Religions under Suspicion of Violence. Theories on the relationship between monotheism and violence supplemented by empirical evidence

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Monotheistic religions have traditionally been distinguished by their humanitarian stance, a desire to bring nations together and compassion towards the less fortunate. On the other hand, there are regular reports from around the world of acts of apparently religiously motivated violence perpetrated by radical adherents of monotheistic religions. The Middle East is one regional trouble spot where violence, supposedly legitimised by religion, has flared up time and again – and not just in the past few decades. The states set up in this region by the Sykes-Picot system during the colonial era took no account of specific contexts nor was any sensitivity shown by their creators for cultural, ethnic or historical factors. The Near and Middle East is home to Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Armenians, Arameans, Greeks, Iranians, Turks and Nubians, to mention only the most prominent of the peoples living in the region. This multitude of peoples is matched by a host of different religious believers: Sunnis, Schiites, Alawites, Christians, Jews, Druzes, Baha'i, Zoroastrians, Yazidis and Mandeans.[239] There is also considerable overlapping between ethnic and religious identities, e.g. Arab-speaking Christians, Kurdish Muslims, Yazidi Kurds, Syrian Alawites, Turkmen Schiites, Aramaic-speaking Chaldeans, etc.[240] This ethnic and religious heterogeneity has given rise to a complex overall situation with an inherent potential for violence that has existed for decades now.

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[239] Cf. Vellguth, Klaus, "Freude und Trauer, Hoffnung und Angst. Globale Herausforderungen der Katholischen Kirche", in: Akademische Monatsblätter 128 (2016) 2, 38–47.

[240] Cf. Vogt, Matthias, "Ende der religiösen Pluralität? Zur Zukunft der Christen im Nahen und Mittleren Osten", in: Herder Korrespondenz 70 (2016) 1, 13–16, here: 13

However, the religious violence we have witnessed since the start of the third millennium is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Near and Middle East. Boko Haram, an Islamist terrorist group which originated in Nigeria, is extending its area of influence in West Africa.[241] Boko Haram first attracted attention in 2004 when it set up its "Afghanistan" training camp on the border between Nigeria and its northern neighbour Niger. This Islamist terrorist group is known for its attacks on Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.[242] Al-Shabaab is broadening its influence in East Africa over a geographical area which now stretches from Somalia via Kenya to the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar. Since 2012 Al-Shabaab has presented itself as a regional offshoot of the Al-Qaida movement which deliberately sets itself apart from the Islamic State. While Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and the terrorist militias of the Islamic State first conducted their terrorist attacks outside Europe, Islamist terrorism has in the meantime spread to the continent with attacks being carried out, for example, in Paris, Brussels, London and Copenhagen.

The global phenomenon of fundamentalist religious violence raises the question of the extent to which the religions involved in violent excesses have an inherent potential for violence which erupts in different contexts. Needless to say, this is not a phenomenon restricted exclusively to the present. For long periods the history of the Christian Church was marked by intolerance or violence towards non-believers or members of other denominations and religions. One need only refer here to the Crusades, the religious wars, the Inquisition, the treatment of heretics, anti- Judaism, etc. From a German perspective, of course, mention must also be made of the Shoah, in the course of which Germans, most of whom had been baptised as Christians, systematically persecuted and brutally murdered six million Jews just eighty years ago in a deliberate and meticulously planned manner that was previously inconceivable. In view of the Nazi genocide, reference has repeatedly been made to the fact that National Socialism was able to unleash its potential for violence by assuming the guise of a political religion.[243]

Monotheism and violence

Initiated by the religious violence which continues to dog the modern world, a debate has been under way for some time now in the German-speaking countries about the relationship between monotheism and violence. It was sparked by Jan Assmann, a cultural scholar and Egyptologist from Heidelberg, who published a book in 1997 entitled *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* in which he advanced the argument, subsequently much discussed in theological circles, that Judeo-Christian monotheism[244] with its differentiation between a "true" and a "false" religion is the cause of violence which is supposedly legitimised by religion.[245] Assmann put his central argument as follows: "It is this revolutionary, exclusive monotheism on which we shall focus here. It alone rests on the distinction between true and false religion, which I have called the Mosaic Distinction, and ultimately leads to the distinction between God and the world."[246] Assmann made it clear that the biblical sources contain numerous accounts of violence which should be treated not as historiography but as a narrative illustration of the difference between true and false religion. Even today this remains constitutive for the monotheistic religions, including for Judaism, but especially for Christianity and Islam. These accounts of violence polarise and foster integration into a specific religious community while at the same time making a distinction between the adherents of different religions.

[241] Cf. Kukah, Matthew Hasan, Boko Haram – Nachdenken über Ursachen und Wirkungen, missio–Studienreihe Menschenrechte vol. 34, Aachen 2009.

[242] Cf. Vellguth, Klaus, "'Westliche Bildung ist verboten'. Der Terror von Boko Haram erschüttert Nigeria", in: Deutsche Bischofskonferenz (ed.), Solidarität mit verfolgten und bedrängten Christen in unserer Zeit: Nigeria (Arbeitshilfe 295), Bonn 2017, 6–7.

[243] Cf. Vellguth, Klaus, "Die Dekonstruktion des Nationalsozialismus als Politische

Religion", in: Lebendiges Zeugnis 68 (2013) 1, 52–64.

[244] An exclusive form of monotheism can be shown to have existed in the worship of the sun god Aton under Echnaton in the 14th century BC. Later on, however, Egypt returned to polytheism. Cf. Ludger Schwienhorst Schönberger, "Keine Wahrheit ohne Gewalt? Ein Gespräch mit Jan Assmann", in: Tück, Jan Heiner (ed.), Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann, Freiburg 2015, 34–54, here: 43

[245] Cf. Assmann, Jan, Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur, Munich 1998 (published a year earlier in English: Assmann, Jan, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism, Cambridge/Mass. 1997). A few years later Assmann returned to his argument, treating it in greater depth in: Assmann, Jan, Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus, Munich 2003.

[246] Assmann, Jan, Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus, op. cit., 2003, 56f. Later on Assmann contrasts the tendency towards violence in monotheism with the tendency towards peace in polytheism, saying: "The so-called monotheistic religions are intrinsically violent, whereas the so called polytheistic religions are intrinsically peaceful." (Assmann, Jan, "Monotheismus und Gewalt. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Rolf Schieders Kritik an 'Moses der Ägypter'", in: Schieder, Rolf, (ed.), Die Gewalt des einen Gottes. Die Monotheismus-Debatte zwischen Jan Assmann, Micha Brumlik, Rolf Schieder, Peter Sloterdijk und anderen, Berlin 2014, 37.)

As a consequence, the world is divided up into Jews and non-Jews, Christians and pagans, Muslims and infidels. Although Assmann later disassociated himself from the term "Mosaic Distinction", which he had coined, and conceded that Moses was primarily concerned not so much with an abstract truth as with practical liberation (and thus primarily with the distinction between servitude and freedom rather than a differentiation between "true religion" and "false religion"), he held on to "the concept of the distinction between true and false and its revolutionary novelty as a religious category"[247]. To support his argument Assmann cites prominent Old Testament passages from the Pentateuch in which he sees "quite explicitly the distinction between friend and foe"[248] as the reason for the prohibition of alien gods and aniconism: "You must not bow down to these gods or serve them. For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God and I punish the parents' fault in the children, the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren, among those who hate me; but I show faithful love to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments." (Deuteronomy 5:9f.; cf. Exodus 20:5f.; Exodus 34:7).

Assmann regards the exodus myth as a narrative aimed at establishing an identity. This is the narrative in which the Jewish religion, which is based on the concept of loyalty, has its roots. He replies to objections that the Old Testament also contains passages which document a respect for others and, indeed, a positive assessment of their religion by referring to the origins of the Pentateuch. The editorial linking of the books of Genesis and Exodus in the sixth century BC, he says, resulted in the emergence of a kingdom of priests. It merges lines of tradition concerning the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis with texts telling of the liberation and the Covenant in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 19:5–6; Numbers 23:9), thereby paving the way for a new development in the history of religion. In linking the relationship with God in the Book of Exodus, which is based on the concepts of liberation and loyalty, with the notion of God in the Book of Genesis, which treats God not just as the guardian of the law but as the creator of heaven and earth and the origin of the law, Assmann detects a

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[247] Assmann, Jan, "Mose und der Monotheismus der Treue", in: Tück, Jan-Heiner (ed.), Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann, Freiburg 2015, 16–33, here: 17

[248] Ibid.

major difference compared to all the known concepts of God in Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Persia, India, Canaan, etc. Whereas as the lines of tradition in the Book of Genesis contain no attacks on alien gods and even cite the Canaanite King Melchizedek, who sees no difference between his god and the God of Abraham (Genesis 14:18–20), the Exodus myth with its exclusive monotheism negates any polytheism or cosmotheism. It makes a sharp contrast between immigrants and native inhabitants and their respective gods, although it states that a "Holy War" involving violence and destruction must be waged on the Canaanites.[249] In the Priestly Code both lines of tradition are intertwined and interlinked, although the differentiation between friend and foe, especially in the Covenant agreed with God and elsewhere, applies to the peoples settling in the Promised Land.[250] The Book of Deuteronomy makes the following strongly worded remarks about these peoples:

"When Yahweh your God has brought you into the country which you are going to make your own, many nations will fall before you: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than yourselves. Yahweh your God will put them at your mercy and you will conquer them. You must put them under the curse of destruction. You must not make any treaty with them or show them any pity. You must not intermarry with them; you must not give a daughter of yours to a son of theirs, or take a daughter of theirs for a son of yours, or your son would be seduced from following me into serving other gods; the wrath of Yahweh would blaze out against you and he would instantly destroy you. Instead, treat them like this: tear down their altars, smash their standing- stones, cut down their sacred poles and burn their idols. For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your God; of all the peoples on earth, you have been chosen by Yahweh your God to be his own people." (Deuteronomy 7:1–6)

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[249] In the Bible a "Holy War" is described as a war of destruction in which no spoils of war are taken. Instead they are dedicated to God. The first mention of a Holy War in the Bible occurs in the Book of Numbers (Numbers 21:1–3). The term "Holy War" does not have its origins in the Bible, as is evidenced, for example, by the inscription on a stele of King Mesha of Moab dating to the 9th century BC. Cf. Kang, Sa-Moon, Divine War in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East, Berlin/New York 1989; Lang, Thomas, Buch der Kriege – Buch des Himmels. Kleine Schriften zur Exegese und Theologie, Leuven 2011.

[250] Cf. Assmann, Jan, Mose und der Monotheismus der Treue, op. cit., 23f.

Similar words are to be found in the Book of Exodus: "He then said, 'Look, I am now making a covenant: I shall work such wonders at the head of your whole people as have never been worked in any other country or nation, and all the people round you will see what Yahweh can do, for what I shall do through you will be awe–inspiring. Mark, then, what I command you today. I am going to drive out the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites before you. Take care you make no pact with the inhabitants of the country which you are about to enter, or they will prove a snare in your community. You will tear down their altars, smash their cultic stones and cut down their sacred poles, for you will worship no other god, since Yahweh's name is the Jealous One; he is a jealous God." (Exodus 34:10–14)

According to Assmann, it is only later – during the exile in Babylon – that this Israelite-Jewish monotheism of loyalty[251], which provides the breeding ground for the development of a concept of Holy War, is accompanied by a religious exclusivism described as a "monotheism of the truth", which categorically denies the existence of other gods and is at first not committed primarily to the God of the Exodus tradition but to the God of creation in the tradition of the Book of Genesis (see Isaiah 45:5–7; Joshua 24:14f.). This exclusivist monotheism, which finds expression in the biblical texts of the post-exile prophets (especially Deutero–Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel), now stands alongside the monotheism of loyalty. "The one God, in whom Jews, Christians and Muslims believe, is regarded not just as the only God, next to whom there are no other gods, but also as the one loving and therefore jealous God who demands absolute allegiance. The true religion is defined as the sole religion which makes its believers free – or in the Christian reinterpretation – 'blessed'. Freedom and truth coincide. This is something completely new in the history of religion."[252] The codification of this religious conviction, which is understood to be a revelation, generated a polarising momentum in the Persian and early Hellenistic period. According to Assmann, it is

this codification which enables violence to be legitimised by reference to a divine law.[253]

Considering the potential for violence in the texts of the post exile prophets, in particular, Christian theologians point out that the conflicts between nations that are related in these texts are allegorical and existential or should be interpreted as inter-personal disputes. They refer in particular to Origenes[254], who noted with regard to the texts in the Book of Joshua that: "We find in ourselves all these sin-ridden peoples who constantly and incessantly attack the soul. The Canaanites are within us, the Perizzites are within us and the Jebusites are within us. How hard must we try, how vigilant must we be and how long must we persevere so that 'our country will finally be free of warriors', after all these vice-ridden peoples have been driven out of us? […] Even while it may seem that we have emigrated from Egypt and have left the idolaters behind us, we have not been relieved of the ignominy of Egypt."[255]

In addition, the response to the hypothesis of a potential for violence within monotheistic religions, which was formulated by Assmann with respect to the three Abrahamic religions, is that alongside the biblical texts, "which warn of alien gods and denigrate their adherents as idolaters, there are other less well-known texts which demand respect for the gods of other nations (see Micah 4:5)"[256]. Referring inter alia to Rolf Rendtorff[257], Michael Theobald points out that in addition to intolerance, polemics and religious satire a corrective line of tradition can be traced in the Old Testament, given that the Book of Exodus, for example, states: "You will not revile God, nor curse your people's leader" (Exodus 22:27).[258] Thomas Söding

[251] Cf. Assmann, Jan, "Monotheismus der Treue. Korrekturen am Konzept der 'mosaischen Unterscheidung' im Hinblick auf die Beiträge von Marcia und Micha Brumlik", in: Schieder, Rolf (ed.), Die Gewalt des einen Gottes. Die Monotheismus-Debatte zwischen Jan Assmann, Micha Brumlik, Rolf Schieder, Peter Sloterdijk und anderen, Berlin 2014, 249–266.

[252] Assmann, Jan, "Mose und der Monotheismus der Treue", op. cit., 28.

[253] Cf. ibid., 32.

[254] Theresa von Lisieux, patron of the world mission, is cited as another example of how a language which sounds warlike and militaristic can be understood in a spiritual or even mystic way when she talks of an armour which Jesus has put on her and with which she moves from "victory to victory". (Cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Ludger, op. cit., 54.)

[255] Origenes, hom. inIos 1,7, quoted from: Elsner, Thomas/Heither Theresia, Die Homilie des Origenes zum Buch Josua. Die Kriege als Heilswirken Jesu (Beiträge zur Friedensethik 38), Stuttgart 2006, 23f.

[256] Tück, Jan-Heiner, Preface, in: idem. (ed.), Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann, Freiburg 2015, 7–15, here: 8

[257] Rendtorff, Rolf, Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kosmischer Entwurf (vol. 2: Thematische Entfaltung), Neukirchen-Vluyn 2001

[258] Theobald, Michael, "Über die Götter sollst du nicht schlecht reden!" Ex 22,27 (=28LXX)

explores the theology of the Apostle to the Nations, which is closely bound up with the biography of St. Paul, who prior to his conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus attacked Christians on religious grounds. Söding argues that a declaration of belief in the one God – as the case of Paul makes clear – can in itself curb religiously motivated violence. Paul, he says, regarded the persecution of Christians as the mistake of his life and came to realise that "the use of violence against people of other faiths […] is not an act of goodness but one of sin […], for which God must be asked for forgiveness"[259]. The objection is also raised that, in contrast to the Old Testament, in which a distinction is made between "true" and "false" religion, the New Testament links the concept of truth with respect to God to "a semantics of kenosis and love"[260].

Widening horizons

It is apparent from the theological discourse on the relationship between monotheism and religious violence that the monotheism founded in the Old Testament has the potential for both violence and a humanising influence. As we have seen, Assmann deals with the potential for violence emanating from an exclusivism rooted in the Exodus tradition, which rejects other notions of the truth and their development in monotheistic religions. However, the tradition in the Book of Genesis reveals other approaches which are based not on exclusivism leading to self-isolation but on inclusivism aimed at pluralism and are, therefore, open to dialogue. It transpires from this differentiating approach that the statements in the Bible are not self-explanatory (for instance in a fundamentalist understanding of them) but that the meaning of biblical texts is created by those who read them.[261] This applies to the question of the extent to which religion implies violence as well as to the question of the extent to which religions harbour a potential for peace and humanisation.

Ottmar Fuchs points out in this context that "the crucial question about the humanising power of religions is addressed not primarily to their traditional texts but to the way in which the respective readers address it in their time."[262]

Jan Assmann explores the discourse on the relationship between violence and the claim to truth asserted by monotheistic religions from an exegetic standpoint and with an eye to the history of ideas. However, it is very important that this discourse should be supplemented by a historical, ethnic, political, economic and social analysis of the contexts[263] in which the apparently religious potential for violence can erupt.[264] It was to fill a gap in research in this field that missio launched its project on "Religion and Violence" in 2014.[265] This involved an empirical and partly documentary regional study of the relationship between religions and violence in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Chad and the Central African Republic.[266] In view of the many trouble spots with an apparently religious background in Africa, people affected by violence, including the leaders of religious groups, were asked In the course of the project to give their assessment of the role played by the various religions in the respective conflicts. Semi- structured individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted and documented to this end. The empirical material was then evaluated against the background of the relevant theories on the relationship between religions and violence. It turned out that fundamentalist religious violence is bound up, on the one hand, with the historical sins of the past, ranging from colonialism to totalitarianism, racism, genocides, wars, etc.[267] and, on the other hand, with tribalism, despotism, nepotism, corruption, etc. – these latter being

im Frühjudentum, im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche, in: Tück, Jan-Heiner (ed.), Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann, Freiburg 2015, 55–88

[259] Söding, Thomas, "Diesseits und jenseits der Gewalt. Der paulinische Monotheismus in der Kritik", in: Tück, Jan-Heiner (ed.), Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann, Freiburg 2015, 89–123, here: 95

[260] Tück, Jan-Heiner Tück, Preface, op. cit., 8

[261] Cf. Pemsel-Maier, Sabine, "Texte ohne Leser/innen sind bedeutungslos. Entwicklungen und Perspektiven biblischen Lernens", in: Anzeiger für die Seelsorge 125 (2016) 10, 30–32.

[262] Fuchs, Ottmar, "'Wenn Fremde bei dir in eurem Land leben …' (Lev 19,33–34). Zukünftige Herausforderungen durch die aktuelle Migrationsbewegung", in: Theologie der Gegenwart 60 (2017) 1, 47–71, here: 58.

[263] Cf. Söding, Thomas, op. cit., 91.

[264] Cf. Schweitzer, Friedrich (ed.), Religion, Politik und Gewalt (Veröffentlichungen der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 29), Gütersloh 2006.

[265] See the article in this volume by Marco Moerschbacher on "Religion and Violence – the Importance of Dialogue".

[266] There are plans to continue the regional studies with a look at the situation in Northern Nigeria, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[267] Cf. Polak, Regina, Migration, Flucht und Religion. Praktisch-Theologische Beiträge vol. 1: Grundlagen), Ostfildern 2017, 36; see. idem., "Flucht und Migration als Chance", in: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft 99 (2015) 3–4, 202–212.

highlighted, in particular, by proponents of dependence theories. The research project represents an "African" contribution to the current global discussion. While it primarily examines the connection between religion and violence from a Christian perspective, it can nonetheless be built on in inter-religious terms, particularly with a view to the Islamic-Christian dialogue. For example, Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayeb, President of the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, recently pointed to the exploitation of religion for political and imperialist purposes and warned that: "If you are searching for the causes of this violence, there is no point looking in the Koran, in the Gospels or in the Torah. You will not find the real reasons there. It is not the sacred texts of the religions which are the problem but the injustices of global politics, the tendencies towards hegemony, the attempts at occupation, and the urge to control sources of wealth and natural resources."[268]

Other aspects highlighted by the results of the research are the connection between the lack of opportunities for political participation and radicalisation, the role of religions in a secular state and the exploitation of religious convictions and feelings for political purposes.

Conclusions

The inclusion theories developed by the social sciences may well be a source of assistance in conducting an analysis. They point out that the fear of others (with different religious persuasions) and the inability of members of a religious group to see the presence of, or coexistence with, members of different religions as an opportunity ultimately highlight social deficits and inequalities, as a result of which groups such as the poor, the unemployed, the old, the educationally disadvantaged, women, the sick, children, young people and others find themselves cut off from social development and condemned to a life on the fringes of society.[269] Social inequality often goes hand in hand with political and religious fundamentalism which, in turn, breeds hate and violence. This would seem to confirm what the psychoanalyst Horst Eberhard Richter has pointed out: "If you don't

want to suffer, you have to hate."[270]   Ottmar Fuchs adds to that by saying: "If you don't want to share, you have to injure, discriminate and ultimately destroy."[271]

The question also arises as to whether the claim to the truth asserted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the cause of intolerance and violence and whether the suggestion made by Jan Assmann is helpful, whereby the aspiration to the truth should be relativised in order to open up the monotheistic religions for inter-religious dialogue and thus to curb the religious violence that is based on a particular religion's claim to the truth. Taking up Lessing's Ring Parable, Assmann advocates the development of an understanding of the truth which will enhance the ability of the monotheistic religions to accept plurality and thus help representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to build viable alliances for justice and peace. A dialogue based approach of this kind could build, for example, on the tradition line of a theologia negativa which can be found throughout the theological history of Christianity.

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[268] al-Tayyeb, Ahmad Mohammad, "Freiheit ohne Grenzen heißt Chaos", in: Herder Korrespondenz 72 (2018) 2, 19–21, here: 20.

[269] Cf. Ataç, Ilker/Rosenberger Sieglinde, "Inklusion/Exklusion: Ein relationales Konzept der Migrationsforschung", in: idem. (eds.), Politik der Inklusion und Exklusion, Vienna/Göttingen 2013, 35–52

[270] Richter, Horst Eberhard, Wer nicht leiden will, muss hassen. Zur Epidemie der Gewalt, Hamburg 1993.

[271] Fuchs, Ottmar, op. cit., 55.