

Religion and Violence: *A Matter of Approach*

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the relationship between religion and violence. The idea is that religion, as a collection of texts, is single, but various kinds of actions have been taken under its name. The reason lies in the fact that religion, as a textual entity, is prone to various interpretations. Each of the interpretations indeed, in its turn, embodies a particular approach to the religion. It is in fact the approach and its resulting interpretation that lead to actions on the part of the believers. Some of the approaches to religion may amount to violence and they have indeed amounted to such a phenomenon. We will conclude that the spiritual approach, as compared with the jurisprudential and theological ones, is less likely to give rise to violence.

Keywords: Religion, Violence, Jurisprudential path, Theological position, Spiritual approximation.

I. Introduction

This paper intends to explore, in general, the relationship between religion and violence and, in particular, the role of the former in the latter. It should be noted at the outset that here by religion we mean Islam; though the arguments presented here shall apply equally to any other religion that embraces both systems of “dogmas” and “normative rules”.

There is a paradoxical situation here. Both violence and peace have been sought under the name of the religion, all over the history and under the names

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of all religions, and of course under the names of ideologies for this matter. Therefore, one may rightly ask about the secrecy of such a paradoxical relationship between religion, on the one hand, and both violence and peace, on the other. In order for us to answer this question, we need to raise another question. What do we mean by religion?

By religion, in particular by Islam, we should mean a body of (sacred) texts. The reason is that both the reality and discussion of religion and violence occur at an interpersonal level. That is to say, this is not something about personal states of individuals *per se*; rather, it is about communication among them. In this case, one may not equate religion, in this discussion, with personal experience (i.e. religious experience), as the latter is a sheer subjective internal state of an individual which may not be “publicly” understood and/or evaluated. Therefore, it is imperative on us to put forward here a public concept of religion, namely, a concept that may be conceived and criticised by all in an inter-subjective way.

Accordingly, a public or inter-subjective concept of the religion has to be limited to the existing religious texts. In other words, the religion refers to a collection of texts that guide the minds and conducts of those who believe (more precisely, have faith) in them. This is all of which we may avail ourselves in our intellectual endeavours concerning religion and violence.

Now, given a text-based definition of religion, we may turn to the question of secrecy of various, even contradictory, actions and measures taken by the community of the faithful in their practice of the religion. The answer relates to the nature of religion as it was just explained. It is said that religion consists of a body of (sacred) texts and as such it is undoubtedly prone to diverse readings and interpretations. In other words, this is the faithful who read, understand and explain (in a word, unravel) the meaning of the texts. There is no such thing as a reading-free meaning. On the other hand, actions taken by believers, under the name of the religion, derive from their particular understanding of the religious texts. That is to say, they act on the basis of their understanding or interpretation of the religion as such.¹ However, reading or interpretation is not the ultimate link in the chain of a text-reading pursuit. Any reading or interpretation of the text, in its turn, depends on the kind of “approach” the reader has taken towards the latter. Thus, everything in this regard revolves around “approach”. One’s reading of the religion (i.e. the sacred texts) commensurate with ones’ approach

¹ The interpretation, no doubt, amounts to their beliefs, which in their turn to actions. It is, then, worth mentioning that, here, we rely on the following model of action: belief + intention = action

to the latter, which in turn gives rise to particular beliefs and, hence, actions on the part of the “reader”.

The question ultimately focuses on possible approaches to the texts. Having said that (i.e. depending on the approaches adopted on the religion, various interpretations and, hence, actions (violent, peaceful, etc.) that take place within or without the faithful community), we need to identify the approaches in this regard.² Thus far, over the long Islamic intellectual history, three main approaches to the religion may be recognized: the “jurisprudential”, “theological” and “spiritual”.

In what follows, we attempt to briefly introduce the three mentioned approaches. Upon taking account of the main characteristics and implications of the three approaches, we shall criticise the first two approaches and explore more the third one, which cannot sit with violence. At the end we conclude by explaining the last approximation of the religion a bit more.

II. The Jurisprudential Outlook

It is a well-known fact that the Muslim intellectual tradition has been mainly a jurisprudential one. The main bulk of Muslim scholarly works relate, directly or otherwise, to jurisprudence.³ To explain, soon after the formation of a (faith-based) Muslim community in Medina, and in particular after the death of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), events unfolded in a direction that eventually a kind of legal ethics emerged among Muslims to be enforced all through their conquered territories.

By legal ethics we mean the social normative system that was developed rapidly by Muslim scholars, in response to the need of their government to regulate the vast expanded society. Indeed, the community governors and Muslim leaders became intent to spread the Islamic word and implement the values derived from Qur’an and the Sunna (Tradition).⁴ The socio-political normative system that took form was indeed the most general and practical part of the religion. We may call this the third layer of the religion and religiosity.

² We focus our attention on those approaches which have been “actually” taken to the religion of Islam by the faithful, as delving into “possible” approaches will make our discussion and analysis unnecessarily lengthy and, worse, speculative

³ On the origin and unfolding of the enterprise, see, for instance, Schacht, J. (1950), *The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. For a critical approach to this work, see W.B. Hallaq, (1997), *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, Cambridge: CUP.

⁴ See, for example, W.B. Hallaq (2005), *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

To be sure, the new religion (i.e. Islam, which first emerged in opposition to the pagan Arab (*jahili*) world view and values⁵) consisted of various parts.

The core, or the first layer, of this religion was, and still is, the faith in the one and only God (*Allah*). In addition, two almost equally important elements of the faith, namely the faith in the prophet-hood of Mohammad (PBUH) and that in the world hereafter, accompanied the monotheistic kernel of the faith. Indeed, not only did Islam declare the existence of the other world, it also prioritised it over this world.⁶ In other words, it formed the basis of the Islamic morality. The morality of the new religion was in fact a practice of those virtues that revolved around the main elements of the faith. To be more precise, the commands of this moral system originate in the faith and (in its turn) protect it. This constituted the second layer of the religion. The aforementioned two layers of religion and religiosity were introduced and developed in Mecca over the first thirteen years of the Prophet's mission. A new layer gradually came into existence and later rapidly developed after the Migration to *Yathreb* (Medina) during the formation of a Muslim community. This comprised several rules for the regulation of a Muslim's life in the context of a faith-based community; this time, not only distinct from the tribal pagan Arab worldview and values, but also in contradistinction to the normative systems of the People of Book (Christians and Jews). It formed the third layer of the religion (i.e. Islam). This layer was meant to regulate the whole society under the Muslim rule. The society, in particular after the conquests of new territories by Muslims under the Caliphate system of rule, consisted of both Muslims and non-Muslims. The characteristic feature of this third layer of religion (i.e. the social regulatory system) was that the religious values were to be "enforced" through it. The purpose, of course, was to protect and spread the Islamic cause and mission. The social regulatory system soon became famous as *Sharia* or *fiqh* (jurisprudence); that continued to embrace all moral and non-moral values and rules for the sake of regulating the society and subjects (be they Muslims or non-Muslims).

It so happened that the aforementioned normative system was taken as the main concern of Muslim scholarship and, hence, most Muslim scholars became experts of *fiqh* and the relevant disciplines (e.g. *usul al-fiqh*: principles of jurisprudence or *fiqhi* reasoning). This was the embodiment of a jurisprudential approach to the religion. No doubt, Islam embraced more than social/legal rules, but the Muslim government and scholarship tended to take the social regulatory

⁵ T. Izutsu (2002), *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

⁶ See, for instance, Qur'an, Surat al-A'la (87), Verse 17: «و الاخرة خير و أبقى»; and Surat al-Qesas (28), Verse 60: «و ما اوتيتم من شئى فمتاع الحياة الدنيا و زينتها و ما عند الله خير و أبقى أفلا تعقلون».

part of it more seriously, to the extent that denial of most of the rules of this part could, and still can, amount to an accusation of blasphemy on the part of the jurisprudents and Muslim governments. The jurisprudential approach to the religion, however, is faced with many problems, one of which is the danger of an ensuing violence. Let me explain.

First, almost all jurisprudential schools miss the main message and point for which the new religion had emerged. In this outlook, the protecting system of faith founds the central place within the religion, whereas it was supposed to be instrumental in the preservation and deepening of the faith, rather than providing for the (formalistically) “valid” commission of outwardly religious actions.

Secondly, as religious legal morality under the title of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) does not deserve this title unless the highest authority and power of the society is willing to implement it, the very concept of jurisprudence is intertwined with the concept of enforcement. That is, jurisprudence without authoritative enforcement would be reduced to a moral normative entity which has no stronger a claim on the enforcing power and authority than any other moral system (religious or otherwise) within the society. The ambition, since the inception of the concept of legal morality among Muslims was, however, to enforce it against the will of subjects living under the Muslim government.

There is no need to go through many other problems with the jurisprudential approach to the religion – such as the formation of an interest group of jurisprudents, rigidification of rules of the social normative system over the time and (hence) its becoming anachronistic – in order to conclude that this approach amounts to violence. The reason underlying the necessary outbreak of violence relates to the fact that the aforesaid approach gives rise to an interpretation of religion and courses of action thereupon that do not leave any options for the faithful to choose. They have always only one choice to make (regarding the announced rules): they have simply to follow them. On the other hand, the binding morality does not allow any contending moral claim to exist in the community, let alone for a dialogue and coexistence of various moral systems to exist within the society. The occurrence of any of the said events is punishable in one way or another. Violence is the only alternative to any will or aspiration other than the direct enforcement of jurisprudential commands.

III. The Theological Position

Since the early years of the establishment and expansion of the Muslim society and government, discussions over certain theological issues arose among them and took deep roots in their scholarly works. One of the most important issues that first appeared in Muslim discussion circles concerned the word of God. What was the nature of such a phenomenon? Were they to consider it as an eternal entity or was it created for a particular people, time and place? This is why theological discussions and arguments are called among Muslims the science of “*kalam*” (word).

Of course, theological issues and discussions did not remain limited to the subject of the divine word. They rapidly expanded to all constituting elements of the faith (be they theoretical or practical, ranging from attributes of the God to the issue of political authority and legitimacy). Quite naturally, Muslims, like any other religious or ideological community, soon divided on certain theological issues. For instance, in one respect, they differed on their analysis of attributes of the God, in particular those related to values (moral or legal) and human volition.⁷ One group (the *Ash`arite*) believed in a kind of divine command theory on values, while the other (the *Mu`tazilite*) supported a pre-religious rationalistic approach to the issue. Moreover, while one group (the *Sunni*) did not believe in an appointive structure for the succession of the Prophet, another group (the *Shi`a*) believed in such an enterprise, a division that affected almost the whole of their theoretical and practical understanding of the religion and religious life (be it individual or collective).⁸

All in all, it is gathered from Muslim theological endeavours that all theological schools of thought, in this regard, have actually been making their utmost intellectual exertions to defend the principles of the faith. No matter which stance or school, every intellectual Muslim is concerned with utilizing various parts of human rational resources in order to defend what they consider as necessary elements of the faith. These elements have been called, in the *Kalami* (theological) works, religious beliefs or dogmas (*`Aqa`ed* or *E`teqadat*). Meanwhile, it seems that two interesting epistemological turns have occurred within the delicate and complicated discussions and arguments presented under this approach.

⁷ For an interesting recent work on this issue, see Abu `Omran, Sheikh (2012), *Mas`alat al-Horriya Fi Fekr al-Islami*, Damascus: Elahiya al-`amma al-Suriya lil-Ketab.

⁸ See, in general, Al-Ghazali, Abi Hamed (1945), *Ihya`o`ulum Al-Din*, Beirut: Dar Al-Ma`refa Li-Tiba`a Wa Nashr; and Hilli, Hassan B. Yusof (2000), *Bab Hadi `Ashr*, Tehran: Daneshparvar.

First, the theological approach has gradually transformed the concept of “faith” to that of “belief”. Although all over the sacred text (the Qur’an) it is “the faithful” who are addressed by the God⁹ and the concepts that express the pillars of religiosity are those of “faith in the God” and “faith in the hereafter”, all theological works have been discussing beliefs in God and the world to come. They have made a big (though unfounded) jump from the concept of “faith” to that of “belief”; they have transformed the former to the latter. Secondly, theological works do not search for “truth” as such. They presuppose the truth of certain beliefs (i.e. beliefs in the tenets of the religion) and, then, set out to defend them by using any and all rational, rhetorical and even polemical means. Put differently, *Kalam* is not supposed to weigh various parameters and elements of religious beliefs against the most justifiable and rational criteria of accumulated knowledge of the time. Quite the contrary, the latter are utilized to prove the truth of the former. The former are never doubted, their truth is presupposed. There might appear, in *Kalami* works, certain (finally refutable) doubts and new interpretations of those tenets, but the latter should not be undermined, even against the most compelling evidence, proofs and arguments.

Several criticisms may be raised against the second (the theological) approach to the religion. For instance, this approach, in addition to misplacing “faith” with “belief”, does not pay enough attention to the complementary element of the faith, namely, the “righteous act” which is explicitly and repetitively mentioned in the sacred text.¹⁰ Also, given the problem of *akrasia* (weakness of will), it is vitally necessary for true Muslims to focus the attention of scholarly works and educational resources on nurturing the virtues, which in turn are certainly instances of righteous acts. None the less, the most important and, of course, relevant point of issue (that is relevant to the analysis of the relationship between religion and violence) originates in the second point discussed above.

⁹ The phrase “O you the faithful” (يا ايها الذين آمنوا) has been the constant expression by which the faithful are always addressed and referred to in Qur’an. Apart from the derivatives (أمن، مؤمن، مؤمنون، مؤمنات، ايمان، يؤمن،) (يؤمنون و ...), the exact aforementioned expression has been recurred in Qur’an for more than hundred times. The core meaning of all the related and derived words is no doubt “faith”, rather than “belief”.

¹⁰ Almost all the times, in Qur’an, the faith (ايمان) is mentioned along with the righteous act (عمل صالح). Even in Surat al-Fater (35), Verse 10, it is, *inter alia*, said that “[t]o Him ascends pure word, and righteous act raises it.” (اليه يصعد الكلم الطيب و العمل الصالح يرفعه). Interestingly, `Allameh S. Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, in his exegesis of this Verse, explicitly points out that the pure word should ultimately denote the right beliefs, the most certain part of which is the word of monotheism (... و المتيقن منها كلمة التوحيد ...). The intertwinement of the two concepts of faith and righteous act can be evidently seen here. See his (No Date), *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur’an*, Qom: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Islamiyah, the exegetical text under the Verse.

The theological position is most probably prone to lead to a rigid religious attitude and action. From this perspective, it is the “beliefs” that are of outmost significance and the only acceptable stance towards them, which everybody (believer or otherwise) is supposed to take, is “being convinced”. Otherwise, those who are not convinced or are unwilling to share the beliefs shall be convicted of infidelity and, hence, subjected to designated punishments in the jurisprudential system. In other words, the reduction of faith to belief, the instrumentalist attitude to truth, and the course of actions in its wake will no doubt face with accusations and punishments, and, hence, amount to violence. This has been the case with any dogmatic/doctrinal approach to a religion or ideology.

IV. The Spiritual Approximation

Thus far, we have introduced and criticised two possible approaches to the religion (that is, the jurisprudential and theological ones) which – as shown above, when they are taken as the guide for religious practice – can lead, and indeed have actually lead to violence. The question, then, is whether or not there has been another actual approach to the religion that is less likely, compared with the two previous ones, to amount to violence. If so, do the sacred texts endorse it?

It seems that the spiritual, or the humane, approach is the one that can do away with the violent consequences of “religiosity”. The spiritual approach indeed seeks to nurture and nourish that kind of (tender) personality which it is necessary to adopt on the part of the faithful, an inclusive (rather than exclusive) attitude and behaviour in human life. It seems, accordingly, this kind of understanding of religion has to be concerned with the task of upbringing. To be more precise, it is focused on nurturing such dispositions and predilections in human beings that they readily practice morality and aspire for justice. The important point is that the exact contents of morality and justice are not given in this interpretation of the religion. The contents, at any time and place, need to be determined, intellectually, in a way that a moral and just life can be possible for every single human being. The argument goes in the following direction: not only are all human beings considered as having inherent value in the primary sacred text of the religion, but it has explicitly announced that the Prophet has been appointed as a mercy for all human beings.¹¹ Therefore, every single

¹¹ Interestingly, in Qur’an, Surat al-Ma’edah (5), Verse 32, wrongful killing of a person is considered the same as killing the entire mankind and, vice versa, saving a man is taken as the same as saving the entire mankind. This verse by itself bears witness to the inclusiveness nature of the religion, though we may also

human being should have been granted enough opportunity and resources to enjoy a moral and just life. Moreover, no one's pursuit of a moral and just life should get in the way of such a pursuit by others.

The approach mentioned above does originate in the sacred texts. To explain, in a direct and explicit statement, the Prophet of Islam declared that he had been appointed to complete the best of moral dispositions.¹² On the other hand, according to Qur'an, God's messengers are sent so that the people rise up for justice.¹³ Furthermore, the addressees of the Qur'an are commanded to do justice, since it is the nearest to the pious fear of the God (i.e. *taqwa*).¹⁴ These crucial passages evidently portray the main and pivotal aims of the religion. They show us that a serious aspiration for bringing about moral virtues in oneself, one of which is certainly that of seeking justice, is the closest task to the core of religiosity.

Having set out the above argument and explanation, we should now ask about the method by which a morality aspiring and justice seeker personality may be reared. Put it differently, what kind of personality is most likely to be inclined towards morality and justice for the entire mankind? It can be gathered from the Qur'an that the method is built up upon love. The ideal people in the eye of the God are indeed those who are capable of love, and whom God Himself loves. Verse 54 of the Surat al-Ma'edah (5) reads: "[o] the faithful, whosoever of you turns from his religion, the God will assuredly bring a people whom He loves, and who love Him". Indeed, God is not at all far from human beings. He is closer to them than their own jugular vein.¹⁵ He is in the nearest place and responds as soon as He is called.¹⁶

V. Conclusion

What determines the violent or non-violent nature of acts and measures, being taken under the emblem of the religion by the faithful, are certainly the approach they choose, consciously or otherwise, for the understanding of the sacred texts. Nothing will change unless and until this issue is taken seriously. If

refer to Surat al-Anbiya (21), Verse 107 stating that the Prophet has not been sent except as a mercy to all the people (و ما ارسلناك الا رحمة للعالمين). `Allameh Tabatabai's interpretation of the Verse is that it denotes "mercy to all human groups" (أى أنك رحمة مرسله الى الجماعات البشرية كلهم). See his *Almizan Fi Tafsir Al-Qur'an*, op. cit., footnote 11, the exegetical text relevant to the Verse.

¹² (بعثت لأتمم مكارم الاخلاق). See, for instance, Ahmad B. Hussein Bayhaqi (1424 H.) *Al-Sunan Al-Kubra*, 3rd ed., Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmia, Vol. 10, p. 323

¹³ See, for example, Qur'an, Suart al-Hadid (57), Verse 25: (... ليقوم الناس بالقسط ...).

¹⁴ Ibid., Surat al-Ma'edah (5), Verse 8 (اعدلوا هو اقرب للتقوى).

¹⁵ See Ibid, Surat al-Qaf (50), Verse 16.

¹⁶ See Ibid, Surat al-Baqara (2), Verse 186.

we wish to change the course of actions, we have to grapple with those underlying approaches which ultimately bring them about.

The problems with the first two approaches relate to the coercive characteristic of the jurisprudential path and the truth-instrumentalist nature of the theological position. The third outlook is not concerned either with enforcement or convincing. This approach is actually an “existential”, rather than a legal or cognitive, approximation of the religion. Within the framework of this outlook, what is significant is indeed the “upbringing” of human beings and their existential experiences. In other words, as already mentioned, the main and most important concern of a spiritual view on the religion goes with nurturing and nourishing loving characters. Love cannot sit with violence under the same roof. Once the former enters the room the other is bound to leave.

This may be achieved in practice by developing it in the character of the person, rather than by delving into long and repetitive, though useless, talks. This is the “practice” that bears the main task of upbringing. To be sure, the “role model” does the entire job of upbringing. To this purpose, the faithful are enjoined to be inviters to the religion not by tongue, but by highly praised virtues already taken root in their characters.¹⁷

This practice-based method undoubtedly puts the rationalist or, more precisely, the theoretical trend of spirituality outside of our discussion. The trend belongs to philosophy, rather than spirituality. Any theoretical spirituality, in the best reading, ought to be logically considered as a theological or philosophical interpretation of tenets of the religion. Therefore, by a spiritual approach we mean practical spirituality, rather than the theoretical one.

Let us finish our discussion with a piece of the great spiritual inheritance in Persian that refers to the role of love for *Rumi*. He, in one of those exalted divine experiences, expressed the central position of love and its priority over jurisprudential (superficial) and theological (dogmatic) conceptions of the core of religiosity (namely, in the forms of *kofr- disbelief in Allah and His Messenger, Muhammad- and Islam*):

Infidelity and Islam have come now while love has existed since the beginning,

*Do not take an infidel, who is killed by love, as one of the infidels.*¹⁸

¹⁷ See, for instance, Koleini (1986), *Al-Kafi*, Tehran: Dar al-Kotob al-Islamiya, Vol. 2, p. 78, for a saying of Imam Sadeq (PBUH) stating that “invite people not by your tongue, let them see piety, hardworking, prayer and goodness in you” (كونوا دعاة الناس بغير السنتكم ليروا منك الورع والاجتهاد والصلاح والخير).

¹⁸ See B.Foruzanfar (ed.) (2006) *Kolliat Diwan Shams Tabrizi*, Tehran: Eqbal, Ghazal number 1092, p. 468.