

In God's name

Is violence built into the 'DNA' of sacred texts?

JONATHAN BENTHALL

Richard A. Burrige and
Jonathan Sacks, editors

CONFRONTING RELIGIOUS
VIOLENCE

A counternarrative

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Ziya Meral

HOW VIOLENCE SHAPES
RELIGION

Belief and conflict in the Middle East and Africa
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St Anthony's Shrine, Colombo, Sri Lanka, following the series of bomb attacks on hotels and churches, April 25

“We are the story we tell about ourselves”, writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, co-editor of *Confronting Religious Violence: A counternarrative* with Richard A. Burrige, a Christian biblical scholar. This proposition underpins their book, the opportune and well-conceived outcome of a symposium held at King's College London in 2017 under the auspices of the John Templeton Foundation. The main question asked at the symposium was how a re-reading of the Scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam might soften the militancy whereby group identity can lead to deadly conflict. Jewish and Christian theologies are well represented. But though the Islamic aspect of the question is highly topical, the only one of the twelve chapters written by a Muslim does not address it. (This is a pragmatic, informative report by Amineh A. Hoti on educational and peacebuilding initiatives to promote cultural coexistence in Pakistan and Britain.) The absence of a chapter on the Islamic Scriptures gives us *Hamlet* without the prince. Otherwise the discussion turns out to be wide-ranging and unfettered.

Sacks leads with a chapter criticizing both the post-Enlightenment assumption of human progress and the partial displacement of religion, as a basis for identity, by the nation state, class and ethnicity. He draws on his own strongly argued book *Not in God's Name: Confronting religious violence* (reviewed in the *TLS*, December 18, 2015). Its centrepiece was a meditation on the theme of sibling rivalry, both literally between pairs of brothers in the Hebrew Bible, and metaphorically in that the three Abrahamic monotheisms are closely related. The stories of rival brothers drive home the necessity of non-exclusivity in religion, all the more pressing today as religions are clearly not going to disappear.

Burrige takes up Sacks's theme of sibling rivalry to question the common reading of Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism. This interpretation led to the doctrine of supersessionism, or replacement theology, which has been an important element in the teaching of the Christian Churches, albeit balanced by acceptance of the Old Testament as the first tier of the two-part Bible, with each part reflecting the other. Burrige diagnoses in supersessionism

an element of parricide: hence the infamous record of Christian antisemitism and eventually the Shoah. St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was not, Burrige tells us, a conversion away from Judaism but a call to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul can be polemical about his Judaizing opponents when he worries that the whole basis of the gospel is at stake, but he can also write positively about his Jewish heritage. Judaism during the period of Roman rule was so multifaceted that the early communities of Jews who came to accept Jesus as Messiah would have been seen as one of many argumentative sub-groups. Burrige extends his rigorous analysis to the Gospels of Matthew and John, both of which were to fuel antisemitism in the later history of the Church after the Constantinian settlement (AD 312) when the Jews became an oppressed minority. His case is that both these texts were essentially Jewish in their character and assumptions, and must be read as instances of intra-mural Jewish debate during turbulent years after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. Burrige draws an intriguing analogy with Irish or Jewish jokes that are acceptable within the ethnic “family” but take on an offensive tone when told by an outsider. He rests his case on John's assertion that the love of God is for everyone (John 1:11–12), but he has to admit that the debate is still open, for the proceedings of a colloquium held in Leuven in 2000 on “anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel” included a select bibliography of some 400 items.

In a pithy chapter, “Open Religion and its Enemies”, the historian Guy G. Stroumsa accepts the challenge of the editorial demand for counternarratives as a rearguard strategy. He stresses that, despite the clear importance of the Jewish heritage to early Christians, they soon fashioned their own identity in terms profoundly different from any kind of Jewish

identity: already, according to the second-century Epistle to Diognetus, they were a different people from the Greeks and Jews, a *triton genos*. Abandoning the cultural criteria of Jewishness – ethnicity, language and legal prescriptions – Christians came to take refuge in dogma, defined by its negation: “heterodoxy or heresy from within and Judaism and paganism from without”. Following Freud and Arnaldo Momigliano, Stroumsa questions the sublime Christian ethic of universal love and forgiveness as dangerously utopian: paradoxically, it authorizes violent intolerance against those who refuse to join the community of believers. He reasons that the present struggle is not between religions, but between modes of religiosity within each tradition. He advocates an eirenic counternarrative that decentres the experience of each faith group within a given society and reintegrates the memories of other groups. If Stroumsa's tone is rather tentative, this might be because he intuitively feels that the Burrige–Sacks counternarrative enterprise is a kind of purification movement, but one whose success will depend on transgressing the boundary markers cherished by each confession.

Among the remaining, diversely inspired chapters in *Confronting Religious Violence*, two of them adhere implicitly to the principle of “methodological agnosticism”, widely favoured by social scientists, which has the advantage of facilitating a level playing field for debate regardless of the strength or otherwise of discussants' religious beliefs. The evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson proclaims the revival of the concept of human communities as superorganisms, a notion eclipsed by individualist approaches during the twentieth century (and still today rather more disputed by his fellow Darwinians than he admits here). Group or multi-level selection

theory leads him to the conclusion that “selfishness beats altruism within groups; altruistic groups beat selfish groups”, and to bold speculation as to the origin of religions. Two points from his rewarding chapter may be singled out. First, he insists that counternarratives are doomed when they depart from facts, and unfortunately “violence is built into the ‘DNA’ of the sacred texts of all the major religions, along with the functional equivalents of sacred texts in nonreligious meaning systems, ready to be expressed whenever warranted by environmental conditions”. Wilson recommends as a counternarrative “interspirituality”, which would alert us to prizing the interconnectedness of the whole cosmos – an approach reminiscent of the mid-century French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or the theoretical physicist David Bohm. Second, he warns against use of the word “sacred” as a guarantor of virtue, for “when violence between groups evolves, it becomes as sacred for perpetrators of the violence as does nonviolence when it evolves”.

An outstanding chapter by the anthropologist Scott Atran, also a methodological agnostic, is as sceptical as Wilson's about the practical value of counternarratives, in that they “treat ideas as disembodied from the human conditions in which they are embedded and given life, thereby animating social groups”. Atran has conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with both pro- and anti-ISIS fighters. His alternative prescription for opposing terrorism is “personalized counter engagement”, addressing and harnessing the fellowship and passions of particular people within their specific social contexts – just as ISIS has often done in its recruiting. Moreover, Atran writes in similar vein to Wilson's that “sacred values” are “preferences, beliefs, and practices that communities deem protected from monetary or other material trade-offs, as when land or law

becomes holy or hallowed". To protect these values, a group may acquire a collective sense of invulnerability and engage in extreme actions at high personal cost. For Atran, the non-negotiability of such values cuts across any distinction between religious and secular. Similarly, Sacks writes in this book of evil undertaken in what is claimed as a noble cause; and Rogers Brubaker has written in the journal *Sociological Theory* (2015) of the extreme moral ambivalence of the "hypercommitted self".

Ziya Meral, in *How Violence Shapes Religion: Belief and conflict in the Middle East and Africa*, is less circumspect when he writes of the sacred. He borrows Peter L. Berger's concept of the "sacred cosmos, which transcends and includes man in its ordering of reality, thus provides man's ultimate shield against the terror of anomy". Meral follows Berger, who was a Lutheran theologian as well as a major sociologist, in insisting that the concept of transcendence is necessary for the theoretical discussion of religion. But in his case studies he confines himself to the mundane tools of empirical social science. Meral succeeds in puncturing "self-fulfilling prophecies of Manichean battles between 'us' and 'them' with devastating outcomes". In his introduction he finds fault with three essentialist views: Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations model (now discredited in political science but still influential in popular lore); the New Atheists' attribution of blame for violence to religion per se; and the sociologist Ulrick Beck's contention that the main culprit is monotheism with its exclusive truth claims. Beck's contention – which, incidentally, overlaps with Sacks's opinion that monotheism is haunted by Manichean dualism – is one that Meral brings into question with the example of violent Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

The bulk of his book is devoted to a careful and illuminating comparison between Nigeria and Egypt, two major countries – their respective populations roughly 198 million and 99 million – both defaced by violence between Muslims and Christians. At first sight the demographic disparity might seem to weaken his comparison. In Nigeria, Islam and Christianity account about equally for some 90 per cent of the population, the north being mainly Muslim and the south mainly Christians of various denominations, with the Middle Belt evenly occupied. Only about 10 per cent of Egyptians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, concentrated in Upper Egypt and in Cairo, by far the largest Christian denomination but politically marginalized and oppressed, having gradually lost their majority status since the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century. But Meral points to marked commonalities between the two countries' histories. Both emerged from colonial rule with resulting tensions between communities and elites. In Nigeria, the British colonial administration had played off the traditional Hausa-Fulani northern Muslim elite against the more evangelized western and eastern administrative zones, dominated respectively by the Yoruba and the Igbo. In Egypt during the early twentieth century, the Copts had more political posts than they could have had if a quota had been based on population estimates; but subsequently their political influence declined, they were scapegoated by Islamist groups, and violence against them began to erupt in the 1970s.

In both Nigeria and Egypt, military interventions have won public support on promises

of stability, an end to corruption, and protection from dangerous ideological agendas; but the actual outcomes have been exploitation of state revenues, exclusive access to opportunities based on ethnic or religious affiliations, and widespread poverty especially as a result of migration from rural to urban areas. In both countries, ethno-religious violence is only a part of wider patterns of conflict: in Nigeria, armed militias in the Delta state claiming a share of oil revenues, and common criminality; in Egypt, intimidation of the populace by thugs, and regular challenges by militants to the state's recourse to torture, disappearances and executions. In both countries, the place of religion in society has fluctuated. Nigerian politics between independence and the 1970s, including the Biafran civil war (1967–70), was mainly to do with ethnicity, but later became "religionized"; in Egypt, secular nationalism with a blend of socialism dominated between the lead-up to the 1952 revolution and the defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War, but Islam became central to Anwar Sadat's claim to political authority. In both countries, religious ideologies were themselves affected by political developments. Islamist thought in particular became more focused than before on opposing all that stood in the way of achieving a pure society, but Christian moral values were also compromised in both countries: Nigerian Christians have taken part in violence while preaching the non-violence of the New Testament, while the Coptic Church has supported the dictatorial methods of Presidents Mubarak and Sisi in the name of security and protection.

In both countries, impunity and a deficit in the rule of law have led to cycles of violence. Conspiracy theories abound, and mistrust is sustained by religious office-holders. Both Nigeria and Egypt have responded to successive transnational ideological movements amplified by the media: in turn, the "right to self-determination", socialism, the Iranian Islamic revolution, al-Qaeda, the "global war on terror". Meral concludes that "neither in Nigeria nor in Egypt do we see theological beliefs or imagined notions of civilizational identities being the starting point of violent conflicts or even political tensions". Hence – extrapolating from these two countries to the whole of Africa and the Middle East – Meral writes that it is simplistic to see local and regional episodes of violence as expressions of a given global problem. Moreover, in both Nigeria and Egypt religious confrontation is alleviated by numerous faith-based initiatives for reconciliation. (One of these, the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, northern Nigeria, is described by the journalist and poet Eliza Griswold in her chapter in *Confronting Religious Violence*.) Such initiatives challenge the self-fulfilling prophecy that tensions are escalated to the extreme.

Meral, who is qualified in both political science and Christian theology, shows an admirable even-handedness, but he seems to set up a comparison that tacitly attributes a victimhood to the Nigerian Christians analogous to that experienced by the Egyptian Copts, though they are much more numerous in proportion to the total Nigerian population, and indeed the largest Christian population in Africa. Such an analysis may well be justified. Their fear of the establishment of Islam as a state religion – a fear dating back to the British colonial administration's favouring of the

North – intensified after 1986, when General Ibrahim Babangida signed up Nigeria, despite its secular constitution, as a full member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Meral's general argument could have been corroborated if he had taken as a further case study the overwhelmingly Christian Philippines, where the presence of a small Muslim minority in the South has given rise to a violent liberation movement, inspired by international Islamism, lasting for fifty years. He rejects all pretences that "we", as opposed to "others", are inherently free from a predisposition to violence. "Some of the world's most developed countries ... have historically highest rates of incarceration, and their armed forces continually deploy brutal force across the world to assert national interests and foreign policy preferences". His insistence that religions are intrinsically neither violent nor peace-making is surely justified. But not satisfied with defending this thesis and criticizing the aforementioned three essentialisms, he has added an ambitious chapter entitled "Religion and violence in a global age", which digresses into palaeoanthropology and ancient history. It is stimulating but over-reliant on the historian René Girard and the classicist Walter Burkert, two heroic generalizers of yesteryear on the theme of bloody sacrifice.

Methodological agnosticism as to the truth values of religious doctrines is evidently compatible with the formulation of monocausal explanations relating to their origin and survival. Within the self-imposed disciplines of

empirical social science, however, such explanations have to be treated with scepticism, given the bewildering extent and variety of the evidence available. Equally, in a strictly comparative analysis any insertion of theological values such as sacredness and transcendence, however self-evident to insiders, has to be treated with reserve. It would be fruitless to dispute the deep conviction of an acclaimed religious leader such as Jonathan Sacks that there is a providence at work in history, and that God's avenging of wrongs makes vengeance by human beings unnecessary; but these teachings do not necessarily follow from the observable facts.

In *Confronting Religious Violence*, Eliza Griswold eloquently evokes the amplification by climate change of ethno-religious tensions in sub-Saharan Africa. Interfaith dialogue and counternarratives can no doubt contribute towards mitigating this and other occurrences of conflict. But there is a strong tradition in social science of preference for the down-to-earth, a reluctance to levitate. The richest encounters by social scientists with theology (if a partiality towards anthropology may here be excused) are those where an effort is made to understand and empathize with religious and quasi-religious lifeworlds, while maintaining analytical distance. This approach is well exemplified in the chapter by Scott Atran, and it is to the credit of the editors of *Confronting Religious Violence* that they have not restricted their hospitality to those who follow exactly their counternarrative lead.



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