

The Contexts of Religion & Violence

Introduction

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

[1] When the terrorists who flew airplanes into the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001, and their supporting organization, Al Qaeda, used the rhetoric of Islam to justify their actions, the problem of religion and violence entered the public square in an unprecedented and urgent way that it had not in recent U.S. history. Whereas much of the public discourse of the twentieth century focused on the dangers of ideology – fascism on the right and communism on the left – the twenty-first century has given birth to a new enemy: the religious extremist. Religion had previously served a positive social role, such as the religion of Martin Luther King Jr. and others that was a catalyst for peace and social change during the Civil Rights Movement. With 9/11 religion became the legitimation of mass murder. Moreover, the problem of religion and violence posed by the terrorism of 9/11 was compounded by the fact that the new enemy spouted its hate through a religious rhetoric with which most Americans were unfamiliar.

[2] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Islam was a minority and little understood religion in the United States. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration repeatedly defended Islam by distancing the terrorists from their own religion. In public addresses, President Bush claimed: “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don’t represent peace. They represent evil and war” (17 September 2001, Islamic Center of Washington, D.C.), and “The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself” (20 September 2001, Joint Session of Congress). Perhaps the Bush administration sought to reject the

religious overtones of 9/11, or to reassure American citizens that their Muslim neighbors are not terrorists, and certainly the President sought to appease our Muslim allies in the Middle East and Asia. But can the role of religion in general, and Islam in particular, in the violence of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in Madrid, Bali, and London be so easily dismissed? Were the terrorists' religious convictions inauthentic or inconsequential?

[3] Although the statement "Islam is peace" is a common misunderstanding of its etymological meaning (Islam is related directly to *al silm*, "submission," and only secondarily to *al salaam*, "peace"), the Qur'an does present Islam as a peaceful and tolerant religion. The Qur'an states, for example, "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things" (2:256, Yusuf Ali), and "Say ye: 'We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah (in Islam)'" (2:136). But the Qur'an also includes numerous statements supporting violence, such as: "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya [a tax imposed on non-Muslims] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29). According to the Qur'an, God is compassionate and merciful, but uses violence or the threat of violence to punish the wicked and ensure the faithfulness of believers. The violence that pervades the Qur'an makes it impossible to accept the simple equation that "Islam is peace."

[4] Judaism and Christianity are no better off. The violence that is depicted in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament or TaNaK) is well known: God sends down sulfur and fire from heaven to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. After repeatedly causing the Egyptians to suffer through numerous plagues, God kills all first born males and then incites the Egyptian army to pursue the Israelites so that God can kill them at the Red Sea. God leads the Israelites into the Promised Land with instructions that they should annihilate the Canaanite population. The God of the Bible also acts violently against his own people. God makes a covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai and threatens violence if the Israelites do not obey God or observe God's commandments. When the Israelites fail to follow God's covenant, God brings foreign armies in war against them, resulting finally in the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of his people to Babylon.

[5] In the Christian tradition, Jesus has been credited with preaching peace: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 6:44, NRSV) and "Do not resist the evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 6:39). Yet there are other texts that would seem to support violence, even violence within the home: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household" (Matthew 10:34-35). Indeed, even the crucifixion would seem to give an ambiguous message regarding violence: of a Son, who willingly submits to the violence of others; of a Father, who demands a violent sacrifice.

[6] The problem of religion and violence is not simply the misappropriation, or “hijacking,” of a religious tradition by those who otherwise do not embody the religion. The religious tradition of Muslims, as well as Jews and Christians, is itself filled with violence. In other words, the problem of religion and violence is inherent in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and perhaps also to the very nature of religion. Drawing upon the work of Paul Tillich, Richard Hecht claims in this volume that religion is all about meaning – religion uses symbolic communication, behavior, persons, places, and objects to articulate that which is ultimate – and it is religion’s role in meaning-making that links it to violence: “It is not just that religion provides justification for acts of ultimacy, acts of violence, but is essential to it. Religion is thus not hijacked by bad people to justify evil acts. Religion is the carrier of meaning, often meanings that are contradictory, but always about meaning” (§19). Because religion may bear violent as well as peaceful meanings, the problem of religion and violence invites us to explore the circumstances and conditions of the violence and the purposes to which the religion is put.

[7] In the present volume, ten scholars examine historically, socially, culturally, and religiously diverse cases of religion and violence. Their purpose is not to discover some common or universal explanation for the nexus of religion and violence – such theories are in abundance – nor to offer solutions to the problem of religion and violence, though their work might aid in that effort. Rather, their purpose is simply to understand the contextual particularities of specific cases of religion and violence. In an age that is becoming characterized by religious conflicts and extremism, the problem of religion and violence needs to be recognized as a problem that unites rather than divides Jews, Christians, and Muslims. All seek to promote peace and justice in the world, yet all must confront the violence in their own tradition. Understanding the contexts of religion and violence is but a first step.

[8] Most of the papers in this volume were originally presented at “Religion and Terrorism in Context,” a symposium sponsored by the Kripke Center at Creighton University on November 14, 2005. Noreen Herzfeld was not a participant at the symposium, but her work on the massacre of Muslims at Srebrenica, Bosnia, was recommended by Vern Neufeld Redekop, and we are pleased to include it in this volume.