

Militant Piety: The Shadow Side of Religion

1. Introduction

Recently on BBC radio an Anglican bishop recounted his experience at an inter-faith occasion in his diocese. Members were asked to read a short passage from their sacred scriptures which would serve as a basis for dialogue. A Muslim, a Hindu and a Christian read some uplifting verses. The local rabbi was unwell and could not attend, but he had sent in his chosen text to be read out and discussed. It was the final verses of Ps 137 where the author calls for revenge on the Babylonians for taking the Jews into exile: 'O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock'. There was a stunned silence.

A few days later the bishop met the rabbi at another meeting and asked him why he had chosen that lamentable text when the Bible contained so many inspiring verses. The rabbi replied: 'All world faiths have irenic passages in their scriptures, but they also have difficult or even scandalous passages, and we will not make real progress in inter-faith relationships until we have the courage to discuss *those* with one another'.

The rabbi was presumably insinuating that the promotion of hate by organized religions has received far too little notice. He was also drawing attention to the fact that religion is like a fire: it warms, but it also burns. Yes, it constrains aggression and promotes reconciliation. But far too often in world history it has increased the potential for human conflict rather than reduced it. The killing dimension of religion is an inter-faith phenomenon. Though rarely the *only* cause of conflict, religion is too central in many cases to be ignored or regarded as irrelevant.

Religiously motivated violence is not a new phenomenon. People have been killing in the name of one God or another time out of mind. Instances in the recent past have coincided with a resurgence of religious faith. Concerned with the erosion of religion's role in society, a new breed of believers, many of them educated, affluent and sophisticated people, have gone on the offensive. We now witness, in some quarters, a militant piety which justifies the use of violence to achieve its goal which is the establishment of a theocracy.

As we witness a link between appalling atrocities and a strong faith, despair mingles with perplexity. How can any religion produce such dark and bloodthirsty theology? Why does religion foster a culture of rage and resentment which is at odds with the proclamations of love and peace heard from every pulpit? What prompts rational human beings to become murderous fanatics? The focus of this kind of question is on the shadow side of religion. This is I want to consider by addressing topics relating specifically to the three Abrahamic Faiths.

2. Violence as a Sacred Duty

Every monotheistic religion believes it has God on its side. Because his voice must be obeyed, his honour protected, and his plan for the world executed, violence in his name has been, and in some cases still is, regarded by the faithful as a duty. Consider the religions in turn.

a. Judaism. On 25 February 1994 Dr Baruch Goldstein, an ultra-Orthodox Jew of American extraction,

entered a mosque in his home town of Hebron in Israeli-Occupied Territory carrying a machine gun. Before he was beaten to death, he had shot 29 Muslims as they knelt in prayer. Today at the assassin's grave in a nearby park pilgrims hold services and light memorial candles. At his funeral Rabbi Jacob Perrin commended his action by stating in his widely-reported sermon that 'one million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail'.

The British Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, roundly condemned the massacre by declaring that 'violence is evil. Violence committed in the name of God is doubly evil. Violence against those engaged in worshipping God is unspeakably evil'. Reflecting on Sacks' reaction, another prominent British rabbi, Norman Solomon commented thus: 'The problem with Sacks' position is that, much as we may concur with the sentiment, and however many Biblical and talmudic citations we may amass in praise of peace, we are left with numerous texts that *do summon us to violence* in the name of God, and this makes it difficult to argue against Perrin and the like on purely *textual* grounds'.

On February 4, 1995 Yigal Amir, the son of an Orthodox Rabbi, assassinated Israeli Premier Yitzchak Rabin. In his defence he claimed that was honouring Goldstein who had acted in the name of God. Because Rabin traded land for peace in the Oslo Accords, and shook hands with Arafat, he was a traitor. For such people the Torah mandated death.

I note these two notorious instances because they point to the religious dimension of Zionism. Both men regarded the Palestinians as modern-day Canaanites. Their hero was Joshua who eliminated the native population of a country which, by divine right, belonged to the Israelites. For them, cleansing the land of all non-Jewish elements in order to facilitate settlement by those to whom God had given it, was a commandment, a religious duty.

b. Islam. The tragedy of 9/11 in the US was the work of Muslims who saw themselves as agents of divine justice against an evil empire, the Great Satan. Papers the perpetrators left behind show the depth of their religious feelings. They regarded themselves as martyrs, their action a sacred duty justified with verses from the Koran. For example: 'Fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them'. 'Say to those who reject Faith: Soon you will be vanquished and gathered together and driven into Hell'. By carrying out these commands, they saw themselves not as murderers but as warriors, the agents of a stern and implacable God.

In a document entitled *The Management of Savagery* (2004) ISIS acknowledges and sanctifies its ultraviolent ideology. Promoting terror by means of atrocity is a necessary stage in political evolution. A pure Islamic state, free of foreign influence, must be achieved in every way possible. The end justifies any means.

c. Christianity. The Crusader knights, who crossed Europe to defend Christianity's holy places in the East, regarded their cause as holy. Though greed may well have overshadowed any religious intent, their songs and chronicles display a religious mindset. Pope Urban II accused Muslims of committing atrocities (whether real or imaginary) against Christian pilgrims in order to arouse horror and encourage a reaction. But he preached the First Crusade not as an armed pilgrimage but as a holy war. The stated intention was, he said, 'To restrain

the savagery of the Saracens by force of arms; to wrest the land from the wicked race'. Driving out the infidel was a religious obligation. But when the armies romped through the Rhineland, another group of unbelievers, Jews, became collateral targets of pillage and violence. The legacy of the Crusades, in terms of the damaged relationships between East and West, continues to haunt us.

In every holy war what is a sacred duty for the victors is mayhem and murder for the victims. Violence becomes obligatory when selected scriptural passages are taken literally and not given to interpretation; when reading is believing. Terror in God's name is not *primarily* one of believers distorting sacred texts. Rather it is a problem rooted in the violence-of-God traditions that are a prominent feature of those texts. Scripture provides the script.

3. The Dictates of Dogma

When readers find in it a God who commands violence, a holy book can very easily become a charter of oppression and shamelessly exploited for political ends. Dogma, derived from the book itself, can dictate how it is used, with the result that what is divine in one camp is demonic in the other.

a. Absolute Truth. All religions have adherents who will gladly speak on God's behalf and are perfectly ready never to doubt what they are saying. As privileged recipients of God's final message to humankind, they have a triumphalist view of their Faith. There is only one truth, which the faithful must preach to all people. Those who reject the revelation are subject to punishment. Believers who deny some aspect of dogma are declared heretics and excommunicated. Those who convert to another faith face ostracism and worse; Islam and Christianity have a history of executing apostates.

All this makes relating to another religion problematic. While the Talmud declares that the righteous of all faiths have a place in paradise, Muslims and Christians have condemned such a relativist view because they share the conviction that there is only one true Faith. The only chink in this triumphalist armour is tolerance. But while tolerance is welcomed, it is in essence a very intolerant concept. It has been described as 'resentment mastered'. It says in effect: 'I'm in charge. You can enjoy some privileges, but only on my terms'. This has been a particular problem for Christians with regard to Jews because they reject the fulfilment of divine promise in Christ, a core tenet of Christianity. Historically Islam has tolerated Jews and Christians, the peoples of the book, but only under certain conditions because they do not recognise the truth enshrined in the Koran.

In every religion the unbelieving outsider is more easily tolerated than the dissident insider. Witness the tension between Sunni and Shia in Islam, Ultra-Orthodox and Reform in Judaism, fundamentalist and liberal in Christianity. Heretics, incorrect believers, are a much greater threat to the stability of the Faith than infidels because they deny some cardinal truth, and yet claim membership of the family.

Any theocratic society requires total conviction that one side possesses absolute truth and the other is irredeemably evil. Because an exclusive creed cannot admit opposition, it is a virtue to despise the enemies of

God. So orthodoxy is protected by recourse to anathema and violence. But the essence of any killing done in God's name is the identity of the victims not their behaviour. The victims of 9/11 and of the Holocaust were killed not for what they did but for who they were.

b. Divine Particularity. You may remember what Golda Meir said when she was PM of Israel, 'Moses led my people through the wilderness for 40 years and brought them to the only place in the whole of the ME where there is no oil'. Oil or no oil, of all the promises made to Abraham and his descendants, that of land is the most prominent and decisive. Abraham Heschel says that the right to the land 'is at the core of Jewish history, a vital element of Jewish faith'.

The land was given to the nation to form a society in which it could live in total obedience to God's law. The actual map-readings are not a matter of history but of divine mandate. The boundaries were set by God, and are therefore non-negotiable. So partition is unthinkable. The aspirations of a homeless but chosen people to live in a specific location are synonymous with the divine will. But actual possession is elusive. Acquisition comes only through violence, conquest and occupation. What is mandate for the one is misery for the other.

For ISIS the Caliphate, is crucial. The existence of a designated territory acts as a magnet for fighters from across the globe. But its significance is not just political, it is a means of salvation. It is only in a wholly Islamic state that the faithful can live one hundred percent according to Sharia. So believers are required to reside in the Caliphate. If they cannot, they are expected to pledge allegiance to it; to die without doing so is to die in disbelief. So holding on to parts of Iraq and Syria is vital.

On 1.9.1689 the renowned Puritan divine Cotton Mather delivered a stirring sermon in the Old Meeting House in Boston. His listeners were soldiers fighting the inhabitants of New England. His text, from Deut 25, was God's command to the Israelites to exterminate the Amalekites who confronted them at the border of the promised land. Mather told the soldiers that they were the modern equivalent of the Israelites. The Amalekites who were to be beaten small as the dust before the wind, cast out as dirt in the streets, eliminated, were the native Americans. The genocide was justified not *only* on practical grounds, as a protective measure, but also on dogmatic grounds. The native population must be disinherited to make room for God's chosen people. Puritan policy had divine approval. The drive by God's elect to find a new land had its paradigm in the Bible and was dictated by dogma.

In cases of conquest and occupation it is often claimed that security dictates settlement. But it should not be forgotten that subjugation and settlement are also regarded by the invaders as divinely ordained. The assumption of righteousness, coupled with the belief that God has handpicked his representatives and given them specific territory, excuses every barbarous act. Destiny absolves the deed.

c. The End of Days. Each of our 3 religions supplies its adherents with a cosmology to explain their suffering and help them respond. Pain is the result of an ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil, God v Satan.

The faithful, whose assured victory will bring the present world order to a close, positively welcome the end of days because their religion is an embattled Faith. They see conspiracy everywhere. So they cultivate a theology of atrocity and terror. Anything that brings the end that much closer is grist to the mill.

Apocalyptic or eschatological thinking developed in ancient Israel when the redemption promised by the prophets failed to materialize. In the Dead Sea Scrolls it appears as the war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness. Today it features more prominently in Islamic and Christian fundamentalism than it does in Judaism.

In the American occupation of Iraq ISIS saw unmistakable signs of an approaching bloodbath which will take place near the city of Dabiq, north of Aleppo. God's faithful followers will defeat the infidel army of Satan. The final cosmic battle, in which Islam will triumph, will be in Jerusalem. The teaching is based on a literal reading of Koranic texts.

In Christianity the end-timers are known as millennialists. Their primary text is the Book of Revelation, supplemented by passages from Paul's letters and the Gospels. They believe that the faithful will be raptured. They will be taken physically out of this world to join Christ in the heavens. They will thus escape the 7 years of tribulation when the Antichrist will rule the world. Christ and his saints will then return and defeat Satan and his cohorts at the battle of Armageddon before establishing an empire lasting a thousand years in Jerusalem.

Those who yearn for the end of days welcome what they regard as obvious signs of the imminence of the end: famine, strife, immorality, unbelief, natural disasters. An eschatological mindset finds it is easier to legitimize violence and engage in conflict with infidels. For that reason Jonathan Sacks regards belief in the apocalypse as 'the most disastrous form of politics associated with the Abrahamic faiths'.

4. In conclusion

Any consideration of a militant piety based on sacred scripture presents the student with two related issues: the nature of a holy book and the way to handle it. Texts which advocate violence in God's name bring both of these topics into sharp focus. I conclude with three brief observations.

a. Interpretation. Almost from their inception the three Abrahamic Faiths have wrestled with the meaning of their scriptures. Each one has interpretative traditions, schools of thought which advocate a specific and recognized method of understanding and applying the text. Fundamentalists in all 3 religions ignore this tradition. For them, reading is believing. There is no intermediate step between revelation and application. But every hard text requires interpretation, which implies contextualization, otherwise it can do much harm.

b. Evaluation. Because holy books are used as instruments of oppression against one group or another, it is of crucial importance that they are not only interpreted, but evaluated and critiqued. E. Schlusser-Fiorenza

writes: ‘If scriptural texts have served – and still do – to support not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then biblical scholarship must take responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate them’.

The need for critical evaluation is nowhere more apparent than when morally offensive passages are put to the kind of use noted above. Criticizing a person’s faith is taboo in every corner of our culture. Nevertheless, ‘What does scripture do to those who read it without evaluating its message?’ is a legitimate question. If religions presume to tell us how we should live, their sacred texts should be open to discussion and challenge. Recognition of scripture’s role as the oppressor’s handbook should inspire a self-critical theology.

c. Dialogue. I end where I began with dialogue. Dialogue generally concentrates on identifying the commonalities between religions: compassion, justice, peace, reconciliation. But this is not enough. It should also generate difficult conversations by directing us beyond safe, peripheral concerns. It has to include the hard sayings, the profound differences, the belief in exclusivity and absolute truth.

For this to work, what is required is not tolerance, putting up with the ‘other’ for as long as we can, but mutual respect. In this context some Koranic injunctions cannot be repeated often enough: ‘Unto every one of you We have appointed a different law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community; but He willed it otherwise’. ‘We have made you nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another and compete with one another in doing good’. There is no mention of violence there, and the existence of plurality, it seems, is a fact of life. Despite our cultural, national and religious differences, our common humanity should promote respect and unite us in doing good. That must be an appropriate recipe for healing a broken world.