

Do religions always lead to violence?

One of the major objections to religion from humanists and unbelievers is that religions in general and western Christianity in particular cause insoluble and unending conflicts between peoples, nations, established churches or individuals. Many historical examples are referenced with regard to Christianity, in particular the Crusades and the wars of religion in Europe.

The man in the street latches on to this like iron filings to a magnet. Look at Northern Ireland, India and Pakistan, Palestine and Israel he says, or in a hazy past, colonialism and the inquisition.

Fear is never a good counsellor. Some of our contemporaries are trembling at the idea of war between Islam and the Christian west against the backdrop of the Palestinian problem, Samuel Huntingdon's "clash of civilisations". Future wars, he claimed, would not be waged between countries but between civilisations and these imply religions.

Why do religions seem to engender violence? A friend of mine from New York who recently revisited his native Brooklyn told me that many there are not only frightened of renewed terrorism, but deep down, there is a desire for revenge for September 11th by a good hit on Iraq.

René Girard, the French anthropologist who teaches in the USA, has developed an interesting theory of "sacred violence". Over the past fifteen years, in several of his books, including *Violence and the Sacred*, *Things hidden from before the Foundation of the World* and *The Scapegoat* Girard has sought to address the fact that violence is at the origin of religions and of human social experience.

Violence has its origin in mimetic behaviour, or imitation of or desire to be equal with the neighbour, who has become a threat because they are envied. Elimination of the other is a solution to rivalry between opposing forces and this leads to violence and death.

The way of diffusing opposition is by focalising it on an excluded third party, or the scapegoat, which is sacrificed in a triangular transfer of violence. Thus sacrifice serves to eliminate violent confrontations by crystallising animosity in a victim which assumes a mediatorial function between the opposed parties. In so doing, the victim becomes a sacred symbol. Sacrifices, which are repeatedly renewed, and which are present in all religions, are ways of removing violence and maintaining order in society. Laws indicate what is prohibited and repeated sacrifices serve to maintain order and peace in human groups.

This may seem far-fetched when put like that, but the interesting fact is that Girard's theories are illustrated with reference to biblical texts and practices. Man wishes to be "like God", who is considered a rival and not the One who insures the limits of man's liberty by the original prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This order is not restrictive but puts God and man in their respective places – God as Lord and man as servant.

When sin enters, guilt is transferred by Adam to Eve to the serpent, and by implication to God himself, who is blamed for the way he made human beings. However the real victim is not the human couple but God himself, who is abused and done out of his rights as creator by man's sin.

Does God exact revenge in a way which corresponds to man's violent dethronement of him? No, he does not. God institutes a sacrifice for sin, which indicates that a life in God's creation is taken in place of man's for cleansing and reconciliation. The sacrificial victim removes violence and opposition and restores normality. Life can continue beyond violence on the condition of sacrifice. Although humanity is excluded from the garden, grace is present and life continues.

Primal violence is therefore an aspect of original sin and is fundamentally a religious act against God. Violence is typical of the human condition right from the start. It implies a reversal of a divine command, which leads to death. It is dealt with by sacrifice and the mediatorial victim.

So religions as such do not foster violence as reply to it. It is man's rejection of God and his blessing of life and peace that is the root of violent aggression. Here lies the fount of every human evil and every vendetta. But the original divine law is nothing but love and is resumed in the words of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and your neighbour as yourself." The creator's good intention for life and fellowship in paradise was nothing other than ordered love, which was forfeited when man wished to put his own ambitions in God's place.

Sacrifices exist in the great majority of religions as ways of purification and reconciliation. The biblical narrative in particular indicates that God has provided a way for reconciliation and peace with himself and among men. He instituted the sacrifices in Israel as types of the one perfect sacrifice to come – that of his own Son, Jesus-Christ.

God's solution to human violence is not *homeopathic* – treating violence by violence, but *allopathic* – healing violence by love.

However, the world of sinful man has never followed the Beatitudes of Jesus and the 20th century has followed Nietzsche's scorn of the peacemakers with the idea that the superman is superior than the New Testament's perfect man. Only Jesus managed to live out as the unique sacrifice for paradise regained in communion with

God. But modern man has preferred the way of power and domination rather than that of the weakness of God. To keep order in societies made up of warring factions and clans an iron hand in a soft glove (to quote Robespierre) is the only way. However, if you kick the hornets nest you better be ready to have hornets all over the place, which happens before our very eyes.

But what is the problem with religions? Religions are quite dangerous things, as Karl Barth pointed out a while ago, and as Jacques Derrida, the French deconstructionist, said more recently. Why do they never seem to be able to cohabit? Because humanly originated religions take their way of sacrifice, worship, legislation and tradition to be the only way. And as human systems they are exclusive.

So they engender rivalry, exclusion, conflict of ideas, then of territory and ultimately violence, war and death. But Jesus warned his followers that those who take the sword will also perish by it. The kingdom of God does not come out of the barrel of a rifle. Violence is always against God's primal law of love. "Man is born to trouble and the sparks fly up" says Job (5.7). Modern man invariably says the opposite: God creates trouble and men are the victims of religion. But the opposite is true. God is love and men make their own trouble as their conflicts create sparks. Man is not the victim but the perpetrator.

In a sense, people who say that all would be well if all religions were one, or if there were no religions at all, even if they are being glibly simplistic, are not far from the mark. Because really there can *only* be one religion – not the many paths trying to force their way through the jungle of terror to God. True religion is given not invented by man, and is God's coming to us from heaven's glory in servant form, concretised in the descent of God's son to the death of the cross (Philippians 2).

The question, what is true religion? is the same as what is revealed religion?

So what about Islam and its sacred violence? Its followers are willing to sacrifice themselves for it. But *jihad* only perpetuates violence without end in an eternal cycle. The sacrifice Christ demands of his followers is different. It is that of sacrificial love which forgives wrongdoing and does not revenge itself against acts of aggression.

A member of the family of Stephen Oake, the police officer killed by a terrorist in the course of duty in Manchester on January 14 2003, was exemplary¹. His reply to violence was a prayer for the power to forgive. If world problems lie beyond our control, on a personal level this is surely the way of Christ for his people in their daily experiences.

¹ Stephen Robin Oake was a police officer serving as an anti-terrorism detective with Greater Manchester Police in the United Kingdom.

Pity our secular media which are all too adept at stirring animosity against asylum seekers and the often defenceless poor cannot make more of this kind of Christian courage which is disappearing all too rapidly from our horizon.