Religion and violence: an ambivalent relationship

Religião e violência: uma relação ambivalente

DOI:10.18226/21784612.v26.e021047

Carlos João Correia*

Abstract: In this paper, we sustain the thesis that there is a violent aspect in the religious attitude. However, it is also true – as paradoxical as it might sound – that religion has been the privileged field to limit all kinds of violence in human societies.

Keywords: Religion. Violence. Sacrifice. Frazer. Girard. Eliade.

Late in the past century, it was common, in the western world, to follow the idea that religion, and its associated beliefs, were private to people's lives and, as such, compatible with the secular world we are living in. In fact, one of secular societies 'key aspect is the acknowledged respect towards its citizen's beliefs without the state adopting, on its own, any of them.

Even in epistemological terms there was what we can metaphorically designate as "expertise split". Religion and scientific knowledge worried about quite different dimensions of the human being's circumstance in the world. Wittgenstein's formula – found in the twenties – was key to this thesis. According to the Austrian philosopher, what is religious – mystical in his terminology – "isn't as the world is in itself", but "the fact that it is"[1].

However, in this century – and particularly after the events originated by the 9/11 – e situation is completely different. The peace once found between the religious and the secular field

* Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade de Lisboa. Professor Associado na Universidade de Lisboa. Orcid Id: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3612-8204 Site: http://ccorreia.academia.edu

[1] Wittgenstein. *Tractatus* § 6.44.

ISSN online 2178-4612 Disponível: http://www.ucs.br/etc/ revistas/index.php/conjectura

was challenged when it became clear the existence of a religious fundamentalism that, instead of defending the integrity of its values, embodied an aggressive and violent form of opposing the western societies – the so-called Islamic State is merely the last embodiment of this belligerent attitude.

Upstream we could find crescent aggression towards western societies and downstream, in the west, a new movement was rising, journalistically labelled as "New Atheism", a movement assuming a new positioning in the multiple streamlines of attitudes in the history of human thinking. New Atheism was new to sceptic, agnostic or atheist dispositions. Instead of the usual disregard for perceived naive and childish religious beliefs, New Atheism directly and aggressively states its "*conversational intolerance"*– Sam Harris's expression[2]. This expression aims to encapsulate a new skeptical posture towards the evil produced by religion and its beliefs in human societies. Religion loses its private space and becomes the object of hostile critics about its value in the life of human beings. In sum, religion, whatever its denomination, is considered one of the main causes of violence in human societies.

It is now a commonplace to associate religion to intolerant and violent attitudes. This association is so trivial that we sometimes forget that the two Twentieth century's big world wars weren't motivated by religious causes (not to mention the killings in the Korean war, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan, ex-Yugoslavia and even in Syria, conflicts in which motivations clearly transcend the religious field).

In this paper we reflect upon the existence of a justified argument sustaining the thesis that there is a violent aspect, even if not observable, in the religious attitude. Our answer will be positive in the first moment so that in a second moment we can demonstrate that – as paradoxical as it might sound - religion has

[2] "Our fear of provoking religious hatred has rendered us unwilling to criticize ideas that are increasingly maladaptive and patently ridiculous. It has also obliged us to lie to ourselves – repeatedly and at the highest levels of discourse –about the compatibility between religious faith and scientific rationality" (Harris, 2006, p. 26).

been the privileged field to limit all kind of violence in human societies.

I

When analyzing the religious experience of humankind, across history, and particularly, when putting in perspective the origins of the religious phenomenon, we can hardly find elements sustaining the idea that non-violence represents its dominant tone. The reason is simple: the history of religions is deeply associated with the experience of sacrifice.

Although we can find great diversity in types of sacrifice – ranging from the bloody holocaust of people and animals to the simple offering of flowers and fruits – in the genesis of all known religions we can find the idea of a ritualized action in which something precious is sacrificed in order to establish, maintain or restore the connection with the worshipped object, might it be an ancestor, a totemic animal or a deity.

The perception of the relevance of sacrifice in the genesis of the religious phenomenon finds one of its capital moments in the work of the British anthropologist James Frazer. Particularly in his monumental work *The Golden Bough. A Study of Magic and Religion, de 1890*, Frazer argues the existence of complicity between the essence of religion and the violent sacrifice action[3]. Let us briefly observe how far Frazer's thesis reaches. The work's title – *The Golden Bough* – was influenced by Turner's painting by the same name in which the English painter wanted to represent a Classic Antiquity's mythological scene. It is known that, in that painting, Turner aimed to reproduce his vision of a particular scene of Virgil's *Aeneid* [Book VI]. In the scene, prince *Aeneas* decides to visit the kingdom of the dead to meet his father. However, he needed the assistance of the priestess *Sybil* that, as it has been told to us in Petronius' *Satiricon*, tragically knows the secret to immortality, but not the one of youth. The golden

[3] Frazer (1983).

bough is, precisely, the symbol offered to *Aeneas* by *Sybil*, without which the Trojan prince could never win the challenge of death. About this golden bough, James Frazer uncovers one of the most enigmatic rituals of Classical Antiquity (particularly of the Roman civilization). The golden bough should be picked from a tree in the sacred wood dedicated to goddess *Diana*, the virgin goddess of the forests. Well, around that tree, wandered a priest, whose obligation was to preserve, with his own life, the sacred symbol. This priest, usually a slave or a gladiator, didn't have a single moment to rest or any tranquility for the moment would come that, by distraction, someone would kill him and take his place. As demonstrated by Fraser, this was the brutish rule of that shrine: the priest position and, interestingly, the king title, could only be obtained by killing the former in the position.

According to Fraser, if this ritual appears to be *prima facie* a barbaric expression in western civilization, we can also find in it a universal religious conviction. Beyond preserving a legendary historical habit supported by the cyclic death of the kings, the golden bough rite symbolizes a religious vision based in the symbolic parallel between, on the one hand, death and resurrection of gods and, on the other hand the regenerative cycles and rhythms of Nature. The central idea in this rite is the need for continuous sacrifice as a means to revitalize existence and life. There are several myths and religious beliefs embodying this idea. Let us observe some examples that seem to prove the close relationship between the religious cult and the experience of sacrifice.

In Vedic religion, in the pre-Hindu era, sacrifices were the fundamental aspect of the religious experience, in a way that nowadays we think the same word pronounced in the axial moment of the rite is at the root of different religious ideas such as representing *Brahaman* as an expression of unity in everything that exists, of *Brahma* as demiurge-creator and of *Brahmins*, priestly cast in charge of the services. If at the base of this cult, there is the mythic-symbolical idea of ensuring the equilibrium of all cosmic forces, it is also the latent vision of a world in which continuous sacrifice is key to its essence and each element only

has the ephemeral existence of sacrificing itself for all others. We can find the same idea in the Egyptian mythology in the symbolic consecration of *Osiris*'s (the King-God) death and resurrection, or in Greek mythology, particularly in the *Eleusis* Religion's foundation myth narrating the periodic irruption of the goddess *Persephone* from the kingdom of hell as the symbolic expression of periodic and permanent renovation in Nature.

Sacrificial religions clearly present themselves as religions of the sacred. According to the linguist Émile Benveniste[4], this idea is immediately observable in Indo-European cultures where the term "sacred" helps to converge two opposed dimensions; on the one hand, the sacred, the *sacer*, the thing desired and worshipped by the gods but that, in a different side to it, can appear as the experience of being tainted and hateful. How to understand this paradoxical coincidence?

Several arguments were sustained and, in each one, we found the effort to converge the essence of the religious phenomenon as the essence of sacrifice. One of the most plausible arguments is advanced by Benveniste himself in *The vocabulary of Indo-European Institutions*. The word sacred aimed to describe the ambivalent feeling towards the act of sacrifice in which the victim is – in reality, or symbolically – *annihilated* as means of connection between men and their gods. Sacrifice literally means *sacrum facere*, to make or do something *sacred*. Through the ritual, the victim would communicate with the divine dimension and, in a way, become worshipped and admirable. However, there was the need to annihilate her; otherwise, the connection wouldn't exist which led to the view of her being tainted and not pure.

Although suggestive and convincing, Benveniste's explanation about the ambivalence of the sacred faces two difficulties. We can question if the victim's ambivalence expresses a much more radical ambivalence of the object being worshipped. In this way, the sacrificed victim would only be the soothing means of a disturbing aspect of the religious experience greatly expressed

[4] Benveniste (1969, p. 187188).

in the late religious notions of divine anger and rage. Benveniste's thesis aims to circumscribe his field of study to the cultures with Indo-European roots, imposing limitations to the generalization of the suggested hypothesis. A second explanatory thesis is clearly stated in the work of the contemporary philosopher and sociologist René Girard[5].

According to this philosopher, sacrificial violence isn't a secondary element in the religions administrating the cult of the sacred. The sacred' s ambivalence would be the direct result of the cathartic function played by the victim of sacrifice within the human conflicts and dissensions. Instead of reciprocal violence among the members of a community, a symbolic satisfaction would be promoted by channeling that violence to a sacrificed victim embodying the evil to purge. Whence the reiterated expulsion or killing of an animal, usually a goat, after having transferred to it all the social evil, in many religious traditions. In *Leviticus* there really are two goats: the first is immediately sacrificed and killed on the spot while the second one is taken to the desert after the priest had channeled to him all the community evil. The symbolic myth of the scapegoat is a common feature in the sacrificial religions and far of being an exotic tradition is, according to Girard, the most typical way human communities solve their internal problems. As demonstrated by Jean Cazeneuve, in a line of thought very similar to Girard's, in many archaic communities "when a new king was empowered, all impurity was eliminated to prevent contamination of the king. With that purpose a prisoner would be the scapegoat taken to the border of the neighboring country accompanied by a cow, a goat, a dog, and a chicken, with the aches of the dead king and the remains of the royal house fire. In that place, the legs of the man and animals would be broken so that they couldn't return and were left to die in that place".[6]

The most accurate explanation on the genesis of the experience of the sacred is the one sustained by Mircea Eliade in his work. Beyond a linguistic, psychological, sociological or

[5] Girard (1972).
[6] Cazeneuve (1971).

anthropological explanation, Eliade put forward an authentic philosophical understanding of the problem. When questioned in his autobiographic interview by Claude Henri-Rocquet[7] about his understanding of the sacred, he spoke these remarkable words:

> How can we mark borders to what is sacred? It is very difficult. In the aftermath, however, what seems truly impossible is to imagine how the human spirit could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly real in the world. It is impossible to imagine the emergence of consciousness without the attribution of meaning to man's impulses and experiences. The consciousness of a real and meaningful world is deeply connected with the discovery of the sacred. Through the experience of the sacred, the spirit has learned the difference between what reveals itself real, powerful, rich, and meaningful, and what is empty of those qualities, such as the chaotic and dangerous flow of things, its unforeseeable and meaningless appearance and disappearance […]. It is necessary to insist in this aspect: the sacred is not a point in a scale (a level) in the history of consciousness, it is an element in the structure of that consciousness. In the most archaic levels of culture, to live as a human being is, in itself, a religious act because feeding, sexual life and work have sacramental value. The experience of the sacred is inherent to being human in the world. Without the experience of what is real -and what is not - the human being wouldn't know how to construct himself […]. The sacred doesn't require the belief in God, in Gods or in spirits. It is- I repeat it – the experience of reality and the foundation for a consciousness of existing in the world.[8]

Mircea Eliade introduces a radical new vision for the concept of sacred. As this Romanian thinker highlights, the sacred is not so much a feeling or a social event but the expression of the constitution of human consciousness in the relationship with the surrounding world. Most religious experiences are about reifying a temporal or a special event working as a reference point from which human action is guided and embedded of meaning. However, underlying this symbolic projection about temporal events and privileged places, what is at stake in the notion of sacred is our consciousness's roots within a world that transcends it. The sacred is, in Eliade's words "the experience of reality" available to our consciousness when we discover ourselves as

[7] Eliade (1985).

[8] Eliade (1985, p. 175-176).

beings in the world. Without self-consciousness of being a real being, without discovering ourselves as embodied beings, the difference between what is real or merely illusion could hardly be revealed. The existence of sacrificial rites, many violent ones, can be seen in the light of the constitution of a reference point considered absolute. Eliade tells us:

> To the Aztecs, the meaning for the sacrifice could be found in the belief that the human victim's blood-fed and strengthened the sun-god and gods in general […]. In Iranian dualism every believer that kills a frog, a serpent, a demoniac animal, contributes to the purification of the world and the triumph of good.[10]

We could add that the violent fundamentalist does nothing more than expressing this exact religious tendency that we can designate as "world purification" of all evil.

II

This analysis seems to conclude that there is an undeniable violent aspect to the religious experience. If it is like that, why is it possible to think "religion" as a privileged space to overcome violence? The answer becomes clear if we analyze the historical evolution of religious thinking. Well, it is clear the growing aversion, shared both in Christianity as in eastern traditions, to the sacrificial practices.

One of the most interesting aspects of Vedic religious evolution – supported, as we have seen, in the supremacy of sacrifice, as privilege rite or as axial category of world understanding – can be found in the growing repulse from the priesthood side towards the sacrifice of living beings in religious rites. The perception of the limited quality of sacrifice is expressed in the *Upanishads,* namely stating that the sacrificial method are not only fragile ways of redemption as indicate spirit blindness. So it is said: "Those wrapped in the imperfect wisdom, the sacrifices, think

[9] Eliade (1985, p. 146).

about themselves as being wise and educated […] but are nothing more than blind man guiding other blind men."[10]

Probably, this aversion towards sacrifice originates in the main crisis in the Vedic religion occurring between the 6th and the 5th century BC when two new heterodox religions emerged: Buddhism and Jainism. Although very different they both share the same ideal of non-violence (*ahimsa*), expressed in the Buddhist notion of infinite compassion towards the suffering of others and in the Jainism ideal of not inflicting any damage caused by thoughts, words, or actions towards other living beings. As Buddha has said: "all beings tremble facing danger, all fear death. When one meditates upon this, one does not kill nor causes death."[11]

The irruption in India of these two heterodox schools – that don't recognize in the *Vedas* special religious authority – created a serious religious crisis in Vedic tradition, a tradition that only gained strength again with Hinduism, or, if we prefer a more rigorous language, of the *sanathana dharma*, literally, "eternal doctrine». Hinduism still respects the *Vedas* as sacred books but through the influence of Buddhism and Jainism, develops a vision of the world that doesn't stand on sacrifice but in the notion of perfect knowledge suggested in the *Upanishads*. It consists in perceiving the radical identity between the inner nature of our being and the essential nature of all that exists.

It is interesting to observe the same aversive movement towards sacrifice in the emergence of Christianity. As Jesus tells us, without any ambiguity, in the *Book of Mathew* 9,13, "It is mercy what I seek and not sacrifice". To a great extent, Christ aversion to sacrifice practices can be clearly found expressed in the *Book of prophets*.

So *Isaiah*: "The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says God. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer

[10] *Maitrayana-Brahmana-Upanishad* §7.
[11] *Dhammapada* §129.

many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!" [12] Or in the book of *Amos*: "I despise your feasts and gatherings […]. I don't look at the sacrifice of your fattened animals […]. Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?" (*Am* 5, 2125).

The primacy of love and the conception of a non-vengeful divinity in Christianism, make unlikely, as highlighted by René Girard, the readings about the sacrifice of crucifixion in which God himself demanded the sacrifice of his son as the atonement of all that is evil. On the contrary, the strength of Christianism would be in the intuition that "the harmony of relationships between men doesn't demand more bloody sacrifices, absurd fables of the violent divinity".[13]

In my opinion, both the post-Vedic religions, in the east, such as Christianity, in western culture, have built the foundations of a new vision of the religious experience beyond violent and sacred sacrifice. One could argue, however: could sacrifice be a form of love? It is undeniable that in the rites of sacrifice we can find the idea of offering, that is, the loss of something the community considers very precious. The intrinsic retribution's logic in the offering of sacrifice can be found in the religious experience of the most elementary principles, but not less essential to justice. In fact, it is hard not to be surprised with the universal character of the well-known golden rule, in which both sides are required not to harm one another. As formulated in *Mathew* 7:12, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

Regardless we consider this a positive or a negative rule, its universal aspect places justice as the basis of the construction of fundamental ethic principles in human religiousness. Could we establish, from this enigmatic consensus, equal universality in love? Can the word of love can be spelled secretly in the principle of reciprocity of actions? Not necessarily. How many times the golden rule is applied as a variation of the *Law of Talion*. How

[12] *Is.* 1,1115.

[13] Girard (1978, p. 271).

many times the golden rule is understood as the need to give in order to receive "I give something to you to get something in return". About this, once again, west and east combine in the rejection of the retribution law, which is, at the limit, revengeful. Firstly, in the words of the canonical Mahayana Buddhist text *Collection of Practices*: "If you don't practice compassion with your enemy with who will you practice it with?", or in the magnificent words of the sermon of the mountain: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and a tooth for tooth […]. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (*Mt* 5, 38-44).

The fact that all experience of sacrifice implies love – as we have seen, in the act of sacrifice, might it be a ritual or a social one, the violence dominates, although in a controlled way –, so the deepening of the religious experience of sacrifice can create the conditions for religion to be conceived beyond the experience of sacrifice, challenging the hasty thesis in which religion always has a violent identity.

References

BENVENISTE. *Le vocabulaire des institutions indoeuropéennes: 2. Pouvoir, droit, religion*. Paris: Minuit, 1969.

CAZENEUVE, J.. *Sociologie du rite: tabou, magie, sacré*. Paris: PUF, 1971.

CORREIA, C. J. ed. *A religião e o ateísmo contemporâneo*. Lisboa: e. ed. CFUL, 2009.

CORREIA, C. J. *A religião e o sentido da vida:* paradigmas culturais. Lisboa: CFUL, 2011.

ELIADE, M. *L'épreuve du labyrinth*. Paris: Belfond, 1985.

FRAZER, J. *The golden bough*: a study in magic and religion. London/ New York: MacMillan, 1983.

GIRARD, R. *La violence et le sacré*. Paris: Grasset, 1972.

GIRARD, R. *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset, 1978.

HARRIS, S. 2006. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. *Logish-philosophische Abhandlung. Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Hrsg. B.McGuiness und Joachim Schulte. Frankfurt aM: Suhrkamp, 1989.

Submetido em 17 de novembro de 2020.
Aprovado em 10 de janeiro de 2021.