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Are Religion and Peace Antithetic to One Another?

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ABSTRACT

“Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people.”

- Richard Dawkins

The worldview is inconceivable without the interplay of religion and violence. The human population has categorised itself in different sects based on the religious beliefs. The conflicts between the religious communities have predominantly resulted in violence. The concept of religion is such that it knits the community so finely that even a minor threat to their religion could open doors to massive bloodshed. Though the major religions in the world preach peace yet the human race has been a witness of gruesome wars and battles in the name of religion. The religion based violence include the great The Thirty years War, Bosnian Wars, The French Wars of Religion, the Protestant- Catholic conflict in Ireland, 9/11 attacks etc. This paper is aimed to analyse with examples the contemporary issues of conflicts between the religion and the cause of violence. The approach towards writing is from the point of understanding the relationship between religion and world peace through understanding the dynamics of religion, politics and violence. The paper would further delve into the conflict resolution to conclude that there is a mid way where religion and peace can meet in the world today.

I. RELIGION AND VIOLENCE- A CAUSAL AND EFFECT RELATIONSHIP?

“Religion and violence are hardly strangers. Yet neither are episodes in which they become connected all of a piece. The September 11 terrorist attacks; continuing struggles between Jews and Palestinians; the Troubles in Northern Ireland; the nationalist conflicts in the Balkans; ethnic wars in Africa; simmering conflict between Pakistan and India; terrorist actions by extreme right Christian fundamentalists in the U.S.; the subway poison gas attack by the Aum Shinrikyô sect in Tokyo; the deaths of hundreds in a burning church of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda; the persecution of Falun Gong in

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China -- this is but a cursory list of some of the most dramatic violent events involving religion at the turn from the modern era's second to its third millennium"².

The relationship between religion and violence can be studied through four major theories. The first theory begins with explaining and digging into defining what 'violence' is? A plain definition of violence would include elements of coercion, physical injury and harm, mala fide intention etc. However, such definition may not always hold true. The difficulties of defining violence thus concern (1) the limitations of an understanding keyed to force resulting in physical injury, and (2) the difficulty of acknowledging the symbolic dimension without privileging one or another ethnocentric or hegemonic definition³. Keeping these difficulties in mind Mary Jackman defines violence as "actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury." Violent actions, she continues, may be "corporal, written, or verbal," and the injuries may be "corporal, psychological, material, or social."⁴ This definition encompasses a wholesome point of view without assuming physical violence as the only form of violence. The considerations in Jackman's definition are important since it includes all other forms of aggression that may or may not be accompanied by physical violence especially in cultural and religious aspect. Further thinkers have also stated that violence in the name of religion is a special category which is used by certain groups to achieve greater objective or simply disrupt peace in an effort to establish a hegemony. For example - Terrorist acts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may fail to achieve any direct military objective but to date they have derailed the prospects of peace⁵.

To understand the dynamics of religion and politics- it is imperative to understand the theories on violence which are not entered around religion. The general theories of Conflicts and Violence is explained by various thinkers including Simmel. Simmel states that sometimes violence it is an escalation of conflict which occurs within an ongoing social relationship. Thus, war is a condition in which antagonisms stemming from mutually irreconcilable objective interests come to a head⁶. The irreconcilable differences could originate from many aspects - religion being one of them and hence the violence.

The third theory throws light on the fact whether there is an inherent relationship between religion and violence. According to Emile Durkheim religion becomes very deep rooted within a community sharing the same ideologies and beliefs. The profound entrenchment of the

²John R. Hall, "Religion and Violence: Social Processes in Comparative Perspective", < https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/569_jhallreligionviolence11-01.pdf>

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ John R. Hall, "Religion and Violence: Social Processes in Comparative Perspective", < https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/569_jhallreligionviolence11-01.pdf>

⁶ *ibid*

religious sentiment includes the sacralisation process which may open war and martyrdom as a sacred duty. This signifies the fundamental embeddedness of violence in religion⁷.

The theorisation of the religion, the social order and the state refers to understand the relationship amongst there varied religious communities, relationship with secular or a political power in particular territory where the religious community exists. Weber analyzed relationships between religion and the political by identifying two kinds of domination: political domination by means of authority and “hierocratic coercion” -- a form of “psychic coercion” implemented by “distributing or denying religious benefits⁸.The premise of Weber’s sociology of domination there is that a recognition of continuities between religious and political organization, and a specification of different sources of religious and political authority. This open relation between the religious power and the political authority, which might open the possibility of a clash and hence the violence.

Apart from the abovementioned definite theories of religion, there are other significant contributors and concepts to the relationship between religion and violence. Nationalism motivated by religion and take the form of violence, for example - Hindu- Muslim struggle in India during the Independence movement was driven by nationalist spirit. The presence of Hindu nationalism recent times as well lead to major violence riots in India which include the Babri Masjid riots and the Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002. The aspiration of establishing religion as a state domination is yet another important factor that contributes to the relationship of religion and violence. For example - Roman Catholic Church indulged in forced conversions as an expansionary measure for Portuguese empire in America.

II. POLITICISED RELIGION?

Religion and Politics are two inseparable concepts. None can exist in the isolation of the another. The relationship between the religion and politics has enhanced the chances of disruption of peace since religion has become a tool in the hands of the politically charged groups. ‘The growing saliency and persuasiveness of religion, i.e. the increasing importance of religious beliefs, practices, and discourses in personal and public life, and the growing role of religious or religiously-related individuals, non-state groups, political parties, and communities, and organizations in domestic politics is occurring in ways that have significant implications for international politics’⁹. These significant implications include religious

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Economy and Society, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹ Thomas, Scott M., ‘Outwitting the Developed Countries? Existential Insecurity and the Global Resurgence of Religion’, *Journal of International Affairs*, Fall/Winter 2007, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2007, pp. 21-45

uprisings and communal violence. The politicisation of the religion has led to a “New Cold War”¹⁰. The term “New Cold War” was seen in the light of revival of the religion in the non-western world is considered by some authors as a ‘revolt against the West’ and especially against the Westphalian order. Thus, not just the Political Islam’s but Sikhism’s narratives, for instance, also reject the subordination of the religious to the political and accordingly challenge the Westphalian international order¹¹.

The politicisation of religion is one of the biggest reason of conflicts and disruption of the world peace. However, the question stands “Is Religion the main cause of conflict?”. This question was dealt by large scale report prepared through survey by The Institute for Economics and Peace. The study recorded that of 35 armed conflicts that occurred in 2013, 21 of the conflicts included religious aspects¹². The study hinted that religion alone has not been the major cause of conflict. However, this is not to state that the religion has been absent as an origin of conflicts around. Politicised religious movements and politically active organisations instigate the violence by using religion as a motivating factor along with many others to widen the communal differences. The fact that the religious rhetoric and symbols are extensively employed by the warring parties throughout the world seem to give credit to the assumption that killing in the name of God has become the main driving force of many of the conflicts in the world and under these circumstances, the current resurgence of religion would be nothing more than the ignition spark of security’s powder keg¹³. The name of religion has been used to fulfil political vendettas and such intentions take form of terrorism and violence. The 9/11 attacks is the primal event in the history of the contemporary world that can be market as a point where the concern of religion and violence entered the discipline of International relations and global peace and security.

The religious organisations are politicised while they enter the race of economic and social power. The politicisation of such organisations leads to an inevitable struggle of establishing the control. To establish one’s own religion and religious organisation as a super power, the path of violence is chosen. Otis observes, ‘individuals and groups on all continents and in all social strata have begun constructing a new religious politics based on the relationship between a transcendent being and themselves – bypassing or redefining traditional forms of state/church

¹⁰ Tibi, Bassam, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe. Democratic Peace and Euro/Is-lam versus Global Jihad*, Abington, New York: Routledge, 2008.

¹¹View Of IS RELIGION INHERENTLY VIOLENT? RELIGION AS A THREAT AND PROMISE FOR THE GLOBAL SECURITY' (*Politicsandreligionjournal.com*, 2020) <<https://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/index.php/prj/article/view/134/136>> accessed 27 November 2020.

¹² <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/index.php/prj/article/view/134/136>

authority. The new reality is the emergence of particularistic do-it-yourself religion(s), in which some individuals use a peculiar form of logic to perpetuate violence in order to fulfil what they believe is God's will. Thus, the structure of violence and warfare in the modern world... is violence perpetuated by individuals on the global stage in pursuit of transcendent goals – albeit by earthly means'¹⁴.

Political objectives such as nationalism, territorial expansion, state control etc are such transcended goals that can lead religion to violence. An appropriate example of it would be the religious conflict in South Sudan. The cause of the the conflict dates back to 1820s when the army of Muhammad Ali occurred the Arab- Muslim northern region which was later named as Sudan. In the further conquests, his forces enslaved the community in the south. In the last two decades of 19th century, the Mahdists acted militantly to Islamise the people in the Sudan¹⁵. Following this even British treated north and south differently for their economic and political motives. During the first round of the war in Sudan (1955-72), the Northern rule state executed forced arabization and islamization of the south, with an aim to achieve unity through uniformity. The Sudanese President in mid 1980s shifted the focus of country's management to Islamic practices forcing the Christians in the South to convert and practice Islam. The situation worsened and led to call for a Jihad leading to further political complexities between North and South. The conflict has continued till as recent as February 2020. Though all the years of the war, it can clearly be noticed that the religion was being used as a political tool to meet the selfish nationalist and expansionist political objective of the ruling governments. Thus, politicised religion is one of the deadliest weapon against the global peace.

III. WHERE DO RELIGION AND PEACE MEET?

As it holds true from the above discussion that no religion is inherently violent. It is the politicised religion which is a cause of violence. It can be noted that religion in its pure form and in isolation of politics, without becoming tool in the hands of political leaders, can be an important contributing factor towards global peace building. Religious actors which includes religious organisations and religious leaders play a vital role in global peace and security.

Faith- based diplomacy is a concept explained by Douglas Johnston which states that religion should be introduced in the discipline of International Relations. The introduction of the spiritual dimension in the conflict management efforts is very important, one reason for that

¹⁴ Otis, Pauletta, 'Religion and War in the Twenty-first Century,' in Robert A. Seiple & Dennis R. Hoover, *Religion and Security. The New Nexus in International Relations*. Row-man & Littlefield Publishers, 2004

¹⁵ Ronen, Yehudit. "Religions at War, Religions at Peace: The Case of Sudan." *Zeitschrift Für Politik*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2005, pp. 80–96. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24228236. Accessed 27 Nov. 2020.

being the fact that a significant part of the human conflicting behavior is based on emotional feelings that cannot be changed by negotiations and rational bargaining; accordingly, the use of the spiritual/religious element can make actors to critically examine their actions and attitudes¹⁶.

In a survey done by the The Institute of Economics and Peace¹⁷, it was asked “ *Can religion play a positive role in peace building?*”. The study suggests that there are two ways in which religion can actually help promote and maintain peace. Firstly, through the common benefits of group membership and secondly by inter- faith dialogue for conflict resolution. A study of the responses from 46 countries in the World Values Survey finds that higher group membership corresponds with greater levels of peace¹⁸. Inter- faith dialogue for conflict resolution is a significant step towards peace building. For example - The inter- faith dialogue for conflict resolution includes the civil and political movements such as the interfaith movement surrounding the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the reconciliation efforts at the end of Apartheid in South Africa, as well as armed conflict including less well known events such as intervention of an imam and pastor in Yelwa Shendam Nigeria and the mediation of the Sant’Egidio Community which helped resolve the civil war in Mozambique in 1992. Religions for Peace for instance played a key role in ending the conflict in Sierra Leone via the Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone¹⁹.

Thus, with the above mentioned list of conflict resolution techniques, it is established that religion and peace do meet and have a way towards coexistence in the contemporary times. Where religion can be a cause of conflict it can also be skilfully used to resolve a conflict.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I have tried to ascertain that no religion is inherently violent. Through all the religious texts, religious organisations and religious leaders, it can be deciphered that “peace” has centred the idea in religion in its purest forms. Religion is a critical thread that holds a community together. The attachment to the religion is so severe and profound that religion can be a deadly menace if not used rightly. The intricate relationship between religion and peace is dependent largely on the religious organisations and leaders. The charisma of religion leaders is massive upon the masses. Thus, the responsibility of not politicising the

¹⁶ David R. Smock, ed., *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking – When Religion Brings Peace, Not War* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, Peaceworks, Nr. 55, 2006

¹⁷ <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf>

¹⁹ *ibid*

religion falls heavily on the shoulders of religious leaders in the current times. However, the world has seen the religious leaders out rightly misusing the power and using the religion as a political tool as seen in Sudan. The correct use of religion can foster the world peace. Conflict resolution based on religion is potent to play a huge role in establishing world peace, restoring justice and maintaining global security. Thus, Religion and Peace are not antithetic to one another.
