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Religious Violence and the Conspiracy of the Secular West

*Vhuyashi Das**

ABSTRACT

Religion has a dangerous tendency to condone, propagate and even promote violence. This idea is so deeply rooted in both Eastern and Western social and political psyche that it is almost impossible to separate religion and politics from their policies and institutions. However, I will challenge the validity of this thought in this paper. Firstly, I will try and prove that dividing institutions and ideologies into separate watertight compartments is not possible and when done becomes incoherent and arbitrary. Secondly, this division just seems to ignore some varieties of violence are while others are condemned. Finally, this paper will try to prove these two hypotheses and bring home the conclusion that, while religion has to an extent instigated violence, it has usually done so in alliance with secular, political and economic forces with a very 'worldly' end in mind.

Keywords: *Religious Violence; Secular; Politics.*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Religious Violence and the Conspiracy of the Secular West

All people understand that at one level religion has a dangerous tendency to condone, propagate and even promote violence. It has been driven so deep in the Western social and political psyche (a view that the Indian academic also subscribes to) that it underlines their many policies and institutions.

This paper is an opportunity to challenge the wisdom of the said thought. However, that will be done in ways that will differ from the methods applied by individuals who see themselves as religious. Such people usually argue that all motivation that happens to be the life blood of religious bloodshed is in fact political and economic.

Another popular argument is that people who carry out acts of religious violence are in fact not religious at all. So by definition a crusader can't be a Christian in spirit, as he has no real understanding of the words of Christ.

I believe that neither of these arguments holds any real meaning because firstly, it's almost impossible to separate religion from political and economic motives in a straight and clear cut way which exonerate religious motives as being innocent of the act of violence, committed under its influence.

2.0 Detaching Religion from Politics

How could one, for instance, detach religion and political affairs in Islam, when the Muslims themselves have never made any such division? Secondly, in the case of zealous Crusader, it can be argued that he has misunderstood the real message of his saviour, Jesus Christ, but even then we can't therefore excuse the religion of Christianity of all blame. Christianity isn't simply a set of spiritual guidelines. Rather it's lived chronological experience personified and shaped by observable deeds of all Christians through history. So I don't have any plan of excusing Islam or Christianity and any other spiritual/religious belief from careful investigation. The fact is that under certain conditions, all religious philosophies have been seen condoning and contributing to violence.

3.0 Religious Violence Versus Secular Violence

However, conventional wisdom also believes that compared to religion, institutions and ideologies that are seen as 'secular' are much less violent. This is something that I will challenge in my essay and will do so in two separate steps. Firstly, I will try and prove that dividing institutions and ideologies into separate watertight compartments is not possible and

*Department of Dept. of Applied Sciences, Delhi Technical Campus, Noida (UP), India.

when done becomes incoherent and arbitrary. Whenever academic arguments on whether religion causes violence are examined it's often found that what is or isn't considered as religion is often based on indefensible and subjective assumptions. Because of this some varieties of violence are ignored while others are condemned.

Then the question arises that 'if religion is seen as being more violent than secular institutions is so illogical, how did the idea become so persistent?' The answer, I believe is because the West finds it ideologically useful and comforting. Creating the falsehood of violence encouraged by religion helps in establishing a blind-spot with regards to the violence inflicted by a supposedly secular country. The west revels in the belief that secular and liberal states came into being to establish an environment of peace and end the struggle between warring religious groups. Since today the West finds itself under the burden of maintaining peace as it reels under the threat of uncompromising fanaticism of the Muslim world, the dichotomy of between the secular west which is peace loving and rational and the marauding religious zealots is proving to be quite useful. As such Islamic violence needs to be condemned and punished because being religious it's divisive and irrational, while the violence inflicted by the secular west is necessary, peacemaking and rational. As such though saddening it's actually necessary to bomb the fanatical Muslims into adopting a scientific and rational temperament.

4.0 The Incoherence of the Argument

Since the September 2011 attacks on the twin towers, academic institutions have been riddled by articles and books that attempt to somehow explain the reason that why does religion which is supposed to work towards peace and spiritual growth of its followers has consistently shown a unusual tendency towards aggression and bloodshed.

These academic contributions come from experts of various different fields: religious studies, sociology and history. I will try and examine a number of examples – borrowed from a number of important books on the theme of religion and violence – and explain why these books similar: which is an ineptness in separating violence contributed by religion from that contributed by secular bodies. When religion becomes Evil written by Charles Kimball states 'though somewhat

hackneyed but it's sadly true that more battles have been fought, more people mercilessly slaughtered and more evil has been perpetrated by religion than any other institution or force in the history of humanity.' The author feels that his claim is so true and universal that he doesn't feel the need to reinforce his claim with any empirical evidence. But if he had tried to prove it, then he would have had to carve out a perception of religion which would at the very least be theoretically separate from other secular institutions in the course of history. Even though the author doesn't attempt to identify these so-called secular forces, one obvious contender that emerges is political: kingdoms, fiefs, tribes, states etc. The issue here is that religion strongly dominated statehood right till the modern times. How could we separate Egyptian, Roman or even The Mughal Empire from their respective religions, where the head priest, the pope or the ulema was almost as strong an authority figure as the ruler himself? In fact the ruler was shown drawing rightful authority from the all mighty himself to rule over his subjects and this was sanctioned by the high priest of the respective religion. In the 1935 book *Story of Civilization Our Oriental Heritage* Will Durant argues.

"The Mohammedan conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. The Islamic historians and scholars have recorded with great glee and pride the slaughters of Hindus, forced conversions, abduction of Hindu women and children to slave markets and the destruction of temples carried out by the warriors of Islam during 800 AD to 1700 AD. Millions of Hindus were converted to Islam by sword during this period."

The fact of the matter is that rulers in question had spiritual backing of the religious heads of carry out acts of genocide, to strengthen their political position in the country. In his 1962 epic *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith tried to prove that religion as a human activity is separate from politics, culture and various other areas of life and is in fact simply a product devised by the Modern West.

Since then several other scholars like Richard King, Russell McCutcheon, Derek Peterson have tried to demonstrate that the concept of religion was actually invented by the bureaucrats serving the European colonial powers to categorize their non-western fiefs as backward and irrational. However, now that we can argue that that 'religion' has

emerged as a separate entity, can we classify it as a coherent one? According to Jonathan Smith, religion has been created solely for the purpose of scholarly study and has no existence independent of the academy. Brian Wilson feels that religion is nothing more than an ‘article of mythological dogma’ and Timothy Fitzgerald feels that religion nothing more than vague mysticism and as such should be scrapped. What we have here are two groups of academics, one of which is convinced that religion is the root cause of violence while the other refuses to believe that there is any such thing as religion to start with.

5.0 Practicing Nationalism with a Religious Fervour

The former group couldn’t care less and merely acknowledges it as a problem in terms of semantics. Charles Kimball goes to great length to assure us that religion is of utmost importance to human life and permeates all facets of it. And nowhere is it truer than in the university. Under religious studies as a subject we’ll find witchcraft, totems, Marxism, liberalism, Nationalism, free market philosophy, sports, Japanese tea ceremonies and a host of philosophies that are taught in the spiritual context. So if the definition of ‘religion’ can be expanded to the point that it is seamlessly able include subjects that fall in the category of ‘secular’ beliefs and philosophies, and then religion cannot obviously be limited to a belief in Gods and Goddesses. There are a number of ideologies and religions that do not confirm to religious deity in a way that other do. In *Nationalism: A Religion* written by Carlton Hayes in 1960, the author argues that in USA ‘nationalism’ or ‘patriotism’ is the most powerful religion. It’s something that we in India can all identify with. The image of ‘Bharat Mata’ may have Hindu connotations, but is still as secular a unifying force which could have been conceived of to back strengthen the Independence movement. In his play *Bharat Mata* first performed in 1873, Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay elaborated the meaning the national deity in idealist terms. Essentially it came to represent a spiritual essence and transcendental ideal of the Universe as well as an expression of nationhood. Initially an icon to create nationalist feelings in us during the freedom struggle, it soon became the symbol of the so-called extremist forces,

who were willing to go to any lengths to win freedom for the nation. A pseudo-religious motif used to serve a political purpose brings to fore the necessity of a spiritual force to arouse strong emotions – sanctioning a violent response from the people.

6.0 War: A Religion in Itself

Terror in the Mind of God by Mark Juergensmeyer is perhaps one most influential books written on relationship between violence and religion. According to the author, religion intensifies the tendency to divide people in friends and foes and good and evil and lock them in a struggle for ‘moral’ not economic or political victory. This is what makes religious violence particularly relentless and savage since it takes worldly fights and turns them into battles of cosmic proportions. That’s what separates religious violence from secular violence as the former is absolutist, symbolic and unrestrained by time. If we go by the concept of Juergensmeyer we would see that there’s no possible way to distinguish a religious war from a secular one. But in the same breath, the author undermines his distinction as he continues to analyse it. What he deduces about secular war is actually quite undistinguishable from a religious war. According to him, war is an all out struggle against an enemy who must be destroyed at all costs. No compromise can happen between the warring factions and the existence of one is a threat to the existence of the other and until the threat is crushed or at least contained one’s own survival will be at peril. Such an attitude may be regarded as noble and heroic by those who sympathies lie with the party and demonic and dangerous by those who are not. Either way, it cannot be regarded as rational. Simply put war and violence gives us an excuse of refusing to compromise. It is true even if the issues at the heart of the matter may not warrant such a stance. When this happens the differences between an epic cosmic struggle between spiritual forces and a mundane worldly secular war disappears completely. War becomes a worldview and a religion in its own right.

7.0 The Conspiracy of the Secular West

Conventional wisdom argues that is if religion being the root cause of violence is incoherent, then what makes it so prevalent. That I feel is because the West continues to see it as use. In the domestic sphere, it’s used by policy makers to silence the

representatives of certain religions. Since the liberal state has learnt its bloody lesson about the necessity to tame religion and cocoon it into the safety of the private sphere, it helps justify the attitude of the West towards the non-western Muslim world – the primary point of contention between the two being latter's stubborn refusal curb the passion of their religious beliefs from invading the public sphere. Since the West has long ago moved towards secularisation having learnt the painful lessons of religious strife, it simply wants make peace with the Muslim world. Unfortunately, because their stubborn fanaticism has made truce so difficult, it becomes something of a necessity to bomb them into acknowledging the benefits of secular democracy. The poignancy of the similarity of the current situation with the atrocities the Hindus suffered at the hands of the jingoistic Muslim invaders hardly needs to be pointed out. In *The End of Faith* Sam Harris tries hard defend the double standard of the secular West. While he strongly attacks the irrational persecution and torture of innocent people accused of being witches, he vociferously defends the torturing of terrorists. He is convinced that there's no way that the rational and secular West can ever reason with the Islamic world. Instead they need to deal with fanatical Muslims by force. Harris in his book argues that they are confronted by a group of people with beliefs that can't be justified rationally and as such can't even be discussed, yet many of the demands made on the USA and the larger Western world by Islamists are based on these beliefs. The problem will be compounded with such a group of people ever get access to nuclear weapons. Since there's little possibility of cold war with a fanatical group armed with weapons of mass destruction, the only thing Harris feels will ensure survival of the West is a pre-emptive strike. The author of course admits that it will be an unthinkable act leading to the deaths of millions of innocent men and women, but it's quite likely that if they don't, they will be one facing the death squad. The only peaceful solution he can offer is that of benign dictatorship over the Islamic nation to help them form a civil society. He concludes by saying that while it seems like an arrogant doctrine to follow, they are left with no viable alternatives. One doesn't need to go very deep to find startling similarities between the Harris' logic from doctrine of the erstwhile president of USA, George Bush, who believed that America with its access to liberal values

and secular philosophy must use its powers ensure that such values are followed 'on every continent' and that America should be prepared to take pre-emptive military measures to ensure the promotion of such values. In its arrogance, the USA tried using massive amounts of violence tried to free Iraq from religious bloodshed. Needless to say that it was an inherently contradictory effort doomed to fail.

8.0 Conclusions

Through this essay, I have attempted to refute both religious and academic arguments that religion purely to be blamed for all 'religious' conflicts and the violence committed secular rational West is always in self defence and for the greater good of humanity. While religion has to an extent instigated violence, it has usually done so in alliance with secular, political and economic forces with a very 'worldly' end in mind. (Words: 2524)

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