
FOR AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: THE LIMITS OF ILLUSION AND TRUTH

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate connection between religion and violence within modern global conflicts. It treats violence not as an abstraction but as a lived reality shaped by power struggles and declining peace. Rather than analyzing its forms, the study investigates its roots—especially religious motivations and justifications. Religion, while offering identity and belonging, can also generate division and hostility toward perceived outsiders, sometimes resulting in symbolic or physical aggression. Historical examples such as holy wars illustrate how dogma and fanaticism may link faith with violence. Employing historical, deconstructive, and contextual methods, the paper seeks to move past ideological simplifications to reveal the dual role of religion: as both a source of resistance to violence and a potential contributor to it. Ultimately, it adds depth to academic debates about the boundaries between truth and illusion in interpreting the religion–violence relationship.

Keywords: Religion / Violence / Communication / Peace / Truth / Illusion.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the issue of violence has moved beyond its traditional political context as conceived by Enlightenment philosophy. Meaning that violence is the act of domination exercised by the ruler over his subjects within the context of the state. See in this regard especially the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, John Locke in *Two Treatises of Government*, and Spinoza in *Theological-Political Treatise*.

The issue of violence becoming a broader philosophical problem that intersects with various dimensions of human existence— economic, social, intellectual, and political as indicated, for instance, by the Frankfurt School— particularly in the thought of Adorno—when it speaks of the violence of technology and the disciplinary society imposed upon the human being today. Violence is now understood as the result or manifestation of a complex web of influence and interaction within which human beings exist and operate.

According to the concept of “*microphysics of power*” — a Foucauldian term coined by Michel Foucault (Foucault Michel. 1990) to move beyond the reductive frameworks of earlier philosophies — violence as exercised by power permeates the entire social body. It is not confined solely to the political sphere, as envisioned by Karl Marx, nor is it reducible to psychological mechanisms, as posited by Sigmund Freud.

Violence today surrounds the human being, who has increasingly become a victim, reaching a state of objectification— especially under the dominance of the capitalist system, which prioritizes values such as efficiency and productivity. As a result, the human being is reduced to a one-dimensional entity (Marcuse Herbert. 1988). In this framework, the individual loses essential aspects of their humanity — such as freedom and awareness — and is reduced to a mere productive tool, constrained by various economic and structural limitations.

Consequently, violence emerges not only as a social and political issue but also as a moral problem. This is particularly evident in the efforts of political sociology to explain the rationale behind the presence of legitimate power, which is deemed necessary to ensure the continuity and stability of civil life, Max Weber argues in his interpretation of the necessity of legitimate violence that politics needs legitimate violence and that society continues to function through a minimum threshold of force guiding individuals. According to him, the state appropriates and nationalizes all forms of violence, turning it into its legitimate tool, even though violence is immoral. In his view, society needs violence despite its immorality. (Weber Max. 1982).

Today, violence is being reconsidered outside of its traditional social and political frameworks and is increasingly viewed as a byproduct of the religious experience itself—an experience fundamentally rooted in the claim to possess absolute truth, to define the sole source of righteousness, and to promote an exclusive normative model.

From this perspective, the religious experience is seen by some as inherently violent, directed both inwardly and outwardly: inwardly, it targets the individual by stripping them of agency, restricting independent thought, and suppressing the right to dissent or resist; outwardly, it perceives the "other"—the religious outsider—as both a deviation from the central narrative and a potential threat to the religious order, particularly through their rejection of the sacred or adherence to non-religious stances.

This idea that links religion to violence has long been present in philosophy—from the time of the ancient Greeks such as Lucretius to contemporary atheistic movements and various calls to reject religion—as well as in politics. Many political figures today argue that the entanglement of religion in political affairs is a primary driver of violence. All religiously based political experiments around the world are often accused of fostering exclusion, discrimination, and threats to societal unity, as they tend to emphasize identity-based divisions and the fragmentation of collective belonging. (Joshua D. Wright & Yuelee Khoo .2019) (Contemporary Voices)

This raises a fundamental question: Is it the human being who has rooted violence within religion? Or is it religion itself that has made the human being a violent creature?

In this academic paper, we aim to examine the various theories surrounding the issue of violence and its relationship to religion. We seek to uncover the underlying assumptions and stakes of these positions, striving first to understand them as they understand themselves. Following this, we will critically reassess these perspectives in order to develop a nuanced framework that relativizes all positions on the religion–violence relationship.

Our objective is to distinguish between the essence of the religious call—which is fundamentally grounded in unity, communion, and empathy—and the various distortions that have stripped the sacred of its positive dimensions, transforming it into a violent force that suppresses human will and obstructs the establishment of harmony among those who differ.

The reconsideration of the relationship with the sacred has been undertaken by Western thought in its attempts to distinguish between the human dimensions of religion and its social and political implications. (Henry Munson .2005) (ResearchGate) For example, Mircea Eliade in his discussion on religion and meaning; Roger Caillois in his treatment of man's relationship with the sacred; and Roger Garaudy in his various writings, such as *The Dialogue of Civilizations* or *The Foundational Myths of Israeli Politics*, among others.

1. On the Concepts of Religion and Violence

○ On the Concept of Religion

Contemporary philosophical thought tends to revisit the concept of religion, moving beyond earlier views that dismissed it as mere illusion or as a sign of the human mind's deficiency. This is particularly evident in the analyses of Auguste Comte and his view of the evolution of human thought and its increasing capacity to understand, interpret, and control the world. For Comte, religion represents no more than a phase of naïve and simplistic human thinking, characterized by an imaginative and illusory vision that fails to provide adequate answers to the essential questions humans pose about themselves and the world around them.

Moreover, religion constitutes a form of symbolic violence imposed upon the intellect, as it prevents reason from transcending its delusions and errors—errors that stem primarily from the religious worldview itself, which attempts to explain the visible through recourse to the invisible. Proponents of the positivist school argue that religion, as a limited intellectual experience, is inevitably destined to vanish with the rise of scientific enlightenment and the expansion of empirical rationality as the ultimate alternative to the failures of thought evident in both the theological and metaphysical stages. There is no benefit in excluding religion or in viewing it as mere imagination or superstition; rather, it is necessary to work toward understanding its various functions. (Meyer Richard. 1997).

On the other hand, numerous voices affirm that religion is one of the intellectual and interpretive activities that humans have engaged in—and continue to engage in—to understand themselves and their relationship with the world. This emphasis on the importance of religion has led scholars and thinkers to attempt to delineate its meanings in order to identify what is common and universal in the human conception of religion, insofar as it represents a human experience in the world encompassing what people have believed, contemplated, and perceived in terms of values and meanings. Hegel, for instance, does not define religion as a set of rituals or ceremonies, but rather as a level of consciousness and a form of the mind's relationship with the world. (Hegel. 1970).

This definition is what led most post-Hegelian studies to explore religion in relation to reason, history, and the human being. Roger Caillois, for instance, sought to define religion through its essential component—the sacred—which distinguishes it from other human experiences such as philosophy, art, or science. He regarded religion, at its core, as a relationship between the human being and the sacred, seen both as a source of assistance and as a domain that evokes awe and fear (Roger Caillois. 2010). This implies that religion is one of the universal constants—a shared human experience across cultures, ethnicities, and historical periods.

Some thinkers, moreover, view religion as one of the fundamental human needs, independent of meanings tied to divinity or devotional practices. In this view, religion serves as a guiding framework for individuals and communities alike, making it a phenomenon that extends across both history and geography (Erich Fromm. 1989).

What matters to us is that definitions of religion vary according to the perspective from which it is approached—not merely as a spiritual experience detached from human reality and concerns (Granger Gaston. 2000). Therefore, we will adopt this direction in order to deconstruct the various forms of the relationship between religion and violence.

○ **On the Concept of Violence**

Violence is commonly defined in linguistic contexts as any act or movement characterized by forcefulness, directed outwardly, and causing harm—whether physical or symbolic. Definitions of violence vary depending on context. Within legal frameworks, for instance, it is viewed as a severe act imposed by one person upon another in order to achieve a specific aim. Legal scholars consider violence a crime that warrants all forms of punishment and various mechanisms of prevention, whether through judicial means or cultural interventions.

From the perspective of political sociology, violence is understood as a tool monopolized by the state and exercised according to legal frameworks aimed at maintaining order. Among scholars interested in intercultural dialogue and encounters between peoples, violence is seen as a condition in which values or ideologies are imposed upon different nations, compelling them to adopt a singular model that is regarded as ideal and capable of securing all forms of progress for humanity (Jean Baudrillard. 2006).

Violence is not understood solely as an act tied to physical force directed at bodies; it may also be interpreted through its symbolic dimensions, which aim at the domination of minds, consciousness, and intellects. At its core, violence can be considered any harsh action devoid of gentleness that causes pain or distress to others (Gandhi. 1969). Based on this understanding, violence has been viewed as a form of power intended to impose opinion, demand conformity, and deny tolerance and acceptance of difference and diversity, for example, Tzvetan Todorov argues that tolerance arose first and foremost from religious experience, and that it has often been extinguished through misguided interpretations of religion and its political instrumentalization. He also points out the distinction between the history of religion (its emergence, development, and expansion) and religious history (the tendency of historians to limit their focus to those wars connected with the sacred, which later came to be seen as representative of religion). (Tzvetan Todorov. 2006).

What concerns us here is to examine violence in its various forms, alongside humanity's consistent refusal to regard it as a virtuous act. Those who engage in violence are typically criminalized and viewed as lacking both humanity and reason. Philosophy from the Greek era to the present has generally regarded violence as a negative state incompatible with human perfection, as in Plato and Aristotle, and in modern times in the works of Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and others. The only exception is Nietzsche, who viewed violence as a sign of the strong man. (Ricoeur Paul. 2005 / Aristotle. 1984).

2. On the Possibility of Accusing Religion of Violence

There exists a line of thought that views religion as a form of authority that exerts influence over individuals, compelling them toward specific choices, fixed opinions, and predetermined tastes. This transforms the experience of religiosity into a state of subjugation, loss, or alienation, rendering religious commitment an impediment to human engagement in the world. Consequently, religion is seen as obstructing one's capacity to innovate, develop, or construct a human future that transcends the perceived nihilism of religious doctrine. We may refer here to Ludwig Feuerbach and his view of religion as a form of authority or violence exercised over the human being, reducing them to a creature devoid of will and incapable of liberation (Feuerbach Ludwig. 2017).

When returning to classical German philosophy, religion is subjected to critique not only in terms of its content, but more significantly in its relationship to free and autonomous will. Excessive religiosity, according to Ludwig Feuerbach, leads to a state of alienation or the "death of the human"—that is, the loss of the individual's ability to think freely and act independently of external influences. Feuerbach perceives religion as a negative experience characterized by a double violence imposed upon both reason and humanity. He famously stated that in order for religion to be everything, the human must become nothing.

Feuerbach strongly criticized classical German philosophies, particularly Hegel's perspective on religion. His primary concern was the construction of a philosophy of the future in which the human being is both the means and the end—unshaped by any external imposition or direction. In other words, he called for a human who is the master of themselves and an active agent in history, rather than a passive being as he believed religion renders them liberation (Feuerbach Ludwig. 2017).

Such a position is clearly reflected in the Marxist philosophical and social system, which calls for the liberation of the individual from all forms of violence imposed upon them in order to prevent their emancipation from exploitation and domination. Marxism views religion as a product of violence, a justification for it, and a means of concealing it. In this regard, Karl Marx links the demand for liberation to a critical re-examination of religion, exposing the symbolic violence it entails—namely, its role in deluding the working classes into believing that their miserable condition is divinely ordained and fated, and that they must accept this situation without seeking to change it through resistance or violence.

Marxism, therefore, regards religion as an inherently violent experience, whose danger lies in its ideological exploitation by economically and politically dominant classes. Religion, in this view, becomes an instrument used to perpetuate existing power structures and to suppress efforts at revolutionary change. In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx exposes the violence of religion as a false ideology that convinces people to accept reality and be content with misery. From this perspective, religion is inherently violent, and a tool used by those in power to perpetuate their exploitation. For Marx, the danger of religious violence lies more in its justification of violence than in producing it. This, in his view, has hindered the pursuit of liberation.

The violence of religion is manifested in its obstruction of the spread of other forms of knowledge. Whenever religion becomes the sole reference, the individual refrains from engaging in empirical (realistic) thinking and instead retreats into imagination and illusions. Thus, this form of violence becomes a suppression of understanding and interpretation, and a rejection of other rational approaches—particularly philosophy and science.

Scientific tendencies that glorify and defend science were founded on the idea that religion was merely a primitive stage in human thought, expressing its naivety and simplicity. Religion, according to this view, has endured not because it indicates or witnesses truth, but because it exerts systematic violence, pushing man to interpret the visible through the imagined invisible. The spread of scientific enlightenment was seen as the key to dismantling this violence imposed on reason (Comte Auguste. 1830).

This critique is especially evident in the works of Auguste Comte, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Herbert Spencer, who deconstructed religious experience by portraying it as the imposition of illusion—a form of violence that undermines rationality. With Nietzsche, particularly through his genealogical method—which involves tracing the origin and transformation of values—the emphasis on religion as a force of violence becomes even more pronounced. Religion, in his view, acts against the "will to power" and the affirmation of life. Religious practice, Nietzsche argues, fosters a reactionary spirit and promotes the figure of the priest, who seeks to domesticate humanity and denigrate all that is associated with strength and vitality. In this way, religion compels human beings to dwell in the present at the expense of the future.

In this context, Gilles Deleuze considers Nietzsche to be the founder of a philosophy that exposes everything opposing the human desire for happiness—particularly through his critique of philosophy's complicity in denouncing pleasure and producing a model of life for fools and simpletons, who reject reality and flee toward imaginary worlds constructed by religions. See especially Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where he argues that philosophy truly began with Nietzsche, who inaugurated a philosophy of life (the plane of life) after moving beyond the plane of transcendence and establishing the plane of immanence.

In contemporary Islamic thought, there is a notable effort to study the phenomenon of violence in relation to religion. This effort approaches violence as a consequence of misinterpretations of the objectives of the Qur'anic text—interpretations that impose meanings conflicting with both the text itself and with reason. Violence is no longer perceived as an inherent threat posed by religion toward human beings; rather, it is increasingly seen as a reductive understanding that confines religion to violence, power, and the imposition of opinion and conformity. This reductionism stems from narrowing religious practice to the realm of commands and prohibitions, legal judgments, and excommunication (takfir).

This tendency is particularly evident in religious discourses infused with political and ideological motives, especially those affiliated with specific movements. As a result, the religious experience becomes reduced to a logic of domination, marked by a rejection of renewal and a refusal to engage in tolerance or accept the other—whether religious or non-religious. This dynamic has contributed to what is now termed "Islamophobia," which promotes the image of a militant Islam, represented today by groups or ideologies that refuse to recognize Islam as a message of peace and love (Al-Dairi Ali Ahmed. 2017/ Abu Zayd Nasr Hamid. 2017).

In such contexts, the interpretation of the religious text becomes a tool for exclusion and marginalization—a form of violence directed at both Muslims and non-Muslims. It reflects a distorted understanding that immerses Islam in discourses of takfir, prohibition, and racial or ideological supremacy.

Thus, it becomes clear that the study of religions today increasingly focuses on the forms of violence they may direct toward thought, reason, and humanity. This includes the incitement of fanaticism, the rejection of all forms of diversity and difference, and the reinforcement of exclusionary thinking that opposes all possibilities of pluralistic integration. By pluralistic, integrative thought, we mean all positions that view humanity as a diverse unity and regard universal culture as a collective product which, while grounded in points of contact, also rests on forms of recognition of the Other without inclinations toward violence or exclusion. This is emphasized in particular in the works of Edgar Morin, such as *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*, *Ethics*, and *The Unity of Humanity*.

3. On Investigating the Intersections Between Religion and Violence

There are various intellectual approaches and orientations that seek to reconsider religion as a foundational structure of human reason and as an embodiment of what might be called human universals—those shared principles that define and unite the human species. In this specific context, Mircea Eliade raises the question of the presence and continuity of religion and its ability to respond to the human desire to discover the deeper meaning of existence—something that other forms of discourse, such as philosophy and science, have failed to fulfill. (Eliade Mircea. 2007), He underscores

the persistence of the religious experience as a renewal of a communicative act that transcends interpretation and explanation (Eliade Mircea. 1997).

These perspectives call for renewed attention to the positive human dimensions inherent in the religious phenomenon, particularly its potential to establish a normative framework that guides individuals toward forming constructive relationships with the self, others, and the world—relationships free from violence, coercion, or compulsion. From this standpoint, religious experience is not associated with constraint, but rather with guidance and orientation toward the well-being of humanity.

Thus, religion provides a normative model grounded in the human attempt to emulate the divine—an emulation that encompasses creativity, contribution, and a practical ethic that rejects all forms of violence against others and the world. The religious person perceives the world as a manifestation of the divine and therefore does not exercise any form of power within it. The relationship becomes one of perceiving beauty and order and seeing others as brothers or friends with whom to build a virtuous and happy existence. As Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (may God be pleased with him) said: “People are either your brothers in religion or your equals in humanity.”

Violence is not intrinsic to religion; rather, it is the result of misinterpretations or forms of fanaticism that lead to hostility and viewing the other as a threat to existence or an affront to the sanctity of religion. The Qur’an calls for embracing the other: **“Repel [evil] by that which is better; and behold, the one between whom and you there was enmity [will become] as though he were a devoted friend.”** (*Fussilat*: 34), and for engaging in intellectual dialogue that rejects domination and aims for truth and unity: **“Say: O People of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords beside God. Then, if they turn away, say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.”** (*Aal ‘Imran*: 64)/ **“Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good exhortation and argue with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who is rightly guided.”** (*An-Nahl*: 125).

It is evident that re-examining religious experience outside the constraints of ideological and intellectual biases (such as “religion is the opiate of the masses” in Marx, “religion is a future illusion” in Freud, or “religion is the foundation of nihilism” in Nietzsche) allows for a redefinition of religion as a worldview and a system of values centered on restoring bonds of intimacy with the self, the world, and others.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it becomes clear that revisiting and interrogating the complex relationship between “religion” and “violence” requires a critical re-examination of both concepts, taking into account their underlying assumptions across diverse contexts and perspectives. This also necessitates a deliberate and cautious approach, avoiding hasty judgments regarding the nature and consequences of this relationship. To assert that religion is either the source of violence or its antithesis demands a reconsideration of the various interpretations and readings of religion, especially as a human-centered experience shaped and enacted by human agents.

From our inquiry into this issue, we may draw several key conclusions:

- There is an urgent need today to expand the scope of dialogue about religion in general, and interfaith dialogue in particular, in order to affirm that religious belief, while essential for understanding the human condition in the world, also plays a critical role in advancing human consciousness, freeing it from intolerance, dogmatism, and attempts to impose uniformity of thought.
- It is vital to widely disseminate Islamic values related to engagement with the Other and to rational discourse, emphasizing the Qur’anic invitation to peaceful dialogue, evidence-based communication, and the rejection of all forms of coercion and violence. This can be achieved through the clear verses of the Qur’an that advocate such principles, the Prophet’s traditions that promote virtuous behavior and righteous conduct, the political practices throughout Islamic history in dealing with ethnic and religious diversity, as well as the vast intellectual output in Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy.
- It is essential to liberate the discussion on religion and its relationship with humanity, culture, and violence from ideological preconceptions that hinder a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Doing so will allow us to benefit from the positive ethical dimensions inherent in religion, and to explore its potential for fostering shared human values in a time increasingly marked by divisive thinking and an emphasis on radical otherness—developments that risk expanding the scope of conflict and violence.

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