RELIGION AND WAR

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It’s often said that religion has been the primary motive for humans slaughtering other humans throughout history. But I’m skeptical.

One reason people say this is for the delicious irony: religion should be the *last* reason people kill one another. Another reason for saying this, for some at least, is anti-religious sentiment. But there are other reasons to be skeptical.

Examples

Consider the greatest slaughter of ancient and medieval times. When the Mongols under Genghis Khan conquered China, India, the Near East, and Eastern and Central Europe (1215-23), probably over a million people died. But that conflict was not primarily religious: Mongol religion was shamanistic polytheism, which had little interest in spreading itself.

Because technology has progressed, and because the human population has grown exponentially over the millenia (200 million in 1 CE, 750 million in 1750, 8 billion today), a higher number of deaths per conflict tends to correlate with later dates. So consider the four greatest instances of humans killing humans in the 20th century: none was primarily religious in motive.

1914-18: 10 million died in World War I.

1928-38: 40 million died in Stalin’s forced industrialization.

1939-45: 60 million died in World War II.

1957-66: 45 million died in Mao Zedong’s forced industrialization.

One could argue that a fifth major instance of humans killing other humans in the 20th century *was* religiously motivated: from 1915-19, 1.5 million died in the Armenian genocide by the Turks. But how much of the genocide was religious zeal, how much nationalism, how much racism, how much fear of Western modernity (with which the Muslim Turks identified the Christian Armenians), how much greed for Armenian lands and possessions?

Material Motives

In *Old World Encounters*: *Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York; OUP, 1993), Jerry H. Bentley argues that “large-scale conversion to foreign cultural standards occurred only when powerful political, social, or economic incentives encouraged it” (p. 19). He constantly notes that religious conversions in the ancient and medieval worlds resulted primarily from material motives, not spiritual motives (7, 8, 10, 13, 19, 22, 25, etc.).

Rudolph Peters, in his doctoral dissertation on jihad (*Islam and Colonialism*: *The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History*. Religion and Society 20. The Hague: Mouton, 1979), agrees: “the wars of the Islamic states [632-732 CE] were fought for perfectly secular reasons. In a society where politics are entirely dominated by religion, there is no articulate distinction between politics and religion and political aims will always be represented as religious aims” (4).

. . . the course of history is in last instance determined by economic and social factors [and] ideology plays only a secondary role. . . . Armed conflicts between groups, be they wars or revolts, arise out of a clash of material interests. In order to secure maximal popular support, also among those who are not directly involved, the leaders will appeal to an ideology of group solidarity . . . (Peters 5-6)

Religion as a Culture’s Major Characteristic

Sociologists have said that there are five must-have institutions that no society has been without (sociologists call these “functional requisites”): systems of family, education, economy, government, and religion.

Gerald R. Leslie and Sheila K. Korman (*The Family in Social Context*. 7th ed. New York: OUP, 1989) note that “the adequate performance of [the first four] functional requisites depends on this last one [religion]. There is a universal human problem of finding meaning for life itself . . . One of the functions of religion is to define and strengthen ultimate values” (10-11). Perhaps this is why, when one civilization attacks another, people assume religion is the motivation: they tend to identify all aspects of a culture with its religion.

Church and State

Prior to the Enlightenment (1650s-1780s), no one saw religion as distinct from other aspects of society. Every culture assumed that a heretic was also a traitor, a danger to society. But with the Enlightenment came the concepts of separation of church and state and freedom of religion.

All Muslims believe that the Qur’an contains the *exact words* of God. Since the Qur’an contains many rules concerning the structure of society and state, separating religion from state seems impossible. But the greatest difficulty facing Muslims is the “sword verses”:

Q 9:5, “slay the polytheists wherever ye find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere; if they repent and establish the Prayer and pay the Zakāt, then set them free; Allah is forgiving, compassionate.” (Qtd. in Peters 14)

Q 9:29, “Fight against those who do not believe in Allah . . . [and who] do not practise the religion of truth of those who have been given the Book, until they [are] subdued.” (Qtd. in Peters 14)

Here is the crux of the clash between Islam and the West: Islam has not, perhaps cannot, accommodate itself to the innovations of church/state separation and freedom of religion.

For all of the above reasons, I’m skeptical that we can be certain that more deaths of humans by humans have been religiously motivated than otherwise motivated.

Let me conclude by quoting the “Abstract” from the Oxford University Press’s website for William T. Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence*: *Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: OUP, 2009):

The myth of religious violence is the pervasive secularist idea that there is something called “religion,” endemic to all human cultures and eras, that has a tendency to promote violence because it is essentially prone to absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality. Religion must therefore be separated from “secular” phenomena like politics for the sake of peace. This book argues that the myth of religious violence is a piece of Western folklore that underwrites Western violence. The book shows that religion is not a universal and transhistorical phenomenon. Religious-secular and religion-politics distinctions are modern Western inventions. The book shows that what counts as religious or secular in any context corresponds to how power is arranged. The myth of religious violence helps to construct a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. In domestic politics, the myth underwrites the triumph of the state over the church in the early modern period and the nation-state’s subsequent monopoly on its citizens’ willingness to sacrifice and kill. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence reinforces the superiority of Western social orders to nonsecular—especially Muslim—social orders. Their violence is seen as fanatical; our violence is seen as rational and peace making. . . . the myth of religious violence is used to justify U.S. diplomatic and military actions, including the Iraq War. Peace depends on recognition that so-called secular ideologies and institutions can be just as prone to absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality.