

# Religion and violence in a globalised world

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Violent religious extremism is seen as one of the mega-problems of the 21st century. This article – based on a key lecture at the conference on 'Violence in a democratic South Africa' at the University of Pretoria and the David de Villiers memorial lecture at the University of Stellenbosch, both held during August 2010 – critically discussed the interaction between religion and violence in our present-day, globalised world. Three different propositions on the relationship between religion and violence were scrutinised. In countering the proposition that religion, or more specifically monotheism, necessarily leads to violence, it was argued that violence is not an inherent, but rather an acquired or even an ascribed quality of religion. The second proposition that religion leads to non-violence was affirmed to the extent that religions do provide a strong impulse to overcome violence. However, they also tend to accept violence as an inevitable part of reality and even justify the use of violence on religious grounds. The third proposition was regarded as the most convincing, for it argues that the link between religion and violence is contingent. Some situations do seem to make the use of violence inevitable; however, religions should refrain from justifying the use of violence and maintain a preferential option for nonviolence.

## Introduction

Many people around the world celebrated the release of Nelson Mandela from prison on 11 February 1990, an event that marked the beginning of a new, democratic South Africa. This new South Africa, however, is now faced with a number of serious problems that need to be addressed, amongst which is the problem of violence. To begin examining this problem with the aim of finding a resolution to it, we need to ask ourselves: what does 'democracy' mean? The answer is that it quite simply refers to the organisation of the political process according to democratic principles. The South African people can testify proudly that they govern themselves according to one of the most remarkable democratic constitutions of the world. Democracy is, at the same time, a spirit by which a society is characterised. It is a spirit of freedom and justice, of solidarity and nonviolence. Yet, that spirit is endangered in South Africa, as well as in other parts of the world.

Nothing is more dangerous for such a democratic spirit than an atmosphere of hatred and violence. Our time is characterised by an open conflict between two tendencies. On the one hand, freedom, human rights, peace and justice became elements of the political order at a national, as well as international level. On the other hand, we observe not only a resurgence of the spirit of hatred and violence, but, even worse, its justification and promotion by means of seemingly religious reasons. That leads to a situation in which violent religious extremism is seen as one of the mega-problems of the 21st century (see e.g. Martin 2007). Together with global warming, exponential population growth, water shortages, and pandemics, specifically HIV and AIDS, this violent extremism forms one of the biggest challenges that societies are facing on a global scale. Therefore, in this paper I will address the interaction between religion and violence in our present-day, globalised world.

Firstly, I will turn briefly to the definition of violence and then describe some forms in which we observe a new linkage between religion and violence. Secondly, I will discuss three different propositions on the relationship between religion and violence: a necessary connection between religion and violence, religious criticism of violence and, finally, a contingent relationship between religion and violence. Thirdly, this will lead us to some insights into the tasks religious bodies should address in the future. However, a detailed description of these tasks would require an additional paper, so I will confine my argument herein to the linkage between religion and violence and its current interpretations.

## What is violence?

There is a longstanding debate on the meaning of the term 'violence'. The restriction of the term only to the physical violation of persons creates problems. On the one hand, such a restriction

might give the mistaken impression that the destruction of things is pardonable compared to the use of violence against human persons. On the other hand, it is obvious that human persons can be affected just as negatively by structural restrictions as by physical violence; therefore, it is for a good reason that the concept of structural violence was introduced. Structural violence in this sense is found in all structural conditions that prevent people from developing and using their capabilities. The segregation of ethnic groups in the United States of America before the success of the civil rights movement and the system of apartheid in South Africa, have often been used as examples for such structural violence. But even in the case of direct violence, not every violation of human persons takes the form of physical violence. We know of psychological and other forms of non-physical, but highly effective, violence by which people are hurt. Today, bullying at the working place is often described as a form of such psychological violence. 'Violent language' – namely language that hurts people – is another example that should not be underestimated.

What is most important in such a broader reflection on the understanding of violence is a shift in perspective. Recent research looks at violence not primarily from the perspective of the act and its perpetrator, but from the perspective of the victim. Empathy for the victim becomes the key to understanding violence. Therefore our image of violence is formed not so much by the means but by the effects of violence and not so much by the intentions of the actors but through the consequences for the victims.

However, there is also a need to define the limits of the term 'violence'. Anyone who has tried to wrestle with the problems of terminology, as indicated above, has had to address the concern that the term 'violence', itself, is simply too vague. Violence in this broad sense seems to be an omnipresent reality; the hope to limit, to contain and, at least partly, to overcome violence, seems futile when the term is used in such a limitless sense. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, I restrict myself to the problem of direct, physical violence exerted by human persons against one another.

Yet, even in this narrow sense, however, violence is extremely manifold. In naming these different forms we have to keep in mind that whilst many forms of criminal violence are recorded, a high percentage of violence remains hidden. Without pretending completeness we can name the following possible entries in a list of different forms of physical violence committed by human beings against other human beings: personal violence – especially violence against children and acts of rape, violence in families and on the streets, other forms of criminal violence affecting individual lives, as well as the social fabric, terrorist violence ranging from suicide bombing to organised warfare, civil wars in failed states or between states, foreign military interventions on humanitarian, economic, or other grounds, and – finally – a monopoly of the state on the legitimate use of physical force.

## Violence in South Africa

South Africa is a paradigmatic case of the way in which the manifold faces of violence are intermingled. The 'oppressive violence' of the apartheid system is, in its consequences, still present. The 'reactive violence' in the upheavals of resistance is still commemorated. The 'repressive reaction' of the state security system violated the lives of many people, as some of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made clear in a horrifying manner. And, finally, 'destructive violence' is still spreading across South Africa from year to year (for the distinction between oppressive, reactive, repressive and destructive violence see Smit 2007:49f). In many cases, this destructive violence is combined with xenophobic attacks, but also often occurs without any political connotation. It destroys individual lives as well as social coherence. It is therefore also called 'social fabric crime' (cf. Mistry, Snyman & Van Zyl 2001).

Ethical traditions are, in principle, clear in their judgement on physical violence. 'Thou shalt not kill' is a basic commandment in religious and humanistic ethical traditions. However, there are many controversial issues related to this basic commandment. The use of coercion in education and family relations, especially against children and women, was widely accepted and is still accepted in different cultures throughout the world. This is an example of the slow changes of behavioural patterns in this respect. There also is a disturbing continuity in the use of violence against minorities in many societies.

Serious research shows that religiosity does not necessarily lead to a decrease but rather, at least in certain circumstances, to an increase in latent or manifest violence. This tendency is astonishing, considering that at least the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam include the commandment to love one's neighbour as one of their central ethical commandments (for an Islamic perspective, see Muslim religious leaders 2007; see also Eissler 2009). What could be the driving force negating the basic religious stricture not to kill but rather to respect the dignity of the other and to love one's neighbour? What could be the reason for the violation of the 'Golden Rule': to treat the others as we ourselves would like to be treated? Some argue that aggression is so inherent in human nature that it cannot be limited by ethical or even religious restraints. But that is obviously not true. People are able to limit their aggression, they listen to the voice of their conscience and invent the instruments of law to overcome or limit the tendency to hurt one another.

The better question in this regard then is: why, are the sources of religion not used in this direction but, on the contrary, become instrumental in the intensification of hatred and the readiness to use violence? To explain this linkage between religiosity and the use of violence, it is often argued that when people are convinced of the superiority of their own belief system they tend to devalue those of a different faith (see Küpper & Zick 2010). But, again, this is not an inevitable

consequence. Personal trust in the truth of a specific religion does not imply the need to disrespect people of other faiths. Historically, we can find examples of both the peaceful coexistence of religions and of violent conflicts between them.

Other explanations do not relate to religious factors in the narrow sense of the word, but to cultural factors. Some observe, for instance, that conservative Turkish families with a Muslim background cultivate an ideal of masculinity that legitimises the use of violence by young men (for the debate over the new findings of the *Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen* and its director Christian Pfeiffer, see e.g. Kelek 2010). Evidently, it would be a simplistic interpretation to assert that Islam as a religion implies the justification of violence exerted by young males. However, there is no strict separation between religious commands and cultural traditions. Religious education always relates to social and cultural factors and it is therefore not easy to separate them from each other. However, such complex interactions should not be interpreted in a reductive and therefore simplistic manner.

To summarise, none of these explanations leads to a necessary linkage between religion and violence. But they provoke the question why the impulses of religions are not translated more consistently into the behaviour of their adherents. Religion seems to be limited in its influence in anomic situations, in situations of extreme inequality, or in situations in which children are raised in an atmosphere of mistrust and violence and so internalise this atmosphere from the beginning of their lives. In such situations, it is not enough to proclaim the good values of religions or ethical systems. One has to work on the conditions in which children are raised and have to live. Thus – to name the most important aspects of the tasks to be addressed – one has to change the anomic situation, one has to work for justice in society and one has to improve the educational conditions for children and youth.

These days, South Africa provides an outstanding example of such an approach to the problem of violence resulting from anomic situations in society. We also have to keep in mind the specific factor that the amount of violence that affects the social fabric in this country continuously reflects the ongoing consequences of the inherently and evidently violent apartheid regime. We therefore cannot understand the disturbing role of violence in South Africa at present, without relating it to the centrality of violence in its history.

## Violence on a global scale

As already indicated, the general ethical debate on violence deals mainly with the problem of collective physical violence. Until 1989, the European debate was concentrated on the potential for violence inherent in the antagonism between the two superpowers – the USA and the Soviet Union – and their respective satellite states. This antagonism came to an end without the much anticipated transition from ‘cold war’ to ‘hot war’. This historical miracle bolstered the hope for a ‘peace dividend’ after the peaceful European revolution of

1989, for a containment of military violence that would, in the end, further the use of available funds for sustainable development and for the promotion of global justice. Yet, none of those expectations was fulfilled. The Millennium Development Goals proclaimed by the United Nations in the year 2000, with the intention of reducing global poverty by half by the year 2015, did not trigger a thrust towards sustainable development. The great confrontation between East and West has been followed by a plurality of military confrontations, many protagonists of which have been non-state actors, such as the war-lords in Afghanistan and those parties engaged in civil wars. Indeed, the world public still has to learn that the use of violence by non-state actors can result in wars.

Terrorist violence has become a rather omnipresent phenomenon in the world today. For the international conscience, 11 September 2001 continues to function as a historical watershed in that it has given international terrorism a new shape. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were directed at the economic, military and political power centres of the USA, but affected the whole world. They had an explicitly religious motivation, as explained in the manual of ‘spiritual guidelines’ that was found in the hands of the attackers (cf. Kippenberg & Seidensticker [eds.] 2006). Other attacks in Europe followed – in Madrid in 2004, in London in 2005 and some failed terrorist attempts in the following years. To a much greater extent, people in the Muslim world, itself, have fallen victim to religiously motivated terror attacks, as the cases of violence in Afghanistan, Nigeria and Sudan testify. Indeed, since 2001, the interaction between religion and violence belongs to the characteristic traits of our era of globalisation, which dictate that people’s destinies become dependent on the uncertainties of the market and that traditional forms of solidarity are dissolved. These phenomena create new tasks for religions. Their ethic of ‘brotherhood’ has stepped in to take the place of traditional solidarities. But, often, this ethic of ‘brotherhood’ is combined with a fundamentalist worldview that can result in a violent confrontation with those who do not belong to the same group, are not adherents of the same religion and do not envisage the same political goals. A new idea of martyrdom has developed that promises immediate access to paradise for those who sacrifice their lives in a ‘holy war’.

This is one of the ways in which violence is understood as being akin to worship in our times (cf. Kippenberg 2008:161–184). Such examples can be useful in countering the notion that the linkage between religion and violence is limited to one religious community. However, this does not take away from the fact that 9/11, as well as the suicide attacks that are part of the conflict in the Middle East, directs our attention towards the renewal of the Islamic *jihad* doctrine in particular. Today, this doctrine is often given a meaning in which the ‘holy wars’ of the individual against his or her inner person, those against the evil around him or her and, finally, those against unbelievers, are intertwined. In such a framework, the transition from tolerance of unbelievers to violence against them plays a decisive role. Of crucial

relevance in this respect is the so-called 'Verse of the Sword' in the Qur'an:

Once the Sacred Months are past, (and they refuse to make peace) you may kill the idol worshipers when you encounter them, punish them, and resist every move they make. If they repent and observe the Contact Prayers (Salat) and give the obligatory charity (Zakat), you shall let them go. GOD is Forgiver, Most Merciful.

(Sura 9:5)

As Islamic studies have shown, this verse documents the changed attitude of the prophet Mohammed towards unbelievers after his transition from Mecca to Medina (Kippenberg 2008:177–178). It is thought likely that this verse replaced an older revelation of differing content. Whereas violence against the unbelievers is seen here as obligatory, in his Mecca period Mohammed coexisted rather peacefully with the unbelievers. This inner tension in the Qur'an has repeatedly provoked controversial interpretations. But there is no doubt that the tendencies towards a new kind of religious violence that have been observed in Islam since the 1970s are based on the aspect of *Jihad* directed towards the unbelievers.

But, again, the new linkage between religion and violence is not restricted to Islam alone. This linkage exists also in Christianity. The Iraq War of 2003 was an example of the use of religious arguments to propagate war. In this highly debated case, some understood the war against Iraq as the execution of a death penalty against Saddam Hussein – accepting the danger that many other Iraqis were far more likely to lose their lives than the well-protected dictator himself. Insofar as one could argue that one form of violence is not equal to other forms of violence, the religious justification for terrorist violence has to be judged differently from the religious interpretation of the use of violence in the framework of a state monopoly on violence. But even respect for the state's task of securing peace and justice by all necessary means – under certain conditions even violent means – turns into a highly problematic proposition if it becomes a bellicose concept that gives preference to military violence over other means – political, economic, or legal – in whichever context, religious or nonreligious, such a preference may occur. The application of a religious justification for the death penalty to international relations leads, with inner necessity, to a kind of bellicosity which, in dubious cases, privileges war over other possible solutions.

The linkage between religion and violence occurs today in different religions. This nurtures a kind of public debate that does not differentiate adequately. These developments – as complex as they may be – result in a rather simplistic public perception: the justification of violence is seen as a crucial element of religion in general. From such a perspective, the political role of religion is understood as preparing for and justifying the use of violence. In our times, the critique of religion has its centre very often in the critique of the interaction of religion and violence. The point of criticism

here is simply that religion leads to violence. This critique responds to a situation in which violence seems to become present everywhere. The ubiquity of violence is part of the globalisation process; violence, itself, is globalised. This is true in the sense that violence is omnipresent in the media. Everyone has easy access to all kinds of violence through TV or the Internet. Everyone has access to reports about how successful new academic elites are as actors in the field of violence. Even the importance of the arms trade within the global economy has led to violence being deemed an important economic good in and of itself.

When one starts to analyse this position critically one can see different patterns of interpretation. Firstly, some posit a necessary connection between religion and violence, secondly, others point to a religious criticism of violence and, thirdly, still others note a contingent relationship between religion and violence. We will now turn to a discussion of these patterns of interpretation.

## Three propositions on the relationship between religion and violence

### Religion leads to violence

On an academic and intellectual level, this widespread assumption is currently discussed in a version proposed by the well-known German Egyptologist, Jan Assmann (1997, 2003), in his recent statements on monotheism. Briefly, Assmann says that the biblical connection between Moses and Egypt leads us back to the reform of Pharaoh Echnaton in the 14th century BC, who tried to replace the old Egyptian deities with Re or Aton, the God of the Sun. This reform was not successful, but became part of cultural memory in Egypt, including the enslaved people of Israel who lived there. It was Moses who adopted this idea and created an exclusive monotheism for the people of Israel that denied the right of existence to all other Gods. Assmann distinguishes this kind of monotheism from other forms of henotheism, in which the cosmic order gives a place to all deities but veneration is concentrated on one God. Distinguishing this religious attitude from monotheism, Assmann calls it 'cosmotheism'. For him, the so-called monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are exclusive by nature and therefore have a tendency to be violent, whereas cosmotheism is peaceful by nature. The violent character of the monotheism he refers to is not a question of historical data on the ways in which monotheism gained superiority as such, but rather a 'semantic paradigm' that explains how such processes were remembered. For instance, it is historically probable that, in Judaism, violence was used against internal dissenters rather than against adherents of other religions. Already, the Hebrew Bible includes more examples of the suffering of the people of Israel under the polytheism of its neighbouring powers than of the perpetration of violence in the name of the one God of Israel. That was even more, and terribly, the case in later historical times. But there has also been no consistent line of justification for violence in Christianity or Islam. So the

semantic paradigm of monotheism does not mean that the use of violence is justified or practiced in every single case. It is not sufficient to go back to the 'Mosaic distinction' in order to explain the problem of religiously justified violence. It is rather superficial to proclaim, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2007:211) has, a 'renaissance in the sign of Egypt' in order to 'destroy the poison that declares all other cults to be enemies'. Finally, it seems misleading when the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2008:220) argues that all truth claims in religions have to be invalidated (by whom?) as a condition for respecting the 'religious otherness of the other'.

It is not the religious truth claim as such, but rather its exclusivist misconception that makes it a motive for violence and warfare. This exclusivity occurs today in fundamentalist movements of religious renewal. These movements are reacting to the processes of globalisation, for they respond to the dissolution of traditional forms of solidarity and to the experience of cultural fluidity by reverting to simple religious 'truths'. It is not monotheism, as such, but the protest against modernisation, in which they partake simultaneously, that makes fundamentalism a threat to peaceful coexistence.

There are also other points that shed critical light on the more recent debate on monotheism (cf. Angenendt 2008; Schieder 2008). The horrible outbreaks of violence during the 20th century, for instance, cannot be attributed to a connection between monotheism and violence. This is most evident in the case of the murderous violence perpetrated by Nazi Germany after 1933. On the contrary, Nazi ideology clearly used elements taken from ancient German polytheism. Moreover, the ideology of blood and soil, or of a specific German '*Volksnomos*', was evidently and directly opposed to the recognition of the one God.

To go a step further, we have to recognise that the idea of one, single monotheism that has unfolded differently in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is intrinsically problematic. In Judaism, adherence to the one God developed in stages over a long period of time; it is an unhistorical construction to call Moses a monotheist in the generally accepted sense of the word today. In Christianity, monotheism unfolds as the faith in one God, represented in three persons. In Islam, this Christian understanding is explicitly seen as 'polytheism' and therefore as an apostasy from true monotheism. It is exactly this Christian position that is sharply criticised in the already quoted 'Verse of the Sword'. This fits with observations that the concept of 'monotheism' and its undifferentiated application to all three religions is rather new. The history of the word 'monotheism' begins only in the 17th century and was used as a general concept comprising the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam only in the 19th century (Hülsewiesche 1984:142–146). It was in that period, with the confessional wars of early modernity in mind, that the general statement was formulated that monotheism necessarily implies an intolerant and violent attitude towards the adherents of other religions or confessions. Since then, the critical perspective has been formulated that monotheism, as

the idea of the superiority of one's own religion, and violence depend on one another.

Today, this thesis is often combined with the assumption of a clash of – religious – civilisations, as predicted by Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996). So far, this assumption does not have sufficient empirical evidence. In fact, today's military conflicts rarely have their original cause in differences of religion or confession. Many military conflicts are civil wars in which adherents of the same religion fight on both sides: Rwanda, Iraq and Iran are examples of this. In other conflicts – for instance, Kosovo or Sudan – the fighting ethnic groups are divided by religion, too. The role of religion can only be understood within a broader spectrum of the causes behind these conflicts. To the extent to which religion has been taken more seriously over the last 10 years, it is often seen as a driving force behind those conflicts, even if – and this is normally the case – the political and economic strengths or weaknesses of the respective countries or parties play an important role.

Without any doubt, however, during the last decade we have been observing a tendency to regard religion as the one decisive factor sparking and feeding conflicts. This interpretation has to do with how the identity of ethnic, national, or social groups is predominantly seen through the lens of religion much more than before. The identity of groups and individuals always has many facets. It is therefore misleading to reduce this identity to one single factor. This reductive interpretation that conflates identity with religion intensifies conflicts, because it pits groups against one another, using only one denominator for their identity. When one looks at all Iraqis or all North-Sudanese only from the perspective that they are Muslims, then this trait of their identity will necessarily be seen as the driving force behind actual conflicts. As Amartya Sen (2006) has shown in an admirable manner, this use of religion as identity-marker damages our understanding of identity, as well as our understanding of religion, and ends up advancing the deadly spiral of antagonism and violence.

To justify and to drive violence in conflict is not an inherent and unchangeable characteristic of religion, but rather an acquired or even ascribed quality of religion. There are situations or contexts in which this kind of acquisition or ascription tends to be enforced, as seems to be the case today. The necessary answer to this dangerous constellation includes good historical research on the manifold reasons for conflicts and the forces behind them, as well as a self-critical reflection within religious communities on their role in conflict and their possible functions in peace-building processes.

## Religion leads to nonviolence

All religions include an impulse to overcome violence. The critique of violence in Old Testament prophecy, Jesus' blessing of the peacemakers and the meek, and the Qur'an's opposition to force in the name of religion – 'there is no

compulsion in religion' (Sura 2:226) – show, in different ways, the distance of those three religions to violence. The same can be demonstrated in the cases of Buddhism or Hinduism.

There is a common advocacy by religions of the sanctity of life, the integrity of every human being and the nonviolent character of religious truth. The 'Golden Rule' that appears in one form or another in many different traditions of our world – that is, to treat the other in the same manner in which you want to be treated – demands a mutual recognition that would be violated by any kind of violence. The first expectation of every religion would be that it advocates a principle of nonviolence, rather than one of violence. This tendency is most explicit in Christianity but there is no reason to link it exclusively to the Christian faith.

However, no religion, including Christianity, can claim consistency in its advocacy for nonviolence. All religions, in one way or another, take part in the ambiguity of dealing with a reality that includes violence on an individual, as well as on a social and international level. In our era, this ambiguity is very clearly encountered on a global level. Wars tend to become 'world wars' and the commitment to nonviolence becomes a global, ecumenical and even inter-religious commitment. The 20th century was a century in which examples of extreme violence and exemplary nonviolence occurred simultaneously. Both tendencies appeared across continents, cultures and religions. Nonviolence as a political strategy was introduced by a Hindu lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, who was also well versed in the Christian religion and spent an important part of his lifetime in South Africa. Some Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., who devoted their lives to the task of overcoming violence, became, as martyrs, shining examples for the adherents of different religions. In the USA, the nonviolent struggle for civil rights, the opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Sanctuary Movement showed the potential strength of religiously motivated nonviolence. Likewise, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa became an outstanding example of the possibilities of nonviolent transformation. Nelson Mandela very often underlined the great influence of Mahatma Gandhi on the South African struggle to overcome apartheid. The paradigm shift in the ethical debate from 'just war' to 'just peace' was prepared and promoted by those who, for their part, renounced all types of violence.

Many of those who renounced all types of violence – across religions – used the example of Jesus and referred repeatedly to the Sermon on the Mount. The message of Jesus is characterised by a renunciation of violence, love for one's enemy and blessings for those who champion peace without the use of violence. Jesus himself suffered from violence. Regarding his death on the cross, it is said, that it happened 'once forever' (Hb 10:10). A repetition of this sacrifice is therefore excluded; there is no compulsion to sacrifice. Therefore, it can be said that Christianity turned away from violence in a specifically radical manner. However, it could not resist the seduction of violence and

its apparent unavoidability. The conviction that you cannot avoid answering violence with violence became a crucial point in Christian doctrine since the Constantine era. Since those times, violence has even occurred in the service of the church itself. Being a part of the world, the church did not only take the reality of violence into account. It went a step further and used violence for its own purposes. Every critical observer will be astonished time and again by the fact that a religion of love adapted so well to a climate of violence and even developed a theory about its inevitability. The idea of certain punishment for human sinfulness was not used in order to understand the human dependence on God as saviour. Instead, it was used in order to integrate human persons into a system of threat and punishment. The idea of nonviolence was often restricted to the private sphere, in which individuals could abstain from the coercion without which life in society, as a whole, was seen as impossible. On the one hand, this ambiguity was a sign of a religion that took ambivalent realities seriously; on the other hand, this happened at the expense of the clarity of Christian witness.

Therefore, reform groups, peace churches and pacifists promoted self-critical reflection within Christianity and in dialogue with other religions. Their intention was to renew the clarity of the Christian witness as a witness for justice, peace and nonviolence, as well as for the poor. In our globalised world, we can also see this development taking on the form of a globalised movement. All religions that really address this issue are 'risky religions'. They have to liberate their basic motives continually from the internal contradictions in which they become entangled. Mercy and power, love and violence, charity and profit, sustainability and self-interest – these are some of the basic tensions in which religions become involved in our globalised world. The effort to stand clearly for the preferential option of nonviolence, without blindness to the existing threats of violence, is a test of the identity of religions in our time.

### **Religion and violence are linked to each other in a contingent manner**

The linkage between religion and violence is not at all automatic. There is no inevitable and necessary relationship between monotheism and the justification of violence. Instead, such justification responds to particular historical circumstances and challenges. The linkage between monotheism and violence, wherever it occurs, is contingent; it is neither necessary nor impossible (Kippenberg 2008:22). Therefore, whether or not the critique of violence in religious traditions prevails in the behaviour of the faithful is also related to contingent factors.

Religion, in general, and monotheism, in particular, neither guarantee pacifist attitudes nor make them impossible. When pacifism not only relates to an individual conviction but also includes the responsibility to protect the freedom of others from coercion and violence, the crucial question is always whether a nonviolent practice is apt to overcome the use of violence from the other side, or rather give it free reign.

Whenever theories of 'just war' or 'just peace' regard the use of violence in particular concrete situations as an ultimate resort to end the violence that is already being exerted, the question has to be asked whether the violence that is designed to maintain or to restore the rule of law effectively limits the use of violence, or increases it. This fundamental ambiguity in the phenomenon of violence itself explains why religions have an ambivalent attitude toward it. However, at least for Christianity, it has to be said that this faith is consistent with its original impulse only if, even in ambivalent situations, it defends the priority for nonviolence over and against violence and therefore rejects a religious justification of violence, even in those cases in which the situation makes the use of violence seemingly inevitable. When measured by this criterion of clearly rejecting a religious justification for the use of violence, it becomes evident that the Christian churches have often failed.

There is no critique of violence, no matter how radically formulated, that could save anybody from being sucked in by the seemingly never-ending cycle of violence and counter-violence. The reason for this conundrum is that religions have to deal with reality as a whole. That this reality bears violent traits cannot be denied (Häring 2006). Reality, as a whole, includes not only personal lives from beginning to end, individual destinies with their joy and suffering, human freedom with its successes and failures – whether caused by fate or guilt – but also human communities, who have to deal with tensions between hate and love, conflict and reconciliation, as well as violence and peace.

René Girard (1983, 1987), a French philosopher of culture, went one step further. In his view, dealing with violence – taming and overcoming it – represents the most important social function of religion. Religion channels violence and averts it. This is the reason behind rites of sacrifice in old religions. Therefore, it becomes self-contradictory when religions limit the use of violence in a ritualistic form but, in the same moment, justify it politically. Today, too, religions may be aware of the potential for violence in human life, but name and address them without justifying them. They may take into account the human tendency towards violence, but simultaneously oppose its glorification. They may avoid illusions about the susceptibility of human beings to violence, but not abandon the field to it.

## Conclusion

Let me summarise some results of these reflections in five proposals for further discussion.

Firstly, the linkage between religion and violence is one of the great challenges for the 21st century. It reveals the difficult aspects of globalisation in concentrated form: the erosion of culture, the increase in religious fundamentalism, the increasing domination of politics by economics, and the ubiquity of violence.

Secondly, building on this, it has become clear that the process of globalisation has set new tasks for religious communities.

New forms of public religion help people to find their place in a world full of uncertainties. Much depends on whether religious communities understand themselves as part of civil society, or as enemies of an existing society which endorses a violent struggle against it. This endorsement of violence by religious communities is often combined with new forms of religious fundamentalism, which poses a challenge for inter-religious dialogue and sets a central task in defending the rule of law.

Thirdly, it is of primary importance to maintain the distinction between religion and politics as a necessary precondition for peaceful coexistence in a religiously and culturally diverse world. This does not mean that religion and politics should not interact, but, in doing so, that they have to deal with different aspects of human life. It is the secular character of the political order that makes religious freedom possible.

Fourthly, religions themselves can cooperate in order to promote peaceful coexistence and proscribe the use of violence as much as possible. This effort necessitates a self-critical evaluation of violent traits in the histories of the different religions, the elaboration of religion's specific contributions to the future tasks of humankind and the need to work towards a consensus on basic ethical questions.

Lastly, in the same context, all religions need to recognise that they have a great educational responsibility. They have opportunities to transform the 'Golden Rule' into daily practice. They can strengthen the moral identity of their adherents so that they develop respect for the dignity and integrity of their neighbours. In order to put an end to the spread of violence in societies, they have to plead for a politics that overcomes anomic situations and promotes justice.

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