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Violence and Religion

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Abstract

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

"Chapter 8, entitled "Violence and Religion" was written by Dr. Darlene Fozard Weaver for the textbook *Introduction to Religious Studies*. In this chapter, Weaver discusses the connection between violence and religion that has been prevalent in world history as well as provide questions aimed at the reader in order to provoke reflection and discussion. The most thought-provoking of these include "Is religion inherently violent? Why or why not?" and "Could teaching religion be an act of violence? Why or why not?" *Religion is not inherently violent*"



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Violence and Religion

Introduction

Chapter 8, entitled “Violence and Religion” was written by Dr. Darlene Fozard Weaver for the textbook *Introduction to Religious Studies*. In this chapter, Weaver discusses the connection between violence and religion that has been prevalent in world history as well as provide questions aimed at the reader in order to provoke reflection and discussion. The most thought-provoking of these include “Is religion inherently violent? Why or why not?” and “Could teaching religion be an act of violence? Why or why not?”

Religion is not inherently violent

In recent memory the connection between religion and violence seems to be gaining momentum year by year with every breaking news story about terrorism and religious ties of terrorists. The threat of religious extremism is very real and is the main point in labeling religion as an inherently violent institution. It is easily exaggerated in order to maintain a negative stigma towards the Muslim faith in general and even the Middle East as a whole. There is no doubting that religion is a double-edged sword when it comes to interpretations. In Silberman, Higgins, and Dweck’s article *Religion and World Change: Violence and Terrorism versus Peace* the prevailing ideology of the authors is that religious

and spiritual leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mohandas Gandhi and Mother Theresa from different religious views demonstrate how religion should be used as a catalyst for peace. The author states: "Under the leadership of such figures, organizations of faith attempting to transform the world closer to a religious ideal and to realize "God's kingdom" on earth, have contributed significantly to social change that aims at the correction of injustice" (763).

Although the majority of recent terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by violent activists in the name of religion, the Five Pillars of the Islamic Faith, the basic guidelines of the Islamic religion actually preach civil service rather than violence. The Third pillar of the Islamic faith, Zakat, is an obligation of the Muslim faith where the individual donates what equals out to around 2.5 percent of an individual's net worth (Qur'an 9:71). The Holy Quran also preaches that a Hajj should be performed if a believer is physically and financially able. The Hajj is considered the Fifth Pillar; it is a ritual that was performed by the prophet Muhammad and is the most significant manifestation of Islamic faith and unity. According to Ibrahim the Hajj is performed by Muslim believers so "they may establish regular prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them and feed them with Fruits: so that they may give thanks" (Qur'an 14:37).

Another religion that has been deemed inherently violent is Judaism. In Oliver Leaman's essay "Peace and Judaism" in the book *Philosophies of Peace and Just War*, Leaman argues that although Judaism has many prevalent violent practices, God has been documented as expressing disapproval towards violence and the celebration of violence. Leaman argues that the midrash depicting angels cheering over the defeat and destruction of the Egyptian army and that "the Almighty is supposed to have chided them at their

pleasure over the death of some of his creatures” (34). Another example of peace that is perpetuated by the Jewish religion, as stated in Leaman’s essay, is the 34th psalm in the Hebrew Scriptures. The psalm state: “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalm 34:15). Leaman argues that, although the interpretation can be made where violence may be justified by the end result of peace, “peace is the eventual outcome for our actions” (35).

Teaching Religion

As stated previously, religion can be distorted in the interpretation of the sacred texts. By keeping the entire spectrum of interpretations of religious scriptures it is difficult to attempt to arrive at an absolute conclusion if teaching religion is violent or not. We are, however, able to provide reasons why specific examples from religious texts could be interpreted into violence, when the teaching of religion is not an act of violence.

Violence is defined for us by David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton in their essay *Violence and Religion in Perspective* as

An act, process or relationship. Violence may involve individual actions, as in the personal murder of one member of a religious group by another, an outsider by an insider, or an insider by an outsider. It may also involve collective action by or against a group, as in the cases of war, revolution, repression, and terrorism. (1)

In defining the term “violence” we are able to have guidelines on what ways religion is the sole motivation behind specific acts of violence.

In William T. Cavanaugh’s *The Violence of “Religion”: Examining a Prevalent Myth*, Cavanaugh argues that the interpretation of “religious” violence by some scholars is flawed since religions and cultures are often grouped together. Cavanaugh also argues that the belief that religions are continually at odds is because each religion has a differing claim to

the authoritative truth, but states that a stigma has been developed on religion that it is an “isolatable cause” for violence (35).

An example of the implied jump from religion being a slight cause to the absolute and isolatable cause is the exaggeration of religious influences during the Holy Wars. The belief that the Holy Wars were a direct cause of Christianity’s views on liberation from both physical and mental bonds falls apart when we look at the governing beliefs behind Christianity.

In the book *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation* by Raymond Firth, Firth argues that the emphasis on liberating the repressed is not specific to Christianity, but rather “people of pure life with ethical systems of a lofty selfless kind are not the prerogative of any one religious faith” (28). Firth goes on by stating that the original goal of Christianity and religions in general is the ideal that “the world is impermanent; it is the future, the eternal, that should be sought, by the road of salvation through faith and grace” (28).

In the book *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* by Peter Byrne, Byrne claims: “Wherever liberal religious thought has spread, so has the general message that the ethics of religion is more important than the metaphysics or historical claims” (2). If we apply this mindset to acts of violence like the terrorist bombings of the Twin Towers in New York City, we infer that although violence is perpetrated in the name of religion, the ethics behind the religion is the real cause of the violence. The terrorist group believing in the acceptability of violence doesn’t lend itself to religion as a whole, but rather a moral interpretation of religious ideas. Byrne goes on to say that it is impossible to assume that religion dictates morals in stating that the link “threatens the autonomy of morality” (12).

In other words, the belief that morality is directly caused by religious ideas cannot be accepted since morals dictate the religious beliefs.

Charles Kimball offers an explanation to the violence that seems to be perpetrated by religion in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil* by stating, "When the hoped for ideal is tied to a particular religious worldview and those who wish to implement their vision become convinced that they know what God wants from them and everyone else, you have a prescription for disaster" (105). If we apply Bryne's ideas about morality guiding decisions based on religion, we see that the violence is caused by a group of people repressing another group. A non-religious example of this could be the Jim Crow laws enacted from 1876 through 1965 in the United States repressing African Americans of all faiths. Repression of rights and beliefs are not exclusive to religion, but when the acts are perpetrated in the name of religion, there is the widespread belief that religion is the isolated cause for the violence.

Weaver concludes: "Religious discourse can facilitate violence by claiming a transcendent authorization that allows it to recode the moral status of people and practices" (111). Weaver means that religions have the ability by claiming absolute truth to start conflict and, by doing so, to lead to violence. Weaver follows this claim with the claim that "the problem is not that *religions* are ambivalent or hypocritical, but rather *we* are" (112).

Conclusion

Through exploring Dr. Darlene Fozard Weaver's take on violence and religion, as well as the claims of various other scholars, we are able to determine that, although religion is often used as the sole cause of violence, it is an individual's morality that can be

the cause for violence. We are also able to determine that the teaching of religions is not an act of violence, but the forced implementation of any group's ideas onto another group causes violence.

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