JPJRS 6/1 ISSN 0972-3331, Jan 2003 101-120
DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4265624
Stable URL:http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4265624

The Hijacking of Religion Unmasking Violence Discourse

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Abstract: The author studies the relation between religion and violence within the special context of India. He tries to unmask religious discourse on violence and contends that most of the violence in the world is not caused by religion but by the state.

Keywords: Violence, terrorism, religion, state violence, religious discourse.

In his editorial introduction to the book "Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World," Mark Juergensmeyer begins in the following way:

> Violence has always been endemic to religion. Images of destruction and death are evoked by some of religion's most popular symbols, and religious wars have left through history a trail of blood. The savage martyrdom of Hussain in Shiite Islam, the crucifixion of Jesus in Christianity, the sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur in Sikhism, the bloody conquests in the Hebrew Bible, the terrible battles in the Hindu epics, and the religious wars attested to in the Sinhalese Buddhist chronicles indicate that in virtually every tradition images of violence occupy as central a place as portrayals of non-violence (Juergensmeyer 1992: 1).

From the above citation of Juergensmeyer one may be led to the impression that religion is the major source of violence in the world, even though Juergensmeyer himself does not subscribe to this view. One might however be tempted to attribute the rising violence in the world, as many 'post September 11' newspaper articles did, to the variable of religion. The situation, I feel, is far more com-

plex and such a simplistic, straightforward cause-effect analysis is problematic to say the least. It is the premise of this paper that most of the violence in the world today is not caused by religion, but is state-driven. Not only was the birth of nation-states associated with violence, (vide the English, Russian, Chinese, French revolutions), but the nation-state is the only agency that has the means, the money, the technology and a military-complex to unleash a scale of violence of alarming proportions. By far the greatest amount of violence in the world is state produced, state supported or a reaction to state repression.

If this is true, then why is religion associated with violence? The clue to an answer lies, I imagine, in discourse theory. Strictly speaking, religion has little to do with violence (Schilleebeeckx 1997: 131). However, the nature of religious discourse is such that it can be used as a tool by the state and other agencies to 'legitimatize' violence. Thus, indirectly it does have a part to play. The purpose of this paper is to try to understand how religious discourse is used as a legitiming force.

1. Religion provides the language, the mythology, the imagery, which can then be used by political or politico-religious leaders to motivate people to violence.

2. Religion is a powerful source of identity; so if political leaders use religious discourse, based on the majority religion, to construct a national identity, the door is open for violence against minorities.

3. The variable of religion is used as a smokescreen or external 'peg' to conceal deeper economic or material interests, which are the real causes of conflict.

The purpose of this paper then is not to develop an apology for religion but to unmask the discourse by which religion is linked with violence. Specifically, the paper's task is twofold: to establish firstly that the so-called 'religious violence' compares minimally to the scale of state violence; secondly, to understand the role of religious discourse in explaining the association of religion with violence.

Different types of violence

If violence is defined as "the destruction of life, limb or property," perhaps it might be best to begin by an elementary classification of the different types of violence experienced in this world. The focus of this classification would be the 'perpetrator' of violence, rather than the 'victim' of violence. Eqbal Ahmed affords a brilliant starting point with his taxonomy of terrorism (2001). I propose to modify his typology, adapt it for violence and flesh it out with examples of my own. While Ahmed spoke of five types of terrorism, I would suggest six types of violence.

1. One type of violence is the violence perpetrated by individuals. Under this category I would include homicide, abuse, assault and battering as well as every form of discrimination, whether of gender, race, or age. In all these cases, violence is committed by an *individual,* whether out of revenge, jealousy, or any other motivation.

2. Another type of violence is the violence of organized crime. Here I would include the loss of life and property that results from delinquents and gangs, whether professionally organized like the mafia or even those not so well orchestrated, but generally associated with businesses like gambling, narcotics and land acquisition.

3. The third type of violence is called religious violence, *in the strict sense*, that is to say, violence committed by religious persons or religious organizations. Under this there are at least two categories: a) the violence resulting from certain types of religious expansion and conversion (including the Crusades, the Caliphate conquests and colonial expansion) b) the violence against those who challenge religious truth or dogma (Inquisitions and persecutions of heretics). Religious violence, in both senses of the term, is generally considered a phenomenon of the past. Religious conversions by force are on the decline and likewise persecution because of religious truths is fast disappearing from today's world, though one might come across some sporadic instances, like the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie or the silencing of certain theologians.

4. There is a fourth type of violence, not mentioned by Ahmed, but very prominent in liberation theology literature (see Davies 1976:

130ff). This is institutional or structural violence, the violence of an unjust law or unjust policy, or the violence enshrined in social customs and traditions. The law of untouchability, the 'deliberate' lack of basic amenities, drinking water, electricity in Indian villages, the tradition of dowry, unjust labour laws, or unfair international trade practices, are typical examples of this type of violence, often sanctioned and legitimized by the state but also by other agencies. According to Sobrino institutional violence is the root of all types of violence (Sobrino 1997/4: 39). The suffering and harassment from institutionalized violence gives rise to most change-oriented groups – dalit or feminist groups, environmental groups or worker unions - that eventually want to rectify these unjust policies. Thus, women consider their secondary status in society a form of institutionalized violence, which gives rise to all the other types of violence, like rape, wife battering and prostitution. The deleterious, long-term effects of institutionalized violence have been well brought out by liberation theology.

5. The fifth type of violence refers to the violence of certain revolutionary groups or movements. These are people who are protesting a cause and want to be heard. They generally have an issue that they want redressed, but the tactics they use classify them as violent. At one end of the continuum are the extremists, often called terrorists, because even their symbolic (read suicidal) actions end in violence; at the other end of the continuum are the moderates, more confrontational, who use minimal violence. Even though many of these groups may have a very strong religious motivation or ideology, they are actually political in nature and are wrongly classified as "religious groups." Thus, for instance, the Al Qaeda or Hamas groups, the Zionist or Meir Kahane factions, the I.R.A. (Irish) or the E.T.A. (Basque group), the Tamil Tigers or the Bajrang Dal, Baader Meinhof or the Italian Red Brigade (Juergensmeyer 2000)[2] all have (or had) political or nationalist goals. They are more political than religious. Even those groups with an apparent religious ideology actually have political intentions.

6. The sixth and most important type of violence is state violence. It is the most important because it has caused the greatest number in loss of lives and the largest destruction of property in the

history of this world. State violence goes under various names: *repression* against citizens, whether fully sponsored or supported; and *aggression* against other nations, whether overt or covert. One example of overt repression would be when the Republic of China crushed the Tien-an-mien rebellion; whereas an example of covert repression is what happened in India in Gujarat and Mumbai when the government and police stood idly by or positively supported a pogrom of violence against the Muslims (Bannerjee 2002 and Lewis 2002). With regard to violence against other nations, the US bombardment of Iraq with subsequent sanctions is a form of overt aggression, whereas its support of the Contra movement in Nicaragua was more covert and subtle.

The purpose of this entire panorama was not so much to draw a somber, pessimistic view of the state of the world, as much as to situate the role of religious violence in this entire scenario. One conclusion which surfaces is that the notion of 'religious violence' is a blurred category to say the least. Firstly, it can refer to strictly religious violence (when violence is restricted to fighting over a matter of religious truth or dogma) but this is diminishing in today's pluralist world (Houtart 1997/4: 3).[3] Secondly, the term religious violence can also be used to refer to instances of institutionalized violence that are religiously sanctioned (like caste) but even here religion is only the "canopy" or "external justification"; the real root cause is economic, social status or political power. Lastly, we have also seen that the label of religious terrorism has been used with regard to revolutionary movements that have a religious inspiration and use a violent strategy, but this is a misnomer as these groups are actually political in mission and in nature.

Religious violence Vs state violence

The second conclusion that emerges from the above classification is that in terms of scale religious violence is minimal compared to state violence. If a good indicator were 'loss of lives' then comparative figures will illustrate the point. The New York WTC bombing of Sept 11 has been described as the work of religious terrorists. Even if one accepts this for the sake of the argument (I would however strongly dispute it; more appropriately it was the action of a

political group), in that bombing 3000 persons lost their lives, whereas the initial bombing of Iraq by the US (a clear case of overt aggression of one nation against another) left over 200,000 dead (Thobani 2002: 107). To take the more recent instance of Afghanistan, I have not yet seen exact figures of the number of lives lost in the bombing of Afghanistan (another example of overt aggression) but UN estimates report that over 3 million Afghanis have been rendered homeless (Thobani 2002: 111). No one can dispute that in terms of loss of lives and property, religious violence is Lilliputian in comparison to state violence.

The sociologist who has devoted a considerable time researching the question of the nation-state and violence is Anthony Giddens. For him the nation-state is the pre-eminent holder of power in the modern era. It has implemented violence at a new level because it has been able to mesh industrial production with military strength. The stupendous scale of military expenditures by both developed and developing nations is an indicator of the military society we are living in today. At no other time in the history of the world has the global military complex been so threatening or, as Giddens phrases it, "the combined spread of industrialism and of the nation-state system has served to ensure that every state across the globe now possesses armed strength far in excess of that of any traditional empire" (Giddens 1987: 254). If Giddens is right, then the inescapable inference from this is that we are living today in a militarized war culture. Not only is our vocabulary and terminology war-like (words like bombard, conquer, blast, defeat, etc are now transferred to everyday situations) but it is as though the entire environment we breathe in is highly inflammable and we are sitting on a powder-keg ready to explode at any minute. This overall situation is the remote cause of much of the violence in the world. Religion at most can only be an ancillary or aggravating factor.

Going by statistical studies, Quincy Wright, covering a fairly vast period from 1482 (the Conquest of Granada) until 1940 (World War II) listed 278 instances of war that were fought between members of the modern family of nations. The most combative nations were: Britain, France, Spain, Russia and Germany (Wright 1965). Lewis Richardson, a Quaker, making a more detailed list, examined

the period from 1820 to 1952 and found 315 instances of wars, with 78 combating nations. According to Richardson, by far the largest number of wars was caused by economic and territorial factors. Religion could be said to spark the cause of conflict in just 15 % of the cases (Wilkinson 1980).

Very often when people, (especially media personnel), talk about violence, they seem to have at the back of their mind "terrorist violence," and of the different types of terrorism, they are thinking mainly of "terrorism" that stems from a religious motivation. So the frame that dominates the mind when talking of violence is religious terrorism. This is misleading. The purpose then of this broader classification of violence is to demonstrate that religious violence or even violence that is religiously motivated is hardly the main perpetrator. State violence is by far the greatest and most dominating culprit.

Why then does religion have a bad name? Why is religion associated so much with violence? Why do people speak about the logic of religious violence, when they should be speaking about the logic of state violence?

Discourse theory offers us a clue. Both religion and violence are discourse-related. So when religious discourse is usurped or hijacked we have a highly explosive situation. This situation is exploited by the state or other agencies and violence ensues.

The importance of discourse[4]

Discourse is very powerful. Michel Foucault has forcefully demonstrated this in his book:, *I Pierre Rivierre* (Foucault 1975). The definition of truth, according to Foucault, in the matter of a crime committed, is the result of a contest of discourses – legal, medical, criminological, psychiatric. The domain (or discourse) with the most powerful vocabulary has the ultimate power to categorize, label, assign punishment and define the truth.

Discourse starts with events; interpretations or constructions are placed on these events and an interpretative discourse is developed. It is this discourse, when embodied within a community, which plays a powerful role. David Apter, a foremost analyst of violence,

tells us "Without discourse, events may explode, burn brightly for a moment, then sputter and go out. It is only when events are incorporated into a discourse that the context for violence builds up, and becomes self-validating and self-sustaining" (1997: 11). According to Paul Brass, whether to define an occurrence of violence as an isolated instance of crime, as a riot or as a pogrom depends on the choice of discourse and is therefore an inherently political action (1997: 4,5).

Language and vocabulary are crucial in discussions about violence. For instance, calling a person a "terrorist" already prejudices the issue and judges the person's action negatively. If instead you were brought up, within the revolutionary sub-culture the same person would be labelled a "freedom fighter." That is why the Reuters news agency has decided to drop the word "terrorist" and instead use the more neutral word "militant." It all depends on who controls the main media channels and where you stand vis-à-vis the dominant culture. Using Noam Chomsky's words, "Consent can be manufactured," depending on who is doing the manufacturing. So often we hear the expression 'terrorists are evil because they kill innocent lives" and we tend to agree with it. Whereas a nation-state may be allowed to kill thousands of innocent lives and just because it is part of the meaning-making agency, the same loss of innocent lives is termed "collateral damage" and no one disagrees.

Having seen the salience of discourse, we shall now enquire into how the hijacking of religious discourse is accomplished.

1. First of all, religion has the language, imagery and mythology to generate passion, intensity of feeling and deep commitment. Religion is able to command such loyalty and zeal precisely because it can connect the mundane with "ultimate concerns."

One of the great symbols that religion can offer is the image of "*cosmic war*" (Juergensmeyer 1992:145-60). This is a powerful image because it recasts a conflict between two ordinary terrestrial groups into the metaphysical conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Thus, it makes the ordinary protagonist feel that he or she is part of some great cosmic war. Secondly, every group will try to project the idea that God is on their side. This pro-

vides the identity and opposition, "we" versus "they," with 'we' being on the side of the good, and 'they' being the enemy. Thirdly, when an ordinary battle is transposed into fighting the "war of God," the protagonist becomes an instrument of God's vengeance and therefore violence against the enemy is justified. Lastly, the image of "fighting for God" becomes the perfect explanation for sacrificial death. In case one loses one's life, one need not be troubled; one becomes a "martyr."

Now, we can understand why V. H. Dalmia, the then president of the VHP, told an assembled crowd of half a million Hindus in New Delhi's boat club in 1991 that "the struggle for Ayodhya is a continuation of the ancient battle of the Ramayana" (Fineman 1991). By comparing the Ayodhya struggle to a mythological battle, Dalmia was very subtly also comparing the 'kar sevaks' to religious heroes of the Hindu epic and thereby elevating them in the process. It is for the same reason that Balasaheb Thackeray also called the Ayodhya struggle a dharma yuddh (holy war) (*Saamna* editorial as cited in Katzenstein, Mehta and Thakkar 1997: 385).

Uma Bharati, a VHP spokesperson, went a step further and demonized the Muslims likening them to the demon Ravana... Addressing a multitude, she declared: "We could not teach them with words....now let us teach them with kicks. Let there be bloodshed once and for all. The holy men who lay the foundation of the temple will destroy the tyrant just as Ram had vanquished Ravana" (Katherine in Arvind Sharma 1994: 99-100).

Osama bin Laden, for instance, months before the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, declared in a public broadcast that American actions in the Middle East were "a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger and the Muslims. Jihad is therefore our individual duty" (cited in *India Today* 2002: 34).[5] By turning the struggle against Americans into a war on behalf of God, he was able to call up numerous young men to work for his organization. George W. Bush Jr., President of the US, uses similar discourse in trying to get all the American people on his side, when, post September 11, he termed Osama, "a destroyer of everything good" and termed Iraq, Iran and N. Korea as the "axis of evil" thereby

registering the almost-unanimous consent and backing of the American people for his 'war against terrorism'.

This 'cosmic war' image also offers a justification for violence. In a situation of warfare everything is justified. In time of peace, these same actions may not be permissible Thus Godse defended his assassination of Gandhi by saying that it was "moral" though "illegal" (see Jayvant Dalvi's play *Mee Nathuram Godse bolthoy*). Perhaps a good example of the use of religious ideology to inspire commitment is seen in the difference between the two ideologies of the moderate *Gush Emunim* (Zionist block of the faithful) and the extremist American *Jewish Defence League* (founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane). For the Gush Emunim, Jews must be thankful that God has given them the state of Israel. For Kahane and the JDL, Israel is given to the Jews by God as *an instrument of revenge*, so that they can take revenge against all those who had discriminated against the Jews, God's chosen ones (Ehud quoted in Juergensmeyer 1992: 48-49). The ultimate aim of the JDL, like that of Ariel Sharon, is to bring a million more Jews to populate all Judea and Samaria. When religious discourse reverberates with themes of revenge, (and then it is no longer *religious* discourse) it is no wonder that members of the JDL are willing to be violent.

Lastly, religious mythology offers tremendous courage, because it offers a reward - paradise and after-life - to all those who may have to die for the sake of a religious cause. Marytrdom becomes a sacrifice for a greater good. Thus, the diary notes of Mohammed Atta, the militant who allegedly piloted one of the planes into the World Trade Center, speak about life after death, and tell of how he encouraged his fellow militants by describing images of rewards that God will give to all those who die for 'His' cause.

The important point to note is that the 'cosmic war' image is made use of equally by political agents and by religious leaders with political aspirations – *for political and nationalist purposes.* Thus, whether we are talking about the Sangh Parivar or the JDL, the Al Qaeda network targeting America or Bush targeting specific nations, the goals are all political. Religious images are expropriated to inspire and motivate their constituents and followers towards achieving these political goals.

2. Secondly, religious symbols and rituals can be co-opted to create a religious-national identity, which is potentially violent to minorities.

Religion – A source of identity

In the present world, due to a number of forces consequent upon globalization, people feel lost and long for an identity. *Economically*, there is a loss of jobs; *socially*, there is a feeling of loss and dislocation caused by migration from rural areas to the urban slums; *culturally*, a sense of insecurity as a result of the homogenizing and hegemonizing impact of the modern (mostly Western) world, which has ripped apart the familiar world of secure values and ideals (Kakar 1996: 187). At such a time religion steps in to provide the most stable and secure form of identity.

Religious identity touches the core of one's being. 'Who am I?" and "what should I do?" are the two central questions in a person's search for identity. And if the answers to these two questions are given more satisfactorily by religion than by any other variable, then religion becomes the strongest source of identity, more preferred than identities based on class, profession or other criteria. Thus, even during the height of the violence against Sikhism in Delhi in 1984, Sikhs were proud to display their religious identity even at the cost of being beaten up. They refused to discard the external markers of their religious identity – beards and turbans – even if it meant inciting the violence of the Hindu mobs (Bannerjee 2000: 19). Similarly, in the United States, even after September 11, many Muslim women continued to wear the burkha or chador, openly exhibiting their religious identity, in spite of having to face suspicion and discrimination.

There is no doubt that religion, with its encompassing Weltanschauung and entire corpus of myths, provides meaning and order to one's entire existence, which is vital at a time when the world appears to have become meaningless and values precarious (Kakar 1996: 189-190). The only other identity that comes close to religion in terms of unifying a collectivity is nationalism. That is why when religion teams up with nationalism the combination becomes highly combustible.

Religious nationalism of the Sangh Parivar

Given the fact that religious identity is so cohesive, we can understand the campaign of the Sangh Parivar to assimilate religious identity with national identity. Their strategy was to 'use the liberation of the alleged birthplace of Rama' (in other words use religious symbols, Ram and Ram Rajya) to forge a Hindu national identity. Put simply, religion was being hijacked for political purposes. This campaign was undertaken not by Hindu monks or swamis, but by politicians, Hindu Nationalists, who are not otherwise serious about religion, nor are they well versed in religious texts or theology. Their strategy was twofold: on the one hand, the struggle for the recapture of the sacred centre of Ayodhya was constructed into a struggle for national identity. This was accomplished through a whole sequence of religious symbols and rituals, which were basically Hindu but were projected as nationalist – starting with the Ramayana serial aired on public TV, the Rath yatra of L. K. Advani, the process of defining the birth place of Ram as historical, the Ram *shilanyas* (with processional carrying of bricks to Ayodhya), the Mahayanas and the audio cassette campaign, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and the eventual construction of a new temple. The primary aim was the construction of a Hindu identity and consequent outlawing of minorities.

On the other hand, national identity was also being forged by an entire discourse against "the enemy." The concept of the outsider or the "enemy" is very instrumental in drawing a community together. The collectivity bonds together, forgetting their individual differences to focus on the "other," the 'enemy'. Thus, according to the Sangh Parivar's discourse, anyone who is not Hindu, is not nationalist. This has put all minorities, Christians, Muslims and tribals, outside the pale of the Hindu rashtra, and therefore potentially anti-nationalist. Muslims in particular were the favoured targets, especially since the antagonism with Pakistan is simultaneous and contemporary. According to the Parivar, Muslims at heart are pro-Pakistan and hence can never be trusted to be loyal to Bharat Mata. The bursting of firecrackers by a few Muslims after Pakistan's victory in a cricket match against India becomes incontrovertible evidence that Muslims are traitors to Mother India (Kishwar 1998: 259). It is be-

cause of this 'enemy' propaganda that minorities in India in recent years have been victims of atrocities – massacres and pogroms, one after the other, of Muslims, Christians and tribals, the most recent being the post Godhra pogrom against the Muslims in Gujarat, in which 800 persons lost their lives.

"Nationalism," according to Kishwar, "has caused more bloodshed and hatred than any other ideology in recent times. The two world wars, other devastating twentieth century wars, the current bloodshed in East Europe and the war between Iran and Iraq have all been rooted in nationalism" (Kishwar 1998: 252). The nationalist discourse, trumpeted by the Sangh Parivar in India, and raging for the last two decades, has been insidiously hijacking religious categories for political gain. It is the chief reason why vast numbers from the silent Hindu majority are slowly joining the ranks of the violent minority. It is the biggest factor for the violence against minorities, Muslim, Sikh, Christian or tribal.

Religious Nationalism of Iran

Iran is the paradigm of religious nationalist revolutions. Again it is a mistake to consider it a religious revolution. It was a political revolution that rode on the wings of a religious discourse. The Ayatollah Khomeini reinterpreted the meaning of the Ashura celebrations (the first 10 days of Muharram). The mourning for Hussain was altered to emphasize the collective outrage against oppression. In the words of the Ayatollah, "the month of Muharram is the month in which the leader taught us how to struggle against the tyrants of history, by attacking the 'Yazids' of the present age" (Juergensmeyer 1994: 52).

The chief tyrant or Yazid was the Pahlavi Shah, his introduction of Westernization and 'the consequent perversion' of Islam. The Shah had replaced the Islamic code with a secular code, had used Muslim schools and seminaries for secular purposes, had promoted the liberalization of women, and with it introduced a culture of Coca-Cola, discos and girlie magazines. The Ayatollah inveighed against all this in his discourse of re-Islamization. Eventually, the Shah was overthrown, and a new religious nationalist regime installed, but not without loss of lives.

> Some 7000 people were executed for crimes as varied as homosexuality and believing in the Bahai faith. For a time bands of young people in the Hizbollah (Party of God) roamed the streets, attacking anyone or anything that appeared anti-Islamic, even taking a group of hostages from the American embassy in Teheran (Juergensmeyer 1994: 55).

The Iranian revolution was a revolution that succeeded on the grounds of religious nationalism and at the cost of bloodshed. There is now a fusion of Iranian nationalist goals with Shi'ite political ideology. Once again religion was hijacked for political purposes, even though this time by a religious leader.

These two examples of India and Iran have demonstrated how political agents have used the cohesive powers of religion, including its symbols and rituals, to construct nationalist identities. This religious nationalist identity has then been the basis for violence against minorities and those who think differently.

3. Lastly, the variable of religion is used as a veneer, a smokescreen, an external 'peg' that conceals deeper economic and material interests.

Marx and Engels documented long ago in their historical studies that many of the so-called "religious wars" in France and Germany were deep down economic struggles between the peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. Studying events further back in history, Jeanine Estebe analyses the religious wars of the sixteenth century (with their culmination in the 1572 St. Bartholomew massacres) as an expression of class hatred, a rising of the poorer peasant Catholics against the richer Protestant Huguenot merchants (Estebe 1968 and Quoted in Davis 1973: sec. III).

Following the same instrumental model, there are political analysts who, using a class-based analysis of BJP politics, ascribe the Indian communal conflicts to a strategy of the upper class *Brahmin elite* to increase their vote bank and ultimately monopolize the Indian economy and political power (Ram 1998). Asghar Ali Engineer is one such political scientist who argues that "Communal tension arises as a result of the skilful manipulation of the religious sentiments and cultural ethos of a people by its *elite* which aims to realize its political, economic and cultural aspirations by identifying

these aspirations as those of the entire community" (*Communal Riots in Post Independence India:* 34).

Perhaps the best example where religion has been used as a smoke-screen is Pakistan's hijacking of the separatist movement in Kashmir, *painting it over with religious fundamentalism* and injecting pro-Pakistani, jihadi elements into it. The separatist movement was not a religious movement at all. Its ethos was always multicultural and multi-religious. It was a simple movement for self-determination, representing the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. The movement is now dominated by pro-Pakistani, jihadi groups whose radical extremism will not rest until the entire land of Kashmir is part of Pakistan (Muzamil 2002). It was and will always be a movement to gain control of the land of Kashmir but has been projected as a religious movement of Islamic peoples.

Moving to another continent, Paul Nzacahayo explains the story of Rwanda's miseries as both economic and eco-political. The story of Rwanda, he suggests, should be discussed in terms of the powerful trying to monopolize the resources, education, land, employment and finance (Nzacahayo 1997/4: 14). Rwandan society is divided into: Hutus 84%, Tutsis (15 %) and Pygmees (1%). So, if it was merely a question of tribal warfare, one can understand why Hutus were killing Tutsis and vice-versa, but how does one explain Hutus killing other Hutus? Unless, of course, it is also a question of power and land as well.

It would be truly naïve to describe the most notorious struggle in today's world between the Palestinians and the Israelis as a struggle between two religions. No doubt, religious factors have complicated the conflict, but deep down, no one can deny that it is a struggle for land. Likewise, even the war in Bosnia is not just a struggle for cultural identity, it is also a question of a struggle for resources. While religion may be the extraneous factor, the deeper causes are economic and political.

Why then do people speak of religious wars? Why then do the media refer to conflict as between Jews and Muslims, Christians and Protestants, Hindus and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, etc. Todd Gitlin (1980) showed how certain variables like religion can

become an easy and convenient "peg" or "handle" around which data and bits of information can more easily be pigeonholed. It is far more difficult and sometimes downright dangerous to unearth and expose the deeper-lying, vested economic and political interests. To take an example from family life, when a woman is battered by her husband, she goes to the police station to make her complaint. The attendant police officer takes down her complaint but when trying to attach it to a legal crime or misdemeanor, he files it under "dowry harassment" since dowry harassment is a common, well trodden path on which women's complaints are generally handled. At the present time, there is no legal provision specifically against wife beating, but there is one for dowry harassment (Flavia 1992: 23).[6] Hence, most wife battering cases are filed under the umbrella of dowry harassment. This becomes a problem later, because when questioned by the magistrate as to whether there was any dowry harassment, should the woman answer in the negative, the case is summarily thrown out of court. Similarly, the media classify "conflicts" and "violence" under the rubric of religion rather than economics or politics; for the media it is often a question of sound bytes; those sound bytes which are shorter and more manageable are more newsworthy than long-drawn out accounts, by which the entire historical, economic and political contexts are explained. It is more sensational and eye-catching to refer to an incident involving Muslims and Hindus, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Muslims than to narrate the same incident in terms of more complicated economic and class variables.

The media have always been shapers of thinking. However, when the media use the 'simpler' categories of religion to understand conflicts, then religion becomes a smokescreen that conceals the deeper economic and eco-political interests that underlie these conflicts.

Conclusion

Having seen the various contexts in which religion is often caught up in a violence that it has not generated, the question now remains: what then is the role of religion?

The purpose of religion, as always, is to liberate people from the shackles that bind them. This is what Jesus did. This is what the

Buddha did. This is what Mohammed did. This is also the aim of the Vedas, the Gita and the Upanishads. Thus the aim of religion is violence reducing. This violence reducing role of religion, however, has been understood in two ways.

On the one hand, religion has been understood to reduce violence in a symbolic or ritualistic way. Religious ritual becomes the outlet for violence. According to Rene Girard who advocates this theory, the ritual scapegoat is the object on which violence is ventilated. The ritual, therefore, by drawing off violence symbolically, prevents the greater violence which might have resulted, had the ritual not been enacted (Girard 1977 and Girard 1986). In this way religion is violence reducing. Mahatma Gandhi for instance undertook a sacrificial 'fast unto death' whenever an ethnic conflict broke out in the country. He became the scapegoat to avoid the far greater ethnic violence that might have resulted.

On the other hand, a second powerful way in which religion reduces violence is by bringing about 'greater awareness'. The role of religion is understood as 'uncovering', 'revealing' or 'unmasking' the subtle manner by which all discourse is manipulated (especially religious discourse) for political and economic ends. An awareness of how religious discourse is used to legitimatize unjust structures can be very liberating and frees one to practise religion in an authentic manner. This is the great role and challenge of religion.

This is also its great ambiguity. Religion is very powerful and effective but in the wrong hands it can be the instrument by which the state and its political agents can let loose tremendous violence. The responsibility lies with those who wield religious discourse.

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Article received: June 10, 2002
Article approved: July 12, 2002
No of words: 6699