

A Study Into Causes Of Religious Violence In Pakistan

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the roots of religious violence in Muslim tradition with special reference to Pakistan. It aims to describe and dissect its central terms, assumptions, labels, narratives, and genealogical roots, and to reflect on the political and normative consequences of the dominant language and knowledge. In addition, the understanding of the causes of violence can be useful for leaders so that they can try to prevent the emergence of conditions that are likely to result in violent collective action. This paper argues that three variables are important for understanding when certain religious groups engage in violence: the relationship between religious and governmental authorities, the role of threat perception, and the number of resources available to the religious community. Furthermore, this paper argues that religious violence- violence with saliently religious goals- are largely defensive and include three broad pursuits: the defence of religious nations, the defence of sacred sites and the instillation of an Islamic State through revolution.

Introduction

‘Religion causes violence’ seems to be one of the most perceived ideas not only in Western culture but also in Eastern culture. From the university taught courses to electronic and print media the perception that religion, if it does not cause violence, is nevertheless important factor of many clashes and gun-battles throughout human history. Religious holy wars, modern trend of suicide bombing and killing of innocent and non-combatants have specified religious tendencies and behaviour. The religious ideologies such as jihad and martyrdom seem to be used for political and material benefits. Religion was implicated expanding European and Muslim colonialism. (Scott, 2000)¹ Thus, religion was implicated maintaining social structures of violence from the earliest historical records. (Abu Nimer, 2003)² Today, terrorism and

violent acts by tiny bit minority of Muslim fundamentalists seem conclusive. In short, as a religious scholar writes, ‘the brutal facts of the history of religions impose the stark realization of the intertwining of religion and violence: violence, clothed in religious garb, has repeatedly cast a spell over religion and culture, luring countless decent people-from unlettered peasants to learned priests, preachers, and professors-into its destructive dance...’ (Lefebure, 2000) ³

In fact, violent conflict seems to be a result of human actions and decisions and co-constructed through the actions of individuals situated in relation to the discursive and institutional continuities that enable the occurrence of war and render it a legitimate human behaviour. Religion, as a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred, and uniting its adherents in a community, has a powerful hold on people’s way of thinking, acting, and perception of interests. Religious feelings can mobilize people faster than any other element of their identity. The moral and spiritual forces of religion encourage people to act and change. (Abu Nimer, 2003) ⁴

According to Marc Gopin, the way sacred texts are used to foster peace or promote violence and destruction:

“... seems to depend on the complex ways in which the psychological and sociological circumstances and the economic and cultural constructs of a particular group interact with the ceaseless human drive to hermeneutically develop religious meaning systems, texts, rituals, symbols, and laws”. (Gopin, 2000, 11) ⁵

Especially under extreme conditions, such as at times of war, religious texts are interpreted through deep fears and concerns. At such times various verses, ideas, or spiritual images may meet cognitive and emotional needs of the individual. (Gopin, 2000, 17)⁶ Accordingly, the turbulent relations with the enemy affect the way texts are understood. Various tales, sagas, and myths are selected to support interpretation of the religious tradition that legitimizes war and fighting against enemy.

Many political leaders have used this unique power of religion for legitimating their policies and for mobilizing people towards their constructed ends. Although the main reasons and issues of a conflict may not be of religious character, religion plays a significant role at times of conflict, where different religious systems encounter one another. In such cases, political leaders do not hesitate to resort to religious myths and sacred documents of their religion to justify their acts, and policies. By doing that they try to get the support of their communities and reinforce their power.

The field of theology and religious studies in Pakistan faces many problems when addressing religion’s impact on violence and violent conflict. First, religious studies-as an academic subject of a historic, political, and social force- is largely absent in Pakistani educational system. Religion- as a historic, political, and social force is rarely taught in Pakistani public schools.⁷ Few academic institutions in Pakistan require or even offer courses on world religions as part of academic degree.(Smart, 1988; Jeurgensmeyer, 1991)⁸ Furthermore, religion as an academic discipline has been cordoned off into its own world, hindering interdisciplinary studies of its impact on other academic fields such as politics, history, and natural sciences.⁹ Moreover, this lack of knowledge on religion is heightened by the unspoken assumption that

religion cannot be studied within the context of the rational sciences, the two subjects are incompatible.¹⁰ All of these factors have contributed to the lack of rigorous work done in theological studies on religiously motivated violence and violent conflict in Pakistani educational system.

The field of theology and religious studies in the world in general and in Pakistan and scholars on roots of violence need to seriously address the role of religion in history, society and inter-state relations because it appears that religion is reasserting itself in global politics. First, the post-Cold War era has seen a rise in religiously motivated conflict.¹¹ Therefore, theological, and religious studies scholars need to identify how and under what circumstances religion is used to justify violent wars and gun-battles. To do this, however, scholars need to explain what religion is and how it functions in social, political spheres and individual's lives.

In fact, Islamic tradition in practice- the application of religious beliefs and scriptures to individual, social, and political life- is the result of interpretation; these interpretations are the product of the individuals, usually religious leaders, who are grounded in specific contexts. Furthermore, as previously argued, that extremist interpretations of a religion, not the religion itself, causes religious violence, but that extremist interpretation occur at some points in time but not at others. Therefore, the main puzzle here to be explored is: Why do violent interpretations of a religion occur at some points in time and in some places but not at others? What explains this variation of war and peace in Islam?

This paper argues that violent interpretations of a religion seem to be the result of political, social, and economic circumstances, surrounding those who interpret the faith. Therefore, it will consider three variables as causes of extremist interpretations of a religion: the nature of actual or perceived threat, the relationship between religious and political leaders and the amount of material, social and technological resources available to a given religious community. These three variables will be tested against one case study of Taliban Movement of Pakistan to determine if they explain the conditions, under which violent interpretations of the faith and religious violence occur.

Literature on religious and secular war can be divided into two categories: the role of religion-based ethics in declaring and fighting wars, and the connection between religion ethnicity and nationalism in wars and violent conflicts. First, much attention has been paid to religion-based ethics in justification for the use of and conduct in war. Most notably, there is a wide body of literature on the role of religion in justifying the use of force and battle-ethics in Islam.¹² This literature is important for understanding religion's role in legitimating the use of force and the use of religious rhetoric for mobilization. However, this literature does not answer two important questions. Firstly, this does not explain the condition under which specific religious systems, their resources, their practitioners become engaged in violence and violent conflict. Secondly, this literature tends not to explain the variation between war and peace in the world's major religious tradition i.e., Islamic tradition.

Causal Argument for Religious Violence

If the source of religious violence exists within a religion, either through its scriptures or through beliefs, then it stands to logic that its practitioners would be in a perpetual state of war. However, Islamic tradition studied in this paper does not fit this description, because it has historical examples of violence and examples of peace. This variation between religious peace and violence suggests that there are factors other than scriptures and beliefs that cause violence and war. The above discussion posited that religious violence is the result of interpretations of the faith, which is the product of individuals grounded in specific circumstances. Therefore, to understand the conditions under which violent interpretations of a religion are generated, it is necessary to identify the variables that fuel these interpretations.

In this regard, it seems appropriate to use the insights of the renowned scholar Robert Jervis- particularly his articulation of the security dilemma- to explain the threat perception as a motivator elite-driven religious war. Jervis argues that offense/defence balance between states- factors such as geography, military equipment, technology, and intentions- is often difficult to distinguish, which makes states feel insecure. It is this uncertainty that breeds the ‘security-dilemma’- defensive measures taken by one state which, in turn, are interpreted as hostile acts by another state, thus prompting that state to take defensive actions, which spirals both states into a diminishing sense of security.¹³ Threat perception and the security dilemma, are critical for explaining variation between religious war and peace throughout time and space. This is not to say that all religious violence seems to be in reaction to threat since there is some religious violence, which comes from pre-emptive opportunity. However, most religiously motivated violence is in response to a perceived or actual threat, it is thus reactive instead of proactive.

This paper concentrates on violent interpretations of the faith and conflicts they produce. It considers three variables as causes of religiously motivated violence and violent conflict: the relationship between political and religious leaders as a cause of religious violence, the role of threat perceptions in shaping leaders’ actions and the amount of material, social and technological resources in determining actions of groups.

A. Religious And Political Leaders

Following on Brown’s¹⁴ and Christensen’s¹⁵ arguments, the role of elites i.e., leaders in precipitating violence and violent conflict cannot be ignored. Therefore, the leaders are the ones who call for violence and violent conflict and who determine the goals of violent campaigns. Both political and religious leaders are important for understanding religion’s involvement in violence and violent conflict. Religious leaders are the ones charge with interpreting scripture and maintaining religious traditions, these religious resources can be valuable tools for justifying the use of force and mobilizing populations for violence and violent conflict. Political leaders also manage resources- particularly the military- that could be used for defence in times of threat.

B. Threat Perception

Because the relationship between religious and state authority does not produce clear results for religious violence and extremism, other variables must be important for determining the conditions under which the religious violence occur. This paper, therefore, considers the role of real or perceived threat in determining religious violence and violent conflict. A careful study of Taliban Movement of Pakistan demonstrates that most of the religious violence are called by leaders in reactions to perceived or actual threat, not as opportunity to gain resources or adherents to the faith. It is important to note, however, that not all-religious violence is threat driven. However, many religious wars are fought for defensive ends.

This paper posits that religious leaders will react to threats against holy sites, territory, and communities believed to be essential to the preservation of a religion. Religious mobilization to protect holy places is particularly evident in the battles over Jerusalem in Palestine and Ajodhya in India. Religious mobilization can also occur over territory and populations deemed essential to a faith tradition such as Muslim actions to defend the Dar al Islam.

However, it is important to know that threats aimed at radically altering the order of society tend to produce a religious reaction. Radical social transformation comes from several different sources including wars, occupation, new ideologies, and new political systems. For example, 19th century European colonial powers radically transformed the social fabric of the regions they occupied. They introduced land reform, new educational system, new political structures, new religions, and new ways of thinking about identity. These transformations produced reactions in Muslims. Likewise, in the post-colonial period, the efforts of several governments to implement secular-nationalist agendas- complete with social, economic, and political reforms produced religiously motivated backlashes. This is true in Pakistan, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In addition, the current rise of globalization has also threatened religious groups and nations around the world, producing backlashes, which are often violent. Therefore, the threat of radical social and political transformation often provokes a religious reaction, which can be violent.

C. Resources

Finally, it seems important to mention that resources are important for explaining the conditions under which religious violence occurs. Specifically, three sets of resources: material resources, which include money, property, buildings and military equipment, social resources, which include charismatic leaders, educated leaders, networks and organizations and technological resources, which include transportation and communications technology. It seems that the greater the resources available to religious leaders and groups, the more likely these groups will choose violence as a means of achieving their goals. Conversely, the fewer resources these groups have, the less likely they will choose violence and the more likely they will use other means, such as hiding from the threat or isolation to defend their faith.

The Taliban Movement of Pakistan reveals that, of these three types of resources- social resources- particularly educated leaders and well-structured organizations are important for explaining the ability of religious groups to assert their demands, including by force.

This paper argues, considering Taliban Movement of Pakistan, that religious violence and violent conflicts with saliently religious goals: defence of holy nations, holy places, and religious revolutions aim at installing religious government. First, it considers religious violence to defend holy nations, land and people central to the preservation of specific religions. This can be demonstrated through the jihads of the 19th century and compare them to jihad movements today including Osama Bin Laden's declaration of war against the US. Second, the Taliban Movement of Pakistan considers religious violence to defend specific holy places, namely mosques and religious seminaries and finally, to establish Islamic state in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The above study described and dissected the central terms, assumptions, labels, narratives, and genealogical roots of religious violence, and reflected on the political and normative consequences of the dominant language and knowledge concerned. In addition, this study also shows the understanding of the causes of violence which can be useful for leaders so that they can try to prevent the emergence of conditions that are likely to result in violent collective action. This study argued that three variables are important for understanding when certain religious groups engage in violence: the relationship between religious and governmental authorities, the role of threat perception, and the number of resources available to the religious community. Furthermore, this paper argued that religious violence- violence with saliently religious goals- are largely defensive and include three broad pursuits: the defence of religious nations, the defence of sacred sites and the instillation of an Islamic State through revolution.

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⁵ Gopin, Marc, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*,(New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁷ It is important to note that the argument for teaching a course on world religions should be distinguished from the debate on

allowing prayer and courses on spiritual development in public schools. The first category calls for teaching world religions as a historic, social and political phenomenon. The later category argues for allowing spiritual practices and instruction of specific religion, usually Islam, in public schools. The current interpretation of the law allows for the second type of instruction but prohibits the first type. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States world media in general and American television commentators in particular widely associated madrassas with violence. This association is only partly correct. Most madrassas are simply schools providing religious education to boys (and some girls) who would probably not get any education otherwise, as their country has a poorly developed or nonexistent secular public education system. Some are, however, associated with providing fighters. Therefore, former Pakistani President Gen. Musharraf tried to bring them under his regime's control. Two laws were passed: one to create state-controlled madrassas (model: Dini Madaris); the other to register and control them . The first had moderate success, as some religious institutions registered in 2003 with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board it created. However, the three model institutions it created suffer organizational difficulties. The second was unpopular with the madrassas, but the government has been firm about removing foreign students suspected of being possible or potential recruits of the Taliban organization. However, the madrassas have been functioning for a long time without being associated with violence. This association is a consequence of the Afghan war and the ongoing dispute between Pakistan and India about Kashmir.

⁸ Religious scholar Ninian Smart notes that although religious studies or the study of world religions has its origins in the 19th century, it has only become an academic discipline in the late 1960s , see ' Methods in My Life', The Craft of Religious Studies, edited by Jon R. Stone (New York and London: St. Martins Press, 1998), 18-20. Mark Jeurgensmeyer notes that survey courses in world religions are difficult to offer because they require a broad range of knowledge on history and numerous religious traditions but that, nevertheless, this is perhaps one of the most important courses to teach in a liberal arts education because it is information that students would not get elsewhere, Mark Jeurgensmeyer, ' A Brief Argument in Favor of an endangered species:

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