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Voltaire, the great icon of the Age of Reason, after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 ended the century of what is known in European history as “the Wars of Religion,” gave thanks that such “abominable monuments to fanaticism” would never recur.¹ Three centuries later, the relation of the world’s religions to peace and violence remains the most complex issue in international affairs, marked by fundamental contradictions and misunderstandings. While almost all their institutionalized forms stress social harmony in their foundation texts and in their expository writings as the basis for human life, both the historical record and contemporary experience indicate that religions have been in the past, and continue to be, a causal factor in violent behavior, even as their spokesmen call for peaceful solutions. If one made a list of wars and violence where religion can be seen as a contributing factor and one where religion promoted peace, the balance might turn out be dishearteningly in favor of the first list, but the simple conclusion is misleading, for it ignores how complex is the nature of both peace and violence.²

While they seem to stand in polar opposition, the causes of peace and of violence are mingled in ways that are not easy to untangle, for both are products of human nature and human history.

The actualities of peace and violence, seemingly so starkly different, are products of the ongoing flow of human history, whether in the repulsive brutalities of the civil wars in Liberia and Rwanda, or in the very different kind of civil war, such as the American Revolution, usually

regarded, at least in school texts, as a necessary search for peace and justice. The authors of the magnificent document in 1776 that justified that eventual war, and, by extension, many others, appealed to inalienable rights derived from “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.” So did President Bush of the United States, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Charles Taylor of Liberia in 2002 in their different ways and perhaps to different gods, a reminder of what the Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung had in mind when he wrote, “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.”³

In a useful study published in 1992 entitled *The Spirit of Violence*, Christopher Candland listed over eleven hundred titles of scholarly books and articles relevant for contemporary discussions of religious and violence.⁴ If it

had been published ten years later, the number of titles would have been increased by many hundreds, an indication of the enormous importance of the subject in the opening years of the twenty-first century. It is a safe guess that a similar listing of works on religion and peace in this same period would have been meager, despite the efforts of virtually all religions to preach love and harmony, prompting the query from Mark Juergensmeyer in a number of important studies: “Why is religion so violent, and why is violence often cloaked in religion?”

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This essay is an attempt to explicate, through specific historical evidence, how religions function in promoting peace and violence by looking at the particular context of contemporary South Asia. Other areas could, of course, be chosen — Ireland, Sudan, Nigeria, Israel-Palestine, China, Japan, the United States — but South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal), with its immense population of about 1.5 billion people, its many cultures, languages, religions, and very long and varied historical experiences, is of great interest in its own right, as well as of importance to the rest of the world. Most of the world’s Hindus and Muslims live in the area; it was the birthplace of Buddhism and Jainism, often characterized as religions of peace; it has the largest surviving community of the very ancient Zoroastrian religion; it has a sizable Christian community that claims its origins in the first Christian century with a visit from the Apostle St. Thomas.⁶ This does not exhaust the list, for as Mark Twain remarked with pardonable hyperbole when he visited India in the 1890s, it is “the home of a thousand religions and two million gods.”

⁷ It has been the center of great violence associated with religion, but it has also been the center of peace movements, rooted in religion, symbolized by the career of Mahatma Gandhi who argued that nonviolence, based on religion, was the pathway to the independence of India. In 1947, however, he saw, as political freedom came, the outbreak of horrific violence between the three great religions of India, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism, tearing its society apart. Watching the destruction of his dream, he said his “heart grew sick and weary,” but despite the conflagration raging around him, he continued to believe in “the still small voice within.”⁸

Pakistan, the other country that became independent out of the conflagration, was created as a homeland for Muslims where they would be free from the domination of Hindus. Nonetheless, just as Pakistan came into existence, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, its chief architect, told his people that while division of the subcontinent into Pakistan, with its Muslim majority, and India, with its Hindu majority, had been necessary, now the ideal was that in the course of time, “Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”⁹ In India, Nehru said much the same thing to his people, many of whom desired a specific role for Hinduism as the majority religion, when he argued for a secular state, by which he meant a society where religion would be a strictly private matter, with no voice in public policy. “The cardinal doctrine of a modern democratic state is the separation of the state from religion. The idea of a religious state has no place in the mind of the modern man.”¹⁰

In neither India nor Pakistan did religion become a strictly private matter. Pakistan became a constitutionally defined Islamic state, and at the time of Partition in 1947, most of the Hindus fled to India, leaving a small minority, along with an even smaller number of Christians. While subject to some harassment by local police, they were too few in number and too unimportant economically to attract much attention. This was not the case of Muslims and Christians in India, who were guaranteed the rights of all citizens, including full freedom of religion in the constitution, but who were subjected to increasing pressures as Hindu nationalist groups became more powerful, seeking to make India not, they insisted, into a Hindu state, but into a nation where the values and ancient traditions of Hindu culture, summarized under the term *Hindutva*, became part of the fabric of Indian society.

Four aspects of religious and political life in modern South Asia can be identified as interacting to provide coherence for the study of the role of religion in promoting both peace and violence. Religion as a definer of social and personal identity is one; nationalism, with its claims for absolute loyalty, is another; the function of leaders in fusing these two social forces is crucial; and, finally, the nature of the violence produced by this fusion must be understood in context. While all these relevant terms defy agreed-upon definition, one can at least point to their usage here. Peace is a ubiquitous term in religion for an internal spiritual condition — in the Christian phrase, “the peace that passes for understanding” — but here it is used in the sense of freedom from war and civil unrest.

At the same time, most contemporary versions of religion seem to recognize, in the words of Psalm 85, that “righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Religion is understood here as “a fusing of memories and experiences around symbols that are regarded as possessing powers that transcend ordinary life, and these shared experiences unite people into community.”¹¹ Such a sense of community can bring peace or, as often happens in South Asia, it can be used to promote hatred and violence against other communities. Nationalism, like

religion, can mean many things, but minimally it means a sense of identity based on belonging to a nation-state that is circumscribed, to some degree, by territory, culture, language, religion, and history. Out of this mixture comes what Carleton Hayes, the eminent historian of nationalism, many years ago called “the religion of nationalism,” parallel in many ways to traditional Christianity, with its demands for loyalty, sacrifice, and obedience. ¹²

Religion and nationalism thus share many characteristics, not the least of which is a utopian vision of what a good society should be like, and the differing versions of such a society are a potent cause of conflict when religions compete for loyalty. At this point, leadership has a crucial role in creating this religion of nationalism and the conflicts that follow from it. Leaders articulate and define the often inchoate goals of a people, offer solutions, and create institutional forms to carry them out.

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Violence also covers a large territory of human activity, including wars between nations, attacks on neighbors, oppression through slavery, stigmatizing groups by gender, and, very frequently, enmities between institutionalized religions and their leaders.

Peace, violence, nationalism, religion, and leadership make, then, a strange and volatile mixture, and I have attempted to give them some coherence by constructing a course for looking at them in the historical context of contemporary South Asia.

Endnotes

¹Quoted in Ainslie T. Embree, *Utopias in Conflict: Religion and Nationalism in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

²Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Thompson, eds., *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³Quoted in James Carroll, “Why Religion Still Matters,” *Daedalus* (Summer 2003), 12.

⁴Christopher Candland, ed., *The Spirit of Violence: An Interdisciplinary Bibliography of Religion and Violence* (New York: Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Occasional Papers, No. 6, 1992).

⁵Mark Juergensmeyer, introduction to *Ibid.*, i; Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁶For a brief overview, see Ainslie T. Embree, "Religion" in *Understanding Contemporary India*, Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta, eds., (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2003), 191–320.

⁷Quoted in *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸Quoted in Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 251.

⁹Quoted in *Ibid.*, 387.

¹⁰Quoted in Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 155.

¹¹Embree, "Religion," in Ganguly, *Contemporary India*, 192.

¹²Carleton J. H. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 93–125.

¹³Embree, *Utopias*, 10.

Resources

In addition to the endnotes, the following resources will be useful.

Gandhi, Rajmohan. *Revenge and Reconciliation: Understanding South Asia*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu National Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*. London: Hurst, 1996.

Marty, Martin E. and R. Scott Appleby, eds. *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Varadarajan, Siddharth, ed. *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy*. Delhi: Penguin, 2002.

Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.