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Theses on Religion & Violence

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The following observations constitute a preliminary and provisional response to two recent events: the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, and the American assault on Fallujah, both of which prompt broader reflections on issues pertaining to violence and religion.

1. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, as von Clausewitz observed, violence is the continuation of conflict by means of physical force. Understanding the causes of violence thus involves two questions: a) What are the causes of conflict (in general and specific)? b) Why is it that a given conflict was not resolved—or not resolvable—by other means?
2. Some violence is the product of psychopathology: paranoia, sadism, wildly displaced rage, and the like. Violence of this sort accounts for a very small portion of the total and holds relatively little theoretical interest. The designation of violence as irrational, however, is attractive to certain theorists and policy-makers since it removes such acts from the realm of the comprehensible and relieves them of the responsibility to have prevented or understood them.
3. Most conflict is caused by competition over scarce resources. Violence represents the attempt to resolve such conflict to one's own (individual or collective) benefit against the determined resistance of an adversary.
4. The resources most often and most bitterly contested include not only material desiderata—above all, wealth, power, and territory—but also such non-material items as prestige (the respect of others), dignity (the capacity for self-respect), and justice (or at least the sense of having been treated justly). This latter set is more diffuse and harder to quantify than the material desiderata, and as a result such considerations tend to be analytically undervalued. Nonetheless, they have enormous importance, especially when the maldistribution of material goods is compounded (also facilitated and legitimated) by non-material maldistributions.
5. Crossing the threshold from non-violent to violent conflict involves a qualitative leap that can be difficult to accomplish, particularly if it is motivated only by material desires. Normally, the naked pursuit of self-interest is perceived and defined as greed, not only by observers, but also by those who experience such temptation. To reveal oneself as motivated by greed calls forth sanctions. These include the loss of non-material assets (reputation, trust, self-respect, et al.) that seriously offsets potential material gains, thereby inhibiting the move to violence.
6. Insofar as a sense of suffering non-material maldistribution also entails a sense of having been wronged, would-be aggressors become able to define their violent acts as not just greedy, but morally justified. The discourses they develop and circulate toward that end may be intended to persuade others, but above all they help overcome their own subjective (i.e. moral) inhibitions.
7. Certain kinds of religious discourse can assist in this task, specifically those which recode otherwise problematic acts as righteous deeds, sacred duties or the like, as when killing is defined as sacrifice, destruction as purification, or war as Crusade.
8. In principle, no religious tradition is more inclined than any other to make arguments of this sort. All people are capable of this move and the canonic texts of all religions include passages that can be put to such purpose. Those who are interested in undertaking violence can always find arguments and precedents that sanctify their purpose, but selective reading and tendentious interpretation are an important part of this process.
9. When social groups constitute their identity in religious terms and experience themselves as a sacred collectivity (the faithful, the righteous, or God's chosen people, for instance), as a corollary they tend to construe their rivals in negative fashion (heretics, infidels, apostates, evil, bestial, demonic, satanic, etc.). Under such circumstances, the pursuit of self-interest—including vengeance for slights to one's pride (a.k.a. "honour")—can be experienced as a holy cause, in support of which any violence is justified.
10. The factors that determine whether a group will embark on violent action include the extent to which it feels itself to have been wronged; the extent to which it experiences those wrongs as unbearable and intractable; and its ability to define itself and its cause as righteous, even sacred.
11. Religious considerations are never the sole determining factor and there is no necessary relation between religion and violence. In most instances, religious considerations probably help to inhibit violence. But when religious discourse, authority, or communal identity are deployed in such a way as to facilitate the leap from non-violent to violent conflict, they can be enormously effective in accomplishing what Kierkegaard called "the religious suspension of the ethical."
12. In such moments, religion can help disadvantaged groups to gain a more equitable division of the world's resources by unleashing violence (or the threat thereof) that helps them overcome the resistance of their better-situated adversaries.
13. The ugliest, most dangerous situations of all are not those in which the disadvantaged turn violent, believing they enjoy divine favour. Worse still are episodes in which groups who already enjoy disproportionate power (and other resources) persuade themselves that religious injunctions, like the need to convert the heathen or the need to spread "freedom," justify use of their superior force against disadvantaged others, construing such aggression as benevolent, meritorious, or holy.
14. Just as the use of violence tends to elicit a violent riposte, so the religious valorization of violence prompts its victims to frame their violent responses in religious terms. In doing so, they normally invert the signs through which their adversaries mark one side as sacred and the other, profane. When both sides experience their struggle in religious terms, the stage is set for prolonged, ferocious, and enormously destructive combat.

A British priest gives a service at the Shaibah Base, Basra, Iraq, 30 October 2004.

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