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## Violence in Religion

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## Violence in Religion

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Religion plays a large role in many people's life. Many of the choices that people make are influenced and guided by their religious practices. Religion can often help people better themselves and help the lives of others. On the contrary it may seem that religion can do the opposite, causing people to be violent. Religion often gets blamed for acts of violence including suicide, martyrdom and terrorism. This paper will discuss several views of scholars on the role that religion plays in violence, paying close attention to whether religion is inherently violent and if religion recodes human perceptions of violence."



*Zach VanAernum*

## **Violence in Religion**

### *Introduction*

Religion plays a large role in many people's life. Many of the choices that people make are influenced and guided by their religious practices. Religion can often help people better themselves and help the lives of others. On the contrary it may seem that religion can do the opposite, causing people to be violent. Religion often gets blamed for acts of violence including suicide, martyrdom and terrorism. This paper will discuss several views of scholars on the role that religion plays in violence, paying close attention to whether religion is inherently violent and if religion recodes human perceptions of violence.

#### *•Is religion inherently violent?*

In his piece written for Christian Century, Isaac Mwangi discusses the killing of Muslim cleric Sheikh Aboud Rogo. This event evoked one of the worst inter-faith acts of violence in Kenya to date. Although this event is clearly driven by religious beliefs, Mwangi argues that the source of violence is not directly from religion, but rather from other factors such as politics and military actions. He believes that the violence is a sort of chain reaction due to initial violence not necessarily related to religion. "Kenya's military involvement in Somalia opened the country to the possibility of increased terrorist attacks" (26). Mwangi believes that initial terrorist attacks

originated in response to military actions. However these attacks were associated with the attacker's religion, leading to a religious tension that remains present today. Mwangi was sure to follow up with the fact that religion more often than not seeks to resolve conflict: "The most religious thing for us is to be human... and being human to seek justice for every human being" (29).

William Cavanaugh discusses how religion was associated with the Boston Bombings that occurred in 2013. Following the capture of the Tsarnev brothers, the media erupted with stories blaming the act of terrorism on the brothers' Islamic beliefs. Cavanaugh states that although Islam likely played a role in the brothers' worldview, it did not necessarily cause the act of violence. "Islam and Christianity are not just sets of doctrines but lived experiences that are constituted in part by what people make of them" (12). His point is that although religion may in some circumstances contribute to people's acts of violence, it is not inherently violent. "We prefer to locate "religious" causes of violence and become quite incurious when "secular" causes like nationalism are in play" (Cavanaugh, 12).

Ibrahim Khan and Faruk Karaca both believe that religion is not inherently violent. Instead, religious violence occurs when people interpret the teachings of their religion in their own way and use those beliefs to justify violence to others. "Many people blame religion as responsible for violence but the reality is that religion is a victim of violence as it is manipulated by its followers" (Khan, 375). This quote does a good job at explaining how religion related violence originates and is very similar to something that Karaca states.

In this context, in order to legitimize their violent actions, some arguments that people make carry religious features. In this way, violence is legitimized and in the mind of the person who resorts to violence, the behavior is no longer perceived as a violence act, but as a right and necessary action.

(Karaca, 20),

This is a powerful quote and concisely explains how religion can be used as a justification for violence when people take liberties with their interpretations.

Taking a different approach, Benjamin Purzycki and Kyle Gibson use a scientific perspective to address the relationship between violence and religion. They use evidence regarding violent situations to determine if there is any causal link to religion. “Perhaps the most common problem making the claim that religion causes violence is one of logic; are we finding causal relations where there may be only correlations?” (22) Throughout the paper they discuss their findings and “find little if any reason to conclude that any essential feature of religion(s) plays any real role in causing violence or oppression” (24). The methods used in this study brought a fresh new perspective to the argument over violence and religion.

Wolfgang Huber discusses many of the acts of religious violence throughout history and attempts to systematically determine the role that religion played. In this discussion he not only states his own opinion, but he uses other research to support his statements. He states; “Serious research shows that religiosity does not necessarily lead to a decrease but rather, at least in certain circumstances, to an increase in latent or manifest violence” (Huber 40). It is important to realize however that like Purzycki and Gibson stated, “correlation does not prove causation” (23). Huber goes on to state that during the last century, religion has been increasingly regarded as a factor sparking and feeding conflicts. However, “This interpretation has to do with how the identity of ethnic, national, or social groups is predominantly seen through the lens of religion more than before” (Huber, 43). Similar to the points discussed previously, Huber believes that violence is not an inherent characteristic of religion, but rather an acquired or even ascribed quality of religion.

The overwhelming majority of the points made by these authors suggest that religion is not inherently violent. Instead it is the way that religion is interpreted that can be the cause of violence. The problem arises when people take the liberty of interpreting religion in such a way that allows them to justify being violent against another person. In some cases religion may not even be what originally fueled the violence, but instead modern society jumps to the conclusion that religion is the cause.

•*In what ways might religion “recode” human perceptions about the use or restraint of violence?*

Due to the power of religion and the extent to which it plays a role in people’s lives, it is not hard to believe that religion may “recode” or change the way that people think about certain aspects of life. As discussed above, people interpret religious texts and practices differently. Depending on one’s interpretation, religion can often sway the way that one thinks about the world.

A controversial example of recoding was brought up by Purzycki and Gibson discussing the murder of Jesse Anderson and Jeffrey Dahmer by Christopher Scarver. “Scarver claimed that God had told him to do it... Did Scarver’s belief in a deity cause him to murder these men?” (22) This is certainly an extreme claim of religious recoding and it would be difficult to make the argument that Scarver did in fact commit murder due to his religious beliefs and not psychological problems. However this is a useful example to introduce the fact that some people make drastic claims about the extent to which religion can change people.

Many feel that extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda have been “recoded” by their religion. This is likely solely based on the Al-Qaeda’s interpretation of their religion, specifically the meaning of jihad; it is a good example of how dangerous it can be if religion is wrongly

interpreted. Ibrahim Khan discusses how violence can occur due to recoding as the result of incorrect interpretation. “Religious terrorism is a type of political violence motivated by an absolute belief that an otherworldly power has sanctioned terrorist violence for the greater glory of the faith” (364).

A similar argument is made by Isaac Mwangi about the religious battle between Christians and Muslims in Kenya. In this case it is slightly different in the fact that Muslims seem to be “recoded” by the Christian faith. Mwangi argues that “they (Muslims) consider Christians to be responsible for their material deprivation” (29). In this case the Muslims seem to truly believe that Christian beliefs have caused them harm and in return changed their own beliefs to attack Christians. This may not be “recoding” in the traditional sense, but it is still a form of religious recoding.

On the other hand, William Cavanaugh argues that it is not religion but rather nationalism that recodes people’s beliefs. “My point is simply that we prefer to locate “religious” causes of violence and become quite incurious when “secular” causes like nationalism are in play” (12). He believes that things such as nationalism and society play a bigger role in the beliefs of people than religion.

Wolfgang Huber argues that religion does in fact help to “recode” people’s beliefs but in a way that leads to nonviolence rather than violence. “All religions include an impulse to overcome violence” (43). He believes that the positive teachings of religion help to invoke beliefs in people that cause them to do good in their community and within society as a whole. “All religions need to recognize that they have a great educational responsibility. They have opportunities to transform the ‘Golden Rule’ into daily practice” (Huber, 45). He shows the true power of religion in teaching people to treat others with kindness rather than violence.

Faruk Karaca uses a similar argument to show that religion generally causes non-violent outcomes for people. “Religious people are more benevolent towards foreigners, more generous for charity foundations and also attract attention for their politeness and honesty” (21). He also goes on to show that religions that assume a tougher attitude against suicide actually have a lower rate of suicide than in religions that don’t (cf. Huber 21). This is a very strong example of recoding. This directly shows that people’s beliefs towards suicide are different based on their religion.

Based on all of these examples it seems fair to say that religion can in fact “recode” the way that people think about violence. In the cases where it recodes people to use violence it seems that it is generally due to improper interpretations towards religious teachings. However the opposite can be said: often religious teachings can have good outcomes and cause people to be less violent.

### *Conclusion*

In my opinion religion is not inherently violent. The examples provided in the first section of the paper have convinced me that religion is not violent; instead it is the way that people choose to interpret religion that can provide them with justification for violent actions. This can be especially dangerous and probably leads to many of the violent disputes between the world’s religions. I also believe that religion can in fact “recode” the way that people feel about violence. Because I don’t feel that religion is inherently violent, I don’t think that religion can recode someone to use violence unless he/she incorrectly interpret the religious teachings. In fact I think that religion recodes people to be less violent and better citizens in their community.

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