Religion and the Legitimation of Violence in the Contemporary World:

a comparative analysis

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The contemporary context

- Not so long ago enlightened commentators – no less in the liberal than in the marxist tradition – were confidently predicting the 'death of religion'
  - on the grounds that science and modernity were set to overwhelm such irrational and superstitious hang-overs from the past
- As we enter the twenty-first century such predictions carry little weight
  - it is now only too obvious that religion remains a salient feature in human affairs
  - although not in the way that most critics of the theorists secular modernism expected
- For it is not so much the contemplative, peace-loving and spiritually oriented dimensions of religion which are such a salient feature of the contemporary world
  - although those dimensions should most certainly not be overlooked
- But rather the ever more vigorous nexus between religion and violence

  - which seems set to become one of the most salient features of the 21st century

Consider:
if only to remind ourselves of the obvious

- George Bush's (popular) decision to launch a 'Crusade' against the evils of terrorism
- Osama Bin Laden's parallel efforts to launch a *jihad* against the self-proclaimed crusaders
- The violent division of Palestine as between its indigenous Muslim and Christian population and largely immigrant Jews intent on reclaiming their 'biblically assigned' heritage
- The increasingly violent division of India between the 'defenders of its indigenous civilization' and the descendants of 'anti-national elements who sold out to alien traditions' (i.e. Muslims and Christians)
- The rise of militant Buddhist efforts to drive 'alien Hindu invaders' out of Sri Lanka and many more …..
    — whilst all these disputes initially emerged from political driven quarrels about access to scarce resources
    — as the 20th century has progressed, so religious justifications of the resultant patterns of violence have become steadily more violent
- So much so that the 21st century may well turn out be marked by the resurgence of religious war on a global scale

How is this to be explained?

- Two separate but interconnected sets issues confront us here
1. Contemporary
    — how and why is it that 'religion' – or rather the ways in which religious traditions have currently begun to manifest themselves
    — is currently precipitating ever more violent outcomes on a global scale?
2. Historical
    i. what form has the relationship between religion and violence *so far* displayed in each of the worlds major religious traditions ?
    ii. to what extent is the current nexus between religion and violence a *novel*, and perhaps even a *modern* phenomenon?
- Hence even though I am much more of an anthropologist than a historian
    — let alone a theologian
- I'm nevertheless going to begin by talking quite extensively about the past
    — since it is only by exploring these issues from a diachronic perspective thatwe can begin to gain an analytical handle on our contemporary experience

Some caveats

- Attempting to pose as a comparativist in a field populated by specialists is always potentially foolhardy
  - — for whilst I, too, am also a specialist, in this case in the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent
    - ➢ and most especially of developments in the Sikh, Hindu, and Islamic traditions (which by no means exhausts the field)
  - — my knowledge of the Christian tradition, and still more so that of its Jewish roots, is distinctly sketchy
- That said it seems to me that the field cries out for comparative analysis
  - — so I hope you'll accept an invitation to join what has for me been a voyage of discovery

Some initial working premises

1. As with all other products of human social, linguistic and cultural creativity
   - — religious traditions develop (and hence continuously reconstruct themselves) over time
     - ➢ even as they periodically 'rediscover' (or more usually comprehensively reinterpret) their roots
2. Hence there is no such thing as religious 'orthodoxy'
   - — not only do conventional understandings within every tradition change and develop over time
   - — but time also invariably precipitates schism
     - ➢ so precipitating the emergence of rival parties, each of which insists that theirs is the more authentic interpretation
3. All religious traditions are multi-dimensional in character. These invariably include
   - i. a mystical and spiritual dimension
     - ➢ which is contemplative and hence 'peaceful' in character
   - ii. a moral, social, and organisational dimension
     - ➢ which consequently engages much more actively with political processes
     - ➢ And regularly generates a nexus with 'righteous' violence
4. Hence the nexus between religion and violence which is the focus of our current concern is far from unprecedented
   - — even if its contemporary format has few, if any, historical precedents

Further working premises

5. It is vital distinguish between
    i. the prophetic teachings of the founding father(s) of each major tradition on the one hand
    ii. the ideas and conventions subsequently developed to support and articulate the tradition
        ➢ given that no religious tradition ever survives in the long term in the absence of some form of corporate institutionalisation
6. Once in place, the officers of such structures ('priests') are well placed to legitimise – or to condemn – the structure of the social order
    – and hence to transform a ruler's naked power into divinely sanctioned authority
7. If we also accept Weber's arguments that one of the crucial characteristics of a state is its ability to monopolise the exercise of within a given territory
    – it follows that a nexus between religion, political authority and the exercise legitimate violence is a commonplace feature of human affairs
8. Hence its not so much the existence of such a nexus on which we need to focus our attention
    – but rather with the varied ways in which that nexus has been articulated
        ➢ no less *as between* traditions
        ➢ than over time *within* any given tradition

Religion and violence in Islamic contexts

● On the face of it the nexus between religion and violence in Islam is more firmly established than in any other tradition
    — the Prophet Mohammed was amongst other things a skilled and successful military commander in his own right
    — his immediate successors followed in the Prophet's footsteps by conquering not just one but two major Empires
        ➢ bringing a huge swathe of territory formerly controlled by the Romans and the Sassanians
        ➢ and stretching from the Atlantic to the steppes of Central Asia
    — firmly under Islamic control
● From the provincial perspective western Christendom, this was a distinctly 'un-holy' development
    — which had enabled 'un-believing' Muslims to gain control of the greater part of the civilised world though violent means

But was this 'holy war'?

- Shocked and disturbed by these developments, and entirely ignorant of the new order, they viewed Muslims as mirror images of themselves
  - — so concluding that the Muslims must have been waging an 'unholy war'
- But although the best part of a millennium and a half has passed since these events took place
  - — there is still little remarkably little appreciation (at least in Euro-Christian contexts) that this process of expansion was *not* driven by an urge to convert
  - — rather its central objective was to bring the maximum amount of territory under the control of the *ummah*
- Such that the controllers of the new empire formed an Islamic elite
- However it was also an open elite:
  - — in which those prepared to acknowledge Mohammed's position as seal of the Prophets joined a thriving development within the Abrahamic tradition
  - — and thereby gained access intellectually and philosophically sophisticated ruling class
  - — which stood in a position of governance over many millions of non-Muslims
- in these circumstances the central concern of the *ummah* was that their subjects should pay their taxes without demur
  - — which they would be a great deal less likely to do if subjected to religious coercion
- Muslims may have used their swords to extend their empire – but not to enforce conversion

Nor did the unity of the *ummah* long survive the death of the Prophet Mohammed

- After Ali, the fourth of the 'rightly guided' *khalifa* (successors to the Prophet's authority) was murdered by a successful rival
  - — Islam experienced its first (and still its most substantial) schism
    - ➢ that between *Shi'a* and *Sunni* parties
- The circumstances of schism also had a profound impact on Islamic attitudes towards the legitimation of political power
  - — the Shi'a have always harboured an intense awareness of the prospect of political power being exercised illegitimately
    - ➢ given Ali's death at the hands of an ungodly aspirant for control of the *ummah*
  - — to be sure the *'ulema* (the scholarly articulators of Sunni religious law), have much less sceptical of the legitimacy of royal authority than their Shi'a counterparts
  - — the most respected 'ulema have likewise always sought too keep their distance from Islamic authority-figures
    - ➢ regardless of whether they described themselves as an *emir,* a *sultan,* or even a *khalifa*
- Hence for by far the greater part of its history, the political unity of the *ummah* has been a fiction
  - — and the most respected doctors of Islamic law have carefully distanced themselves from royal authority

Nor has Islam has never had a central source of theological authority

1. Although *'ulema* can be broadly ranked in terms of the esteem in which they are held by their peers
    — there is no formal hierarchy, especially amongst those of Sunni persuasion
    — nor are the activities of the 'ulema regulated by any formally institutionalised structure
        ➢ with the result that there is no 'church' of Islam
        ➢ nor even priests in either the pastoral or the sacerdotal sense
2. The *'ulema* are not primarily concerned with matters of theology *per se*
    — the most accurate way of identifying their position (no less in the Sunni than the Shi'a tradition) is as 'doctors of religious law'
3. In matters of spiritual insight, of philosophy, and hence of theology
    — another set of specialists have had a far more important role to play
    — the *pirs,* the *sheikhs* and the *marabouts* who can conveniently be identified as sufi
● In consequence there is and always has been considerable tension between the *'ulema* and their *sufi* counterparts throughout the Muslim world
    — let alone the endless academic squabbles between individual *'alim*

The legitimation of power and authority

● Nevertheless Muslim rulers – no less than those in all others traditions – routinely sought religious legitimisation for their *de facto* positions of power
● Such that they regularly sought an *imprimatur* for their authority
    — either from the legalistic *'ulema*
    — or from saintly *shaikhs* and *pirs*
    — and preferably from both
● But whilst it proved relatively easy to find compliant '*ulema* to fulfil this role
    — especially if their pockets were filled with gold
        ➢ even if its acceptance promptly undermined their scholarly reputation
● The full-hearted support of *shaikhs* and *pirs* was invariably much more difficult to obtain
    — partly because their spiritual commitments led them to downplay the significance of involvement in mundane affairs
    — and partly because of their legendary indifference to all forms of economic and political hierarchy
        ➢ preferring, instead, to rank devotees in terms of the intensity of their spiritual commitment
● Moreover *shaikhs* and *pirs* come with a prospective sting in their tails

Religious challenges to authority

- Whilst the '*ulema* have always been lawyer-like in their attitude to authority
  — and were always as keen to insist that the properly constituted authorities should enforce their rulings
  — as they were sceptical about becoming engaged in active confirmation of the authorities' legitimacy
- Their counterparts amongst the *shaikhs* and *pirs* have always played a far more complex role
  — given that their status was primarily a function of their spiritual charisma
- As a result of the intensity their spiritual devotions
  — *pirs* are regarded as being close to and indeed to have become the beloved friends (wali) of Allah
    ➢ so much so that they have direct access to his *barakat* (approximately 'grace')
- Hence opening up the prospect that a devoted *murid* can
  — with the assistance of his master's capacity to facilitate divine intermediation
  — gain occult support for his plans
- An opportunity to which few Islamic rulers failed to avail themselves
  — however *pirs* had no necessary obligation to facilitate rulers' objectives
- Quite the contrary: *pirs, sheikhs* and *marabouts* have long played a crucial role in legitimating processes of Islamic regime-change
  — especially when they reached the conclusion that the ruler was acting unjustly or unrighteously

Holy War?

- As with all other civilisational traditions, Islam is no stranger to violence
  — such that Muslim regimes have found themselves involved in episodes of intra- and inter-dynastic warfare since the very outset
- Moreover the '*ulema* have long distinguished between
  i. the greater *jihad:* an inner struggle against *kufr,* unbelief
  ii. and the lesser *jihad:* an external struggle against *kaffirs,* unbelievers
    ➢ thus apparently rendering the prospect of 'holy war' legitimate
    ➢ as Islam's critics have never failed to emphasise
- Nevertheless 'holy war' in the crusading sense
  — or in other words wars whose principle objective was to extirpate heretical forms of belief and practice
    ➢ and/or where adherence to Islam was the prime source of military solidarity
  — has never been a significant driving force behind the many episodes of warfare which have occurred during the course of Islamic history
- Despite the Islamic world's long-standing condition of sectarian and religious plurality

Religion and violence in the Christian tradition

- What happens if we ask the same questions of the Christian tradition?
    — the answers turn out to be very different
- If we look to what we know of the life of the tradition's founder
    — it is not just that the militaristic features of Islam's origins are wholly absent
    — but also that Jesus' attitude to politics was equally antithetical to that of the Prophet of Islam
    — since he appears actively eschewed any prospect of building a new and better socio-political order within the limitations of the existent world
- Hence military expansion could not have been further from his mind
    — instead his emphasis was above all on peaceful persuasion and proselytisation
- Taking his teachings as they stand, the last thing that one would expect to be derived from Jesus' followers is the legitimation of violence through and by the state
    — how, then, did the Church militant arise from the midst of all this?

The institutionalisation of the Christian tradition

- Let me begin by considering what was clearly a turning point in the development of the Christian tradition
    — or to be more specific in the development of the European as opposed to the Asian and African dimensions of that tradition
- By focusing on the role of the Bishop of Hippo in the institutionalisation of the Roman Church
- and which led to the concatenation
    i. of Augustine's profoundly influential theological synthesis
    ii. with the equally influential consequence Christian tradition's incorporation into the heart of its long-standing enemy
        ➢ the institutional structure of Imperial Rome
- In the midst of which the resultant process of institutionalisation
    — established the conceptual and theological foundations of the greater part of what we now know as Christianity
- With the result, amongst other things, that a religious tradition which had hitherto seen itself as subversive of the state
    — and of all its violent proclivities
- Suddenly became an institutionalised legitimator of that very structure

Much followed from this, including

1. The priestly hierarchy was powerfully reinforced
   - such that the Bishop of Rome became the Emperor of a universal Church
2. The Church became the ultimate legitimator of the social order
   - and hence of the authority of Christian princes
3. In keeping with Augustine's theology, the Church was identified as the *only* route to the good life in a sinful world
   - so rendering moral and religious plurality wholly unacceptable
4. The Church and its hierarchy became the adjudicator of theological orthodoxy
   - hence legitimating the extirpation of heresy, if necessary by violent means
5. The Church and its priesthood became the sole facilitators of both moral and spiritual achievement
   - so further undermining the legitimacy of all forms of plurality
6. Proselytisation (i.e. the expansion of Christendom) was organised from above
   - and consequently came to be perceived as a necessary component of church/state policy
7. In consequence Church and state became closely interwoven
   - not only did the Church legitimate the authority of princely rulers
   - but its princes gained a right – and a duty – to deploy violence should their authority be challenged

The Crusades

- The irruption of Islam into the territory which had come to be identified as Christendom
  - was perceived as a staggering challenge to the authority of the Church
- Not only did large numbers of people in North Africa and Spain desert Christianity for in favour of Islam
  - but Jerusalem itself fell to the political control of these 'infidels'
- A development which was perceived as a wholly unacceptable threat to the integrity of the universal church
  - leading to attempts to recapture Jerusalem in Christ's name
  - and to extirpate the heretics who had defiled its holy shrines
- Moreover despite the ultimate failure of the Crusades
  - they were both perceived as and fought as 'holy wars'
  - in which was unnecessary to show any kind of mercy to the 'barbarous infidels' whom the Crusaders found themselves confronting

Religious plurality in the Islamic world

- Whilst the Crusaders further legitimated their violence by suggesting that they were merely paying back the 'Mohammedans' in their own money
  - just how much truth was there in such arguments?
- How did the Muslims *actually* behave in all the territories of which they so swiftly gained control?
  - and not least in the city of Jerusalem ?
- The answer is very different from the legitimating myths generated by the Crusaders themselves
  - and which remain just as influential to this day in much of western Europe
- Far from presaging the bloody strategies of extermination pursued by the Crusaders
  - not only did the Muslim conquerors of the newly establish *dar ul Islam* accept the religious plurality of their newly acquired subjects
    - whom they consequently allowed to get on with their religious beliefs and practices as they so chose
    - always provided that they accepted the authority of their new masters, not least by dutifully paying their taxes
  - but this acceptance of plurality was particularly salient in the holy city of Al Quds itself
    - both before and after the Crusaders' violent irruption into the Holy Land

Religious Plurality in Christendom

- Although the temporary irruption of the *firangi* (Franks) into Palestine had no significant impact on Muslim attitudes towards religious plurality
- These adventures further reinforced (Western) Christendom's view of itself as an embattled defender of the true faith
  - and its vision of the legitimacy of (and indeed the necessity for) crusade
- Which resulted in repeated efforts to suppress all forms of heresy, unbelief and paganism within the territories its own territories
  - leading to crusades against Cathars in France
  - against Muslims in Andalusia
  - and against Jews across the board
- Which in turn set the scene for the 'wars of religion' which erupted across Europe in the aftermath of the subsequent Protestant/Catholic schism
  - hence both the reformation and the counter-reformation left Europe's ideological hostility to pluralism untouched
  - and in turn reinforced the ethnocentric view that all other traditions must of necessity take the same view

Religion and plurality in the Hindu tradition

- Before moving on to consider developments which are taking place on this front in the contemporary world
- I'd like to bring a third comparative element into play:
  - — the Hindu tradition, noting that
1. This is a tradition which has long regarded plurality not just as a legitimate, but as a *necessary* feature of the socio-religious order
   - — as exemplified in the notion of *varnashramdharma*
2. It posits a necessary connection between religion, rulership and the legitimate exercise of violence
   - — exemplified by the conceptualisation of the Raja as an *avtar* of Vishnu
   - — and who is thereby entitled to utilise *danda* (raw force) as his ultimate fall-back in fulfilling his sacred duty to maintain the integrity of the social order
3. It is a tradition in which the relationship between religion and violence is frequently as grievously misunderstood as in the Islamic case
   - — albeit in the reverse direction
   - — and for quite different reasons
4. Processes of institutionalisation within it have followed radically different courses from those which occurred in Islamic and Christian contexts

Cosmological assumptions

- Since the Indic religious tradition we currently know as 'Hinduism' claims no specific founder
  - — we only know of it in institutionalised formats
    - ➢ which have in turn been changing and developing over time
- Nevertheless all those forms have displayed some common features
  - — one of the most notable of which the presence of dynamic tension between two spheres of religious activity
    - i. formal and socially constructive ritual practice, facilitated by a priestly caste of Brahmans
    - ii. more transcendently oriented efforts to gain spiritual insight and awareness, invariably articulated through some form ascetic practice
- But in both dimensions of religious ideology and practice the concept of violence
  - — whether understood in physical or in symbolic terms
  - — has always played a key role in the whole exercise
  - — and has done so on deep-rooted theological grounds
- In cosmological terms, Indic traditions have always assumed that *himsa* (violence, as opposed to *ahimsa*, non-violence)
  - — is an intrinsic dimension of all forms existence
- Such that life and death, creation and destruction are but two side of the same coin

Yajna: the symbolism of the fire sacrifice

- *Yajna* is one of the most ancient of Indic religious practices
  - — as well as one of the most enduring
- Its basic structure is quite straightforward
  - — following the instructions of an officiating *purohit* (usually a Brahmin)
  - — the *yajamana* (he who offers the sacrifice)
  - — sits before an altar on which a sacred fire (*agni*) prepared by the *purohit*
  - — and at appropriate points in his recitation of *mantra*
  - — makes offerings of grain and ghee to the pure flames of the fire
  - — generating clouds of sweet-smelling smoke which rises to the heavens

DRAUPADI

DRUPADA, KING OF PANCHALA, WAS PERFORMING A GRAND YAGNA, TO OBTAIN A MIGHTY SON.

- What's so violent about that? – you may well ask
  - — as ever, complex rituals require exegesis and interpretation before their significance can be adequately teased out

Creative violence at a Cosmic level

- *Agni*, in this tradition, is no less creative than destructive
  - — offerings, the product of natural fertility, are consumed and consequently destroyed by the fire
  - — but in that very process they are transformed in (and reborn as) sweet-smelling smoke
  - — which ascends to the heavens, pleases the gods who in turn transform the offerings into rain
  - — where it is consumed by the earth in a further process of creative destruction which serves to generates life itself
- Hence the *yajna* both celebrates and facilitates the dynamics of the entire cosmos
  - — and in the case of the comic-strip myth, facilitates the fecundity of the queen

Creative violence at a ritual level

- However the yajna also has a further symbolic role: as a consumer of impurity
    - here the role of the *yajamana* – ideally a *raja* – is critical
    - it is he who makes offerings to the fire, and to the *purohit*
        - whose belly is also a fire which digests the *yajamana's* gifts
        - but in the process of digesting those gifts the Brahmin is himself impurified
- hence the whole edifice provides the *raja/yajamana* creatively to 'burn off' his own accumulated impurities
    - and having thereby resacralized himself, regenerated his capacity to perform his *dharmic* duties
- But just what are those duties?

Creative violence at a socio-political level

- As a nominal incarnation of Vishnu, the core *dharmic* duty of the raja
    - and beyond him all those in a position of authority (i.e. all *kshatriya*)
- Is to maintain the integrity of the *dharmic* order, where necessary by force, *danda*
- However the implementation of violent force necessarily precipitates impurity
    - and which in turn can only be removed through the regular performance of elaborate fire sacrifices
- So once again the *yajna* simply completes the circle in symbolic terms
    - but in doing it also underlines a further crucial point
- Given its assumption that rulership is both a sacred and an intrinsically violent role
    - the Indic tradition takes it for granted that the righteous exercise of violence is as necessary as it is legitimate in *dharmic* terms
- There is no place for *ahimsa* here either

What, though, about the world-renouncing ascetics?

- In the first place it is worth remembering that *yoga* is by definition a process of *internal* violence
    - which aims to overcome, and hence bring under one's personal control
    - natural bodily processes of all kinds
- Moreover by exercising such discipline, *yogis* acquire *siddhi*, occult power
    - and the greater the austerities practiced, the greater the *siddhi*
    - up to and including the creative/destructive powers of Shiva himself
- Having gained such powers, which are envisaged as being no less in temporal than in occult spheres
    - *Yogis* can legitimately make careers for themselves as fearless warriors
    - for any cause they choose

If both Rajas and Yogis can legitimately participate in violence, what space is left for *ahimsa*?

- To be sure some world-renouncers take the view that avoiding all forms of violence is a necessary prerequisite for achieving *moksha*
    - But in Indic traditions as a whole this view has always had more critics than supporters
- Arguments mounted against the efficacy of *ahimsa* as a route to liberation include:
    i. The proposed route is a contradiction in terms, on the grounds that participation in life itself – from breathing onwards – necessarily generates *himsa*
        - hence whilst it may indeed be morally admirable to reduce one's degree of *himsa* generation to the lowest possible level
        - absolute zero can never be achieved, short of death
    ii. Hence as the violence-legitimating *Bhagavad Gita* (for example) teaches
        - comprehensive transcendence can only be achieved by continuing to participate in *samsara*
        - whilst simultaneously finding a strategy by means of which to rise above it
- None of this is to suggest that avoiding violence is anything other than a worthy goal
    - the Hindu tradition is nothing if not plural
- But it is to emphasise that the pursuit of *ahimsa* not behavioural strategy which is intrinsically superior to all others

Gandhi's commitment to *ahimsa*

- Besides being highly skilled in the art of political manoeuvre
  — Gandhi was equally skilled in the art of ideological creativity
    ➢ indeed the simultaneous articulation of those dual skills lay at the heart of his personal impact
- Although his tactic of non-violence was a highly effective 'weapon of the weak'
  — not least because it provided a highly effective means of gaining the moral high ground vis-à-vis heavily armed colonizers
- Gandhi's own preferred term for this strategy, *satya graha* (the ascetically generated creative/destructive 'force of Truth')
  — also appealed to indigenous Indic ideologies of righteous violence
    ➢ articulated no less in temporal than in occult terms
  — in a novel but particularly effective way
- To be sure the conceptual subtleties of Gandhi's arguments were far beyond the ken of India's alien rulers
  — who relied primarily on missionary notions such as 'the white man's burden' to legitimate their presence in India
- But the triple whammy of the Mahatma's message chimed powerfully with the ideological presumptions of his Indic audiences
  — however Gandhi was in no sense a traditionalist
  — rather in challenging external hegemony he played fast and loose with established ideas and practices, in a manner which is can accurately be described as revolutionary

Before bringing the three strands of my argument together we must first make a quick back-track

- To the highly significant date of 1492:
  — which marked the fall of Granada to the crusading force of *reconquista*
  — as well the successful crossing of the Atlantic by Columbus
    ➢ which quickly gave birth to a process of predatory colonial expansion
- The two events also have a powerful ideological connection
  — not least because the crusading mission
    ➢ the self-imposed task of bringing unbelievers to Christ, if necessary by force
  — became the principal legitimating myth of the subsequent process of European colonial expansion
- And in the form of current policies stemming from the White House
  — under the steadily rising influence of North American neo-fundamentalist evangelist movements
- Continue to do so till this day

# However there is much to fill in between 1492 and the present

- Not least the impact of the Catholic/Protestant schism
    — since the turning point in Christian theology which gave rise to that schism
    — proved to have as far reaching an impact on colonial developments as did the institutionalisation Roman church
- As their Empires developed, Catholic interpretations of how their mission should be implemented differed sharply from those of their Protestant rivals
    — given that they put much less emphasis on conformity with the prescriptions of the scriptures
        ➢ Iberian (and hence catholic) imperial ventures for the most part displayed little alarm at the emergence of hybrid forms of belief and practice amongst their subjects
    — but as the scale northern European empires gradually outshone those constructed by the Iberian pioneers
- With the result that Protestant interpretations of 'mission' became increasingly influential
    — and still do so to this day
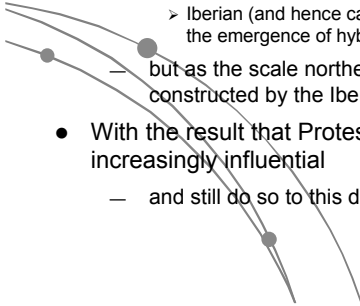
Core features of the Protestant position

- A central feature of the protestant reformation was a vigorous critique of religious hierarchies
    — together with the tendency of such hierarchies to form institutionalised links with, and to provide automatic legitimation to, established secular powers
- Not only have most protestant movements consequently favoured a go-it-alone approach to socio-political activity
    — they have favoured both a textually based and a do-it-yourself approach to theological exegesis
- Along with this they have put a great emphasis on popular (and populist) evangelism
    — preferably practiced from the bottom up
    — as opposed to the more intellectualist, top-down approaches favoured by their Catholic rivals
- Yet despite these differences, certain commonalities were still sustained despite the schism
    i.   the view that all other faiths are by definition mistaken
    ii. the assumption that the exercise force in an effort to defend and extend the City of God is an unfortunate but nevertheless legitimate necessity
- Taken together, these features have provided the bedrock for the emergence of contemporary forms of neo-fundamentalism
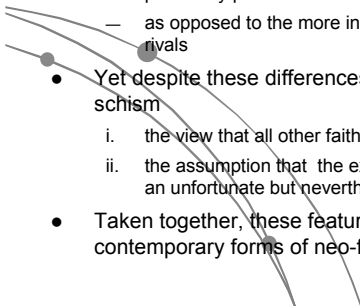
Local responses Christian mission in colonial contexts

- Whist Catholic efforts at mission met with considerable success
  - not least because they were generally relaxed about the emergence of hybrid forms of belief and practice amongst their converts
- By contrast Protestant efforts at conversion in colonial (and most especially in Asian) contexts for the most part proved to be a dismal failure
  - although they are currently proving a good deal much successful in recruiting those who had already converted to Catholicism
- What the Protestant missionary effort has spurred, however, is a huge range of countervailing reform movements
  - most especially in the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic traditions
- In which local religious revivalists have borrowed large parts of the missionaries' conceptual agenda
  - stood them on their heads wherever necessary
  - Incorporated them into a reformed version of their own tradition
    - frequently legitimising the radical changes in belief and practice consequently proposed by means of a protestant-style re-reading of 'scripture'
- Thereby generating a neo-fundamentalist agenda by means of which to challenge the legitimacy evangelists' arguments

Anti-Imperialism and the rise of neo-fundamentalism

- MK Gandhi was a classic exponent of this 'turning the tables' strategy
  - and in political terms it was manifestly one which met with immense success
  - although it should also be noted that the impact of his teaching on popular belief and practice in India was very much more limited
- However Gandhi was by no means alone in taking this neo-fundamentalist route:
  - parallel developments also took place, and indeed continue to thrive, within the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Islamic traditions alike
    - almost all of which also enthusiastically adopted a further feature of the Protestant position which Gandhi deliberately eschewed
  - hostility to pluralism
- Resulting in lines of thinking which led directly to contemporary hot-spots of neo-fundamentalist inspired outbreaks of violence, as for example
  - from Swami Dayanada through VD Sarvarkar to the rise of the BJP
  - from the Singh Sabhas to the Akali Dal to Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale
  - from Mawdudi and al-Banna through to Qutb and ultimately to the Taliban and bin Laden

Making sense of these developments

- None of these neo-fundamentalist figures were in any sense 'traditionalists'
    i. few, if any, had any kind of formal theological training
        ➢ most were trained as lawyers, scientists, engineers or doctors in the Western tradition
    ii. they played fast and loose with established scholarly conclusions
        ➢ taking the view that formal qualifications are not a prerequisite to the conduct of theological exegesis, they simply re-read ancient texts on their own preferred terms
    iii. they were bitterly critical of all forms of popular practice which contradicted 'modern' expectations
        ➢ condemning them, as did the missionaries, as superstitious and irrational
- In doing so the revivalists borrowed three further arguments from their opponents:
    i. an assertion of the absolute correctness of their own chosen path
        ➢ resulting in vigorous condemnation all forms of cultural and religious hybridity and plurality
    ii. a parallel assertion that homogeneity was the only legitimate foundation of a good society
        ➢ leading not only to challenge the legitimacy of the colonial presence
        ➢ but also the presence of all deviant minorities
    iii. dismissal of all of their tradition's institutionalised linkages with the state
        ➢ so enabling them to set out a revolutionary socio-political agenda
    iv. an assertion that violence is both a necessary and a legitimate means of reaching one's ends

A contextualised view of current developments

- Most contemporary Euro-American observers view these developments as extremely disturbing
    — such that they are routinely condemned 'extremist' and 'fascist'
- However in the process of so doing, three crucial points are routinely overlooked
    i. these developments are in large part a reaction to colonial occupation
    ii. the vast majority of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhist and Muslims still operate within the context of largely unreformed versions of their traditions
    iii. It is the growing salience of neo-fundamentalist inspired policies emanating from north America which are now the principal recruiting sergeant for these developments
- Within the context of which the events of 9/11, together with subsequent Euro-American reactions, have been a critical turning point
    — such that a long-standing dialectic of mutual polarisation
        ➢ which can be traced back to the Reformation, to 1492, to the Crusades and perhaps even earlier
    — has been brought to a head at the outset of the 21st century

What price the future?

- In those parts of the world which were (or are) exposed to the force of Euro-American hegemony
    — as well amongst the offspring of people of such ancestry who have by now established themselves as migrant workers throughout Euro-America
- Support for various forms of neo-fundamentalism continues to grow apace
    — largely as a dialectical response to their experience of both material and ideological injustice
- Meanwhile the missionary efforts which initially precipitated these responses
- Have been powerfully reinforced by ever-rising levels of support for neo-fundamentalist ideologies throughout the length and breadth of the United States
    — hence biblically grounded interpretations of world affairs now underpin a great deal of American foreign policy and practice
    — where they are now actively deployed to legitimate exercises in pre-emptive violence
- So much so that we now live in the midst of a hall of ideologically constructed mirrors
    — in which activists in each party have come to the conclusion
        ➢ on the basis of their 'theological' reading other's actions
    — that the deployment of 'defensive' violence is as necessary as it is legitimate

Essentialism and Neo-fundamentalism as aspects of modernity

- In the midst of all this 'secular' arguments to the effect that the ideologies relied on by all concerned are 'irrational'
    — cut very little ice
- To be sure the underlying contradictions which drive contemporary processes of polarisation are primarily socio-economic in character
    — but suggestions that these can be resolved by seeking to show that the ideological constructions used by the contenders to legitimise their position are fictitious
    — can only be regarded as the outcome of a signal failure to appreciate the role of religion and culture in human affairs
- A similar response must also be made to suggestions that we have found ourselves unexpectedly tied up in the limitations of archaic superstitions
    — as I hope I have shown, all the neo-fundamentalisms by which we currently find ourselves confronted are above all a *modern* phenomenon
- Hence whilst each strand has its own distinctive history
    — current developments are above all the outcome of *contemporary* dialectical processes
- They cannot be understood as mere hang-overs from the past

'Modern' responses to cultural and religious diversity

- In contemplating the contemporary nexus between religion and violence
  — it is easy to focus on the perceived threat of the neo-fundamentalism of others to our own interests
- But what happens when we reverse the question
- and ask instead how our own growing addiction to neo-fundamentalism
  — is perceived by communities committed to values other than our own
    ➢ especially when those alters are our own fellow citizens
  — and who differ from the dominant majority not just in terms of gender and sexual orientation
- But in terms of their religious and moral priorities, such that
  — they issue their calls to prayer from minarets rather than bell-towers
  — families are organised in such a way that marriages are arranged
  — they care deeply about issues of honour and shame
  — they prefer to adopt a nomadic lifestyle rather than being trapped by bricks and mortar
- Are such manifestations of plurality legitimate – or should they be criminalised?
  — and are not efforts to do so an assault – no matter how well-meant – on the deeply held values of those who differ

A Conclusion ?

- Neo-fundamentalism is now a global phenomenon
  — from infection by which few religious or cultural traditions appear to be immune
- Hence in a world which is growing ever more plural
  — thanks to the communications revolution and the ever-falling cost of long-distance travel
- We are all becoming less and less able to cope with the *de facto* reality religious and cultural plurality
  — what is novel about our current predicament is not the phenomenon of plurality itself
  — nor even the innate hostility of religion *per se* to such plurality
- But rather an extraordinary turn in global religious, ideological and cultural developments
  — which has brought us all to our current pass