



# *Jnanadeepa*

*Pune Journal of Religious Studies*

ISSN 0972-3331

[www.punejournal.in](http://www.punejournal.in)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4289046

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4289046>

Religions and Violence: Causes, Consequences, Remedies

Isaac Padinjarekuttu

Abstract: Nobody will deny that our world today is thoroughly violent and that far too much violence takes place in the name of religion. Almost daily there are reports of violence, where religions play a direct or indirect role. History has ample records of the past intertwining of religions and violence; how they have initiated, incited, fostered, and condoned violence, in the form of systematic discrimination, hatred, intolerance, persecutions and wars. This realization prompted Pope John Paul II, the head of one religion, Roman Catholicism, on March 12, 2000, to ask forgiveness for the violence that some Christians have committed in the service of the truth, and for the attitude of mistrust and hostility sometimes assumed toward followers of other religions. One of the greatest challenges to religious belief in the 21st century will be the sheer enormity of the evil done by humans to each other in the name of religion. None of the great religions can be acquitted of this charge and there are patterns at work which indicate that religions could be one of the most important causes of massive violence in the coming decades.

Keywords: Religion and Violence, Evil in Religion's name, Crusade

Cited as:

Padinjarekuttu, Isaac. (2002). Religions and Violence: Causes, Consequences, Remedies (Version 1.0). *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, July-Dec 2002 (Vol 5/2), 5-22. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4289046>

2002-06-05 | Updated on Nov 10, 2020

## **Religions and Violence**

### **Causes, Consequences, Remedies**

**Isaac Padinjarekuttu**

*Dept. of Historical Theology, JDV, Pune 411014*

#### **1. Introduction**

Nobody will deny that our world today is thoroughly violent and that far too much violence takes place in the name of religion. Almost daily there are reports of violence, where religions play a direct or indirect role. History has ample records of the past intertwining of religions and violence; how they have initiated, incited, fostered, and condoned violence, in the form of systematic discrimination, hatred, intolerance, persecutions and wars (Lefebure 2000:13). This realization prompted Pope John Paul II, the head of one religion, Roman Catholicism, on March 12, 2000, to ask forgiveness for the violence that some Christians have committed in the service of the truth, and for the attitude of mistrust and hostility sometimes assumed toward followers of other religions. One of the greatest challenges to religious belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the sheer enormity of the evil done by humans to each other in the name of religion. None of the great religions can be acquitted of this charge and there are patterns at work which indicate that religions could be one of the most impor-

tant causes of massive violence in the coming decades (Huntington 1997).

But the irony is that every major religion in the world, at least at some point, has also expressed a commitment to the value of peace and nonviolence. Many globally well known leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, bishop Desmond Tutu, Maha Gosananda, Nhat Hahn etc., and many other less well known but equally revolutionary leaders have drawn inspiration from their religions in their non-violent struggles. Religions have provided civilization with values like love, empathy, compassion, hospitality, forgiveness, humility, justice, repentance, reconciliation, human rights, etc (Gopin 2000:13). Many dissident movements against political systems, wars, racism, militarism, colonialism, imperialism, dictatorship etc. have a strong religious motivation, and their leaders have been supported by the spiritual resources of their religions. Moreover, not all the violence in the world is caused by religions. The worst and most abhorrent crimes of the last century were committed in the name of antireligious ideolo-

---

\* Isaac Padinjarekuttu is the Head of Dept. of Historical Theology, JDV, Pune. He may be contacted at <padinjar@vsnl.com>

gies like National Socialism, Stalinism, etc. The view that religions necessarily breed violence (Merleau-Ponty) is as one-sided as the one that they automatically generate peace. The thesis of this article is that most violence in the name of religion has nonreligious causes, like national interest or political oppression; moments of economic and social uncertainty or cultural upheaval. I shall argue this thesis in the following way: I shall begin with a discussion of religion and its resurgence in the contemporary world; then I shall deal with the problem of violence and the phenomenon of 'religious' violence; next I shall point out the possible causes of religious violence; in the final section I shall explore the possibility of peacemaking through religion.

## **2. Resurgence of Religion in the Contemporary World**

The twentieth century began with the great promise of secularization and the demise of religion (Cox 1999: 6-8. no. 2/3). Religion came to be associated with fanaticism and intolerance, and its elimination from social life was regarded as a factor of progress and stability (Riccardi 1997/4: 71-73). The fact is that the promise of secularization and the demise of religion have turned out to be myths of the 20th century. Religions have not declined; on the contrary, they have revived and revitalized themselves and have reappeared as a relevant factor in individual and communal life in many parts of the world. In some regions of the world there is a decline of institutional religion but there has emerged a new religious sensibility characterized by independence from tra-

ditional religious authority, dogma and law, and more inquiry, experimentation, and creativity. In some other regions there is a resurgence of old patterns of belief and practices, expressed sometimes in active opposition to state authorities, the liberal spirit of religion, and the global secular culture (Gopin 2000: 3). In many regions of the world religions have become factors of stability or instability, of war or of peace. Let us illustrate this point with some examples: Pope John Paul II and the Polish crisis formed a situation in which the religious factor, with peaceful social pressure, became a key element in destabilizing the Soviet Union. Liberation Theology in Latin America through its concern for social justice became a symbol of Catholicism as a relevant social factor; we might think of bishop Desmond Tutu and his struggle against apartheid or the social and political power of Islam and Khomeini's Revolution in 1979. The supporters of Hindutva in India use religion to gain political power and consolidate high caste domination by forging the collective identity of Hindus through several religiously motivated activities. The assertiveness of religious parties in Israel and their direct involvement in political questions are well known. The most recent example has been the rise and fall of the Taliban and its religious aspirations. Examples can be multiplied from all parts of the world, like Sri Lanka, former Yugoslavia, or Algeria. In all these cases, we see the return of religion as a phenomenon of mass identity. And the violence that is associated with it is qualitatively different from the wars of religion of medieval times. Very

often it is a protest against the existing order of things and an aspiration toward something new; in other words, it is a cultural reconstruction to cope with an existential situation. It is evidently one-sided to see religions as necessarily leading to backwardness and fanaticism. On the contrary, “the religions represent a complex world of believing men and women, of values and of a rich experience of profound social depth. Like any important factor in human history, the religions can present different and contradictory aspects and can contribute to both stability and instability” (Riccardi 1997/4:77).

### 3. “Religious” Violence

That brings us to the specific question of religious violence, but before that, let us say a few words about violence itself. We humans are prone to violence and our histories are stamped by experiences of violence. What is violence? There are many definitions of violence, but let me choose one from among them which defines it as the attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others through any verbal, nonverbal or physical means that inflict psychological or physical injury (Nessan 1998: 451). What causes violence? Eugene Drewermann, depth psychologist and theologian, says that violence is innate to human nature (Drewermann 1994). Others claim that it is rooted in the patterns of aggression among primates<sup>1</sup> but humans transform it through reflective self-consciousness. Human violence is not an instinct but an intentional act (Lefebure 2000: 13). Thomas Cullinan makes an interesting distinction between violence ‘within’

and violence ‘without’, and connects the violence ‘within’ to the violence ‘without’. The former has to do with our inner conflicts and the latter with our reactions to external social conflicts. The outer violence takes three forms: ‘hot’ violence, by which is meant guns, bombs etc.; ‘cold’ violence, by which is meant economic power used to dominate or to destroy those who lack it; and ‘cool’ violence, which gives apparent legitimation both to ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ violence (Quoted in Nzacahayo 1997/4: 12). The question can naturally be asked whether there is any justification for attributing a religious motive to violence, if aggressiveness which is seen as the biological nucleus of violence (Wils 1997/4: 110-118) is an anthropological constant belonging to humans as humans. That is what the last century, steeped in violence and bloodshed caused by several nonreligious factors and ideologies, apparently tells us. But at the same time, we have to ask another question, namely, if violence is such a brute biological fact, can religion which, too, is intrinsic to human culture, be left out of its purview, and what is the exact relationship between the two?

Contrasting views have been put forward regarding this. The famous theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, does not see any intrinsic relationship between religion and violence. He says that the massive violence that has occurred in the name of religion is tied up with various presuppositions which are alien to religion, which in fact mean a betrayal of the deepest dynamic of any relationship to the Absolute (Schillebeeckx 1997/4: 130-34). According to him, religious violence is

based on non-religious foundations. The first foundation is the claim of a religion to be the only true religion. Here the right of other religions to exist is consistently denied. In a multireligious society such a negation is in itself a virtual declaration of war and thus amounts to violence. The second foundation, according to Schillebeeckx, is the claim of a religion to be the direct guarantor of the well-being of human society. As a result there arises the conviction of some religious people that their own religion is their first civic duty and that the God whom they confess is the direct guarantor of the well-being of human society. Thus it would mean that the relationship to the Absolute necessarily implies a direct connection to the concrete social and political order created by human beings. In the context of multiplicity of religions such a view leads to religious violence (Schillebeeckx 1997/4: 133-34).

The noted sociologist, Francois Houtart, on the other hand, says that the roots of religious violence, in some measure, can be found right back in the 'religious', and that is why religions easily become vehicles of violent tendencies (Houtart 1997/4: 1-3). He bases himself on the well known theory of Rene Girard who begins his theory from the fundamental nature of violence. Girard's argument begins with an analysis of the role of violence in the construction of human culture in general and religious culture in particular. The key to understanding the extent of violence within human culture, for Girard, is to be found in understanding the way we learn. Human beings are fundamentally social beings and learn by imitat-

ing others. This he calls the 'mimetic desire'. This implies in the long run creating one's social identity through a process of both attraction and repulsion. For Girard the whole process of mimetic learning tends to violence (Fraser 2001: 15-17). If that is the case, the whole of human society will fall to pieces through violence. Therefore, there should be a way to counter this violence. There should be some safe detonation of the violent impulses. For Girard that safe detonation is sacrifice. "Violence is not to be denied, but can be diverted onto another object, something it can sink its teeth into" (Girard 1977: 4). That something is the sacrificial victim. Sacrificial scapegoating is a way of regulating violence. Thus religion through sacrifice sacralises violence and makes it possible to distinguish it from lawless violence. Girard traces the roots of all religions to the directing of violence into manageable pathways. Although Jesus rejected the culture of violence with his call for forgiveness, the Christian theology of the cross has reinforced and deepened the very thing Jesus himself railed against (Fraser 2001: 30). Girard's search for an explanation for the interpenetration of religion and violence through the mimetic theory is commendable and illumines a wide range of aspects of religion and culture although it remains problematic in many respects (Lefebure 2000: 21-23).

Houtart goes on to mention other causes of religious violence. One is the urge of religion to identify it with the good. This identification with the good has justified much violence in the history of all religions (Houtart 1997/4: 2). Religious mission which also implies

expansionism has also been linked with the use of violence. In the case of Christianity we have such examples as the patronage given to the Iberian powers by the popes to conquer, dominate politically, and reduce to slavery the people they met on their voyages to convert and combat the infidel. While this does not by itself require violence, it certainly has caused extreme violence in the past. According to Houtart, "If we touch on the great religious systems one after another we find the same traces. The basic texts reflect the ritualized violence of sacrifice, the use of violence for a superior good, and the need for violence in defence of the faith, along with the ethical regulation of non-legitimising violence, all aimed at ultimate peace" (Houtart 1997/4: 2).

A study of the different religions can point to the presence of other legitimating factors for religious violence. For example, in the monotheistic religions the passion for fulfilling God's will is paramount. The whole cosmos is to serve this purpose. To this end even violence against the cosmos and the nonhuman world is allowed more readily than in the Eastern religions. The world is to be transformed and God's will is to be established. Any one, and so any religion, who/which wants to fulfil God's will feels continually called to exert force or violence, at least in self-defence. Consequently there developed the theory of Just War<sup>2</sup> in Christianity. In Judaism, according to most readers of the traditional texts, the principle of using violence to save innocent lives in violent situations where there is no alternative, overrides the commitment to peace. In Islam, unjust injury is certainly

ground to defend oneself. So in these religions even though there is a strong tradition of nonviolence present in their foundational texts, "the ideal of nonviolence is constantly threatened and endangered for a good end" (Häring 1997/4a: 97). The religious reading of social relationships is another cause of religious violence. Here religion fulfils an ideological function by legitimizing social relationships and the social order is presented as willed by God. No one can touch it. Feudal structures in medieval Europe and brahminical domination in India are examples of this. Any naturalization of unequal social relationships will lead to violence.<sup>3</sup>

I intend here to avoid a philosophical discussion as to whether violence belongs intrinsically to religion. I would rather follow a phenomenological approach to religious violence and show that it is a very complex phenomenon, involving a number of factors. The strictly 'religious' is just one of these factors. It is often manipulated by other forces because of the return of the religious dimension as an influential factor in the contemporary world. Religion is a force that envelops hundreds of millions of human beings and it plays the central role in the inner life and social behaviour of these people. It generates enormous power. This power can be used either for promoting violence or for generating peace. Often it is the former that happens. Religion accentuates the deepest emotions and intuitions of the human heart and hides its darkest fears. We have the choice either to allow these intuitions to flower or allow the fears to surface. Often it is the latter that is done. This is the experience of

India where senseless communal violence has created enormous terror and suffering.<sup>4</sup> Let us therefore try for a deeper glimpse into the reality of religious violence today.

#### **4. Understanding Religious Violence**

The first step toward understanding religious violence today is to grasp its genuine complexity. Failure to do so has led to the repeated recurrence of such violence and the lack of effective strategies to prevent it. As pointed out above there are non-religious motives that are central to religious conflicts. Since religious language and symbolism are critical ways in which human beings interpret reality, and the religious terminology can express their full range of emotions, nonreligious factors soon receive a religious colouring. Sacred texts, myths, rituals, and images from religions then become central elements in the conflicts. One should in the first place be aware of this fundamental fact. Having said that let us analyse some of these concrete factors at work in religious violence.

##### **4.1 Conflict of World Views**

One factor at work in religious violence today is the conflict of world views, one liberal and secular, and the other conservative and religious. The former is supported by the liberal state and expresses either secular views on life, or religious views that are liberal. The latter is characterized by an extreme enthusiasm for old patterns of beliefs and practices, and opposition to the state, secular authorities and the basic

institutions of the secular culture. Here is a fruitful ground for religions setting people on a collision course with the rest of society causing serious levels of violence. Both the liberal and the conservative sides can become militant through their bias, prejudice and intolerance toward the other.

##### **4.2 Identity Formation**

A second factor at work in religious violence is the quest for identity. Contemporary globalization – the unprecedented economic integration and cultural homogenization under the leadership of a materialist, consumerist Western culture, offers it a fertile context. There is a rebellion against this overwhelming and overpowering economic and cultural hegemony with its attendant symptoms of inequality, poverty, and destruction of culture. In this setting of great social, cultural and psychological uncertainty, there is a frantic search for roots, for identity, uniqueness, and the original system of meaning. It is quite common in such situations that human beings turn to traditional religious systems in search of stability and identity. There is also a general loss of meaning in contemporary materialist societies. This void is increasingly being filled by people searching for an organized response to the world, and it is religion which is best suited to it. Depending on the socioeconomic, psychological and political situation of the individual and the society, this search can become violent.

Let us see how some of the conflicts that are/were going on in the world are defined by this factor.<sup>5</sup> In Sri Lanka,

where the Sinhalese and the Tamils who are still engaged in a conflict, religion is invoked by the Sinhalese whose identity is defined by Buddhism, which is very solidly established as the result of various historical factors, including the colonial preferential policies toward the Tamils. Now they feel that their identity as a people is being threatened. This justifies their pursuit of a merciless war against the Tamils. It is seen by the Buddhist *sangha* as a religious mission making Buddhism a party to this war which is in direct contradiction to its philosophy.

In Ireland, where English colonialism has subjected the Irish Catholics to real genocide, the settling of British colonists who became Anglicans has added a religious dimension to the already existing economic and political dimensions. The two religions involved have not become the standard-bearers of the conflict but religion is very much present in it and the conflict is often identified today as a Catholic-Protestant one.

In Yugoslavia, the main cause of the disintegration of the country was political and economic, but religious identity added a violent dimension to it, and accentuated the conflict. The whole conflict turned out to be a test case for fidelity to one's religion and the conquest of territory necessary for the preservation one's identity. The historical reasons for it are well known, like the Catholic dream of resistance to Communism and Orthodoxy through the creation of a belt of Catholic Baltic states even by tolerating fascism and Nazism. But then there emerged an Orthodox-Slavonic, and a Muslim dream,

centred on Serbia and Bosnia respectively. This has created a triangular conflict.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the religious factor is relevant only for a part of the two camps but an influential part. Both sides use the religious argument and both sides kill in the name of God. One party kills to defend the land given to it by God. The use of violence is a religious duty to safeguard a supreme value. The Palestinian side sees the defence of Muslim identity as central and sacred.

In Algeria, the quest for identity is central to the conflict. The issue here is the destruction of a culture and the economic and political failure of the West. The reaction is both against the West and its socio-political and economic models, and its own people who are considered western in life style. But the struggle is carried out in the name of Islam, which is considered to be the sole certain value remaining in the midst of disintegration.

In northeast India which has a considerable Christian population there are various violent insurgency movements. The Hindu nationalists have identified the insurgency movements with Christianity and are whipping up anti-Christian sentiments. The reality is that the northeastern insurgency is a sample case for the search for ethnic and cultural identity and autonomy arising from many factors; the failure of the rest of India to accept and respect its Mongoloid heritage; the allegedly non-transparent political process of integrating these peoples into the Indian union; and the neglect of economic development.



In Kashmir, which many fear will be the nuclear flash-point of the 21st century, a movement for identity and legitimate autonomy has been high-jacked by radical elements and has been communalized and placed in the hands of Pakistan, which now invokes the name of Islam. Many more examples can be added to this list. This survey shows that a conflict which may have economic, cultural, social or ethnic backgrounds can gradually assume a religious garb and threaten to become a matter of preserving one's religious identity.

### *4.3 Economic Factors*

Latin America offers a good example for religious violence generated primarily through economic factors (Sobrino 1997/4: 38-54). Here religion is caught up in violence which it has not generated itself but which is the fruit of institutionalized injustice. Injustice is itself violence because it deprives people of the basic necessities of life, and therefore, life itself. This violence gives rise to more violence, repression, war, and state terrorism. The root cause of this violence is capitalism and the injustice and inequality that accompanies the particular brand of capitalism that exists in Latin America. It is supported by a section of the Church and the conservative evangelical sects with their apolitical and otherworldly message. In the midst of this, many Christians have also perceived the liberating potential of their religion. This reaction which has taken the form of a pastoral and theological movement, called Liberation Theology, is not necessarily violent. But it resists the manipulation of religion

and has even defended the possibility of Christian participation in armed struggle. Therefore, although it is anti-violent and is absolutely against the causes of violence, it is not pacifist in the last resort. The political authorities have sought the support of conservative Christians to brand their opponents as irreligious, and to uphold what they profess as Christian values. There have been violence against and persecution of these Christians shown in the murder of archbishop Romero, the massacre of the Jesuits of the UCA, the rape and murder of the four US nuns and countless other crimes. Here we see how economics in a direct sense causes religious violence.

To this must be added another type of economic activity, namely the funding activities of some groups from the rich countries in the poorer countries. Religious militants from around the world, including violent groups, receive vital funds from the United States, Saudi Arabia etc. In the United States, adherents of different religions live quite peacefully side by side, but they generate conflict elsewhere. Were it not for American financial aid for terrorist networks of the Palestinians and the Israeli rejectionists in West Asia, so much violence would not have taken place there. Christian fundamentalist evangelical sects who cause significant conflict in many parts of the world are mostly funded from the United States. Russia passed a rather repressive "Religion Law" in 1997 because of the evangelical sects streaming into that country with large funds from the United States. Many rich evangelical sects are engaged in aggressive missionary work in India

and that is one of the reasons for the anti-Christian propaganda there in recent times. The financial support given by Saudi Arabia to militant and non-militant groups of Muslims in many parts of the world is well known. There can be many explanations for this dangerous funding activity. One could be that privileged people express their darker fears and aspirations through conflicts that they support elsewhere. Secondly, the wealth that they have created for themselves has not healed the wounds that they as immigrants have brought with them. There may be still other factors at work here (Gopin 2000: 213-15), but I would consider it an example of economic causes fuelling religious violence.

#### **4.4 Political Factors**

The contemporary Indian situation where there is a systematic campaign by the advocates of Hindutva against the minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, is an example of the politicization of religion as a cause of violence. Surely as in most other cases, there is an intertwining of many factors, but the political factor is obvious to any one. Hindutva is an ideology that defines India as a Hindu nation through a process of cultural homogenization, social consolidation, and above all political mobilization of the majority community against the minorities. It has a clear political agenda and it has unleashed violence against the minorities in India.

This political dimension becomes apparent when we examine the history of the emergence of Hindutva. One of

the main causes was the political, economic, cultural and religious insecurity that some of the upper caste and upperclass Hindus felt under British rule. As a reaction to this, a Maharastrian brahmin Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) codified the political and social doctrine known as Hindutva. He argued that the Hindus constitute a single nation and asked people to build up a Hindu Rastra (Hindu nation) in order to safeguard the interests of the Hindus. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940) founded the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 in order to consolidate Hindu unity against the other religions in India. Accused of being associated with the assassination of Gandhi, the RSS was banned, but it kept itself alive through various organizations, like the Jana Sangh (1951), Vishva Hindu Parishad (1964), Bajrang Dal (1984), etc. The Jan Sangh, its political wing, changed its name into Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980. With its coming to power recently, there began a rapid polarization of the Hindu/non-Hindu fronts. The issues apparently seem to be the Ram temple in Ayodhya or the conversion activities by Christian missionaries, but a closer look at the facts shows that a great deal of the agenda consists in organizing greater Hindu consolidation for future electoral combat. Indonesia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Afghanistan etc., too, offer examples of military or "tribal" politics playing active roles in causing religious violence.

#### **4.5 Religious Pluralism**

Another factor that causes religious violence is religious pluralism and

the claim of some religions to superiority. Pluralism is a fact of reality. The postmodern intellectual situation is characterized by pluralism and by its very definition rules out hegemonic attitudes (Latourelle and Fisichella 1994: 783). Religious pluralism, too, is an accepted fact in the modern world. The awareness of and openness to the vitality and authentic power of other religious traditions should put an end to all superiority claims by religions because in the name of this claim, there has occurred massive violence and oppression. For example, Christian overconfidence that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was final has led to harsh and damning judgments of those who did not accept the Christian claims. Today people realize that even when religious traditions have sharply divergent views of human existence and the universe, their central values often resonate with those of other traditions.

Any claim to superiority by one religion over the others can meet with stiff resistance. In the wake of the publication of the Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* by pope John Paul II (AAS, 83 (1991): 249-340), the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammed, summoned the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Soter Fernandes, to seek explanation about certain passages in the document. A similar reaction was shown by the authorities in Indonesia. The recent exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, created a similar reaction in India (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of the Holy Father John Paul II 2000). One of the newspapers in India commented: "The head of the Roman Catho-

lic Church painted his own vision of the 21st century in which the third millennium would see the triumph of the cross in Asia just as the first millennium had seen Christianity conquer Europe. Thus the pope has confirmed the suspicions of the sangh parivar that conversion is very high on the Roman Catholic agenda" (*The Telegraph* 1999: editorial). A still more recent document, *Dominus Jesus* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000: 33) contains the rather disrespectful expression that the non-Christian religions are in a gravely deficient situation as regards salvation. If they are deficient then they should accept the better religion, Christianity, which means evangelism. But the fact is that evangelism ipso facto is unacceptable to the orthodox Hindu mindset. It is in this sense that religious pluralism can become a cause of violence.

#### ***4.6 Violence against Women and Dissidents in the Name of Religion***

This is another area of religious violence. Take for example the biblical tradition and its treatment of women. Of course it must be said that all Christian churches are not equally guilty of this, and other religious traditions, too, have religiously sanctioned violence against women. An insistence on the fatherhood of God, the absence of women in positions of church leadership, and the exclusive language of the liturgy etc. provide ideological and social support for violence done to women (Meyer-Wilmes 1997/4: 56). A number of biblical texts reproduce the whole gamut of sexual violence against women, the power of men over women, and a the-

ology of suffering which is prescribed as a means to overcome this violence. There are passages in sacred texts which continually demean women's sexuality and legitimize male violence (Judges 19). The portraying of women by scripture and tradition across all religions as not possessing full human subjectivity, but only derivatively, has to be seen as a contributing cause to domestic violence. Religion fails to own its own responsibility for the pressurizing of women into accepting cultural norms which sanction violence (Grey 1997/4: 65). The deplorable treatment of widows sanctioned by Hinduism is well known. The religiously sanctioned subordination of women in many Islamic societies and the reaction to it are also much discussed today.

Another area of religious violence is the legacy of violence against dissidents in the name of protecting the purity of the faith. Dissidence or heresy is a threat to the very identity of the faith. Usually dissidents are ahead of their times, are critics of the power and order on which the faith depends, and this causes anxiety and unrest in the minds of religious authorities. Those who do this suffer violence and oppression, physically (fortunately, a thing of the past), and psychologically. The history of this violence which may have had political, sociological and theological arguments to justify it need not detain us; but the fact is that large scale violence has taken place on this account (Häring 1997/4b: 81-92). Even in modern times the Catholic Church has maintained rigid and intolerant rules toward the dissidents.

## 5. Overcoming Violence in the Name of Religion

Our survey has been a brief one omitting many countries and regions but one which still shows the many faces of religious violence today. So much violence in the name of religion should surprise everyone. People thought that it was a thing of the past. On the other hand, one is even more surprised at the opposite trend. At a casual search on the Internet on the theme of peace, one is astonished to see several peace initiatives by people and organizations throughout the world. Most of them are religious people who draw inspiration from their religious traditions. One of the best examples of this is the "Truth and Reconciliation Committee" in South Africa. This only shows that the world's religions have a reservoir of spiritual and ethical values which can build up rather than destroy. Never before in history have so many religious leaders and adherents of religions been inspired to work for a truly multicultural and multireligious vision (Gopin 2000: 4). Never before has there been such a high level of interaction among the world's faiths. But seldom in history has so much of hatred been expressed toward other people in the name of religion as in our own times. So religion has a dual legacy of violence and peacemaking. The task today is to make peace the first and only option. To this end religions should venture on a theoretical and practical action plan which could have the following components.

### 5.1 *Recognition of the 'Religious'*

We must acknowledge the rightful place of religion in individual and

societal life today. Now that the promise of the demise of religion has proved to be a myth, our task is to analyse how the new found religious sensibility and the reawakening of conservative religion can be channelled so as to contribute to peace and well-being in the world. Religion is not wished away by an overdose of secularism or a liberal, rationalist discourse. As has been shown above, religion is a mighty force; it can be recharged with collective energy and join forces with any situation in a most unexpected manner, in the least expected places and times. Naivete about religion can be dangerous.

The standard approach to religious conflict by the liberal, secular state and the intelligentsia which controls it, has been to fight against it by strengthening the typical components of civil society: civil rights for all, a free press, honest courts, integrated police system, etc. (Gopin 2000: 15). Others advocate that the best way to move society away from intolerance and violence is to develop a universal set of guidelines, a global political culture, a global ethic, a global economy, universal human rights, etc. Still others predict that religious violence will cease when economic progress is achieved. But none of these solutions address the reality of the growing enthusiasm for religion among ordinary human beings and the power it has over them. This phenomenon should be addressed. What has given religion such an extraordinary hold on millions of people all over the world and why is it susceptible to manipulation by religious leaders? In fact it is the failure of the rational, secular, apparently democratic polity itself. Civil

society has been weakened or rendered dysfunctional. Modernity as embodied in these institutions has become alienating. So people turn to religion and the rhetoric of religious leaders seems even more persuasive.

## 5.2 *Experiencing the 'Religious'*

Secondly, we need to recognize that we are naturally violent, that it is always within us, and that it might break out at any moment to ravage all that we hold dear. The lie that people have always wanted to believe is that violence is wholly outside themselves and is caused by 'others'. Demonizing the 'other' and making the 'other' violent and hateful is a game that has been played often. Rene Girard's theory has been mentioned above: the very origin of religion is for the containment of violence. Now the question is, how can religions overcome this violence. Religions have to devise mature ways of encountering human nature in its totality and making its adherents aware of their violent side. Calling the violence within by name is the first creative step in this direction. Then one has to use the nonviolent streams of one's religion to face this violence. Every religion has this stream running through it: love, empathy, nonviolence (ahimsa), sanctity of life, interiority, compassion, asceticism and discipline, prophetic criticism, etc.

In other words, the most effective means of overcoming violence through religion is personal transformation through religion. Religion should affect the internal working of the human mind and heart. For that, religions have al-

ways emphasized personal morality, ethical behaviour etc. Violent behaviour cannot be separated from inner transformation through the eradication of sin, ignorance, suffering or whatever name religions give to this negative side of the human situation, and the practice of transforming virtues. There are countless examples of this in our world. Forgiveness is perhaps the greatest religious virtue. It has been proved that it has a profound healing power. It is a virtue that religions could teach its followers to practise. Another dimension of personal transformation through religion is the need for prophetic protest by religious people against other subtler forms of violence, like injustice, inequality, discrimination, etc.

### 5.3 *A Pluralistic Vision*

Thirdly, religions have to devise ways and means to live in a genuinely pluralistic situation. This I would consider one of the greatest challenges to religions in our times. Pluralism is not ethical relativism or the attitude that anything goes. It is the foundation of the intellectual flexibility and cross-fertilization that characterize the modern world. Plurality as a fact and pluralism as an ideology should be clearly distinguished (Newbegin 1993: 239-240). Surely the acceptance of pluralism is not in itself the solution for religious violence and does not substitute the age old values of honesty, justice, love, compassion, etc. But still pluralism should be respected. It is the law of the universe. It is the ability to have an identity which can at the same time cross the border into another's humanity. It is the refusal to see an ontological opposition to the

'other', a dualistic division between the good 'self' and the evil 'other', between the saved and the damned. It is the humanization of the 'other,' instead of demonization. Religions must learn to accept this. Then they will rethink the meaning of fundamental concepts like mission, witness, proclamation, etc. One should ask whether proselytism is necessarily a value, whether coercion of others into one's own religion is the way to spiritual fulfilment and whether numerical and institutional superiority over others is a religious value. We need a "new psychological foundation for institutional fulfilment of obligations and dreams, one that focuses on the internal quality of a community's life and values, not its corporate victory over others" (Gopin 2000: 206).

It is here that fashioning an agenda for dialogue becomes important (Origins (21/8) 1991: 130). The Christian claim to absolute truth put forward by the churches enmeshed in a network of imperialistic features, is to be rejected. This is not to reject Christianity's unique significance. No religion can claim absoluteness nor is there any place for relativism and the surrender of one's deepest convictions to the supermarket of the liberals. Christians are called to a critical appropriation of their tradition and also to an openness to truth and grace in other traditions. Given the amount of data from the world's religions, and given the relatively recent beginning of serious dialogue among most of the major religious traditions, it may well be premature to seek any final, theoretical, conceptual resolution of the problem of religious pluralism. The constantly widening horizon of knowledge

calls upon religions both to the incorporation of insights and images from other traditions and the maintenance of identity in a spirit of openness, humility and patience before the chaotic (Lefebure 2000: 174-184)<sup>6</sup> diversity of the world's religions. Chaos theory suggests that we cannot predict or control the outcome of many natural processes and cultural encounters. But there is a purpose behind them all the same. The world's religions, too, have a purpose in the mystery of the universe, and there is no place for any one tradition overruling others or indulging in triumphalism. If truth is important, the primary concern is to search for it in whatever way one can and wherever it is possible.

#### 5.4 *A New Hermeneutic*

Fourthly, there is the urgent need for a new hermeneutic of religious texts. There has been a lot of violence in the name of religious texts which have emerged from varying contexts. Hermeneutics is a process that is going on subtly every time someone reads a text, and in particular situations this can turn violent. It is the duty of religious authority to help the correct reading of texts. That brings us to the specific place of religious authority in religious violence, and the need for affirmative action by religious leadership. No one can underestimate the power of leaders. In many societies emulation of an ideal figure including a deity is important. It can lead to prosocial or antisocial attitudes. Even their smallest gestures take on mythic significance. It is a fact that many developments in the world today are threatening to many religious lead-

ers, who, too, are products of their individual and cultural histories. A positive methodology for interacting with religious leaders and thinkers is important and there is also the need to train leaders who are ready to incorporate the peaceful attitudes of a religion. Unfortunately, often religious leaders appear to have become helpless spectators as politicians and criminals hijack religion to promote their vested interests.

#### 5.5 *A Call for Justice*

Justice is another name for peace, and the lack of justice is the cause of many violent global conflicts. Justice is giving one his/her due economically and culturally. The phenomenon of contemporary globalization with its economic model called market economy or global capitalism is unjust by its very logic. Millions of people are negatively affected by it. It is understandable that the marginalized and the dispossessed are prepared to work for an alternative vision, often with the help of politicized religion. Globalization has a strong cultural component as well, namely, the attempt to impose a western culture on all. This is resented by many and they get the help of religions to resist this. The exaggerated claims of contemporary globalization should be exposed, and the fears, the resentment and the harm it has done should be assessed. The nature of civil society should be determined on the basis of consensus. No solution can be imposed, especially solutions which are culturally alien and economically oppressive. Universal concepts should be framed with a provision for their intercultural application. Most often the solutions proposed are

culturally rooted in the western context, but they claim universal applicability. This is an unwarranted intrusion into the inner life of another culture and it will have violent repercussions which may also involve the religions.

## 6. Conclusion

Religious violence, combined as it is with many factors which are central to the human situation, will continue to occur as long as these factors exist. Religious violence legitimized by false or true religious assumptions will continue to occur as long as these assumptions exist. Therefore, the task of everyone concerned about religious violence is to address these problems. If I may be allowed a prognosis, some of the factors that could be responsible for violence involving religions in the coming decades would be the attempt by the West at economic and cultural hegemony, refusal to accept pluralism, religious

fundamentalism, and the politicization of religion. It is a realistic assumption that these problems are not going to be resolved easily. But if the new found religiosity, the emerging cooperation among the various religions to establish peace, the tremendous economic possibilities, etc. are used toward a fundamental reordering of our worldview these problems can be justly solved. Religions are important and will continue to be important. They are the guardians of conscience and the soul of culture. But they have a serious task ahead, of bringing the ethical back into the centre and cooperating in the creation of a just, compassionate and equitable society by challenging their adherents to confront their selfishness, pride, greed and violence within. This is the only way to purge the world of rabble rousing clerics and their demonic claims which have created enormous terror and bloodshed in the world.

## Endnotes

1. This is what Frans de Waal has demonstrated, challenging the common view that animals do not kill out of cruelty or sheer aggression as quoted from the Dutch edition *Van nature goed. Over de oorsprong van goed en kwaad in mensen en andere dieren*, Amsterdam and Antwerp 1996. Quoted in Wils 1997/4: 112).
2. For an excellent treatment of the "Just War" theory, see Lefebure 2000: chapters 3-5.
3. Such violence is caused today perhaps only in India, and that, too, in a limited way.
4. I am referring to the history of communal violence in India which are often caused by nonreligious factors (Parathazham 1998: 5-18).
5. In the following paragraphs I am using a summary of the analysis made by Houtart (1997: 5-7).
6. Lefebure makes an interesting connection between Chaos Theory and the plurality of religions.



## Reference

AAS, 83

1991, 249-340.

Amsterdam and Antwerp

1996 *Van nature goed. Over de oorsprong van goed en kwaad in mensen en andere dieren* (Dutch edition)

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

2000 *Declaration Dominus Iesus on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, Vatican City.

Cox, Harvey

1999 "The Myth of the Twentieth Century," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 28, No. 2&3, 6-8.

Drewermann, Eugene

1994 *La spirale de la peur, le christianisme et la guerre*, Paris.

Fraser, Giles

2001 *Christianity and Violence*, Darton: London; Longman and Todd.

Girard, Rene

1977 *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Gopin, Marc

2000 *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, New York.

Grey, Mary

1997/4 "The Role of Women in Overcoming Violence," *Concilium*.

Häring, Hermann

1997/4a "Working Hard to Overcome Violence in the Name of Religion," *Concilium*, 97.

1997/4b "Overcoming Violence in the Name of Religion (Christianity and Islam)," *Concilium*, 8-92.

Houtart, Francois

1997/4 "The Cult of Violence in the Name of God," *Concilium*.

Huntington, Samuel

1997 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New Delhi.

Latourelle, Rene and Rino Fisichella (eds.)

1994 *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, Slough.

Lefebure, Leo D.

2000 *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, New York.

Meyer-Wilmes, Hewing

1997/4 "Excessive Violence against Women in the Name of Religion," *Concilium*.

Nessan, Craig L.

1998 "Sex, Aggression, and Pain: Sociobiological Implications for Theological Anthropology," *Zygon*, 33.

Newbegin, Leslie

1993 "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach," *Studia Missionalia*, 49, 239-240.

Nzacahayo, Paul

1997/4 "Religion and Violence: Outbreak and Overcoming – Africa: Rwanda," *Concilium*.

Parathazham, Paul

1998/1 "Communalism in India: An Empirical Investigation," *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 5-18.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Dialogue and Proclamation

1991 *Origins* 21/8 (July 4).

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of the Holy Father John Paul II

2000 Mumbai.

Riccardi, Andrea

1997/4 "Between Violence and Dialogue: The Religions in the Twentieth Century," *Concilium*, 7-73.

Schillebeeckx, Edward

1997/4 "Documentation: Religion and Violence," *Concilium*, 30-34.

Sobrino, Jon

1997/4 "Latin America: Guatemala/El Salvador," *Concilium*. 38-54.

*The Telegraph*

1999 Tuesday, November 9.

Wils, Jean Pierre

1997/4 "Violence as an Anthropological Constant? Towards a New Evaluation," *Concilium*.