

1 Religion and Violence: Introduction, Clarifications and Limitations

This contribution to the Cambridge University Press Element series claims to offer insight into the relationship between Christianity and violence. On this topic, even the most cursory review of the faith tradition would support the proposition that violence has been a permanent and ongoing issue since Christianity began over two thousand years ago. In that history, Christians have perpetrated violence through Crusades, heresy trials, anti-Jewish pogroms and anti-Muslim attitudes, the subordination of women, and racist colonialism; they have also been victims of violence. The Religious News Service has reported that “Christians remain one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world . . . [with Christians facing] imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, rape and even death as a result of their faith.”¹ Christians have been proponents and opponents of violence – so what is new to say? How do we go about seeking insight into the relation of Christianity to violence that offers something more than the unremarkable observation that the two notions are of course inextricably intertwined?

This Element is intended to respond to this question. The effort here is not to offer something entirely new and never before seen but to organize an approach to the question about Christianity’s relation to violence in such a way that the topic is illuminated. To that end, we must begin by noting some qualifications that are necessary to establish the scope and parameters of this study. Some of these qualifications are themselves obvious things to note about Christianity or violence or the relation between the two, but they are noted because they will provide needed guidance for what will appear in the upcoming pages.

Qualification 1. Christianity is a complex and multiform religion. There are three Christianities, not one – Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism –

¹ Religious News Service Press Release, “Violence against Christians Surges Globally, Data Shows More than 9K Attacks on Churches in 2019,” *Religious News Service*, January 15, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/01/15/violence-against-christians-surges-globally-data-shows-more-than-9k-attacks-on-churches-in-2019/>.

and a variety of forms of Christian faith are encompassed within each of those divisions. (There have been some estimates that as many as 30,000 different forms of Protestantism exist, which is most likely a high exaggeration, but it does make the point.) So, to raise a question about the relation of violence to Christianity requires that one not generalize any particular claim to all structural forms and institutions of Christian identity and certainly not to all Christians. A question, easily overlooked and often suppressed, accompanies this inquiry: When one talks about Christianity and violence to which Christianity – to which institutional form, to which division, to which authorities or Christian identities – is one referring? There will be no one understanding of violence among Christians, no single and unified response to violence on behalf of the faith by faith leaders or even communities, and no single viewpoint on how and whether the faith tradition offers resources to justify violence. Inquiry into the topic of Christianity and violence is a particular way of inquiring into the broader topic of “religion and violence,” but “religion” and “violence” are both disputed terms. For present purposes, acknowledging Christianity as a religion is not controversial whatever qualifications one might make to the term “religion.” Violence is related to terms like “power” and “force,” but since there can be legitimated uses of force that do not amount to violence, this volume will consider violence to be an excessive use of force that causes destruction and harm and especially the injustice of injury. Context often determines how invoking the term “violence” to describe a destructive natural event like a tornado differs from the violence of psychological abuse or physical torture – these different meanings are all legitimate ordinary language uses of the term, but in this Element we shall keep the term violence as it attaches to Christianity to mean that human agency is involved in action, usually intentional, to inflict injury on others.²

Qualification 2. A temptation exists to interpret the faith tradition of Christianity as itself providing a source and sanction for acts of violence

² John D. Carlson, “Religion and Violence: Coming to Terms with Terms,” in Andrew R. Murphy, ed., *Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2011): 14–18.

(or, contrariwise, resistance to acts of violence), and care is required on this point. While there is no doubt that Christian beliefs and practices help create bonds of unity to motivate Christian persons to acts that either justify violence or nonviolence under Christian rubrics and action guides, it is not the religion of Christianity writ large that is the actor on the stage of history. Christianity can be, and often is, invoked as if the religion itself were an agent, as if the religion itself were the cause of violence or the actor deciding between action options. But we must beware. Christianity is a cultural institution, a symbol system organized around the ultimate values of religion, but it cannot claim agency. It can affect and does affect decision-making due to the values and action guides that it houses in its various institutional forms, but it is not itself an agent.³ The problem that arises is that ascribing actor status to a non-agent is to “misplace concreteness,” as the informal fallacy by that name asserts. We must beware the *fallacy of reification*, by which is meant that fallacy of ascribing to institutions and nonactor entities the status of actors. An institution, even a cultural institution like a form of a religion, despite being created and perpetuated by human beings, does not as an institution do what real human beings do. Only people are agents. Only people are actors who are motivated to act. Only people are capable of conceiving options for action in the complexity of community life where different ideas, ideologies and institutional frameworks can play a role in providing justification for acting one way rather than another. Reinhold Niebuhr supported the Vietnam war, Martin Luther King opposed it – these two notable twentieth-century Christians found grounding for their perspectives in the Christian tradition, but the

³ In the American legal context, certain institutions – especially companies and corporations acting as non-human persons – have been authorized to enter into contracts, sue and be sued. As fictionalized persons they can be viewed as agents. Such non-human but legal persons, however, do not generate intentionality out of their own resource and are not self-directing agents. Rather, they have agency conferred upon them by human agents acting through legal mechanisms. In that conferral of fictionalized personhood, agency still rests with those who confer agency and claim authorization to do so. Agency, then, in the strict sense of agent-as-person, continues to rest with human rather than non-human persons.

viewpoints advanced and the actions advocated were those of agents who believed their religion had a role to play in deciding policy, direction and action. They invoked what they believed were the action guides that Christianity supported. But these were individual persons – agents – who acted and urged others to do so, not the religion. We must not ascribe agency to Christianity as if it were itself an autonomous agent capable of action and decision-making apart from the people who act based on the values and beliefs and practices they find in their understanding of Christian life and Christian values. Seeking to conform actions to that understanding, people of faith in various ways and in accordance with their commitments of faith will find religion a means that helps frame the values and commitments that affect what they will decide to do to. But human agents do this, not the cultural institution of religion.

Qualification 3. This Element is entitled *Christianity and Violence* rather than *Christian Violence*. Scholars, most notably William Cavanaugh, have questioned the whole idea of “religious violence,” his argument being that serious issues arise with how the term religion itself is defined – and most religion scholars do hesitate to define the term. His argument is that in the complicated history in the West, the rise of secularism allowed religion to be cast as fanatical and unreasoning – hence prone to violence – as the state and the push toward secularism created the idea of rational secular violence over against irrational “religious violence.”⁴ Religious violence is for Cavanaugh a myth designed to bolster the standing of secular authority and justify a secular claim on powers over life and death, including the power of justified state-sponsored violence. The claim to a secular foundation for these powers arose at the expense of religion, which was then, from the viewpoint of rational secularity, relegated to the arena of irrationality, fanaticism and absolutism. From this secular creation of a form of violence contained within the confines of religion – religious violence – a form of violence, a unique form, emerged expressing that irrationality connected to religion – religious violence. This is one view – that religious violence is

⁴ William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

a myth. There are other scholars who support the idea that there is something inherent in religious ideas that lends credence to the idea of religious violence – this would include, in quite different ways, Richard Wentz, John Hick, Charles Kimball, Mark Juergensmeyer, even Martin Marty and his claim that religion is divisive – so whether there is such a thing as religious violence is a scholar’s debate in many respects. This study does not take a decisive stand on the issue, but it does believe that the idea of “religion and violence” avoids some implications of causality provoked by ‘religious violence’ and keeps the concepts of religion and violence conceptually distinct so that the relationship between the two can be more carefully examined. “Religion and violence” allows that that casual observation previously mentioned – that of course Christianity seems to have been involved with violence – now lays before us to be explored.

Qualification 4. Although what lies ahead will lead us into Christianity’s sacred scriptures⁵ and into history and even some psychology explorations, the topic of religion and violence is essentially fodder for ethics. This is because violence is human action decided upon by human beings and anything human beings do and decide to do is subject to moral analysis. Although institutions within Christianity, like Church bodies, may play a significant role in gathering people to address violence, for or against, the responsibility for Christians acting violently or choosing to oppose violence lies with the people who are, as agents, making decisions to express their religiosity – their faith – one way in preference to another with respect to the question of violence.

Qualification 5. Violence involving religion can have special characteristics, just as one might find distinctive characteristics with violence as it arises politically, economically, ethnically, racially, or in response to a phenomenon like globalization. But religion does demand careful scrutiny. Matthew Isaac cites research that conflicts involving religion are more violent than other forms of conflict; that violence involving religion is “more violent and longer lasting than other forms of violence”; and that

⁵ The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) has been used throughout.

“While some scholars maintain that religious beliefs encourage violence, there is also reason to believe that violence encourages religion.”⁶ (The rhetoric of religion, Isaac argues, can serve to mobilize people in their social and political conflicts, religion providing a strong foundation for social solidarity in the face of conflict.)

While these preliminary qualifications have been brought forward to frame the inquiry that follows, this investigation into the “elements” of “Christianity and Violence” involves several other factors that will provide a focus for discussions to follow. These foci are relevant to ethics and moral psychology, for always at issue when violence comes into the picture is why the option for violence is chosen as a good and viable option, which must be assumed since it was in fact chosen, and it is reasonable to assume people choose what they believe to be good rather than bad options.

An overarching issue pertains to locating this study, as mentioned, in the arena of ethical analysis and moral psychology. The question of violence always concerns itself with motive, taken here to mean a backward-looking reason for action, and intention, taken here to be a forward-looking reason for action. What is the motive for violence undertaken by Christian people in the course of the conflicts they have endured throughout history? What intentions are in play when Christians encounter violence? Accompanying the motive–intention issue, Christian people involved with violence will take a stand in relation to violence due to the several relevant factors, including the following, which will specify “elements” relevant to the discussion about the relationship of Christianity to violence:

1. *Insecurity*. Clearly, one motive for the Christian resorting to violence is the profound experience of insecurity and vulnerability.

⁶ Matthew Isaac, “Sacred Violence or Strategic Faith? Disentangling the Relationship between Religion and Violence in Armed Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 53, no. 2 (February 2016): 211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315626771>. Worthy of note is the research of Joshua D. Wright, “More Religion, Less Justification for Violence: A Cross-National Analysis,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2016): 159–183. Wright argues that the more religious persons are around such beliefs as life-after-death, the less likely they are to be perpetrators of violence.

2. *Dialectic of violence and nonviolence.* Referencing once again the diversity of viewpoints within the wide bailiwick of the world's largest religion, Christianity, it is important to recognize the diversity of beliefs and practices and think about them in terms of a dialectic. Of course certain affirmations of faith will appear universal to Christians, the importance and centrality of Jesus of Nazareth and the New Testament Scriptures, for instance, but still the details of the many denominations and divisions within the faith tradition point to differences in content, emphasis, belief and practice. Since there is no one religious viewpoint on the question of how to understand violence from a Christian perspective, discussions of justification for violence will often be met by other Christians opposing violence also on religious grounds. The violence/nonviolence dialectic will be a constant issue in this volume.
3. *Punishment and identity.* Another motive for resorting to violence is to inflict punishment for actions deemed threatening to good or established order or to the faith community's commitments of doctrine and practice. Violence is a way to respond to challenges to identity – and the future identity – of Christian persons and their communities (Church), which provides the structure for identity and its continuity generation to generation. The preservation of identity through punishment, the fear of losing identity and the desire to enforce identity on others, have all been motivations for violence.
4. *Protection of identity.* The use of violence to protect identity points to practices that may violate moral norms, but which also indicate, even if quite backhandedly, pursuit of the end of securing peace and social harmony. Violence is, curiously, a means of conflict resolution when the community or the faith identity is threatened. Resorting to violence can indicate support for practices that demean people on the basis of race, sex or gender, or subject innocent persons to threats of harm through terrorist activities, yet such violence can be interpreted in ways that demonstrate aspirations to peace through religiously affirmed values for the religious community. Specifically, Christian people who resort to violence may seek to conform their actions to what is believed to be the divine will in particular conflicts. Violence can be justified as a means –

unfortunate perhaps – to move through conflict because the end that is sought is peace and social harmony for the community of faith.

Looking ahead, we shall begin by examining the sources of Christian affirmation in the early theological work of St. Paul and in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as told by the Gospels. We shall then examine various instances of violence in the history of the West where Christianity has made a response by justifying violence or refusing to justify it; then, in a third section, conclude with an examination of the ways in which Christian identity is an issue relevant to violence, examining issues such as war, punishment, inquisition, heresy and even Christian terrorism.

2 Theological Sources and Sanctions for Violence and Nonviolence

Violence has played a significant role in the history – and in the internal story – of Christianity from its very beginning. The birth narratives of Jesus in the New Testament, for instance, one obvious starting point in the Christian story, announce through heavenly heralds an explicit message of peace on earth and good will to all people. That message of peace suppresses a more subtle story of violence. Even the Christmas story manifests the element of violence–nonviolence since the parents-to-be at the center of the story were on the road to Bethlehem, traditional site of Jesus' birth, because of an obligation to obey an imperial census decree. Thus, the story provides a reminder that the world into which Jesus was born was marked by military occupation. The occupier, Rome, remains, even in today's memory, one of the most violent and brutal imperial regimes the world has ever known, and that reputation is hardly ameliorated by the roads, aqueducts and all the other Roman engineering marvels.

First century Israel-Palestine was properly known as Judea, a Roman territory that identified both the area around Jerusalem as well as the wider area of Palestine inhabited by Jews. Jerusalem was the center of the world for Jews, for the Temple where God dwelt was to be found in this ancient city, which had long been a site of annual pilgrimage. When Jesus was born, Palestine was ruled by a ruthless Roman vassal, Herod the Great, the sons

of whom, upon his death, would divide power and unsuccessfully govern Galilee, Judea and Samaria. So much unrest ensued that Rome appointed a Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to assert Rome's hard hand of discipline on the land, and Roman authority was strongly in place as the story of Jesus unfolds in the Gospel stories.

The years of the first century were socially unstable, politically conflicted and economically oppressive. Heavy tax burdens imposed on farmers led rural inhabitants in the wider area to migrate to urban centers, and discontent only grew in urban settings. The Romans were hated by the local populations, and the political skirmishes and revolts against Rome would finally culminate in the 66 CE Jewish War. Rome would suppress rebellions arising from a dissatisfied and resentful indigenous population; and religion was not unaffected by all the turmoil.⁷ Messianism, apocalypticism and Zealotry had become major ideological attachments for religious people in Judea in the two centuries leading up to Jesus' birth, and the Roman war against the Jews would finally lead to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.

The razing of the Temple, this dwelling place of the Holy One, proved to be a singular moment in the history of the religious life of Jews and of Christians as well. Jews did not find in the Jewish sect of Christianity reason to adopt the Christian belief that messianic hopes had been realized in the person and work of Jesus as the Christ; and the destruction of the Temple further separated Christians from Jews, reflecting an anti-temple theme that is quite pronounced in the Gospels where it is even attributed to Jesus himself. The early first century history of Christianity is noteworthy for the conflicts of the early Christians with Jews and the Jewish community, with Roman authorities, and with parties internal to Christianity itself. In dealing with those conflicts, Christians turned to source authorities to discern what to believe and how to act, and the writings of Paul and the story of the life of Jesus would prove to be determinative for Christians seeking to discern the will of the divine. These authorities would be consulted on the issue of

⁷ Philip Jenkins, "A Most Violent Year: The World into which Jesus was Born," www.abc.net.au/religion/a-most-violent-year-the-world-into-which-jesus-was-born/10097496.

violence and whether and how it can be sanctioned and justified as consistent with – if not exactly integral to – the tenets of faith. The role that violence played in the development of the religion of Christianity can be seen even in brief compass by examining relevant aspects of Christianity’s most important figures in the first century, St. Paul and Jesus of Nazareth.

St. Paul

St. Paul is memorable for a variety of reasons. He was, first of all, a liberal Pharisaic Jew who became a founder of the religion of Christianity after originally opposing all things Christian. As the Book of Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament tells it, he was present at the stoning of Christianity’s first noteworthy martyr, Stephen, and approved of the killing (Acts 8.1). So in his first appearances in Scripture, St. Paul – originally Saul of Tarsus – is identified as an opponent of Christianity sanctioning a lethal act of violence. Moreover, Paul, prior to his adoption of the new faith, is known, according to the author of Acts, as a persecutor of Christians, one who entered by force the homes of Christian men and women, imprisoned them, and “breath(ed) threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9.1). But Saul does accept Christian faith claims, and, as one who would share with the original disciples the title of “Apostle,” also understands that the demand of the new religion is for a missionary proselytizing faith that seeks to make converts. While not inherently violent, such a mission for the faith could lend itself to coercion and violence, and subsequent missionary history would bear out that this did in fact happen and with some frequency. The Book of Acts also shares that Paul and St. Peter divided the outreach mission of the new faith between them, Peter continuing to spread the Gospel message to Jews, and Paul taking the message to Gentiles or non-Jews. It is this mission to the non-Jewish world that allows us to say of St. Paul that he is responsible for envisioning a wider post-Jewish vision of Christianity. Paul’s missionary activity, along with that vision of outreach to the Gentile world, is what contributed more than anything else in the history of the faith tradition to making Christianity a world religion.

Paul’s letters, the earliest writings in the New Testament, are addressed to the church communities he helped found, Rome being an already-established exception. In his letters, Paul settles conflicts that have arisen