

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

Dear Friends

Well, looks like it's about time to get started on getting started on our spring term course

Re doing so, below please find a three part mailing:

- I) Class meeting procedures
- II) Intro to our subject matter
- III) week by week class topic(s) schedule, with suggested readings in Karen Armstrong's, FIELDS OF BLOOD, our suggested book

I'm looking forward to being with you all Tues morn next, and subsequent weeks

with best wishes to all

steve p

- I) Class meeting procedures

Six weeks, on zoom

Zoom invite links will come to you from our class host, Sue Kingsland. 2 hr classes, starting 9:30, but the meetings will open at 9:15, giving those of us who wish to do so some schmooze time, and also time to deal with any techie problems that may arise. And I will be glad to stay after 11:30 for more chat, should any so wish

We'll take short breaks about mid way through our two hour sessions.....

Class time will be divided, about 1/3 lecture and 2/3 discussion. I'd like to emphasize the importance to us of the discussion time. This is a main reason we do a class..... to share with each other

After each class meeting I will beam around a Last Week/Next Week(LW/NW)mailing in which I pick up on stuff which arose in the class meeting just completed and look down the road.

The latter will involve summary agendas for the next class meeting, as is done below for class meetings one and two

Experience with senior college courses teaches that we may want to be in touch with each other out of class. If you have anything - e.g., article, thoughts, scheduled events - that you expect will be of interest to class mates, email same to yours truly and as soon as I see it in the in box I will send it out all class..... and if there is anything that you would like to discuss with me, I will welcome that, we can do it by email or phone or zoom..... And being in touch with me may certainly include suggestions of stuff that you would like to be treated in class. Re adopting such suggestions, time will be our only constraint.

II) Intro to our subject matter

As Karen Armstrong notes at the start of her book, in our time it has come to be widely supposed - by some scholars, also non specialists - that religion causes violence. Is this so? How to go about looking into this? At the outset, and in step with Karen Armstrong..... no ifs, ands, or buts..... religion and violence definitely DO co-occur, do cohabitate, in many specific cultures and times and places. But, in any and all such cases, HOW - if at all - do the two functionally inter relate? Friends, I dare say this is Karen Armstrong's \$64 question..... and it is our \$64 question.

For openers, let's step back and look at the general thesis - religion causes violence.

By 'violence', Karen Armstrong means mainly collective physical violence, warfare. And so shall we (although, in our discussions, we may wish to range more widely, e.g., individual physical violence..... and what some call non physical violence, e.g., hurting the feelings of others by what is said to them..... some of which, as recent neurological studies have shown, lights up the pain center in the brain at least as brightly as does physically inflicted pain

Re religion..... there's a bunch of definitions of religion out there, we may wish to consult some of same, even coin some of our own. But I suggest that re the question, what is religion? we at least start out otherwise, in two different ways.....

A) When each of us thinks, reads, writes, speaks about religion..... just what have we got in mind? Let's share on this. I'm confident that, tho what we come up with may be conceptually messy, it will light the path that we will be walking together this term

B) Then I will share with you some of what mainly interests me when I'm into religion..... which is supernaturalism..... which, happy coincidence, looms large in Karen Armstrong's treatment of religion. More on this during our first class meeting.

And..... re the relationship between religion and violence. One thesis posits that it is a one way causal relationship. Is it? Our course description suggests that, no, arguably it is not..... That the relationship between the two is much more complexly interactive than that..... and that the real world interactions in which religion and violence are

implicated include stuff other than religion and violence. How to go about untangling this? Karen Armstrong's approach - and I'm on board 100% with this - is, we gotta get down and get dirty..... we gotta look in depth at specific social historical scenarios in which both religion and violence are at play. And she gives us fine case materials for this chore.

III) Weekly class topics schedule

FIRST CLASS MEETING Suggested reading.....Karen Armstrong, Introduction

Agenda

A round robin of brief self introductions including, for those who may feel so prompted, a word or two about what brings you to this course

Brief review of class meeting procedures

Class discussion. What do we understand by 'religion'?

Lecture. Religion has been a career long interest of mine, both teaching and research. What interests me most about religion? And, time permitting..... intro to collective

violence, warfare

SECOND CLASS MEETING . Suggested reading. Karen Armsrong, chs 1,2

Agenda

Lecture: Collective violence, warfare in human history

Class discussion..... suggested topics

A) Warfare is enacted by people. What motivates the enactment?

B) An outrageous proposition: Killing, violence are but very small parts of the enactment of warfare(and hunting). Huh? This is an empirical proposition. How sensibly to evaluate it

THIRD CLASS MEETING . Religion and warfare in history: the Hebrew dilemma and the Muslim Dilemma. Suggested reading : Karen Armstrong , chs 4,7

FOURTH CLASS MEETING. Religion causes warfare. Two oft cited examples in support of this: the Crusades, and modern Jihad. Suggested reading: Karen Armstrong, ch. 8

FIFTH CLASS MEETING. Modern terrorism and Jihad under the microscope. Suggested reading: Karen Armstrong, chs 12,13

SIXTH CLASS MEETING Social historical understanding of the relationship between religion and violence. Karen Armstrong, Afterword, Postscript

LAST WEEK/NEXT WEEK(1)

1) Summary of our discussion, re, what is religion?

A) An organized body of beliefs and social structure

B) Groups of people who allow someone to have a large impact on their thoughts and beliefs and conduct..... in effect, to exercise authority over them. (A little cross cultural perspective on this. This kind of thing is definitely present and big in much of American religion..... and the 'someone' may be the Priest or Rabbi or Minister of a local congregation or someone higher up in the national, or world, organization of the faith of which their congregation is a part.....e.g., for Roman Catholicism, the Pope. But in many of the religions of the world's cultures this kind of thing is unimportant or non-existent. Thus, in modern Thai Theravada Buddhism, a local expression of which I learned a lot about, there is just about none of this. And, for the most exalted religious specialists in the land, Buddhist monks, this kind of thing is conspicuous by its absence in their relationships to and with householders. To be sure, in Thailand religious specialists - both monks and lay - have importance in the thoughts and feelings and conducts of householders, but the influence expresses itself otherwise

C) Religion features belief in a higher power, from which believers derive purpose, understanding of why they(we)are here

D) Religion can be organized to foster violence

E) Important functional relation between a religion and the society of which it is a part.....religion provides a calendrical rhythm for living

F) Religion provides important explanations, makes sense of things, e. g., why we are here

Friends, all real good observations..... I clearly recognize each and all as important parts of how religion is understood in my career neck of the woods

2) Picking up on where the lecture left off.....

A) We noted that religion everywhere is a cultural institution, as such coordinate with other cultural institutions, e.g., family/kinship, subsistence, politics, education, recreation..... and we asked, what are some of the working features of religion as a cultural institution? And we noted the following.....

i) the nexus religion/religiousness/parochialization

ii) Religions are syncretic. Please see attached ms. for a case study illustration of syncretism in Thai Theravada Buddhism

(and, to continue)

iii) For any religion - e.g., those which present in the modern U.S. - for believers, for the faithful.....do all parts of their lives hold for them explicit religious significance? Or only some

parts? Some students of religion name the former religious monism, and the latter religious dualism. Of course, remembering that concepts are neat but the real world is messy..... this is not a one or the other matter., but a more or less matter. Thus, just in contemporary American Protestantism, religiousness in some of the so-called 'main line' faiths (e.g., Methodism, Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, United Church of Christ) tends to be dualistic, and in many Evangelical congregations tends to be more monistic

iv) Religions/religiousnesses..... they differ greatly one from another. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written, 'If one defines religion generally... as man's most fundamental orientation to reality (a frequently adopted definition of religion by students of religion) then one cannot at the same time assign to them a highly circumstantial content; for clearly what comprises the most fundamental orientation to reality among the transported Aztecs, lifting pulsing hearts live from the chests of human sacrifices toward the heavens, is not what comprises it among the stolid Zuni, dancing their great mass supplications to the benevolent gods of rain. The obsessive ritualism and unbuttoned polytheism of the Hindus express a rather different view of what the really real is really like from the uncompromising monotheism and austere legalism of Sunni Islam.' Or, maybe compare and contrast what you experienced the last time you attended services for worship in an American church or temple or synagogue with Balinese trance states in which they perform all sorts of spectacular activities - biting off the heads of living chickens, stabbing themselves with daggers, throwing themselves wildly about, speaking (in) tongues, performing miraculous feats of equilibration, mimicking sexual intercourse, eating feces.....and so on.....Balinese enter trance states rather more easily and much more suddenly than most of us fall

asleep. Trance states are a crucial part of every ceremony. In some, fifty or sixty people may fall one after another (into a trance state)...emerging anywhere from five minutes to several hours later, totally unaware of what they have been doing (but)... convinced that they have had the most extraordinary and deeply satisfying experience a person can have'

Indeed, religious diversity seems to be endless. How then, quickly, to make a useful start on getting an organized grasp of this vastly multiplex domain? In courses on the anthropology of religion which I have been offering for most of my career, I have found the attached paper by American sociologist Robert Bellah ('Religious Evolution') to be real helpful with this. In this paper, Bellah divides all human religions present and past into five general categories. Of course, with innumerable different religions presenting with endless diversity..... if we got only five categories, it goes without saying that each category will subsume as well as exclude a lot of diversity. But if you pay special attention to the criteria by which Bellah discriminates among his five categories..... I expect you will make some significant progress toward being able to explore usefully within the domain, human religions.

3) Next class meeting

suggested reading: KA, chs. 1,2

topics:

A quick review of the 200,000+ years history of our species

a) first 95%: only forager cultures, very little collective violence

b) then..... emergence of state societies, emergence of lotsa collective violence/warfare

c) religion in (a) and (b)

d) How large does violence/killing loom in warfare (and hunting)? Counter intuitive answer: looms small, not large

e) What enables the enactment of warfare/collective violence? Role of religion?