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Author(s)	Miyajima, Shunichi
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Religion and Violence: Theoretical and methodological aspects

Shunichi MIYAJIMA

Abstract: Religion and violence have been the subject of numerous discussions. One side considers that religion has the function of eliminating raw violence. According to R. Girard, when violence occurs as a result of the tension and hostile relationships that inevitably occur within a community, and to prevent further retaliative violence, a sacrifice is required to end the cycle of violence. This sacrificial mechanism becomes a purification from violence. The other side, as represented by M. Juergensmeyer, suggests that religion may be the cause of war. He called the struggle between good and evil “cosmic war,” noting that it not only provides a background of violence, but also an excuse to use violence.

One reason for this conflict in discussions about religion and violence is the ambiguity of the terms “religion” and “violence.” For example, terrorism is direct violence and terrorists are undeniable perpetrators. If, however, those who became terrorists did so as a result of being kept in poverty, of discrimination and oppression, they themselves would be the victims of greater structural violence. One religion may give them a way to cope with structural violence peacefully, while another may provide an ideological affirmation of terrorism as a means of release from such violence.

Discussions of religion and violence are diverse; it is not easy to grasp the relationship between the two, but it is, however, necessary to provide a platform for discussion allowing religions to recognize each other’s existence.

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1. Introduction

Numerous discussions have been repeated on religion and violence. Among them, discourses about religious violence have contrasted with arguments that religion brings peace. This paper does not analyze individual problem cases. It also does not address specific theories of the relationship between religion and violence. They are certainly very important tasks. However, I will dare to review the discussion on religion and violence by pointing out the issues included in the structure of the problem itself. To be specific, this paper focuses on the problem of the definition of religion.

2. Is religion a device that causes violence, or is religion a device that avoids violence?

On the one hand, there is a debate that religion functions to eliminate “raw” (direct) violence. For example, René Girard says that it is not the difference that exists among people, but the dissolution of differences that causes violent confusion.¹ In other words, when differences disappear due to the loss of order, tension and hostile relations arise inside the community, and violence occurs. Furthermore, when retaliatory violence continues, sacrifice is required to cut that chain. This sacrificial mechanism is the purification of violence, according to Girard.² The scapegoat, that is, the “goat in substitution” need not be a living human being. By ceremonially and symbolically killing the “goat of substitution,” you can break the chain of violence and recover order. If such a symbolic and ceremonial series of actions can be called “religion,” then it can be argued that religion is a means of avoiding “raw” violence.

On the other hand, there is also the idea that religion brings about violence. For example, Juergensmeier thinks that religion is the cause of war. He named the “struggle of right and wrong” as a “cosmic war,” noting that it is not only behind violence but also the reason for using violence.³

I call such images “cosmic” because they are larger than life. They evoke great battles of the legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflicts between good and evil. Notions of cosmic war are intimately personal but can also be translated to the social plane. Ultimately, though, they transcend human experience. What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle — cosmic war — in the service of worldly political battles.⁴

According to Juergensmeyer, the premise of violent confrontation is a conflict in world views; and there are various views of the world in the world. If one view of the world is fixed and exclusive, conflict is

1 “As in Greek tragedy and primitive religion, it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos, that inspires Ulysses’ plaint. This loss forces men into a perpetual confrontation, one that strips them of all their distinctive characteristics - in short, of their ‘identities.’ Language itself is put in jeopardy. ‘Each thing meets/In mere oppugnancy:’” René Girard, *Violence and the sacred* (translated by Patrick Gregory), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p.51.

2 “The scapegoats certainly do not cure actual epidemics, droughts, or floods. But the main dimension of any crisis, as I mentioned earlier, is the way in which it affects humans. A process of bad reciprocity begins with the fact that it feeds on itself and does not need external causes to perpetuate itself. As long as any external causes such as an epidemic of plague persist, scapegoats will not be effective. These causes cease to play as final to the crisis by liquidating the victim’s interpersonal sequels through the projection of all malfeasance on him/her. The scapegoat only acts on the human aspect of the crisis but gives the impression of acting on external causes, pestilences, drought, and other objective calamities as well.” René Girard, *Le bouc émissaire*, Paris: B. Grasset, 1982, p.65. (my translation)

3 “Looking closely at the notion of war, one is confronted with the idea of dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. It is not just a matter of differing opinions or an even contest with an opponent. After all, the articulation and adjudication of differences are not advanced by warfare. War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy whom one assumes to be determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is either crushed or contained, one’s own existence cannot be secure. What is striking about a martial attitude is the certainty of one’s position and the willingness to defend it, or impose it on others, to the end.” Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the mind of God: the global rise of religious violence*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p.148-149.

4 *ibid.*, p.146.

inevitable.⁵

So far, two opposing perspectives have been described; that “religion is a means to avoid ‘raw’ violence,” and that “religion inevitably produces a violent confrontation.” According to the former, we can derive the thesis that “violence is avoided by religion,” and from the latter, the thesis that “religion brings violence.” However, it does not matter which way of thinking is right. The former regards religion as a symbolic system of ceremonial acts. The latter regards religion as a kind of philosophy and worldview. In other words, depending on how you define religion and what you consider it to be, the thesis that “religion is violent” and also the thesis that “religion is peaceful” can be deduced. In other words, the definition of religion is the problem. Moreover, the same thing can be said about “violence.” Without asking what violence is and on what basis an action is prescribed as “violent,” deciding whether “religion is violent” is problematic, as well as ambiguous.

3. Questions on the thesis that religion is the cause of violence

One reason for this conflict in discussions about religion and violence is the ambiguity of the terms “religion” and “violence.” Let’s start with the concept of “violence.” For example, terrorism is direct violence and terrorists are undeniable perpetrators. If, however, those who became terrorists did so as a result of being kept in poverty due to discrimination and oppression, they themselves would be the victims of a greater structural violence. Whether the terrorists are perpetrators or victims depends on your definition of violence. Each side for or against terrorist activity can be highlighted by paying attention to such definitions.

Moreover, in ethnic conflicts that have lasted many years where ethnic groups and religions once coexisted peacefully due to shared regional identity; when a conflict occurs, separate ethnic and religious identities are evoked. Occasionally, conflicts often intensify. For example, let us consider the Palestinian problem. Various religions coexisted for many years in the land of Jerusalem during the Islamic dynasty. One of the major reasons that peaceful coexistence has broken down is not conflict between religions, but the British foreign policy on Palestine implemented during the early 20th century. It must be said that it short-circuits history to attribute the cause of conflict to religions only. Thus, even if different, conflicting, religions exist in a place of violence, opinions can be divided about whether religion can ever be the cause of violence.

4. Principle problem

Furthermore, the concept of “religion” has been defined over the past decades by a Western modernist bias. Since the criticism of religious concepts arose, it has been made clear that the concept of religion is

5 It is not just Juergensmeier that captures religion as “the world.” Many religious scholars have explained religion in terms of various “worlds.” For example, William Payden describes religion as follows. “The concept of ‘world’ provides a tool for understanding and analyzing the plurality, contextuality, and self-positing nature of religious cultures. Thus, rather than viewing religions in terms of a given standard - whether religious or nonreligious - of what ‘the’ world is and then seeing how they, the religions, represent ‘it’, here the assumption is that religious systems themselves create their own versions of world.” William E. Paden, *New patterns for comparative religion. Passages to an evolutionary perspective*, New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p.63.

a modern Western construction, and that it has worked just like “violence” coupled with colonialism. There are so many references on this issue, but in relation to this paper I would like to mention Chidester’s “Savage System Colonialism and Comparative Religion.”

European researchers once thought that there was no religion in Asia and Africa, up until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was “discovered.” Chidester asserts:

During its long history, which stretched from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century in southern Africa but varied according to local circumstances in other parts of the world, this comparative religion was practiced by travelers, missionaries, and colonial agents. At the furthest peripheries of the known world, European comparativists inquired about the existence or nature of local religions. Initially, they issued surprising reports about the absence of religion in the Americas, Australia, the Pacific Islands, or Africa. By the nineteenth century, however, discoveries of indigenous religions had been authenticated all over the world.”⁶

Then he says, “As a preliminary orientation to a more precise and contextualized investigation of frontier comparative religion in southern Africa, ... two questions must be put to this global litany of denial. First, what did the absence of religion signify? And second, under what conditions would the presence of religious beliefs and practices, or a religion, or a religious system, be discovered by European comparative religionists?”⁷ During the 16th and 17th centuries, the European researchers thought that the indigenous people of an alien society did not have religion, so they lacked any recognizable human right or entitlement to the land in which they lived.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, travel reports frequently coupled the lack of religion with the absence of other defining human features, such as the institution of marriage, a system of law, or any formal political organization. In many cases, the diagnosis of an alien society without religion was delivered bluntly in the assertion that such people were brutes or beasts. As animals by comparison to Europeans, therefore, indigenous people who lacked religion also lacked any recognizable human right or entitlement to the land in which they lived.⁸

So Chidester agrees “the discovery of an indigenous religious system on southern African frontiers depended upon colonial conquest and domination. Once contained under control, an indigenous population was found to have its own religious system.”⁹

6 David Chidester, “Frontiers of Comparison,” in Scott S. Elliott and Matt Waggoner (ed.), *Readings in the Theory of Religion. Map, Text, Body*, London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009, p.63.

7 *ibid.*, p.71.

8 *ibid.*, p.72.

9 “As I agree, the discovery of an indigenous religious system on southern African frontiers depended upon colonial conquest and domination. Once contained under colonial control, an indigenous population was found to have its own religious system.” *ibid.*, p.76.

Africans had a religion and had beliefs and practices that could be defined, analyzed, and reconstructed as a religious system was made precisely in the context of establishing colonial borders around Africans. When a frontier closed, as indigenous resistance was broken or contained, and European hegemony was more or less established, a religion, or a religious system, was discovered that could be defined and inventoried.¹⁰

Let's confirm. It is not that "religion" originally existed and caused violence. By defining a phenomenon as "religion" or "not religion," we control it. The concept "religion" has been used to exert control in this way. I would like to point out here: in the statement itself that "religion is violent" or "religion is not violent," a kind of "violence" is hidden in the labeling of a phenomenon according to our own convenience.

As mentioned earlier, not only the concept of "religion" but also the concept of "violence" is similar. To define a phenomenon as "violent" or "not violent" involves power, and this power can enact "violence." Everyone would agree with the idea that "violence is evil." However, it is possible to label a certain action, by proclaiming "it is violence" to regulate its expression. By doing so, you can oppress and dominate your opponent. The problem of violence is thus defined by whoever recognizes the action as "violent."

As I have understood it, the statement that "religion is violent" is violent in a dual sense. That is the violence of the concept of "religion" and the violence of the concept of "violence." Turning to a specific example will help us understand this fact. Let's examine the statement "religion is violent, as you can see from ISIL." The activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) reported in the media describe many problems and sound violent. However, one can doubt the thesis that "religion is violent." We first define whether the phenomenon ISIL is a "religion." Furthermore, the actions of "ISIL" are defined as "violence." By conflating these terms, the discourse "religion is violent" is formed. The phrase "religion is violent" includes a strong value judgment, such that the label of "religion" is affixed to a phenomenon that the user of this word regards as "violence."

Another case adds a concrete example. When the Aum-Shinrikyo's affair in 1995 in Japan occurred, two types of statements were made. One said that "religion is essentially violent as seen in the Aum-Shinrikyo," and the other said "the Aum-Shinrikyo is not a true religion. An organization that causes such a problem is not a religion, the origins of true religion are peaceful." The incident that occurred is first defined as "violence" (although that itself is reasonable, from the viewpoint of experts on the theory of violence, but there may be doubts about how to prescribe it). Next, the incident was labeled according to each individual's definition of religion.

5. Conclusion

This paper was chiefly concerned with the violence of the discourse "religion is violent." However, a mere discussion of this discourse will not solve the problem. The problem is so complex that we cannot

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.81.

offer solutions here right now. However, based on the gist of this paper, although it is only a suggestion, I would like to explain the two roles that “religion” can play, in order to avoid “violence.”

Firstly, the role of religion should be understood in terms of post secularization theory. Currently, there is not just conflict between religions. The conflict between religion and “secular” is also an important issue. So far, “secular” has been considered value neutral, colorless, and transparent. This was demonstrated by the principle of *Lysite* in France, which aimed at separating religion from the secular, and excluding religion from public space, thereby forming a value neutral public sphere. However, recent studies have recognized that “secular” is neither colorless nor transparent, it is full of values. Based on that, I would like to suggest that it is necessary for people with diverse values to form a platform for discussion. It goes without saying that it is necessary to form a public space where cultures with different values can acknowledge each other’s existence and value. However, the exclusion of religion is not necessary to form such a public sphere. Habermas’s assertion that religion should be welcomed into discussion forums (“Religion to challenge the public sphere - for coexistence in the post secularization era”) is considered worthy of attention.

Secondly, I would like to focus on the role of memorials and mourning, whether we call it religion or not. One of the causes of the so-called “chain of violence” is that victims of violence become “advocates for the deceased,” thus becoming substitutes for the dead whom they avenge. However, it is impossible for a living person to become “an advocate for the dead” in principle. In other words, the living person uses the dead to construct “a chain of violence.” It is important not to use the dead but to celebrate them and cut this “chain of violence.” In this paper, I explained how the definition of religion and the definition of violence cause problems. Therefore, we should avoid calling this behavior “religion.” However, if we believe that our world does not just exist for the living, but should honor and be faithful to the dead, we may call the behavior that demonstrates this belief “religion.”

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