

Third Diversity Matters Forum

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RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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May I begin by explaining the choice of topic. There are three main reasons behind this choice. The first concerns the adverse reflections that are often made against particular cultures on the ground that religious association with these cultures generate violence and even terrorism. The second reason relates to the new and disturbing phenomenon of suicidal violence, ostensibly in the name of religion. I will examine this special issue in more detail in the second half of this paper. The third reason is that in our secular societies there is a decline in religious belief and a failure to recognise the contribution of religion to peace, both in the lives of individuals and the life of nations.

I turn then to the general perception which is increasingly appearing, namely that religion generates extremism, which in turn

Australia to reach its present situation of cultural diversity. Indeed our country is often seen as a possible model for others in the way in which multicultural policies have developed. It was not always so. Within our own lifetimes, Australia had as its official endorsed national policy, the notorious White Australia Policy. This operated from the time of Federation and was reflected in legislation - indeed it was one of the first pieces of legislation of our new Parliament in 1901. It was enforced right up to the 1960s and was only officially abandoned in 1972. Since then we have had a non discriminatory immigration policy and an internal policy of welcoming cultural diversity and the religious diversity which goes with it. This was precious progress.

Yet in recent days, there are some apparently reasonable members of our society who say in effect – we question the value of our present policies because they do not exclude those who profess religious faiths which preach violence and extremism and which cause turmoil and terrorism. At this point they point to Islam, but no doubt they could apply this to other faiths if international events seemed to them to suggest this criticism.

countries, in particular in the United Kingdom, in other parts of Europe and in the United States.

Let us begin by looking at the wide proposition – namely that history demonstrates that religion begets violence and that it has been the cause of many wars. Leaving aside for the moment the modern era, it is not at all evident that religion has been a major cause of wars. There are four periods of warfare which can fairly be said to have been linked to religion, namely, the Moslem conquests in the 8th Century, the Christian Crusades in the 11th Century, the wars between Christians, ie between Catholics and Protestants starting perhaps with the Spanish Armada and especially illustrated by the Thirty Years War in Europe and fourthly the Spanish conquest of the New World.

The first, the Moslem conquest followed the Prophet's first drive to subjugate Arab lands and eventually led to the conquest of Christian Spain. Though true, it needs to be noted that eventually the Moorish State allowed Moors, Catholics and Jews to live alongside one another in peace for centuries. This was brought to

destroyed thousands of Christian churches and excluded Christian pilgrims. There is little doubt that this Caliph was mad and it is likely that his eventual death would have seen a return to peace, harmony and tolerance.

But the Pope responded rapidly and fiercely and in effect blessed the Crusade as a Holy War to liberate the Holy Places. This was a very disturbing development for it endorsed the notion of a Just War where there was religious justification for it. It was a major departure from the previous attitudes and teaching of the Christian church – whether in the East or the West. An indication of the previous long settled official religious disapproval of violence was the official practice that a soldier who had killed an opponent in combat was denied the Sacraments for up to six months.

The third example of a grave and serious religious war was the Thirty Years War between 1618 and 1648. This was however, if it matters, a war between Christians – effectively between Catholics and Protestants. As to the Spanish Armada, it may be doubted whether this was not also about greed and the wealth of the New

From ancient to the beginning of modern times, in the context of the many wars which have occurred, four major wars generated for and in the name of religion, do not seem very many. Let us recall the many wars in ancient time – those waged by Alexander and by the Romans – none could be said to have any religious motivation or factor on the part of the Greeks or the Romans. Yet the wars waged by the Romans were many and extended over centuries. Rome wanted its rule to prevail but it imposed no religion.

In the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries it can be argued that religion has not been a major factor in provoking war or violence. The major exceptions would be the bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims upon the partition of India in 1947 and the current turmoil in the Middle East. The 19th Century began with the Napoleonic Wars, then there followed the Crimean War and soon after the American Civil War. None of these major wars of the 19th Century had any element of religion – either in their causation or name, even if in the Civil War, soldiers sang of the “glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The modern era has in fact very few wars, general or civil, directly caused by religion or waged in pursuit of religious objectives. It is sometimes said that Ireland and the revolt of the Catholic South of Ireland was in part a war of religion. Certainly at the time of Cromwell and in the continued celebrations of the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1692, religion was a critical factor. But the modern fight by the Irish in the 20th Century did not invoke the Catholic religion. This might have been so if the Catholics of Ireland were still being persecuted and discriminated against as had been the case for centuries. But well before the Easter Uprising of 1916 much of the discrimination against Catholics had disappeared – the main reform being the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

It is significant that the most violent century of all – the 20th – which included two terrible wars, Auschwitz and the use of the atom bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki – was the century which could be described as the most secular century in the history of mankind. It saw a steady decline in religion.

for the loss of life and hardship and expropriation which have occurred.

It is appropriate however to consider a more particular area, namely to see what has led to the perception by some that Islam as a religious movement is linked to war, terrorism and violence.

Thus the major terrorist movement led by Bin Laden was and is constantly expressed in religious terms, whether it be the September 11 events or the Bali Massacres. The religious context comes to the fore in the use of suicide terrorists who personally describe themselves in their video interview before the event, as engaged in a religious mission. Moreover there is considerable evidence that some local Imams or other Muslim religious leaders endorse the actions of those deliberately committing suicide during conflicts as ensuring themselves a speedy path to Paradise.

Now in all religious wars or conflicts, there have been many cases where participants took grave risks or faced such overwhelming odds that death seemed almost inevitable, but they were never

civilians. It is therefore desirable to consider what is the traditional teaching of Islam on suicide and whether Islam as a faith now permits suicide in the cause of religion.

This new phenomenon of suicidal missions is characterized by three elements – it involves deliberate suicide; secondly, it is brought about or strongly endorsed by persons or bodies purporting to speak as Muslim religious leaders, and thirdly it invariably involves deadly attacks not on military or police, but on innocent civilians.

As to the first element of deliberate suicide those attacks are of an entirely different character to the taking of a very high risk of death such as engaging in say an attack in war which might be described as suicidal. The attacks exemplified by the Trade Centre involved quite deliberate and certain death. In the long history of war and of terrorism, it is difficult to think of any similar systematic suicidal acts, with the possible exception of the Kamikaze bomber attacks in the Second World War, but then these were directed at warships.

terrorist actions of the IRA. But religion was never used to justify any of these.

As I have already noted, these terrorist attacks have been denounced on a number of occasions by Muslim leaders in various parts of the world, including the United Kingdom and Australia.

This new phenomenon merits study and discussion for it adds a new dimension to terrorism. It causes many who are poorly informed about the true nature of the Muslim faith to see it being used to justify the worst kind of terrorism in the name of religion. And it will lead to added pressure and unjust discrimination against Muslims in many parts of the world, outside the Middle East.

I have to confess that I was both troubled and curious for I asked the obvious question – how is it that such an extravagant claim to instant entry to Paradise could continue to be made and taught in the name of a faith which treasures, along with Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and all the other great religions – the sacredness of human life. My inquiries have been very much

“The Prophet himself certainly disapproved of suicide. A number of *hadîth* leave no doubt that Islam forbids it. The person who commits suicide regardless of the circumstances (unless it happens accidentally) forfeits Paradise. His punishment in Hell will be the repetition of the very act by which he killed himself. The Prophet is said to have refused to say the customary prayers for a suicide. Suicide was thus generally a grave sin.”

Similar conclusions are reached in a learned article “On Suicide in Islam” in the Journal of the American Oriental Society written in 1946 by Franz Rosenthal. He writes:

“While the Qu’ranic attitude toward suicide thus remains uncertain, the great authorities of the *hadîth* leave no doubt as to the official religious attitude of Islam. In their opinion suicide is an unlawful act. Thus, at the latest in the eighth century, but most probably earlier than that, Islam as a religion had come to condemn suicide as a grave sin.”

After reviewing the many authorities of the *hadîth*, he concludes:

The most up to date information is that contained in the Oxford Dictionary of Islam which was published last year. The entry on Suicide reads:

“One phrase in the Quran mentions suicide (4:29) forbidding it and the subject is little discussed in the exegetical literature. The Prophetic traditions clearly and frequently forbid suicide, reflecting the Islamic ethic of forbearance and patient acceptance of hardship as well as the belief that God, not humankind, has absolute power over human affairs and the term of human life. Despite this disapprobation, some Muslims in the Middle East and Islamic Southeast Asia have recently become known for their suicidal missions. Some Muslims perceive these actions as a necessary part of active armed struggle and view the death that results as martyrdom, not suicide.”

It is sometimes argued that the suicides are an understandable response by those who feel helpless and frustrated in the face of hopeless odds and what are perceived to be acts of injustice and

The feature which is of most concern – certainly to us – should be that this is a terrible violence – to the suicider and to others – done manifestly in the name of religion.

It is submitted that those who link deliberate suicide to Divine approval and reward, are distorting religion not preaching it. Since September 11, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, with the Islamic Council of Victoria and other state councils, have issued a strong denunciation of acts of extremism and terrorism. In the United Kingdom there was a strong denunciation of terrorism from Britain's leading Muslim body. I refer in particular to The Times of 1 April 2004 which gave almost a full page coverage under the heading "Britain's Muslims are urged to fight fanatics". It merits reading in full. I will limit myself to the first few paragraphs but I have copies of the full article with me. It reads:

"Britain's leading Muslim body took the unprecedented step yesterday of writing to every mosque to urge worshippers to fight against terrorism. The letter, sent to more than 1,000 mosques, urges Muslims to inform on terrorists in their midst

It is the first move in an action plan to increase the vigilance and co-operation of Britain's Muslim community in bringing terrorists to justice, and in distancing Islam from terrorism.”

We should congratulate Britain's Muslim leadership for its action which perhaps offers a model for all our faiths.

No condemnation of this new evil can be too strong, for it is often accompanied by exploitation of the vulnerable and the very young. It is causing grievous harm to the true adherents of the Muslim faith around the world. How these adherents and their leaders are to address this terrible evil is a matter for them. What those of good will can do is to show understanding and support in what will be a difficult challenge.

The perception – largely erroneous – that religion justifies and sustains violence and war – also fails to recognize the positive contribution that religion has made and continues to make to peace and the cause of non-violence.

adherents to the Christian faiths, whether Catholic Orthodox or otherwise?

In the life of nations, the contribution of religions to peace is more difficult to analyze. It is interesting to observe that for some three centuries, Christianity was radically pacifist in its teachings and in its traditions. So Jesus taught that when struck we should turn the other cheek and said "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God". So military service in the Roman Army was rejected by Christians in these terms: First Origen and then Hippolytes spoke as follows:

Quotes in here

But once Christianity became the official religion after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, service in the army to repel barbarian invaders was permitted. And soon there followed the notion of a just war and further followed in the Crusades by the notion of a holy war.

find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war.”

On another occasion Pope John Paul said that it was blasphemy to say one can kill in the name of God.

On 24 January 2002 the representatives of the religions of the world met at Assisi under the leadership of Pope John Paul II. There were represented Christians of various denominations, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Confucians and many others. All joined in the Declaration of Peace which began as follows:

“Gathered here in Assisi, we have reflected together on peace, a gift of God and a common good of all mankind. Although we belong to different religious traditions, we affirm that building peace requires loving one's neighbour in obedience to the Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you. With this conviction, we will work tirelessly in the great enterprise of building peace.

Therefore:

War never again!
Terrorism never again!
In the name of God,
may every religion bring peace upon the earth
justice and peace,
forgiveness and life,
love!

It is of course, clear that these prayers have not been answered, but it is also clear that the vast majority of those who profess a religious faith pray for peace and not for war or violence.

I conclude by the expression of belief that these prayers are going to be more powerful than to resort to violence in the name of religion. Finally I note that the great martyrs for non violence and peace of our time, namely Gandhi and J. Luther King will always be remembered, whereas the names of the pilots and hijackers who flew into the World Trade Centre Towers will soon be forgotten.

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