More religion, less violence: "Thick" practice of the Christian faith

by Miroslav Volf in the April 10, 2002 issue

Recently, in a class titled “Theology and Trauma Theory,” we read the text that catapulted Karl Barth to theological fame: *Epistle to the Romans*, written shortly after World War I. In the light of current events, what resonated with some of us was Barth’s critique of religion. Religion is not the solemn music that accompanies all the noblest human experiences, argued Barth. Rather, we can see “sin celebrating its triumph in religion.”

Stung by his teachers’ facile identifications of Western civilization with the “kingdom of God,” Barth raged against religion. “Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion.” As I was reading these words last fall, I thought of the terrorist attackers and their religious inspiration in Islamic fundamentalism. What Barth had in mind, however, were not primarily *other* religions but his own, Christianity.

While I resonate with Barth’s critique of religion, I resist some of its contemporary appropriations. A sense that religions are irredeemably implicated in violence around the globe is prevalent among intellectuals and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in the general public. One can easily point to prominent examples of religion fueling violence-inducing passions.

Historically, contemporary coupling of religion and violence has fed on the memories of the wars that plagued Europe from the 1560s to the 1650s and raged around religious differences. Today also it seems that the gods have mainly terror on their minds. Ireland, Serbia and India are just a few sites where religion is a factor in bloody conflicts.

For an example to make a point it needs an explanation, and there are many theories that purport to explain why religions generate violence. Mark Juergensmeyer’s recent book *Terror in the Mind of God* suggests that violence has accompanied religion’s renewed political presence because of “the nature of religious imagination, which always has had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war.” Of course, cosmic war is waged for the sake of

peace, so that religion, a phenomenon with cosmic war at its core, “has been order-restoring and life-affirming.”

The problem is that religion seeks to restore order and affirm life through the violence of cosmic war. Though its intentions are good, its means are not. If religion is not to do more harm than good, it cannot be left to its own devices, argues Juergensmeyer. He does not go as far as some Enlightenment critics, who demanded that religion be neutralized or even eliminated as a factor in public life. But he insists that religion “needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society.” Religion qua religion is inherently violent; the Enlightenment must redeem it.

Jurgensmeyer is mistaken, not in affirming values of rationality and fair play, but in thinking that these values need to be introduced into religion from outside. He implies that religion is bereft of resources to counter any tendency toward violence it may have. Take Christianity as an example, the religion I know best and a religion whose legacy is sometimes claimed to be the most violent of all religions. Does it need to learn rationality from the Enlightenment? What about its many eminently rational figures, such as some major theologians? Is Descartes more rational than Augustine? Kant more rational than Aquinas? One must operate with a rather provincial notion of rationality to make such a claim.

Does Christianity need to learn fair play from the Enlightenment? What about those members who were not only fair but truly loving, such as some of its most prominent saints? Is St. Francis less fair than Locke? Mother Theresa, with all her shortcomings, less fair than Marx? These and other theologians and saints are not anomalies in the Christian tradition, at odds with the inner logic of the faith itself. They are embodiments of what is best in it.

At least when it comes to Christianity, *the cure against religiously induced or legitimized violence is not less religion*, *but*, *in a carefully qualified sense*, *more religion*. What I mean is this: Strip religious commitments of all cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, and you are likely to get religiously inspired or legitimized violence.

Or—nurture and educate people in the tradition and, if you get militants, they will be militants for peace. As R. Scott Appleby argued recently in his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, contrary to the notions popular in some academic and political circles,

religious people play a positive role in the world of human conflicts and contribute to peace not when they “moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized and often highly particular beliefs,” but rather “when they remain religious actors.” “Thick” practice of the Christian faith will help reduce violence and shape a culture of peace.

Karl Barth offers good guidance on what to do in face of the undeniable misuse of the Christian faith to foster violence. First, we need an unflinching critique of Christianity. It deserves critique and it can stand critique. Attempts at damage control by theological spin doctors and ecclesiastical document shredders are not only counterproductive but deeply offensive to the spirit of the very faith being defended.

Second, we need authentic and imaginative retrieval of the faith. Barth’s critique of Christianity as religion was in service of rediscovering Christianity as a living faith. Ultimately, it will take such living and embodied Christian faith to show that love and not terror is on the mind of its God.