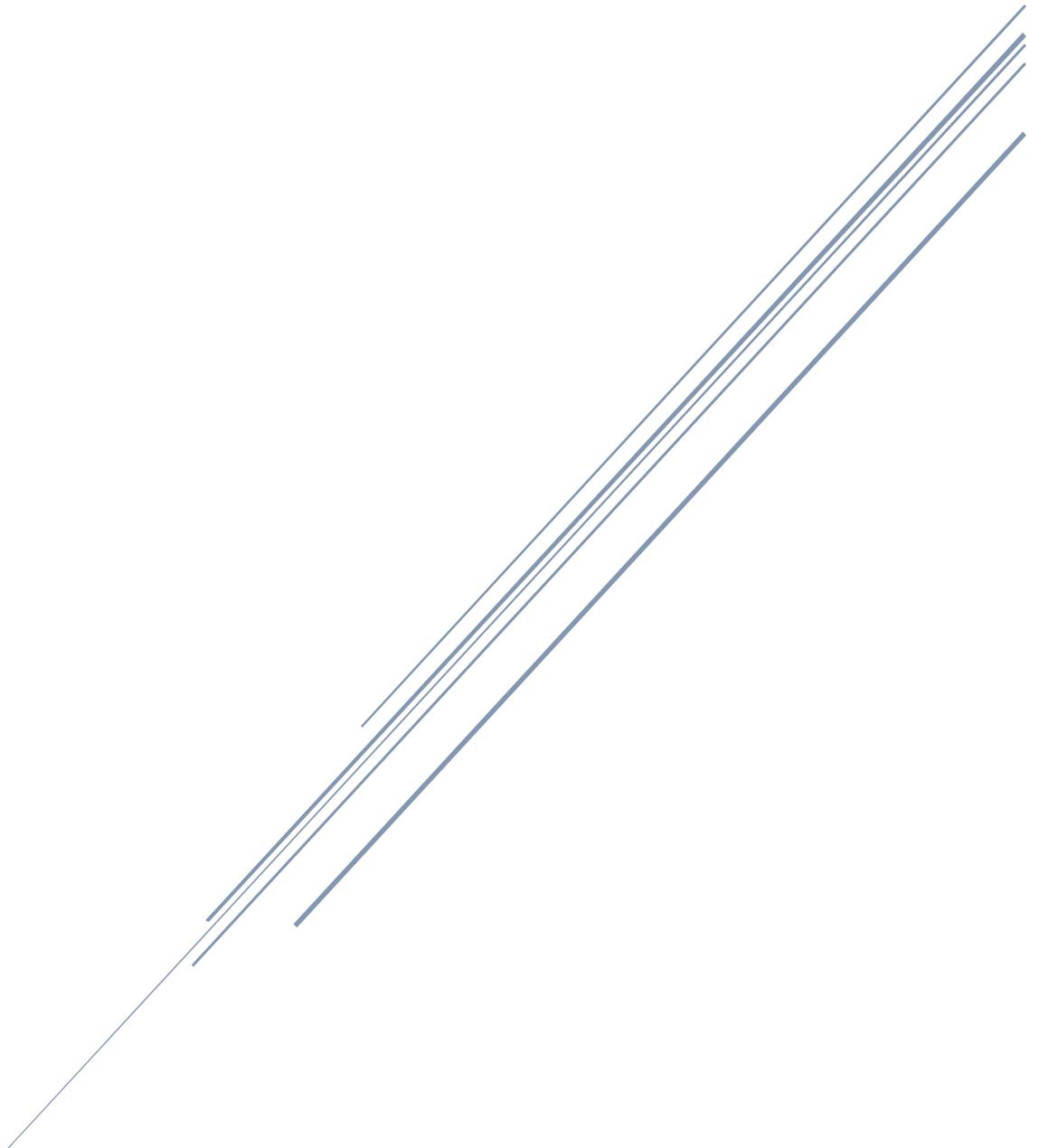


# RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

Exploring the Religious Perspective on Violence



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## Introduction:

Scholars from different fields, atheists and agnostics in particular, have always been critical of religion and belief in God, gods, or any divine supernatural agent: 1) for lacking the experimental and observational properties like science and 2) for arguably inciting violence and divisiveness. However, for the past few decades, especially in the post 9/11 era as Rowley (2014) and Cavanaugh (2007) explain, literature on religion causing violence has exponentially increased. The Western “academic world” has been overwhelmed—by numerous books and countless articles explaining and exploring the peculiar tendency of religion toward violence (Cavanaugh, 2007). Although the literature inclusively criticizes all religions, its content overwhelmingly suggests Islam to be at the center of criticism. The surge in anti-West operations of the so called Islamist groups including but not limited to Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in the past two decades, have probably been the adding and abetting factors in shifting the focus of antireligious literature towards Islam. The Islamist and Jihadist groups believed or claiming to be resisting the Israeli occupation and oppression in the Palestine has also contributed to the anti-Islamic discourse.

Despite the tremendous amount of literature written on the subject, scholars still fail to make a logical causation between religion and violence. Some scholars may have established a potential correlation between the two, but, even then, their arguments are incoherent, lack depth and contain serious loopholes, putting the authority and validity of the arguments under question.<sup>1</sup>

This essay aims to provide a possible answer as to whether religion does or does not cause violence. The first part of the paper covers a critical analysis of the current literature explaining the religion and it being the cause of violence, identifying the loopholes and inaccuracies of the literature. The paper then identifies the probable causes of such loopholes and inaccuracies. Finally, the essay will provide a religious perspective on what religion is and whether or not it may cause violence. Since most of the anti-religion literature in question is focused on Islam, as will be discussed in later parts, and exploring all religion in this paper is not feasible anyway, the essay presents only the Islamic view on religion and where possible, brief examples from other religions as well.

## Contemporary Literature on Religion and religious Violence

Before going to the discussion of how religion causes violence, it is important to look into scholars’ explanation of what religion actually is. Scholars from different academic disciplines have been making attempts to find a comprehensive definition for religion, but we are yet to have a definition that everyone can settle with. On one hand, one group of scholars deny the existence of religion all together. For instance, Smith (1962) argues that the premodern West had no such concept as religion and that the modern West invented religion as a separate phenomenon from culture and politics.<sup>2</sup> McCutcheon (1997), King (2002) and Petersen (2003) join Smith in stating that as a tactic to declare the non-Western cultures, colonized by the West, as irrational and defiant to modernism, the European colonialists invented the concept

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<sup>1</sup> Purzycki, B.G. and Gibson, K. (2011), *Religion and Violence: An Anthropological Study on Religious belief and Violent Behavior*. Skeptic.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, C. W. (1982) *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, University of Chicago Press.

of religion.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, other claim the religion to be nothing but a confusion,<sup>4</sup> and a creation of scholars, who deny its independent existence outside the academic world.<sup>5</sup>

Kimball (2000), on the other hand, is of the belief that people have a clear understanding of religion, but agrees that they have trouble coming up with a proper definition of the term.<sup>6</sup> Cavanaugh (2007), referring to a survey on religious studies, reports that “totems, witchcraft, Nationalism, Japanese tea ceremony, neo-liberalism, sport, Marxism, free market ideology, and [numerous] other are believed by many to be in the category of religion.<sup>7</sup> Whereas other scholars define religion as believing in God, gods or some form of supernatural agent(s). For example, Freud (2016) describes religion as to having a belief in a patriarchal God of law and conscience.<sup>8</sup>

Norenzayan (2010) quotes other scholars describing the religion as to have four elements, called the four Cs—Counter-intuition (believing in some form of Supernatural agents or a mightier force than the human being itself), Commitment (one will be required to make costly sacrifice for the supernatural agent to prove allegiance), Compassion (to accept what has been bestowed upon them to get relief from existential anxieties like death and the life thereafter and threat of societal repudiation), and Communion (participating in emotion-arousing rituals).<sup>9</sup> They define religion as being a product of both cultural and genetic evolution, with having belief in a supernatural agent, who relieve existential anxieties such as death and at the same time call for a dedicated commitment that has to be validated through emotional rites.<sup>10</sup>

From the nonexistence of religion, to all political and secular concepts and institutions being considered as religion, to religion being specifically having a belief in God or a supernatural agent, the rift in these scholars’ views and understandings of the religion is evident. Reconciling these diverting perceptions is probably unattainable. As Cavanaugh (2007) rightly explains that, on one hand, scholars, limiting the religion to belief in supernatural agents, automatically deny religious beliefs like Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism the status of religions. On the other hand, if the belief in supernatural power and/or agent is eliminated as a requisite, then numerous secular practices like nationalism can be treated as religion, like Carolyn Marvin and others have repeatedly argued for nationalism to be the utmost and authoritative religion in countries like the United States.<sup>11</sup> Such fundamental deviance in scholars understanding of the religion is unneglectable because understanding of the religion is detrimental in proving its impacts, violence in particular, on society.

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<sup>3</sup> McCutcheon, R. (1997) *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Oxford University Press; King, R. (2002) *Orientalism and Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, Routledge; Petersen, D. and Walhof, D. (2003) *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, Rutgers University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald, T. (2000), *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan, Z. S. (1982) *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>6</sup> Kimball, C. (2002) *When Religion Becomes Evil*, HarperCollins. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Cavanaugh, T. W. (2007) Does Religion Cause Violence? *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35(2 & 3). 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jones W. J. (2006) Why Does Religion Turn Violent? *A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Religious Terrorism*, *Psychoanalytic Review* 93(2). 184.

<sup>9</sup> Norenzayan (2010), *Why We Believe: Religion as a human universal*, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69

<sup>11</sup> Cavanaugh, supra note 7 at 3-4.

## Religion Causing Violence

Now, ironically, without having been able to establish what qualifies as religion or, at least, have a consensus on the existence of religion, numerous scholars have blamed religion for violence. Pattison (2000) argues that shame and humiliation, almost always been cited as a factor for religiously driven violence and terrorism by social psychologists and political scientists, is exacerbated by human's connection to a divine being, a master or a sacred text. He adds that the more exalted the overpowering ability of the divine master in a religion, the greater the shame and humiliation will be, eventually leading to higher chances of violence.<sup>12</sup> Jones (2006) also argues that religions intensify the feelings of shame and humiliation and increases the possibilities of violence, which will need to be inflicted on religiously justified targets within societies.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Tezcan (2011) argues that religion causes its followers to think that violence, being a form of worship in a cosmic battle between good and evil, is the way to purify the society.<sup>14</sup> Jones reports that Juergensmeyer (2000), Kimball (2002) and Wessinger (2000) hold a similar view stating that religious fanatic movements in their apocalyptic vision believe to be religiously sanctioned with a never ending cosmic war of the all-good against the all-evil, with the latter being secularism as a Palestinian fighter had put it that their fight was not only against the Israeli occupation but everything related to secularism including the Palestinian authority for secularism being un-Islamic. He further explains that, unlike the traditional sectarians (e.g. the Amish people) who isolate themselves from the evil world, apocalyptic religions believe the all-good and the all-evil worlds are irreconcilable and use violence and force to exterminate evil in the most atrocious way possible.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Rowley (2014) reports numerous scholars declaring various aspects of religion, including "violent stories contained in holy text, selective exposure to violent texts, the belief that God actually sanctioned the violence in the text, monotheism giving a group their identity in reference to excluded others, believing one owns God, and believing one is owned by God, causing religious violence."<sup>16</sup>

If we try to make sense of all the arguments presented about how religion causes violence, we see that where one group of prominent scholars denied the existence of religion, calling it nothing but an intellectual construct of dubious values,<sup>17</sup> another group not only claims its existence but argues it to be the cause of violence. Going with the first group of scholars, if we assume religion does not exist, then there is no question of it causing violence. If we accept the arguments of the second group, then the first group is fundamentally wronged when denying religion to exist.

Secondly, if we suppose that religion is to believe in some sort of divine master or supernatural agent, is it not then a common sense that there must also be a mandate, text or other forms of guidance from the divine master which may provide some explanation as to what the religion might be? If it is, then sadly many of these scholars have failed to study such

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<sup>12</sup> Pattison, S. (2000) *Shame: theory, therapy, theology*, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, supra note 8 at 169-170.

<sup>14</sup> Tezcan (2011) *Religion and Control of Violence*, Springer Science and Business LL.C. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, supra note 8 at 170-172.

<sup>16</sup> Rowley, M. (2014) What Causes Religious Violence? *Three Hundred Claimed Contributing Causes*. *Journal of Religion and Violence* 2(3). 364—377.

<sup>17</sup> Cavanaugh, supra note 7 at 3.

mandates holistically. Had they based their argument of religious issues, for or against, on the analysis of such mandates, they would have been much stronger and articulated.<sup>18</sup> They instead base their arguments on the personal views of fanatic so called religious groups and individuals as if it were the divine mandate of that particular religion. For example, Jones, while arguing that religion requires sacrifice and purification of the soul and eradication of evil from society, gives the example of the leader of the 9/11 attack, calling on his comrades that by sacrificing the targeted people and themselves, they will be purifying their souls from all blemishes.<sup>19</sup> This statement is nothing but an individual's view and in no way sets a mandate for all Muslims. When the Pakistani army justify the killing of Bengali Muslim guerillas by calling them non-Muslims or create religious madrasas and training camps for fighters against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan (Fair, 2014),<sup>20</sup> is it for religion? Of course, not. They pursue their own political interests. According to Purzycki and Gibson (2011), the Bosnian Muslims are less likely to resort to violence than the Palestinian Muslims.<sup>21</sup> Both groups being Muslim, why the two groups behave differently? The only possible answer could be that both have different motive, other than the religion. Religion has always been used by individual and groups as an instrument to justify their actions so they can recruit the less informed.<sup>22</sup> Cavanaugh rightly points out that categorizing such actions, ideologies and institutions as religious is completely arbitrary and incoherent,<sup>23</sup> and recalling the contradictory explanations of scholars for religion, the arguments of what does or does not constitute a religion seems mere assumptions.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, when Jones (2006) explains that Hinduism, previously violent in their sacrificial rituals, latter adopted more peaceful yogic, meditational and devotional rituals and practices; and that the Hebrew prophets and later writings evolved, leaving the belief of God requiring a bloody and violent sacrifice, and embraced the idea of repentance, mercy and humility,<sup>25</sup> this clearly suggests that even within the same religion people's behavior changed. Is this not a strong indication that the problem is with the people not the religion? Armstrong (2015) argues that humans perpetuate violence quite easily on their own without religion. She adds that regardless of its ideology, acts of terror and violence are always political in nature. It is irrational to put everything on religion whereas, it is all about gaining power and changing power.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, the argument that religion causes violence has serious shortcomings. For example, by examining the academic arguments that hold religion responsible for causing violence, we see that...some types of violence are condemned, while several others are simply overlooked.<sup>27</sup> Some religions are blamed more than others, and religion is also used as a cover-up for political gains. Like stated earlier, to justify their colonization, the modern Western colonizers would declare non-western cultures as irrational and against

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<sup>18</sup> Armstrong, K. (2015) *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. Random House.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, supra note 8 at 173.

<sup>20</sup> Fair, C.C., 2014. *Fighting to the end: The Pakistan army's way of war*. Oxford University Press. 128.

<sup>21</sup> Purzycki, B.G. and Gibson, K. (2011). *Religion and violence*. *Skeptic* 16(2). pp.5.

<sup>22</sup> Armstrong, supra note 18.

<sup>23</sup> Cavanaugh, supra note 13 at 1.

<sup>24</sup> Id.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, supra note 19 at 172-173.

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, supra note 18.

<sup>27</sup> Cavanaugh, supra note 23 at 3.

modernism.<sup>28</sup> Other times the religion is made a scapegoat by scholars for unsolved riddles. Rowley warns that to make sense of all the claims about religion being the cause of violence, it is important to avoid making it a scapegoat.<sup>29</sup> However, Cavanaugh strongly argues that the Western nation-states make religion a scapegoat to justify their involvement in the Muslim world. He states that despite the argument of religion being the cause of violence is misleading and incoherent, it is still widespread and accepted as reality by many scholars. He explains how the Western nation-states create a cover-up for their violence in the Muslim World by accusing the Muslim world of fanatic religious violence. Western democracies present themselves to be playing the peacemakers in the fanatic Muslim world. Using the narrative of religious violence and terror, they have created a rift between the West, whose atrocities and violence during the process of bringing “peace” is considered rational, and the violence of the religious fundamentalists in the Muslim world irrational, divisive and unjustifiable.<sup>30</sup>

## Religion from a Religious Perspective

An angle that Scholars seem to be missing or ignoring, intentionally or unintentionally, in these discussions is taking into account the religious perspective about the religion. This could be because of the grudge developed against religion in the Western societies throughout history. Kutub (2006), for example, explains that where some scholars declare religion to be a psychological as well as an intellectual necessity for mankind,<sup>31</sup> other Western scholars, due to the tensions and hatred between the Christian church and the men of science sprung during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, call religion obsolete, exhausted, useless, and superstitious. Freud divides human life into three phase: superstition, religion and science and, with now being the age of science, he calls religion outdated and scholars advocated for its removal as the requisite for civilization.<sup>32</sup>

To balance the inherent bias of these scholars, it is reasonable to explore the religious perspective of what religion is. Because exploring all the religion within this paper is not feasible, we will look into Islam only as Islam is the central focus of almost all studies of religious violence and terrorism by the Western scholars. As Rowley states that although we fully recognize that for centuries Christians slaughtered one another, religious terrorism occurs almost exclusively within Islam. The fact that most of the current terrorists are Muslims who present religious justification for their atrocious acts cannot be overlooked either.<sup>33</sup> Most of the Western scholars and men of science may not buy the Islamic explanation or show any interest at all, but such an analysis would be doing proper justice to the issue.

Confirming McNeil’s (1966) position, Qur’an acknowledges the violent nature of human beings, “... when your lord said to the angels, indeed, I will descend mankind generations after generations on earth. They said, will you place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood?”<sup>34</sup> It cannot be denied that rationalist thoughts on its own are insufficient to

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<sup>28</sup> McCutcheon et. al, supra note 3.

<sup>29</sup> Rowley, supra note 16 at 363.

<sup>30</sup> Cavanaugh, supra note 27 at 2.

<sup>31</sup> Kutub (2006) Islam the Misunderstood Religion, International Islamic Student Organization.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> Rowley, supra note 29 at 400.

<sup>34</sup> Qur’an 2:30. See also, McNeil, E. (1966) Violence and Human Development. ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 364(1). 149.

determine good and evil, thus logically, a certain set of law(s) or a specific code of ethics is mandatory for a human society to function systematically and in organized manner,<sup>35</sup> and Muslims believe Qur'an to be the code and guiding principle for all human affairs.

Hallaq (2009) also argues that God all knowing about humans, sent Quran as the divine law to regulate human belief and the way they conduct themselves in their daily lives.<sup>36</sup> Kamali (2005) confirming the position, states that, in consideration of the principles of freedom and equality, Qur'an, as the guiding rules, regulates all aspects of human life within society, including relations between individuals, transactions and commerce, contracts, war, the treatment of prisoners of war and range of other issues, with the aim to realize justice and respect for human dignity. He also describes the humanitarian, legal and cultural reforms of the Qur'an which were implemented on both the ruler and the ruled.<sup>37</sup> Basically, religion is the code of conduct that regulates almost all aspects of human life including but not limited to spiritual, financial, marital, civil, criminal, and war. Like Lowie puts it:

“A living faith serves to assimilate the individual's behavior in society, to give him confidence in meeting the crises which lie inescapably. Religion should also provide the basis for ethics. It should enter into everything an individual does, every judgement he makes, every point of view he develops.”<sup>38</sup>

Does this mean religion does not deal with or discuss war and violence? Of course, it does, and may contribute towards violence in some cases, but to call it a cause for violence is too big a claim. Violence and war being undeniable events of the human society, the governing code (the religion) ought to address it. However, as to whether religion promotes violence is highly contentious. For example, the Islamic provisions for war seem to be defensive rather than offensive. Qur'an ordains, “Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not transgress for God does not like transgressors..., and expel them from wherever they had expelled you....[but] do not fight them at al-Masjid al-Haram<sup>39</sup>.... If they fight you, then kill them..., but if they cease [fighting], then there should be no aggression except against oppressors....[also], Whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, addressing the Christians, Qur'an says that God had ordered them not to shed each other's blood, but they killed.<sup>41</sup> In another place, Quran orders the Prophet to prepare against the enemy well, but if they incline to peace, then peace is what should happen.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Quran orders for a mandatory ceasefire during four months (1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>) of the Islamic year.<sup>43</sup>

Islam not only discourages violence, it promotes morality and social harmony. Qur'an advises to do *good* in society to parents, relatives, orphans, and the needy, and give charity.<sup>44</sup> Let alone preventing the killing<sup>45</sup> or physically hurting others, it prohibits people from ridiculing

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<sup>35</sup> Hallaq, B. (2009) An Introduction to the Islamic Law, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Id.

<sup>37</sup> Kamali, (2005) Principals of Islamic Jurisprudence (44). Revised edition. Islamic Text Society.

<sup>38</sup> Lowie, H. (1963) Religion in Human Life, American Anthropologist 65(3).

<sup>39</sup> Muslim's central mosque in Saudi Arabia where the annual pilgrimage (Hajj) is performed. It is also called Kaba.

<sup>40</sup> Qur'an 2:190-194. See also Firestone, R. (1999) Jihad: the Origin of Holy War in Islam, New York [U.A.]: Oxford Univ. Press.

<sup>41</sup> Qur'an 2:84-85.

<sup>42</sup> Id. at 8:60.

<sup>43</sup> Id. at 5:2, 9:36, 2:194 and 2:217.

<sup>44</sup> Id. at 2:83.

<sup>45</sup> Id. at 5:32.

and insulting one another and calling each other offensive nicknames. It also prohibits people from negative assumptions and even backbiting.<sup>46</sup> Believers are ordered to respond to evil with good and turn away and from ill speech.<sup>47</sup> This being a very small sample of Islam preventing violence and promoting harmony, there are hundreds of verses of such peaceful messages in the Qur'an. Other religions also promote peace and social harmony. For example, Cristian's scripture also advises its followers to love enemy, avoid domination, power, force and violence.<sup>48</sup> The Ten Commandments also prevent its follower from stealing, killing and lying.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, where Hinduism is believed to be a tolerant religion, advocating peace and believing in "Ahimsa" (meaning Hindus must not do harm to any living thing),<sup>50</sup> Hindus have carried out numerous mob attacks against Muslims between 1960—2002, killing thousands of Muslims.<sup>51</sup> Should one conclude that Hinduism incited these mobs and killings? Unless the Hindu scriptures contain something provoking against other religions or a particular group of people, blaming Hinduism for such atrocities is not justifiable. Hence, without looking at a religion holistically and blaming it for violence just because the perpetrators of such violence are followers of that particular religion is absurd.

## Conclusion

Although religion is heavily criticized for causing violence, the arguments are based on mere assumptions. Scholar's understanding of the religion and their arguments for religious violence have serious bias and loopholes. If with all the efforts, scholars are still unable to provide a comprehensive definition of religion, what could be the fundamental issue for such failure? Why are their arguments about religious violence incoherent? There are numerous such questions which need to be answered. Considering the analysis of the religious understanding above, one possible explanation for scholars' incoherent and dubious arguments would be that they might be getting the religion wrong. And unless they have a proper understanding of the religion, understanding its impacts on society seems unrealistic. Once we get our understanding of the religion straight, the question of whether or not it causes violence will be much easier to answer. To do so, one option would be to explore the religious perspective on the understanding and impacts of religion. Religion plays significant role in almost all aspects of human lives. Making religion a scapegoat not only distract us from identifying and addressing real causes of violence, but also gives those so called religious groups an excuse to use religion for political, economic and personal gains.

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<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 49:11-12.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 28:54-55.

<sup>48</sup> Gumbleton, T. (2015) Jesus Shows Us There is a Special Way of Overcoming Evil and Violence. National Catholic Reporter <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/jesus-shows-us-there-special-way-overcoming-evil-and-violence>

<sup>49</sup> Ten Commandments.

<sup>50</sup> Babu, K (2017) Religious Violence in India with Special Reference of Hindu and Muslims. 26.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* 32-34.

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