It is a great honor for me to deliver this year’s Gerd Bucerius Lecture. This lecture is named after a great German publisher, politician, and philanthropist. Gerd Bucerius was among those who were exposed not only in their youth, but also as adults to the horrors of the Nazi regime in Germany and to the cruelties of World War II. This generation was devoted to the task of forming a new, democratic Germany embedded in the political culture of the West, a peaceful Germany far removed from the militaristic spirit of former times. Independent and free—these two words best characterize Gerd Bucerius, whose memory we honor with this lecture.1

Nothing is more dangerous for such a spirit of freedom and independence than an atmosphere of hatred and violence. Our time is characterized by an open conflict between two tendencies. On the one hand, freedom and human rights, peace and justice are highly esteemed in our time. But, on the other hand, we observe not only a resurgence of the spirit of hatred and violence, but, even worse, its justification and promotion with seemingly religious reasons. That leads to a situation in which violent religious extremism is seen as one of the mega-problems of the twenty-first century.2 It figures together with global warming, population growth, water shortages, and pandemics as one of the big challenges facing our global societies. Therefore, in this lecture I will address the interaction between religion and violence in our present-day, globalized world.

To begin with, I will briefly describe some manifestations of a new linkage between religion and violence. In the subsequent parts of this lecture I will discuss three different concepts for explaining the relationship between religion and violence: a necessary connection between religion and violence, religious criticism of violence, and, finally, a contingent relationship between religion and violence. These are the three patterns of interpretation I want to discuss. That will lead us, finally, to some insights into the tasks that religious bodies should address in the future, but to describe these tasks in more detail would require an additional lecture.


Turning to the present debate on violence, I will, in a first section, address the problem of the definition of violence in general and the attitudes of religions towards it. In a second section, I will turn to the specific problems of military violence.

I.

There is a longstanding debate on the meaning of the term “violence.” The restriction of the term to only the physical violation of persons creates problems. On the one hand, such a restriction might give the mistaken impression that the destruction of things is pardonable compared to the use of violence against persons. On the other hand, it is obvious that human beings can be negatively affected by structural restrictions just as intensely as by physical violence; therefore, it was for good reason that the concept of structural violence was introduced. Structural violence in this sense is found in all structural conditions that prevent people from developing and using their capabilities. The segregation of ethnic groups in the United States of America before the success of the Civil Rights Movement or the system of Apartheid in South Africa were often used as examples of such structural violence. But even in the case of direct violence, not every violation of human beings takes the form of physical violence. We know psychological and other forms of non-physical but highly effective damage by which people are affected. Today bullying at the workplace is often described as a form of such psychological violence.

Most important in such a broader reflection on the understanding of violence is a shift in perspective. Recent research looks at violence not primarily from the perspective of the act and its perpetrator, but from the perspective of the victim. Empathy for the victim becomes the key to understanding violence. Therefore, not so much the means but the effects of violence and not so much the intentions of the actors but the consequences for the victim form our image of violence. However, there is also a need to define the limits of the term “violence.” Whoever tries to wrestle with the problems of terminology indicated above has to address the problem that the term “violence” becomes very vague. Violence in this broad sense seems to be an omnipresent reality; the hope of limiting, containing, and at least partly overcoming violence seems futile when the term is used in such a limitless sense. For the purpose of this lecture, therefore, I restrict myself
to the problem of direct, physical violence exerted by human beings against one another.

But even in this narrow sense violence is extremely manifold and disturbing. Indeed, you find a whole spectrum in which this problem has to be addressed. Different forms of physical violence committed by human beings against other human beings include: personal acts, especially rape and violence against children, in families and on the streets; other forms of criminal violence affecting individual lives as well as the social fabric; terrorist violence ranging from suicide bombing to organized warfare; civil wars in failed states or between states; foreign military interventions on humanitarian, economic, or other grounds; and, finally, a monopoly of the state on the legitimate use of physical force.

Ethical traditions are in principle clear in their judgment of physical violence. “Thou shalt not kill” is a basic command in religious as well as humanistic ethical traditions. However, there are many controversial issues related to this basic commandment. The use of coercion in education and family relations, especially against children and women, was once widely accepted, and it is still accepted in different cultures around the globe. This is an example of the slow changes of behavioral patterns in this respect. There is also a disturbing continuity in the use of violence against minorities in many societies. Scholarly research shows that religiosity does not necessarily lead to a decrease but, at least in certain circumstances, rather to an increase in latent or manifest violence.

This tendency is astonishing considering that at least three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—including the commandment to love one’s neighbor as one of their central ethical precepts. What can be the driving force negating the basic religious stricture not to kill but instead to respect the dignity of the other and love one’s neighbor? What can be the reason for the violation of the Golden Rule, to treat the other as we want to be treated by him? Some argue that aggression is so basic to human nature that it cannot be limited by ethical or even religious restraints. But that is obviously not true. People are able to limit their aggression; they listen to the voice of their conscience and invent the instruments of law to overcome or limit the tendency to hurt one another.

Why, then, does it happen that the sources of religion are not used in this direction but instead become instrumental in the intensification

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of hatred and the readiness to use violence? To explain this linkage between religiosity and the use of violence, it is often argued that people tend to devalue others with a different faith when they are convinced of the superiority of their own belief system. But, again, this is not an inevitable consequence. Personal trust in the truth of a specific religion does not imply the need to disrespect people of other faiths. Historically, we know examples of the peaceful coexistence of religions as well as violent conflicts between them.

Other explanations do not relate to religious factors in the narrow sense of the word but to cultural factors. Some observe, for instance, that conservative Turkish families with a Muslim background cultivate an ideal of masculinity that legitimizes the use of violence by young men. It would evidently be a simplistic interpretation to assert that Islam as a religion implies the justification of violence exerted by young males. Yet there is no strict separation between religious commands and cultural traditions. Religious education always relates to social and cultural factors; it is therefore not easy to separate them from each other. However, such complex interactions should not be interpreted in a reductive and therefore simplistic manner. To summarize, none of these explanations leads to a necessary linkage between religion and violence, but they provoke the question of why the impulses of religions are not translated more consistently in the behavior of their adherents. Religion seems to be limited in its influence in anomic situations, in situations of extreme inequality, or in situations in which children are brought up in an atmosphere of mistrust and violence and so internalize this atmosphere from the beginnings of their lives. In such situations, it is not enough to remember the good values of religions or ethical systems. You have to work on the conditions in which children are brought up and must live. You have to change the anomic situation; you have to work for justice in society; you have to improve the educational conditions for children and youth—to name the most important aspects of the tasks to be addressed.

II.

As already indicated, the general ethical debate on violence deals mainly with the problem of collective physical violence. Until 1989, the European debate concentrated on the potentials of violence inherent in the antagonism between the two superpowers and their respective satellite systems. This antagonism came to an end
without a transition from “cold war” to “hot war.” This historical miracle provoked hope for a “peace dividend” after 1989, hope for the containment of military violence that would, in the end, further the use of available funds for sustainable development and the promotion of global justice.

None of these expectations were fulfilled. The Millenium Development Goals proclaimed by the United Nations in the year 2000 with the intention of reducing global poverty by half by the year 2015 did not trigger a thrust towards sustainable development. The great confrontation between East and West has been followed by a multiplicity of military confrontations, many of whose protagonists are non-state actors. Indeed, the world public still has to learn that the use of violence by non-state actors can result in wars.

Terrorist violence has become a rather omnipresent phenomenon in the world of today. For the international conscience, September 11, 2001, continues to function as a historical watershed that gave a new character to international terrorism. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were directed at the economic, military, and political power centers of the United States of America, but they affected the whole globe. They had an explicitly religious motivation, as explained in the manual of “spiritual guidelines” that had been in the hands of the attackers.6 Other attacks in Europe followed—in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005—and there were some failed terrorist attempts in the following years. To a much greater extent, people in the Muslim world itself have fallen victim to religiously motivated terror attacks. The case of Afghanistan is before our eyes. To sum up, the interaction between religion and violence has belonged to the characteristic traits of our era of globalization since 2001.

It is a characteristic trait of globalization that people’s destinies become dependent on the uncertainties of the market and that traditional forms of solidarity are dissolved. These phenomena create new tasks for religions. Their ethic of “brotherhood” can step in to take the place of traditional solidarities. But often this ethic of brotherhood is combined with a fundamentalist worldview that can end up in a violent confrontation with those who do not belong to the same group, who are not adherents of the same religion and do not envisage the same political goals. A new idea of martyrdom has developed that promises immediate access to paradise for those who sacrifice their lives in a “holy war.”

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This is one of the ways in which violence is understood as worship in our times. Such examples can be useful in countering the notion that the linkage between religion and violence is limited to one religious community. In fact, however, 9/11 and also the suicide attacks that are part of the conflict in the Middle East direct our attention towards the renewal of the Islamic *jihad* doctrine in particular. Today, this doctrine is often given a meaning in which “holy wars” of the individual against his or her inner person, against the evil around him or her, and, finally, against unbelievers are intertwined. In such a framework, the transition from toleration of unbelievers to violence against them plays a decisive role. Of crucial relevance in this respect is the so-called Verse of the Sword in the Qur’an: “Once the Sacred Months are past, you may kill the idol worshipers when you encounter them, punish them, and resist every move they make. If they repent and observe the Contact Prayers (Salat) and give the obligatory charity (Zakat), you shall let them go. GOD is Forgiver, Most Merciful.”

As Islamic studies have shown, this verse documents the changed attitude of the Prophet Mohammed towards unbelievers after his move from Mecca to Medina. It is thought likely that this verse replaced an older revelation with differing content. Whereas here violence against the unbelievers is seen as obligatory, in his Mecca period Mohammed coexisted rather peacefully with the unbelievers. This inner tension in the Qur’an has repeatedly provoked controversial interpretations. But there is no doubt that the tendencies towards a new kind of religious violence that have been observed in Islam since the 1970s are based on the aspect of *jihad* directed against unbelievers.

But, again, the new linkage between religion and violence is not restricted to Islam alone. It also exists in Christianity. The Iraq War of 2003 was an example of the use of religious arguments to propagate war. In this highly debated case, some understood the war against Iraq as the execution of a death penalty against Saddam Hussein—accepting the danger that many other Iraqis were far more likely to lose their lives than the well-protected dictator himself. Insofar as one could argue that violence does not equal violence, the religious justification for terrorist violence has to be judged differently than the religious interpretation of the use of violence within the framework of a state monopoly on violence. But even respect for the state’s task of securing peace and justice by all necessary means—under certain conditions even violent means—turns into a highly

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8 Sura 9:5.
problematic proposition when it becomes a bellicose concept that gives preference to military violence over other means—political, economic, or legal—in whichever context, religious or nonreligious, such a preference might occur. The application of a religious justification for the death penalty to international relations leads with inner necessity to a kind of bellicosity which, in dubious cases, privileges war over other possible solutions.

The linkage between religion and violence occurs today in different religions. This circumstance nurtures a kind of public debate that is not prepared for differentiations. Moreover these developments—as complex as they may be—result in a rather simplistic public perception: the justification of violence is seen as a crucial element of religion in general. From such a perspective, the political role of religion is understood as preparing for and justifying the use of violence. In our times, the critique of religion very often has its center in this critique of the interaction of religion and violence. The critical point is simple: Religion leads to violence.

This critique responds to a situation in which violence seems to be present everywhere. The ubiquity of violence is a part of the globalization process. Violence is globalized. This is true in the sense that violence is omnipresent in the media. Everyone has easy access to all kinds of violence through TV or the Internet. Everyone has access to reports about how successful new academic elites are as actors in the field of violence. Violence is an important economic good in a global economy. The arms trade is an important part of the global economy.

When one starts to analyze the relationship between religion and violence critically, one can see different patterns of interpretation. First, some posit a necessary connection between religion and violence; second, others point to religious criticism of violence; and, third, still others note a contingent relationship between religion and violence. We will now turn to these patterns of interpretation.

III. First proposition: Religion leads to violence.

On an academic and intellectual level, this widespread assumption is currently discussed in a version proposed by the well-known German Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, in his recent statements on monotheism. Briefly, Assmann says that the biblical connection between Moses and Egypt leads us back to the reform of Pharaoh Echnaton in
the fourteenth century B.C., who tried to replace the old Egyptian deities with Re or Aton, the God of the Sun. This reform was not successful, but became part of cultural memory in Egypt, including among the enslaved people of Israel, who lived there. It was Moses who adopted this idea and created an exclusive monotheism for the people of Israel that denied the right of existence to all other Gods. Assmann distinguishes this kind of monotheism from other forms of henotheism in which the cosmic order gives a place to all deities but veneration is concentrated on one God. Distinguishing this religious attitude from monotheism, Assmann calls it cosmotheism. For him, the so-called monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are exclusive by nature and therefore in their tendency violent, whereas cosmotheism is by nature peaceful. The violent character of monotheism that he asserts is not a question of historical data on the ways in which monotheism gained superiority as such but rather a “semantic paradigm” that explains how such processes were remembered.  

For instance, it is historically probable that in Judaism violence was used against internal dissenters rather than against adherents of other religions. Already the Hebrew Bible included more examples of the suffering of the people of Israel under the polytheism of its neighboring powers than of the perpetration of violence in the name of the one God of Israel. That was even more, and terribly, the case in later historical times. But there has also been no consistent line of justification for violence in Christianity or Islam. So the semantic paradigm of monotheism does not mean that the use of violence is justified or practiced in every single case. It is not sufficient to go back to the “Mosaic distinction” in order to explain the problem of religiously justified violence. And it is rather superficial to proclaim, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has, a “renaissance in the sign of Egypt” in order to “destroy the poison that declares all other cults to be enemies.” Finally, it seems misleading when the German sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that all truth claims in religions have to be invalidated (by whom?) as a condition for respecting the “religious otherness of the other.”

It is not the religious truth claim as such; it is its exclusivist misconception that makes it a motive for violence and warfare. This exclusivity occurs today in fundamentalist movements of religious renewal. They are reacting to the processes of globalization, for they respond to the dissolution of traditional forms of solidarity and to
the experience of cultural fluidity by reverting to simple religious truths. It is not monotheism as such but this protest against modernization, of which these movements are at the same time a part, that makes fundamentalism a threat to peaceful coexistence.

There are also other points that shed critical light on the more recent debate over monotheism. The horrible outbreaks of violence during the twentieth century, for instance, cannot be attributed to a connection between monotheism and violence. This is most evident in the case of the murderous violence perpetrated by Nazi Germany after 1933. On the contrary, Nazi ideology clearly used elements taken from ancient German polytheism. Moreover, the ideology of blood and soil or of a specific German “Volksnomos” was evidently and directly opposed to the recognition of the one God.

To go a step further, we have to recognize that the idea of a single monotheism binding together Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is intrinsically problematic. In Judaism, adherence to the one God developed in stages over a long period of time; it is an ahistorical construction to call Moses a monotheist in the generally accepted sense of the word today. In Christianity, monotheism unfolded as the faith in one God in three persons. In Islam, this Christian understanding is explicitly seen as “polytheism” and therefore as an apostasy from true monotheism. It is exactly this Christian stance that is sharply criticized in the already quoted “Verse of the Sword.” This fits in with such observations that the concept of “monotheism” and its undifferentiated application to all three religions is rather new. The history of the word “monotheism” begins only in the seventeenth century, and only in the nineteenth century was it used as a general concept comprising the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It was in that period and with the memory of the confessional wars of early modernity that the general statement was formulated that monotheism necessarily implied an intolerant and violent attitude towards the adherents of other religions or confessions. Since then, the critical perspective has been formulated that monotheism, as the idea of the superiority of one’s own religion, and violence depend on one another. This kind of critique of religion was found already in the nineteenth century, for instance, in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

Since then, different theories have tried to explain in which sense monotheism produces a certain kind of “political theology.” In the early 1930s, the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt traced...
the central political terms back to a seemingly “final, systematic structure.” For him, the concept of legitimate, necessarily personally identifiable political rule led back to the reign of the one God, whereas rule based on liberty, which inevitably ended up in anarchy, was based on the “ideal of humanity in the process of [attaining] self-consciousness.” But this interpretation, as the theologian Erik Peterson already explained in the discussion at the time, stems from an inadequate understanding of the Christian concept of God and therefore also of Christian monotheism. Such a “political theology” cannot be based on the Christian understanding of God, as it had already unfolded in the Trinitarian doctrines of early Christianity. In brief, the monotheism reflected in this position does not take into account the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God.

Today, discussions on the political role of monotheistic religions normally do not touch on these explicitly theological dimensions. Instead, the current debate addresses empirical questions. Are we really observing a clash of—religious—civilizations as predicted by Samuel Huntington in the mid-nineties? In fact, today’s military conflicts rather rarely have their original cause in differences of religion or confession. Many military conflicts are civil wars in which adherents of the same religion fight on both sides. Rwanda, Iraq, and Iran are examples of this. In other conflicts—for instance, Kosovo or Sudan—the fighting ethnic groups are divided by religion, too. But the role of religion can only be understood within a broader spectrum of causes behind these conflicts. To the extent to which religion has been taken more seriously over the last ten years, it is often seen as a driving force behind these conflicts, even if—and this is normally the case—the political and economic strengths or weaknesses of the respective countries or parties play an important role.

But without any doubt, for a decade we have been observing a tendency to regard religion as the one decisive factor sparking and feeding conflicts. This interpretation has to do with how the identity of ethnic, national, or social groups is predominantly seen through the lens of religion much more than before. The identity of groups as well as individuals always has many facets. It is therefore misleading to reduce this identity to one single factor. In fact, the reductive interpretation conflating identity with religion intensifies conflicts, because it pits groups against each other, using only one denominator for their identity. When one looks at all Iraqis or all...
North-Sudanese only from the perspective that they are Muslims, then this trait of their identity will necessarily be seen as the driving force behind actual conflicts. As Amartya Sen has shown in an admirable manner, this use of religion as identity-marker damages our understanding of identity as well as our understanding of religion, and it ends up advancing the deadly spiral of antagonism and violence.18

To justify and to drive violence in conflict is not an inherent and unchangeable characteristic of religion, but an acquired or even ascribed quality of religion. But there are situations or contexts in which this kind of acquisition or ascription tends to be enforced. This seems to be the case today. The necessary answer to this dangerous constellation includes good historical research on the manifold reasons for conflicts and the forces behind them, and a self-critical reflection within religious communities on their role in conflict and their possible functions in peace-building processes.

**IV. Second proposition: Religion leads to nonviolence.**

All religions include an impulse to overcome violence. The critique of violence in Old Testament prophecy, Jesus’s blessing for the peacemakers and the meek, and the Qur’an’s opposition to force in the name of religion (“there is no compulsion in religion”)19 show in different ways a distance of those three religions to violence. The same can be demonstrated in the cases of Buddhism and Hinduism.

There is a common advocacy of religions for the sanctity of life, for the integrity of every human being, and for the nonviolent character of religious truth. The Golden Rule that appears in one form or another in many different traditions of our world—treat the other in the same manner in which you want to be treated—demands a mutual recognition that would be violated by any kind of violence. The first expectation of every religion would be that it advocates nonviolence and not violence. This tendency is most explicit in Christianity, but there is no reason to link it exclusively to the Christian faith.

On the contrary, no religion, including Christianity, can claim consistency in its advocacy of nonviolence. All religions, in one way or another, take part in the ambiguity of dealing with a reality that includes violence on an individual as well as a social and international level. In our era, this ambiguity is very clearly encountered

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19 Sura 2:256.
on a global level. Wars tend to become “world wars”; and the commitment to nonviolence becomes a global, ecumenical, and even interreligious commitment.

The twentieth century was a century of extreme violence and exemplary nonviolence at the same time. Both tendencies appeared across continents, cultures, and religions. The introduction of nonviolence as a political strategy was due to a Hindu lawyer who was also well versed in the Christian religion, namely Mahatma Gandhi. Some Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., who devoted their lives to the task of overcoming violence, became, as martyrs, shining examples for the adherents of different religions. In the United States, the nonviolent struggle for civil rights, the opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Sanctuary Movement showed the potential strength of religiously motivated nonviolence. Likewise, the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa became an outstanding example of the possibilities of nonviolent transformation; Nelson Mandela very often underlined the great influence of Mahatma Gandhi on the South African struggle to overcome Apartheid. The paradigm shift in the ethical debate from “just war” to “just peace” was prepared and promoted by those who, for their part, renounced all types of violence.

Many of them—across religions—used the example of Jesus and referred again and again to the Sermon on the Mount. The message of Jesus is characterized by a renunciation of violence, love for one’s enemy, and blessings for those who champion peace without the use of violence. Jesus himself suffered from violence. Regarding his death on the cross, it is said that it happened “once forever.” A repetition of this sacrifice is therefore excluded; there is no compulsion to sacrifice. Therefore, it can be said that Christianity turned away from violence in a specifically radical manner. However, it could not resist the seduction of violence and its apparent avoidability. The conviction that one cannot avoid answering violence with violence became a crucial point in Christian doctrine already in the Constantine era. Since those times, violence has even occurred in the service of the church itself. Being a part of the world, the church not only had to take the reality of violence into account. It went a step further and used violence for its own purposes. Every critical observer will be astonished again and again by the fact that the religion of love adapted so well to a climate of violence and even developed a theory about its inevitability. The idea of

20 Hebrews 10, 10.
certain punishment for human sinfulness was not used in order to understand human dependence on God as Savior. Instead, it was used in order to integrate human beings into a system of threat and punishment. The idea of nonviolence was often restricted to the private sphere, in which individuals could abstain from the coercion without which life in society as a whole was seen as impossible. On the one hand, this ambiguity was a sign of a religion that took ambivalent realities seriously; on the other hand, this happened at the expense of the clarity of Christian witness.

Therefore, reform groups, peace churches, and pacifists promoted self-critical reflection within Christianity and in dialogue with other religions. Their intention was to renew the clarity of Christian witness as a witness for justice, peace, and nonviolence as well as for the poor. In our globalized world we can also see this phenomenon as a globalized movement. At a certain point, it was even explicitly encouraged by Pope John Paul II, who invited representatives of the different world religions to a peace prayer held in 1986 at Assisi, the place of Saint Francis, an early precursor of modern pacifists. Self-critical reflection was also encouraged worldwide by the Protestant and Orthodox Churches who cooperate in the World Council of Churches. When they proclaimed a ten-year program to overcome violence in 1999, that proclamation was a response to a globalization process that included new forms of violent conflict. Different movements motivate religions to contribute to a global ethos based on the Golden Rule, including the rejection of violence. But in all these processes we learn that all religions that really address these kinds of problems are “risky religions.” They have to liberate their basic motives again and again from the internal contradictions in which they become entangled. Mercy and power, love and violence, charity and profit, sustainability and self-interest—these are some of the basic tensions in which religions become involved in our globalized world. The effort to stand clearly for the preferential option of nonviolence without blindness to the existing threats of violence is a test of the identity of religions in our time.

V. Third proposition: Religion and violence are linked in a contingent manner.

The linkage between religion and violence is not at all automatic. There is no inevitable and necessary relationship between monotheism and the justification of violence. Instead, such justification responds to concrete historical circumstances and challenges.
The linkage between monotheism and violence, wherever it occurs, is contingent; it is neither necessary nor impossible. Therefore, whether or not the critique of violence in religious traditions prevails in the behavior of the faithful is also related to contingent factors.

Religion in general and monotheism in particular neither guarantee pacifist attitudes nor make them impossible. When pacifism not only relates to an individual conviction but also includes the responsibility to protect the freedom of others from coercion and violence, the crucial question is always whether a nonviolent practice is apt to overcome the use of violence from the other side or give it free reign. But whenever theories of just war or just peace regard the use of violence as an ultimate resort to end violence already being exerted, the question has to be asked whether the violence that is designed to maintain or restore the rule of law will effectively limit the use of violence or increase it.

This fundamental ambiguity in the phenomenon of violence itself explains why religions have an ambivalent attitude toward it. At least for Christianity, however, it has to be said that this faith is consistent with its original impulse only if, even in ambivalent situations, it defends the priority of nonviolence over and against violence and therefore rejects a religious justification of violence even in those cases in which the situation makes the use of violence seem inevitable. Measured by this criterion of clearly rejecting any religious justification for the use of violence, the Christian churches have often failed.

There is no critique of violence, no matter how radically formulated, that could save anybody from being sucked in by violence and counter-violence. The reason for this conundrum is that religions have to deal with reality as a whole. That this reality bears violent traits cannot be denied. Reality as a whole includes not only personal lives from beginning to end, individual destinies with their joy and suffering, human freedom with its successes and failures, whether caused by fate or guilt, but also human communities and their inherent tensions between hate and love, conflict and reconciliation, as well as violence and peace.

René Girard, a French philosopher of culture, went one step further. In his view, dealing with violence—taming and overcoming it—represents the most important social function of religion. Religion channels violence and averts it. This is the reason behind rites
of sacrifice in old religions. It therefore becomes self-contradictory when religions limit the use of violence in a ritual form but justify it at the same moment politically.

Today, too, religions may be aware of the potentials for violence in human life, but name and address them without justifying them. They may take into account the human tendency towards violence, but simultaneously oppose its glorification. They may avoid illusions about the susceptibility of human beings to violence, but not abandon the field to it.

VI. Conclusion

Let me summarize some results of these reflections in five proposals for further discussion.

1. The linkage between religion and violence is one of the great challenges for the twenty-first century. It reveals the difficult aspects of globalization in concentrated form: the erosion of culture, the increase in religious fundamentalism, the increasing domination of politics by economics, and the ubiquity of violence.

2. The process of globalization presents new tasks for religious communities. New forms of public religion help people to find their place in a world full of uncertainties. But this role depends on whether religious communities understand themselves as a part of civil society or as enemies of existing society who endorse violent struggle against it. This question is both an essential issue for inter-religious dialogue and a central task in defending the rule of law.

3. It is of primary importance to maintain the distinction between religion and politics as a necessary precondition for peaceful coexistence in a religiously and culturally diverse world. This does not mean that religion and politics do not interact, but they have to deal with different aspects of human life. It is the secular character of the political order that makes religious freedom possible.

4. Religions can cooperate in order to promote peaceful coexistence and proscribe the use of violence as much as possible. This effort necessitates a self-critical evaluation of violent traits in the histories of the different religions, the elaboration of religion’s specific contributions to the future tasks of humankind, and working toward a consensus on basic ethical questions.
5. All religions have a great educational responsibility. They have opportunities to transform the Golden Rule into daily practice. They can strengthen the moral identity of their adherents so that these people develop respect for the dignity and integrity of their neighbors. In order to put an end to the spread of violence in societies, they have to plead for a politics that overcomes anomic situations and promotes justice.

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