Is it Essentialism to Claim that Some Religions Foster Violence – and Some Do Not?

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Abstract: Leading representatives of religions involved in conflict frequently emphasize the pacific impact of their particular convictions. However, in studies of religions as well as in political science it seems to be commonplace that the impact of religions in conflict is ambiguous. The question arises: does it exclusively depend on the political, sociological, and economical circumstances that religions either foster or discourage violence? Is it possible to identify the core message of a certain religion in reference to violence? Moreover, how might an affirmative answer to the question escape the allegation of essentialism?

Introduction

At the beginning of the third millennium and throughout the world in military conflicts, on the one hand, political leaders recurrently legitimate their political claims or even violent measures by referring to religious arguments. On the other hand and simultaneously, religious representatives normally emphasize the appeasing and pacific character of the religion they profess.

Frequently this phenomenon in literature is called 'ambiguity of religion', or 'ambivalence of sacred'.[1] Ambiguity in this context means that religious arguments can be used to justify or even foster violence just as easily as to minimize or abate violence in conflicts, to establish peace and to promote reconciliation. Some essayists call this the 'Janus-faced nature'

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1 Cf. Appleby, R. Scott. The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation. Lanham MD, 2000.

of religion – referring to the two-faced Roman deity who looks both to the future and the past.[2]

But can we really accept the theory that religions are essentially ambivalent with regard to social, political, and military violence? For then we would be obliged to say that in the end religious ideas are completely irrelevant with regard to their influence on human behaviour. Religious ideas – as multifaceted as they might be – wouldn't have any effect on private, social, or political actions. They would be void of any normative or critical function in society. Religious ideas would have the sole function of legitimizing human behaviour – either before action or in retrospect – that would be primarily motivated by political, sociological, and economical reasons. Religions would serve as a maidservant to social or political actions.

It is clear that such a consequence is hardly acceptable for any committed adherent of a religion. Although it is difficult to present a comprehensive definition of 'religion', it is generally accepted that religions present a certain understanding of reality and human existence. From this starting point, religions offer some orientation in social relationships, they help to deal with suffering and contingency, and they nurture spiritual progress. Religions claim to establish helpful rules for individual, social, and even political behaviour. Evidently this self-concept of religion contradicts the previous theory that religion is of no key significance for human behaviour.

Therefore the question arises whether or not there is any substantial and normative impact of religions on human behaviour. Do the various religious ideas on nature and human beings have any effect on human behaviour, particularly with regard to violence and peace?

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2 Cf. Schaefer, Heinrich. 'The Janus Face of Religion. On the Religious Factor in New Wars.' In: *Numen*. 51. 2004, pp. 407-431; Stewart, Pamela J. / Strathern, Andrew. 'Religion and Violence from an Anthropological Perspective.' In: Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, Michael Jerryson (Eds.). The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence. Oxford, 2015, pp. 375-384, p. 380; Scheffler, Thomas (Ed.). Religion between Violence and Reconciliation. Würzburg, 2002, p.76.

1. A challenging example

Frequently researchers refer to the performance of human sacrifices by Meso-American Aztecs when they consider the relationship between religion and violence.[3] In doing so it is important to realize that the Aztecs had good reasons to perform these sacrifices constantly. According to their religious convictions the Sun would not have kept moving, had they interrupted their sacrificial practices.

But these convictions would by no means suffice to allow us at the present time to sanction the Aztecs' practice of sacrifice. First of all it is compassion and advocacy for the victims that encourage commentators on the beginning of the 3rd millennium to criticize the Aztecs' belief and practice. Compassion appears legitimate, even if one is aware of the temporal gap that yawns between the age of the Aztecs and the present day. Compassion seems to be legitimate, even if one bears in mind the fact that moral standards have changed over the course of time. On the basis of compassion it seems to be legitimate – or even compulsory – to criticize the link between the Aztecs' religion and violence.

Furthermore, from a contemporary point of view, it is the normative standard of human rights that encourages judging the Aztecs' belief and practice to be intolerable. Human sacrifice does not respect the basic human right to life and physical integrity – not to mention other human rights that are violated by the practice of human sacrifice.

But bloodshed and human sacrifice are exactly what are demanded by Aztec mythology, the foundation for the Aztecs' mode of understanding reality. This mythology is the conceptual basis of social, ritual, and even political and military behaviour and action. On the ritual level it demands human sacrifice in order to maintain the world. Therefore one cannot easily deny that the religion of the Aztecs justifies and fosters violence.

Another question deals with the authorization for blaming the Aztecs' religion for fostering violence. The deep historical and cultural gap between the Actecs' time and the present age makes an affirmative answer difficult. Furthermore, is 'blaming' a legitimate category of historical survey?

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3 Cf. Carrasco, Davíd. 'Sacrifice / Human Sacrifice in Religious Traditions.' In: Juergensmeyer et al. (Eds.). The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence. Oxford, 2015, p. 209-225, here p. 217.

In any case, although this frequently quoted example is somewhat extreme, it does allow a closer scrutiny of some basic aspects of the leading question, whether it is legitimate or even possible to state that some religions foster violence, and some do not. Presupposing contemporaneity of religions – what precisely is the basis on which a critique of religion referring to violence is feasible? Furthermore, does such a critique authorize the establishment of a sort of ranking of religions with regard to their inherent dynamics of violence and peace? And finally, as a possible caveat – would this ranking introduce a certain kind of essentialism? But what is the meaning of the concept 'essentialism'?

2. Religion and 'essentialism'

Apparently, the concept of essentialism is not well received in the scientific community. Usually it suggests that for any specific entity there is a set of attributes that are necessary to its identity and function.[4] This implies in particular to cultures and religions. It is evident that the subject of my inquiry doesn't aim at ontological or metaphysical essentialism, but at cultural or religious essentialism.[5] 'Cultural' or 'religious essentialism' means that somebody claims to be able to define what is necessarily – by nature – linked to a certain culture or religion.

Anne Phillips, Professor for Political and Gender Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science, distinguishes four types of social essentialism:

> The first is the attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category: the '(all) women are caring and empathetic', '(all) Africans have rhythm', '(all) Asians are community oriented' syndrome. The second is the attribution of those characteristics to the category, in

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4 Cf. Cartwright, Richard L. 'Some remarks on essentialism.' In: *The Journal of Philosophy*. 1968, 65, pp. 615–626.

5 Cf. Grillo, Ralph D. 'Cultural Essentialism and Cultural Anxiety'. In: Anthropological Theory*,* 2003, p. 158, 'By "cultural essentialism" I mean a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as "cultural" (and under certain conditions territorial and national) subjects, i.e. bearers of a culture, located within a boundaried world, which defines them and differentiates them from others'. Cf. Grillo, Ralph D. 'Islam and Transnationalism.' In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 2004, 30. p. 864: 'It must be accepted that for some people a person's essence is captured by their religious identity.'

ways that naturalize or reify what may be socially created or constructed. The third is the invocation of a collectivity as either the subject or object of political action ('the working class', 'women', 'Third World women'), in a move that seems to presume a homogeneous and unified group. The fourth is the policing of this collective category, the treatment of its supposedly shared characteristics as the defining ones that cannot be questioned or modified without undermining an individual's claim to belong to that group.[6]

According to Phillips we can't avoid generalizations when we try to comprehend something. In biology this is evident: without a clear and well-defined taxonomy it is impossible to classify different animals or plants. Therefore, according to Phillips, avoiding essentialism is a matter of caution and prudence. What matters is – primarily – the intensity of generalizing characteristics.

Intensity of characteristics, in turn, is always a matter of dispute. To avoid a misguided essentialism – 'misguided' in the sense of naturalized characteristics that are socially created – there must be a distinctive openness to reassessment and criticism. Critical analysis takes for granted the capability and the willingness to reflect on one's own understanding of a phenomenon.

It is Phillips's second distinction that seems to be most instructive here: the attribution of specific characteristics to a certain religion, 'in ways that naturalize or reify what may be socially created or constructed'. Phillips encourages distinguishing between the adherents of a religion and the religion itself. 'Religion itself' doesn't exist in reality. Instead it is a mere social and conceptual construction that underlies multiple and alterable conditions. Thereby the expression 'religion itself' might be conceived to be the vanishing point of religious ideas, conceptions, and practices that define identity and behaviour of such persons we usually call the adherents of a certain religion.[7]

It is unnecessary to say that there are very different manners of adherence to certain religions. Furthermore, human beings always exist with multiple identities: they operate in the context of their belonging to a certain race, gender, culture, nationality, and social role in society very differ-

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6 Phillips, Anne. 'What's wrong with essentialism?' In: Gender and Culture. Cambridge, 2010, pp. 57-82, particularly 71 s.

7 In the present paper, I do not address the difficult question of how to discern between religion and ideology if one accepts this definition. Nor do I discuss the complex issue of the concept of 'violence' – what it is and what it is not.

ently. This also applies to the individual's belonging to a certain religious tradition.

Therefore the appearance of a 'religion' in human society essentially depends on the manner in which normative texts and traditions are interpreted by ordinary adherents, or by religious authorities. It depends on the way in which these groups derive theoretical conclusions, spiritual benefits, and normative orientations from their interpretations of religious texts and traditions.

Although a clear distinction between religious ideas and believers is necessary, both dimensions are closely linked with each other. There is a dynamic and complex process of interaction between texts and traditions, between interpretation and behaviour.

Normative traditions are written corpora, oral traditions, ritual customs, and social practices that are transmitted from generation to generation. Their normative force is never released from interpretation. I only need make mention of Gadamer's famous 'hermeneutical circle' and his concept of 'prejudice' or 'mind-set' (Vorverständnis).[8] It requires a certain degree of self-consciousness, capability to discern, and willingness to question one's own convictions in order to reflect on the hermeneutical circle that guides every interpretation.

This fact applies to religious convictions as well. Normally believers and religious authorities feel obliged to act in a manner that respects religious texts and traditions. They tend to regard them as indisputable and unalterable commands. To reflect analytically about one's own understanding of normative texts, traditions, and practices in religious communities is not at all a matter of course.

This observation suggests to question the relationship between religions, on the one hand, and human reason on the other hand. Human reason is inevitably involved if religious texts, traditions, and practices are interpreted. This is even more the case if normative conclusions are drawn.[9]

But it is precisely this involvement of human reason that furnishes a criterion for questioning the relationship between a particular religion and violence, I would argue.

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8 Cf. Gadamer, Hans Georg. Truth and Method. 2nd ed. (1st English ed., 1975). J. Weinsheimer and D.G.Marshall (Trans.). New York, 1989, pp. 366-369.

9 Fundamentalism essentially means a denial of the critical function of human reason when religious texts and traditions are interpreted.

3. Religion, human rights, and human reason

My thesis that human reason furnishes a criterion for questioning the relationship between a particular religion and violence might be clarified by a very brief reference to the vast complex of human rights.

I already stated that criticizing the Aztec practice of human sacrifices might by encouraged by present standards of human rights comprising the basic rights of corporeal integrity and self-determination. In modern times, mankind reached the position of being able to claim that respect for human rights is based solely on the fact that someone is a human being. It doesn't matter to which nation or ethnic group he or she belongs.[10] Nor does it matter to what religion or ideology he or she adheres.

From a global perspective today, we have achieved an international standard of human rights that can't easily be ignored. Human rights are universally compelling – at least theoretically. They regulate human behaviour even if conflicts occur between members of different ideologies and cultures or between adherents of different religions. They should be respected even in the case of war.

However, both the extent and the authority of human rights are nowadays highly disputed throughout the world. Frequently they are suspected to be a means of Western colonialism.[11] Passionate disputes continue on women's rights and gender equality in general, and religious liberty for instance. Nevertheless, there is hardly any state in the world where politicians do not justify political measures or claims with reference to human rights.

Even if human rights are contentious issues, some pivotal rights exist that are accepted by nearly everybody. First and foremost is that a person's right to life and physical integrity should never be violated. In emergencies or in cases of self-defence there might be exceptions, but normally this basic human right is to be respected unconditionally.[12]

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10 Cf. Bielefeldt, Heiner. 'Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights.' In: Martin Scheinin, Catarina Krause (Eds.). International Protection of Human Rights: A Textbook. Åbo, 2009, pp. 3-18.

11 Cf. Burke, Roland. Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights. Philadelphia, 2010.

12 Therefore torture according to UN Conventions is forbidden even in cases where it may serve to save innocent human beings (the ticking-bomb-scenario). Other human rights are the right to self-determination, the right to freedom of movement,

Historically the various declarations of human rights have their origins in the need for political consensus as a consequence of the violent wars throughout the 16th and 17th centuries CE in Europe. Some of these wars have been justified by religious arguments that were advocated by different confessional denominations or churches.

In 1648, after the Thirty Year's War, a political consensus was established in Europe. The conclusion of peace agreements was rendered possible by a preceding exclusion of religion from the political sphere. The so-called 'Peace of Westphalia' was principally based on human reason, not on religious belief. The various agreements came about through political pragmatism. Simultaneously the opposed coalitions agreed to ban any religiously legitimated political claims to represent the only truth as Christian.

The philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) designed their theories of the state on the basis of an analysis of the human condition and by focussing on human welfare. According to them it is human reason that offers a common ground to achieve a balance between conflicting interests, and not religion.[13]

The original impetus of the Enlightenment entailed a decided shift towards humanism, secularism, and rationalism in the Western world. Furthermore it is not revelation or divine will that should direct human behaviour but theoretical and practical reasoning. The last foundation of society is – or at least should be – the dignity of human beings and human reason. Mutual respect and tolerance should rule daily life. Differences should be acknowledged and even valued in order to enrich the plurality of a society. The only limits to be safeguarded in society are the property

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the right to freedom of thought and religion, and the right to peacefully assemble – including the right to live in a family.

13 Cf. Hobbes, Thomas. The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic. John Gaskin, Charles Addison (Eds.). Oxford, 1994 [1640], pp. 1-182; Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil. Ian Shapiro (Ed.). Yale, 2010 [1651]. – Cf. Hoekstra, Kinch. 'Hobbes on Law, Nature and Reason.' In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 2003, 41, pp. 111–120; Krom, Michael P. The Limits of Reason in Hobbes's Commonwealth. New York, 2011; Venezia, Luciano. 'Hobbes' Two Accounts of Law and the Structure of Reasons for Political Obedience.' In: *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2013, 13, pp. 282-298; Locke, John. Letter Concerning Toleration. James Tully (Ed.). Indianapolis, 1983 [1689]; Locke, John. Two Treatises of Government. Peter Laslett (Ed.), Cambridge, 1988 [1689]; Cf. Grant, Ruth. 'John Locke on Custom's Power and Reason's Authority.' In: *Review of Politics*. 2012, 74, pp. 607–629.

of human beings, mental and physical integrity, and religious belief and practice. A peaceful life in the community seems to be possible if these principles are respected by every citizen.

After World War II, however, and in the light of political totalitarianism, mankind realized that the age of Enlightenment was not able to exclude war and violence from European history. With regard to totalitarian regimes, the German philosophers Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) recognized the 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment' (1947).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno human reason bears a totalitarian tendency that is ushered in via its limitless claim to dominate nature and human reality. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason leads to domination in a triple sense: the domination of nature by human beings, the domination of nature within human beings, and the domination of human beings by others.[14]

Consequently 'postmodern' philosophers attempt to justify different and even conflicting interpretations of the world. They suppose a plurality of reasons within human mind. They stress the value as well as the limits of different interpretations of reality.

These interpretations usually are characterized by conceptual coherence. But they are intentionally restricted with regard to their possible application to human life. Postmodern theories of truth deny that there is such a thing as an overwhelming reason that allows a comparison between different and competitive interpretations of the world, particularly with regard to their practical consequences. Evidently, this assumption also affects our attitudes to religion.

Indeed, one might doubt if universally compelling reason exists at all. From a postmodern point of view, one might claim that there are only limited fields or realms of language, culture, and religious beliefs. Today exponents of 'Postcolonial Studies' encourage questioning the existence of universal human reason. In their criticism of colonialism, violent 'othering', Eurocentrism, and exclusionary policies, they deny that one culture or religion is superior to another. Consequently, it is not possible to blame

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14 Cf. Horkheimer, Max / Adorno, Theodor W. Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments [1947]. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Ed.). Stanford, 2002.

adherents of a certain religion with regard to their attitude towards violence.[15]

On the other hand, does the postmodern appreciation of conflicts justify the use of violence in conflicts? As a matter of course it doesn't. But how can one argue in favour of social, cultural, and ideological conflicts by simultaneously banning violent conflicts between members of different cultures or adherents of different religions?

It is communication that thus becomes indispensable in order to overcome conflicts and violence. Every attempt at understanding the position of an adversary is useful in order to ban violence and establish peace.

But how do members of different cultures or adherents of different religions communicate – particularly if they use different languages and symbols? Particularly in the shadow of violent and exclusionary policies we recognize the need for a human reason that is – at least to some extent – universally compelling.

Obviously we cannot compare human reason with an archipelago that consists of a number of solitary islands. Otherwise communication between human beings belonging to different languages and cultures would be completely impossible. Therefore, we cannot escape supposing the existence of certain sets of symbols, meanings, and concepts that facilitate communication across different languages, cultures, and even religions. But these sets are neither stable nor immutable. Sometimes they are taken for granted and sometimes they are a matter of dispute and conflict. In any case they have an essentially historical dimension.

Based on this premise, it seems to be legitimate or even compulsory to criticize religious beliefs and religious practices, particularly when they tend to disturb peaceful life.

Corresponding, national constitutions are normally a statement and codification of a certain kind of overwhelming consensus on the basic values of a multifaceted and pluralistic society. For the benefit of human society characterized by social diversity and religious plurality, it is essential that the guiding principles of its constitution dominate the statutes of particular groups – including religious groups. This principle has to be enforced even if these groups claim that they have to obey some 'higher' religious truth or revelation.

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15 Cf. Childs, Peter / Williams, Patrick. Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory. Hoboken, 2014.

But what if adherents of a religious practice or creed are not committed to a rational reflection of their own presumptions? Such an attitude might well be justified by their own prevailing religious convictions. It seems impossible to oblige religious communities or even compel them by external pressure to elucidate their convictions and traditions using human reason. In this case, inevitably social conflicts are imminent.

In modern, secular, and pluralistic societies it is human reason alone that furnishes a basis for mutual understanding and tolerance. Here inevitably the question arises whether it is possible to achieve some coherence between human reason and religious beliefs? Usually this question cannot be answered in a general manner, because the variety of religions implies a variety of attitudes to, and connections with, human reason.

This variety becomes obvious in the light of the religions' attitude to human rights. One of the basic disagreements about human rights is the question of its foundation. Secularists insist on an autonomous foundation to human rights. Very often they argue explicitly in opposition to religious claims. They point to the indisputable fact that in the past and in the present religions frequently justify and even foster violence. They claim that in spite of its limitations, and its misuses, it is only human reason that in the long run preserves non-violence and peace. Religious authorities often reject this position because they regard it as an attack on the sovereignty of religion. Therefore they try to root human rights in religious traditions. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990) is a well-known example of this approach.[16]

Therefore a number of questions arise. Can the reference to human rights be generalized in order to criticize religions? What would justify such an extension? Can the reference to human rights furnish a basis for the evaluation and even a ranking of religions concerning their relationship to violence and peace?

According to Charles Seelengut, professor of the sociology of religion and expert on the psychology of religious movements, 'for the faithful, religious mandates are self-legitimating: they are true and proper rules not because they can be proven to be so by philosophers or because they have

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16 Cf. the critical approach of Heiner Bielefeldt, '"Western" Versus "Islamic" Human Rights Conceptions? A Critique of Cultural Essentialism in the Discussion on Human Rights.' In: *Political Theory*. 28.2000, pp. 90-121.

social benefits but because they emanate from a divine source'.[17] Consequently, logical reasoning does not play as much of a role as loyalty to one's religious creed.

But does it really matter in social or political practice whether human dignity is based on religious authority or on secular reasoning? To believe that a human being is created in the image of God – as it is proposed in the Holy Bible (Genesis 1:27) – or to assert that a human being is a moral subject – as it is proposed by humanists and by the philosophers of the Enlightenment – leads to the same practical consequence: every individual human being has to be respected unconditionally.[18] Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that rational human beings should be dealt with not as a means to something else, but as an 'end-in-themselves'. This means that a human being's value doesn't depend on anything apart from being human.

The bottom line is that this philosophical conclusion by no means contradicts religiously founded valuations of human beings – at least if one considers the major religious groups today. Frequently in contemporary religious traditions, one encounters the idea of the "sanctity of human life". Although this idea does not directly furnish a basis for the claim of unconditional human rights, it might be taken as a starting point for a mutual understanding between adherents of a certain creed and secular philosophers.

Philosophers sometimes discern between discovery, justification, and validity of moral norms.[19] In our context, it might be useful to set aside the questions of discovery and justification. What is important is validity: the acceptance of human rights in principle, even if they are highly disputed in detail. For the acceptance of individual human rights encourages accepting difference and otherness – otherness of religious conviction, sexual orientation, political alignment etc.

The dispute about particular implications of human rights follows – or should follow – reasonable arguments primarily in order to clarify differ-

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17 Seelengut, Charles. Sacred Fury. Understanding Religious Violence. 2nd ed. Lanham, 2008, p. 6.

18 This applies at least in principle. Exceptions are given in war or if there is a conflict between human lives in case of medical emergency – to give only two exemples.

19 Cf. Habermas, Juergen. 'Rightness Versus Truth.' In: Truth and Justification. Hoboken NJ, 2014, pp. 237-276, particularly p. 244 f.

ent standpoints and claims. In public discourse, according to Habermas every disputant is obliged to ensure that everybody is able to understand his position and arguments even if he doesn't share the convictions of the opposite party. These clarifications will be based nowhere but on the field of human reason – even if it is limited or fragmented, as postmodern philosophers claim. And perhaps in the long run religious mind-sets will benefit from reasonable arguments as well. For reasonable arguments bear the potential not only to contaminate religious convictions and practices but also to purify them in the light of their own normative religious traditions.[20]

Thus we might say that human reason and respect for human dignity are the basis for the criteria that allows us to judge religious claims in general, and their relationship to violence in particular.

The alternative undoubtedly is even worse. If there were no categories to judge religious beliefs and practices, we would be obliged to give our assent to any kind of religion, or to any kind of cultural or social behaviour. Then we would have to accept that the sacrifices of the Aztecs as well as the crimes of the so-called Islamic State are justified by their particular reasons. The Aztecs' explanation of the cosmos was coherent and plausible, and consequently their practice of sacrifice was justifiable. The same argument is valid with regard to the Islamic State.

The conclusion seems compulsory: We can't abandon external criteria in order to disapprove forms of religiously motivated or justified violence. And it is human reason that furnishes these criteria – in spite of its limitations.

Additionally, I would argue that this lesson of European history and philosophy is universally valid. In any case, it should not be too hastily blamed as being a colonial discourse.

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20 Cf. Habermas, Juergen. 'Faith and Knowledge.' In: The Future of Human Nature. Cambridge, 2003, pp. 101-115. Cf. Audi, Robert / Wolterstorff, Nicolas (Edd.). Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate. Maryland 1997; Audi, Robert. Religious Commitment and Secular Reason. Cambridge, 2000.

4. *Religion, violence, and peace*

Admittedly human reason is fundamentally shaped by culture, history, biography, and in no small measure by religious traditions. But if human reason is conditioned in many cases and multifaceted, can we then derive from it universal criteria to evaluate the relationship between a certain religion and violence?

In recent years, some remarkable theories have been presented that deal with the relationship between religion and violence, taking a universal approach. Mark Juergensmeyer for instance, a world-renowned scholar in religious studies and sociology, affirms that while violence is not an exclusive monopoly of religious individuals or groups, it is apparent that religions frequently provide compelling symbols that render violence more likely.[21] Because all religions are, in one way or another, inherently revolutionary, as Juergensmeyer argues, the motivations or the justifications for violence are not restricted to any single religious tradition.[22]

Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist, took a similar position when he claimed that monotheism in particular is a compulsory source of religiously legitimated violence. According to Assmann, the assumption that there is only one God inevitably leads to religious intolerance. He argued that if one is convinced that there is only one God, the coercive consequence is that only one and single truth is prevailing. This truth has to be propagated all over the world in order to honour the one and only God. Everyone who continues to adhere to deities other than the one and only God is either deluded or an incorrigible liar. In consequence he has to be eradicated in order to establish the only legitimate social and political order in the world referring to the one and single truth.[23]

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21 Cf. Juergensmeyer, Mark. Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence. Berkeley, 2001, p. 105.
22 Cf. Sloterdijk, Peter. God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms. Cambridge, 2009.
23 Cf. Assmann, Jan. Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism. Madison WI, 2008; Assmann, Jan. The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism. Stanford, 2009; Cf. already Langerak, Edward. 'Theism and Toleration.' In: Quinn, Philip L. / Taliaferro, Charles (Eds.). A Companion to Philosophy and Religion. Cambridge MA, 1997, p. 515, 'The motivation for religious intolerance and violence intensified when monotheism became not just universalistic but also exclusivistic and expansionistic, as it did with Christianity and Islam.'

Christian theologians did not criticize Assmann solely with reference to peaceful traditions in the Bible.[24] More compelling is their objection that Assmann's argument is purely formal. By no means does it respect the conceptual content and normative implications of religious traditions and beliefs Assmann refers to.

Provided that the truth of the one and only God is summarized in God's command to love one another, it would be self–contradicting to propagate this truth by violent means. And this supposition is not a mere hypothesis. During World War II, Jehovah's Witnesses suffered a great deal by refusing military service, because they insisted on God's command that thou shalt not kill (Exodus 20:13). Today, Quakers in particular, and other churches committed to peace, are recognized primarily for their categorical rejection of violence as a justifiable form of behaviour.

What insight do we derive from this dispute? It encourages us not only to scrutinize the formal structure of a religion – if it is monotheistic or not, for instance – but also to scrutinize its contents. What are the basic ideas of a religion? What is the manner in which it interprets reality? What normative conclusions are derived from this interpretation?

These questions build up a comprehensive idea of a certain religion. It does not at all deny internal differences in a religious community – differences with regard to the interpretation of normative texts and traditions, as well as differences with regard to ritual or daily-life practice. But it focusses on the central beliefs of a religion, which might be considered as being at the heart of all its possible interpretations and practices. In spite of inner divergences therefore, it is not impossible to identify the core of a particular religion.[25]

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24 Cf. Zenger, Erich. 'Der Mosaische Monotheismus im Spannungsfeld von Gewalttätigkeit und Gewaltverzicht.' In: Peter Walter (Ed.). Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott (Quaestiones disputatae 216). Freiburg, 2005, pp. 39-73; Zenger, Erich. 'Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit? Alttestamentliche Beobachtungen zur sogenannten Mosaischen Unterscheidung.' In: Friedrich Schweitzer (Ed.). Religion, Politik und Gewalt (Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, 29). Gütersloh, 2006, pp. 37-39, particularly pp. 37-39; Cf. Bernstein, Richard. Violence: Thinking without Banisters. Hoboken New Jersey, 2013, The Mosaic Distinction.

25 For Christians this core probably is the belief in a triune God and his incarnation in a single human being; for Muslims the belief in the one and only God and his Prophet Mohammad.

Inescapably, this core will be a matter of dispute in order to identify its theoretical and practical implications. These implications will change in different circumstances and at different times in history. But I would argue that in the course of these disputes there will appear a certain vanishing-point that directs all reflections and practices in the overwhelming framework of a certain religion – even if this point itself is unattainable.

I would like to make the case that there are essential ideas in a particular religion that cannot be negated without abandoning this religion. Otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish one religion from another. It does make a difference whether you believe in a triune God, or if you suppose a non-personal deity, for instance.

Does this mean 'essentialism'? The problem will be increased if we claim that believing has certain practical consequences that follow from the core of a certain religion.

In the early 20th century the German theologian Erik Peterson wrote his landmark essay on ancient political theology entitled 'Monotheism as a Political Problem'.[26] In this essay Peterson claimed that the belief in a triune God entails the acceptance of difference and plurality. This acceptance has immediate consequences for the interpretation of a political system. Peterson's idea is that strict monotheism fosters monarchianism, whereas the belief in a triune God fosters pluralism. Here indeed we face an approach we are more likely to call essentialism. Christian emperors, in Byzance as well as in Western Europe, continued to reign without any commitment to pluralism or even democracy. Obviously, one has to discern between theory and practice, between belief and behaviour.

Many researchers maintain that all religions foster violence because of their claim for supremacy.[27] In contradiction, I would argue that the adherents of a certain religion are less likely to justify and foster violence if the normative content of religious texts, traditions, and practices they refer to permits, or even encourages them to acknowledge religious and social plurality. Admittedly, history shows a large number of contradictory political

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26 Cf. Peterson, Erik. 'Monotheism as a Political Problem' [1935]. In: Theological Tractates. Michael J. Hollerich (Ed.). Stanford, 2011, pp. 68-105.

27 Cf. Gort, Jerald D. / Vroom, M. Hendrick (Eds.). Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation. Amsterdam, 2002, p. 3: 'The presence of many religions in the world and the claim for supremacy by all religions have led to conflict, dissentions, and vehement reactions to religion instead of uniting mankind.'

practices. But it will hardly be possible to completely deny the influence of normative texts and traditions on human behaviour.

My thesis is that the texts, traditions, and practices bear their own force. Therefore they are not without any influence on social or political behaviour. In the long run they can animate the adherents of a certain religion to acknowledge difference, to question themselves, to accept ambiguity, and to be prepared for empathy and compassion, and in a word, promote peace.

Nevertheless, all these capacities are ruled and limited by historical conditions. Therefore their effects by no means are compulsory. Nevertheless, I would argue that this statement is sufficient to establish an at least provisional ranking of religions with regard to their capacity to overcome violence, to encourage peace, and to promote reconciliation.

This ranking depends on the manner in which normative texts and traditions are interpreted. It may change in time, and it may be passionately disputed amongst the adherents of a certain religion at a particular time. Therefore, the ranking is always subject to modification. However, this undeniable fact does not contradict the fundamental possibility of ranking.

5. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the likely answer to the initial question whether it is essentialism to claim that some religions foster violence and some do not, depends on the manner in which one defines essentialism. According to Anne Phillips we can't avoid essentialism when we try to understand anything. Therefore essentialism is a matter of degree: to what extent are we willing to question our judgement on something we wish to comprehend? Our willingness to reach a dialogue between divergent positions might be an indicator as to whether we are really open to modify our judgement.

Evidently my question entails another dimension: is it legitimate to claim that some religions foster violence – and others do not? I dare to say: yes, it is – at least for a particular moment in history. Even if we take into account that we never get in contact with a religion itself – because it is always mediated by human interpretation and practice – we can distinguish between normative texts and traditions that foster violence, and different normative texts and traditions that do not. The case is clear if we compare the religion of the Aztecs with that of the Jehovah's Witnesses or

the Quakers. Admittedly these examples are extremes, with a wide range of possibilities in between.

The claim that a certain religion fosters violence will inevitably provoke objections and disputes. These disputes are necessary in order to avoid misleading essentialism. Moreover they are necessary in order to preserve the ability of religiously committed people to revise their attitude towards violence.

Any statement about the relationship of a certain religion to violence is based on a complex analysis: one has to analyse the manner in which its adherents interpret reality, and what practical conclusions they derive from their interpretation. And one has to analyse to what extent social or political behaviour is oriented by a more or less considered interpretation of normative texts, traditions, and preceding practices.

In order to fulfil this task researchers are referred to the interplay between normative texts and traditions with contemporary religious figures. They are referred to the actual practice of the members of a religious community who bind themselves to religious texts, traditions, and authorities. Notably, they have to scrutinize the manner in which normative texts and traditions, religious authorities, and the 'ordinary' adherents of a religion interact. Who interprets normative texts and traditions? How is the interpretation executed, and how binding is its character? To what extend are the texts and their interpretations normative with regard to ritual commitment, and to daily life?

All these questions will have to be answered in detail in order to decide whether some religions foster violence and some do not – and in order to escape misleading essentialism.