Chapter 12

Religion, conflict, and peace

In our study of religion we have seen that religion has a great many functions. Among these is the fact that religion serves to bind people together into social groups, importantly people who are not related to one another and do not share bonds of kinship. Religion also spells out and emphasizes moral rules of human behavior that are essential for large numbers of people in a community to coexist in harmony.

Yet within these functions are the seeds of conflict. As effective as religions are in binding people together, they are equally effective at separating out the people outside the religious community, people whose behavior and moral code is often vilified and viewed as alien and incorrect. Religion may foster peacefulness and proper behavior but is also frequently the cause and facilitator of conflict and violence. This is the subject of this chapter.

Religion and conflict

Conflict is part of life and will always exist because different people have different worldviews, cultural beliefs and values, and individual interests and goals. We previously discussed conflicts arising from different uses of the same symbol, such as the swastika, or different interpretations of the same myth. Conflict in itself is not good or bad—it is how we deal with conflict.

Andrew Heywood argued that politics, and in particular democratic politics, is in essence a form of conflict resolution.[1] Our government is part of a complex system designed to deal with conflict over things such as the distribution of resources. When the political system breaks down, individuals may resort to violence to try to address the conflict or to express their frustrations. Does this mean that conflicts resolved through political means are always nonviolent and those resolved through other means are always violent? That depends on how we define violence.

When we think of violence we usually think of people directly and physically harming other people. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, defines violence very broadly as whatever stops people and groups from achieving their full potential.[2] He distinguishes between **direct violence** and **indirect violence**, which he describes as structural violence and cultural violence. **Structural violence** is the result of societal conditions such as lowered life expectancy in lower socioeconomic classes. A society's way of justifying this kind of violence and making it seem natural is called **cultural violence.**

You may be thinking that by including indirect violence, the definition is too broad. Certainly with these definitions we would see violence everywhere and when most

people think of violence they are thinking of direct, physical violence. However, it is useful to understand that violence can happen without a specific actor. Taking into account structural and cultural violence can help us understand the more direct violence of particular groups. For example, Islamic terrorist attacks on innocent Europeans can be understood as a reaction against structural violence both historically and currently that has led to war and instability in the Middle East.

Role of religion in conflict and violence

What is the role of religion in conflict and violence? Some theorists argue that conflict and violence are inherent to religion (the substantive view) while others argue that religious conflicts are always really about something else (the functional view). Those who think that religion has a built-in tendency to cause conflicts and violence point to specific characteristics or warning signs, including that religion is absolutist, divisive, and irrationalist. Others argue that these features are not unique to religion and can be found associated with such things as **nationalism** (Box 12.1).

Religions are absolutist in that they claim to be the absolute truth, drawing sharp lines between good and evil. This allows for no dialogue or understanding of other viewpoints and offers no possibility of compromise. When social struggles get

Box 12.1 Nationalism as religion

Nationalism refers to a sense of identification with and loyalty to one nation above all others. In this sense it is a purely secular phenomenon. However, nationalism and patriotism share many parallels with religions from an analytic and functional perspective. Nationalism and religion are both based on deep emotions and serve as sources of identification and for defining self and other. Both provide major themes for an individual's worldview, and include important stories, symbols, and rituals that people feel reverence for. Insiders who go against the nation or religion are seen as having committed a crime beyond that of a normal transgression and may be exiled or shunned. Individuals will give their lives for their nation in the same way that they will do so in the service of religious beliefs.

In the United States, the flag is the predominant symbol of nationalism. There are rituals around raising and lowering the flag and children pledge their allegiance to the flag every day in school. Songs, reminiscent of hymns, are sung that invoke the imagery of the flag and reverence for the nation. The constitution and declaration of independence are sacred texts and are quoted on important occasions. Relics of the nation are kept in the National Archives and places such as the Washington Memorial, Gettysburg, and Ground Zero are treated as sacred places to which individuals make pilgrimages. The founding fathers are rarely portrayed as complex human beings, flaws and all, but are treated as saints to be revered and never criticized. For many, any criticism against the country is a betrayal and shows a lack of loyalty. Historical traitors, such as Benedict Arnold, are seen as evil beings.

interpreted in terms of religion, they become larger than life, a cosmic battle between good and evil.

Religion suggests clear-cut distinctions not just between good and evil but also between "us" and "them." Religious symbols, rituals, and worldviews create a strong sense of community and identity. They also often provide believers with a sense of sacred privilege; being the chosen ones elevates them above all others. This type of worldview is divisive, tending to cause disagreements with others.

Believers see the rules and directives of religion as going beyond the ordinary. Therefore, normal logic and judgments do not apply and religious beliefs and rules are beyond scientific and rational understanding, which can be termed *irrationalist.* Religion often calls for a blind obedience to the supernatural. Believers are taught that their personal desires are secondary to religious traditions. Because of this they can be persuaded to fight for religious battles even if it is not in their own best interest. Since the supernatural is more important than the natural world, it is possible to justify any means and fight against all odds to realize religious goals. It may not even matter if they are not winning the battle in the natural world since they will ultimately be rewarded in the afterlife.

Fundamentalism

Many of the features considered to link religion to conflict from the substantive viewpoint are also closely linked with fundamentalism. The term **fundamentalism** originated in the nineteenth century. At that time it was used to refer to the opponents of liberal Protestantism who were urging a return to the "fundamentals" of Christianity as a way to guide those whom they believed had lost their way. Among these fundamentals was a belief in the inerrancy of the scriptures and a resulting millenarianism based on the Book of Revelation.

The term *fundamentalism* was generalized to other religious traditions with a strong scriptural component, mainly Judaism and Islam. Judaism, in particular, has focused historically on debates, commentaries, and interpretations of scriptures, and differences in these interpretations led to different Jewish denominations. In Islam, however, the Qur'an is seen as the Word of God and is not seen as something that can be treated as a historic or literary text. Therefore debates over meanings are not seen as challenging the foundations or sanctity of the scriptures—the fundamental always remains so there is no need to justify or rediscover them. Because of this, many Islamic and some Jewish groups question the use of the term fundamentalism to refer to non-Christian traditions. Some Islamic writers prefer the terms "absolutism" or "extremism" instead of "fundamentalism."

Over time, however, the use of the term *fundamentalism* has shifted from an emphasis on religious scriptures to being associated with religious and social movements that share certain features and worldview in common. It is that etic perspective that we will use here.

Characteristics of fundamentalist groups

In many ways fundamentalists groups are easier to define by what they are against than what they are for. These groups protest against, and fear, modernization in

general and the secularization of society specifically. Society is no longer focused on the big questions of morality and salvation. Change is now prized over continuity. An emphasis on production and commerce has replaced more traditional values. Loyalty to and identification with the state have replaced loyalty to and identification with one's religious group. Fundamentalists express outrage at these trends.

The fundamentalist worldview is focused on finding certainty and simplicity in an otherwise complex and uncertain world. They tend to see issues in terms of black and white and reject the idea of relativism. Because of this mindset, they generally refuse to engage in dialogue and compromise or find common ground, an absolutist perspective.

Richard Antoun describes fundamentalism:

> as an orientation to the modern world, both cognitive and emotional, that focuses on protest and change and on certain consuming themes: the quest for purity, the search for authenticity, totalism and activism, the necessity for certainty (scripturalism), selective modernization, and the centering of the mythic past in the present.[3]

Totalism is a reaction to the increasing separation of religion from other domains of life. Fundamentalists believe that religion is relevant to, and should be a part of, all parts of a society. Religious texts play an important role in fundamentalist beliefs. **Scripturalism** refers to the practice of justifying beliefs and actions by reference to the religious text. These texts are generally held to be inerrant and represent certainty and stability in a rapidly changing world. Another aspect of the importance of religious texts is the idea that these texts are relevant to life today, what Antoun calls **traditioning.**

Other important themes of fundamentalist groups include millenarianism and a focus on the perceived struggle between good and evil. These groups also are characterized by activism. Antoun points out that "Fundamentalism is inherently oppositional and minoritarian. It is the protest of those *not* in power."[4] It is important to note that he means political and cultural power, not necessarily economic power.

Although the themes of fundamentalist groups are very similar cross-culturally, individual movements obviously have arisen in response to very different cultural and historical circumstances. The growth of Christian fundamentalism in the United States was a reaction to the secular Protestant ideology that was very important in the early days of the country. A belief in secular progress and ideas such as manifest destiny served to elevate nationalism to the level of religion. In contrast, Islamic fundamentalism is largely a reaction to Western colonialism and the general outrage at the extent of Western cultural and economic infiltration into Islamic countries. And Jewish fundamentalism has its roots in reactions to the strong anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in eastern and central Europe.

Mormon fundamentalism

Joseph Smith, the prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), received the revelation regarding marriage in the early 1830s. A few years later he made the revelation public. It is recorded as Section 132 of *The Doctrine and Covenants*

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of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, The Prophet. This revelation introduced the principle of plural marriage, based on the marriage customs of the patriarchs of the Bible, such as Abraham and Jacob, who had more than one wife. Among the Mormons, polygamy became an obligation; some referred to it as a sacrifice. Joseph Smith and his successors were given divine authority to perform polygamous marriages.

Polygamy was actively practiced in secret by members of the church until 1852 when Brigham Young brought it out into the open. Knowledge of the practice of polygamy caused great concern among non-Mormons, and the Federal government passed a series of laws making its practice a crime. The government also actively prosecuted polygamists and plural marriage was an important factor in originally denying statehood to Utah. In 1890 the Mormons no longer entered polygamous marriages. The explanation given was that God accepted the sacrifice of plural marriage and removed the commandment. Although some polygamous marriages were authorized after 1890, all such marriages ceased in 1904. After 1904, church members were excommunicated for practicing polygamy.

Not all church members accepted the end of plural marriages, and some continued the practice after 1904. They continued to regard polygamy as a religious obligation based upon Joseph Smith's revelation. Because they could no longer marry within the Church, they found other ways of legitimizing polygamous unions. In the 1920s, Mormon fundamentalist groups began to accept the claim made by Lorin C. Woolley that he had the divine authority to solemnize polygamous marriages. He preached that he was the legitimate head of the Church holding the authority passed down from Joseph Smith.

Although the practice of polygamy has been the most publicized feature of fundamentalist Mormon groups, other concepts, which were articulated and practiced to a greater or lesser degree in the mid-nineteenth century, are also found and would fit with the practices of high demand groups that were discussed in the previous chapter. Three of these are controversial and have been repudiated by the LDS Church.

The first is known as the Law of Consecration. Consecration refers to individuals deeding their property to the Church. The Church in turn assigned a certain amount of property back to the individual to use. In the LDS Church, consecration has been replaced by tithing whereby a certain percentage of one's income is given to the Church. However, in many fundamentalist groups this principle is used to concentrate control of all property, including homes and farmland, in the hands of the leader who then allows people to use the property as he sees fit. The second is the prohibition against African Americans entering the priesthood. Although the LDS Church rejected this policy in 1978, it is still practiced by fundamentalist groups.

Finally, there is the practice of blood atonement. Many historians believe that this was practiced by the early Church. Individuals were killed who committed one of many sins, including adultery, sexual intercourse between a white person and an African American, and leaving the Church. A series of murders in the 1970s and 1980s have been attributed to fundamentalist groups practicing blood atonement.

Today the fundamentalist movement has split into a number of small, self-contained, and highly secretive communities living in rural areas in the western United States, Mexico, and Canada. Each group is controlled by a leader who demands complete obedience. Polygamy is practiced, with girls as young as 12 and 13 being required to

marry leaders of the community. Many of these groups have been accused of illegal practices such as forcing underage girls into marriage.

Case studies of religion and conflict

Disillusionment with secular models of geopolitics was key to how religion became prominent in conflicts in the last few decades. For example, the end of the Cold War, the ideological conflict between the capitalist democratic United States and the communist authoritarian Soviet Union, dominated the global political landscape for much of the twentieth century. The conflict is referred to as the Cold War because there was no actual direct violent conflict between the two countries. Instead the conflict was fought indirectly in smaller battles through their allies in various parts of the world, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Many scholars argue that the impact of this global ideological conflict was that other sources of ideological and identity conflict (including religious) were subordinated to the broader conflict between capitalist democracy and communist authoritarianism. However, once this framework was no longer there, other sources of identity and conflict began to reemerge.

In the Middle East, disillusionment with secular governments started even earlier. Secularism was strongly associated with authoritarianism, as in the case of the Shah in Iran and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Under these authoritarian regimes, extreme poverty, deprivation of rights, and limited access to resources were common. For many, this represented not only a failure of secular nationalism but a failure of the state to provide for and protect its citizens, an important tenet of Islam. Another factor in the growing prominence of religion in conflicts is the function of religion to reduce ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity. In a rapidly changing and ever more complex world these would be expected to be a factor but even more so in situations of conflict.

The Iranian Revolution

Islamic fundamentalism is a movement grounded in social, religious, and economic stressors that exist in many Muslim countries. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, world history has seen the political marginalization of these countries. The colonial context of political and economic domination is an important backdrop. In many areas of the Middle East the borders drawn by European colonial powers in the early twentieth century rarely coincided with boundaries of preexisting communities. Ethnic and regional diversities, as well as local loyalties to various tribes or religious sects, made it difficult to integrate people into one nation.

Even after Muslim countries gained independence, Western colonialism was still seen as a problem. Most Muslim countries were ruled by a Westernized elite, mass-produced Western goods were flooding in, and Western culture was coming in through mass media. Although great wealth came into the region in the 1970s as a result of OPEC oil price increases, this went only to the elite and only served to accentuate the relative deprivation of the majority of people. For many Muslims, this cultural and economic domination by the outside was seen as a sign of God's wrath and a call for a return to the Qur'an and strict adherence to its principles. Islamic fundamentalism

illustrates many of Antoun's themes described earlier, including scripturalism and traditioning.

Perhaps the best example of the political activism aspect of fundamentalism in Islam is the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This was a religious revolution against secular nationalism, led by religious leaders and using religious idioms. An exemplar of this was the use of the myth of the Imam Husayn. The Shi'a Muslims in Iran focus not on the Prophet (like Sunni Muslims do) but instead on his descendants. According to Shi'a tradition, almost all twelve of the imams, direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad, died by violent means and at the hands of the secular government in power at the time. The obvious message was that these governments could not be trusted. These stories form the backdrop for a worldview of alienation from society, and more particularly from the government, which is seen as unjust and illegitimate.

Of particular importance is the story of the third imam, Husayn, grandson of Mohammed. Before the revolution, religious devotion centered on Husayn, focused on his role as intercessor between humans and God. However, during the course of the revolution, a new interpretation and emphasis emerged. The story tells us that in the seventh century Husayn was on a pilgrimage to Mecca when he heard that his adherents in Iraq were surrounded by an army and needed his support. He broke off his pilgrimage, one of the five required pillars of Islam, to go to them. In Iraq, he, his family, and his followers were martyred. The focus shifted to Husayn as a revolutionary who believed that the struggle against oppression was more important than even the performance of basic Muslim worship obligations.

At the time of the revolution, Iran was a constitutional monarchy ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The Shah ran a strict dictatorship, complete with censorship laws and the imprisonment of political activists. At the same time, some conditions in Iran had improved and some rights were established. The White Revolution in the 1960s had begun a series of social, economic, and political reforms that gave more freedom to women and emphasized secular over religious education. These attempts to modernize Iran were undertaken with the help of the United States who saw Iran as a potentially stabilizing force in the region. The Shah was opposed by many groups. Some disliked the Shah's autocratic rule and the corruption of the very wealthy royal family. Religious leaders saw his rule as overly secular and tied to the West, particularly to the United States.

The revolution against the Shah utilized the imagery of the story of Husayn. Demonstrators yelled that "Everywhere is Kerbala and every day is Ashura" (Kerbala and Ashura being the place and time that Husayn was killed). The U.S. president at the time, Jimmy Carter, was identified as Yazid, the ruler of the army at Kerbala, and the Shah was seen as Shimr, the general sent by Yazid to kill Husayn. The United States was called the "Great Satan."

On December 10, 1978, on the Day of Ashura, the anniversary of the day that Husayn was killed, two million demonstrators marched for hours. They carried flags of green, red, and black, symbolizing Islam, martyrdom, and Shi'a. By the end, a resolution was passed and Ayatollah Khomeini, living in exile, was invited to become the new leader of Iran. He returned in February 1979 and formed the Islamic Republic. Islamic law was reestablished, religious instruction was reinstituted in the educational arena, and many new social norms were instituted, including the veiling of women, a ban on alcohol and gambling, and the censoring of all media for sexual content.

Box 12.2 The veil in Islam

Many religious systems prescribe standards of behavior. This includes standards of dress and grooming. Examples are the dress codes of the Amish and the Hasidic Jews. While the details and underlying theology may differ, these rules function to identify members of the group and to display one's commitment to the group's religious practices. In Muslim countries it is traditional for women to cover their head, and sometimes even their entire body in the presence of non-family males. This is seen as adherence to a level of modesty that is required by religious and social custom.

The nature of the covering varies from society to society. The most commonly worn garment is the *hijab,* a headscarf that covers the head and neck. Other forms of veiling includes the *niqab* that covers the entire body except for an opening for the eyes; the *chador,* a long shawl that covers the head and body but leaves the face uncovered; and the *burqa,* a full-body veil with the eye opening covered by mesh.

The wearing of such coverings is mandated by law in several countries such as Saudi Arabia; in other countries it is customary but optional. A survey by the Pew Research Center in 2011 of Muslim American women showed that 36 percent wear the *hijab* all of the time, 24 percent wear it most or some of the time, and 40 percent never wear it.[5]

In some communities undergoing assimilation the *hijab* has become an important symbol not only of a religious system, but of one's cultural origins and identity. This has become a major issue in France, which maintains a strict separation between religion and the state in the education system. In 1989 this became a major issue when three teenage girls of North African descent wore headscarves to school. When asked they refused to remove them and were subsequently expelled. This became known as the "headscarf affair" and led to attempts to outlaw the wearing of headscarves in public schools.

In 2004 France passed a law banning the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in French public schools. The law does not single out the *hijab;* it refers instead to conspicuous religious objects. This means that each school must find its own interpretation. A cross and Star of David are usually allowed, but in one case a student was expelled simply for wearing a long dress that came to her ankles. Yarmulkes (Jewish skullcaps) are frequently allowed as cultural and social symbols rather than religious symbols.

The law is controversial. The many debates focus on the rights of minority groups and religious freedom. The *hijab* is also seen as an avoidance of assimilation by stressing one's ancestry and cultural heritage. However, the issue is not simply an academic one. France has been racked by several acts of terrorism, perpetrated by religious extremists. Anti-Muslim feelings have risen, and the *hijab* has become another type of symbol. It has become a symbol of the fear of the "other."

The debates have moved beyond the schools. On the Mediterranean coast of France many cities banned the *burkini,* a full-body swimsuit worn by Muslim women, in response to terrorist attacks there in 2016. City officials argued that the burkinis were associated with Islamic fundamentalism and would cause emotional distress following the attacks. In Nice, France, the human rights group Collective Against Islamophobia brought a court case saying it was discriminatory, Anti-Muslim, and unconstitutional. The court suspended the ban as no public risk was shown. Some have pointed out that full-body coverings worn by Catholic nuns are permitted on the same beaches.

Iran under the new religious rule has been criticized for many human rights violations, including the imprisonment and murder of critics of the regime. Although women had gained many important rights under the Shah, these have all been lost. Patrols were formed to confront women for such violations as wearing lipstick or showing their hair.

The Arab Spring

The failure of the state to protect its citizens was a catalyst for many forms of open resistance, many of which were religiously based. The uprisings often called the "Arab Spring" are one of the most recent of these events. Beginning in Tunisia in 2011, it spread to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. The term "Arab Spring" was coined by the Western media in response to the successful uprising in Tunisia and referenced the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, when most countries in the former Communist bloc adopted democratic political systems and a market economy in a very short time frame. The expectation that a similar thing would happen in the Middle East, with political systems collapsing in the face of popular uprisings, was misguided. As opposed to what happened in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East there was no consensus on what should replace the existing system.

Two conflicting principles were at play in the uprisings: the desire for more implementation of Islamic fundamentalism on one hand and the belief that secularism had to be defended on the other. This has resulted in the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Instead of political reform and social justice, there has been more war and more violence.

The Hobby Lobby case in the United States

In 2010, the Patient Protection Affordable Care Act (PPACA, otherwise known as "Obamacare") was introduced in the United States. The legislation required businesses to provide health insurance coverage for their employees. The basis of the religious conflict, though, was a provision that this insurance would include all Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved contraceptive methods. Although regulations provided by the Department of Health and Human Services did make some exemptions for religious employers, some religious businesses felt that this was not enough.

In September of 2012, the Hobby Lobby stores sought an injunction under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The RFRA was passed by Congress

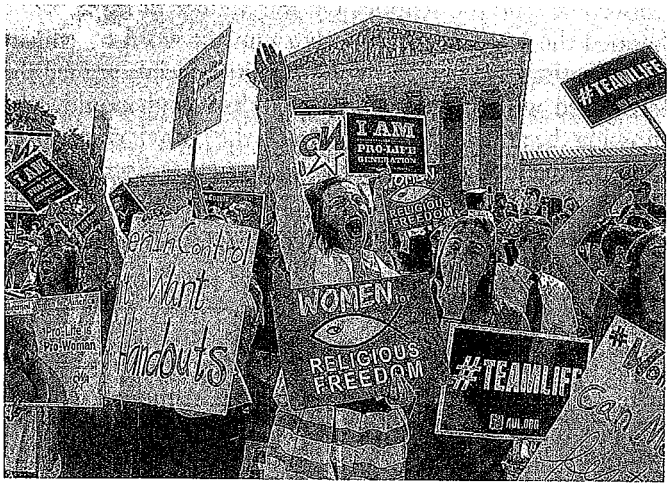

Figure 12.1 Hobby Lobby. Supporters Hobby Lobby react to the U.S. Supreme Court decision of June 30, 2014.

in 1993 and requires strict scrutiny when a law "substantially burdens a person's exercise of religion." It was amended in 2000 to define exercise of religion as any exercise of religion "whether or not compelled by, or central to, a system of religious beliefs." Hobby Lobby was founded and is run by the Green family who are devout Christians who run their company in a way consistent with Biblical principles. For example, the company and all its stores are closed on Sundays. The Greens objected to four of the twenty contraceptives covered by the PPACA, including the morning-after pill, because they conflict with their belief that life starts at conception.

Although the injunction was initially denied it was upheld on appeal. After an appeal by the United States government the course went to the Supreme Court in 2014 where the justices ruled in favor of Hobby Lobby (Figure 12.1). This was considered a landmark decision and was the first time the court recognized a corporation's claim of religious beliefs. The court found that for-profit corporations could be considered as persons under the RFRA, a recognition that was already extended to non-profits.

The case speaks to a critical issue that is at the heart of liberal democracies in North America and Europe. To what extent does the government have the right to infringe on freedom of religion when it concerns the health and well-being of other groups within the state? Is the right to freedom of religion applicable only to individuals or also to businesses?

Religion, terrorism, and peace

Religiously based conflict may lead to violence considered to be terrorism. However, religion may also play an important role in peacebuilding. Examples of both of these are discussed below.

Religious conflict and terrorism

Although religious violence is nothing new, the last few decades of the twentieth century saw an increase in religious violence and terrorism around the world. Some of this is linked to new fundamentalist movements. Examples of religious violence can be found in all of the world religions and in smaller religious groups as well. Christianity is associated with attacks on abortion clinics in the United States and with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, not to mention the religious conflicts in Northern Ireland. The Middle East has seen much violence perpetrated by both Jews and Muslims, including the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Baruch Goldstein's attack at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and Hamas suicide bombers. Sikhism is associated with the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and a sect of Japanese Buddhism with the Tokyo subway gas attack. The September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., is only one of many examples of religiously motivated violence.

Much of this violence has been referred to by the term *terrorism.* **Terrorism** can be defined as "public acts of destruction, committed without a clear military objective that arouse a widespread sense of fear."[6] Such acts are generally committed with a deliberately exaggerated level of violence. The violence is justified by reference to religious beliefs, including the idea that the act is part of an ongoing cosmic war, a battle between good and evil. Thus those who commit the acts are seen as martyrs to the cause; those who are attacked are defined as demons and agents of Satan.

Terrorism is also usually defined as the tactics of a smaller, weaker group against a more politically established enemy with the intent to intimidate or put political pressure on the more dominant organization. The actors are typically non-state related. Of course, there is state-sponsored violence and acts that could be considered state terror but this differs in scale, motivation, and the means by which the fear-inducing violence is carried out.

Mark Juergensmeyer argues that terrorist acts are highly symbolic and, as such, can be analyzed in much the same way that religious ritual is.[7] For example, the timing and location of attacks are usually highly symbolic. The violence is meant to send a message, although the intended message is not always the one that the general public perceives.

Many theories of terrorism focus on the role of a lack of education or poverty in states that are weak. However, research has shown that both poor and wealthy individuals engage in terrorist acts and that support for terrorism actually increased among Palestinians that were higher on the economic continuum. Similarly, individuals with increasing levels of education often show increased support for terrorism. Some terrorist organizations will specifically target university students for recruitment.

Other theories focus on the role of social dynamics in small groups. Charismatic leaders bring socially alienated individuals into a network of fictive kinship that acts as a tight-knit family group. Many individuals recruited by terrorist organizations are migrants living in diaspora communities where they are marginalized from the societies they live in. The terrorist groups offer them a sense of meaning and belonging. Not only do emotional attachments grow with the new family-like group, but bonding among young males occurs as we saw in our previous discussion of rites of passage (Chapter 4).[8]

Figure 12.2 Terrorist attacks in Paris. People react to a series of attacks in Paris, France, in 2015, in front of a memorial display, an example of a situational ritual.

Religion and peace

Just as we needed to define conflict, we also need to define peace. Most people think of peace as just being the absence of war, something John Galtung called **negative peace.**[9] How Galtung defined peace relates to how he defined violence as including more than just direct, physical violence. An absence of direct violence would be negative peace. But only an absence of structural violence results in what Galtung called **positive peace.** Positive peace is not just about ending violent conflict but about ensuring the safety and well-being of the population.

We have discussed how religion is related to conflict and violence, but religion also has a role to play in peace and peacebuilding in the aftermath of violent conflict. There are many ways that religious leaders and religious institutions can contribute to peace, including acting as mediators, providing meeting places, and calling on their extensive communication networks. As we saw in Chapter 6, priests often have secular powers and play a strong role in society and can promote civic engagement, a sense of shared responsibility and participation in peacebuilding activities. Religious leaders can also call on the mythology and worldview of their traditions to form strong ethical and moral arguments.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an example that shows the role of religion in the peacebuilding process in post-apartheid South Africa.[10] The system of apartheid was based on often brutal mistreatment of the majority black population by the minority white Afrikaans population. Christianity played a role in supporting apartheid as the Dutch Reformed Church suggested that Afrikaners were God's chosen people and that blacks were a subservient species. In their worldview, apartheid and the church were linked. We can see here how more religious ideas become entangled with more secular ones such as racism.

However, religion was also an important part of efforts at peacebuilding following the transition to democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s. Christianity played a large role in the TRC, which actually led to some criticism as it was unclear whether

the TRC was state-sponsored or church-sponsored. The TRC framed the process as one of religious redemption and suggested that Christianity was needed to achieve reconciliation. This case shows how difficult it can be to separate out the sacred and the secular, the church and the state. Although post-apartheid South Africa was a secular state, the people of South Africa, black and white, considered it to be a Christian country.

The TRC operated from 1995 to 2002 with the mandate of investigating human rights violations that occurred during apartheid by both the state and the liberation movement. The main focus was on providing a safe place for victims to tell their stories and for perpetrators to confess, atone, and apply for amnesty. The commissioners came from three backgrounds—legal, health and mental health, and religious—and was chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Many TRC events took place in churches and Christian rituals were also held at the TRC. Hymns were often sung during testimony and biblical passages read aloud. While the TRC helped with some healing and recovery, much of the social and economic injustices were not addressed and South Africa remains a very unequal country.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this book, religion is connected to and interacts with all other areas of a culture. Religion is an important aspect of identity and a major shaper of worldviews. As such it is inevitable that religion will be involved in conflicts of many different types. To truly understand these conflicts and search for solutions we need to understand the context in which they are occurring, which will include many of the topics we have discussed throughout this book. People's worldview and cultural beliefs about the supernatural may be a causal factor in conflict or may be used to express other conflicts. As such, efforts at peacebuilding need to address these factors and can harness the functional aspects of religion to help resolve conflicts.

Summary

In addition to direct, physical violence, John Galtung proposes that there is also indirect violence both structural, based on social structures and social institutions, and cultural, where culture is used to justify the structural violence. The substantive view argues that conflict is inherent to religion because religion is absolutist, divisive and irrationalist. The functionalist view states that religious conflicts are really about something else.

Fundamentalism is a religious movement characterized by a return to fundamental principles, usually including a resistance to modernization and an emphasis on certainty through a literal interpretation of scriptures. Themes of fundamentalist groups include the quest for purity, the search for authenticity, totalism and activism, the necessity for certainty (scripturalism), selective modernization, and the centering of the mythic past in the present.

Disillusionment with secular geopolitics and a need to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty were major contributors to the prominence of religion in conflicts in recent decades. Examples of the role of religion in conflicts include the Iranian Revolution, the Arab Spring, and the Hobby Lobby case.

Terrorist acts are those committed by a smaller, weaker entity against non-combatants with the intent to arouse fear and put pressure on the more dominant organization. Terrorist acts are often symbolic in nature. Individuals may join terrorist groups for the sense of stability, family, and belonging that it gives them.

Religious institutions and leaders also play a role in peacebuilding, such as in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Religious leaders may act as mediators, provide meeting places, and call on extensive communication networks and their secular influence. They can also call on the mythology and worldview of their traditions to form strong ethical and moral arguments.

Study questions

1. What do you think is the relationship between religion and conflict? Why?
2. Think of a situation of conflict in your own society. Can you identify any indirect violence associated with this conflict?
3. Give an example of a myth, symbol, or ritual that emphasizes or encourages conflict and violence and one that emphasizes or encourages stability and peace.
4. Imagine there was no separation of church and state in the United States and that a fundamentalist religious group has taken control. How do you think that society would change?
5. What is your opinion on the core questions raised by the Hobby Lobby case? To what extent does the government have the right to infringe on freedom of religion when it concerns the health and well-being of other groups within the state? Is the right to freedom of religion applicable only to individuals or also to businesses?
6. In your opinion, what would positive peace in a society look like? What criteria would need to be met?

Suggested readings

Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *The Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
[An ethnography of modern fundamentalists.]

Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001).
[Looks at the common characteristics of fundamentalist movements.]

Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
[A discussion of fundamentalism, focusing on Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran.]

Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[A look at Christian fundamentalism as seen through the life of Jerry Falwell.]

Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[A comparative look at religious violence and terrorism.]

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).