

## **Religion and Violence: Myth and Reality**

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It's hard to know where to start let alone where to finish on such an immense topic that and continues to spawn a veritable industry of books, articles and commentary in all forms of media. So in 20 minutes I want to briefly draw your attention to some myths and realities about the relationship between religion and violence. I shall do this by way of report on some recent writers in the field of religion and violence.

### **Religion is the cause of violence**

This is a popular point of view and one that is stubbornly resistant to change. Moreover I consider this belief extremely dangerous. Dangerous beliefs are those beliefs that actually propel people and communities to violence. For example, the belief that some people are more superior to others is a dangerous belief because it tends to generate violence. 'Religion is the cause of violence' is one such dangerous belief.

In her book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, Penguin, Random House, 2014, the well-known author Karen Armstrong (one of the foremost scholars and popular writers on world religion and a former Catholic nun) states: 'In the West the idea that religion is inherently violent is now taken for granted and seems self evident' (1). She continues: 'As one who speaks on religion, I constantly hear how cruel and aggressive it [religion] has been, a view that, eerily, is expressed in the same way almost every time: "Religion has been the cause of all the major wars in history"'(1). Armstrong notes that it is an odd remark. 'Obviously the two world wars were not fought on account of religion'. She goes on to state, 'Yet so indelible is the aggressive image of religious faith in our secular consciousness that we routinely load the violent sins of the twentieth century on to the back of "religion" and drive it out into the political wilderness'.

Armstrong's reference to the political wilderness is a reference back to her earlier remarks about ancient Israel's Day of Atonement. On this day one goat was sacrificed to expiate the sins of the community. Another goat was sent out of the city following into the wilderness. This occurred after the high priest had laid his hands on the animal's head thereby transferring all the people's misdeeds on to its head; literally placing the blame elsewhere. Armstrong argues that this scapegoat ritual is played out in modern society that has made a scapegoat of faith (1).

She goes on to note that even those who admit that religion has not been responsible for all the violence and warfare of the human race 'still take its essential belligerence for granted' (1). The claim is usually related to

monotheistic religions for ‘once people believe that “God” is on their side, compromise becomes impossible’. And of course it is easy to recite a long list of events that seem to support this: the Crusades, the Wars of Religion of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Century, more recent terrorism committed in the name of religion supporting the view that Islam is particularly aggressive. If Buddhist non-violence is offered as a counter example the retort comes quickly that Buddhism is not a religion but a secular philosophy. Though, as witnessed in recent events in Myanmar, Buddhist extremism (against Muslims) can take violent forms. So what’s the truth of things regarding religion and violence? Is religion inherently violent and as a consequence the cause of violence? Armstrong argues that religion is neither inherently violent nor the cause of violence. On the other hand she does not shirk away from the showing how the actual history of religion has at times been complicit in, and in some cases a driver for violence. Armstrong states at the end of her book: ‘We have seen that, like the weather, religion “does lots of different things” (359). To claim that it has a single, unchanging and inherently violent essence is not accurate. Identical religious beliefs and practices have inspired diametrically opposed courses of action’. For example in the Hebrew Bible the Deuternomists were virulently against foreign peoples, while the priestly authors sought reconciliation.

Armstrong’s tour de force of the subject is worth the read. So is another recent book by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks – a respected leader, philosopher, author and social commentator who has been described as ‘Britain’s most authentically prophetic voice’. The title of his book is disarming, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2015). Like Armstrong, Sacks argues that religion is not the cause of violence. However he does not shy away from some of the brute realities of life that impact all people whether religious or non religious.

Sacks zeroes in on those acts of violence that claim God’s stamp of approval. Hence the title, *Not in God’s Name*. Sacks takes his cue from the statement by Blaise Pascal, ‘Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction’. And Sacks responds ‘When religion turns men into murderers, God weeps’ and he reminds us of ‘one of the most searing sentences in religious literature from Genesis when ‘God saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth....’God regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain’ (Gen 6:6). Sacks states it bluntly: ‘Too often in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion. When this happens, God speaks, sometimes in a still, small voice almost inaudible beneath the clamour of those claiming to speak on his behalf. What God says at such times is: *Not in My Name*’ (3).

Sacks recounts a long list of current brutalities and violence committed in the name of God. He notes that a century ago Christians made up 20% of the population of the Middle East, today it is 4%. He also notes that Muslims form the majority of victims of Islamist violence. He argues that we need a name to describe ‘this deadly phenomenon that can turn ordinary non-psychopathic

people into cold blooded murderers of schoolchildren, aid workers, journalists and people at prayer' (9). He calls it 'altruistic evil': evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals'. And he makes the point that there is nothing particularly religious about altruistic evil citing Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Mao Zedong's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia, as 'avowedly secular' (10).

Sacks states, 'None of the great religions can say, with unflinching self-knowledge, "Our hands never shed innocent blood"' (21). In Sacks' view Jews, Christians and Muslims have to be prepared to ask 'the most uncomfortable questions': 'Does the God of Abraham want his disciples to kill for his sake? Does he demand human sacrifice? Does he rejoice in holy war? Does he want us to hate our enemies and terrorise unbelievers? Have we read our sacred texts correctly? What is God saying to us, here, now? We are not prophets but we are heirs and we are not bereft of guidance on these fateful issues' (21). Hard questions from Sacks. His own view is nuanced: 'there is a connection between religion and violence, but it is oblique, not direct' (23). In this respect he notes that 'religious people in the grip of strong emotions – fear, pain, anxiety, confusion, a sense of loss and humiliation – often dehumanize their opponents with devastating results'.

What is Sack's response to this state of affairs? He makes a fundamental distinction between the covenant of Noah and the covenant of Abraham. The covenant of Noah is the covenant of our common humanity. The early stories of Genesis - Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood, Noah covenant, Babel - are stories of our common humanity. We are all in the same boat, as it were. These stories bind us together where we are called to recognize the face of God in each other before any distinctions. It is only after the covenant of Noah that our founding narratives turn to the particularity of the Abrahamic covenant; to the promise to Abraham to be the father of a future nation. This is the covenant of faith. Sacks argues, and has for some years, 'that *our common humanity precedes our religious differences*' (200). This axiom is critical for it leads to the basic proposal that 'any religion that dehumanizes others merely because their faith is different has misunderstood the God of Abraham' (200).

In other words there is no justification for religious violence when the founding sacred texts of Jews, Christians and Muslims are subjected to a careful theological interpretation. This accords with Sacks' view that 'weapons win wars but it takes ideas to win the peace' (17). Thus while religion might not directly cause violence it is from time to time implicated and complicit, and the antidote is better theology. Proper interpretation of sacred texts reveals the solution to the problem of violence in religion. This seems both reasonable and wise but is his proposal sufficient?

### **Violence is the Cause of Religion**

What if the relationship is quite the reverse; that violence is generative of religion? How so? Violence is a feature of the human condition – we are capable of great good and great evil. History, experience, theology tell a common story. Because we humans are made for each other and constantly form social groups

to live, survive and thrive it is inevitable that rivalries and competitive behavior will be a feature of our common life. Moreover we tend to be altruistic towards those of our group and aggressive towards other groups though it is also the case that internal conflicts always arise and are never far from the surface.

So on this account violence has nothing to do with religion as such. It has to do with identity and life in groups. And precisely here we have a problem. How can we live together without resorting to violence? Or rather, how can we manage our predispositions to violence? If we can't find a way to manage violence, human community and culture will not be a viable project. Enter religion; the solution to the problem of violence among and between human beings.

The person who has reflected on this more than anyone else in the modern period is the French anthropologist and philosopher Rene Girard. I remember reading his famous book *The Scapegoat* (Eng. Trans 1986) and even before that one of his most important theological interpreters who asked the question, *Must there be Scapegoats?* The scapegoat is the one upon whom blame is directed for an outbreak of violence in society. How do we stop people from killing each other on a tit for tat basis? How do we break the inevitable spiral of retaliatory violence? The secret lies in the scapegoat. The scapegoat mechanism involves sacrificing a third party, 'one who stands outside the feud, and whose death will not lead to another cycle of retaliation' (75). By sacrificing the outsider, a revenge killing has taken place, so both sides can feel a justice has been done, but in such a way as to stop the cycle since the victim is not a member of either of the contending groups (75). Hence the primal religious act is human sacrifice; the primal sacrifice is the scapegoat and the function of religion is '*to deflect away internal violence that would otherwise destroy the group*' (75). And this dynamic is not just a thing of the ancient past but is alive and operative today, more or less. Of course the system of violence management requires the victim to be seen to be the actual cause of the violence and hence close enough to the violence to persuade warring parties that such a scapegoat will break the cycle of violence.

It is a meta-theory and critics are wary that this explains too much. My stock response is to say that I am in my seventh decade on planet earth and in all my life I have not yet found an example from my life or my observations generally that overturns Girard's approach to violence and religion.

For Sacks, following Girard, religion, far from generating violence is in fact the result of violence and also its solution. This is the reason why Sacks argues that religion 'sustains groups more effectively than any other force. It suppresses violence within. It rises to the threat of violence from without' (39). This seems to resonate with the plain fact that 'most conflicts and wars have nothing to do with religion whatsoever. They are about power, territory and glory, things that are secular, even profane. But if religion can be enlisted, it will' (39). The dark side of *homo-sapien* i.e. *homo-religious* re-emerges.

And the place where that dark side comes to the surface more powerfully than anywhere else is in sibling rivalry. This ought not surprise us. The first community murder in the bible is the story of Cain and Abel. The sacred texts of

Judaism and Christianity abound with instances of sibling rivalry. And it is the dynamics of sibling rivalry that helps to explain the often fraught relationship between the Abrahamic faiths - Jews, Christians and Muslims. Sacks opines that 'there must be some additional cause to explain the Crusades, jihads, forced conversions, inquisitions, burnings at the stake, pogroms and suicidal terrorism in religions dedicated to love, forgiveness and compassion' (87). This is to be located in the dynamics of sibling rivalry and the associated jealousies and desire to have what the other has, to be what the other is.

So 'does religion cause violence? Or does violence cause religion? Is religion the problem or the solution to violence? What's myth and what's the reality? What do you think? But even putting the issues in this way is dangerous. And it is dangerous for a very good reason. Preoccupation with the relationship between religion and violence can become a major distraction from deeply entrenched cultural and political views about religion and violence. I want to finish by briefly touching on this quite fundamental issue for us today.

### **Whose religion? Which violence?**

All that I have said so far has traded on the fact that we all assume we know what religion is. In the West 'we see "religion" as a coherent system of obligatory beliefs, institutions and rituals, centring on a supernatural God, whose practice is essentially private and hermetically sealed off from all "secular" activities' (Armstrong 2). In other cultures and through the ages the idea of religion has never been reduced to beliefs and practices separated off from the rest of life. But that notion of religion is an invention of the West.

The Latin word *religio* concerns obligations. To say that something was *religio* meant it was incumbent on you to do it, whether it was a cultic observance, keeping an oath etc. *Religio* was that which was binding. St Augustine gave this a slightly new twist by relating *religio* to the binding that occurred between God and people and with each other. And in medieval Europe *religio* came to mean the monastic life with its quite particular obligations for the monk, compared to the 'secular' priest who worked in the world (*saeculum*). In the pre-modern period religion permeated all aspects of life. It could not be cordoned off in some private sphere. Ancient people 'would have found it impossible to see where "religion" ended and "politics" began' (3). As Armstrong notes 'They wanted to invest everything they did with ultimate value' (3). Why? Because we are meaning seeking creatures.

The notion of religion as something separate from public life arose in the wake of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation and the so-called Wars of Religion in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Englishman John Locke, gave voice to the modern Western notion of religion. Locke argued that religion was a "private search" 'and as such could not be policed by the government; in this personal quest everyone must rely on "his own endeavours" rather than an external authority. To mingle "religion" and politics was a grievous, dangerous and existential error:

The church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes two societies, which are in their original end, business, and in everything perfectly and infinitely different from each other (quoted in Armstrong 236).

Locke assumed that the separation of religion and politics was inherent in the nature of things. He argued that 'because of the violent passions it supposedly unleashed, Locke insisted that the segregation of "religion" from government was "above all things necessary" for the creation of a peaceful society' (236). Karen Armstrong concludes: 'In Locke we see the birth of the "myth of religious violence" that would become ingrained in the Western ethos' (236). Society is maintained in peace when religion is kept in the private domain.

Armstrong is not alone in this assessment. A leading American Catholic theologian, William Cavanaugh, in his remarkable book, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (OUP 2009) agrees. He discusses the 'invention of religion' and the 'creation myth of the Wars of Religion'. He argues that the separation of religion from political life on the pretext of its inherent violence serves a darker purpose. Not only does it provide the foundation for the sovereign nation state separate from religion; at the same time it provides a mask for violence perpetrated by sovereign states. If it is religion that is prone to violence then whatever violent action is sanctioned by the nation state will be more easily justified as an act necessary for the protection and survival of the people. State sanctioned violence will only ever be consequentially violent; it is not inherent to the character of the state as such. Controversial? Perhaps. But let history be the arbiter. As Cavanaugh shows 'attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent' (3). It's all in the mix so to speak.

By locating religion in the private sphere we become blind to the deeper reality that the nation state has in effect become another religion – a total way of life through which our everyday world is ordered. It matters not whether it is nationalism, capitalism, Marxism, liberalism or a host of other secular ideologies and institutions. This new idolatry proves itself anything but benign in its use of force in the pursuit of justice. Whose religion indeed are we signed up for? Which violence are we really sanctioning? These are uncomfortable questions that lurk not far below our modern discontents and political narratives.

If there is one lesson from all this it is simply, beware the myths that we live by? Be prepared to examine the foundations of our life. Learn to read the signs of the times; exercise an appropriate suspicion. Ask the simple question at all times: who benefits from this or that?

### **Christianity & the Peaceable Kingdom**

I want to conclude by asking if there is some wisdom from the Christian tradition that might shed some light on our theme for tonight. At its heart the Christian way is about a new community of peace; a community that no longer lives bound

by hostilities; a community where differences are welcomed and no longer regarded as impediments to peace but part of the rich diversity of God's intention for the world; a community to practice the lost art of hospitality and generosity. And frankly wherever such communities appear, whether they claim the name of Christ or not, Christians ought to rejoice that God's wisdom and life is for the whole world; rejoice that it cannot be bounded by any select group or people. In this sense the Christian church is invited by the gospel to see itself as a community of companions travelling with all people. All too idealistic I hear you say? Well it is aspirational but is it a hollow aspiration? Is there something that has happened in the history of God's ways with the world that might make the hope of such a peaceable community a real possibility, even if never completely realized?

The Christian story is shaped by the events of Jesus life death and resurrection. As the writer of 1 Timothy 3:1 states: 'Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory'. This great mystery is the red thread that runs through the Church's history. It is the story of one who was made a scapegoat, who suffered the fate of a victim of the brutalities of others; who was subject to the scapegoat mechanism that had operated from ancient times. The resurrection broke the cycle of scapegoating; the unthinkable, the utterly unimaginable happened; the victim cycle was broken; the mechanism for violence management was rendered impotent; a new possibility for the life together with God and one another on earth emerged out of human violence; the blame game was set aside; people could no longer hide behind a religious mechanism to pacify warring people. The new possibility had to do with genuine forgiveness, compassion and welcome of the stranger. The Christian gospel is a gospel of peace and the measure of the Christianness of the people of God will be the measure by which it is a community of active peacemakers in violent times. The sign of the empty tomb is the clue to the peaceable kingdom. Too often the church has preferred to go back into that very tomb from which the Lord was raised. That happens each time violence is perpetrated and none more so than when it is perpetrated in the name of God.

*You can listen to Prof Stephen Pickard talking to the ABC Religion and Ethics Report about this topic [here](#)*