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The Dehumanizing Illusion of Religion-and-Violence Arguments

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The Dehumanizing Illusion of Religion-and-Violence Arguments

Like a fun-house mirror, Western conceptions of religion and violence have distorted the truth in a way that is severely damaging to us all. The relationship between religion and violence is a subjective connection used to justify political goals. Because the West purports itself to be secular, the use of religion and violence arguments allows people to dehumanize religious people and societies and to therefore justify violence done against them for political purposes. According to *Terror in the Mind of* God author Mark Juergensmeyer, for those committing violence, it

> requires an enormous amount of moral presumption for the perpetrators of these acts to justify the destruction of property on a massive scale or to condone a brutal attack on another life, especially the life of someone one scarcely knows and against whom one bears no personal enmity.[1]

Othering, the fear of someone different from oneself and subsequent prejudice, comes into play as an important factor in the psychological need for religion-and-violence arguments.

Religion-and-violence arguments lead secular Westerners to believe that their wars are justified because they are not religiously motivated. William T. Cavanaugh is a professor of theology at DePaul University who wrote *The Myth of Religious Violence*. He uses the functionalist perspective on defining religion. This perspective uses definitions that are "based not on the content or substance of a belief system but on the way that such a system functions, that is, the social, psychological, and political tasks that it performs in a given context."[2]

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[1] Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press: Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London, 2000), p. 11

[2] Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 105-106

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Using this approach to defining religion has "the advantage of being based on empirical observation [assuming that observation can be objective and unbiased, which it really cannot] of people's actual behavior, and not simply on claims of what they believe in the confines of some interior and unobservable mental state."[3] This perspective erases subjective boundaries between established world religions and removes the ability of religion-and-violence apologists to justify their arguments. If 'religion' is not defined through professed belief, it becomes less clear what does or does not count as religious. Nationalism and capitalism, for example, under this definition, can be considered religious concepts. If this is true, then the line differentiating state from religion disappears. He asserts that religious violence and secular violence cannot be meaningfully or usefully separated as logical categories of violence.[4] 'State violence' and 'religious violence' then, are false classifications.

Furthermore, he argues that the use of religion as a coherent category is nothing more than an expression of state power. "There is no transhistorical or transcultural concept of religion," and the "attempt to say that there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West."[5] This application of the term 'religion,' Cavanaugh claims, is used to justify 'secular' violence.[6] He proclaims that,

> For its many avid consumers in the West, the myth of religious violence serves on the domestic scene to marginalize discourses and practices labeled religious, especially those associated with Christian church and, particularly in Europe, with Muslim groups. The myth helps to reinforce adherence to a secular social order and the nation-state that guarantees it.[7]

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[3] Ibid., p. 106
[4] Ibid., p. 3-4
[5] Ibid., p. 59
[6] Ibid., p. 3-4
[7] Ibid., p. 225-226

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Additionally, he expands this argument to account for the psychological need for an Other in this equation,

> The myth of religious violence…provides secular social orders with a stock character, the religious fanatic, to serve as enemy…Violence feeds on the need for enemies, the need to separate us from them. Such binary ways of dividing the world make the world understandable for us, but they also make the world unlivable for many. Doing away with the myth of religious violence is one way of resisting such binaries and, perhaps, turning some enemies into friends.[8]

As Cavanaugh elucidates, religion-and-violence arguments create an Other, a fanatical being or group against whom rational, state-sanctioned violence is morally acceptable. The Other is someone who is different from oneself and becomes dehumanized through the discourse of assumptions underlying religion-and-violence justifications. This Other allows the west to carry out violence against its enemies without incurring any moral compunction.

Žižek

The supposedly secular west is the true engineer of world tyranny, which flies in the face of western religion-and-violence arguments. The west uses subjective argumentation to support their political goals. Slavoj Žižek is a cultural critic, psychoanalytic philosopher, and Hegelian Marxist from Slovenia; he wrote *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections,* which introduces the concepts of objective and subjective violence. Objective violence in western society is "the subtler form of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence."[9] Systemic violence is a facet of objective violence. It is the violence that results from capitalist political and economic arrangements, the "often catastrophic consequences

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[8] Ibid., p. 5, 230
[9] Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008), p. 9

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of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems."[10] Symbolic violence, the other form of objective violence, is the violence that is "embodied in language," or violence that is achieved through specific use of language.[11]

Žižek's exploration of the way violence and conceptions of violence work in our society reveals that violence is a deep-rooted part of our western civilization. Colonialism and later imperialism are good examples for how violent action was taken against others for capital gain. In this example, the societal values promoting imperialism represent systemic violence, and Rudyard Kipling's *White Man's Burden* would represent symbolic violence. The physical violence enacted against those who were subjugated under western imperialism and colonialism fall under the category of subjective violence. Subjective violence, the effect caused by objective violence, is "enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, or fanatical crowds"; therefore, subjective violence is always "attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions."[12] Žižek's analysis of subjective violence illuminates how the idea of the Other, in this case, the perpetrator of violence, is usually characterized as "evil" or "fanatical."[13] His discussion also shows how othering is subjective: in the colonialism example, the west are the perpetrators of violence and thereby become the evil, irrational Others; in the west's perspective, the evil, zealous Other is usually the subject of their colonization. One cannot ignore the irony of subjective violence and Othering.

Another important contribution from Žižek are his sideways glances at violence: studying violence and its effects without directly, emotionally engaging with the material. This technique is necessary because obsessing over grotesque detail obscures the reality of the situation,

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[10] Ibid., p. 2
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 3, 11, 13
[13] Ibid., p. 11, 13

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allowing further violence against those who have been dehumanized by religion-and-violence arguments. Žižek demonstrates in his book *Violence* how societies understand, obscure and deny the sources of violence. When we emotionally engage with violent material, we become bystanders of violence and totally complicit in systems of institutional and interpersonal violence.[14] Our instinctive outrage at the physical manifestations of violence (e.g. 9/11, the Paris attacks of 2015, or the massacre in Nice on Bastille Day 2016) blind us to the objective violence of the world, a violence where we are perpetrators and rather than the victims or blameless bystanders we sometimes pretend to be. All we see are apparently inexplicable actions that disturb the assumed peace of everyday life.[15] In other words, we become so wrapped up with reacting emotionally to outright displays of violence that the reality of violence and its effects are lost. By failing to recognize the source of violence – the west, according to Žižek – we become complicit in the atrocities committed against others through the interplay of objective and subjective violence.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Bringing compassion into the analysis of violence prohibits the othering of one's enemies and allows them to be humanized. Thích Nhất Hạnh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and globally renowned peace activist. *Love in Action* is a collection of two decades' worth of Thích Nhất Hạnh's writings on the importance of peace, reconciliation, and nonviolence. Included in this collection is the play *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*, which illuminates some of Thích Nhất Hạnh's views on violence and how it should be dealt with. First, he maintains that it is not humans we're fighting against, but evil, hatred, and fear. In the play, a character

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[14] Ibid., p. 11
[15] Ibid., p. 27, 37

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rhetorically asks, "Who is really killing us? It is fear, hatred, and prejudice."[16] Displacing fear

and hatred onto others results in violent action taken against those we normally would not harm.

Fear and hatred themselves are emotions – abstract concepts against which it is difficult to do

battle. By personifying fear and hatred in the faces of our enemies, we create a physical entity

against which we can channel our emotions. One could argue that having a physical way to

challenge fear, anger, and hatred is a result of psychological need for self-efficacy. However,

more constructive ways to deal with these emotions are available (i.e. meditation, artistic

expression). Dealing with fear and hatred through physical violence makes othering necessary to

maintain clear consciences and the façade of moral purity. Hatred and fear blind us, leading to

othering.

> Tuan: I agree with you, Sister Mai. "Youth for Social Service" is just a label they pasted on the objects of their hatred and fear, an object that exists only in their perception. It has nothing to do with us as persons. They shot only at the object of their fear and hatred, but because they had pasted the label of this object on us, they ended up shooting us, and we died by mistake. They killed us because they truly did not know who we were.
> Hy: Brother Tuan, are you speaking about wrong perceptions? Hatred and fear blind us. We no longer see each other. We see only the faces of monsters, and that gives us the courage to destroy each other.[17]

In this example, Hy, Tuan and company are the victims of physical violence – the manifestation

of fear and hatred on their countenances by their enemies. Tuan notes that the men who killed

them did not know them, and Hy extrapolates this observation to conclude that only in not

knowing them could the men who killed them have had the courage to do so. This exchange of

thoughts demonstrates the psychological need for an enemy to be othered before violence against

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[16]Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parralax Press, 1993), p. 32
[17] Ibid., p. 30

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them can be conscionably rationalized and carried out. Individual men are not evil, societal

pressures cause evil.

> Mai: You do not understand, Tho. The ones who killed you were only obeying the orders of their superiors. And those superiors were also victims. Yet those who shot you did show their human qualities. They hesitated, not wanting to kill you, fighting against themselves. They had to carry out their orders because they were crushed between the hammer and the anvil, the orders and their families, their jobs, even their lives. Their consciences and perceptions had been greatly obscured.
> Hy: One man even exclaimed, "God, you are all so young!" It was not just an expression of pity for us, but also a protest against his own fate.
> Mai: Men kill because, on the one hand, they are pushed into a position where they must kill.[18]

This dialogue between Mai and Hy reveals that society, not individuals, is evil and at fault for

violence. Mai prompts her companions to be compassionate, to understand that the men who

killed them did not do so for the sheer pleasure of committing murder but because they were

socially obligated to do so. She further encourages her group to remember that all men are

subject to the same pressures and the consequences of those pressures. It was not the case that

the men who killed Hy, Tho, and Tuan were inherently evil, as conventional western othering

philosophies would suggest. They were victims in another way, forced to commit atrocities in

the name of the abstract – society, family, and fate – that defied their moral codes.

The Islamic State

Each theorist's ideas can be applied to the case study of ISIS. ISIS, or the Islamic State of

Iraq and Syria, is a terrorist organization founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It began as an off-

shoot from al-Qaeda, but has since become far more brutal in its actions and more decisive in its

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[18] Ibid., p. 31

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political standpoint. ISIS believes in re-establishing a caliphate (they have installed their current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new caliph) and bringing about the apocalypse. They consider themselves to be the purest Muslims and actively exterminate those who disagree with their ideology. ISIS takes Cavanaugh's theories on using religion to justify violence and flips it on its head. Using religion to justify violence can be used two ways: the way the west uses it and the way ISIS uses it. This tactic, "acting in the name of Islam means that, for the ignorant at least, the groups have some legitimacy for their actions...They can pretend it is not just about power and money."[19] ISIS uses religious doctrine to advance their political goals, a tactic supposedly designed to grant them more legitimacy.[20]

As can be seen in this case study, religion can be used not only to justify action taken against those perceived to be religiously fanatical by the rational, sane, secular state, but religion can also be used to justify political action in order to garner the sympathy of a religious population. Political players understands that power is maintained through the support of the masses. The way to gain the support of the public is to use their dominant ideology: In the United States, for example, the dominating idea of the separation of church and state pervades the post-Enlightenment society; in Iraq and Syria, the majority of the population is devoutly Muslim. Religious justifications are used correspondingly by each population's respective political power. While some philosophical evidence exists to support the claim that ISIS is a religious organization and many experts agree that ISIS is not religiously motivated. If ISIS is not, in fact, a religious organization, then religion-and-violence arguments lose their power. Using Žižek's sideways glances allow for a more objective look at what ISIS does; it is crucial to understand one's enemies in order for them to be defeated. We "need to get acquainted with the Islamic

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[19] Hasan, Mehdi. "How Islamic is the Islamic State? Not at all." New Republic, March 12, 2015. https://newrepublic.com/article/121286/how-islamic-islamic-state
[20] Ibid.

State's intellectual genealogy if we are to react in a way that will not strengthen it, but instead help it self-immolate in its own excessive zeal."[21] This is not to say that religion has no role at all in ISIS and what they're doing, but it is merely "a role of justification...It's not why they do this [or] why young people" join their crusade.[22]

Unfortunately for those who employ this tactic, "highlighting only the role of religion in the radicalization process to the exclusion of, or above, other factors is short-sighted."[23] Engaging directly in this way with ISIS and the horrors they've wrought leads to anger, fear, and hatred. These emotions lead to the psychological need for a monstrous, physical Other against whom our anger can be railed. In the west, the popular methodology for creating an Other are religion-and-violence arguments. However, given the evidence that ISIS is not actually religiously motivated, these arguments fall apart. It is essential that these arguments are dismantled so that ISIS can be dealt with rationally. Humanizing ISIS, in the way that Thích Nhất Hạnh encourages, is essential to understanding and eventually defeating them. People join ISIS out of anger *against* the United States for what happened in Iraq similarly to American military recruits who joined after 9/11. These are emotional, reactionary responses.

A major problem currently affecting the west is fundamental attribution error. Fundamental attribution error can be described as "the phenomenon in which we place excessive emphasis on internal motivations to explain the behavior of others...rather than considering the relevant external factors."[24] In other words, we fall prey to the tendency to view our own actions as

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[21] Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS Really Wants" The Atlantic, March 2015.
http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/

[22] Hasan, "How Islamic is the Islamic State?"
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

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determined by circumstance, but rarely extend this privilege to others.[25] Applying Thích Nhất Hạnh's lessons on compassion and understanding to ISIS lead to the revelation that this terrorist organization, while a fearsome entity in itself, is made up of humans who are motivated by the same things we are – family, society, identity, and emotions. Forgetting that they are human, using religion-and-violence arguments to purposefully dehumanize them, is a mistake that, for humanity's sake, we cannot afford.

Religion-and-violence arguments dehumanize our enemies, therefore justifying and obscuring the reality of violence committed against them. Religion-and-violence arguments create a dehumanized, fanatical Other against whom rational, secular wars are considered justified. The west's fully engaged view of violence leads to the participation in/propagation of objective and subjective violence as well as a cloudy view of the reality of violence and its effects on others. Compassion and understanding of an enemy's human aspects counteracts the western tendency to other/dehumanize those it opposes. The lesson here seems to be: quit using religion as a justification for committing violence both against the religious for being religious as well as against the secular for not being religious. As Ellen DeGeneres would say, we should all just "be kind to one another."

There are some great ideas in here but they need to be reorganized a bit to flow better. I'm not super clear on exactly what you are trying to say, and it is difficult to work with this many moving parts without laying them out super clearly.

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[25] Ibid.

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As well, make sure you're paying attention to grammar/when things should be capitalized.

Look through the readings to see how other authors format if you are unsure.

Overall really great work! Can't wait to see the finished product!

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