



Violent Beliefs: Faith, Hope and Violence in Religious Movements

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1. Introduction

The reappearance of religious belief at the heart of contemporary conflict is a challenging and perhaps tiresome development for essentially secular political and military analysts. It requires that they take religion very seriously. For many of them, this often means engaging rationally with something they find fundamentally irrational and ridiculous. Realist politics of interest or hyper-rational grand schemes like fascism and communism make some sort of terrible sense. But all this stuff about infidels, spirit possession, holy lands and heavenly virgins may not seem to be the meat of serious analysis.

Some analysts get round the problem of engaging with what they regard as such obvious delusion by deciding that religion is only ever a cover for the normal interest-based politics of greed and power. This they can then easily understand. It is thus common to hear people underplaying the political and military significance of faith by saying that religion is simply being “used” by cynical leaderships. The idea being that once you understand the hard political motives of these leaders you can then ignore the religious froth. So, Bin Laden is really about Saudi Arabian and Palestinian politics. Joseph Kony is just about Ugandan tribalism. Jewish settlers are about land and water resources. And that lot who did the sarin gas attack in Tokyo are just plain mad.

There is truth in this idea. Religious fervour is often exploited in politics and war. Godless elites can find it useful to find a sudden faith if it might bring a determined and obedient religious constituency under their influence. And it works the other way. Unbelieving political and economic opportunists can find considerable advantage in allying themselves with religious leaders and doing their dirty work. Godless Somali,

Sudanese and Afghan militiamen have found it lucrative to implement the policies of Islamist ideologues and to expand on them somewhat. But religious belief is not only exploited in war, it also genuinely drives war. Religious belief must be analysed as conviction politics and not simply as political ploy.

It is also true that secular ideas can be held religiously. Observers of extreme nationalism, communism and fascism have all noted how they function religiously. The totality of their belief, their passionate motivation, the frenzy of their rallies, their emphasis on blood sacrifice and the unchallenged power of their secular priesthoods make them more akin to religious than political movements. We democrats can also hold our beliefs religiously – to the point of killing and dying for them. Humans are religious animals. Unless we believe in something, we are unlikely to value it.

So we are all believers in a sense. The believing mentality and vision that I describe below may equally be applied to determined western democrats who may not regard themselves as religious at all. But I think it is no coincidence that the two most fervent leaders of the War on Terror – Bush and Blair – are in fact deeply religious men.

But just because we are all believers in something does not mean we should discount the reality of particular religious conviction and its very different cosmology. New theologically aware political analysis is emerging as a critical skill – most obviously around today's meta-conflict of terror and counter-terror. Islamist terrorism and its explicitly violent beliefs have made theologians of many previously secular analysts who now read Sayid Qutb as easily as they once read Marx. This new theological facility among security analysts is encouraging and needs to be applied more widely.

Studying religious movements carefully in their own terms is essential to informed military and political analysis. Understanding armed religious movements and their approach to violence needs to focus on two main areas of enquiry – a general appreciation of religious mentality and a particular understanding of the distinct religious vision and intent of the group in question. The first is an enquiry into psychology and social temperament. The second requires an analysis of a movement's theology and its political and military implications.¹

2. Religious Mentality

The religious mind works differently to the rational secular mind – most notably because it tends to emphasize faith, interpretation, paradox, parallel reality and ritual over reason, fact, logic and reality.

Faith is a set of beliefs about what God wants for the world and for His people. But it is also an attitude of mind which involves submission to God's will and sets one on a

¹ This article is based on a longer paper entitled: Religiously Killing Civilians: Faith, Hope and Violence in Religious Movements, forthcoming from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, www.hdcentre.org

spiritual journey through life in which one tries to follow God. Critical to the journey of faith is a deep sense of promise and hope – a belief that God will fulfill what He has set out to do for the world and His people.

Religious hope is not a sort of wishful thinking but a profound conviction – an unshakeable knowledge that God will prevail no matter how dismal things look now. This combination of faith, promise and hope can make for a particularly resilient political and military movement that often finds deep value and theological meaning in both suffering and patience.

Because many religions recognize the truth of God’s observation to the Prophet Isaiah that “My ways are not your ways and your ways are not my ways”, the journey of faith is usually unpredictable and confusing. It requires continual *interpretation* as people struggle to discern where God is leading them, why and what He wants them to do next.

Religious leaders constantly use scripture and their own personal experience to interpret God’s purpose to make sense of the times and to guide and justify their actions. Because such interpretation is a process of faith not science, many of them interpret God’s purpose and requirements very differently. Most notably, in political terms, some interpret God peacefully and others very violently.

The experience of faith regularly confronts religious people with the truth and power of *paradox* – that God often requires what is counter-intuitive and contradictory to human reason. In many religions, God is experienced as working more through paradox than anything else and a great deal of religious teaching and truth is a celebration of the transforming power of the paradoxical in human life. Thus, it is common for almost every religion to value paradoxical ideas such as: people find most when they are lost; have everything when they have nothing, are strongest when they are seemingly weakest, are triumphant in defeat or are remade in the moment they are destroyed.

The deep religious embrace of paradox is extremely important when faith becomes politicized because it allows paradox to become political and military policy. A religious movement that embraces paradox can soon find that death is good (one’s own and that of others) or that destruction is purging, violence is creative and the innocent are guilty.

Everyday reality is not necessarily that important to the extreme religious mind which often gives more credence to a *parallel reality* and its gradual unfolding of the divine purpose for the world. Belief in this superior and transcendent reality intended by God and revealed to the believer can lead to an extraordinary dismissal of this world as mirage, folly or despicable hedonism. The result is a sort of spiritual arrogance that forms a strange mix of compassion and contempt for the rest of us going about our business in this fallen, material world.

The main way to stay in touch with and empower this transcendent reality is *ritual*. For religious people, ritual can be more real than reality itself because it is in ritual that one encounters and engages the transcendent or divine. The sacrament of the Christian

eucharist, the deep meditative recitation of the Koran, the frenzy of charismatic group worship, the mixing of potions or the altered state of spirit possession are all points where heaven and earth touch for religious people.

Behind all ritual is also the belief that a religious performance helps to instigate a reciprocal heavenly movement. If humans start something off in a ritual, God will finish it off in reality. If they blow up the twin towers to start God's judgment of America, He will finish it off. If they cut off the lips and limbs of civilians in Northern Uganda, the spirit world will begin to be rebalanced after the humiliation and corruption of the Acholi people.

The idea of ritual is extremely important in any assessment of religious violence.² Many armed religious movements are highly ritualized in their terrorist attacks in the time, place and people they choose, the way they kill their victims or the way they sacrifice themselves. For most religious movements, spilling blood is not just the stuff of war but also the practice and power of ritual – the bringing about of God's purpose. In extreme rituals of violence like suicide bombings which the secular liberal imagination interprets as desperate acts, religious people are in fact at their most hopeful – sure that they are signaling God's judgment and bringing it ever nearer to earth.

3. Divine Future and Violent Present

If the mentality behind religious violence requires understanding, so also do the cosmology and theological vision of the group concerned. In the 19th century, a group of German Christian theologians coined the term “eschatology” to describe religious doctrines about God's purpose and future for the world.³ A religious group's eschatology expresses its beliefs in God's purpose, its hopes for the future, its sense of God's judgment on the world, its view of heaven and hell, and its demarcation of in-groups and out-groups – those who are doomed and those who are saved.

Eschatology concerns where religious people think they are heading and what they believe to be God's end-state for the world. But every religious movement that thinks futuristically and historically about their God's purpose for the world is automatically challenged by the predicament of today. How does one make sense of a highly problematic present? What does one do in the “not yet” period before the fulfillment of God's will and purpose?

How a religious movement answers the “not yet” question in their theology determines how violent it will become. Does the not yet period simply require forbearance and endurance? Or does it demand some form of action on the part of believers to help God

² See Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, California University Press, 2001.

³ The term comes from the Greek work *eschaton* meaning the last thing and so refers to doctrines of the end of the world.

bring about His purpose? If so, is this action violent or non-violent? And, who is God's enemy in this interim period?

Resolving the interim question poses the problem of divine violence and requires a religious group to develop a theology of violence. To reach the profession of a violent faith, a religious group has to answer a very basic question. Does God deal in violence at all? In other words, is their God a violent God?

Polytheists have always accommodated the reality of violence and human attraction to it by recognizing particular gods of war and strife. Monotheists have a more difficult time with this because they have to reconcile a single, simultaneously loving and violent God. Jewish, Islamic and Christian believers manage this problem by understanding divinely sanctioned violence as embodiments of the protective, vengeful, judgmental or creative attributes of God.

4. Four Potentially Violent Doctrines

Once a group has accepted an activist theology of violence, there are perhaps four particular ingredients in such a theology which can lead it to develop into a doctrine of extreme and indiscriminate violence: the context in which it is shaped; the way it understands history; the emphasis it puts on human agency within the divine plan, and the extent to which it becomes highly dualistic.

The way a theology understands the *context* and plight of its believers can lend itself to violence. Not all theologies which emerge from marginalized, oppressed and resentful social and political contexts become extremely violent – South African theology under apartheid being the classic example of a non-violent response. But there is no doubt that a personal and political situation which is felt and theologized as humiliating to God and His people can shape a corresponding theology which justifies violence, vengeance and retribution.

The second ingredient is a theology's treatment of *history*. If human history – instead of transcendent eternity - is viewed as the place where God works out his purpose then history and politics can all too easily become a cosmic battlefield between the forces of good and evil. If a religious movement has a very precise vision of the end of history – a worldwide *ummah* under God's rule, the possession of a promised land, some terrible apocalypse or President Bush's vision of democratic freedom for the world – then the historical struggle can become very precise with God identified as having very clear interests in the minutiae of human history and politics.

If history is the place for God to act, a religious movement's sense of *human agency* within the divine plan is the third potentially violent doctrine in any theology. If a religious group believes that God's people themselves have an active role to play in bringing about God's future for the world then they are more likely to take up arms. If God is seen to need their help and the enemy is identified as evil and hostile, then a

religious movement can adopt a military form and violent action becomes religious obligation. Here there is little difference between Christian crusading past and present, Sayed Qutb's notion of offensive jihad, Bin Laden's doctrine of blood-based reciprocity.

Finally, the level of *dualism* that emerges in any violent theology is perhaps the most critical ingredient of all in shaping an extremely violent faith. This dualism affects both people and space by determining which group and which places are holy to God and which are anathema. If places like the Saudi Peninsula, Palestine, Jerusalem, Acholiland and Ayodhya are holy places then, in extreme dualistic thinking, they must be cleansed and made sacred. If only people who are true to God are pure and worthy then the rest must be challenged and cleansed. The dangerous thing about extreme religious dualism – like its Nazi, Stalinist and nationalist cousins – is that it leaves no moral space for intermediary categories of person like “civilians” or “non-combatants” in war.

5. Valuing Religious Analysis

New religious movements are being born from within all the great faith traditions on a daily basis. Most of them will lead a mainly quiet and peaceful existence. But a few will develop as armed movements while others will offer ideological support to dangerous political ideas.

The flurry of new books on charismatic Christianity in Africa, on Islamist ideology and the increasingly routine monitoring of cults shows that it is both possible and important for secular political and military analysts to engage with and understand religious ideology and the political and military programmes that flow from them.⁴

Faced with the texts and creeds of certain groups, secular analysts and policy makers may still react by saying “Do people really believe this stuff?” But confronted with repeated suicide attacks in the Middle East and child abductions in northern Uganda, the answer is obvious to many ordinary people on the front line: “Yes, they do.”

The burden of credulity is now on the side of the secular analysts. It makes sense to believe that religious movements do believe this stuff and to examine why they do, where such belief might lead and how best it may be challenged.

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⁴ See for example: Religion and African Civil Wars, ed Niels Kastfelt, Hurst and Co, London 2005; Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, Hurst and Co, London 2004; The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation, R. Scott Appleby 2000.