Religion, Violence, and Peacemaking

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The recent rise of religiously inspired terrorism has revived interest in religion's darker capacities. Although the events of September 11 occurred only a few years ago, religion and political violence have been intertwined for centuries. Holy wars, forced conversions, witch hunts, and heresy executions led early social theorists to question why and how the religious imagination fosters and is fueled by cultures of violence. Although these are critical questions to revisit in light of contemporary political concerns, it is also important to recognize that religion has historically played a significant role in curbing violence, constraining aggression, and promoting reconciliation and understanding between disputing groups. Church history, for example, demonstrates that Christianity was responsible for the brutal Crusades but has also tried to place limits on fighting through Ambrose and Augustine's Just War criteria. Furthermore, it has inspired nonviolent groups that denounce militarism and have heroically intervened in war.

Since religion can be both bellicose and pacifying, what are the conditions that, on the one hand, make it a force that foments violence or, on the other hand, promotes peace? In his book *Terror in the Mind of God,* Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) offers an answer to the first part of this question by examining the social dynamics that foster religious violence. Comparing terrorist groups in several faith traditions, he concludes that religious terrorists share the following attributes. First, they consider contemporary forms of religion as weakened versions of the true, authentic faith. These terrorists embrace a more demanding, "hard" religion that requires sacrifice. Second, they refuse to compromise with secular institutions, critiquing "soft" religions for readily accommodating to the mainstream culture. Thus Islamic radicals call for a stronger stance against Western influence, Jewish settlers denounce Israeli politicians who are willing to negotiate over the occupied territories, and abortion clinic bombers reject U.S. Christians' complacency vis-à-vis the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision. These activists feel justified in defying laws since they view their responsibilities as citizens as secondary to their faith and religious obligations. Finally, Juergensmeyer notes that religious terrorists reject the public-private split whereby faith is considered a private matter to be kept outside the realm of politics. Some even hope that their actions will contribute to the demise of the secular state, ultimately leading to the establishment of a theocracy.

Yet these same attributes are also typical of many religious activists who aim to *stop* political violence. For example, the U.S. Catholic Left repudiates "soft Christianity" that acquiesces to expanding American militarism. This group commits radical acts of peacemaking by breaking into weapons production sites and military compounds to disarm weapons of mass destruction through sabotage. Those who participate in these "plowshares actions" face lengthy prison sentences, but this does not deter them since they believe that authentic faith yields the same consequences that Christ and the early apostles faced, namely, prison and death (Nepstad 2004). Similarly, Quakers have a longstanding tradition of rejecting compromises with secular institutions such as the government. They refused conscription and military service (which most religious groups accept) and denounced slavery. Yet Quakers did not confine their convictions to a personal refusal to own slaves or private decisions to boycott goods produced by slave labor. They actively interfered with the institution of slavery by participating in the Underground Railroad and obstructing slave hunters' efforts after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Perhaps the best-known religious

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peacemaker, Mahatma Gandhi, also rejected a complete public-private split, stating: "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics . . . You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments" (Gandhi 1958:63).

If these three traits—rejection of soft religion, the public-private split, and compromises with secular society—characterize religious terrorists as well as peacemakers, then why is religion sometimes divisive and destructive and sometimes a powerful force for peace? Aside from ethical differences on the use of force, there are several factors that distinguish peaceful religious movements from violent ones. I offer some reflections on these differences by examining commonalties in the philosophy and practice of several prominent religious peacemakers of various faiths—Gandhi (Hindu), Daniel Berrigan (Catholic), Martin Luther King Jr. (Protestant), and Thich Nhat Hanh (Buddhist). Although this type of comparative analysis could include a variety of other factors, I focus on distinctions in the worldviews and religious imaginations of these groups.

Distinctions Between Violent and Nonviolent Religious Activists

Views on the Nature of Good and Evil

One notable point of divergence between radical religious peacemakers and religious activists who use violence is found in their view of good and evil. For religious terrorists, there is no ambiguity: they perceive their enemies as completely wicked and consider themselves the protectors of righteousness. James Aho (1994) argues that this tendency to view conflicting parties in Manichean terms is not unique to religious groups. In fact, he states that both religious and secular groups manufacture enemies because this provides the opportunity to valiantly battle evil, thereby establishing themselves as heroes and granting meaning and purpose to their existence. Furthermore, Aho notes that enemies function as a societal enema, allowing groups to transfer their own negative attributes to others and purifying themselves in the process.

> We represent right, *Recht,* law and morality. We are righteousness; we are rigid; we are, to use a term familiar to clinical psychologies of anality, "rectal." We comprise the social rectum, as it were. The enemy is what is wrong, what is left, not right, what is left behind, that which remains. What remains is waste material, the refuse of the social body, what it refuses, that which is not permitted . . . . Moral campaigns purge the social body of its refuse. They represent public enemas of sorts, collective "escapes from evil." (Aho 1994:109)

When religiosity is mixed into the process of constructing an enemy, it can intensify the conflict. If people believe that they are carrying out a divine mandate, they may be less willing to negotiate, since the devout will not compromise the will of God. Furthermore, earthly struggles may take on cosmic significance, reflecting a transcendent battle between good and evil. This type of worldview often leads people to draw rigid, impermeable divisions between groups. Evil is no longer an individual trait but rather a characteristic of an entire group that is considered incapable of change. "A satanic enemy cannot be transformed," Juergensmeyer states, "it can only be destroyed" (2000:217). The only way to completely eliminate evil, therefore, is to annihilate the wicked and any means used to accomplish this are morally justified.

For religious peacemakers, the line between good and evil lies within each individual, not between groups. By acknowledging that we are all capable of evil, the basis for moral self-righteousness is removed and it becomes difficult to condemn others for weaknesses that all people possess. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, frequently emphasizes this point. He deconstructs rigid dualisms and simplistic moral judgments as he speaks about a letter he received from a Southeast Asian refugee who recounted how he and others fled by boat, only to encounter a pirate who raped one of the refugees—a 12-year-old girl. The girl became so despondent that she threw herself into the ocean and drowned. Hanh writes:

> When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But . . . in my mediation I saw that if I had been born in the same village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, there is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I cannot condemn myself so easily. In my meditation, I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in 25 years a number of them will become sea pirates . . . . If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs. (1987:62)

Recognizing that everyone is capable of committing injustices, religious peacemakers also believe that all individuals are redeemable. Unlike the religious terrorists who argue that the wicked cannot be transformed, advocates of nonviolence assert that anyone can be converted. Rather than shunning their enemies and accentuating divisions, peacemakers intentionally traverse group boundaries to have dialogue and develop relationships with their opponents. Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest who destroyed draft files during the Vietnam War and damaged missiles during the nuclear arms race, underscores this point.

> [T]he Christian (if he follows Christ's example) will constantly want to cross over and be with the ex-communicated, or be with the stigmatized, or be with the so-called "enemy." . . . For those who belong to the radical religious community, I don't care whether it is located in the East or West, whether it is Christian or Buddhist, there is a constant insistence that . . . whatever judgments are rendered, they are not retributive so much as redemptive. Mercy is the point. We are trying to say even to those who in the name of law or in the name of power commit most awful actions against others—we are declaring that those people are redeemable too. (Berrigan and Coles [1971] 2001:165).

This should not be misunderstood as unrealistic optimism or naïve faith in the essential goodness of humanity. Martin Luther King Jr. called people to be realistic pacifists who would not ignore "the glaring reality of collective evil" (King 1958:99). He emphasized that all humans have the capacity for both good and evil but he argued that the use of violence expands an individual's malevolence whereas nonviolence calls forth virtuosity.

Views on the Nature of Truth

A second fundamental distinction between nonviolent and violent religious activists centers on their views of truth. Religious terrorists maintain that there is only one truth that is timeless and unchanging. Protecting this divine, absolute truth is of paramount importance and thus ideas take precedence over people. In contrast, Thich Nhat Hanh argues that this mindset is dangerous, leading to dogmatism and a readiness to kill in the name of truth. His religious principles encourage the opposite—nonattachment to ideas. He describes the first three precepts of the Tiep Hien Order of Engaged Buddhism.

> First: Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth . . . . Human life is more precious than any ideology, any doctrine. . . . [I]f you have an ideology and stick to it, thinking it is the absolute truth, you can kill millions. This precept includes the precept of not killing in its deepest sense. Humankind suffers very much from attachment to views. In the name of truth, we kill each other . . . . Second: Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn to practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints . . . . Third: Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness. (Hanh 1987:89–91)

This alternative perspective is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Gandhi's life and work. Gandhi maintained that "Truth is God," in contrast to the more common premise that God is truth. Since humans do not know God completely and fully, then they do not possess absolute

truth and hence are not in a position to punish others. Thus, rather than being protectors of the truth, Gandhi argued that we should be pursuers of it, which is tantamount to seeking God. This quest for truth requires individuals to unmask falsehoods, persistently persuading oppressors to stop perpetrating injustices. Yet it also requires truthseekers to remain unceasingly open to other views, including their opponent's. This is the heart of the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha,* translated as "holding on to truth" or "truth force." Joan Bondurant (1958) described it as a "Gandhian dialectic" since the ultimate goal of *satyagraha* is to synthesize the truths of both parties in a conflict, thereby expanding their common ground and bringing each closer to God. In practice this means that religious activists cling to their understanding of truth, aiming to resolve conflicts through persuasion of their opponents in word and action. Yet simultaneously the *satyagrahi* (truthseeker) invites the other side to demonstrate the correctness of its position. Bondurant carefully notes that this is not equivalent to compromise. She states:

> [T]he Gandhian technique proceeds in a manner qualitatively different from compromise. What results from the dialectical process of conflict of opposite positions as acted upon by satyagraha, is a synthesis, not a compromise. The satyagrahi is never prepared to yield any position which he holds to be the truth. He is, however, prepared—and this is essential—to be persuaded by his opponent that the opponent's position is the true, or the more nearly true, position . . . . When persuasion has been effected, what was once the opponent's position is now the position of both antagonist and protagonist. There is no victory in the sense of triumph of one side over the other . . . . There is no "lowering" of demands, but an aiming at a "higher" level of adjustment which creates a new, mutually satisfactory, resolution. (1958:197)

Satyagraha does not mean that religious peacemakers are any less radical than religious activists who use violence. Gandhi's faith and convictions inspired him to fight for comprehensive social change in India's political, economic, and cultural realms. His movement had revolutionary goals—to free India from British colonial rule, to move toward economic self-sufficiency, and eliminate the caste system. This is not the "soft" compromising religion that religious terrorists repudiate. The Gandhian pursuit of Truth/God, the Catholic Left's efforts to abolish weapons of mass destruction, and Engaged Buddhists' efforts to stop the Vietnam War required serious sacrifice. Similar to religious terrorists, these religious peacemakers were willing to die for their faith and their cause. However, they were not willing to kill for it.

Views of Religion

The discussion of Gandhi's view of truth reveals that religious terrorists and religious peacemakers also think of faith in fundamentally different ways. For religious terrorists*, religion is an end in itself.* Often, their struggle is not only to defeat earthly evil but also to usher in an era in which their religion dominates. For some, this may take the form of a theocracy while others believe their actions will inaugurate an apocalypse that will culminate in a spiritual transformation of the world (Juergensmeyer 2000). Because religion is the end goal, people may be sacrificed in order to establish or preserve a religious foothold in society.

For religious peacemakers, *religion is viewed as a means to an end*, namely, enlightenment, truth, or spiritual fulfillment. Thich Nhat Hanh asserts that religious principles and practices are methods designed to guide individuals toward this destination. "Buddha's teaching is only a raft to help you cross the shore, a finger pointing to the moon," he states. "Don't mistake the finger for the moon. The raft is not the shore" (Hanh 1987:89). Moreover, many religious peacemakers hold that the type of vessel one uses to reach the shore is not so important. Gandhi commented:

> Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals. If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of others too. So long as there are different religions, every one of them may need some distinctive symbol. But when the symbol is made into a fetish and an instrument of proving the superiority of one's religion over others, it is fit only to be discarded. ([1958] 1999:54)

For religious peacemakers, therefore, the goal is spiritual enlightenment and truth—not only for individuals but also for society as a whole. This is not to be confused with religious terrorists' desire to establish a religious government or culture but rather to integrate religiously inspired principles of justice and respect for all people into the fabric of society.

Conclusion

A comprehensive discussion of the factors that contribute to religion's capacity to promote respect, dialogue, and nonviolent resolution of conflicts—or, conversely, promote a climate of terror—requires a more systematic, in-depth investigation than I offer in this brief essay. Although I examine key differences in the worldviews of religious peacemakers and terrorists, future research ought to explore the broader structural influences on religious actors' decisions to adopt nonviolent or violent tactics. For instance, recent debates suggest that the spread of democracy may inhibit violent revolutionary movements and foster nonviolent protest as opposition groups can now work for reform within the system. Although the nature of religious terrorism is fundamentally different from political acts of violence, we do not have systematic data that determines whether or how various forms of government affect religious activists' tactical choices. Juergensmeyer (2000) also suggests that key historical developments and economic shifts have contributed to the global rise of religious violence; we need similar comparative information about the type of environmental changes that foster the emergence and vitality of faith-based peacemaking movements. Additionally, the social organization within religious groups is another factor that merits further consideration. Do hierarchical religious institutions encourage moral dualism and dogmatic views of truth more or less often than decentralized groups that determine and implement doctrine at the local level?

I have not presented a definitive theoretical account of why religion sometimes promotes violence and at other times fosters peace. Rather, I drew attention to the fact that religion is not inherently dogmatic, rigid, socially intolerant, and exclusive. It can be—and this is true for both conservative as well as progressive faiths. However, when religious teachers and practitioners reject simplistic moral dualism and define themselves as truthseekers rather than truth protectors, then religion can undercut the polarizing dynamics of conflict. It can be a potent force that encourages disputing parties to see the limitations of their own perspectives, the humanity of the opposing side, and the possibility of transforming even hardened hearts. Religion can operate as a moral compass that values human life over ideas. Those who seek fulfillment through a "hard" faith will find that many nonviolent faith traditions require resolute commitment and sacrifice, including the willingness to offer one's life as Gandhi, King, and other religious peacemakers have done. Radical religious peacemaking demands the type of altruism that accepts suffering but does not inflict it on others.

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