

Cohodas Essay

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Religious Violence and the Associated Stereotypes

Looking at current events and our history, we can see that many genocides and acts of violence are towards religious groups, we also see that many extreme religious groups are the ones that cause these genocides and acts of violence. Religion, according to many anthropologists, can be described as the relation we have between humanity and the order of existence. For majority of people, the order of existence, does not entail violence. William James would describe religion as a personal experience that one has, and that religion is different for everyone. Religion is viewed in a positive way on a personal level, helping people in many ways, and giving them a sense of purpose. However, society views certain religions negatively, especially religions that differ from our own views. Majority of religions have stood on both sides of violence.

Many would immediately think of the oppression and violence associated with religious groups in the Middle East like the Sunni and Shia. This is a very common situation that many can see, specifically because you can physically tell when someone belongs to an Islamic religion. This stereotype is one of the most dangerous stereotypes there is. We are shown images of Muslims so often in a negative sense that we have now only put violent associations to this religious group. This has to do with our media in Westernized countries, our world-wide perspective, our own diverse or non-diverse communities, and our lack of knowledge on what is not familiar to us. Specifically, here in the United States, we view religion and define religion differently than other regions of the world. As a country that is majority Christian or Unaffiliated (Pew Research Center), and does not have a religious government our definition of religion is

very different than those in areas like the Middle East. Although Christianity and Islam are both universal religions, we tend to view Islam as a more ethnic religion, which is not the case. Even though some Muslims do identify ethnically with their religion. I believe, we view this strongly due to the fact that someone who believes in an Islamic religion can be determined immediately by their physical appearance, if wearing their traditional attire. Physical appearance is the key factor in stereotyping someone of any form, because it can be done on the spot, which also makes it the most dangerous type of stereotyping. People stereotype on many things including, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities, these stereotypes are the prime factor in genocides around the world. The oppression that happens to specific groups due to stereotypes can be seen before hand in many of the genocides, like the oppression of ethnic Jews in the Holocaust, the oppression of the native Tutsi people and then Hutu people in Rwanda, or the oppression of religious Muslims in Bosnia. These are all examples of oppression leading to massive deaths. Majority of these people being targeted by their physical appearance, this especially specific to the Holocaust, where some Jews tried to hide their Jewish heritage by changing their name or not wearing their Kippah, because they knew that those things would immediately categorize them. Those with other physical qualities that differed from the 'stereotypical' German were also targeted. This was a terrible attempt at ethnic cleansing that was based on stereotypes.

Many religions have stereotypes, both good and bad. Many negative stereotypes deriving from the various extreme groups that claim to be part of a specific religious or ethnic group. There are many political, economic, and social factors that play into these extremists however the stereotypes that appear on all Muslims and those from the Middle East is much more extreme than the stereotypes we see on other religions. Over the past few years, we have seen

governments around the world implementing discriminative laws from developing countries like Sri Lanka to Westernized societies like France. These stereotypes are much more extreme for Muslims than others, for example, within the Buddhist religion there are extremist groups that have acted out violence on others, however, many still view Buddhists as peaceful, in harmony with the world, and harmless. We don't view all Buddhists as 'terrorists' because a very small percent practice extreme values that are not found in that religion. Buddhism specifically is a religion that has a core belief in abstaining from suffering and causing harm to other living beings. Our stereotypical Buddhists isn't the Buddhist attacking Hindus in India or causing oppression in Sri Lanka. These things are very interesting because the issues that Buddhists and Hindus face is a mirror of the issues that Shia and Sunni Muslims face. Shia and Sunni have a lot in common, their biggest difference being who they recognize as their leader after Muhammad died. This is similar to Buddhism and Hinduism, both have many similar morals, pathways to enlightenment, and the belief in karma, their biggest difference being again who they view as priests and their disagreements on the caste system. Buddhism is much more of a personal practice, whereas Hinduism is more strongly focused on gathering with others. However, with so many similarities and violence happening between these different branches of religions, we view one as a 'terrorist' and one as a 'hippy'.

I believe that some of our misinterpretation of this stereotype comes from how we view these different parts of the world. We see the struggle between Sunni and Shia Muslims, along with the oppression of Kurds in Turkey. Specific ethnic and religious groups are being targeted in this region of the world every day. We can start to see this discrimination happening in our own Westernized societies currently, contrary to seeing Westernized discrimination towards Buddhists. In today's society, especially in our current political and social situations, we view

certain religions as a threat or danger. With our political activity going on in the Middle East it's easy to understand that our greater threat is an extreme group from the Middle East over an extreme Buddhist group out of Sri Lanka.

That still does not explain why these extreme religious groups are affiliated with specific religions when their actions do not match up with the texts or beliefs. In fact, many that are higher up in these extreme groups aren't even religious enthusiastic people. Specifically within the Syrian crisis, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which is a predominately Sunni affiliated group, does not have all radical Sunni leaders. In fact, if they were all radical Sunnis, ISIL would not be able to be as organized as it is today. The question that rises though, is why would a non-radical Sunni want to be a part of this extremist group like the ones that we see creating violence. William James would say that it is easier to follow those who are religious extremists, due to their enthusiasm, someone who is crazy, or a genius would not go all out on something if it were not true. Therefore, these radicals must be telling the truth, but you need to find the people that will follow these extremists and manipulators.

The psychological theory is based on the authoritarian personality, Bob Altemeyer says that typically those who have strong authoritarian personalities are very religious, however, their dominators are not religious at all. This is exactly what we see when people join these extremists groups, the leaders may not have a religious affiliation, or they identify weakly with a certain religion. Dominators, however are very good at manipulating their followers. Altemeyer explains how one with an authoritarian personality will, if manipulated, go out on a limb to believe their dominator (166). Soon after, a dominators followers are expressing the dominators proposed beliefs and the dominator doesn't need to 'lie' or 'pretend' any longer, as they have already established affiliation with a certain position or religion. This is what I believe is contributing to

the growth of extreme groups, the leaders themselves are not radicals, however their followers are. This leads to the confusion of these extremist groups being affiliated with certain religions. These dominators know what to say and how to say it, they grasp the attention of these authoritarians and fundamentalists and essentially insert fear to really hook them into following. Fear is a dangerous emotion, when someone may feel threatened they will do things that they would not usually do. An example of this would be the killing of thousands of people in America and Europe because it was feared that they were witches. The executors didn't hate these people, but they were scared of them and feared what may happen. This is an example where fear and emotions took over the rational brain. There are many other examples of people letting their emotional fear-stricken brain make decisions for them.

Many of those who were involved in the killings of millions during the Holocaust, were scared for their own life and that's why they killed others. There was extremists in the Nazi regime too, however, many of the people were scared and feared for their own lives. The fear of those people lead to millions of deaths. Hitler initially implemented the fear of what was going to happen to Germany's economy, which was in a crucial state. Fear is an emotion that authoritarians run off, causing Hitler to gain many followers, the fear over the years turned into not what is going to happen to Germany, but what is going to happen to yourself. This fear can be seen in other examples as well, such as with the Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist Power Force attacking Muslims, due to fear that they will take over primarily Buddhist and Hindu areas. This to some extreme Buddhist is justified, while other extreme Buddhist do not agree because it goes against their core beliefs.

Overall, there are a lot of factors that play into religious violence. Political parties, religious parties, and our perception of the world all play important roles in how we view a

specific group of people. There are tons of other factors, and our own personal self-awareness that contribute to these stereotypes and acts of violence. The truth being though that unless we can educate ourselves on the real issues behind extreme groups, wrongly affiliated members of religions, and the understanding of others beliefs and views, we will not be able to end all the violence and discrimination. Jarni Blakkarly said by not looking at the complexity to these situations “we take the cheap option of blaming religion instead of making the effort to understand”. This is true and ideally avoidable, if more were educated on how many pieces play a part in the discrimination, violence, and genocide people face every day all around the world.

Bibliography

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