1 | *Introduction*

We are afraid. The loud voices that dominate television channels, social media posts and popular politics provide very little by way of actual solutions. Instead, with each new terror attack and with each news report of violent religious conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, we are garnished with the same petrifying commentaries. A cosmic war is said to be unfolding across the world, not simply between local communities or nations but between Muslims and Christians, the 'Islamic world' and 'Judeo-Christian West', 'us' versus 'them'. Myriad of events, conflicts and terror attacks are claimed to be intrinsically linked to each other. A thread is said to run across issues surrounding migration to social cohesion, female genital mutilation, honour killings, domestic abuse, civil wars, violent conflicts and failed states. It is claimed to be historic, primordial, timeless and sets 'them' apart from 'us' eternally, leaving no chance for things to change and improve but only bringing us closer each day to an inevitable global clash. Distances melt, long dead histories become here and now, geographies disappear along with distinctly different localities, individuals, languages, backgrounds and beliefs. A single factor, a single cause captures the complexity. One narrative to explain them all. Variations of this can be heard frequently and bluntly on American cable infotainment shows and lectures at worried European capitals as well as mosques in the Middle East and Africa. The only difference is who the antagonist is, who 'them' is in a given conversation, not the declared bankrupt and innate qualities of the 'other' who is always seeking to destroy 'us'.

There is a reason why such explanations persist and find willing audiences. Terror is a real threat, and terror groups that ground their activities in religious calls, particularly Islamic, constitute most of the increase in terror attacks across the world.[1] Yet, the larger picture is much more worrying than the relatively small number of individuals that are attracted to committing terrorist acts in European or North American cities. The Pew Research Center notes that 'religious

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hostilities increased in every major region of the world', particularly in
the Middle East and North Africa, with 33 per cent of the 198 countries
surveyed by Pew having high religious hostilities in 2012, up from
29 per cent in 2011 and 20 per cent in 2007.[2] Since some of the countries
where there are social hostilities involving religion are among the most
populous in the world, Pew calculates that the percentage of the world's
population that live in countries with religious hostilities went up from
45 per cent in 2007 to 74 per cent in 2012. Subsequent Pew studies
continued to record worrying levels of social hostilities involving religion
across the world, noting the increase of use of violence or threat of
violence to enforce religious norms in 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa
in 2015.[3] The same study also noted that 17 countries in Europe saw
mob violence related to religion and assaults on individuals in 28
countries, a sharp increase from nine countries in 2014.

While such studies suggest a recent intensification, violent conflicts
involving religious actors and causes are not a new phenomenon.
There have been widespread incidents of ethno-religious violence
since the mid-twentieth century.[4] Rapport notes that 'after World
War II half of the internal struggles were ethno-religious; by the 1960s
ethno-religious violence outstripped all others put together' (Rapport
2007:275). He estimates that some three-quarters of conflicts globally
from 1960 to 1990 were instigated by religious tensions (Rapport
2007:259). Steve Bruce also claims that three-quarters of violent con-
flicts in the world had religious characteristics and argues that many
who were involved in these conflicts 'explain or justify their causes by
reference to their religion' (as quoted by Ruane & Todd 2011:67). In
his study of the State Failure Data Set, Jonathan Fox observes that
'throughout the 1960–96 period, religious conflicts constituted between
about 33 per cent and 47 per cent of all conflicts' (Fox 2004:64). The
last ten years have seen further examples of this worrying trend with
violent ethno-religious conflicts across Africa and the Middle East,
including in Sudan,[5] Central African Republic (CAR),[6] Egypt,[7] Nigeria,[8]
Syria,[9] Afghanistan[10] and Iraq.[11]

It is true that the events in distant places are no longer tragedies
separated from our day-to-day lives. Conflicts spill over; terrorism is
contagious. As Rene Girard observes, each violent act creates another
one as rivals mimic one another and retaliate in a 'planetary principle
of reciprocity' (Girard 2010:40). An act of violence in one part of
the world triggers further violence and animosities in another, and

religious identities and solidarities seem to provide an effective global channel for that to happen. Girard notes that 'the world is caught up in an escalation to extremes and that people today do not see that it can be stopped' (Girard 2010:197). It is a petrifying thought. But is that true? Can we really not stop this escalation to extremes? Are we really facing a global war between the adherents of two of the world's largest religions and identities and nations that are deeply shaped by them? Is this an inevitable clash? Are the terror attacks in Western cities linked to conflicts and grievances elsewhere? What leads human beings to pursue violence? Is it religions that cause violence? If they do so, how? Or are there other factors in play? Are some religious communities and nations more violent than others? And most importantly, are these even the right questions to ask?

These thoughts have haunted me personally for a very long time and have shaped my personal, academic and professional journey thus far. Over the years, I have witnessed first-hand the suffering of countless people, for no other reason than their religious identities and their beliefs. I have sat across from people who have suffered immensely from torture, from imprisonment, from arbitrary state violence and communal conflicts. Those experiences have given me a personal agenda that will be clear to the reader rather quickly: the need for a better understanding of the conflicts the world is facing, so that we can also explore ways to contain and prevent them. This is a difficult task in an age that is more interested in sound bites asserted most confidently rather than conclusions from studies that take a long time to mature, or in sensational arguments providing you with more proof of what you already believe rather than challenging you with your assumptions and even questions you ask before giving you an answer.

Popular Explanations

This is particularly the case for the topic of religion and violence. The resurgence of violent conflicts with religious characteristics has triggered an avalanche of popular explanations that argue that religions, if not particularly Islam, are the primary causes of such violence. A prominent example of this has been the 'clash of civilisations' language provided by Samuel Huntington. Huntington argued that 'in the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural'

(Huntington 1996:21). He attributed this to the fact that 'improvements in transportation and communication have produced more frequent, more intense, more symmetrical and more inclusive interactions among people of different civilizations. As a result, their civilizational identities become increasingly salient' (Huntington 1996:129). Thus, not only enforcing sharper 'civilizational identities' but also 'deeper consciousness of civilizational differences and of the need to protect what distinguishes "us"' (Huntington 1996:129). Huntington saw Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western (Europe, North America and Australia and New Zealand), Latin American and 'possibly African' to be the major civilizations in the world (Huntington 1996:45, 46, 47). While predicting particularly a clash between Christian Western and Islamic civilizations, Huntington noted that conflicts have not been evenly distributed among world's civilizations: 'the overwhelming majority of fault line conflicts have taken place along the boundary looping across Eurasia and Africa that separates Muslims from non-Muslims' (Huntington 1996:255). In fact, some of the deadliest examples of ethno-religious violence take place in countries that have mixed religious populations and are located between Muslim-majority North Africa and non-Muslim-majority sub-Saharan Africa. Since the overwhelming majority of religion-related violence over the last couple of decades has involved Muslims, Huntington argued that there was a 'Muslim propensity to violence' due to the historic origins of doctrines of jihad and warfare seen in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and early formation of Islam (Huntington 1996:258).

Huntington's conceptualization of a clash of civilizations – and his argument that there is an intrinsic aspect of Islam that promotes violence – has remained influential as it seems to have provided an intellectual framing to many who see a Manichean battle unfolding between an imagined Christian West with an equally imagined Islamic world. Bernard Lewis, in his widely cited essay 'The Roots of Muslim Rage' (1990) took Huntington's theory further and argued that there is a thread in Islam that links violence to the emergence of Islam with a prophet who was a statesman and a warrior and Islamic beliefs that deny a separation between religion and politics, divide the world into the 'World of Islam' versus the 'World of War' and does not grant equality between believers and non-believers. Lewis noted that 'we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and

policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations: the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival to our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both' (Lewis 1990:60). Sam Harris, an American author who frequents television news and commentary and popular publications, argues that we have to leave political correctness behind and face the 'reality of Islam', which is 'a civilization with an arrested history', and as he warns about Muslim migration to Europe, he argues that it is time we recognized 'and obliged the Muslim world to recognize that "Muslim extremism" is not extreme among Muslims' (Harris 2006). By this line of reasoning, the root cause of religious violence in the world is Islam and Muslims, who are intrinsically violent, unlike Christians (if not Europeans or North Americans), who, by implication, are not so. As the refugee crisis of the summer of 2015 meant hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa sought asylum in Europe, concerns over religious clashes in Europe became a common topic for debate in the mass media. German sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner warned that 'the refugees bring political and religious conflicts from their countries of origin to Germany like the conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, or liberal Muslims and Salafists' (Deutsche Welle 2015). Therefore, it was no surprise that there were calls both in Europe[12] and in the United States[13] for the Western countries to accept only Christian refugees, not Muslims.

Another kind of popular explanation for the relationship between religion and violence in the world has been provided by the so-called New Atheists headed by celebrity figures such as Richard Dawkins. Their arguments have focused on not just Islam and Muslims as the cause behind violence in the world, but on the very idea of religion as the root cause of all that is wrong in the world. This underlying assumption is clear in Dawkins' adaptation of the song 'Imagine' by John Lennon:

Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles', no 'honour killings', no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money. Imagine no Taliban to blow up

ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female
skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. (Dawkins 2006:23–24)

While Dawkins accepts that 'patriotic love of country and ethnic
group' can also produce extremism and violence, 'religious faith is an
especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems
to trump all others', 'because of the easy and beguiling promise that
death is not the end, and that a martyr's heaven is especially glorious.
But it is also partly because it discourages questioning, by its very
nature' (Dawkins 2006:306). Dawkins boldly states:

Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no
argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them –
given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into
potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. Immunized against
fear by the promise of a martyr's paradise, the authentic faith-head deserves
a high place in the history of armaments, alongside the longbow, the war-
horse, the tank and the cluster bomb. If children were taught to question and
think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith
without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers.
(Dawkins 2006:308)

Thus, for Dawkins, a return to the idealized vision of rational criti-
cal thinking, scientific method and secular education would stop the
violence unleashed in the world under the banner of religion. The
imagined civilizational fault line is once again drawn, not between
the constructs of a Christian West and Islamic World as distinct
cultural entities as Huntington did, but through the Enlightenment
narratives of an advanced world versus a backward world still in the
shackles of religion. Therefore, the violence we see is simply caused by
religions, and those who hold religious beliefs represent the unfinished
task of liberation provided by scientific advancement. However, for
Dawkins, and those who share his ideological belief in science, there is
a difference between Islam and Christianity, which is benign and has at
least a cultural role to play. As the scientist dean of an elite college in
the United Kingdom put to me in a conversation: the solution to
religious conflict is ultimately Muslims converting to 'a mild religion
like Anglicanism'.

A similar linear construct of the advancement of humanity, and thus
by implication its lapse in the illogical endurance of religion, can be
seen in liberal views that neither share the modernist narratives of

scientific truth and objective rationality like the New Atheists, nor accept the essentialization of any culture and people as we see in arguments about a claimed Muslim propensity for violence, but instead follows the postmodern impulse to see absolute truth-claims as the root of problems. In his book, *A God of One's Own,* Ulrick Beck (2010) starts with the assumption that monotheism leads to violence and conflict due to its exclusive truth-claims and unshaken belief in them. Beck asks, 'the question that counts today is: how are we to civilize the global potential for conflict between the monotheistic world religions?' (Beck 2010:44). Beck is worried that a worldwide tension is emerging since there is a cosmopolitan given to religions which move beyond boundaries of nation-states and form global solidarities based on shared beliefs. Beck exhorts the religious believer to let go of a rigid 'truth' to be able to establish 'peace', and to see other beliefs as an enrichment rather than a confrontation, which he refers as the 'clash of universalisms' (Beck 2010:164ff). Beck provides the example of Japan, which he argues, demonstrates the positive example of a 'syncretic tolerance' due to its polytheistic traditional beliefs which accommodate other deities (Beck 2010:62).

The argument that monotheism leads to violence whereas polytheism leads to accommodation of others is not new. Jonathan Kirsch argued that there was a 'war of God against gods', which 'has been fought with heart-shaking cruelty over the last thirty centuries, and it is a war that is still being fought today' (Kirsch 2004:2). Kirsch notes:

Monotheism turned out to inspire a ferocity and even a fanaticism that are mostly absent from polytheism. At the heart of polytheism is an open-minded and easy going approach to religious belief and practice, a willingness to entertain the idea that there are many gods and many ways to worship them. At the heart of monotheism, by contrast, is the sure conviction that only a single god exists, a tendency to regard one's own rituals and practices as the only proper way to worship the one true god. (Kirsch 2004:2)

As convincing as this argument sounds within its reasoning, it faces serious problems when tested against the history of violence in the world. While praising Japanese polytheism, for example, Beck ignores the fact that historically Christianity in Japan was wiped out with mass killings of thousands of Christians. In fact, 'Roman Catholics maintain that the campaign against Christianity which took place in Japan in the

early 1600s was more ferocious than any other religious persecution in the history of the Church. They estimate that tens of thousands of Japanese Christians were put to death, many after being tortured' (Bartlett 2008). Similarly, widespread ethno-religious violence we see in Hindu (World Bulletin 2013) and Buddhist (Strathern 2013) communities today as well as in the violent history of many of the polytheistic pre-Abrahamic religions are simply left out (Timmer 2013). Beck universalizes an assumed intrinsic nature of religious beliefs and concludes an outcome, regardless of the context in which such beliefs emerge and are held, and projects a 'clash' between those who hold monotheistic beliefs and those who do not, whether in Europe or the Middle East, which leads him to see a global conflict unfolding. While not explicitly stated, Beck's argument also implies a lapse in human advancement that should by now have demonstrated a cosmopolitan accommodation and move beyond absolutisms. Thus, the religious believer finds him or herself once again as the root cause of violence, by virtue of their failure to adapt to the milieu we live in.

What all of these popular attempts to explain violence with religious characteristics in the world share is their fundamental belief that it is religions, religious beliefs, and identities that cause violence due to a claimed intrinsic nature they have. While attempting to explain a wide range of issues including conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, terrorism and the cohesion of migrant populations in Europe through a single variable, i.e., religion, these explanations construct a global fault line between 'us' and 'them'. The 'them' in this is often Islam and Muslims with their unbridgeable differences from 'us'. Those who hold religious beliefs in general represent a lapse in human advancement as embodied both by modernity (scientific advancement) and late modernity (cosmopolitan accommodation). Thus, it is no surprise that the reality of a resurgence of violence in the world only seems to prove the narrative they promote.

Deconstructing Assumptions

Awareness of assumptions that lead to such conclusions are crucial before one can even attempt to provide explanations. In fact, assumptions that are not examined and simply taken for granted as 'plain truths' are often exactly where explanations to complex matters

start to go wrong. That is why the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer on hermeneutics is vitally important in interpreting a 'text' as well as developments in the world. Gadamer argued that a person trying to understand a text often projects a meaning into it as soon as some meaning in the text is observed, and such an 'initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning'. (Gadamer 2014:279). That is because, the way we understand the world before us is deeply affected by our context at a particular historic moment. Such a historic positioning 'determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation' (Gadamer 2014:311). This conditioning gives us our prejudices: a judgement we hold before examining a situation (Gadamer 2014:283). As Gadamer warns, 'it is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed' (Gadamer 2014:310). That is why the interpreter and the text – the subject that seeks understanding and the object that is subjected to understanding – lives within horizons. Thus, the interpretation is ultimately an understanding of both of the two horizons: our own and that of the text (Gadamer 2014:313). It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the popular explanations on the relationship between religion and violence cited above contain declared and undeclared political visions, teleologies of linear human progress and *a priori* beliefs held about the place of religion and violence in the world. Incidentally, the horizon that all these views share is profoundly shaped by a particular form of European and North American modernity. This manifests itself as prejudices or assumptions in three critical areas that are central for this book: *religion, violence* and *constructs of civilization.*

Assumptions on Religion

A key prejudice is the perception of religion as an anomaly, and a factor that somehow represents the impediment to human progress, whether in advancement of a more liberal outlook (e.g., Ulrich Beck) or in scientific rationality (e.g., Richard Dawkins) or civilizational achievement (e.g., Huntington). The increase in religious terror attacks in the world since the 9/11 attacks have once again demonstrated this prejudice, widely held in Europe and North America. Islam and

Muslims have not fitted into common projections onto the world, in
which religion ought to be a matter of personal belief, away from the
public and political space, only dealing with the world to come, and
declining as the person achieves education, scientific knowledge and
liberalization. This belief in what the place of religion in the world
ought to be can be seen throughout the history of the Enlightenment
and have been integral in the project of modernity. They have been
actively promoted as inescapable outcomes in much of the twentieth-
century scholarly literature on secularization.

   Jose Casanova distinguishes three different connotations of secular-
ization: 'a) Secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and prac-
tices in modern societies, often postulated as a universal, human,
developmental process'; 'b) Secularization as the privatization of reli-
gion, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and
as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal
democratic politics'; and 'c) Secularization as the differentiation of the
secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as 'eman-
cipation' from religious institutions and norms' (Casanova 2006:7).
All these three connotations can be seen as declared and undeclared
assumptions about the role of religion in today's world in the argu-
ments cited in the introduction. These were assumed to be a given by
many scholars. In fact, in 1968, Berger had famously stated that by
the '21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in
small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture'
(Stark & Finke 2000:58). This projection had a convincing rationale:
the process of modernization meant that religion's role in provid-
ing an overarching meaning for the society and individual has been
shaken. In the process, religious traditions have lost their monopoly
and became just one of the contenders in a pluralistic market that have
been limited to 'specific enclaves of social life' (Berger 1990:135). As
the individual is exposed to multiple views beyond religion, 'the plau-
sibility of religious definitions of reality is threatened from within,
that is, within the subjective consciousness of the individual' (Berger,
Berger & Kellner 1977:75). When the individual interacts with others
from other traditions, or realizes the legitimacy of other interpretations
of the world, 'the hold of religion on society and on the individual' is
weakened (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1977:76). Therefore, as a result