Introduction: Religion, violence, and the West

This issue of *Ethical Perspectives*, although not thematic in itself, speaks quite clearly to current world events. Three of our articles generally focus on religion in contemporary society: one looks at the Islamic experience with modern popular sovereignty, one at contemporary religious violence, and the third poses the question: does religious violence lie at the base of society? A fourth article discusses the idea of deaf culture, a discussion which has unexpectedly become a political issue in England following a recently proposed bill, but which too takes up its own religious questions.

Somewhere Aristotle wrote that everyone acts for the good. Although this is easy to see as highly optative and quite unfashionable, when we seek to clarify people's actions, or even those of an entire society, we often tacitly take up this Aristotelian position. We do not simply approach scandals or travesties of justice or even genocides with the guiding idea that such acts are carried out simply to hurt people, nor do we only explain them away through appeals to nature red in tooth and claw; we also seek to find how those who carry them out seek somehow to profit from these, or even how they seek to do good, in some limited understanding of the term.

Thus it is with politically and religiously inspired violence – the 9/11 actors are no better explained by a simple desire to hurt the West than by mutual antagonism. Instead, this volience is more understandable when seen as a desire to serve a particular vision of the divine (which does not remove any ethical questions, such as means and justification). The same applies to the on-going controversies concerning insults to Islam, which emerged in the popular consciousness with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and which continued through the assassination of Theo Van Gogh, the riots and boycotts stemming from the Danish cartoons, and the impending reactions to Dutch MP Geert Wilders' promised film *Fitna*, which, delayed, remains unscreened at the time of writing.

Terrorism directed against the West is certainly a reaction. Of course, this is not to say that the West causes terrorism, but simply that it is perceived to act in such a way that particular and freely chosen acts of violence result. We in the West may find it difficult to speak of a monolithic body called the West, because we recognize too many traditions within it to see it as a unified whole. Nevertheless, what characterizes the West, after a long march of progress that is still not complete, even in Europe, is the idea of popular national sovereignty framed by liberal democracy. Aspects of this complex wording may be lacking in any given Western democracy (for instance, the UK, Belgium, and every other European kingdom technically lack a degree of popular sovereignty, whereas campaign financing, an "activist" judiciary, and the electoral college impinge upon the purity of American democracy), but the West is certainly approaching such an ideal asymptotically.

The Islamic lands recognize this liberal-democratic core of the West, and this gives their radicalized elements pause for concern. Although it is often said that the narcissism of minor differences spurs on the bloodiest conflicts, sometimes the perception of pure incommensurability is just as contentious. Thus, we fail to understand why civilian and philanthropic organizations such as the UN could be targets of violence alongside the obvious military, economic, and political targets of the countries and alliances currently waging war in Islamic countries. The answer probably lies in the deep discomfort Western liberality offers – we see in these reactions the death of the proposition that liberality is a universal value.

Thus, certain expressions of Islam chafe against the putative Western freedoms offered in our tradition. But there is an other side to this coin: we seem to be learning, as events in Europe have shown, that liberal democracy *itself* is not as open to all traditions as we might expect (various countries have national or local laws regulating the wearing of the hijab and burka, for instance). Into this atmosphere stepped Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams with his recent call for the inclusion of

Sharia family law within the British context. The question remains: if Sharia is basically non-liberal, does it make sense to formalize its use within the Western context? Does this run the risk of not only establishing a parallel legal system – even if only for limited aspects of the law – but also of creating a society in which all of its members are no longer equal? A common response to the archbishop's proposal is that no Islamic country would think to create a parallel legal system for its Christian citizens, so why should the UK? Interestingly enough, Williams could look to Steunebrink's article below in his own defense: the Ottoman Empire had precisely such a system, the millet system, whereby at a largely symbolic price, Christians and Jews could be exempt from Sharia and live under their own legal systems.

As Steuenbrink argues below, the introduction of modernity in Islamic lands brings forth the challenge of taking up constitutionally backed national sovereignty while at the same time remaining Islamic – for the popular sovereignty seemingly presupposed in national sovereignty could be the very undoing of the Islamic state. If the people are sovereign, they can decide on questions – even the very abolition of Islam – that are proper to the state authorities, which, in some cases, are indistinguishable from the clerical class. Steunebrink's masterful paper weaves this theme in and out of a long discussion on the reception of modernity outside of the West, and – without mentioning them helps – greatly to set William's comments in context.

Van Iersel looks at the reactions – he looks to the violence our recent encounters have evoked, and asks to what extent can appeals to God justify these. At first glance, van Iersel's paper seems to have an overwhelmingly theological focus. However, the ethical aspects of this question are impossible to entertain without such a focus, since the sort of violence he is discussing is found exclusively in a theological context. If we are to try to understand the radical alterity we confront in "divinely"-inspired violence, we can first but attend to discussions such as van Iersel's, for it so clearly delineates the ethical playing field we must navigate. Scholars

of the field will also appreciate his thorough bibliography, which itself is an excellent starting point for further research in this field.

But what about a society *founded* on religious violence? Van Coillie points us to *Antigone*, whose titular heroine was prevented from burying her dead brother who died a dishonourable death while attacking his city-state of Thebes. Van Coillie sees this as a story of religious violence – the scapegoat tradition in which religion requires a sacrificial victim for the good of the whole. Prefiguring Christ, the tragedy of Antigone is the founding act of a society, but a society founded on religious violence. This story is at the roots of our own Western culture – and the reader might well ask aloud what this deep and dark origin can contribute to our own comportment with the violence we see committed not only in other religious traditions, but also the hidden violence perhaps contained within ours.

So far this number of *Ethical Perspectives* has – more or less – revolved around the issue of the conflicts emerging from complete alterity, be it in constitutional questions, religious violence, or the foundation of whole societies. But what if people, born among us, refuse to adopt society's plans for their betterment? Are their actions not understandable as a rebellion against a sort of imperialism, and hence against a type of oppression? Broesterhuizen's paper below entertains this question, investigating the idea of a deaf society, a deaf culture, whose dignity is found precisely not only in stressing its own difference from the hearing, but also in rebuffing the hearing's attempts to "normalize" their community. Broesterhuizen's paper will make hearing people think of this community and "disability" differently, especially when they read that deaf parents may prefer deaf children. As such, this paper should be required reading in the UK, which faces the pending Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) bill. Among the many issues this bill introduces (aside from the whole issue of preimplantation genetic diagnosis and selection), we are here concerned with just one: the bill will prevent the positive selection of any embryo genetically indicated as deaf. Is it really rhetorical to ask if deaf

culture is being oppressed, or even being met with violence? Since deaf embryos in the UK are on the verge of being legislated out of preimplantation selection, then clearly – no, it is not rhetorical.

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