
Preface: Islam and Violence

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In Tetova, Macedonia, numerous renowned colleagues from Europe and beyond gathered to present their views on the relationship between violence and religion. Within the focus of the theme for the conference, the current discussions on the position of violence in the name of Islam are certainly of central importance. In this regard, the question emerged whether Islam, as a religion, promotes violence or offers a strong basis for the legitimation of violence.

Since the media has begun to focus on Islam, a closer analysis of such debates increasingly reveals that one question has crystallized, namely, how much religiosity is acceptable in a pluralistic society. Two further polarizing positions have come to be recognized with regard to this question.

On the one hand, many critics of religion have seen current events as an occasion for profound attacks on religion, emphasizing again and again that religion is the real root cause of violence and that the less religion there is, the more peaceful secular societies will be. On the other hand, representatives of religions denounce such modern secular fundamentalist positions, pointing out the potential for peace in religions and the fact that a peaceful world would be inconceivable without the contributions of religions.

It can be inferred from these two positions that religions are under enormous pressure to highlight their contributions to peace, let alone to demonstrate their peaceful contributions with concrete examples. The particular pressure on Islam is due to the fact that, even more so than other religions, Islam, for whatever reason, is predominantly associated with violence and conflicts undertaken in its name, not least because this violence is, in no uncertain terms, committed in the name of Islam. The situations in Iraq or Syria, but also in other traditionally Muslim-majority countries, make it very difficult to convince the world public by arguing otherwise, since the images of violence committed in the name of Islam

stifle all other arguments to such an extent that people cannot or will not listen or pay any attention to further argumentation.

Even if reducing the causes of violence in the world exclusively to religion is too simple and naïve a calculation, religions cannot, in spite of everything, be completely absolved of responsibility, such that all that happens in the name of religion actually has nothing to do with religion. Such a positioning could at best calm those who adhere to the religions, but in this way religions completely lose their credibility. This possibility can no longer be dismissed if religions evade their responsibility and the causes of the violence are constantly projected only onto factors such as the economy, politics, corrupt machinations, etc.

For the future of religions in this debate, it is crucial to try to point out the potential of religions as a resource for world peace. At the same time we must not lose sight of the potential of religions for violence, in order to actively counteract internal theological tendencies that could be misused to support violence.

These critical religious intra-communal debates cannot currently be held in Muslim countries for various reasons. One of the most important prerequisites for such debates, namely intellectual freedom or the freedom to investigate and reflect, which is of the greatest relevance, is lacking in those countries from whose universities important and positive impulses could emerge. The policies of such states benefit from the current ossified theological structures and thus these states cannot risk granting liberties in this area, which would ultimately shake their pillars. Draconian punishments, harsh intimidation, and harassment threaten anyone who might dare to proliferate such critical thoughts publicly.

In this volume, the authors attempt to speak freely about the potential in religions both for violence and peace. I am confident that many impulses from this work will also impact the direction of churches and other religious communities, such that religions, all together, will try to mobilize the members of their communities to actively contribute to world peace. In this way, religions will be perceived as part of the solution for world peace, enabling them to move beyond the stigma of their damaged reputations.

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