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# BEYOND VIOLENCE

Religious Sources of Social Transformation  
in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

*Edited by* JAMES L. HEFT, S.M.

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efforts of élites to mobilize them, but also migration, or the effects of globalization, either through the spread of media or the undermining of older ways in which we make our living. Migration can mean being mixed with unfamiliar others, not knowing how they will react, being unable to reconstitute the older way of life. Loss of the older forms of making a living can undermine our dignity, our identity; it can induce a sense of loss and helplessness. The decay of the old often brings disorientation or feelings of humiliation and lowered self-worth.

In these circumstances, a new categorial identity can offer people something very precious: not only a direction, an orientation, but also a sense of (collective) agency. We are no longer just to suffer a sense of helplessness before dimly understood global forces, but we are to be mobilized against named and identified ills. It is not surprising, in the light of what I said above about scapegoating and holy wars, that these ills are often attributed to a source in an enemy, who wants to destroy us and whom we must combat. We should measure how overwhelming the temptation can be to go along with this kind of (often murderous) mobilization when it comes across as the only way to recover orientation, dignity, agency.<sup>17</sup>

Violence around categorial identities is one of the most pressing dangers of the coming century. It could literally destroy our world.

#### MORALLY DRIVEN HATE/EXCLUSION

I have been dealing with what we all recognize as the terrible cases of group violence. But along with this, we have in the modern world highly peaceful societies, where the level of everyday violence is quite low. Indeed, in some of these societies, the level is very much lower than in earlier epochs. Compare France under the ancien régime and the France of today, for instance. So modern civilization presents the paradoxical spectacle of societies that, in their "normal" internal operation, sometimes through long periods are more pacific than any others in history, while at moments at their boundaries, so to speak, they wage hugely destructive wars, which can then in certain circumstances engulf them, and on occasion they can even fall

prey to civil wars. If we look only at the long periods of internal peace, we can nourish the hope that modern civilization will tame war and violence, which is one of the great aspirations of liberalism. If we think of the terrible destruction of modern war and ethnic cleansing, we are plunged into gloom.

But how does it work when it works? Our civilization is built on an idea of order between equal, rights-bearing individuals, whose action should be directed to mutually enriching and mutually enhancing forms of self-realization. This is not just an idea, but also something that has become entrenched in the institutions and practices, political and economic, in the social imagination, and in the disciplined training of modern subjects. As an established order, it does a great part of the time succeed in keeping us in line and preventing the worst of mutual violence and threats, though we sense how fragile this order can be, and in particular how much depends on the inclusion of masses of people within the mutually enhancing mechanisms of the economy and welfare state.

But even when it works at its best, the modern order can secrete various forms of contempt and exclusion, which replicate some of the motives that break out in violence in less restrained contexts. In the earlier sections, I was dealing with the survival of full-blooded violence, sometimes highly ritualized, always with a purificatory element. But there is also subviolent hatred, even where violence is contained. Let us look at some of these.

Consider another facet of the modern moral order: many of the disciplines that constitute it, as well as the intellectual outlook it inculcates, call for an objectifying, disengaged stance—one that seems consonant with a "scientific" perspective. This justifies itself for a host of reasons, but not least because it separates us from the wild and metaphysical-religious sense of the numinous power of violence and sexuality. It thus should preserve us from going along with holy anger. And it also allows us to see calmly and coolly what needs to be done. We can become calm, collected, clear-seeing agents of healing, of reform, of betterment.

Objectification easily goes along with the therapeutic stance. When we come to treat our problem cases, we are dealing not with evil but with different kinds of pathology, which we have to heal. We seem at the antipodes of Robespierre, with his pervasive moralization. But

the therapeutic perspective justifies us in dealing with these people as charges, patients. Evil has a certain dignity, that of deep investment in a distorted vision of the good. Pathology is just incapacity. Such thinking is the source of a potentially paradoxical deviation, in which a benign stance turns malign.

This deviation can also be seen from another side. The disengaged stance is also a distancing strategy. Thinking of these people as sick, pathological, needing therapy makes them other, not real interlocutors, not really embodying alternative possibilities that can draw us, tempt us. So there is an analogue here to the earlier mode of identifying the outsider as a contrast case, as another species, as savage. Outsiders exist in another space, behind a turn in the road, where they aren't our interlocutors. But their not being real interlocutors, fully responsible beings, also can mean that you can treat them roughly, even perhaps that you have to. You want to make them shape up. We don't need to be too tender with them. See how the politically correct in the United States treat those classed as "homophobes" or "misogynists." We can use shaming as an instrument of coercion or compulsory reeducation or worse.

The benignity of disculpation can become the malignity of rough, contemptuous treatment. But perhaps also something worse is happening. Perhaps that holy anger is recurring here. So one distancing strategy can become the cover for another, much older one. Dostoyevsky has given a penetrating depiction of this turn, for instance, in *The Possessed*. Disengagement can become partly a sham, a comedy we play with and on ourselves.

The two kinds of hate—identity driven and liberal-moral driven (or Jacobin- or Bolshevik-moral driven)—can combine, that is, in the crusade of our civilization against Milosevic's Serbia. My invoking this example does not mean that I think the policy was wrong. That is another, and very difficult and complex, issue. But right or wrong, we should be clear about the kinds of feeling mobilized behind it in our societies. And some of these are troubling.

In a quite different and, one might say, even opposite way, this distancing, disengaged stance encouraged by the modern moral order can generate violence, by reacting to it. There is an attempt in our modern liberal world to work directly against the mechanisms I have been describing in the previous sections, to take all the

numinousness out of violence, and make life tame and ordered. This means also leveling down the hero. From almost the beginning, this reaction has provoked another reaction to what is seen as a leveling down of life, a denial of heroism and greatness. The denial of violence is also that of warrior dignity, and this has seemed to many too high, a price to pay. Perhaps the most influential figure who has given voice to this reaction, and in one of the most radical forms, is Friedrich Nietzsche. His influence is ubiquitous in the higher culture of the last century. And this kind of reaction has also erupted onto the political scene, with fascism. It goes on today without benefit of either high culture or fascist ideology in outbreaks of violence by, for example, skinheads.<sup>18</sup>

#### *LE SOUCI DE LA VICTIME*

The defeat of the Nazis left room for another powerful narrative. This is what Girard has called "le souci de la victime."<sup>19</sup> This shows the tremendous force of the New Testament in our culture. But this impact is also captured and deflected.

There is a narrative of the modern world, like and parallel to that of the growth of freedom, democracy, which sees us as redressing all the historical wrongs and inequalities. We rescue and recognize all the victims. But this is connected to the moralism of meting out punishment to perpetrators, victimizers—which justifies wreaking punishment and vengeance on them. So another powerful engine of destruction is born, and an equally paradoxical one.

The concern for the victim is, in Girard's view, the religion, an absolute of the modern world. How should we understand this? Partly in terms of the modern moral order—but this is not sufficient. This provides the standard of equality and mutual respect, against which victims are identified. But there is something more in *le souci de la victime*.

This more is the idea that we move toward the ultimate order through the unmasking of hidden victimizations, which are covered up, denied, and have to be denounced. So it is part of the dynamic theory of how we move toward the order, not prescribed by the order itself, which was after all originally used for the justification

of the established structures, or what underlay these structures, the proper constitution of power, as for instance, with Locke.

This concern is a more direct borrowing from Christianity. The Gospel involves a reversal, showing the victim to be innocent; it points toward the raising up of victims, of the despised and rejected. Various religious reforms involve taking this idea of reversal farther. The Reformation itself is one such example, as also is modern humanism, which defends ordinary human life against persecution in the name of "higher" modes of spirituality.

So this élan becomes part of the ethic of our time, the political ethic. Joined to a view of history, this yields a transfigured version of the modern moral order as eschatological idea. This becomes on one hand, a great force for battling against injustices. But it also becomes a way of drawing lines, denouncing enemies, the evil ones.

Hence comes the powerful cachet of victimhood. This would have been very surprising to our ancestors living by the warrior ethic; no Greek warrior would insist that he was the oppressed serf. Friedrich Nietzsche would be doubly horrified. Why this cachet? Because my being the victim means that you are the victimizer. I am pure. Claiming victimhood is an assertion of our purity; we are all right. Moreover, our cause is good, so we can fight, inflict a violence that is righteous: a holy violence. Hence we have a right to do terrible things, which others have not. Here is the logic of modern terrorism. Even the Nazis made use of a proto-form of this: "I have suffered terribly at the hands of others; therefore I can wreak mayhem."

All such thinking depends on the external placing of evil and therefore on a dichotomizing of good and evil. Now according to the outlook of modern disengaged objectification, we are not supposed to believe in evil. But this is subverted by the fact that the very definition of ourselves as people of good will seems to require that we see the others as evil. So we show our goodness in fighting against the bad guys.

Even for the greatest disenchanters, evil has to return to their picture, because they have a sense of themselves as actuated by a pure, good will, and have to see, somewhere their opponent, pure evil. So there are new myths of evil, which are not admitted to be such theoretically. They have to fit the myths of good will. These are Rousseauian: we are all good au fond. So whence comes evil? Bad

upbringing, perhaps, or being abused. But this reduces the agents of bad to victims themselves, people who have become incapacitated. The therapeutic perspective dominates. Somewhere we need to find an object to expel, one which concentrates evil. At first, this can just be the "system," as remarked by David Martin.<sup>20</sup> But the search for evil needs in the end wills. So it alights on those who support the system. These are the really evil people, the real victimizers, even though they may be hiding this from themselves; they may not realize it; they may think the system totally "normal"; even so, perhaps especially so, they are the evil ones. They can be treated as pure enemies.

#### VANQUISHING VIOLENCE

Does all this tell us anything about how to lessen violence or get rid of it? Have we a hope of doing this? Let us consider first what I will call the Kant hypothesis, although he was not the only person to hold this view. This is the idea that ordered, democratic societies will become less violent; they will not go to war with each other and presumably will not suffer civil wars. There is some truth to this, as we saw above. Modern disciplined order has had some effect. But the peace is fragile, for a host of reasons—partly because there are certain success conditions of economic order, partly because of tensions of exclusion and rivalry that remain subviolent but generate hostility. And then there is the problem that some societies have great trouble acceding to the category of ordered democratic polities.

So any program to overcome violence must contain at least two objectives: (1) build such ordered democratic polities; (2) try to make their benefits spread as wide as possible, for example, by preventing the formation of desperate, excluded groups—particularly young men.

But this program seems radically incomplete in the face of the carryover or, better, re-editing of older forms of scapegoating and holy war to our day. Can we do something to fight these? Is there a third element to our program?

One answer might be: let us note the metaphysical and religious roots of this categorial, purificatory violence. So, how do we get rid of it? It is religious, or at least metaphysical, and so we will

get rid of it only by totally overcoming the religious dimension in our existence. The problem up to now is that many of the main builders of a supposedly secular republic, the Lenins and the Robespierres, have not really liberated themselves from this incubus as they thought they had.

But it seems clear from the phenomena reviewed above that just proposing some nonreligious theory, such as modern humanism, does not really do the trick. The religious forms seem to reconstitute themselves. So we would have to fight for a real, thoroughgoing disenchantment, a total escape from religion. How do we do this? Is this really possible?

This suggests another answer: all the above shows that the religious dimension is inescapable. Perhaps there is only the choice between good and bad religion. Now there is good religion. For instance, there is Girard's take on Old and New Testaments, as the source for a counterstory to the scapegoat narrative, which shows the victim to be innocent. And we can say something analogous about the Buddha, for instance.

Thus we can point to the Gospel picture of a Christian counter-violence: a transformation of the energy that usually goes into scapegoat purification, transformation that reaches to overcome the fear of violence not by becoming lord of it, by directing it as an annihilating force against evil, but that aims rather to overcome fear by offering oneself to it, responding with love and forgiveness, thereby tapping a source of goodness and healing.

But an analogous point to the one just made about humanism can be made about these religious positions. Just adopting some religion, even a, in principle, "good" one, does not do the trick. Christianity is responsible for *le souci de la victime* in the modern world. But we see how this can be colonized by the religion of purification of scapegoats. Do we want to protest that this is a secularized variant? Then how about the long, dreary, and terrible history of Christian anti-Semitism? Seen in a Girardian light, this is a straight betrayal of the Gospel, a 180-degree reversal. Just believing in these "good" religions does not overcome the danger. Both sides have the virus and must fight against it.

Where does this leave us in our search for a third kind of measure in our program? We noticed a pattern in the paradoxical reversals

above. The goodness that inhabits our goal, or our vision of order, is somehow undone when it comes to struggling to realize it. Robespierre's republic without a death penalty somehow energizes a program of escalating butchery. Similar things can be said for the Herderian order of nations coexisting in diversity or the goal of rescuing all victims. The paradox is that the very goodness of the goal defines us, its builders and defenders, as good and hence opens the way to our grounding our self-integrity on a contrast case who must be as evil as we are virtuous. The higher the morality, the more vicious the hatred and hence destruction we can, indeed, must wreak. When the crusade comes to its fullness in the moralism of the modern world, even the last vestiges of chivalric respect for an enemy, as in the days of Saladin and Richard Coeur de Lion, have disappeared. There is nothing left but the grim, relentless struggle against evil.

There is no general remedy against this self-righteous reconstitution of the categorizations of violence, the lines drawn between the good and evil ones that permit the most terrible atrocities. But there can be moves, always within a given context, whereby someone renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, of the victim to purge the victimizer. The move is the very opposite of the instinctive defense of our righteousness. It is a move that can be called forgiveness, but at a deeper level, it is based on a recognition of common, flawed humanity.

In Dostoyevsky's *Possessed*, the slogan of the scientific revolutionaries who would remake the world is "no one is to blame." That is the slogan of the disengaged stance to reality, of the therapeutic outlook. What this slogan hides is another stance that projects the blame entirely on the enemy, giving ourselves the power to act that comes from total righteousness. Opposed to this is the insight that Dostoyevsky's potentially redemptive characters struggle to: "we are all to blame." It is this restoration of a common ground that defines the kind of move I am talking about. It opens a new footing of co-responsibility to the erstwhile enemy.

It is best to see this in an example. And a very remarkable example stands in our recent history. I am thinking of Nelson Mandela. There was great political wisdom there. Following the only too understandable path of revenge would have made it impossible to build a new, democratic society. It is this reflection that has pushed many

leaders after periods of civil war in history to offer amnesties. But there was more than that here. Amnesties have the flaw that they usually involve suppressing the truth or at least consciousness of the terrible wrongs that have been done, which therefore fester in the body politic. Mandela's answer was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one that is meant to bring terrible deeds to light but not necessarily in a context of retribution. Moreover, the deeds to be brought to light were not only those of the former ruling side. Here is the new ground of co-responsibility that this commission offered.

No one knows if this will ultimately work. A move like this goes against the utterly understandable desire for revenge by those who have suffered, as well as all the reflexes of self-righteousness. But without this forgiveness, and even more, the extraordinary stance of Mandela from his first release from prison, what I have called his renunciation of the rights of victimhood, the new South Africa might never have even begun to emerge from the temptations to civil war that threatened and are not yet quite stilled.<sup>21</sup>

There are other examples in this whole field of transitions from despotic and often murderous régimes, inseparable from the spread of democracy. The Polish case also comes to mind, as well as the strong advice of people like Adam Michnik to forego the satisfactions of retribution in the name of building a new society. The Dalai Lama's response to Chinese oppression in Tibet offers another striking case.

It is in moves of this kind that we need to seek the third element in our program. They follow neither of the lines suggested above in that, although they clearly derive a lot from the religious traditions involved, they are not necessarily the fruit of a personal religious faith. But however motivated, their power lies not in suppressing the madness of violent categorization, but in transfiguring it in the name of a new kind of common world.

#### NOTES

1. James Gilligan, *Violence* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
2. Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 81.

3. See the importance of "Daransetzen": "Und es ist allein das Daransetzen des Lebens, wodurch die Freiheit, wodurch es bewährt wird, dass dem Selbstbewusstsein nicht das *Sein*, nicht die *unmittelbare* Weise, wie es auftritt, nicht sein Versenktsein in die Ausbreitung des Lebens das Wesen—sondern das an ihm nichts vorhanden, was für es nicht verschwindendes Moment wäre, das es nur reines *Fürsichsein* ist." *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix<sup>2</sup> Meiner Verlag, 1952), 144.

4. This interweaving of the warrior code of honor, the vendetta, and sacred violence, is evident in the Palestine-Israel conflict. It emerges also in this telling quote from a leader in the communal riots in Hyderabad: "Riots are like one-day cricket matches where the killings are the runs. You have to score at least one more than the opposing team. The whole honor of your nation (*quani*) depends on not scoring less than the opponent" (from Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, 57).

5. See among others *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982) and the more recent *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (Paris: Grasset, 1999).

6. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).

7. It is in this context that I would like to understand the thesis about monotheism and violence of Regina Schwartz's interesting and suggestive work, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). I am suggesting that the phenomenon is perhaps more widespread and general than she proposes.

8. E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76–136.

9. See Albert Soboul, "Violences collectives et rapports sociaux: Les foules révolutionnaires" in *La Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 577–78; and François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Hachette Pluriel, 1999), 206–7. The idea that someone must always be to blame for catastrophic events is, of course, common in many "primitive" cultures; see, for instance, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937).

10. Cité par Georges Lefebvre, in *Quatre-Vingts-neuf* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1970), 245–46.

11. From Patrice Gueniffey, *La Politique de la Terreur* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 311–13. I have drawn a great deal on the interesting discussion in this book.

12. See again Gueniffey, *La Politique de la Terreur*, 310. He shows the same demonization of opposition in the case of the mass killings in La Vendée. The people here were described as animals, dehumanized as a preparation for massacre. There is a continuity with the prerevolutionary language of élites describing the people (255–61).

13. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14. I have described elsewhere how religion slides to becoming a marker for identity. See *Transit*, published by IWM, Vienna, volume 15, 1996.

15. I have discussed this drive to exclusion at greater length in "Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)" in *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, and R. Sudarshan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138–63.

16. See Craig Calhoun, for instance, his "Nationalism and Ethnicity" in *American Review of Sociology* 9 (1993), 230. The discussion in this section owes a great deal to Calhoun's recent work.

17. I have learned a great deal from the interesting discussion in Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, especially chapter 6.

18. I have discussed this at greater length in "The Immanent Counter-Enlightenment," in *Canadian Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner and Wayne Norman (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2001), 386–400.

19. See *Je vois Satan*, chapter 13.

20. D. A. Martin, *Dilemmas of Contemporary Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 94.

21. For an interesting discussion of the advantages and dangers of a truth commission of this kind, see Rajeev Bhargava, "Restoring Decency to Barbaric Societies," in Robert Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, eds., *Truth and Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45–67.

## Judaism, Christianity, Islam: Hope or Fear of Our Times

*Mustafa Cerić*

"The evil we are talking about here was not committed by Christians, but by those who have broken all the teachings of Jesus. Those who have raped women and killed innocent people have no religion. They are simply murderers."<sup>1</sup> I wish Alija Izetbegovic was able to come personally to this conference and read you this and many other of his statements concerning his understanding of religion and morality in the context of world affairs of today.

Unfortunately, his age and health did not allow him to be with you today in Los Angeles. He has asked me to represent him and to convey to you his warm salams, or greetings, and sincere thanks for giving him the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Distinguished Pathfinders Award for his contribution to "visionary leadership and magnificently distinguished service to Bosnia, Islam, and humanity" and for your interest in his ideas about the role of religion in today's world.

I am sure you are familiar with his work *Islam between East and West*, in which he tried to explain the role of religious morality in the context of the time of communism, hoping for Islam to be an avant-garde in promoting the morality in politics that would lead to a moral as well as political reform of society.

In the meantime, President Izetbegovic, has published other works<sup>2</sup> that are more autobiographical than religious in their form and content, but certainly they express his moral and political opinions concerning both national and international issues of our times. Having experienced the time of totalitarianism, President Izetbegovic is a strong advocate of fair and balanced democracy, free thought and speech, for he believed that only free men can assume