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# The Drama Triangle of Religion and Violence

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The intersection of religion and violence is not the invention of our era. From time immemorial these two have been closely connected, interwoven dimensions of human experience. As soon as humans come together, form societies, and develop culture, both religion and violence become central features. We pray and celebrate together and we kill each other. We practice compassion and create beauty, but we also engage in horrific cruelty. Certainly, the particular contours of that connection shift from time to time and from one context to the other, but there is undoubtedly a structural connection. Whether it is the conservative Christian militants against abortion (Kellenbach forthcoming), the Muslim protesters against sexual diversity (complex as that may be in itself, see Shah, 2013), or the Buddhist exclusivists committing terrorist acts against other faiths (Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010), we can find religiously inspired violence in every tradition and throughout the centuries.

Anti-religious voices would claim that that connection is one of causality, assuming that violence is the consequence of being religious. Some go so far as to advocate the abolition of religion altogether. These actions, however, seem to build on the false premise that there is indeed a direct causal relationship, or to assume the equally false idea that anyone would obey a decision to abandon religion, both of which will be discussed in this chapter. Just as people do not obey the laws that forbid violence, it is not very likely that any effort to abolish religion will be successful. It makes more sense to try to find ways of critically addressing the nexus of religion and violence, while acknowledging that religion is also one of the motivating factors in peace building (Ariarajah, 2005; Nepstad, 2004).

The question then becomes: how can we understand—and then change—the disgraceful and destructive situation of human violence with religious legitimization? My own research has focused on sexual violence in families and churches. We know the stories of sexual violence implicating Buddhist and Hindu gurus,

Roman Catholic and Orthodox priests, Islamic *madrasa* teachers, Jewish rabbis, Protestant ministers, and sect leaders from all backgrounds.

Meanwhile, our societies are marbled with many more forms of violence which are in a number of cases also linked with religion, although maybe even more cases are linked with nationalism and other motives. There is, of course, recent geopolitical history with its continuing and unprecedented struggle with terrorism, justly or unjustly interpreted as religiously inspired (Selengut, 2003). Contemporary acts of terrorism in Western Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, at least, are often framed by the perpetrators as being based on their Islamic faith. In comparison, the highly religious society of the USA has one of the highest percentages of crime and imprisonment (Walmsley, 2016); more people in that country were killed by firearms in the last fifty years than the entire death toll of all the country's wars together (Jacobson, 2015). What is this uncomfortable connection between religion and violence, seemingly so at odds with the proclamations of love, reconciliation, and peace heard over and over in places of worship around the world?

Probably one of the first responses to this question should be that it assumes a one-sided positive view of religion. In reality, the proclamations in places of worship and the teachings articulated in religious books, pamphlets, and Internet sites do not always convey a message of love, reconciliation, and peace. In each religious tradition we find fundamentalist currents that endorse hate, discrimination, and violence (Appleby, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Selengut, 2003). Right-wing evangelicals support anti-abortionist violence and Orthodox believers have engaged in violent attacks on gay emancipation movements in, for example, Serbia. Muslim fundamentalists draw on the language of *jihad* in their cultural conflict with Western Christianity. Hindu extremists have been found to destroy churches and mosques in India, Buddhist fighters in Sri Lanka and Myanmar attack Muslim minorities, and Zionists engage in militant action for the Promised Land. But it is not only these religious extremes that refute the image of peaceful religion. Many mainstream believers in most religious traditions believe that theirs is the only road to salvation and that full and equal acceptance of others would be a betrayal of their deepest religious convictions, as is evidenced in many hot-tempered debates. All of this demonstrates that religion is not only defined by goodness, peace, and harmony, but also by harshness, exclusion, and violence.

A second response to the question would be that general statements about the connection between religion and violence are false by definition. Until now research has yielded contradictory results about the impact of religion on the occurrence of violence and the responses to it. The 'ambivalence of the Sacred'—as Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) calls it—is precisely that religion seems to be a powerful contributor to violence as well as a unique source of reconciliation and peacemaking. If we

try to unravel this complex relationship, we have to account for the variety in and among religious traditions, the different effects of dimensions of religion, and the many forms, causes, and effects of violence.

In my contribution to this conference volume about religion and violence, I will look at the debates and public protests around religion and violence in contemporary Europe. More specifically, I will ask how the framing of Islam and violence has been conflated in the context of the present refugee crisis and in the context of violence committed by Islamic extremists. Using this material I will draw on insights from the psychology of religion to discuss three positions that need to be distinguished: the victim, the aggressor, and the bystander (Twemlow, 2000). These three positions are similar to the three roles in the Karpman 'drama triangle': perpetrator, rescuer, and victim. The assumption is that these roles cannot be reduced to one another, and that individuals or groups may shift roles in their relational transactions. In the analysis of violence, the roles of the aggressor, victim, and bystander suggest the existence of one another and eventually they can only be analyzed in their interactions. For a psychological understanding of the connection with religion, however, we will need separate analyses to discover the intricacies. The psychology of aggression and violence is different from the psychology of traumatization or of witnessing violence. Religion will prove to play a different role in each of these perspectives.

Before we move on to a discussion of these specific positions, we have to address the difficult question of defining violence. This is a complex issue for several reasons. First, the common reduction in definitions of violence to observable physical injury fails to capture the many forms of mental or spiritual oppression and the power of symbolic desecration. Think, for example, of the pulling down of Saddam Hussein's statue by US Marines or the destruction of Palmyra's temples by ISIS. There is all the more at stake when we investigate the connections with religion. This reduction also ignores violent structures and cultures. Secondly, the application of any definition of violence to actual events is more than grouping phenomena into objective theoretical categories. It is also a social construction in which moral judgment and social powers are expressed. To define an act as violent is a performative action, grounded in the power of definition. The difference between liberationist actions and guerilla violence is, after all, a matter of perspective. Thirdly, in my view violence cannot be defined by a higher-order category. Human behavior, for example, does not suffice as such, because violence is not only present in behavior, but also in structures, texts, and so on. It is no coincidence that religion, myths, and literature have often described violence, or evil, as being superhuman and/or supernatural. I therefore take violence, like for instance love and religion, as a concept *sui generis* that can be indicated but not defined conclusively. Our efforts to define violence are necessary in discussing it, but they stop short of decisively

capturing the nature of violence. There is something that surpasses the conceptualization that René Girard (1977) called ‘originary violence’. I will return to that at the end of the chapter. As a working definition, rather than a comprehensive conceptualization, let me suggest that violence at least indicates the exertion of force and the infliction of harm. This meager definition will suffice to discuss the three positions of aggressor, victim, and bystander.

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## Islam, Terrorism, and Asylum Seekers

In contemporary Europe, Islam functions prominently in the two—separate yet connected—debates about jihadist terrorism and about Syrian refugees asking for asylum in Europe. They are separated because there is no indication of significant numbers of potential terrorists among refugees. They are connected because right-wing populists, in particular, frame the discussion as if these individuals are not really refugees coming from life-threatening circumstances, but instead either opportunistic economic migrants in search of happiness or terrorist infiltrators.

The right-wing populist frame—advocated by groups like Pegida in Germany and, for example, Dutch politician Geert Wilders—consistently links Islam with violence, cruelty, and dishonesty. Advocates of this frame point to pictures of refugees with smartphones, intimating that these are rich people and thus “not real refugees”. They use social media to highlight fights among asylum seekers in reception camps, suggesting that they are not and will not be law-abiding citizens. They speak of asylum seekers—focusing predominantly on young males—as “testosterone bombs”, implying sexual aggression against which we need to protect women and children. They post and repost every message they can find about violent acts committed by Muslims anywhere on the earth and disregard, deny, or reinterpret violent acts committed against Muslims. In doing so, they effectively create a polarized frame in which Islam is unequivocally associated with violence.

In terms of the drama triangle, this right-wing populist perspective frames Muslims in the role of perpetrators. Even if they are refugees from war-ridden countries, their religious background takes precedence in the framing. Christian refugees from the same countries are—in stark contrast—framed as victims, for example, by interpreting inter-group fights in reception camps as religious oppression from the side of Muslims. Cast in the role of perpetrators, Muslim refugees are then framed as a threat to society: our freedom of speech, our health care and housing systems, our economy, our safety, our peace, and our harmonious society

are all undermined by the Muslim “asylum-tsunami”. Moreover, they refuse to call Islam a religion and instead call it a “political ideology”.

The frame capitalizes on fear among the population and therefore effectively casts the “ordinary hard-working European or Dutch citizen” in the role of the victim. They allegedly run the risk of losing jobs, not getting housing, and paying the price economically for the influx of refugees. As is well known from other eras of economic decline, xenophobic fears are on the rise and it becomes more and more socially acceptable to explicitly target migrants as the source of all societal problems through their “Islamization”.

In the political debate, however, the drama triangle not only implicates the refugees and the traditional citizens. The right-wing populists define themselves as the rescuing bystander. They use language such as “start resisting” and claim to be the only group that adequately understands the present predicament and is offering a solution to stop the threat. Meanwhile they describe mainstream politicians, including the ruling parties, as conspirators and accomplices, or as non-acting and therefore negligent bystanders. Some go as far as claiming that the parliament and the government no longer represent the true will of the people and that direct action is needed, stopping short of calling on their followers to commit violence themselves.

In response, left-wing activists and politicians, refugee organizations, and churches apply the drama triangle quite differently. They see their right-wing opponents as the real perpetrators, threatening and sometimes committing violence against Muslim refugees. They point to their discriminatory remarks written on mosques, asylum centers, and city walls and to concrete incidents of violence. They describe the right-wing political language as hate speech used by aggressors against innocent Muslims. Muslim refugees are now described as suffering from multifaceted victimization, first from oppressive regimes and cruel opponents, then from traffickers and harsh immigration policies, and finally from the anti-immigration movements. Obviously, these left-wing activists also cast themselves in the role of the rescuing bystander that takes the side of the victims. They too critique the government and mainstream politics for being negligent and silent amidst this refugee crisis, although they may hail German Chancellor Angela Merkel for her—as they would say—moral leadership.

Interestingly, in this coalition defending refugees, the focus is not on the religious dimension but instead on the political one. Some may underscore freedom of religion, but the central language is one of humanitarian support. Left-wing activists traditionally have been critical of organized religion and they could be equally critical of the sometimes rigid ideas, intolerant responses to Western liberal societies, or views of Muslim migrants regarding the position of women or sexual

minorities. In the current debate, however, they do not engage with these critical questions, but instead focus solely on the needs of refugees to be safe and welcome.

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## **The Drama Triangle and Religion: the Perpetrator**

If we want to explore the role of religion within this drama triangle, we can build on a series of psychological theories for each of the positions in the triangle. Obviously, these theories offer only partial explanations and each concrete case may be different.

For the role of the aggressor we can look at various interpretations. Biological research highlights the correlation of violence with neurophysiological processes and hormonal stress levels (Kruk et al., 2004; Soler et al., 2000). Psychoanalytic theories explain violence from experiences of frustration (Fonagy, 2001). Social learning theories look at modeling and reinforcement of violent behavior through support by bystanders (Lehner-Hartman, 2002; Twemlow, 2000). Rational Choice theories focus on how violent behavior serves the social purposes of influencing others, expressing grievances, establishing subjective justice, and defending social identities (Tedeschi, J. T. & Felson, 1995). Systems theories highlight the collective and structural levels of violence ingrained in our social systems (Suárez-Orozco & Robben, 2000). All these theories have been applied to both violence and religion, but usually not to the intersection of the two. Obviously, the application would be very different in the right-wing frame, on the one hand, and the leftwing, on the other.

Specific research on the religion-violence connection in aggressors can be found in several areas. First of all, there is strong evidence for the correlation between religion and prejudice. Although prejudice in itself does not equate to violent behavior, it can be seen as being in the same range. In addition to some data showing that religiosity correlates with pro-social behavior, there is much more consistent proof that religion correlates with ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, and religious and racial prejudice. This relation seems to be curvilinear, with the highest levels of prejudice found among the moderately religious (Wulff, 1997).

The second area of research can be found in social psychological and sociological studies of religious violence. Here, researchers claim that religious violence can only be understood properly if the religious dimension is taken seriously. Even if in general the correlation between religion and violence is weak or disputed, and contrasts with religious people's tendency to distance themselves from militants by claiming that true religion excludes violence, specific case studies show how the religious dimension is inextricable from the complex of violence. Charles Selengut (2003) has identified some key elements in the understanding of religious violence.

The first is the basis for the justification of violence in the religious texts of the religious traditions. These texts provide a frame of reference for holy warriors that is stronger than the social or legal barriers to violence. The second is the psychological process involving the Freudian unconscious, the Girardian mimetic desire, and cognitive dissonance theory. The third element is the apocalyptic self-understanding of certain religious groups and cults, resulting in utopian communities and a propensity for violence. The fourth element is Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', in which group identities are symbolized at the religious level. The fifth element, touching on the psychological again, is the notion of suffering and martyrdom that may easily stimulate victims to undertake and endure violence rather than resist it. For Mark Juergensmeyer (2003), the unifying concept in interpreting religious violence is performance. The performance dimension of violence resembles religious ritual and builds on the tendency of religious imagination to become absolutized. Religious violence takes place in a battle of symbolic power and truth and is grounded in a metaphysical perspective of a cosmic war between good and evil, involving martyrs and demons, a black-and-white description that psychologists would interpret as a pathological process called "splitting".

To be clear, we cannot conclude that there is a direct effect of religion on violence in general. Aggressors may use religion as a justification for their actions or give it a much more prominent role. In the case of right-wing populism and anti-religious violence, the ideological takes the place of the religious dimension.

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## **The Drama Triangle and Religion: the Victim**

In discussing the role of religion and violence for the drama triangle position of the victim, the most important contributions come from trauma theories and research on religious coping. Trauma theory emerged during the twentieth century from research into victims of war, on the one hand, and victims of sexual and domestic violence, on the other. Trauma theories usually highlight the importance of an external stressor that causes experiences outside the range of the ordinary, and involves "intense fear, helplessness, or horror". Victims of violence, oppression, and discrimination can certainly develop serious problems, but that depends on more than the severity of the violence. Among other variables, social support, style of attribution, and coping mediate the effects of violent experiences on trauma-symptoms. Cultural and religious influences may also inspire resilience in response to the effects of trauma or even enable positive effects of trauma through what is called "post-traumatic growth" (Tedeschi, R. G. & Calhoun, 2006).

In these emerging fields, spirituality and religion are awarded a somewhat prominent place (Ai & Park, 2005). The importance of integrating spirituality in the treatment of victims is often stressed. Some researchers found that guilt and weakened religious faith are central to the prolonged use of mental health services and concluded that questions of meaning and spirituality deserve more attention in the treatment of PTSD (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). Others discovered that for survivors of violent trauma general spiritual beliefs were associated with physical and mental health, trauma-related distress, posttraumatic symptom severity, and growth (Cadell et al., 2003; Connor et al., 2003). Contrary to all this, still other researchers found little or no effect for religion (Krejci et al., 2004), so that we need more research to specify the conditions necessary for religion to have a salutary effect.

The effect of traumatization on religiosity is again ambiguous. Some studies report a negative effect on religious beliefs and representations of God, but only in cases of severe traumatization or complex PTSD (Doehring, 1993). Yet other studies showed fewer or contrasting effects with experiences of victimization correlating with transcendent religious experiences and stronger religious beliefs (Carmil & Breznitz, 1991; Kennedy & Drebing, 2002). One could hypothesize that traumatic events reduce well-being, which in turn invokes an increase in spirituality as a coping process to restore well-being. All of these studies, however, are too diverse in types of violence, severity of traumatization, measures of religion, and outcomes to provide a meaningful synthesis. We are only beginning to understand the different effects victimization may have on religion for different persons in varied situations. Further research could draw on studies in the fields of religious coping, forgiveness, and posttraumatic growth to develop more differentiated inquiries.

For our conversations here, however, we need to move beyond the individual psychological level and ask how religion plays a role in construction the drama triangle and in self-positioning in the role of the victim. Both Muslim migrants—including refugees and, for example, second-generation Dutch citizens—and right-wing Islamophobes invoke religion as part of their identity politics. According to the latter, the influx of Muslims and the terrorist threat directly target the “Jewish-Christian heritage and identity” of Europe. The victims identified in this narrative are the ordinary European citizens; more specifically they regularly mention the Jewish population and homosexuals as vulnerable groups. Interestingly, these right-wing movements have a very ambiguous history when it comes to religion, homosexuality, and the Jewish minority. There is reason to doubt their motives in this respect and to wonder whether their implication of religion is more than rhetorical. At the same time, Muslim minorities may also play the religious card in claiming their minority identity. There is ample evidence that identification with Islam can be stronger in a minority context than in the country of origin, especially among



young individuals who rebelliously disaffiliate themselves from the values of their culture and religion and engage in antisocial behavior. They may nevertheless use religious reasoning to oppose Western values and customs by calling them “haram” (forbidden). The sometimes aggressive response to Western liberal discourse and to Islam-critical cartoons and texts uses the same combination of religious intolerance and minority positioning by claiming that this use of the freedom of expression victimizes the religious minorities. Just like the aggressors, victims can use religion to legitimize their position.

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### **The Drama Triangle and Religion: the Bystander**

The third position is dubbed ‘bystander’ and includes a variety of roles when witnessing violence. In the Karpman drama triangle this position is that of the rescuer, seeking to intervene on behalf of the victim. In other cases, however, passing judgment, endorsing the violence, or merely witnessing the horrific may define the role of the bystander. In trying to understand the role of religion in the bystander position, we can start by looking at what happens when people watch violence.

This is an area of scarce research but major relevance. There have been some studies exploring the meaning of watching violent sports, videogames, cinema, television, and religion (Goldstein, 1998). It is claimed that violence is and always has been an important element in popular culture, evidenced by gladiator fights, medieval tournaments, action games, horror movies, and so on. Apparently, viewing violence—both real and fictional—has a certain appeal, more to boys and men than to girls and women. The effects of watching violence are quite diverse. Research has consistently shown a correlation between watching violence and subsequent aggressive or violent behavior, but there are also reports of subsequent apathy or heightened stress and possible traumatization following the viewing of violence. These differences display how in viewing violence the individual can move from the role of the bystander to the role of the aggressor or to that of the victim.

The connection between viewing violence and religion is not coincidental. To begin with, watching violence has a certain ominous quality that appeals and appalls. It seems meaningful to understand violence as a dimension of the Sacred in its life-giving and destructive shapes. The *mysterium tremendum ac fascinans*—Rudolf Otto—is found also in violence and it is here that taboos serve to control the encounter with the Sacred. A second direct connection between watching violence and religion is found in the violent images and stories that characterize the religious traditions. Literal violence appears, for example, in biblical stories of

the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the last judgment. It is also present in certain religious practices like sacrifice, initiation rituals (like circumcision) or religiously inspired terror. On the symbolic level, rituals like the Christian Eucharist (a model of sacrifice) and baptism (a symbol of drowning) express metaphorical violence (Bloch, 1998). Religious imagery is usually packed with violence, as we can see in the many narratives of saints and martyrs. This inevitably sanctions viewing violence.

The religious authorization of violence can turn into outright complicity (Gudorf, 1992). The role of the bystander can function to maintain the structures of violence. In many cases, the aggressors can perform their acts of violence without consequences because they operate in a social system that endorses their position of power. As a consequence of this support, such acts are not even labeled as violence. The victims are being excluded from the community and the perpetrators retain their position. It is not easy for a community to acknowledge possible complicity or to address the question whether the community's religion has fostered violence. They usually refuse to see that violence is part of their tradition, community life, and religious heritage.

In terms of social psychology, group identity is built on the difference between in-group and out-group. Therefore, any religious community endeavors to increase inside conformity and decrease the similarity with the outside. Successful communities have a clear boundary and some sense of exclusivism (Stark, 1996). The community always demands a minimum of exclusive dedication to be meaningful to its members. This exclusivism may be labeled violent because it forces its members to conform and to bring sacrifices: material offerings, intellectual adaptation, and a restraint of the freedom to speak or act. The religious community invokes divine powers to achieve this and the resistance to this force equals resistance to God. At the same time, the encounter with the outside or with other religious groups represents a conflict of truth claims, a conflict of gods so to speak.

In the role of the bystander the connection between religion and violence is usually rather opaque because complicity, social exclusion, out-group aversion, and cultural violence are not acknowledged as such. Instead, bystanders claim a more neutral or beneficent role. It is, however, precisely in the role of the bystander that religion and violence may be most closely knit together.

This raises new and important questions regarding the bystanders in the current connected crises of terrorism on the one hand and the refugee influx on the other. The bystanders, notably the societal actors and public opinion in, for example, Western Europe, Russia, and the United States, play a significant role in deciding who counts as victim and who counts as perpetrator. They seem generally unwilling to attribute "victim" status to refugees at large and try to limit the group that

can be legitimately identified as such. Meanwhile there is a tendency to conflate the categories of victim and perpetrator when asylum seekers are seen as potential terrorists. Finally, most actors do not acknowledge their historical role in the emergence of the current situation.

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## Conclusion

The relationship between religion and violence is complex and dynamic. In the current European crisis of terrorism and high numbers of asylum seekers, the Karpman triangle of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is constantly in motion, which makes it very complicated to arrive at a consensual analysis of the situation and to overcome the present social and political polarization.

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