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DIVINE AUTHORITY AND MASS VIOLENCE: ECONOMIES OF AGGRESSION
IN THE EMERGENCE OF RELIGIONS

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Abstract: From a social science perspective, a major purpose of religion is to organize the behavior of the community of believers in order to maximize its success as a collective. The underlying premise of this lecture is that religious authority will sanction violence and aggression when they are assessed to be an effective means of realizing the goals of the collective. Conversely, when violence and aggression become unhelpful or counter-productive for realizing community goals they are forbidden. This phenomenology of religion and violence is applied to the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to demonstrate that none of these religions is inherently more or less apt to engage in violence. Their use of belligerent and irenic behaviors are more profoundly influenced by historical context and social needs than by theology.

Key words: Just war, holy war, jihad, violence and religion, reward and punishment, divine authority, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Qur'an, exegesis, Islam, Judaism, Christianity

If there is anything that we can call “Western culture,” especially as it is manifest in the US, it would include a tremendous emphasis on the importance of the individual. Here are some common slogans that turn up in the discourse that expresses this individualism: “think different,” “don’t blend in,” “do your own thing.” This emphasis on the individual sometimes clashes with corporate, or communal responsibility. And when I say corporate responsibility I am not referring to the responsibility of corporate business or companies to the environment or to ethical concerns, but rather, the responsibility of individuals to the larger corporate group, the community.

The question underlying this issue is the extent to which we feel responsible to the larger collective, the degree to which the individual feels responsibility to protect or provide for the larger group.

The way we in the US think about individuality today is different than it was in the past, and it isn’t the way that people necessarily construct their worlds in other parts of this planet. Prior to what we call the “modern period,” people used to think much more in corporate terms – and again, I don’t mean modern business corporations. But the analogy of a business corporation might be helpful in this case because, like modern business corporations, the corporate model was one in which people depended on the pooling of resources. In the pre-modern and non-Western world, the survival and success of the collective was paramount. In non-Western models also today, individuals have rights, but the benefit of the collective often tends to trump the rights of the individual.

And in pre-modern and non-Western corporate systems, religion tended to be a far more collective enterprise than the individual spiritual pursuit that we usually associate with religion here and now in the US.

In the West over the past three centuries or so, we have learned to individualize and internalize religion. Religion is an individual thing: “I believe whatever is in my heart.” I can “go shopping” for religion if I’d like. I don’t have to stay in the religious community of my parents. I will not stand for religious coercion. The government has no right to tell me where or how to worship, and not even that I have any *obligation* to worship. These are issues that are highly personal in the West.

Before we go much further, I should clarify that when I use the term, “West,” I am referring to a general way of “doing business,” a general way of organizing one’s understanding of the world. The “West” I’m referring to could exist in LA, Berlin or Bucharest, or in Tokyo, New Delhi, Bangkok or Nairobi.

Outside the geography of what we define very generally as the Western world today, there *are* others who have similar views to what I’m calling a Western view of religion – considering it critical that religion be separated from politics, for example, that religion is a private, personal issue, and so forth. But these kinds of people tend to be quite in the minority.

My point is that what we tend to consider normative with regard to religion may be normative only in our relatively small world of the USA, Europe and small enclaves elsewhere.

In our world – not necessarily the rest of the world – we have largely removed religion from politics. It was quite different, as you know, in medieval Europe – often referred to as the land of Christendom, or the Caliphate, the religious empire of Islam. And it is nothing like the views of many millions, even billions of people living today outside “the West.”

Those of us who have internalized religion, who have removed religion from politics, tend to view our private relationship with God and eternity as the essence of religion. But that really is not the essence of religion in most of human history and in much if not most of the world today. The purpose of religion, even in the West until only the last few moments of human history, was not about private spiritual fulfillment or one’s individual relationship with one’s maker. It was about organizing and administering human groups.

I should inform you that I tend to take a functionalist view of religion. I am convinced that there are functional reasons for the acts of religionists perceived as contributing to the good of the group, and often (but not always) of the individual.

My point is that for most of human history and for many if not most people today, religion is less about personal spiritual fulfillment than it is about organizing and protecting the aggregate, the collective, the community.

The ultimate goal of religion, traditionally, is therefore *not* peace, *per se*, but rather, something more akin to group survival. You might argue philosophically that survival requires peace. I would agree in terms of the “big picture” of humanity as a whole. But in terms of individual groups, one could argue that peace does not necessarily ensure survival. In some cases, in fact, survival may require war.

If the goal were truly peace for its own sake (that is, not for some more important goal), then perhaps religions would not compromise the survival of *individuals*. But peace for individuals might come at the expense of a much better life for the aggregate that could be achieved through war. And so, in the Hebrew Bible, for example, God commands Israel in Numbers 33 to conquer the Land of *Canaan* and kill or force out its Canaanite inhabitants so that the land would become the Land of *Israel* – the land of the Israelites. You can imagine that very many Israelites (not to mention Canaanites) would die in the process. That was acceptable, it would appear from the Hebrew Bible, as long as the goal of the collective was realized.

One general organizing principle of the Hebrew Bible is for God to manage or control human behavior in a way that is functional. Functionality includes organizing and channeling human aggression and violence. When organized, collective violence can be good for the

collective. Let's take a look at the general historical sweep of the Hebrew Bible (the "OT").

In the Hebrew Bible, God creates humanity as part of the great creation of the universe. But no sooner does God create the human species, then God experiences one disappointment after another. God first gives humans tremendous freedom in the utopian environment of the Garden of Eden, with only one or two seemingly trivial restrictions. Can you imagine this? Only one or two restrictions in a Garden of Eden! But Adam and Eve seem to fail. They are unable to handle even that much restraint. Their two sons, Cain and Abel, also fail in the horrendous (if not occasionally tempting) deed of fratricide. Their descendents in Noah's generation fail again in their acts of overwhelming violence. And the fourth and last example of humanity's collective failure is the Tower of Babel, through which humanity, in its arrogance, even tries to reach God by building a tower into heaven.

After these fiascos, the divine attention narrows to a single family – that of Abraham – which through the generations expands to a clan, then tribe, then nation. After human failure at the macro level, the God of the Hebrew Bible narrows the focus and no longer allows the new human experiment absolute human freedom to work things out as best they can. Religion in the Hebrew Bible then concentrates on organizing the behavior of Abraham and Sarah's offspring in the House of Israel through what we often mistakenly call "law," but what is really traditional custom: customary behaviors that are social, moral-ethical and ritual.

Now one could argue, "But isn't this peace?" I think it is, in a way, because when the human collective is organized and functions properly there is a minimum of *internal* violence, of violence directed to members within the group. But the group is limited, never truly universal. It is always a distinct group within the larger aggregate of humanity, and these humanizing laws and expectations are limited and apply – mostly but not entirely – to members of that group. There is always plenty of aggression, violence and war directed *outward* in traditional religious systems, biblical and otherwise.

God *commands* mass violence, usually directed outward, but occasionally also directed inward. Those who are familiar with the Hebrew Bible can come up with plenty of examples of biblical mass violence directed outward: against all the various Canaanite nations (in Deut. 7, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, etc.), the Philistines, the Egyptians at the Red Sea and so forth.

But there are also cases where Israel is commanded to destroy its own communities when they are engaged in ritually or behaviorally unacceptable actions. One classic case occurs in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 13, where an entire Israelite town must be destroyed for worshipping foreign gods and adopting the social system that accompanies the practice. There are other cases as well, such as nearly the

entire tribe of Benjamin that was destroyed by the rest of the tribes of Israel for extraordinarily evil behavior (Judges 19-20).

These are cases of religion functioning as a means of organizing human behavior and controlling human passions that are beyond the acceptable for maintaining the community. A goal of religion is therefore the realization of social community harmony. This includes organizing humans in a way that will minimize unacceptable behaviors. But mass violence is certainly one among a number of acceptable tactics that are employed even within the group for that purpose.

Of course it is true that there exist biblical passages that express longing for a world where strife will end. But we read these texts as Westerners, and our Western orientation causes us naturally to read some things into the texts that may not be there contextually. If you were to take a look at the Hebrew of the prophet Micah, chapter 4, for example – which finds a nearly exact parallel in Isaiah chapter 2 – you would note that the “peace” described there is equivalent to the *pax romana*, a peace of totalitarianism that is achieved through force of arms in the name of the God of Israel.

<p>Micah 4 'In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy. ²And the many nations shall go and say, 'Come let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ³Thus He will judge among the many peoples and rebuke the most powerful nations, however distant. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. They shall never again know war. ⁴But everyone shall sit under their grapevine or fig tree and with no one to terrify them, for it was the Lord of Armies who spoke. ⁵Though each individual among all the peoples walks in the names of his own gods, we will walk in the name of our God forever and ever.</p>	<p>מיכה ד (א) וְהָיָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יִהְיֶה הַר בְּיַם יְקֹנָק וְכוּן בְּרֵאשִׁי הַהָרִים וְנִשְׂאָה הִיא מִגְבְּעוֹת וְנִהְרֹוּ צְלִיזֵי עַמִּים (ב) וְקָלַט גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לָכֵן וְנַעֲלֶה אֵל הַר יְקֹנָק וְאֵל בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִדְרְנוּ מִדְּרָבָי וְנִלְכֶה בְּאַחֲרֵיתָי כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדָבַר יְקֹנָק מִיִּירוּשָׁלַם (ג) וְשִׁפְטוּ בֵּין עַמִּים רַבִּים וְהוֹכִיחַ לְגוֹיִם עֲצֻמִּים עַד רִחוּק וְנִכְמְתוּ חַרְבֵימֵיהֶם לְאַתִּים וְסִנִּיתֵיהֶם לְמִזְרָזֹת לֹא יִשְׂאָה גוֹי אֶל גוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּן עוֹד מִלְחָמָה (ד) וְיָשְׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תְּאֵנָתוֹ וְאִין מִסְרִיד כִּי פִי יְקֹנָק צְבָאוֹת דָּבַר (ה) כִּי כָל הָעַמִּים יֵלְכוּ אִישׁ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵי וְהָנְהוּ וְלָךְ בְּשֵׁם יְקֹנָק אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד</p>
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It is the Israelite “God of Armies” – which is the actual meaning of the euphemistic “Lord of Hosts” who establishes the peace. In the prophecy (which is really more of a dream or an aspiration, really), all the peoples in the world will accept the God of Jacob – that is, the *Israelite* God – who will instruct the world.

There are two terms here and elsewhere in the HB that are used for “peoples” or “nations” (*amim* and *goyim*). And these terms are distinct from the Hebrew term for tribe. But they really refer to larger kinship groups that are extended tribal communities. In the ancient Near East, tribal groups had their own tribal gods, so the image conveyed here is that all the nation-tribes and their gods will serve the God of the extended tribal nation of Israel.

The term, “judgment” (Hebrew *mishpat*) is an attribute of harsh judgment, not mercy, in the Hebrew Bible, so when God will “judge among the many peoples,” it is not a pretty thing. If you are uncertain whether or not to accept this translation, then look at the Hebrew parallel that is used to strengthen the idiom “and rebuke the most powerful national-tribes.” Then “*they* shall beat *their* swords into plowshares and *their* spears into pruning hooks.” (I don’t see that it includes the people of Israel in this equation). The result? “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. They shall never again know war.” The consequence will be that “everyone shall sit under their grapevine or fig tree and with no one to terrify them...” This, I think, *does* include Israel. True, all will benefit, but that is (and I quote) “...because it was the Israelite Lord of Armies who spoke.”

Not very pluralistic, I think you would probably agree. Now this is where the Isaiah 2 passage, paralleling our Micah passage, ends. But in a fascinating addendum, Micah adds the truly pluralistic verse 5: “Though each individual among all the peoples walks in the names of his own gods, we will walk in the name of our God [whose name Jews will not attempt to articulate] for ever and ever.”

What are we to make of this? It seems that this last verse is an answer to the *pax Israel* of the earlier section, which had perhaps become idiomatic by this time, chiseled into the hearts of Israel in the oral poetry of the prophetic utterance. Micah 4:5 was perhaps a way to extend the benefit of a truly pluralistic peace to all nations, for remember that in the ancient world, every nation or people had its own set of gods. An individual’s ethnicity was determined not only by language and culture, but also by religion.

My reading of the Hebrew Bible and the religion it represents might seem to be critical and harsh to you. But be patient because I am just as critical of the other scriptures I will be examining this evening. Let me take a moment now to digress. I am a religious person, a practicing religious Jew to be more exact, and a trained rabbi as well as an academic. It is impossible for me to articulate the depth of my love for my religion and for the Hebrew Bible. I see in the Hebrew Bible extraordinary wisdom and calm as well as anger and violence. God in the Hebrew Bible is the God of mercy as well as God of judgment. But while I revere the Bible and hold it in awe, I try as best I can to read it in a critical as well as traditional manner. And I insist on applying the same methodology to my own scripture as to the scripture of the “other.” It has been my experience that

reading the scriptures and religions of others has helped me deepen my understanding of my own scripture and religion, and it has helped me to become more mature in my faith and understanding. I cannot accept religion simply as it tries to describe itself. I am compelled to look deeper. But this process does not make me discard religion. It actually deepens my own awe and devotion, though not without raising questions.

My point in this little digression is to try to articulate my understanding that religion is much more complicated than we might realize, and that we always need to examine our own faith critically and with the same methodologies that we use to examine the faiths of others. One of our great sins is our tendency to subject the religion and ideas of the "other" to a far harsher critique than we are willing to subject our own religion and ideas.

And now back to topic. There is great aspiration in the Hebrew Bible to a time to come when God will "grant peace in the Land" (Lev. 26:6) – but take note that the reference is to the land that is under the control of Israel and its God – not all lands. And if you read the following verses, you will note that peace in the land means the destruction of Israel's enemies by the sword *outside* of the land. The Bible tends more often to reflect particularist views rather than universalist views. As we've seen from the famous Isaiah and Micah verses, we sometimes universalize them in our modernist readings.

So you might ask why there is nevertheless such a common aspiration in the Hebrew Bible for a time on this earth when life will be really, really good. Why does it not simply emphasize what we tend to believe in the West today: that even if we live among sinners or even if we suffer in this life, as long as we maintain a life that is acceptable to God we will enter heaven, where life will be good in the world to come? Why all the biblical emphasis on Israel receiving collective punishment for the sins of a few? The answer, surprisingly enough, is because in the Hebrew Bible, there is no concept of reward and punishment in heaven and hell.

There is something that we translate as "heaven," – that being the Hebrew word, שמים, but שמים really means sky. There is indeed a place where people end up after this life. Its direction is downward, but it is not hell. It is called Sheol. *Everyone* goes to Sheol – certainly the wicked such as those in the rebellion of Korach against the leadership of Moses. They were swallowed up by the earth at God's command and ended up in Sheol. But also the righteous such as the patriarch, Jacob, or the priest and prophet, Samuel – righteous biblical personages who clearly and explicitly end up in Sheol.

The concept of heaven and hell is actually "post biblical," which doesn't mean that the notion did not exist *somewhere* during the period of the Hebrew Bible. It only means that the Hebrew Bible does not express consciousness of the idea. Because our notion of heaven and hell cannot

be found in the Hebrew Bible, no one among ancient Israel could aspire to a personal salvation in heaven. Salvation or redemption was a *communal* sentiment, not for the individual but for the community. And salvation or redemption was reserved for a future time, and here on earth – not in a separate un-earthly world to come.

By the end of the Second Temple period, in the period that scholars call Late Antiquity, the notion of heaven and hell had penetrated the lands of the Bible. By the time of Jesus, the concept was well known. But not everybody believed in it. Among the Jews of the Second Temple period, the Sadducees, for example, did not accept the notion of heaven and hell. The Jewish Pharisees, who included Paul and probably Jesus, did believe in the “world to come.” And with this we make a transition from the Hebrew Bible to the Christian scriptures of the New Testament.

Why don't I use the term, “Old Testament” when referring to the Hebrew Bible? Jews traditionally use neither “Old Testament” *nor* Hebrew Bible, but rather *Miqra* or *Tanakh*. *Miqra* simply means “that which is recited,” in reference to the recitation or reading of the Bible as a basic part of Jewish religious ritual activity. The more common Jewish word, תנ"ך is an acronym for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: *ta* – Torah, *na* – *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *kh* – *ketuvim* (Writings). The name, “Hebrew Bible,” is an English way to avoid “Old Testament.”

So why should Jews wish to avoid such a term? Because “Old Testament” is a theological declaration that Jews do not accept. The “Old Testament” is another way of saying the “Old Covenant,” the outmoded and out-of-date system that has been rejected by God for the “new and improved Testament” of Christian religion. As Paul said in Hebrews 8:13, “By speaking of a new covenant, he has pronounced the first one old; and anything that is growing old and aging will shortly disappear.”

Because Jews by definition do not reject their own scripture, they do not feel comfortable using the term, “Old Testament.” So we use “Hebrew Bible,” and increasingly, pluralistic Christians as well as academics are using the same designation. I recommend it.

There really is no precise and universal terminology for the New Testament. If we say Christian Scripture, then we might mean both the HB and the NT, or only the NT. In fact, Christians generally do not read the contextual meaning of the HB. They tend to read the Hebrew Bible through the interpretive lenses of the NT.

What I mean is that Christians construct meaning from the OT – I'm going to use OT rather than HB at this moment because I'm speaking in traditional Christian terms. What I mean is that Christians construct meaning from the OT by reading it through the lenses of the NT. If the OT obviously teaches something that seems to contradict the NT, then it is usually ignored or considered out of date in Christian readings – no longer in force, or simply abrogated. For a very and relevant example, Matthew

overrules the Hebrew Biblical teaching of an eye for an eye (as the Gospel of Matthew reads it – I’m not so sure that the way it is read in Matthew reflects its contextual meaning in Ex. 21:24. [parallel to Lev. 24:20]. Matthew overrules the Hebrew Biblical teaching of an eye for an eye and teaches something quite different: turning the other cheek. The same applies to much of the war material in the Hebrew Bible. The war material of the Hebrew Bible is flat and outright rejected in the New Testament.

I have no problem with that. In fact, I like it. But I think we need to take a look at why it was rejected. I believe it was rejected by the early Christians (most of whom were Jews, by the way, for at least the first generations) – I believe that the war material of the OT was rejected by the early Christians for a very simple reason. It didn’t work.

The various sections of the New Testament were written, or were committed to writing from their original oral forms, during a period of history that was marked by two major Jewish uprisings against the Roman Empire, both of which were brutally crushed by Rome. You might consider fighting against Rome to be a no-brainer – really dumb. But remember that we have the glorious advantage of historical hindsight. The first Jewish military uprising against the Roman Empire began in about 66 and is called the Great Revolt in Jewish history books (I doubt whether the Romans called it that). But it took the Empire some four or five years to put down the insurgency. In order to do so, the Romans destroyed the beloved Jerusalem Temple and killed many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Jews, both fighters and non-combatants.

The second revolt began in about 133 and is called the Bar Kokhba rebellion. Some Jews who did not accept the messiahship of Jesus tried a different messiah, a military messiah like King David whose name was Bar Kosiba. He was called Bar Kokhba = “Star Man” by his publicist, a man no less in stature than the great Rabbi Akiba, who believed that God would continue to fight the battles of Israel and destroy Israel’s Roman enemy just as God destroyed the Egyptian Pharaoh, King Nebukhanezzar of Babylon, and the evil Greek King Antiochus. But Akiva was wrong about Rome. And as a result, it was the Jewish people that was nearly destroyed. The Jewish insurgents under the command of Bar Kokhba took Jerusalem and held it from the Roman legions for some time before being totally and brutally crushed about three years later. The Roman devastation was so great that Judea was essentially emptied of its Jewish inhabitants. The survivors limped to the Galilee where they attempted to regroup and survive.

It seems that most of the Jews who believed in the messiahship of Jesus refrained from engaging in these rebellions against Rome, though they had as much reason as the other Jews to hate the empire. They observed their brethren slaughtered and experienced no slight amount of murder and execution in the Roman *stadia* and arenas themselves. Those who followed Jesus were either smarter than their fellow-Jews, luckier, or

more likely, more successful as a cohesive community to withstand the temptation to get even with those Romans rulers whom they all considered to be crude, evil and ungodly.

But Christian scripture was not written down and canonized until after these failed rebellions. With the odds so overwhelmingly against them, it should be no surprise that Christian scripture would not emphasize war.

This is not to suggest that there are not extremely violent emotions visible in the NT. Indeed, Matthew 10//Luke 12, Matthew 23 and John 8 express extreme violence, as does the Book of Revelation and other texts. But they do not call for war. That would have been suicidal. In fact, it is likely that Christian anger against Rome was so risky that it tended to be released, not against the more threatening totalitarian power of Rome, but against the far less dangerous Jews who would not accept the messianic and then, the divine status of Jesus.

My point is simple. The Hebrew Bible tends to express violent emotions in terms of war because it *could*. The Hebrew Bible emerged in a tribal world, which was a mostly even playing field of tribal religions in competition with one another. The God of Israel could authorize war because war was one of many options in the political repertoire of a people in the ancient world that was attempting to carve out a space for survival – a “safe haven” – in a specific territorial area.

The God of the Hebrew Bible was unconcerned about the religious views or practices of other peoples – as long as they didn’t threaten the religious practices of Israel to worship its God without interference. And because there was no notion of a heavenly afterlife where one could realize the grace of God individually in another world, all the cards had to be played in a this-worldly arena.

The Christian NT, on the other hand, emerged in a world that was dominated by the great empire and military might of Rome. It would have been suicidal to suggest that the violent reaction to Roman persecution could be expressed through martial activities. So mass violence in the NT tends to be expressed in apocalyptic terms – in terms of fantasy. And those Jews who believed that Jesus was Christ observed their brethren slaughtered by Rome when they attempted to rebel. Should it be surprising that Christian scripture would de-emphasize talk of mass-violence?

Before moving onto Islamic scripture, I need to call attention to one important monotheistic religion and its scripture that is usually overlooked. That religion is Rabbinic Judaism, and its scripture is the Talmud, also called the “Oral Torah,” to be distinguished by Jews from the “Written Torah” of the Hebrew Bible. According to Jewish tradition, God gave two Torahs at Mt. Sinai: the Written Torah text that Jews call the Chumash or Pentateuch – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible – and a

complex tradition given orally to Moses when he was alone with God on the mountain for forty days and nights. That oral tradition was passed to Joshua, then to the biblical Judges, then onward to the elders and sages and finally, the rabbis. This tradition is what Jews call the Oral Torah or Talmud.

Although this is still a surprise to some, the religion of Israel continued to evolve with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. At about the same time that a new revelation was emerging according to Christians in the person of Jesus Christ, another revelation was emerging according to Jews who did not accept the messiahship and divinity of Jesus. Just as Christianity is not the same religion as that of Biblical Israel, so too is Rabbinic Judaism – the Judaism of the rabbis – not the same as the religion of Biblical Israel. Here is a very short list of differences: different worship (no more sacrifices, different liturgy), different theologies, different behavioral expectations, different expectation of the Endtime. And of course, although unadvertised, an expanded scripture. Such differences are the stuff that make for a different religion.

The reason that this has not attracted more attention than it does is that the Jews never intended to make a break with the ancient religious system as did those who accepted the saving power of Jesus as Christ-messiah. For the new Christians, breaking away from the establishment religions was critical. For the Jews, it was continuity that was critical, so the scriptural nature of the Talmud emerged gradually and only became a doctrinal expectation for most Jews in the 8th century (at about the time of Charlemagne). But the Talmud functions similarly to the New Testament as a hermeneutic – meaning a mode of interpretation through which the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is read. That is to say, like the Christian New Testament, the Jewish Talmud serves as a lens through which to read earlier Scripture.

Even among the Protestant Christian denominations, which claim to go directly to scripture without the interference of the Magisterium of the Church or its Apostolic tradition, the Old Testament cannot be read without looking at it through the lens of the New. So too, in Jewish tradition among all but a tiny group known as the Kara'ites, the Hebrew Bible is read through the eyes of the Talmud. The Talmud is a kind of Jewish scripture.

In fact, there *is* no more biblical religion outside the text of the Hebrew Bible. Nobody practices it. And here is an observation that may surprise some even more than anything I've said so far this evening. The Oral Torah, meaning the unannounced new scripture of Rabbinic Judaism, like the Christian New Testament, also effectively abrogates the militant war-verses of the Hebrew Bible.

Through two hermeneutical instruments that were applied to the familiar war-verses of the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud manages to exclude war from the active political repertoire of post-biblical Judaism. Divinely

commanded war from the Hebrew Bible had simply become too dangerous for the rabbis of the Talmud, who, like their Christian brethren and competitors, barely survived Rome. They couldn't erase divinely commanded war, because it is in holy scripture. They couldn't decide like Christians that the "Old Testament" is no longer in force except as it supports the ideas of the New Testament, because the rabbis took the position that their form of monotheism is the one that is most true to the Hebrew Bible.

So they treated the topic hermeneutically. Through certain interpretive procedures, they managed to place "holy war" on the back-shelf of the library of Jewish political options. They couldn't abrogate holy war, but they could make it virtually impossible to engage. Divinely authorized war had simply become too self-destructive to be used, so it was effectively eliminated. Divinely sanctioned war always remained a *theoretical* option for Jews, but it remained only theoretical throughout Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Early Modern period, until the last half of the 20th Century, when it was revived among some Jews in the establishment of the State of Israel and the wars that accompanied it.

This is not to suggest that there isn't plenty of aggression in the Talmud, plenty of anger and plenty of violent feelings. But engaging in war was not an option.

Like the new scripture of Christianity, the new scripture of Rabbinic Judaism reflects its historical context in the period of Rome's greatest might. It should be no great surprise that divine authority for mass violence, although available to justify holy war from the Hebrew Bible, is not called upon to do so in either the New Testament or the Talmud.

Thus far we have treated three scriptures: the Hebrew Bible/OT, the New Testament, and the Talmud. The earliest emerged in a historical context in which divinely authorized warring was a normal activity. *All* the gods did it. It was considered part of the life of the ancient world, and all the religious systems of that world, whose primary purpose was to organize human behavior on behalf of the collective, considered war acceptable and even commendable at times. But the offspring of the HB emerged in a historical environment in which it had become self-destructive to engage in war, so the NT and Talmud strongly discouraged it.

But let me stress that if divinely authorized mass violence would have been considered advantageous to the communities of believers in early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, you can bet that their leaders would have learned that God had desired it. You can see in history how, when circumstances changed and Rome not only stopped persecuting the Church but *became* the Church, Augustine authorized the notion of "just war" to sanction mass-violence against the enemies of the Christian Byzantine Empire. He was confronted with the problem that the NT did

not sanction such a war for Christians, so a new hermeneutic had to be developed.

And bishops, patriarchs and popes were quite willing to send out Christian warriors to conquer and kill both infidels and Christians under the sign of the cross on behalf of the Church. Note also that certain rabbis in Israel today have a similar motivation when they encourage their students to fight on behalf of God and Israel for the conquest of the full biblical Promised Land.

Now we are about to move into the world of Islam and the historical context out of which emerged the Qur'an, the scripture of Islam. I have articulated my view that historical circumstances determine the position of Scripture on divine authority and mass violence. The Hebrew Bible sanctioned and even encouraged divinely authorized war because that was the way of the world in ancient Western Asia and because it worked. When it stopped working, new scriptures emerged to teach a different message. But it was always possible to make an "end run" around the new scriptures in order to find justification for holy war in earlier revelation.

Here is an important rule: once mass violence was authorized by the divinity and established in scripture, it would always remain a wild-card, because scripture can never, ever be erased or eliminated. It can be "managed" through interpretation, but nothing that is scripture can ever disappear. It can never be eliminated or long forgotten.

The religious civilization of Islam emerged in Arabia in the seventh century. Seventh century Arabia was different from virtually every other sector of Western Asia in that it had never been conquered by any empire. It had never experienced any universal government. No *pax romana* ever prevailed in Arabia. Neither the Egyptians, the Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, Persians or even Ethiopians, who made a number of attempts, ever unified the Arabian Peninsula. There had never been any kind of universal rule of law, no legal system that was enforced by any government army or police force.

With no other alternative, the inhabitants of the peninsula retained a highly traditional tribal organization for sustenance and protection. Arabian society was based on kinship relations. One was protected by one's tribe and owed everything to the tribe. Outside of a tribal relationship and away from tribal lands, one had no rights and no protection. Without the economic, social and military support of the tribe, the individual could not survive in the harsh desert environment. The individual existed only as a member of a larger social organization organized by kinship.

Tribes competed with one another for scarce resources, including sources of water, grazing, access to trade routes, and so forth. Tribes

fought one another for the only material items of real value: the moveable goods of flocks and herds.

But no tribe ever became powerful and large enough to control the peninsula, or even very much of it. This was probably due to the difficult environment, which could only support a relatively small number of people per square mile. Once a tribe was large enough to become truly powerful, its kinship ties would weaken as it became thinly spread over a wide area. It would then splinter into smaller, less powerful groups. On the other hand, weakened, smaller tribal units could become absorbed by other, more powerful tribes. There was therefore a constant rhythm of tribal expansion, fragmentation and absorption.

Islam and Islamic revelation emerged out of this environment, which was more akin to the context of the Hebrew Bible than it was to that of Roman Late Antiquity. Various tribal groupings, often with some distinct association with their own gods, constantly competed with one another over scarce resources. This was an environment of eternal war, even when tribes were not skirmishing. Kinship groups were, by definition, in a warring relationship with one another, and vengeance was a part of tribal responsibility, all of which extended the war environment over many generations and therefore, indefinitely.

You might ask how such a society could survive, because especially with laws of vengeance, wouldn't they all kill one other until there were no survivors? The answer to this is that a *condition* of war does not mean that people always engaged in actual combat. Take a look at the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. There was never any direct military engagement between them (though they did manage to manipulate proxies to kill one another in other battle arenas).

Because of the large geographic area and relatively small population in pre-Islamic Arabia, what we would consider actual warfare was not all that common, and the *type* of warfare was not overwhelmingly destructive. They were mostly skirmishes. There were no weapons of mass destruction. And the particular rules of engagement in pre-Islamic Arabia also prevented major destruction of population. Certain months of the year were "time-out" periods during which any kind of combat was absolutely forbidden, even including individual duels. Certain locations were always sacred and could not be violated with bloodshed. Killing the enemy was far less important than obtaining the moveable goods of the enemy, because killing invited blood-revenge which tended to destabilize the already precariously balanced tribal politics.

And just as in the environment of emerging Biblical Religion, tribal warfare existed on a basically even playing field in which tribes fought one another as part of the process of maintaining the collective. Here again is an environment similar to that out of which the Hebrew Bible emerged. Granted, the Hebrew Bible emerged out of a largely agricultural economic context while the Qur'an emerged out of a largely pastoral one, but there

were plenty of pastoral nomads within the borders of ancient Israel, and there were plenty of farmers in the oases of ancient Arabia.

Given this cultural and historical environment, would one expect the God of the Qur'an to offer the other cheek rather than the sword? I should think that one would not expect this. In fact, however, a number of Qur'an verses seem to indicate such an approach, if not pacifist, then at least quietist in the face of aggression directed against the early Muslim community.

The early Muslims, like the members of all new emerging religious movements (including Christians and Jews when they emerged as new religions) were rejected and scorned by the establishment religions, whether local indigenous polytheists, or Jews and Christians who were living in Arabia. The People of the Book in the Qur'an are Jews and Christians, members of scriptural religions. They tried to prevent the success of early Islam. The Qur'an itself cautions Muhammad in Q.2:109, "Many of the People of Book would love to turn you back from your belief to unbelief because of their envy when the truth has been revealed to them. But be forgiving and pardon until God gives His command, for God is able to do all things." The new believers are taught in this verse *not* to fight back. Rather, they should bear the insult and wheedling in peace and be forgiving.

And in Q.5:48, God calls on the followers of Muhammad to struggle with their enemies, but in doing good works rather than through military engagement. "If God had wished, He would have made you all one religious nation (*umma wahida*), but [God chose not to do that in order] to try you by what He has given you. So vie with one another in doing good works! Unto God you must all return, and He will then inform you of how you differ."

Other verses call for fighting, but only in self-defense. Q.22:39-40, for example, calls for such action, and not only for the protection of the new Muslim community, but for the protection of Christian and Jewish places of worship as well! These texts are the real thing. I didn't make them up. There are many more like them. I wrote a book about them, and I was able to fill up many pages about the wide range of qur'anic views on war.

My point here is simply to help the non-Muslims in this audience to appreciate that the Qur'an, like the Hebrew Bible and New Testament and Talmud, is a complex and multivalent scripture. It cannot be reduced to simple and reductive conclusions, as too many fearful Westerners have tried to do. Some Muslims have attempted the same kind of reductionism out of their own ignorance and lack of appreciation of the extraordinary depth and meanings of qur'anic revelation.

I am not suggesting that there is not also aggressive material about fighting and war in the Qur'an, and like the Hebrew Bible, a lot of it. The Qur'an contains a good deal of anger and aggression, and like the Hebrew Bible and NT, some of it is directed inward to Muslim backsliders called

munafiqun, usually translated as “hypocrites,” who join Muhammad but not out of true fear of God. Like the HB and NT, however, most of the Qur’anic aggression is directed outward. The great success of Islam as a new Arabian religious and social system rested on its ability to unify an extremely fractious multi-tribal system. It did so by creating a “super-tribe,” called the *umma* in Arabic. And all the Arabian cultural emphasis on manliness and fighting was contained by directing it outward.

And it was successful. It was more than merely a functional system. It became an extremely flourishing system spiritually, intellectually, culturally, artistically, and scientifically. Keep in mind that the Qur’an emerged in a context of struggle, like the other three scriptures that we have examined today.

Until now I’ve compared Islam more to the Hebrew Bible than to Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, because Islam emerged in a historical context that finds more parallels with that of the Hebrew Bible. But times change, of course, and successful religion adapts to historical change.

After the birth-periods of all four scriptural systems we are examining today, we find that the parallels shift. Biblical religion and Rabbinic Judaism never become religions of real empire. But Islam and Christianity do. Islam becomes the imperial religion of the great Islamic Caliphates. Christianity becomes the imperial religion of the Byzantine Empire and then Christian Europe.

Because of its particular historical contextual origins, Christianity had a difficult time justifying war in religious terms when in control of imperial armies. But it nevertheless managed to produce a theory of “just war” and a rationale for “holy war.” Islam engaged in a similar process, but it was easier because there are more war-texts to work with in Islamic scripture than in the New Testament.

And like Christianity, the most influential and important legal material of the tradition was codified during a period of imperial power. Islam, therefore, like Christianity, became largely an imperial religion, and its universalism tends toward totalitarianism. But unlike classical Christianity, hell was not the only possibility in Islam for not being a true believer.

And so we see in verse Q.2:62 that righteous Muslims (that is, “those who believe”) have no greater reward than righteous Jews and Christians and Sabaeans: “...they [all] have their reward with their Lord, they shall not fear nor should they grieve.”

And this is why non-Muslims often find a huge disconnect between what we observe seems to be Islam today and what many Muslims’ say when they claim that the Muslim perpetrators of violence against non-Muslims or fellow-Muslims are not following “true” Islam. The disconnect stems, in part, from the difference between emerging Islam and imperial Islam. Emerging Islam required fighting for survival, but it did not require the political domination of others. But when Islam became the religion of

empire, religion became one of the tools used to justify the authority of the caliphs and the imperialist control of other peoples.

But even the most totalitarian Islamist regime cannot erase the irenic or peaceful texts of the Qur'an.

I began my remarks today by suggesting that religion, for most of history and most of the world even today, is less a personal spiritual endeavor than a system that organizes the collective. And I also claimed that religion, like all social systems, is functional, and its function is to both organize and protect the aggregate, the collective, the community. Not all religions succeeded in this, and so they were either destroyed, became obsolete and disappeared, or morphed into forms that could organize and protect the collective.

Truly successful religions were able to do the latter. They morph. But morphing of huge religious-social systems takes a long time. It took many generations before Biblical religion morphed into Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism and other forms that did not survive. It took many generations for Christianity to morph into forms that re-organized Christian thinking and social systems to accommodate and encourage the emergence of the modern Western world. And it is now taking Islam generations to morph into forms that will accommodate and encourage a successful response to the modern and post-modern worlds.

The act of morphing seems to have always included violence. Think of the transition from Biblical religion to Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: revolts, cruel repression, gladiators and crucifixions. And millions of Europeans killed each other (and Jews too, of course) in the wars accompanying the Christian protestant movements. Now, too, we are experiencing extreme violence and bloodshed among and between Muslims much more than directly against the West. We will only know how the morphing turned out in some future time – beyond the length of my own days, I'm sure.

The good news is that scripture, all scripture, includes texts that demand peaceful as well as violent relations with the "other," because scripture can never be erased or eliminated. It can only be *managed* through interpretation.

Religion never withdrew from national politics. In the West and under communism outside the West it only retreated. In most of the rest of the world it didn't even do that. Now religion seems to be making a political comeback in Western Asia, in South Asia, the Far East and in the USA. For those of you who consider yourselves religious, spiritual individuals, I urge you to make sure you know your scriptural verses that support a peaceful resolution to conflict.

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