

Religious Violence: Fact or Fiction?

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Abstract

The main question of this article is this. Does religion itself play a role in “political violence”? After clarifying the meaning of relevant terms such as “religion”, “religious violence”, “secular violence”, “voluntary action” and “political violence”, I will examine two arguments that can be formulated in favour of the claim that religion itself is the unique cause of the so-called religious type of political violence, concluding that both of these arguments are subject to criticism and neither is successful in supporting that claim. Then I will suggest my own explanation of the real cause and origin of political violence in general and its proper solution. I will also conclude that the well-known distinction between religious and secular violence is not tenable.

Keywords: Religious Violence; Secular Violence; Political Violence; History of Religion; Interpretation of Religious Texts.

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1. Introduction

The notion of “religious violence” has gained wide currency in the political discourse concerning violence, religion, secularism, and their interrelationships. Nowadays, many believe that religion itself is responsible, and therefore should be blamed, for acts of violence committed by religious individuals, religious institutions and religious governments throughout the history of mankind.¹ In fact, it is part of secular conventional wisdom that religion invariably creates evil in the public sphere, and so should be confined to the private sphere. As John D. Carlson says, “[...] in secular societies, “good religion” is *private*, nonviolent, and subject to reason; “bad religion” is *public*, violent, and irrational”. (Carlson, 2011: 10 (Emphases are added)) Some militant atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, maintain that, when it comes to violence, atheism is morally superior to theism, because violence is essential to the latter, but accidental to the former. Put another way, there is a logical path from the religious way of thinking to violence, whereas there is no such link between the atheistic or scientific way of thinking and violence.²

When talking about religious violence, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the terms we are using, such as “religion”, “religious violence”, “secular violence”, “voluntary action” and “political violence”. These terms are surrounded by ambiguities which prevent us from having a sound judgment about the role of religion in political violence. So, let us begin by defining these terms.

2. What is religion?

Religion is a complex phenomenon; it is extremely difficult, if not

1. It is interesting to note the discrimination we are witnessing today in mainstream Western media between Muslims and the followers of other religions. Even when they commit identical or similar violent acts, the mainstream media tries to highlight the religious identity of those who are involved if they are Muslim and to overlook or play it down if they are the followers of other religions. This attitude towards Islam and Muslims is sometimes called “Islamophobia”. For a critique of this attitude, See: Armstrong, 2006: 13.
2. See: “The God Delusion Debate (Dawkins-Lennox)”, Available at: <http://fixed-point.org/index.php/video/35-full-length/164-the-dawkins-lennox-debate> (accessed 17/10/2014). In this debate Dawkins says: “[...] These people believe deeply in what they are doing. And it follows logically, once you grant them the premise of their faith, then the terrible things that they do follow logically. The terrible things that Stalin did, did not follow from his atheism, they followed from something horrible within him.... You will not do terrible deeds because you are an atheist, not for rational reasons; you may well for very rational reasons do terrible things because you are religious. That's what faith is about”. (Quoted in: “Thinking Christian net”: <http://www.thinkingchristian.net/C1983916159/E20071017100620/> (accessed 27/10/2014)). See also: Harris, 2005 & Hitchens, 2007; for a similar description of religion as being inherently violent. Jakobsen, 2004; argues against the idea that religion is inherently violent.

impossible, to define religion in a way which would gain universal acceptance.¹ I am not going to do this here. My aim is simply to identify the subject matter of my own discussion in this paper. “Religion” has four meanings that *prima facie* seem to be relevant to the discussion of religious violence. They are “religion as a social institution”, “religion as a psychological phenomenon”, “religion as a political ideology” and “religion as a way of life”. Let us look at each meaning in turn.

1) “Religion” is sometimes meant to signify a “social institution,” usually called church. In this sense of the term, religion is the subject matter of social sciences and politics, but it is not relevant to my discussion. I am not going to examine let alone criticise the claim that religion as a social institution plays a role in political violence. My aim is to determine whether there is a link between this type of violence and religion itself. That is, whether acts of violence committed by (some) members of this social institution are legitimised or motivated by religion itself or not.²

2) “Religion” is sometimes taken to mean a “psychological phenomenon,” or religiosity, or individual religious identity, mentality and commitment. In this sense, it is the subject matter of psychology of religion. Again, this phenomenon is not relevant to my discussion. Therefore, I will not evaluate the role played by some believers in political violence. Rather, my aim is to see whether this role has something to do with religion itself or not.³

3) In some instances, the term “religion” is used to refer to a “political ideology,” which constitutes the theoretical foundation of religious/theocratic government, or what is usually called theocracy. Religion in this sense is the subject matter of politics and political philosophy. Again the role played in political violence by some governments exerting their authority in the name of religion is evident and undeniable. They usually tie their political authority to religious or divine authority. But what I am interested in here is the justifiability of any attempt to link this violence to religion itself.

4) And finally, “religion” is meant to refer to a particular “way of life”, to distinguish it from a secular way of life. This sense of “religion” is the one which is relevant to the current discussion. Every

1. See: For more on different attempts to define religion See: Blasi, 1998; Turner, 2006; King, 2005; Alles, G, 2005 and Idinopulos & Wilson, 1998. Also, for how and why it is difficult to define religion See: Cavanaugh, 2011: 23-29, and Ward, 2011: 6-22.

2. See: For sociological, anthropological and political science perspectives on religion and violence See: Hall, 2013; Stewart & Strathern, 2013 and Philpott, 2013.

3. For a psychological perspective on religion and violence, See: Jones, 2013.

way of life has three major components: a kind of experience, a worldview, and a set of norms and values, as the practical implications of that worldview. So, religion as a way of life consists of religious experience, religious worldview (religious explanation of everything) and religious norms and values. In this sense, religion is the subject matter of theology and philosophy of religion. Philosophical and theological investigation about religion concentrates on the truth of religious teachings/claims. I will refer to this meaning of religion as “religion itself”. My aim is to see whether religion in this particular sense plays the role in political violence that is usually ascribed to it in commonplace political discourse or not.¹

3. What is religious violence?

It is also necessary to clarify what the term “religious violence” stands for.² This phrase has two distinct meanings which should not be confused with each other.

1) “Religious violence” is usually used to refer to a type of violence that is committed by a person, group or institution with a religious identity, to distinguish it from the same or similar type of violence committed by a person, group or institution which does not have such an identity.

2) “Religious violence” can also be used to refer to a type of violence that is legitimised and sanctioned by religion itself. In this sense, religious violence is not just a kind of violence that is committed by religious agent(s), but one that is “justified” and/or “motivated” by authentic religious teachings. I will henceforth refer to these two meanings as “violence committed by religious agents” and “violence motivated by religion”, respectively.

In the same vein, one can claim that “secular violence” has two distinct meanings. It usually refers to violence committed by a person, group or institution with a secular identity, but it can also be used to signify violence that is justified and/or motivated by secular worldviews or secular norms and values. In what follows, these two meanings will be referred to respectively as “violence committed by

1. For Christian theological perspectives on religion and violence, See: Kimball, 2013.

2. Moral and political philosophers disagree about the exact meaning of violence, its scope, applications, moral status, and its conceptual relation to power and force. Throughout this paper I will presuppose that political violence per se is morally bad and wrong, and that it is always illegitimate. But one may disagree, claiming that some subsets of political violence are morally justified. I do not take sides in this controversy here, because it is not directly relevant to my discussion. If political violence is not intrinsically bad and wrong, then I can easily limit the scope of my discussion to the kind of political violence which is morally bad and wrong. At any rate, for the sake of brevity, I will allow myself to use the phrase “political violence” without qualification. For an excellent discussion about the different meanings of violence, See: Carlson, 2011: 14-18.

secular agents” and “violence motivated by secularism”.

It is not always obvious which of these two meanings is at issue in discussions about political violence and in fact conflating these two meanings is a common fallacy in political discourse. Many think that in order to hold religion itself responsible for political violence, it would be enough to show that the violence in question was perpetrated by religious agents. Of course, those who commit political violence under the banner of religion, claim, sometimes sincerely and sometime insincerely, that they have religious justification and/or motivation for it. But there is always a conceptual and logical gap between the religious identity of those who commit political violence and their real reasons for their action. It is quite reasonable to assume, and in fact historically validated, that religious agents may commit political violence for non-religious (secular) reasons such as economic need. Therefore, we cannot infer something about the real motivation of perpetrators of violence from their religious identity or their self-declared motivations (See §7).

3.1. Reformulating the main question

Now, in light of the above definitions and clarifications, one can reformulate the main question of this inquiry as follows. “Is there a causal relationship between religion itself and violence committed by religious agents? By “causal relationship” I mean the kind of relationship that exists between every voluntary action and the cognitive foundations of that action; foundations upon which the agent’s decision is built. In other words, the question is this: “Is there any case in which violence committed by religious agents has been motivated by religion itself? In order to answer this question, we need to look at the nature of voluntary action first, because religious violence is a type of voluntary action for which we hold the doer responsible, blameworthy and subject to punishment.

4. The nature of voluntary action

Voluntary action is a kind of action that is done for a “normative reason”; it is preceded by a deliberative process of decision-making in which the agent, who has some morally and epistemically good or bad character traits, has to put together the following four sets of premises/beliefs in order to decide what to do:

- 1) Beliefs about the current situation
- 2) Beliefs about all available means
- 3) Beliefs about the ideal situation, and
- 4) Beliefs about the ideal means

These sets of beliefs together provide the agent with justifying

reasons for a specific voluntary action, and motivate them to carry it out if they are sufficiently rational.¹ The first and second sets are factual, whereas the third and fourth sets are normative. Factual beliefs *describe* the current situation and all available means which can be used to change the current situation. Normative beliefs, on the other hand, *prescribe* the ideal situation (the end) and the best/ideal means that can be employed to transform the current situation (which is undesirable) to the ideal one (which is desirable).

Each of the above set of beliefs plays an ineliminable role in voluntary action, without which the agent would not be able to make his mind up in deciding what to do. This process of reaching a decision may take place automatically and habitually, and therefore go unnoticed, but it is always present. Therefore, it is part of the very nature or structure of voluntary action, and thus the source of responsibility, and the reason for blame or praise, and reward or punishment. We are responsible for what we are doing because we are reflective beings, able to deliberate and choose between doing and not doing something through this complicated process of decision-making.

However, since there is usually more than one source of values and norms, the agent needs to make a further choice about which sources are relevant to the case at hand and how to resolve their conflict(s), if any. Three of the most important and popular sources of norms and values are morality, religion and ideology. In other words, we have many identities; each of them imposes upon us a set of normative requirements, asking us to behave in a particular way in order to protect that identity or make it flourish. Three of the most important and popular identities are human identity, religious identity and ideological identity. As long as these identities guide us in the same direction, there is no problem, and we would face no dilemma. But sometimes they pull us in opposite directions, forcing us to sacrifice or subordinate one or more of the conflicting identities for the sake of the other(s). In the domain of politics and political conduct, this decision can lead to either violence and conflict or tolerance and peace, depending on the identity that takes precedence.

Since the process of practical deliberation is complex, let me

1. The distinction between justifying and motivating reasons for action is a point of dispute between moral internalism and moral externalism. According to the former theory, these two reasons for action are the same and the distinction is purely theoretical whilst according to the latter theory, they are not necessarily the same. I think they are the same only if the agent is sufficiently rational. For more on this issue, See Smith, 1994; Brink, 1989 and Mabrito, 2013. For the sake of brevity I will henceforth refer to "justifying and/or motivating reasons" simply as "reasons".

illustrate it by an ordinary example. Imagine that you are unhappy with your weight and wish to do something about it. The question is why are you not happy with it and how did you come up with the decision that you should do something about it? Your unhappiness regarding your weight is based on a comparison you have made between your current weight and the ideal one. Since the ideal weight is “desirable”, this comparison convinces you that your current weight is “undesirable”, and that you should do something which makes you happy. You can realise this end by trying to lose weight, but since there are a multitude of ways to do this, you have to choose the best way available and affordable to you. So altogether, you need to make two choices: the first is about the ideal situation/end (weight loss) and the second is about the ideal means (dieting, exercise, etc.).

The situation would become more complicated if you have more than one source of norms and values. Because in this case you have to make a further choice if these sources come into conflict. In this example your belief about your current weight and different ways of losing weight are factual, *describing* what is there, whereas your beliefs about the ideal weight and the ideal way of losing weight are normative, *prescribing* what should be there, and how it should be brought about.

5. The nature of political violence

Political violence is not an exception to this explanation. That is, in order for an agent to decide to commit political violence, he has to put together the four aforementioned sets of factual and normative beliefs. However, it is obvious that the first and second sets of beliefs involved in the process of decision-making, i.e., those beliefs that are purely factual, have nothing to do with religion, and this means that if religion itself is to play a role in political violence and be held responsible in this regard, it must be for its role in providing the third and fourth sets of beliefs involved in that process, i.e., normative/evaluative beliefs. The agent’s beliefs about the current situation and all available means for realising the ideal situation are not religious. His beliefs about the ideal situation and the ideal means, however, can be religious or secular.

It is quite reasonable to think of religion as providing the agent with an answer to one or both of the two following normative questions: “What is the ideal situation?” and “What is the best means of achieving it?” In other words, religious teachings are not a source for purely factual descriptions of the current situation or all the means available for altering that situation. Therefore, if religion itself is to play a role in political violence, it will play that role either by

valuing political violence as an end in itself, or by valuing it as the best means for realising an end.

6. The nature of religious violence

In light of the above explanation of the nature of voluntary action and political violence in general, we can now have a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of so-called religious violence, its nature and origin. To say that religion itself is a cause of political violence is to say that religion itself provides believers with normative reasons which justify and/or motivate political violence. There is no doubt that religious teachings include or imply “reasons for action”. Some of these reasons are meta-religious which are endorsed by religion, but others are inherently religious. This is especially true in the case of religions such as Islam and Judaism which contain a detailed set of norms explicitly guiding the believers on what to do. Religion is not just a set of beliefs. Rather, it is a way of life. In other words, religious beliefs are not normatively neutral; they have practical implications and consequences. They are directly or indirectly action-guiding. For example, to say that there is only one God who is unseen, which is the most basic teaching of Islam, Judaism and perhaps Christianity, has the normative connotation that humans are not God, and therefore should not play God.

So, we can reformulate the main question of this discussion to ask: does religion itself provide the believer(s) with normative reason(s) for political violence? Or to put it more specifically, do authentic religious teachings contain any (divine) command that provides the believer with reason(s) for political violence?

My answer to this question is no. But in order to substantiate this answer we need to critically examine two arguments that can be given to support a positive answer to the question. However, before we go ahead, let us look at some of the consequences of a positive answer. This answer has two types of consequences: theological/philosophical and social/political.

6.1. Theological/philosophical consequences of religious violence

The theological/philosophical consequences of a positive answer are as follows. If religion itself provides believers with reasons for political violence, then either God is not benevolent, or the religious texts are not authentic. This means that, if one succeeds in showing that there is a causal relationship between religion itself and political violence, one would be able to show the immorality of religion and to use this fact as evidence in favour of atheism or religious scepticism, i.e., either to undermine the credibility of religious texts, or to disprove the existence of a benevolent God.

Also, a positive answer to our question naturally leads to the conclusion that religious commitment is practically irrational, and this conclusion in turn can be utilised in a practical argument in favour of atheism, or religious scepticism. This is the reason why some atheists are so keen to equate “violence *committed* by religious agents” with “violence *motivated* by religion” (see §3), overlooking the conceptual and logical gap which exists between the two.¹

6.2. Social/political consequences of religious violence

The social/political consequences of a positive answer to our main question are these. A positive answer contains an explanation of, or a diagnosis about, the origin of political violence whose natural and effective remedy would be political secularism. Political secularism usually refers to the separation of church and state as two social institutions, proposed initially as a solution for conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. That separation means people are not allowed to base their decisions in the public sphere on religion and the only legitimate type of reason by which one can justify a decision about how to govern the public domain is secular.²

However, one cannot extrapolate from this that the replacement of religious ideologies with secular ideologies is a solution for political violence. As the history of the twentieth century shows secular ideologies such as communism, nationalism and racism are as much a source of political violence as religious ideologies.

The second social/political consequence of a positive answer to our main question is that it provides a justification for a ban on religious teachings. If religious teachings justify and/or motivate political violence then we have a right to purge school and university curricula of religious teachings and limit freedom of speech to exclude religious teachings, and freedom of choice to exclude the use of religious attire or symbols in public.

1. See “The God Delusion Debate (Dawkins-Lennox)”, Available at: <http://fixed-point.org/index.php/video/35-full-length/164-the-dawkins-lennox-debate> (accessed 17/10/2014). In this debate Dawkins says: “[...] These people believe deeply in what they are doing. And it follows logically, once you grant them the premise of their faith, then the terrible things that they do follow logically. The terrible things that Stalin did, did not follow from his atheism, they followed from something horrible within him.... You will not do terrible deeds because you are an atheist, not for rational reasons; you may well for very rational reasons do terrible things because you are religious. That's what faith is about”. (Quoted in: “Thinking Christian net”: <http://www.thinkingchristian.net/C1983916159/E20071017100620/>). See also Harris, 2005 & Hitchens, 2007 for a similar description of religion as being inherently violent. Jakobsen, 2004, argues against the idea that religion is inherently violent.

2. Secular reason does not mean atheistic reason. It means a moral reason which is neutral between all religious and non-religious ways of life. For an in-depth debate, See: Audi & Wolterstorff, 1997.

However, as the history of mankind in recent centuries clearly shows, the demise of religion and the rise of secularism did not diminish the level of political violence being committed.¹ Instead, the same or similar type of violence was committed, sometimes even on a larger scale, but for different types of reasons for action. That is, religious reasons were being replaced with secular ones, instead of violence being replaced with peace and tolerance. If in the pre-modern world people killed each other for the sake of God, in the modern era they kill each other for the sake of their countries, or national interest, or even to protect freedom and human rights.² So, political violence still exists and this fact shows that its real origin lies somewhere other than religion itself. I will come back to this issue at the end of the paper, and will try to find the real origin of political violence but before that we need to examine two arguments that one may put forward in favour of a positive answer to our main question.

7. Two arguments for the existence of violence motivated by religion

The first argument is historical and the second is hermeneutical. What they have in common is their objective to show that religion itself is a cause for political violence by providing the believers with reasons for committing such violence. Their difference, however, lies in the premises they rely on in supporting this conclusion. Let us examine each argument in turn.

7.1. The historical argument

Historical argument relies on historical reports to justify a claim about the content of religious teachings. These historical reports, which are collectively reliable, concern violent acts perpetrated by religious believers, religious institutions and theocratic governments.³ From this it is concluded that the only reason/cause behind this type of violence is a religious one. In other words, it is claimed that religious agents would never commit such violence if their religion did not tell them or allow them to do so. Based on the distinction that is made in (§3) between two meanings of “religious violence”, one can summarise this argument as an attempt to prove the existence of violence *motivated* by religion by showing the

1. See: Armstrong, 2014; Jakobsen, 2004 and Glover, 2012.

2. This is why some scholars maintain that if one's religion is what one is ready to kill for it, then we can meaningfully describe what happened by secularisation as a replacement of traditional religions with new ones, rather than describing it as the replacement of religion with secularism. See, for example, Gentile, 2006; Nelson, 2001 and Warner, 2008.

3. For a historical review of the relationship between religion and violence in some religious traditions, See: Juergensmeyer, 2013: 15-196.

existence of violence *committed* by religious agents.

7.2. Three objections to the historical argument

This argument is subject to three major objections. The first is that in the real world we do not have something which is nothing but religious, i.e., there is no such thing as a “purely” religious person, institution or government. Believers are not just believers. They are human beings with multidimensional personalities. They are not only religious agents, but also social, political and economic agents. They have many overlapping identities, and religious identity is just one of them. Thus believers have many different sources of normativity providing them with reasons for action, and religion is just one such source. Hence, logic does not allow us to infer something about the content of a school of thought from the behaviour of its followers.

Therefore, alongside the historical reports, we need extra evidence to single out religion itself as the sole cause/origin of the political violence committed by religious agents. Even if the historical reports are true and authentic, which is at least partially the case, they still fall short of proving the existence of a causal relationship between religion itself and political violence committed in the name of religion. This link is missing; therefore, the first objection to this argument is that it is based on an unjustified reduction of complex identities and sources of normative reasons for action to the religious identity and religious reasons for action.

The second objection is that like other human beings, believers are not perfect or infallible. Rather, they are subject to moral/behavioural mistakes, and may suffer from weakness of will and insincerity, and therefore, may not follow the teachings of their religion as they know it. Also, they may misuse or hijack their religion to rationalise their immoral behaviour, and to hide their real political or economic agenda. Therefore, in order for this argument to be valid, one should add another premise to it to the effect that those religious agents who committed political violence are sincere and perfect or practically infallible.

Historical reports about the behaviour of religious people do not, and cannot, say anything about their real intention(s) and whether or not they were sincere and perfect or infallible. There is always a logical gap between religious knowledge and the behaviour of religious people, and again we need extra evidence to fill in this gap. To jump from the behaviour of religious people to a conclusion about the teachings of religion is to ignore this gap, and to overlook the possibility of behavioural mistakes in the domain of religion.

The third objection is that like other human beings, believers are not omniscient, and are subject to epistemic mistakes; i.e., misunderstanding religion and misinterpreting religious texts. Hence there is another logical gap between “what believers think their religion says” and “what religion really says”. Of course this gap is bridgeable, but to fill it one needs to evaluate the understanding of the believers by hermeneutical investigation, i.e., by testing their understanding against the content of religious texts to see whether or not they understood those texts properly.

So, the historical argument actually depends on the hermeneutical one for its validity and completeness, and therefore it is redundant since hermeneutical investigation alone can reveal the content of religious teachings, and whether they contain anything to provoke or promote political violence, without the aid of historical reports about the behaviour or beliefs of religious agents.

7.3. The hermeneutical argument

The core of the hermeneutical argument is that there are some sections of religious text which directly or indirectly justify and/or motivate political violence. I agree that there are some portions of religious text whose “apparent meaning”¹ in isolation gives the reader such an impression. However, the apparent meaning of a portion of religious text *in isolation* can never be a source for religious knowledge, and must necessarily be combined with other presuppositions.

This is because there is always a “hermeneutical gap” between the text’s “apparent meaning” and the speaker’s “intended meaning”. What is important is the “intended meaning”, not the apparent meaning. However, to discover the intended meaning we need to interpret the text. Our understanding of any text is always the result of interpretation, and interpretation is a process of “reconstructing” the speaker’s intended meaning. In that process the interpreter has to combine relevant raw materials (substantive presuppositions) with a method of interpretation (procedural presuppositions). A method of interpretation consists of a set of hermeneutical norms whose function is to guide the mind of the interpreter in deciding what should be counted as the relevant raw materials and how they should be combined with each other in order to reach a valid understanding of the intended meaning.²

1. By apparent meaning, I mean the first meaning that comes spontaneously to the mind of a competent hearer who is a member of the relevant linguistic community.
2. Hermeneutical norms are external to, and independent from, the text itself and cannot be a part of it because otherwise we would have a vicious circle.

Therefore understanding of the intended meaning is not solely based on the linguistic raw materials provided by a selected portion of the text; it is also based on a set of hermeneutical norms that must be added to the text in order to enable the text to speak for itself. This means that sometimes the interpreter has to give up the apparent meaning of the text. For example, what should the interpreter do if some sections of the text encourage violence whilst others encourage peace and non-violence? Whatever decision is taken is based on following hermeneutical norms and is therefore a type of reconstruction of the intended meaning.

In the case of religious texts, this hermeneutical gap is between “what is said by God” and “what is really meant by God”. What can be counted as religious teaching is the “actual intention” of God, not the “apparent meaning” of His remarks. Therefore, to justify the claim that religion itself provides its followers with reasons for violence, one must show that the actual divine intention is to provide His believers with reasons for violence.

The above explanation makes it clear that both religious fundamentalists/extremists and militant atheists do not rely on the apparent meaning of selected pieces of religious texts alone to prove that religion itself justifies violence. In order to reach that conclusion they have to presuppose a “literalistic” method of interpretation.¹ This method gives them a licence to move from the apparent meaning to the intended meaning, despite the existence of textual and non-textual counter evidence and regardless of the context. In what follows, I will criticise this method, showing it to be hermeneutically invalid.

7.4. Critique of the hermeneutical argument

To criticise the hermeneutical argument one must acknowledge that (1) there is a hermeneutical gap between the apparent meaning and the intended meaning, (2) there is no text, religious or non-religious, which can be understood without interpretation, and (3) the reconstruction process plays an intermediary role here. It follows that a particular understanding of the text is valid if and only if the hermeneutical norms guiding the process of interpretation are correct, and that using incorrect hermeneutical norms will result in misunderstanding of the text.

The hermeneutical argument presupposes a literalistic method of interpretation of religious texts. However, this method is based on a naïve conception of the process of interpretation according to which

1. Of course they do not explicitly acknowledge the role of this method, because if they do, they have to prove the hermeneutical validity of their method before they can rely on it.

the only raw material that one can legitimately use to interpret a text is the linguistic/apparent meaning of the selected section of text in question. In this way, the existence of textual and non-textual counter evidence is disregarded and the text is taken out of its context. The invalidity of this method can be illustrated using few examples from the Qur'ān.

(1) Sometimes “non-textual” counter evidence requires the interpreter to give up the apparent meaning of the text, understanding the intended meaning of the text to be different from its apparent meaning.¹ As with non-religious texts, religious texts may employ linguistic tools such as figurative speech, invalidating the norm that the apparent meaning and the intended meaning are always one and the same. For example, in many verses of the Qur'ān, such as (48:10; 20:5 & 25:23) God is described as though He has a physical body. Philosophical arguments may convince us that it is impossible for God to have a physical body, forcing us to give up the apparent meaning of those verses and understand them as figurative speech in which ‘God’s hand’ (verse 48:10) refers to His power, His sitting on the throne (verse 20:5) refers to His sovereignty, etc. The literalistic method of interpretation simply ignores the possibility that figurative speech may have been used in religious texts and therefore pays no heed to non-textual counter evidence which prompt an alternative non-literalistic interpretation.

(2) Similarly, “textual” counter evidence has the same function in altering the meaning of the text and requiring the interpreter to give up its apparent meaning. For example, Qur'ānic verses (60:8) and (5:32) provide counter evidence with which we can falsify every interpretation of the other verses of the Qur'ān utilised by Muslim fundamentalists as well as critiques of Islam to justify the claim that Islam legitimises political violence against innocent non-Muslims. The first verse explicitly says: “God does not forbid you from treating justly and with kindness those who do not fight you over your religion, or those who do not expel you from your homeland. Verily God loves those who are just”. Similarly, verse (5:32) says: “[...] whoever kills a person who is not guilty of murder or corruption on Earth, is considered as one who has killed all of mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one person, it is as though he had saved the life of all of mankind [...]”.² The literalistic method of interpretation would ignore

1. Concerning religious texts, non-textual counter evidence is in fact substantive presuppositions such as philosophical conceptions about the nature of God, His purposes in communicating with mankind and the way in which He communicates with them, the relationship between religion and morality, etc.

2. In another verse, the scope of justice is expanded to include hostile enemies. In that verse God says: “O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for [the sake of] God, testify

the existence of these pieces of textual counter evidence.

(3) Again, the valid understanding of a text requires the interpreter to put it in its proper “context”.¹ For example, verse (16:81) Qur’ān reminds people of their duty of gratitude for gifts bestowed upon them by God, such as the shade and garments which protect from the heat. However, these will not seem as gifts to people living in icy Polar Regions. To understand the intended meaning, the text must be put in its proper geographical context, i.e., the searing heat of the Arabian desert where the Qur’ān was revealed to the Prophet. The intended meaning is therefore that God has furnished man with the means to protect himself from the hostile environment in which he lives.

The above examples clearly illustrate the existence of a hermeneutical gap between the “apparent meaning” and the “intended meaning” of a text and the limitations of the literalistic method of interpretation. We can derive some basic hermeneutical norms from the above discussion which would form part of a hermeneutically/rationally valid method of interpretation, as follows:

1) The intended meaning of the speaker is the same as the apparent meaning of his remarks, if and only if there is no counter evidence whatsoever. Therefore in this case, it is not the text alone, but the text *plus* the absence of the counter evidence which determines the intended meaning. This is because the speaker has a right to rely on textual or non-textual counter evidence to intend a meaning which is other than the apparent meaning of the text. Correspondingly the interpreter has a duty to take textual and non-textual counter evidence into account.

2) The intended meaning of the speaker is different from the apparent meaning of the text if there is counter evidence. Again, in this case, it is not the text alone, but the text *plus* the counter evidence which determines the intended meaning.

3) The “context” is an inalienable part of the linguistic tool for communication, and the speaker has a right to rely on the context as much as he has a right to rely on the text. Therefore, the interpreter has a corresponding

justly, and do not let the hatred of some group towards you motivate you to do injustice to them. Be just [because] justice is nearer to piety, and be god-conscious, indeed God is well-aware of what you are doing” (Qur’ān 5:8).

1. By “context” I mean the widest sense of the term that should be taken into account in discovering or reconstructing the real intention of the speaker. It includes the cultural, political, historical, geographical, economic and scientific environment of the speaker and his primary audience as well as their personality, background knowledge, etc.

duty to put the text in its proper context. So, again, it is not the text alone, but the text *plus* context that can reveal the real meaning intended by the speaker.¹

To summarise the objection, the hermeneutical argument fails to prove its expected conclusion because it violates the above norms, ignoring the context as well as textual and non-textual counter evidence.

8. The real origin of political violence

Our discussion so far can be summarised as follows. Historical reports of violence *committed* by religious agents are not in themselves sufficient proof that this violence was *motivated* by religion, since violence committed by religious agents can be motivated by *secular* reasons for action. Therefore we need to examine religious texts directly to see if they provide reasons for violence.

There is a hermeneutical gap between the apparent meaning of these texts and the intended meaning of the speaker. Hermeneutical norms do not allow us to bridge this gap without putting the text into its proper context and taking into account textual and non-textual counter evidence. However, once the relevant norms are followed, we come to the conclusion that authentic religious texts do not provide reasons for violence. So, the questions we need to ask are:

1) What is the origin of political violence in general?

And,

2) What is its remedy?

I will try to answer these questions by giving an explanation of the origin of political violence *per se*, and a satisfactory solution for it. I think it is erroneous to try to explain political violence in virtue of a single factor since there are several factors that play a role here. Primarily, these factors can be divided into internal/subjective and external/objective factors.

By internal factors I mean those factors that exist inside the minds of those who commit political violence. External factors, however, are part of the external environment in which the agent lives, and in which

1. This last norm means that a valid interpretation of a text is the outcome of a process of hermeneutical reconstruction in which the interpreter tries to understand the text in light of the context. As another example, if the leader of a community says something about how to behave during a war started unjustly by the other side of the conflict, we cannot generalise his remark to include other kinds of war, let alone the time of peace.

political violence takes place. Internal and external factors play different roles; external factors function as triggers for, or preparatory causes of, political violence. Internal factors, on the other hand, play the major role here, because without them the external factors would not produce political violence.

8.1. The external factors contributing to political violence

Many different aspects of the external environment, including the social, economic, political, cultural and even geographical factors, may act as a trigger for political violence. Economic poverty, for example, can be identified as an external factor for political violence. Ordinary people are not saints; they have a low moral threshold, and therefore if the external pressures which push them towards political violence exceed their moral threshold, their resistance against the temptation to commit political violence weakens. Poor education, political oppression, social alienation/exclusion, exploitation, domestic violence and unjust discrimination are other external factors.

It is evident that the list of external factors is open-ended. If we acknowledge the role of external factors in political violence, we have to accept that part of the solution for political violence would be the elimination of these external factors. In the rest of this article, I will focus on the internal factors and will try to give an overall explanation and treatment of the kind of political violence which is caused by these internal factors.

8.2. The internal factors contributing to political violence

Here the question is what goes wrong in the process of decision-making resulting in the decision to commit political violence? To answer this question we need to explore the mind-set of those who commit political violence. It can be said that political violence is the outcome of a faulty process of decision-making. It is faulty for two reasons; either because it is influenced by some epistemic and/or moral vices of the agent, or because it is fuelled by false factual and/or normative beliefs as its input. If we accept this explanation about the internal factors, then the solution for political violence would be obvious. Where the process is faulty due to epistemic and moral vices, political violence can be overcome by replacing these vices with rival virtues. If, on the other hand, the process becomes faulty because of the use of false beliefs as the input, then the solution is to replace those false beliefs with the correct ones.

9. The mind-set behind political violence

Here we can distinguish two types of mind-set; the mind-set of those who commit political violence and the mind-set of those who avoid it. Each of these mind-sets consists of epistemic and ethical components. Therefore, it can be said that political violence is the result of adopting a pro-violence ethics and epistemology, and the remedy is to adopt an anti-violence ethics and epistemology. In what follows I will try to give a list of these components and show how they contribute to political violence.

Based on what has been said in (§4 & §5) about the nature of voluntary action and the nature of political violence, we can say briefly that in some instances political violence is a result of having false/unwarranted factual or normative beliefs. It may also stem from a lack of relevant epistemic and moral virtues. We can identify at least six internal factors as contributing to a faulty and pro-violence process of decision-making ultimately leading to political violence. These factors are:

- 1) Having false factual beliefs about the current situation
- 2) Having false factual beliefs about available means
- 3) Having false normative beliefs about the ideal situation
- 4) Having false normative beliefs about the ideal means
- 5) Having epistemic vices
- 6) Having moral vices

Before we elaborate on these factors, we need to highlight two relevant points. First, I will examine these factors as if they are independent, because in cases in which two or more factors function together, we would have more than one solution to the problem. For example, when a false belief about the current situation is combined with a false belief about the best means, we have three alternative solutions: to correct the former belief or the latter, or both.

The second point is that both believers and nonbelievers are subject to these mistakes and faults to the same level. A nonbeliever can be just as dogmatic or intolerant as a believer. Similarly, a nonbeliever may rely on false beliefs to the same extent as a believer may do. For example, if someone believes that ends justify means, he would employ violence to realise a religious or secular end. Therefore, if political violence has a common ground, it would have a common solution. In that case, not only does the distinction between religious and secular types of political violence collapse and become theoretically and practically redundant, but it would also become misleading by pointing

us in the wrong direction and hence preventing us from finding the proper solution for the problem.

9.1. The role of false beliefs about the current situation in political violence

In some cases, political violence is committed because the agent's factual belief about the "current situation" is false.¹ The falsehood of this belief has nothing to do with religion itself, or the religious identity of the agent; it is false because it is based on non-verified or incomplete information/ insufficient evidence about the situation, ignoring the counter evidence, etc.² In other words, religion itself does not provide facts about the current situation; it provides norms about what to do should a particular situation arise.

For example, someone who falsely believes that his life is in danger will naturally decide to defend himself by all available means, and that may include political violence. The same is true if the agent falsely believes that his identity, his way of life or his country is in danger. In this case, the origin of political violence is the agent's shortcoming in fulfilling his epistemic responsibility; i.e. the responsibility to follow the relevant epistemic and logical norms that would prevent the agent from forming false beliefs about the current situation.

A real example from recent history is the invasion of Iraq by the American and British forces in 2003. George W. Bush and Tony Blair tried to justify their decision and convince the world community by claiming that Saddam Hussein had amassed weapons of mass destruction. However, it later became evident that their decision was based on a false belief about the current situation supported by insufficient evidence.³

9.2. The role of false beliefs about available means in political violence

Sometimes, the agent's factual belief about the current situation is correct but his belief about the lack of legitimate means for changing the current situation is false. For example, someone may correctly

1. The agent may falsely believe that the current situation is undesirable and should be changed. This belief is normative not factual, but he would not have this belief unless he has a conception of the ideal situation. Therefore the agent's belief about the undesirability of the current situation may come from his religious source of normativity. However, since this belief depends on the agent's belief about the ideal situation, I did not mention it separately.

2. In verse (49:6) the Qur'an warns believers about making a hasty decision based on the reports of an untrustworthy person. "O ye who believe! If a wrong-doer brings you news, verify it [in order not] to treat a group of people rashly, and then afterwards regret what you have done."

3. For more on this, see "Iraq Inquiry Digest" in <http://www.iraqinquirydigest.org/?page id=113> (accessed 27/10/2014).

believe that his identity or way of life is under attack, but, due to a lack of knowledge regarding morally legitimate/non-violent ways of defending one's identity or way of life, believe that the only available means is to commit political violence. The decision to commit political violence in this case is rooted in his false factual belief about the available means.

This kind of false belief is rooted in the agent's epistemic mistake, and therefore has nothing to do with his religion or his religious identity; secular agents may make the same mistake. Thus what can prevent them from this mistake, and consequently from committing political violence, is to follow the relevant epistemic norms and revise their belief about the unavailability of morally legitimate means for realising their ends.

9.3. The role of false beliefs about the ideal situation in political violence

There are two types of false beliefs about the ideal situation that may result in political violence. The agent may harbour the false normative belief that political violence is an end in itself, i.e., it has intrinsic value and consequently commit political violence for its own sake. On the other hand, the agent may think of political violence as having instrumental value, i.e., as the best means for realising a situation that he falsely thinks of as being the ideal situation. In both cases, his false belief about the ideal situation plays a role in his decision to commit political violence.

Now, the question will arise, how the agent comes to such a false belief about the ideal situation. As we saw in (§4), the notion of the "ideal situation" is inherently normative/evaluative, meaning that we need a source of norms and values to tell us what the ideal situation is. This source can be religious or secular, so to single out religion as the unique source for false beliefs about the ideal situation is untenable. Whether the content of this false normative belief is part of the authentic teachings of religious or secular ways of life is a further claim for which we need hermeneutical evidence. However, as we saw in (§ 7.4), the correct method of interpretation does not allow us to infer any justification for political violence from authentic religious texts, neither as an end nor as a legitimate means to an end.

9.4. The role of false beliefs about the best means in political violence

Sometimes, the agent's beliefs about the current situation, available means and the ideal situation are correct, but his belief about the ideal/best means to turn the current situation into the ideal one is false. In this case, the agent will choose political violence as the best/ideal

means to realise a morally permissible or valuable end. Therefore, his mistake in choosing a morally reprehensible means is generated by his false normative belief about the instrumental value of that means. There are many false normative principles that may play a role here, including the principle that “ends justify means”, which is the foundation for “real politics”. Of course, instrumental rationality requires us to choose the best available means, but it does not tell us if those means are morally permissible, let alone which one is the best.

To identify the best means we need to consult our sources of norms and values. Morality is one such source, but by hypothesis it does not recognise political violence as a legitimate means or as having instrumental value. However, a problem would arise if morality comes into conflict with other sources of norms and values. Here, the agent’s erroneous decision concerning how to solve this conflict plays a significant role in political violence.

If the agent believes that in such a conflict morality should always take precedence, then he would never be able to justify choosing political violence as the best means to his end, because morality would not allow him to do so. If, on the other hand, the agent solves this conflict in favour of other sources of norms and values, he runs the risk of choosing political violence as a means to a moral end.¹ The proper solution for this kind of political violence is to acknowledge that global morality is superior to all other sources of norms and values which are local. In fact, it can be said that the agent’s false belief political violence as the best means is rooted in his false belief about the inferiority of global morality to his local sources of norms and values.

9.5. Dogmatism as a source of political violence

Another source of political violence is dogmatism. Dogmatism is an epistemic vice. It is defined as considering one’s belief to be infallible and oneself to have the truth/reality in one’s hand. The truth or falsehood of the agent’s belief is irrelevant here; what matters is that his attitude and reaction are based on his strong emotional attachment to his belief, rather than the belief itself. Dogmatism or epistemic arrogance and its opposite, epistemic humility or open-mindedness, are two different ways in which the agent clings to his true or false belief.

1. According to Islamic religious morality, ends do not justify means. See, for example, a quote from Imam Ali, the prophet Mohammad’s son-in-law, in which he says: “Whoever conquers through evil means is defeated”, See: Razi, 2009: 902, Saying 337.

Put another way, dogmatism can be defined as being certain about something when you have no right to be certain. If the agent feels certain about the truth of his belief, then he does not have any motivation for revision or for taking rival opinions seriously. The agent who is certain about his belief will see himself as being absolutely right and others who believe differently as being absolutely wrong. There is no place for reconciliation, negotiation or discussion between someone who is absolutely right and someone else who is absolutely wrong.

The situation gets worse if the dogmatic belief becomes part of the agent's identity, such that the agent would define himself in terms of that belief. In this case, any revision of the belief in question will entail a change in the agent's identity, and changing identity is a traumatic experience. Also, any critique of a dogmatic belief would automatically be classified by a dogmatic agent as an insult or attack on his identity.

In this case the agent is certain when in fact he has no right to be certain; because his certainty is caused by the inclination to avoid the trauma of changing his identity rather than by proper conclusive evidence. As is obvious, both religious and secular agents can be epistemically humble or dogmatic about their beliefs.

The idea is that sometimes it is not the belief itself or its falsehood that causes violence. Rather, it is the degree of belief, i.e., being certain about the truth of one's belief that is the source of the problem. The question of whether certainty is available to mankind or not is an interesting epistemic question, but what is important is the *right* to be certain, not certainty *itself*. Even if certainty is available to someone, the right to be certain is limited to cases in which the agent has conclusive/indubitable evidence. Therefore, the right to be certain is conditional, and not absolute. It is conditional in two ways: (1) certainty/conclusive evidence should be available, and (2) the agent should actually be aware of that evidence. One has no right to be certain in cases where one or both of these conditions are not satisfied.

The remedy here is to replace "certainty" with "the right to be certain". The right to be certain revolves around having actual epistemic access to conclusive and indubitable evidence in favour of the truth of one's belief. However, this specific kind of evidence is either unavailable in almost all cases, or if available, the agent may not actually have epistemic access to it due to the limits of human cognition. Most, if not all, of human knowledge is fallible, based on defeasible evidence, and therefore should be subject to criticism and revision, if required. Now, it can be said that sometimes

political violence is caused by dogmatism, regardless of whether the content of the dogmatic belief in question is religious or secular.¹ If this is the case, then the solution would be epistemic humility.²

An epistemically responsible agent is not dogmatic; he would think of himself as someone who is not infallible, and does not possess the truth, but is on a continual journey towards truth and reality.³ Also, such an agent would know that the right to be certain has a very limited scope, if any. Epistemic humility is a virtue and an antidote for dogmatism and for its practical consequences, such as political violence. Epistemic humility means to think of ourselves as fallible agents who are always subject to epistemic mistakes, and to accept that the strength of our belief should not be more than the defeasible evidence that we have in favour of that belief.⁴

Both beliefs and evidence are a matter of degree, and being rational means to respect the proportionality between the two. Epistemic humility is the basic requirement of theoretical rationality and the ethics of belief, according to which our basic duty in the domain of beliefs is to ensure that we have proportioned the degree of our beliefs, and our

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1. For a similar view, See: Paya, 2014, in this volume. In his discussion about this epistemic vice, Paya uses the term “doctrinal certainty”. However, his theory is different from what has been developed in this article in two ways. Firstly, according to him, doctrinal certainty is the unique cause/source of political violence, whereas I argue that it is the cause/source of the problem only in some cases. Secondly, his solution is to accept “critical rationalism”, which is an anti-justificationist theory of rationality. Yet, as far as I can see, there is no substantial difference between this conception of rationality and the moderate versions of justificationist theories of rationality.
 2. Textual pieces of evidence that one can mention from Islamic primary sources to support the virtue of epistemic humility are overwhelming. For example, Islam has two major slogans, one of them being that “God is greater than to be known/described,” which means that God is greater than every possible belief or conception that one may have about Him. Therefore, the moral lesson here for Muslims is that their knowledge of God can never be complete and so they should always try to improve their understanding of God by revising their current understanding, and by not worshipping their current belief or conception of God instead of Him. Also, the prophet is famously reported to have prayed repeatedly “O My Lord! We never know you as you deserve,” (Majlisī, M. T. (1993) [1414], vol. 8, p. 430 and Rāzī, F. (1993) [1414], Vol. 1, p. 126.), and that “O My Lord! Show me everything as it is” (Majlisī, M. B. (1982) [1403], vol. 69, p.293, (ʿadith no. 23) and (Aḥādīth, I. A. J. (1982) [1403], vol. 1, p. 132, (ʿadith no. 224)).
 3. In verse (34:24) of the Qurʾān, God instructs His prophet to tell the disbelievers that “[...] certainly either we or you are rightly guided or in manifest error”.
 4. It is interesting to note that one of the essential teachings of Abrahamic religions is that human beings are not God; they are servants. This means that just as their power to change the situation is very limited, their knowledge about everything is also limited, quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative limitation means that God knows many things which we do not know. Qualitative limitation, on the other hand, means that even in cases in which God and Human beings know something, the quality of their knowledge is different. Divine knowledge is perfect and infallible, but human knowledge is imperfect and fallible.

emotional attachment to them, to the strength of the evidence that we have for those beliefs.¹ Needless to say, this rational or moral principle is quite general, and is therefore equally applicable to both religious and secular beliefs. Believers and nonbelievers are rational to the extent to which they respect this principle.

9.6. Intolerance as a source of political violence

Tolerance is a universal virtue of common/global morality.² Intolerance, on the other hand, is a result of replacing global morality with an ideology as a local set of norms and values; a set that does not acknowledge “human identity” as the primary and privileged source of norms and values, and therefore legitimises discrimination between people in terms of their rights and duties according to the less general identities that they happen to have, such as religious, national, political, and social identity. This ideology can be religious or secular, but in both cases, the result of prioritising that ideology over global morality would be the same.

The solution here is to acknowledge that human identity and its normative requirements are more fundamental and more important than all other religious or secular identities that a specific group of human beings may have. Whilst universal human identity insists upon the dignity and equality of all human beings, and therefore leads to the idea that all of us have the same rights and duties, other identities draw a sharp distinction between those who possess that particular identity and those who do not, discriminating between them in terms of rights and duties and insisting upon the otherness of some people as an essential part of their own definition, thereby resulting in intolerance towards the ‘others’.

Therefore, we can say that in some cases political violence is caused by subordinating human identity to a religious or secular identity, which leads to the prioritisation of ideological norms over moral norms when they come into conflict. In this way, moral norms, which are the requirements of human identity, become overridden by non-moral/immoral norms generated by a religious or secular identity. The solution then is simply to acknowledge the priority of human identity, and consequently morality, over other identities and their respective

1. It is interesting to note that one of the essential teachings of Abrahamic religions is that human beings are not God; they are servants. This means that just as their power to change the situation is very limited, their knowledge about everything is also limited, quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative limitation means that God knows many things which we do not know. Qualitative limitation, on the other hand, means that even in cases in which God and Human beings know something, the quality of their knowledge is different. Divine knowledge is perfect and infallible, but human knowledge is imperfect and fallible.

2. For a comprehensive treatment of tolerance, See: Fiala, 2005.

normative requirements.

10. Conclusion

The above discussion has three major conclusions. The first is that there is no historical or hermeneutical evidence to support the existence of religiously motivated violence. Of course, the existence of violence committed by religious agents is evident and beyond reasonable doubt, but this in itself is not sufficient as evidence in favour of the claim that this type of violence was actually motivated by religion itself. The conceptual and logical gap between “violence committed by religious agents” and “violence motivated by religion” invalidates any attempt to prove the existence of the latter in light of the existence of the former. Also, for reasons that we saw in (§7.4) literal interpretation of some sections of religious texts is not hermeneutically valid.

The second conclusion follows from the first. If we do not have convincing evidence about the existence of violence motivated by religion itself, then the division of political violence into religious and secular types (i.e. the religious/secular violence dichotomy) would become explanatory redundant, unhelpful and in fact misleading. This dichotomy only makes sense if religious violence is taken to refer to “violence motivated by religion” and not “violence committed by religious agents”. This is because the religious identity of the perpetrators cannot tell us whether religion was a motivating factor. The religious/secular violence dichotomy has had a very important role in perpetuating the idea that religion as a way of life is and has been the main cause of political violence. However, the above discussion clearly shows that this claim is unwarranted, and therefore the dichotomy is untenable.

The third conclusion is that since so-called religious violence and secular violence have the same origin, they must have the same solution. In (§8 and §9) I have tried to explain political violence in general in terms of the common factors that contribute to it. These factors, which are either external or internal, function as causes of all instances of political violence committed by religious or secular agents. Therefore, a comprehensive and radical solution for political violence should take all of them into account.

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