

# ANATOMY of RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

The history of religion has been a seriously blood-bathed one. It reveals the intense power, weight, and depth of religion within the human heart. No wonder, the word "religion" itself comes from the Latin *religare* meaning "to bind". Religion binds the adherent to its belief, authority, and community. It holds an intense power over the individual. Of course, there are several instances of religious faith opening itself to philosophical dialogues and investigations in the past. However, it is a fact undeniable that much of religious faith is a matter of faith alone and not rational discussion. Therefore, they have the potential to invite physical opposition by not submitting to any force of logic. That is why in some cases words are silenced by blows – with the sanction of some religious authority.

Religious violence may be defined as violence committed in the name of religion. It is both intra-religious violence and inter-religious violence; i.e. violence within the group and violence against other groups. It must be differentiated from communal violence, apartheid, and religio-political violence, i.e. political violence in a religious garb. While communal violence and the like are more a matter of cultural differences, communal feelings, and dehumanizing theories; religious violence is exclusively related to a clash between religious beliefs, religious sentiments, and religious practices. A religious community may suddenly get infuriated at some other religious community and commit violence; however, this kind of violence should not be termed as religious unless it is committed in the name of religion alone – i.e. in recognition (true or false) of some authoritative religious basis for doing it. In this essay, we will analyze some theories that authorize religious

violence and then show their unspiritual nature and irrational procedure in the assertion of faith.

## EPISTEMIC BASES OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

By "epistemic bases" is meant the grounds for believing that religious violence is right. Analytically, all sanction for religious violence is based on authority. I used the word "analytically" because the word "sanction" itself implies sanction by some authority. There is no rational principle for religious violence. There may be one for justice and retribution but not for religious violence. On the other hand, one may look to instinct or emotion as the psychological basis for violence. However, such psychological sources of violence cannot be the sources of theories sanctioning religious violence; therefore, though instinct or emotion may be reactionary sources of violence they cannot be considered to be the epistemic basis for religiously justifiable violence. In fact, no religious authority ever sanctions the unreflective obedience to the passion of emotion. The epistemic basis is, therefore, neither reason nor experience, but it is religious authority in the form of religious tradition, leader, or scripture.

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### *Political Allegiance through Religious Allegiance*

In the Roman persecution of Christians in early Church history, the authority was chiefly political. The persecution of Christians was mainly because they were suspected of working against the State. Their allegiance to the State was examined by asking them to deny Christ and sacrifice to the gods for the well-being of the king, failing which they were punished.<sup>1</sup> This reveals the epistemic bias of judgment; that an individual's allegiance to any God should not be above the state or against any decree of the king.

Later, however, when Emperor Decius assumed control in 249 Christians began to be persecuted

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Booty, *The Church in History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 150-151.

and punished for failing to show their respect and allegiance to the Roman gods through offerings to them. The assumption was that anyone who had no respect for the Roman gods could also have no respect for the government that honored these gods. Therefore, Christians who did not offer to the gods were singled out as traitors of the Empire. In modern secular politics, however, with the separation of religion from state such criteria of allegiance no longer exist. However, there is always the danger of fundamentalist tendencies gaining root to the extent that the political guarantee of religious freedom is lost.

### ***Dharma and Violence***

The concept of religion in popular Hinduism is captured in the word *dharma*. *Dharma* means duty or righteousness (or being true to what one ought to be). *Dharma* includes among many things the practice of truth, justice, caste-duty, and spiritual discipline. In modern times, however, *dharma* is often used for "religion". But many Hindus still don't see an infrastructural difference between world religions and consider the essence of religion to be *dharma* (observance of what is one's right). That is why, Hinduism is considered to be a pluralistic religion. Its pluralism is expressed by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*<sup>2</sup> in the following words:

By whatever way men worship Me, even so do I accept them; for, in all ways, O Partha, men walk in My path (IV. 11).

Whatever form a particular devotee wishes to worship with faith – concerning that alone I make his faith unflinching. (VII. 21).

However, this liberalism is not without its restrictions; for it is soon qualified by Krishna's claims to his own exclusivity.

Even those devotees of other gods who worship (them) endowed with faith, worship Me alone, O son of

<sup>2</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Vireswarananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974).

Kunti (Arjuna), though in an unauthorized way (IX. 23).

Notice that Krishna calls the other ways of worship as "unauthorized" or, as one version says, "not according to ordinance."<sup>3</sup> Still, those ways are acceptable to him. However, though the ways of worship may be different, such differences and relativity is not allowed in matters of *dharma* or personal duty; for all personal duty (primarily of caste) is by divine ordinance. Thus, when Arjuna, the archer, is saddened by the thought of having to kill his cousins in the war, Krishna shows the irrationality of all such grief by teaching him the gist of what he claims to be true *dharma*. One quickly notices in the early part of the *Gita* the common-sense teleological ethics of Arjuna in contradiction to Krishna's view of true morality or *dharma*. Krishna explains to him that his grief over having to kill someone is unfounded since death is never a final event. The phenomena of slayer, slaying, and slain is not real in the ultimate sense; since the self is neither born nor does it ever die; it only changes bodies at death and rebirth as people change clothes (II. 19-23), phenomenally speaking but in its true sense it is unmanifest, birthless, and immutable. Arjuna must do his own duty (*swadharma*) which evidently in this case is

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### **Dharma means duty, righteousness, or being true to what one ought to be**

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punishing the wicked. The caste-duty (*varnashrama dharma*) of a kshatriya was to vanquish the foes of righteousness. The *Gita* never promotes religious violence in the sense of persecuting other religions; however, it does sanction violence against downright wickedness as a religious duty with a justification based on pantheism and the immortality of the soul.

### ***The Command to Defend***

The Koran declares Allah as the All Sovereign and Merciful one (Sura V. 39, 40). Therefore, he forgives those he chooses to forgive and punishes

<sup>3</sup> S.E. Frost, Jr. (ed.), *The Sacred Writings of the World's Great Religions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), p. 58

those he chooses to punish as it says: "Unto Allah belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. He forgiveth whom He will, and punisheth whom He will. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Sura III. 129).<sup>4</sup> In other words, since God is Sovereign Lord, He may forgive whom He will and punish whom He will. The condition for forgiveness is, however, belief. Unbelief is intolerable by God with such severity that believers (Muslims) are commanded to fight and destroy the unbelievers till they are all destroyed or converted, although they are also to be judged in the Day of Resurrection. In fact, violence in Islam originally began as a means of self-defense and as a response to the unabated religious persecution by the people of Mecca. Seeing that such persecution is only detrimental to Islam, the Koran declares: "fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is all for Allah" (Sura VIII. 39). The fight against unbelievers, however, is merciless against those who do not convert. Accordingly it says,

The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger and strive after corruption in the land will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land. Such will be their degradation in the world, and in the Hereafter theirs will be an awful doom (Sura V. 33).

Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful (Sura IX. 5).

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**ISLAM:**  
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The injunctions are clear: those who war against Allah are to be destroyed and those who repent are to be accepted as brethren. One knows of the many atrocities committed by kings like Aurangzeb who wanted to establish the Islamic religion. But there are also examples of those like Akbar and the Sufi saints who looked for peace and tolerance rather than snatch away from others their religious freedom. It is evident that all methods of conversion by force are only, at the most, externally efficient. They can't affect the internal soul. But while self-defence is justifiable seeing that one has also the obligation to care for his own body, yet it is wrong to inflict pain on anyone just because of his faith. Truth is never in need of violence unless it is in danger of being violently destroyed. However, truth cannot be violently destroyed because it is founded in the nature of God Himself and no one can destroy God. At the end, all things will be brought to judgment and consummation. Therefore, the Bible tells us not to take vengeance, for vengeance belongs to the Lord.

### ***The Command to Love***

The New Testament is straightly against violence, except when it is justly executed by a civil government, in accordance to the Law of God (Rom. 13: 1-5). However, religious violence is never endorsed by Christ for political purposes. It was biblically untrue for the Church in the past to unite with political leadership and punish those who it considered to be heretics. The Crusades are a dark spot on the history of Christianity. However, they lack an epistemological foundation in God's revelation through His Word. It was during the Reformation that the evil of the Church's uniting with political leadership to persecute the true Christians was observed. Luther differentiated between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God and made room for just rebellion against evil government when they violated God's Laws.

The Beatitude says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God" (Matt. 5: 10). The contrast between Krishna and Christ is stark here. While

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<sup>4</sup> *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, trans. M. M. Pickthall (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1992). All quotations from the Koran, unless specified, are taken from this translation.

Krishna calls those blessed that persecute others for righteousness' sake; Christ said that it is not the inflictors but the sufferers of persecution for righteousness's sake who will be rewarded. For the strength of the belief is not measured by the ability to hunt people down but by the commitment to live for it and die for it. Thus, though permitting violence in accordance to the justification of moral governments for establishing justice in society, the ultimate end of all relationships according to Christ is the Love of God. He Himself is our example who chose to suffer rather take revenge on His enemies. He doesn't take the law into His own hands until the Father permits it. For, though Christ is our Savior, He will also return as Judge of both the living and the dead.

Thus, we have seen two kinds of epistemic bases: politico-religious relationship and scriptural authority.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Modern psychological research has shown that authoritative devaluation of any human through dehumanization and deindividuation can lead to severe crime in society. Contrary to the anarchists who say that man rules and is ruled best when left to himself alone with nature; psychological research has shown that by demeaning someone, treating people as anonymous or by treating them as less than humans, violent emotions and actions against them can be evoked.<sup>5</sup> Propaganda through literature, billboards, advertisements, secret meetings, etc are ways in which indoctrination regarding falsehood occurs. The brute extent of it was witnessed during World War II in the Nazi concentration camps. Obviously, the Nazi tortures were not confessedly religious; however, they at least tell how dehumanization can bring a change in the character of man. Professor Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University, who has done intensive research on the psychology of evil, writes:

At the core of evil is the process of dehumanization by which certain other people or collectives of them, are depicted as less than human, as non

comparable in humanity or personal dignity to those who do the labeling. Prejudice employs negative stereotypes in images or verbally abusive terms to demean and degrade the objects of its narrow view of superiority over these allegedly inferior persons. Discrimination involves the actions taken against those others based on the beliefs and emotions generated by prejudiced perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

Dehumanization is only possible where love for one's neighbor doesn't exist. However, while earthly philosophies are not opposed to hatred for the enemy – even torture of him, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for them; because it is hatred that dehumanizes any individual or community and discriminates against them. Love accepts the fact of being in opposition (it doesn't suppress it) but it refuses to let such opposition transform its perspective into prejudice and hateful discrimination.

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### **Dehumanization and deindividuation (removal of individual identity) can lead to severe crime in society**

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One another psychological influence is mass suggestion where deindividuation gathers high tones. Riots and majority ruling influence people to join gang of persecutors in their evil acts; in such mob-feeling, conscience is set aside. Further, propaganda and false testimonies lead to enrage people in such direction.

## CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Evidently, the Old Testament cannot always be seen as supportive of religious tolerance. For instance, the Law of Moses stipulated death penalty for idolatry and witchcraft, for breaking the Ten Commandments, and for dishonoring God (Lev. 24: 16). But this was only binding on those who were considered to be the members of

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<sup>6</sup> "The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo" ([www.lucifereffect.com](http://www.lucifereffect.com)).

<sup>5</sup> [www.zimbardo.com](http://www.zimbardo.com) & [www.prisonxp.org](http://www.prisonxp.org)



the Covenant. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament allows any persecution of other religions in the name of religion.

The Bible indicates in 1 Timothy 2: 1, 2 that if people are not able to live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty, then a great part of it is due to the failure of civil governments to comply with the moral government of God. The word for honesty is *semnotes* in the Greek and also means "dignity" and "honor". Obviously, in a state where religious violence is rampant the dignity and honor of the citizens is lost through dehumanization. Therefore, Christians are called for to pray for the government so that there may be peace and order in the state.

We also learn from the life of Jesus and the apostles that religious persecution must be avoided as far as possible. For instance, Jesus tells His disciple to leave any city which as a whole refuses Christ's message and starts persecuting the messengers (Lk. 9: 5; cp. Acts 13: 51). Jesus Himself avoided unnecessary falling into the

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enemy's traps (Matt. 4: 12; Lk. 4: 30). Similarly, Paul escaped once through a basket when people were in wait for him, was prevented by the disciples from getting beaten by a crazy mob, and took measures to inform the authority of a group of Jewish fanatics who had vowed to not eat till they killed him (Acts 9: 25; 19: 30; 23: 17-21). He also used his Roman citizenship as a privilege to prevent unnecessary torture, to appeal to the highest court of justice, i.e. to Caesar, and to get people understand that they cannot just by-pass laws to persecute the minority (Ac. 16: 35-40; 22: 25; 25: 11). Thus, it is obvious that the Bible desires Christians to be rational in their conduct of life, seeing that the Bible does allow the avoidance of persecution if it is possible.

But in any case the Scripture forbids vengeance (Rom. 12: 19). Trials do show the strength of the

truth of one's faith in the Gospel and in the love and justice of God. The Scripture exhorts us to bless our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5: 44). Jesus came not to punish the wicked but to save the sinners. However, man is accountable for his every word and deed at the final Day of Judgment. The believer, truly, is not frightened by anything for he walks not in agitation but in faith, hope, and love.

### References

- Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Vireswarananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974).  
 Booty, John E. *The Church in History*, New York: Seabury Press, 1979.  
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### Selected Glossary:

**Dehumanization** – process or procedure of divesting humans of their human identity, dignity, and rights.

**Deindividuation** – process or procedure of removing individual identity and individuality; thus, creating a sense of anonymity.

**Epistemic** – epistemological or that which is related to the problem of knowledge.

**Individualism** – philosophy that emphasizes individual worth, rights, and specific identity apart from society.

**Secularism** - philosophical ideology that stresses, especially, the separation of science and politics from religious dominance.

**Secularization** – process by which society is freed from absolute dominance of religion or the supernatural.