Varieties of Violence

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Abstract

Violence is a primordial phenomenon dating back to the time when Adam and his sons resided on the Earth. As in all former eras, the twenty first century also is the eye witness of the bitter consequences of the dark side of mankind. So, globally, violence takes thousands of lives every year and the number is increasing annually due both to unequalled mixture of people of all faiths in many parts of the world and unprecedented level of free expression of either religious or secular perspectives on every aspects of life which naturally results in bare widespread violence. Various forms of violence have been recognized as violation of human rights embodied in international and regional treaties as well as in national laws and constitutions. In the present article, the diverse classifications of violence including spiritual violence are discussed, while religious violence, where religion is either the subject or object of violent behaviour, is analysed in more depth. In the concluding part of the article, while it is admitted that certain aspects of religions might be misused to support violence, it is asserted that a genuine interpretation of all Abrahamic religions' core elements would not authorize human violence and every main religion of the world has expressed kind of commitment to the value of peace: "Thou shalt not kill"[1] is in the essence of all monotheism faiths, certainly the three based upon Abraham and God. The concluding remarks of the author in this article is that, as violence is nowadays resorted to in the name of religions and religious leaders, it should, in turn, be fought by religious leaders emphasizing on

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[1] Exodus 20:13

peace, forgiveness and compassion, as the key elements in all religions.

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I. Introduction

The present essay on the violence focuses mainly on varieties of violence, with an analytical approach to probe the religions form of the violence. It attempts to examine in-depth that whilst religion has been a cause of many violent conflicts throughout the history, it is by no means the single reason for conflict. The phenomenon of violence is as old as human history and was born with human beings. The first instance dates back to the time of Adam and the conflict between his sons, Cain and Abel. Cain is a symbol of man's ability to resort to violence, while Abel is a symbol of man's capacity to avoid violence and exercise tolerance. Interestingly, the term *Adam* means person: a person created in God's own image.[2] Globally, violence resulted in the death of 1.28 million people in 2013 up from 1.13 million in 1990.[3] This number is greater than the number of deaths due to diseases like tuberculosis and malaria and road traffic accidents. Moreover, for every death due to violence, there are numerous non-fatal injuries.

Violence is in violation of many human rights, including: the right to life, liberty, autonomy, and security of the person, the right to equality and non-discrimination, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, the right to privacy, and the right to the highest standard of health. Moreover, in countries with high level of violence, economic growth can be slowed down, personal and collective security eroded and social development impeded.

These aforementioned human rights are embodied in international and regional treaties as well as in national constitutions and laws, as in Articles 19-42 of the Iranian Constitution, which provide the rights of the nation. The treaties stipulate the obligations of States, and include mechanisms to hold States accountable. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), for example, requires the Parties to the Convention to take all appropriate steps to end violence against women. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates in Article 19 that

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[2]   Bible. Gen. 1: 26-28.

[3]   GBD 2013 *Mortality and Causes of Death*, Various collaborators (17.12.2014).

States shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of any person having the care of the child.

It has to be said that for many people only physical violence truly qualifies as violence, but certainly violence is more than killing people unless we include all those words and actions that kill people slowly. The effect of limitation to "killing fields" perspective is the widespread neglect of many other forms of violence that degrade, damage or depersonalize others. In view of these considerations, violence may be defined as follows: "any action, verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, in whatever degree of intensity, that abuses, violates, injures or kill". Sometimes, violence is one of the possible responses to specific conflict situations.

Thus, Ralph Tanner cites the doctrine of violence in the Oxford English Dictionary, as going "far beyond [the infliction of] pain and the shedding of blood". He argues that, although violence clearly encompasses injury to persons or property, it also includes "the forcible interference with personal freedoms, violent or passionate conduct or language and finally passion or fury".[4]

II. Different classifications of violence

Violence can be divided according to three viewpoints:

First, from the point of view of the characteristics of those committing the violent act, it can be divided into two broad categories:

(i) Self-directed violence which can, in turn, be divided into two kinds, namely, family violence (such as child abuse and abuse of the elderly) and community violence between individuals who are unrelated, which generally takes place outside the home (such as rape, sexual assault, youth violence, and violence in schools, workplaces, prisons etc.)

(ii) Collective violence which is violence committed by larger groups of individuals or by States and can in turn be divided into the following three categories of social violence (like crimes of hate committed by organized groups, terrorist acts, mob violence) political violence (like war and state

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[4]   Ralph E.S. Tanner (2007) Violence and Religion: Cross-Cultural Opinions and Confluences, Concept Publishing at pp.5-6.

violence) and economic violence (attacks carried out with the purpose of disrupting economic activities).

From a second perspective, violence can be divided into the three broad categories of direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Examples of direct violence are murder, the killing fields in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge and the Holocaust.

On the other hand, Forced movement, such as the forced displacement of population, as applied by Pol Pot in Cambodia, is a clear display of structural violence; and cultural violence is defined as when "any aspect of culture, such as language, religion, ideology, art or cosmology is used to legitimate direct or structural violence".[5]

Third, from the viewpoint of the fundamental right which is infringed, there are nine distinct forms of violence and abuse: physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, psychological violence, verbal abuse, financial abuse, neglect, spiritual violence and cultural violence. I will mention a few words about the last two, since the others are self-evident.

Spiritual (or religious) violence targets people in their spiritual identity and aims to force a spiritual or religious path or practice on a person, or prevents him/her to his/ her preferred spiritual or religious tradition. An example of cultural violence is the honour killing of a woman after being raped, falling in love with the "wrong" person or refusing a pre-arranged marriage. Another example would be female circumcision.

As mentioned above, cultural violence refers to aspects of culture that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence against others. This may be exemplified, among other things, by religion and ideology. What is regrettable is that, in the present century, religious incentives have been placed at the top of the reasons behind conflict and violence, as if the followers of religions have neglected the main philosophy and objective of the divine religions. Sacred ignorance or, as I prefer to call it, 'double ignorance' has been the main cause of religious violence and extremism. This has mainly been due to the misunderstanding of certain theological foundations of some religious traditions.

III. Religious violence

Through the long history of human, religion has been the major contributor to conflict, carnage, hatred, intolerance and dispute between societies. Religious

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See: Johan Galtung (1990) "Cultural violence," *Journal of Peace Research*, 27: 291-305.

violence is a term that covers various phenomena in which religion is either the subject or object of violent behaviour. Religious violence is motivated by, or is in reaction to, religious precepts, texts or doctrines. This includes violence against religious institutions, people, objects, or where the violence is motivated to some degree by some religious aspect of the target or precept of the attacker. Religious violence does not refer exclusively to acts committed by religious groups, but also includes acts committed by secular groups against religious groups.

The rising tide of religious terror and violence has led some critics of religion, such as Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer to argue that all monotheistic religions are inherently violent. For example, he writes that "Judaism, Christianity and Islam will continue to contribute to the destruction of the word until and unless each challenges violence in "sacred texts" and until each affirms non-violent power of God".[6] Regina Schwarty argues that all monotheistic religions are inherently violent because of an exclusivism that inevitably fosters violence against those that are considered outsiders.[7] In addition, Lawrence Wechsler asserts that Abrahamic religions have a violent legacy, but that legacy is actually genocidal in nature.[8]

There are other opponents of religions who are more specific in their criticism of religion. Burgraeve and Vervenne describe the Old Testament as full of violence, and as evidence of a violent society and a violent God. Heitmayer and Hagan identify the Inquisition, Crusades and anti-Semitism as being "among the most notorious examples of Christian violence".[9] Islam, in its turn, has been said to be associated with violence in a variety of contexts, including jihadism and the commission of violent terrorist acts by some Muslims.

Contrary to the views outlined above, there are those like Cavanaugh who oppose the notion that the absolute or dogmatic character of religious belief makes it dangerous or lethal, and that those who take their religion too seriously or the scriptures too literally, will be more inclined to violence than those who kill for a wide range of political or secular purposes.[10] Cavanaugh argues that

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[6]   Jack Nelson-Palmeyer (2005) *Is Religion Killing us? Violence in the bible and the Qur'an,* Continuum International Publishing Group, at p.136.

[7]   Regina M Schwartz (1998) *The Cures of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, University of Chicago Press.

[8]   Lawrence Wechsler (1997) "Mayhem and Monotheism," *The New Yorker* 24 November 1997.

[9]   Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan (2003) *International Encyclopedia of Violence Research*, Vol.2, Spring 2003.

[10]   William T. Cavanaugh (2005) *Killing in the Name of God*, at pp. 127-147.

the Bible makes it clear that persons must not kill except when commanded by God and that the biblical narrative increasingly points to a God unwilling to utter that command or to permit violence. To this, can be added what has been mentioned in the Qur'an that whoever kills an innocent human being is as though he has killed the whole mankind.[11] Thus, believing that it is permitted to kill only in God's name should make persons decidedly less likely to kill.

So, it is right to assert that many would agree whit Aruna Gnanadason's assertion that "all religions have at their center a commitment to peace….[or] a spirituality of non-violence".[12]

In addition, it should be mentioned here that the Arabic word of Jihad does not completely corresponds to the two words of Holy War which were regarded among the Christians of High Middle Ages, as a Christian seal of approval on bloodiest and most horrific acts of violence. The term Jihad covers a vast set of meaning, including "effort to dominate oneself" and "to strive for the cause of God": "Fight for the cause of God with devotion due to Him. He has chosen you."[13] The term "Holy War" does not certainly appear in the Quran, since in accordance with Islamic teachings, a war can never be holy. Also, the Holy Quran provides that in times of sacred month there shall not be any act of violence[14] and within the holy places. Quran clearly stipulates that "Fight no one except the Evil-doers".[15]

At modern time, unlike the early stages of Christianity and Islam, mankind has new advanced technological means to destroy itself, therefore, both secular and religious societies should attempt their best to avoid war and spread peace. So, there is an urgent need to reread and reinterpret misconceptions that every religion has its share. For Islam, it should be announce that there are a few verses of Quran which are concerned with war or violent acts, the words mercy and peace appear more frequently than the term Jihad. In accordance with the first words of Holy Quran that are cited by Muslims at the beginning of five daily prayers (Salah Times), Allah (God) is the Compassionate (ar-rahman), the Merciful (ar-rahim). Also, Basmala (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم- in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful), the phrase recited before every Sura (Chapter) of Quran –Except for the Ninth Sura- is the first phrase in beginning of any formal speech, text, even in the preamble of laws which is among other peaceful

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[11]   Verse 32/V.

[12]   Aruna Gnanadason (2004) "Religion and Violence: A Challenge to the Unity of the Churches," *Political Theology*, 5: 61-75.

[13]   Sura 22:78. The Koran, translated by N.J. Dawood, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, London, 1990.

[14]   Sura 9:5.

[15]   Sura 2:190-193.

titles of Allah, such as the forgiver, the gentle or the forbearing. The word Islam itself means surrender or submission to Allah, which etymologically is derived from the word Salam that means Peace. Quran's golden rule of peace is as follows: "Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend".[16]

Islam, the cult of tolerance and tranquillity, possesses a great potential for peace, so, in addition to reinterpretation and education on religious tolerance and peace seeking, practical measures should be taken to implement the peace in reality. Therefore, religion is generally a force for stability and peace within cultures and sometime as a tool of resistance of the oppressed groups.[17]

IV. Conclusion

Unlike what some fundamentalists may wrongly believe, no true religion ever encounters anything but love, tolerance and understanding. "Thou shall not kill" is at the heart of all genuine faiths, and certainly of the three based upon Abraham and God. These three religions comprehensively condemn the infliction of any intentional harm to others (and to the self as well) for whatever reason. Peace, compassion and forgiveness of wrongs by others are key elements of religious teachings. As one example, even in case of the heinous crime of murder, the Qur'an, declares the murderer to be the "brother" of the victim's family and recommends that they forgive him instead of insisting on their right of retaliation.[18]

It is true that certain aspects of religions might be misused to support violence; rather a genuine interpretation of their core elements would not sanction human violence, but would instead resist it. It is a duty of learned religious leaders to enlighten certain ignorant followers about the true interpretation of sacred texts. For example, the concept of jihad is usually interpreted as "Holy War" in English, whereas it really translates as "struggle", and there are three types of struggles: an internal struggle to maintain faith (as Muslims were reminded of this after one of the battles of the Prophet), the struggle to improve the society, and the struggle in a Holy War, which may only be fought on a defensive basis.

In addition, we should note that there exist few examples of wars waged for specifically religious reasons. Examples of violence and conflict that have been secular in nature include World War I (with over 40 million casualties) and

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[16]   Sura 41:34

[17]   Bruce Lincoln (2006) *Holy Terrors*, Chicago: University of Chicago at pp.77-91.

[18]   Verse 179/II. See also verses 45/V, 40/XLII,4/V of the Qur'an.

World War II (with over 70 million casualties, of whom many were civilians), many civil wars, the Vietnam and Korean wars, the Rwanda genocide in 1990's, the genocide in Cambodia in 1970's under the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot (resulting in the murder of one and a half to three million Cambodians, or about 25 per cent of the Cambodian population,[19] it was one of the contemporary examples of state-sponsored violence) as well as more common conflicts, such as gang and drug wars. According to Phillips and Axelrod, there were 1763 wars overall, of which only 123 (seven per cent) have been classified to involving a religious conflict.[20]

It is perhaps fair to say that many of those who resort to sacred violence are not true believers. They rather see themselves as Superman who, as described in Nietzsche's Superman Theory, is a real individual involved in changing the world everyday by overcoming what he sees as evil. Superman makes his rules and follows what he believes is right. He is similar to the main Character in Dostoyevsky's novel "*Crime and Punishment*" who, in line with his ideals, kills an old pawnbroker hoping to do charitable work with her wealth, but soon realizes that he is not the superman and then suffers a psychiatric illness. To these people, who resort to acts like suicide bombing and regard themselves martyrs, the verse of the Qur'an can be recited: "say: shall we inform you of the greatest losers? Those whose effort goes astray in the life of this world, and yet they reckon that they do good work".[21]

It is to be added that as violence is nowadays resorted to in the name of religion and religious leaders, it should be fought in the same way by religious leaders emphasizing on peace, forgiveness and compassion as the key elements in all religions.

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[19]   Rebecca Joyce Frey (2009) *Genocide and Intergenerational Justice*, Facts on File Publishers at p.83.
[20]   Charles Phillips and Alun Axelrod (2005) *Encyclopedia of Wars: G to R*, cited by Alan Lurie in: *Is religion the Cause of Most Wars?*
[21]   Verses 103-104/XVIII of the Qur'an