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In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the intersections between religion and political violence emerged as pressing subjects in the public debate in the U.S. over the meanings of what had happened on that day. Living and teaching in New York City and called upon to speak “about religion and violence” at an all-campus forum just a week after the attacks, I recall being struck by the immediate emergence of two related but contradictory claims that were made about religion’s role in the attacks. On the one hand, I repeatedly heard statements like “Religion is the culprit here. If it weren’t for religion, this never would have happened.” The implication was that if people would just “get over” religion, the world would have at least a chance of being a peaceful place. On the other hand, a lot of other people were arguing that the attacks had nothing at all to do with religion — that religion itself had been hijacked alongside the four commercial airliners that morning. This second kind of argument was often mobilized in the salutary service of disengaging a critique of the particular actions of the nineteen Muslim hijackers from a characterization of Islam in general.

In a starkly objectivist view, neither claim is factually correct, but I was less concerned with the factual character of these statements — about whether religion was in fact to blame or whether it was simply absent on that day — than I was interested in the impulses that lay behind such claims. One set of statements sought to blame and demonize “religion” while the other sought to protect and exonerate it. “Religion” — one of the many ways in which human beings organize their experiences and their lives together — in both of these sets of statements was framed as somehow unique and radically different from other human

projects. No one was suggesting the need for people to “get over” politics or economics. On the other hand, no one felt the need to defend “politics” or “economics” from the observation that what had happened might indeed have had something to do with one or the other of them. We could, in other words, notice that politics and economics might have played a role without passing a value judgment on that fact. It seemed, however, that religion’s role required that an ethical judgment be rendered. If religion was to blame, then the inference was that religion was dangerous and in need of bracketing and reining in. If the attacks had nothing to do with religion, then religion stood innocently on the margins as other nefarious forces took control.

The question “How might one teach about the relationship between religion and violence?” took on a peculiar urgency in this context. The following reflections focus on the broad theoretical challenges embedded in the process of teaching about religion and violence.

Coming to terms with the intersections of “religion” and “violence” first involves interrogating the very terms of discussion. No one who has been paying attention over the last twenty years to the academic study of religion can have missed the theoretical contestations over the very word “religion,” and the recognition that its emergence in modern/postmodern academic discourse is linked inexorably with the history of European colonialism. That is, the category of religion is itself an intellectual/ideological by-product of historic violence. But even as several generations’ efforts to define “religion” in the abstract have necessarily failed, the term still circulates as a name for arenas of human activity and conviction that occupy a revitalized space in the realm of the social and the political (see Lincoln for a lucid exploration of the theoretical issues). Other terms, meanwhile, come to be affiliated, often fluidly and imprecisely, with “religion” — terms such as “fundamentalism” — anxiously marking epistemological, hermeneutical, and political divides in the terrain of the modern (see Moallem’s work on feminism and fundamentalism). Although definitions are elusive, it is still possible — indeed, crucial — to pay close attention to the ways in which the categories are deployed in public debates.

And just as “religion” has evaded compelling definition, so, too, has “violence” inspired significant theoretical debate. More focused definitions (e.g., violence “immediately inflicts physical damage on persons and/or objects...includ[ing] forcible seizure of persons or objects over restraint and resistance,” [Tilly, 3]) compete with more capacious portraits of violence that focus on forms of social, political, and economic exploitation and oppression (see Weigert; Farmer). Meanwhile, both religion and violence operate in the contemporary world as major figures in a narrative of the modern/postmodern (see de Vries; Derrida; Moallem).

The discussion can begin philologically, definitionally, and phenomenologically, but it needs to move through these frames into the arenas of rhetoric, narrative, history, and affect. What

arguments, stories, and emotions are mobilized when people seek to blame or exonerate religion in occasions of grievous violence, in situations where coercive force is put in the service of competing ideologies and regimes of truth?

When religion is blamed for violence, the narrative invoked is often mythic in its reach, in at least two significant ways. First, conflict that is deemed “religious” is often viewed as occurring outside of concrete historical conditions, indeed beyond temporality itself. How often do commentators and analysts despair over the prospect of conflict resolution where religion and violence intersect, asserting that the apparent intractability of a situation is rooted in an essential and irresolvable difference whose origins recede backwards into a vague, mythic prehistory? Second, political conflicts that have called upon the power of religious narratives often raise the stakes for participants. Where compromise might be a reality and a necessity of the negotiating table, it often has the flavor of failure in the religious realm.

Meanwhile, the vindication of religion as a factor in public violence has its own costs, often making it very difficult to understand, except after the bloody fact, how religious narratives, institutions, leaderships, and followers can all be contributing actors in the strategic use of coercive force. In such situations, religion frequently intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, and nation in providing a grounding rationale for violence. (The cases of the genocide in Bosnia and the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s are devastating cases in point. On Bosnia, see Sells. On Rwanda, see Gourevitch; Longman; Mamdani).

As scholars of recent genocides have made clear, it is critical to historicize and temporally situate the objects of study in exploring the relationships between religion and violence — perhaps most importantly, to address the quintessential modernity of religious violence. It is worth noticing how often religious violence is characterized as “medieval” or “tribal” — constructing an other that is nonmodern, unaffiliated with post-Enlightenment categories of civil society, distanced from “ourselves.” Part of the project here is to pay attention to the material and technological conditions which enable religious conviction and political violence to intersect. As others have observed, the hijackers on September 11 depended fully on quintessentially modern technologies — jet airplanes and television — in the service of their goals. Death raining from the sky, while an apocalyptic (and hence deeply religious) fantasy with a centuries-long lineage, has been a technical reality emerging only in the last one hundred years with the invention, first, of machines that could fly and, second, incendiaries that could be dropped from those machines (see Lindqvist). Many historians of the development of technologies of aerial bombing have documented the claims made by those societies that got there first that God had given them this power to be used in his service. Media technologies, meanwhile, generate images of religious others and interpellate viewers into their narratives (see McAlister; Runions). Explorations of media technologies need to include examinations of how representations of violence shape moral and affective responses (see Cohen; Boltanski).

More generally, teaching about religion and violence requires that attention be paid to the role of affect — anger, hatred, loss — and how it is mobilized and directed through narratives and rhetorics in the service of regimes of truth (see Eng and Kazanjian; Moss). And as we pay attention to affect, works like Chris Hedges's *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* remind us that the deeply exhilarating, narcotic, and meaning-making effects of violence must be analyzed and understood. Meanwhile, the profound implication of religious traditions, institutions, and people in the ideologies and execution of violence is a difficult reality for many students to encounter, stirring up affective responses all their own.

An essay of this length can only scratch the surface of the questions and resources available for teaching about religion and violence at the current moment. I have, for example, not included any discussion of how religious traditions, institutions, and communities have been mobilized as particularly effective agents in opposition to violence and coercive force. These mobilizations have not been limited to the discursive realm (but see Crawford for a compelling analysis of the role of ethical argument, often deriving from religious traditions, in anticolonial movements) but have intervened in institutional and structural realms as well. Like teaching about the intersections of religion and violence, teaching about the role of religion in creating and sustaining alternatives to violence will require careful attention to historical specificity and context, technologies of representation, and affect.

Resources

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