



Christians and Buddhists: Walking Together on the Path of Non-Violence

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Why Do We Have So Much Violence in Our World:

A Sociological Perspective

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Today, we all wrestle with the problem of violence. More than 1.3 million worldwide die each year because of violence in all its forms - self-directed, interpersonal, and collective. Violence accounts for 2.6% of global mortality. The World Bank estimates that 1.2 billion people, roughly one fifth of the world's population, are affected by some form of violence or insecurity. [1] In addition, tens of thousands of people around the world are victims of non-fatal violence every day.[2] By the end of 2016, the number of displaced people had risen to 65.6 million.[3]

The World Health Organization defines violence as

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.[4]

The *World Report on Violence and Health* (WRVH) presents a typology of violence that is useful for understanding the contexts in which violence occurs and the way different types of violence interact. Violent acts can be physical, sexual, or psychological and can involve deprivation or neglect. It further divides the general definition of violence into three sub-types according to the victim-perpetrator relationship.

- **Self-directed violence** refers to violence in which the perpetrator and the victim are the same individual. This type of violence is subdivided into self-abuse or self-mutilation and suicide.[5]
- **Interpersonal violence** refers to violence between individuals. This type of violence is subdivided into family violence and community violence. Family violence includes child maltreatment; intimate partner violence, and elder abuse. [6] Community violence is broken down into acquaintance and stranger violence and includes youth violence, assault by

strangers, violence related to property crimes, and violence in workplaces and other institutions.

- **Collective violence** refers to violence committed by larger groups of individuals. It can be subdivided into social, political, and economic violence.[7] Larger groups such as nation states, militia groups, and terrorist organizations resort to collective violence in order to achieve political, economic, or social objectives.[8]

The 2014 *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention* dealt only with interpersonal violence, using data from 133 countries with a combined population of 6.1 billion people, that is to say, 88% of the world's population. It is estimated that in 2012, 475000 deaths were the result of homicide. Sixty percent of these were males who were between 15 and 44 years old, making homicide the third leading cause of death for males in this age group.[9] Women, children, and elderly people bear the brunt of non-fatal physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.[10] A quarter of all adults report having being physically abused as children. One in five women report having been sexually abused as a child. One in three women has been the victim of physical or sexual violence by her intimate partner at some point in her life.[11]

What causes interpersonal violence?

Violence often disfigures peoples' lives for decades or forever and can lead to alcohol and drug addiction, depression, suicide, dropping out of school, unemployment, and recurrent relationship difficulties. These factors create a social climate that is conducive to more violence. Economic stagnation, inequality, alcohol misuse, and inadequate parenting all increase the likelihood of child maltreatment, youth violence, and intimate partner abuse, and sexual abuse. Moreover, those who witness violence at home or in the community are at greater risk of manifesting violent behaviour as adults.[12]

Religion and Violence

Violence in the name of religion and the growing phenomenon of religious fundamentalism have provoked a heated debate in many societies with regard to the causes of violence and, more specifically, with regard to the role of religion in relation in the perpetration of violence. There are two principal schools of thought: one school argues that religion is inherently violent, while the other refutes that claim, arguing that the essential message of religion is non-violence.

To examine the reasons brought forward by those who claim that religion is inherently violent, we can turn to *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, which offers intersections between religion and violence throughout history and around the world. The editors challenge the thesis that religious violence is not religious, but is rather a distortion of an essential element of religious teaching. The scholars they chose to author the essays in this volume argue that since "it is precisely foundational religious teachings that are claimed to sanctify violence by many of its perpetrators,"[13] religion and violence are therefore inextricably intertwined.

In one of the essays in this book entitled "Religion and Violence from a Sociological Perspective," John Hall defines violence as "actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury" and specifies that injury

may be “corporal, written or verbal.” [14] He identifies two arenas in which religious involvement with violence can take place: within a given religious group and among its participants, and secondly, in situations where religious groups engage in actions connected to broader social processes, mainly relationships between religious groups, political power, and hegemonic culture. [15]

In another book on the relation between religion and violence, this one entitled *The Myth of Religious Violence*, William T. Cavanaugh argues that

The idea that religion has a tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies. [...] What I call the “myth of religious violence” is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from “secular” features such as politics and economies, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence. Religion must therefore be tamed by restricting its access to public power. The secular-state appears as natural, corresponding to a universal and timeless truth about the inherent danger of religion. [...] In this book, I challenge this piece of conventional wisdom, not simply by arguing that ideologies and institutions labelled “secular” can be just as violent as those labelled “religious,” but by examining how the twin categories of religious and secular are constructed in the first place” [16]

Although he does not directly deal with the thesis that “religious violence is not religious,” William T. Cavanaugh does point out the ways secular-violence can provoke so-called religious violence.

Identity Conflicts as Cultural Conflicts

If religion does not directly incite violence, how can we account for the apparent relationship between religion and violence? The reason religion is often *instrumentalized* is that religious, cultural, and ethnic identities tend to coincide when there are cultural conflicts.

By cultural conflicts we mean those domestic, inter-state or transnational political conflicts in which the actors involved focus on issues relating to religion, language and historicity. [...] Three groups of actors can be identified in cultural conflicts: (i) anti-regime wars, inspired by left-wing actors and this type of domestic conflicts are dwindling or are related to other two groups below; (ii) ethnic conflicts among communal groups or against the central government to win cultural and political self-determination and the redistribution of economic rights; (iii) religious conflicts often shaped by transnational groups. [17]

The result of the confluence of religious, cultural, and ethnic identities is that “People and countries with similar cultures are coming together. Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart.” [18] Accordingly, “Political boundaries increasingly are redrawn to coincide with cultural ones: ethnic, religious, and civilizational.” [19] Moreover, the cold war question, “Which side are you on?” has been replaced, today by “Who are you? The answer comes from one’s cultural identity.

A serious problem that confronts us today is how to manage the losers of the global system. [20] Moreover, the dislocation, exclusion, and discontent caused by globalization contribute to

“stimulate the revitalization of indigenous identities and culture.”^[21] Affirming the religious, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic identities of one group at the expense of an “other” contributes to social divisions. The marginalised and discontented members of social systems often give vent to their resentments through cultural resistance. In recent years, religious political parties and religious rhetoric have become dominant features of the political scene in many countries. This situation is further aggravated when one cultural group seeks to seize the territory, wealth, and resources of another group by imposing its own values, culture, and institutions. If one group does not consider another group to be a part of its ethnic or religious world, it will be easier to have no regrets about committing violence against the “other” who is different. In such a situation, those who perpetrate violence will not see themselves as perpetrators because, in their minds, their acts of violence are not directed against real human beings. Socio-cultural particularisms thus contribute to the weakening of the universalistic roles of religion.

How can we prevent violence?

Violence goes well beyond physical harm. It causes depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. Violence can contribute to an early death and lifelong physical and mental ill health. In addition, since violence has a high economic cost, preventing it can promote economic growth.

However, we need to ask if it is indeed possible to overcome fear and hatred between different groups of people. What does it take to change one’s image of a perceived enemy and thus begin to break the vicious circle of violence? What kind of dialogue is needed if we are to create a social climate in which people can live together in peace?

The good news is that while violence is predictable, it can be prevented if we commit ourselves to the following practices:

1. Developing safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and caregivers;
2. Developing life skills in children and adolescents;
3. Reducing the availability and harmful use of alcohol;
4. Reducing access to guns and knives;
5. Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women;
6. Changing cultural and social norms that support violence;
7. Identifying victims and making available to them programmes of care and support;^[22]
8. Deconstructing the image of the enemy and reconstructing the image of the other;
9. Eradicating poverty, injustice, inequality, exploitation and discrimination, which are the underlying causes of conflicts;
10. Promoting dialogue at all levels to build inclusive societies.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*, Mark Anthony says, “The evil that men do lives after them” (Act III, scene 2). Many people experience the truth of this statement because of the devastating and destructive impact of violence on individuals, families, communities, and nations. As we have already indicated, violence is socially constructed, and therefore we need to address the

conditions that give rise to violent behaviour. In our interreligious context, we can find answers in the Axial Age, as well as in the post-Axial Age of Jesus and Mohammad. Many of the world 's great philosophers and religious leaders, among them Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, the Palestinian prophets, and the major Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, emerged between the years 800 -200 B.C.E, the period that Karl Jaspers called Axial Age. The new forms of consciousness they fostered gave birth to great civilizations of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

The idea that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us, known as the Golden Rule, is an ethic that emerged almost universally during the Axial Age. Karl Jaspers in his book, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus*, describes these personages as “paradigmatic individuals” and asserts that their understanding of love (loving your neighbour) is universal.

Today, some scholars suggest that we are witnessing the dawn of the Second Axial Age in the emerging energy and passion of so many people and organizations that strive to bring forth a better world. This new self-consciousness is also open to the reality of the spiritual dimension, to the sanctity of life, and to care for *our Common Home*. Today, dialogue and collaboration with these individuals and organizations is not an option but is a necessity.

The founders of the world's great religions all understood that humanity's core challenge was to overcome the egoism that gives rise to violence. In order to curb aggression, they taught their followers to cultivate compassion and hospitality for all human beings. What we need to do is redefine the inclusive universalistic claims of Axial Age so that men and women of our time can draw on them to develop and direct their yearning for a new humanism.

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[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/armed-conflict-deaths-increase-syria-iraq-afghanistan-yemen>

[2] The Global status report on violence prevention 2014, p.2.

<http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/Reports/UNDP-GVA-violence-2014.pdf>

[3] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/there-are-now-more-refugees-than-the-entire-population-of-the-uk/>

[4] "World report on violence and health", World Health Organization, 2002.

[5] Close to 800 000 people die due to suicide every year—one person every 40 seconds. Many more attempt suicide. http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/

[6] Elder abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person. This type of violence constitutes a violation of human rights and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect, and serious loss of dignity and respect. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs357/en/>

[7] <http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/definition/en/>

[8] In 2011, the WHO Global Burden of Disease project estimated that 6.3% – or 86 307 – of all deaths due to violence were directly due to war and civil conflict.

[9] The Global status report on violence prevention 2014, p. vii.

[10] *Ibid*, p.viii.

[11] *Ibid*, p.viii.

[12] The Global status report on violence prevention 2014, p.viii.

[13] M. Juergensmeyer *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 2.

[14] John R. Hall in “Religion and Violence from a Sociological Perspective”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, p. 364.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 366.

[16] William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 3.

[17] Aurel Croissant – Christoph Trinn, *Culture, Identity and Conflict in Asia and South Asia*, ASIEN 110, (January 2009), pp.13 and 21.

[18] Samuel P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, Rockefeller Centre, New York 1996, p. 126.

[19] p. 126

[20] Peter L. Berger, “Introduction, The Cultural Dynamic of Globalization”, p. 16.

[21] *Ibid*, 129.

[22] The Global status report on violence prevention 2014, p. viii.