

The Puzzle of Religion and Violence

Perhaps the only thing more puzzling than senseless violence is violence that is carried out in the name of high ideals. The role of religion is a particularly difficult part of this puzzle. Religious ideals, and the institutions and traditions that embody them, have been a defining element of some of the greatest moral, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of the world civilizations. And yet, these ideals, institutions, and traditions have been involved in unspeakable brutality and inhumanity. It would seem that every faith is implicated in both the constructive and destructive, the animation of life and beauty and hope and their negation. What is it about religion that inspires both the best and the worst of what humanity is capable of achieving? And how does all this play out in our world today?

Once upon a time there was the belief that as societies modernized they would become enlightened and thus abandon these troubling and confusing problems. But modernization and globalization have only intensified and complexified these dynamics. Religion has not gone away, despite the claim of secularization theories that with modernity we would see the decline and eventual disappearance of religion. Neither has violence gone away with modernization—in fact the technological developments brought by modernization have been utilized to create ever new—and ever more vicious—forms of violence.

These puzzles pose challenges that are as intellectually difficult as they are morally and politically urgent. Unfortunately our discussions of religion and violence are rife with platitudes that center on one of two claims. First are the statements that assume that religion is violent, such as: “Religion is inherently violent.” “More violence has been carried out in the name of religion than anything else.” “Religion in the public sphere leads to violence.” Second are the claims that assume that religion opposes violence, such as: “Religion is peaceful.” “Religious people have been key leaders in peaceful movements.” “Religion is about love and harmony.” But as history shows—and as the essays in this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* ask us to see—the relationship between religion and violence is much more complex than that. To begin to grasp adequately the complexities requires dexterity within multiple but analytically discrete dimensions of the puzzle.

Consider the historical and anthropological dimensions of this conundrum. Religion may be inherently violent, but might it be so in order to prevent more violence? There is evidence that suggests that archaic religions grew out of the need to limit violence in

order to ensure the continuation of the social order, using violence against scapegoats to do this. But there is variation here. René Girard argues that the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity uncover this hidden logic by narrating violence from the perspective of the victim, rather than the mob, and revealing that the chosen victim is innocent.

There are sociological aspects of this dilemma as well. From this vantage point, religion is neither inherently guilty nor innocent but problematic when moved to the political sphere. When religious templates are placed onto the political order, Mark Juergensmeyer suggests, we have conditions where individuals find motivation to commit extreme acts of violence, seeing those acts, and the rewards that will come from them, on a cosmic scale. Addressing social, economic, or political problems as religious problems may increase the amount of violence used.

Consider the conceptual assumptions of the current debate. Is it adequate simply to divide violence into religious and secular types? This is not only empirically suspect; such a dichotomy also often serves to demonize the religious violence and justify the secular violence. The implicit suggestion that religion should be kept out of discussions about the proper use of violence, William Cavanaugh suggests, gives secular authorities absolute power and provides no room for public religious reasons to resist violence.

Part of the complexity of the relationship between religion and violence arises from the fact that there are significant differences within religious traditions and between them in terms of their capacity to repress or to offer freedom, and to inspire violence or restrain it. Take the broad case of Islam as just one example. The Koran itself speaks to the contingencies of a particular time and circumstance, argues Khaled Abou El Fadl, but it also allows the believer to dream of a world that would be more humane and peaceful. Believers can get caught up in the mundane necessities and technical rituals of daily life in such a way that violence itself becomes just another ritual of sacrifice among many. We see variations along the lines of theological practice across the Islamic world today.

Much the same dynamic of variation plays out institutionally. In the more specific case of Catholicism in the war over Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slavica Jakelić shows that institutional differences and traditions within the Catholic

faith both intensified social and political animosities and generated peacemaking activities and possibilities. Theological and institutional dynamics create variations within every religious tradition.

The historical record on the relationship between religion and violence is, indeed, mystifyingly complex; its legacy is both deeply troubling and profoundly hopeful. The contemporary moment is no different: one may find the most appalling and stomach-turning forms of religiously-inspired violence as well as initiatives among religious believers who are working together to develop peacemaking practices.

The contributions to this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* move us forward on every dimension of this challenge, prodding us to think more deeply about the interrelations between violence and religious traditions and asking us to examine the platitudes we blithely utter about religion being either violent or peaceful. Our hope is that working towards a thicker understanding of these two aspects of human existence—religion and violence—might be a beginning towards goals that most of us share: encouraging the peacemaking potential of religious traditions and making violence rare.

—THR