth mentioning, the veteran theologian and philosopher John Hare at Yale University and the younger theologians Afifi Al-Akiti and Joshua Hordern at Oxford University:

In ‘New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought’, essays published in both the American journal *The Muslim World* and the British journal *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Afifi Al-Akiti and Joshua Hordern prefer the word “conversation” to “comparative study” because

This enquiry is not comparing two alien traditions without any common sources but is alert to how conversation between

Christian political thought (from West and East) and the similarly complex (and marginalised) political traditions of Islam show political problems in a new light.⁷

What they have succeeded in doing is bringing together a rich variety of scholars, some from quite conservative Christian and Islamic theological traditions, to explore points of contact (and dissimilarity) especially among those pre-modern scholars who grappled theologically with similar socio-political contexts (such as medieval Spain before Muslims were expelled in the late 15th century) and issues such as “legitimate authority”. In a manner similar to Jonathan Sacks, they argue that this form of study offers a challenge to the “narrow canon of Western liberalism” and “opens up a distinct area of investigation, with its own large body of historic texts and scholarship to be studied on its own [Islamic and Christian] terms”. The results are fascinating, albeit, at this stage, quite brief and diffuse.

The mature work of John E Hare in his *God’s Command* is deeply impressive. In his early book *The Moral Gap* his conversation partners were almost entirely Christian (often quite conservative) theologians and Kantian philosophers. However, in *God’s Command* he has unexpectedly extended his conversation partners to include three key medieval Islamic scholars (‘Abd al-Jabbar, Al-Ash’ari, and Al-Maturidi) and three 20th century Jewish scholars (Marvin Fox, David Novak and Franz Rosenzweig). As he explains:

Despite reservations, I have undertaken this part of the project because the concept of divine command is central outside the Christian tradition as well as within it, and there is a great deal to be learnt from the comparison. Within medieval Islam, and within contemporary Jewish appropriations of medieval Judaism, there is very much the same range of options in

understanding the relation between a sovereign God who gives us commands and our own reason, as we try to determine how to live our lives. This book assumes, without arguing for it, that the three Abrahamic faiths worship the same God, though they say very different things about this God.⁸

Sacks' *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* was explicitly written as a response to the religiously inspired violence following 9/11, as its subtitle indicates. Hare also mentions at the outset that the "first seed" for his God's Command was the Gifford Lectures at Glasgow that he gave in 2005 with his Jewish, Muslim and secular Humanist colleagues, Lenn Goodman, Abdulaziz Sachedina and AC Grayling respectively – a combination that clearly reflected post-9/11 anxieties. The Cambridge Scriptural Reading project was also a post-9/11 initiative.

Ecumenical cooperation between Jews, Christians and Muslims at a local level

On the day following the Manchester bombing in May 2017, when a homemade device was detonated as people left a concert given by Ariana Grande, killing twenty-three people (including the perpetrator Salman Ramadan Abedi) and injuring many more, the Anglican Bishop of Manchester, together with local Imams, Rabbis, Priests and Ministers, held a public, televised vigil in front of a large crowd. Such vigils have now become an important form of witness since 9/11. Sometimes they are entirely silent, but sometimes not. Some include prayers or speeches. Most involve the laying of flowers. Manifestly they are ritual events intended to send out a clear message of peaceful co-existence and cooperation, in stark contrast to brutal acts of sectarian violence.

Having taken part in several such vigils myself I know their significance and poignancy from within. It is especially pleasing that local imams have been keen to take part and to distance themselves from religiously inspired violence. It is vital that all people of faith and not just academic theologians work peacefully and cooperatively together across Abrahamic faiths. In the wake of the Nazi Holocaust successive British Chief Rabbis and Archbishops of Canterbury over the past few decades have been careful not only to work cooperatively together but to be seen to be doing so, just as the late Archbishop Derek Worlock and Bishop David Sheppard did in Liverpool when the IRA was actively engaged in mainland bombing. Now, following the actions of Isis and Al-Qai'da, it has become just as important that Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders and their followers act similarly. Cooperative symbolic action here is vital.

Shared Abrahamic values

In between academic ecumenical theology and local cooperation there is public ethics involving theologians and religious leaders. Jonathan Sacks has again been an outstanding exponent of such public ethics, as have Archbishops Robin Eames in Ireland and John Habgood in Britain (and, indeed, Desmond Tutu internationally). What characterises all of them is that they are prepared to listen carefully to experts in various fields before speaking out publicly on ethical issues. From the 1960s onwards John Habgood, for example, contributed significantly to the development of medical ethics in Britain, as did the theologian Professor Gordon Dunstan. Key concepts of personhood, autonomy and justice within public medical ethics were in part shaped by their theologically inspired interventions. Dunstan, in particular, played a significant role in developing medical ethics within the Royal Colleges of medicine and surgery.

One of the most interesting recent developments in public bioethics in Britain is that Muslim theologians, such as Mona Siddiqui, are sometimes included now on national ethics committees. This is very important indeed, especially in a context of religiously inspired violence. Siddiqui's careful and eirenic work, including *The Good Muslim*, offers a radically different vision of Islam to that of Isis or Al-Qai'da. Without claiming to represent the whole of Islam (just as no Christian or Jewish theologian could credibly claim to represent the whole of Christianity or the whole of Judaism) she does combine deep knowledge of Islam and respectful listening to other Abrahamic and secular faiths. The future looks brighter with her inclusion.

It is interesting to note, for example, that the distinguished Nuffield Council on Bioethics' recent report *Human Embryo Culture* includes contributions from Jewish (Professor David Katz), Muslim (Dr Mehrunisha Suleman) and Catholic (Professor David Albert Jones) theological perspectives. Surprisingly only Jones takes the position that full human life begins at conception and that, as a result, embryonic tissue should never be used for therapies. There is here a significant development: a British independent public ethics forum specifically welcoming theological contributions across the three Abrahamic faiths while recognising differences between them.

Conclusion

Religiously inspired violence sadly does still blight the twenty-first century. Understanding it properly requires careful research. Diminishing it requires cooperative, ecumenical action at several different levels – academic, local and ethical. Yet there are encouraging signs that this is already beginning to happen and that a 'new ecumenism' is emerging.

- 1 Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, p. 263.
- 2 Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2015) pp. 124-5.
- 3 David Ford, 'Christian Perspectives' in Adam J Silverstein, Guy G Strousma, and Moshe Blidstein (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 595.
- 4 Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1992) p. 94.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jonathan Sacks. *Faith in the Future* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995) p. 5.
- 7 Alfifi Al-Akiti and Joshua Hordern (eds.). 'New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought' Part 2, *Studies in Christian Ethics: Special Issue 29:2* (May 2016) p. 132.
- 8 John E Hare. *God's Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) pp. 184-5.



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Religion and violence seem inextricably linked in the public's mind. But what does linked actually mean?

The public certainly isn't clear. While 61% of people think that the teachings of religions are essentially peaceful, 70% think that most of the wars in world history have been caused by religions. Only 8% think religions are inherently violent, but 47% think that the world would be a more peaceful place if no one was religious.

If there is confusion, it's probably because the relationship between religion and violence is confusing. In this essay, ethicist Robin Gill brings some balance to a debate that, particularly of late, has been marked more by caricature than clarity.

Recognising that there is a problem to be addressed (if not necessarily the pathological one alleged by New Atheists) Gill goes to the heart of the issue – the specific religious texts that are hijacked to legitimise violence – and argues that read rightly they can be 'defused'.

Killing in the Name of God will not only deepen our understanding of religion and violence but, in doing so, will enable a richer and more measured debate about these major issues of our time.

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