

RELIGION IN CONFLICT

Rev. Dr. Richard Howell

We live in a world of unimaginable horrors: nuclear weaponry, religious prejudice, and ideological hatred. With such horrors comes a sense of urgency and a moral imperative for us to raise the question, what is the purpose of religious language? Because religious statements are considered truthful by a people; they allow their lives to be shaped by them and project a world they would like to inhabit. At times societies employ religious language to gain moral sanction for the acts of violence. However the Church in its transformational mission is duty bound to encourage and employ the biblical metaphors of reconciliation and blessing.

Religious language is meant to do something. This brings us to the question of power, which undeniably shapes our individual and social behaviour. The purpose of religious language is to use all available intellectual and intuitional means to interpret the nature of ultimate reality and to invite the human race to share in the privileges of a personal relationship with God. But religious language has also been used to justify violence.

Religions and Violence

Democratizing societies in South Asia display a disturbing common tendency towards ethnic and religious violence. The reason is simple. As societies open up and politicians scramble for power, they appeal to the public for votes by using the most direct, effective religious language, which cements group solidarity in opposition to some other group. Religious language is most effective in adding fuel to the fires of ethnic or religious conflict. Sometimes the conflict turns into a full-scale war. The warfare religious language is often used as a motivational tool for political ends, for nothing better unites and mobilises people and resources for action than war.

Religious intolerance is only the first glimpse of the new face of Indian democracy. But why are religious symbols employed for acts of real violence? Do we fault the violent human nature for exploiting religion? Unquestionably, human behaviour and actions measure between brilliance and depravity. Pascal pointed out this antithesis between the person's greatness and his meanness: "What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error and refuse of the universe!" [\[1\]](#)

The depravity of human nature is indeed responsible for abusing religious language. However one cannot undermine the social, economic and political issues that have birthed violent struggles under the facade of delivering justice and ushering in freedom. But why is religious language exploited by people committed to inhuman violent struggles? Mark Juergensmeyer observes, "By identifying an earthly worldly struggle with the cosmic struggle of order and disorder, good and evil, light and darkness, justice and injustice, political actors and religious leaders utilize the readily available way of thinking that justifies the use of violent means." [\[2\]](#) The social scientists research to discover primarily the social and political aspects of the problem, but as Juergensmeyer states, some "have tried to trace the patterns in religion's own logic".[\[3\]](#) David Rapport, for instance has identified several features of Messianic movements that he believes leads to violence, most of which are characterized by a desire for an antinomian liberation from oppression.[\[4\]](#)

For religious language to lead to violence it is essential for the pious to believe that the cosmic struggle is realizable in human terms. Juergensmeyer writes, "If the war between good and evil, order and chaos, is conceived as taking place in historical time, in a real geographical location, and among actual contestants, it is more likely that those who are prone to violent acts will associate religion with their struggles."^[5] Politicians who realize the power of religious language are fond of making allusions to religious and literary traditions in their speeches. They are quick to characterize their worldly foes by associating them with enemies in legendary battles. Juergensmeyer writes, "By sacralizing economic, political and social concerns the political activists give an aura of legitimacy that they did not previously possess."^[6] Morals can be occupied and guided by the most varied forms of ethos. History bears witness to ample religious conflicts in the Indian society.

Religious intolerance is not alien to Hinduism. Romila Thapar writes, "Despite the nineteenth century myth that the Hindus are by instinct and religion a non-violent people. The genesis of this myth was partly in the romantic image of the Indian past projected, for example, by scholars such as Max Muller."^[7] In Hindu tradition, for instance, the mythical battles in Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are frequently used as metaphors for present day struggles. Writing about "The Mahabharata Legacy, and the Gita's Intent" Rajmohan Gandhi says, "Proud as we are of the epic's codes of chivalry, we cannot be proud, I suggest in all humility, of the story, or history, it reveals. In particular, we cannot be proud of the epic's acquiescence in triumph of revenge over reconciliation. I suggest, further, that we cannot be glad that the epic is reproduced in varied forms in our history"^[8]

Violence is rooted in very foundation of some religious traditions one example is the Sikh religion. **The concept of soldier-saint is inherent in Sikh religion.** Sikhs are independent and democratic; they are equal members of a Brotherhood, the Khalsa. It was this spirit of independence that drove them to revolt against the Brahman-dominated caste system in the first place; and it was this same spirit that led them to organize the Khalsa as a militant brotherhood to oppose domination by Islam.^[9] Before his death, Guru Arjan, (1581-1606) seeing the war-clouds gathering, advised his son Hargobind (1606-1645) to sit fully armed on his throne, and he asked Bhai Buddha to make soldier-saint out of him.^[10] "The warrior strain appeared in their ancestors of old. Their Aryan forbearers conquered all Northern India, singing the hymns of the Vedas as they went. A devout appreciation of Nature went along with the ruthless dispossession of the Dasyus (Dalits). These Vedic Aryans were the original warrior saints, and the ideal of the soldier-saint dominates the Sikhs to this day."^[11]

Certainly **the Quranic model of leadership is authoritarian.** Starting with the eleventh AD over a span of eight centuries, conquerors flying the flag of Islam raced down the passes of Hindu Kush, and down the plains and deserts of India, killing those in their way, smashing numberless idols in temples, including images of the Buddha, plundering gold and other precious booty. Sometimes they returned to their homeland with their treasures. Occasionally they remained and ruled. Islam teaches it is the duty of Muslims to exert themselves strenuously "in the cause of God" against both personal ungodliness and the enemies of Islam. Jihad can mean "holy war," but the struggle for uprightness of life and propagation of the faith prefers peaceful means such as persuasion and example. Muslims consider themselves as comprising the Dar al-Islam, "the Household of

submission,” and the rest of the world’s peoples as the Dar al-Hard, “the Household of warfare.” It is the duty of Muslims to extend the Dar al-Islam by means of missionary activities and in some cases even by military jihad, if necessary, toward the ultimate goal of a worldwide Islamic community embracing all. However the Quran explicitly admonishes that there shall be “no compulsion in religion.” (Sura 2:256). Jihad is the only form of armed conflict sanctioned by the religion, and those who fall “in the cause of Allah” are martyrs who will immediately taste the joys of salvation (Sura 2: 154; 3:169, 195) Muslims distinguish between the “greater jihad,” which is the constant struggle of the individual believers against his own evil tendencies, and the “lesser jihad,” which is actual armed conflict in defence of the faith or its propagation.[\[12\]](#)

Catholic Popes combined religious authority and political power for centuries. In 1095, Pope Urban II urged his listeners to undertake a holy war to free the Holy Land from pagan control. The appeal succeeded, and the first crusade was launched. The crusades were the most obvious example of the merger between violence and holiness which took place in the medieval Church. The crusades were a tragic distortion of the Christian mission, for which the Church is still criticised. The religious wars that followed the Reformation were some of the most violent in all of European history.[\[13\]](#)

Peck has wisely stated, “Crusades and inquisitions have nothing to do with Christ. War, torture, and persecution have nothing to do with Christ. Arrogance and revenge have nothing to do with Christ. When he gave his one recorded sermon, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth were, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Not the arrogant. And as he was dying he asked that his murderers be forgiven.”[\[14\]](#)

The West created truly global empires between 1500 and 1750 by improving its ability to wage war which has been termed as ‘the military revolution.’ Huntington remarks, “The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations were converted) but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.”[\[15\]](#)

The established leadership usually does not resort to violence; rather the second level of leadership, a younger and more marginalised group for whom the acts of violence are enormously empowering. The psychological dimension of power may be even more effective. Even a small display of violence can have immense symbolic power: the power to awaken the masses into realization of their potency. This is best illustrated, when on December 6, 1992, the Ayodha’s Babri Masjid mosque, built in 1528 by Mir Baqi under the authority of Babar, the first Mughal emperor of India, was demolished in revenge by a mob of more than 300,000 Hindus, most of whom wore the saffron colour of Hindu nationalism. Ashis Nandy aptly puts it, ‘there is now a peculiar double-bind in Indian politics: the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been available for checking corruption and violence in public life.’[\[16\]](#)

Our brief survey of religious violence sufficiently attest the fact that a community of human beings can be thoroughly blind, corrupt, and incapable of recognizing what is good, just, liberating, and corresponding with God. Very few people would deny that violence with utterly false orientations in which the very powers providing orientation are employed is a conspiracy against life itself. Religious language always becomes a handy tool to mobilise violence. The Christian community in India does not have a history of

involvement in religious violence, even though we are victims of violence. They have practiced with honour and respect from all communities, their rights and duties as citizens to work for social progress and promote the ideals, which seem true and right. They work to alleviate human misery and injustice because they believe God loves all people equally and desires justice for all.

The Cross Defines Our Relationship With Others

How should we then relate to others? The cross defines this. Jesus Christ “died for the ungodly” is the central assertion of the New Testament. The message of the cross is that when we serve and even suffer for others, we are in the company of Jesus Christ. Christ’s love in us motivates us for Christian service, so the church is involved in relief and development, in imparting education and medical services to people. The cross opens us to grace, which is the power and presence of God, giving us the kind of love Christ showed when he washed the disciples’ feet and cared for the unlovable. The transformed community of Christ must be in the forefront of serving others.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity* sociologist Rodney Stark documents how the church lived during the first three centuries of the Christian era in the Roman Empire. Abortion, infanticide, adultery, demeaning treatment of women and plague were all common in the Roman Empire, with negative consequences on the Empire. The Roman population barely reproduced itself because of frequent abortions. Female infanticide produced a serious shortage of women for marriage. Adultery, abortion, and forced pre-adolescent marriage destroyed the fertility of many women. Plagues killed a high percentage of the population. Stark demonstrates that Roman Christians behaved differently. They did not practise abortion. They treated women with dignity and respect and cared for others instead of fleeing when plagues hit. The impact was tremendous. The Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 313. [\[17\]](#)

Transformational mission witnesses to the fact that Christ creates reconciled people who work for justice in the midst of injustice, for truthfulness in middle of deception, and for peace in the centre of a violent society. The best example of this is the reconciling words of Mrs. Gladys Staines in face of the horrific murder of her husband and two sons in 1999 in Baripada, Orissa. “I have no anger. I have no hatred. I forgive them.” People asked Gladys, “How could you forgive?” Such forgiving is not natural, but we believe it comes from Christ and reveals the true power of Christian character. When those who follow Christ focus on godly and righteous behaviour, they supernaturally become a respected alternative. What then should be the language of transformational mission?

Mission Is Primarily Blessings The Nations

The central missionary text for missions is found in Genesis 12:2-3, “I will make you a great nation and I will bless you: I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you will I will curse: and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you”.

Transformational mission is primarily a ministry of blessings the nations. The suffering servant passages in Isaiah also resonates the same theme. “I the LORD, have called you

in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (Isaiah 41-6-7). Jesus echoes the same words in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19). Isaiah continues the same theme of light. “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6.) Light is an important term for Jesus in the Gospels. “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) and “Let your light so shine, (Mt. 5:16) Light is also an important theme in the conversion account of Saul of Tarsus, “I am sending you to them to open to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26: 17-18). Here we observe the theme of blessing and spiritual encounter is present. The Church becomes a source of blessing by proclaiming and practicing the gospel of reconciliation.

The metaphor of light has implications for mission: to illumine, to show reality, to guide us on the way to warn, etc. Paul tells us that we are to be ambassadors for Christ, taking the message of reconciliation to the world, both by word and by demonstrating it among groups, which have traditionally been hostile. (cf.2 Cor.5: 17-20).

The last book of the Bible speaks of the water of life, which nurtures the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”. (Rev.22: 1f).

The Biblical terms like Good News, salvation, and redemption, all fit into the category of reconciliation and blessing. The overwhelming Biblical language for mission reflects the motif of blessing rather than warfare. While we believe in the reality of spiritual warfare, we must question the wisdom of using warfare language for mission today. The history of crusades and western colonialism and the inaccurate perception that Christian mission was an aspect of western imperialism make it unwise. The biblical language about mission stresses the blessing and reconciliation motif far more than that of warfare. This is the language that will move us forward in transformational mission.

Rev. Dr. Richard Howell is the General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India and Asia Evangelical Alliance.

[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), no. 131

[2] Mark Juergensmeyer, ‘The Logic of Religious Violence,’ in, ed T.N.Madan, *Religion in India*, (Oxford University Press: Delhi 1991) p. 386.

[3] Ibid.

[4] David Rapoport, ‘Fear and trembling: terrorism in three religious traditions,’ *American Political Science Review* 78:658-77).

- [5] Juergensmeyer, 'The Logic of Religious Violence,' p.386.
- [6] Juergensmeyer, p. 382
- [7] Romila Thapar, Ibid. Also see, Romila Thapar, *Cultural Transaction and Early India*, 19ff See, M. Muller, *India What Can it Teach Us?* London 1983, 101ff.
- [8] Rajmohan Gandhi, *Revenge and Reconciliation*, Penguin Books, 1999, 34.
- [9] Ibid., p.21.
- [10] C.H.Loehlin, *The Sikhs and Their Scriptures* (The Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow:1964), p. 7
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] M.F. Denny, 'Jihad' in Keith Crim, General editor, *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, (Harper &Row, Publishers, san Francisco, 1981), p 382
- [13] Ibid., p. 220
- [14] M. Scott Peck, *People Of The Lie*, (Simon & Schuster, Inc New York, 1983), p.11.
- [15] Huntington , p.51
- [16] Asish Nandy, An Anti-Secularist Manifesto. *Seminar* 314:14-24
- [17] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper), 1997, 164.