

Religion and Violence

A Protestant Christian Perspective

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It is common knowledge that much of the violence done in the name of religion has little to do with religion. Often religion is used, misused and abused in conflicts that have social, economic and political motivations, and many of the persons that actively perpetrate violence have little or no knowledge of the tenets of the faith in the name of which they join battle. In most of these cases it is religious identity and fervour that play the major role, rather than the motivations provided by the faith itself.

Our purpose here, however, is not to deal with this broader issue but to ask ourselves, in the context of the events of September 11, whether our respective religious traditions do in fact contribute to violence in its many forms and manifestations. “It is too easy in an apologetic concern”, says François Houtart, “to claim that the content of the religion is essentially non-violent and that it is the human beings who, whether individually or collectively, divert [it] from [its] meaning”, adding that “in fact the roots of violence can be found right back in the religions, and that is why the religions can also easily serve as vehicles for violent tendencies.”¹

One needs to heed this warning when one speaks of “religion and violence” from a Christian perspective. Beyond doubt, Christianity has had a violent history, and today many trace this history to the Bible itself and to the way it has been interpreted and applied in the development and spread of Christianity as a religion. Speaking about the Bible in an interfaith context, however, is a difficult matter because what Christians call the Old Testament is also, and primarily so, the Hebrew scriptures. There are considerable differences between Christians and Jews in the understanding and interpretation of scriptures, and therefore what I say here must be seen as a Christian perspective on the scriptures that we share.

Violence in the Bible

The Bible begins with the affirmation that God saw the universe that had been created as “very good”, but soon outlines the human predicament in terms of alienation between God and human beings, and between human beings and nature (Gen. 3). This chapter is immediately followed by the story of the brutal murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The story is said to reflect on the early struggle between the pastoral and agricultural ways of life. However, even though the story says that God held Cain accountable for his brother’s murder, in fact it depicts Cain, the murderer, as the one who begins human civilization under the protection of God. In response to Cain’s fear that he might himself be killed as a fugitive, God said, “‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him” (Gen. 4:15).

Soon violence is also to be attributed to God:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created — people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen. 6:5-7).

This attribution of violence to God is to continue in much of the rest of the Bible. The devastation brought on Egypt, including the death of the first born of Egypt, the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, the conquest of Canaan, including the genocidal acts of wiping out whole tribes are all depicted as acts done by or supported by God. The conquest of Jericho, for instance, ends on this note:

As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys (Josh. 6:20-21).

All the wars that are won are presented as the Lord himself leading the people into battle, and all wars lost are God’s punishment for the sins of the people.

What is violence?

Thus within the first few books of the Bible we come across the many dimensions of what is generally covered by the word “violence”:

- Violence as a human response arising from jealousy, fear or hatred (story of Cain and Abel).
- Violence as judgment or punishment (the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah).
- Violence as structured oppression (the Hebrews under the Egyptians).
- Violence as part of a liberation struggle (events connected with freeing the Hebrews).
- Violence in war and conquest (the occupation of Canaan).
- Violence as part of maintaining law and order (punishments related to the breaking of the social laws).
- Violence as part of religious duty or practice (the sacrificial system).

The stories of violent warfare in the Bible should of course be read in their historical context. They are part of the prevalent practice of tribes in the deserts of the Middle East constantly waging war against each other to control the few, scattered fertile portions of the land on which their survival depended. It should come as no surprise that the gods of such tribes are represented as ones that give them victory in the conquest of the fertile lands. It is also to be understood that the biblical stories and historiography are theological readings and interpretations of events by a particular people, with all the promises and problems such readings entail. But what is important for our present concern is that one of the prominent dimensions of the biblical image of God gets closely associated with domination, conquest and violence.

Contemporary Christian thinking is also delving deeply into the impact the concept of “sacrifice”, which is at the heart of both the Old and New Testaments, has on the psychology of violence. The requirement to shed animal blood as the symbol of reconciliation between God and a person who had sinned, it is claimed, justifies the shedding of blood as a religious duty. This basic principle is worked out in Christian theology in the theory of atonement, which claims that Jesus had to die a violent death in order to placate God’s anger over the sins of humankind. Jesus’ “sacrificial

death”, “shedding of blood for our sins”, and “paying the price of sin” etc. are common themes in Christian hymnody, piety and theology.

The second area where such violence plays a major role lies in the way some biblical imagery and theology depict the problem of evil in terms of violent and ongoing “battles” between good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan. Hence, the eschatological vision in the Book of Revelation presents a cosmic battle between the powers of evil and good in which the powers of evil, after a violent struggle, are conquered, overcome, subdued and eventually abolished by God and God’s angels. Power, conquest and domination take the centre stage in these images.

Violence is also clearly present in Christian images of mission and evangelization of the world. Military language like “conquering the world for Christ”, “deployment of missionaries”, “mission strategy”, “soldiers of Christ”, and “evangelistic crusades” are still very much in use in some sections of the church. It is little wonder then that parts of the history of the church are also written in blood. The burning of heretics, inquisitions, crusades, holocaust, slavery, and the ruthless violence that accompanied the establishment of Christianity in Latin America, Africa and Australia are all part of the history of Christianity.

Christians, therefore, can approach this subject only with humility and repentance.

The other side of the Bible

While the Bible is full of violent episodes, there is also another stream within the Bible that resists war and violence as against God’s will and purpose. God is also presented as loving, forgiving and compassionate (Ps. 103), a god who demands righteousness and justice in human affairs. Clear and unambiguous prohibition of killing is part of the ten commandments, and there are detailed provisions against social and economic violence in the form of relentless advocacy for justice, especially in favour of the poor and the oppressed. The prophet Amos recalls God’s displeasure with the violence perpetrated not only by Israel and Judah but also its neighbouring nations (Amos 1-2).

Significantly all the eschatological visions in the Old Testament deal with the cessation of violence and a state of reconciliation between nations, between God and human beings as well as the natural world. In Isaiah’s vision, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:6-9). Micah sees a vision of an absolute reversal of the way nations relate to one another: “He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 4:3).

Jesus the Teacher

Christians are of course specifically interested in the teachings of Jesus on violence and non-violence. There is considerable discussion among New Testament scholars on Jesus’ attitude to the Roman empire and his relationship to the Zealots who advocated a violent overthrow of the Roman power. At one point Jesus is presented as saying that he has come “not to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10: 34), and in chapter 13 Matthew again presents Jesus as reproaching the

unrepentant cities in harsh language (Matt. 11:20-24). But the bulk of New Testament witness, also by Matthew, presents Jesus as one who advocated radical non-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... 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, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:38-45,48).

Matthew also presents Jesus as espousing total non-violence in his account of Jesus’ arrest and trial. When one of the persons with Jesus drew a sword to defend him, Jesus is reported to have said, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52).

The study of the life of the early church also shows that the church, as it emerged into a new religious tradition separated from its Jewish moorings, basically espoused a non-violent stance in its relationship to the Roman empire. Even though the empire had begun an active persecution of the church for fear that those who followed “the Way” were disloyal to Rome, the church’s non-violence stance appears to have held until its whole ethos changed with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. The political power and material wealth that came with the status of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire was to change completely its attitude to violence and non-violence.

Christian approaches to war and violence

Even though Christianity eventually developed into a religion that in principle rejected violence, both in the Middle Ages as also today, Christian discussions on violence have centred mainly on the issue of whether there are situations in which some measure of violence is justified. Some are very clear that, in accordance with Jesus’ own teachings, violence is not justified under any circumstance. Within the mainstream of the church, “the historic peace churches” (mainly the Mennonites and the Quakers) have adopted the pacifist position of rejecting war and violence for any reason.

Just war

But after the Roman empire adopted Christianity as the religion of the state, the church was faced with the problem of having to respond to the acts of war undertaken by the empire, often as offensive wars but also in self-defence when attacked by outside forces. Although the initial response of the church was not to bless wars, the response to the pressure from the rulers brought forth the idea of a “just war”. The concept was developed and perfected by Ambrose and Augustine in the 4th century, where the church would support wars under certain conditions. Six criteria were developed by which a war might be declared “just”:

- the war must be declared by a legitimate authority;
- it must be undertaken with a right intention, namely, to promote peace;
- it must be used only as the last resort, namely, when all other ways of resolving the conflict have been exhausted;
- it must be waged on the principle of proportionality, which means that the evil and destruction perpetrated should not outweigh the good that comes out of it;

- it must have a reasonable chance of success, so that no wanton destruction is done when it is clear that the intention cannot be achieved;
- it must be waged with all the moderation possible, which means that violence unrelated to the battle (and to persons unrelated to the war) must be avoided.²

These principles were of course subject to interpretation, and were constantly abused to undertake military adventures, and to persecute minorities and those who challenged the state for any reason. These led Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century, to take the position that war is always sinful, even though it may have to be waged at times for a just cause.

The popularity of the theory of “just war” declined in the 20th century. But its principles have constantly re-emerged and have influenced the discussions and jurisprudence on the conduct of modern wars. In recent times the Gulf war reopened the question of just war, polarizing Christians on both sides of the argument.

Within the ecumenical movement, however, there is hesitation to call any war “just”, because modern weaponry and methods of warfare make it difficult to maintain proportionality and to separate civilians from combatants. The advent of nuclear weapons has pushed more and more churches to take a stand against war as a method of resolving conflicts. What we need, the ecumenical movement says, is “not just war, but just peace”.

Resisting evil, and the struggle for liberation

The second area of intense Christian discussion is on the use of violence to resist evil. The Nazi regime in Germany produced the classical case in which Christians had to take sides either to support evil (also by remaining silent) or to resist it actively. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisting the Nazi regime became a matter of Christian faith and discipleship. Therefore, he terminated his privileged research position at Union Theological Seminary in New York and returned to his native Germany to participate in a clandestine plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot was discovered and the Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer. Today Bonhoeffer is considered a modern martyr, and his actions are cited by moral theorists as an example of “how Christians could undertake violent actions for just causes and how occasionally they are constrained to break the law for a higher purpose”.³ Reinhold Niebuhr, a colleague of Bonhoeffer at Union Seminary, who began his career as a pacifist, also began to admit that there may be situations in which limited violence might be necessary for a just cause.

The issue has resurfaced in our day with regard to the “positive” use of violence, for example, by an armed contingent of the United Nations to prevent massacre of innocent peoples. The tragedies in Rwanda and Bosnia, for example, are cited as instances where limited and well-directed violence or armed intervention would have saved the lives of thousands of innocent victims.

There are, however, many Christians who believe that any use of violence would only breed more violence, and maintain that we should work harder on developing measures to predict, prevent and manage conflicts and on finding peaceful ways of resolving conflicts. Many groups have arisen within the Christian fold that put greater emphasis on “conflict resolution”, “peace-making” and “prevention of conflicts”.

The third area where Christians disagree on the legitimate use of violence has to do with liberation struggles. The struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa and against the brutal dictatorships in Latin America (where thousands of dissidents simply “disappeared”)

provided the stage for much discussion within the ecumenical movement on the right of peoples to take arms to liberate themselves from oppressive regimes. While some still opt for non-violent resistance, as advocated by Gandhi in the Indian liberation struggle and by Martin Luther King Jr in the struggle against racism in the USA, others insist on allowing the oppressed to decide on the nature of the struggle that is appropriate in a given situation.

Yes and no

The World Council of Churches has struggled with this question from its inception in 1948. Through several stages of debate within its programme on Church and Society an important statement was made in 1973 under the title, “Violence, Non-violence and the Struggle for Social Justice”. Without itself taking a stance on the issue, it summarized the state of the debate for the study of the churches in the following affirmations:

- non-violent action is the only way that is consistent with our obedience to Jesus Christ;
- however, there may be extreme situations where violent resistance may become a Christian duty, and in such circumstances Christians must follow principles like those enunciated for “just wars”;
- violence seems to be unavoidable in some situations where non-violence does not appear to be a viable option.

The report also identified kinds of violence that Christians must vehemently resist:

- violent causes like conquest of a people, race or class by another;
- unjustified violence such as holding hostages, torture, deliberate and indiscriminate killing of non-combatants etc.

Again, much of the emphasis was on ways of avoiding conflicts by building a culture of peace and dialogue.

Forms of violence

One of the results of the long history of Christian discussions on violence and non-violence has been the emergence of the awareness that violence is a complex reality and manifests itself in many forms. Thus, in addition to overt acts of violence, such as killing a person or engaging in warfare, there are other forms of violence that also need to be addressed. Some of these include:

- physical violence, which expresses itself in killings, massacres, genocides and other forms of blood-letting;
- structural violence, where the very social, political, cultural structures oppress, discriminate, exclude or marginalize groups of people;
- economic violence, where the economic life is organized in a way that denies even the very basic needs of people to live in dignity;
- social violence, where forces like racism and sexism exclude peoples on the basis of colour, gender, caste, ethnicity, etc;
- domestic violence, where women and children are abused or treated brutally within established relationships;
- psychological violence, where persons or groups of persons in an institution, or in a society in general, are kept intimidated and live in fear;

- moral violence, where the brutal force of the state or a dominant group denies people's human rights or their right to peoplehood.

Within the ecumenical movement, therefore, there is a general concern about a “culture of violence” that is expressed in many forms and many places. The World Council of Churches has declared the years 2001-10 a Decade to Overcome Violence, so that Christians and churches would become more aware of the violence that has seeped into all dimensions of contemporary life at all levels, and seek ways and means to overcome it. Violence in, and in the name of, religion is included in these discussions.

Terrorism and state terrorism

The September 11 incidents have brought into greater focus the question of “terrorism” as a form of violence, and the religious and moral issues involved in suicide attacks as ways of perpetrating violence to achieve what the perpetrators consider to be just causes. On the one hand, Christians distance themselves from terrorist and suicide attacks because of the indiscriminate way in which violence is directed at innocent peoples. By and large, churches and Christians reject “terrorism” as a way of attracting attention to causes that may well be just.

But even here Christians disagree. While there are some acts of terrorism that arise out of hatred and malice and should be resisted and stopped, there are others that are part of the cry for attention in desperate situations. Many Christians have therefore also begun to say that indiscriminate violence in the name of “anti-terrorism”, without consideration and alleviation of the causes that produce terrorist attacks, would only deepen the problem of violence rather than resolve it. This division among Christians has become very pronounced, for example, over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. There is very little conviction left that attempts to quell what is considered terrorist violence without resolving the underlying socio-economic-political-land issues would be futile. In the same manner, deep economic divisions that keep peoples in abject poverty or oppression, in any part of the world, are a breeding ground for violence. It is difficult to expect those who have been disenfranchised of power, pushed against the wall, and left with no hope for the future not to resort to desperate methods to attract the attention of the world. The concepts of “social violence” and “economic violence”, therefore, have been receiving greater attention of the churches today.

In relation to this, there is also greater awareness of “state terrorism”, where the state, which is expected to protect the people, has become the perpetrator of violence over sections of the population, resulting in alienation and counter-violence against the state.

The need for new thinking

Part of the discussion on religion and violence, therefore, has to do with the need to become more aware of the complexity of the concept of violence and its manifold expressions in personal, social and religious life. The thirst for “power” that goes with violence has been an abiding temptation to religious traditions, and Christianity for its part has succumbed to the lure of power, in its theological expression, ecclesial structures and its mission practice. It should, therefore, engage in an honest self-examination to understand how it has imbibed, consciously or unconsciously, structures of domination, power, exclusion and discrimination in its teachings, practices and structures. Thanks partly to theological insights from the “third-world” churches, the rise of feminism, and some dimensions of post-modern criticism, Christianity has begun to look more closely at itself in relation to religion and violence. There is a long way ahead.

NOTES

¹ François Houtart, “The Cult of Violence in the Name of Religion: A Panorama”, in Wim Beuken and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Religion as a Source of Violence?*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1997, p.1.

² Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1973, pp.9-20.

³ Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Los Angeles. Univ. of California Press, 2000, p.24.

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