

Religion and Violence

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Does religion cause violence? Is it by its very nature an agent for violent action? Look at all the examples past and present that illustrate this fact...the Crusades, the fanatical cries for Jihad, Hindus destroying Islamic temples, the cruelty in Iraq as sectarian Muslims kill one another, Buddhists killing Muslims and on and on it seems. Is there any doubt about the role of religion in acts of violence?

I would certainly agree but then I read a thoughtful article in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin (Spring/Summer 2007) by William Cavanaugh that challenged my thinking about this relationship between religion and violence. He writes that people who call themselves religious are very defensive these days when they hear people say or write such as Richard Kimball in his book When Religion Becomes Evil that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than of any other institutional force in history. The quick response to such words might be, "Oh, these people who did such violence were not truly religious or that so called religious violence is in fact economic and political and not religious." Mr. Cavanaugh believes that such responses are simplistic and that we need to examine the complicated relationship between religion and violence.

One of these complications is that we in the West find the myth of religious violence comforting and strangely useful. Myth, we might ask, why a myth? In the words of Mr. Cavanaugh it is the way we don't acknowledge the violence of our own secular nation. "We like to believe that the liberal state arose to make peace between warring religious factions. Today the Western liberal state is charged with the burden of creating peace in the face of the cruel religious fanaticism of the Muslim world. The myth of religious violence promotes a dichotomy between us in the secular West who are rational and peacemaking, and them, the hordes of violent religious fanatics in the Muslim world. Their violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. Our violence, on the other hand, is rational, peacemaking and necessary. Regrettably, we find ourselves forced to bomb them into higher rationality." (p.25)

These words are harsh but they do point to another difficulty in understanding this complex relationship between religion and violence. It is the difficulty in defining religion itself. Perhaps we could all give a definition of violence this morning but what about a definition of religion? I remember when I taught a basic course in Eastern Religions at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts, we all struggled with the question, "What is religion?" If we define religion that includes the word "God" as most dictionaries do, would that eliminate Buddhism and Confucianism, Taoism as world

religions? Where is the theistic personal God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in these religions? If we move beyond that problem and say with the theologian Paul Tillich that religion is one's ultimate concern, then is money-making a religion? You might say with me that to some folks making money is indeed an ultimate concern. In our class at Bentley and perhaps with you, the issue was solved by beginning our study of religion by opening the textbook called, "World's Religions." There in the index we found chapters on Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Problem solved! But was it? What then is an inclusive definition of religion that covers all of its various forms?

Another complication with this issue of religion and violence in addition to that elusive definition of religion and one we should remember as "Western," is that religion was not considered something separate from political institutions such as the tribe, the empire, kingdoms, states until the modern era and then primarily in the West. In the United States we are constantly reminded that our constitution affirms separation of church and state. Yet we are also reminded that we are a Christian nation declaring that this nation is under God in the Pledge of Allegiance, that Christian prayers are spoken in public schools, that our presidents usually end their addresses with "and God bless the United States of America"...and that they should have a favorite Bible verse. And it is acknowledged that morning prayers are piped into the Pentagon. What a challenge it is to separate religion from the nation.

How can you separate the Shinto religion in Japan from the Emperor, from the Islands of Japan, from the daily lives of the Japanese? State Shinto was the State. Maybe some of you remember how General MacArthur insisted that the Emperor renounce his divinity as part of the Peace Agreement ending World War II. I am certain that when the Emperor did so he renounced the Christian concept of divinity but not the presence of the Kami, the divine spirits of all creation. MacArthur was pleased but I wonder what he would think today as the current Emperor practices Shinto rituals and make an imperial visit to the major Shinto Shrine in Tokyo?

So what is religion even when we believe we can separate it from the state, the nation, politics? Experts in the subject of religions such as Martin Marty tell us that religion has five features. Religion focuses on our ultimate concern but don't politics and the nation? Religion builds community but don't politics and the nation? Religion appeals to myth and symbols but don't politics and the nation with its flags and war memorials? Religion uses rites and ceremonies but don't politics and the nation do the same with pledges of loyalty, national anthems even though sung so off key at sport events? Religion requires followers to behave in certain ways but doesn't politics with its platforms of beliefs? Perhaps the basic difference could be the fact that religion has a cosmic dimension meaning the promise of heaven or hell. "My kingdom is not on this earth but in heaven."

But when it comes to war, we in the United States were told by our past president George Bush that the war in Iraq was a conflict between good and evil, certainly a cosmic dimension. Democracy is somehow a divine mandate.

Nationalism certainly can take on all the religious signs—warning signs, would you not agree—of absolute truth claims, blind obedience, ends justifying the means, a just war, declaration of a holy war. Nations can become terribly self-righteous and it is amazing what individuals are willing to die for regarding the call to war. Do you agree that more individuals in the West are more willing to die for the nation than for a religion? If we were to take a survey or observe American Christian behavior in wartime, it appears that, at least among American Christians, the nation-state is subject to far more absolute fervor than Christianity. If you heard Kin Burn’s documentary on World War II, you heard the voices of those devoted to the country rather than to any Christian ethical ideal found in the New Testament Gospels.

This is the argument that Mr. Cavanaugh wishes to make, and I think it is a valuable lesson for us during this time of the co-called Clash of Civilizations. The point is that the distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading and mystifying and should be avoided altogether. “We must conclude that there is no coherent way to isolate “religious” ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer “secular” counterparts. So-called secular ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive and irrational as so-called religion. People kill for all sorts of things. An adequate approach to the problem would be resolutely empirical; under what conditions do certain beliefs and practices—jihad, the “invisible hand” of the market, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, the role of the United States as worldwide liberator—turn violent? The point is not simply that “secular” violence should be given equal attention to “religious” violence. The point is that the distinction between “secular” and “religious” violence is unhelpful, misleading and mystifying and should be avoided altogether.” (P.31)

Our temptation these days is to draw that line in the sand between enlightened secular states that have learned to silence contending religious beliefs in public to the unenlightened states who make religious beliefs a public affair with their stubborn fanaticism. How can you compare the secular state—liberal, open minded, rational with the religious state—conservative, closed minded and irrational?

Thus our violence is some how justified in contrast to the religious violence of those religious nations. The prejudice is deep and abiding but like all prejudice the clue to seeing more clearly is to ask the question, “What is the difference between our secular violence and their religious violence?” Are we violent in the name of secular religious

values? Are we waging our wars for secular religious values of democratic states? And if so, can we impose our religion upon the Muslim countries? It is becoming increasingly clear that the answer is “no”...no more than the Muslim world can violently impose its religious values and beliefs on the Western secular world. So what is the solution? Could it be that we human beings should call violence by its own name and to see the consequences of its use as a means to an end?

I don't know how many of you have seen the Indian film Trilogy, Fire, Earth, Water? These films have been produced by a remarkable Indian woman film director, Deepa Mehta. Her films are so controversial that her own country refused to show them until recently and in the past, riots have broken out when they were shown. The second film, Earth, relates the story of the partition of India in 1947 dividing Hindus from Muslims and its affect on various religious groups. Five friends from five different religious faiths gather to witness the violence. The horror of meeting a train filled with the murdered corpses of men, women and children of the Muslim faith devastates their friendship. When they ask one another, “Why this violence, why this hatred?” One of them answers, “It is what's inside us” It is what's inside us. But our excuses flow, don't they! It is religious violence! It is a holy war! It is the United States telling us we must be secular and democratic! It is those religious fanatics! It is that immoral country with its pornography and its violent and sexual media! These excuses, these are the barriers to understanding violence and human nature. “It is what's inside us.” Religious violence and secular violence are disguises for human fear and prejudice. Isn't that the issue for all of us whether we are orthodox, liberal, religious, secular? We must call violence by its own name and find the courage to deny it as a means to an end. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. said that nonviolence is not for cowards. They remind us of the greatest challenge facing humanity, to face up to the violent answers deep within human nature and to call it by its name.