

## TERRORISM, RELIGION AND LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*C.S. Lewis said " ... you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad. "A light hearted manner of indicating just how indispensable change is, for progress and that the lack of it could lead to stagnation or regression. Societies around the world, their governing systems, systems of trade and commerce, civic bodies, their setup and working are all open to gradual change and review, for their proper and sustained functioning. But all these societies have had unique legacies from their past that is their culture, that they hold on to and try to shield from change, in order to retain their identity in a world becoming increasingly similar due to the phenomenon of globalization and neocolonialism. Religion is the social institution which is probably the most fiercely guarded from all external influences or rather impurities. Despite all the efforts to keep them pure and pristine, are religions really healthy or are they decaying, cut off as they are from any vital supply from outside. The incessant growth of fundamentalism in the world, would suggest that the religions or their modes of practice have gone wrong somewhere. In otherifying and segregating others, have they managed to separate themselves from the essence of their own tenets and lost the plot somewhere? This paper looks into the loopholes in the basic construction of the institution which make it vulnerable to extremism and being used as a pretext for terrorism. It would also look into possible ways to avoid such situations and the role of literature, religious or otherwise, in all of this.*

**Key words:** Globalisation, Neocolonialism, Fundamentalism, Otherification, Extremism, Terrorism.

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### Introduction:

Variety makes our world colorful. There are various countries, ethnic groups, cultures, religions etc. that constitute the patchwork of human existence. But they are not all sewn seamlessly, into one another. The differences that demarcate one section of the human population from another, give rise to mental divisions across which usually our instincts of empathy and understanding, dull a bit. Otherification is a pernicious process, which marks our general reaction when dealing with a person on the other side of what we consider to be our group. Religion, historically has been one such social marker that has been capable of producing, spectacular differences not only in visible culture patterns but in our thought process too. We alienate other groups by claiming only our rituals and lifestyle, as authentic and righteous. In Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own", we find a very pithy explanation for this reification:

Life .....—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to one self. By feeling that one has some innate superiority. ( Woolf ch. 3 )

At times religious rhetoric, sinks down blatantly to the level of : demonizing members of out-groups and describing them as "rats," "vermin," "parasites," ...( as an ) effective way of activating someone's sense of disgust, and encourages a propensity to

think of those out-group members as a threat to the health of one's own community that needs to be removed. " ( Rahamim and Yashlavsky 12)

Literature can go a long way towards either exacerbating or saving the situation. Holy books of various major world religions showcase a tendency to prod to violence, their followers against what they consider harming to the cultural or social fabric. While 'Charles Kimball assures us that an authentic religion is always a force for good and only 'corruption religion' leads to violence.' But Steve Clarke goes on to exemplify through religious texts, which are usually considered repositories of ancient wisdom, as having unequivocal references encouraging violence against those perceived as "the other" or otherwise dispensable . He says:

It is very hard to interpret some religious scripture as instructing us to do anything other than kill innocent people. Instructions to kill the innocent are found in the holy texts of various religions. The Koran instructs devout Muslims to kill polytheists who fail to renounce their religion:

And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists whenever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush.... (9 :5)

The Hindu Puranas instruct widows to either kill themselves, or submit to being killed by others, for no other reason than that their husband has died:

Tell the faithful wife of the greatest duty of women: she is loyal and pure who burns herself with her husband's corpse. ( Steve 6)

Iconography of various religious texts combines the portrayal of the Divine Being as a repository of limitless benevolence, as well as terrifying power. Someone who can not only trigger all creation but wreak unrestrained destruction too. To achieve a comprehensive and formidable image of the deity, it is ensured that the extremities of emotional spectrum of the devotee can be evoked by it. Imagery of an awesome God with power for complete destruction comes in handy. Margo Kitts in her paper "Literary

Theories Violence And Religious Imagination”, gives such an example from one of the earliest known civilizations, the Mesopotamian civilization, while making this point:

Destroyer of enemy lands --

you, Inanna, empowered the storm

Beloved of Enlil,

you let terror reign over the land of Sumer.

Enheduanna, first known poetess of Mesopotamia

As Enheduanna's praise poem to Inanna attests, the splendor of divine terror is at least as old as Western literature, from the third millennium BCE. The theme is not limited to Mesopotamia.... Representations of divine violence are profuse in Classical religious texts, as are reports of human violence sanctioned by divine sources and often mimicking them. (Kitts 410, ch. 29)

Amitav Ghosh in his paper “The Fundamentalist Challenge”, remarks on the transformation in the perception of religion: “With the benefit of hindsight, I am ever more astonished by the degree to which, over the course of this century, religion has been reinvented as its own antithesis.” ( Ghosh 19). This opinion seems to indicate that there has been a transfiguration of religion in recent times but the examples from religious texts above show how the association of religion and violence is not exactly a new or foreign phenomena. The only change probably is that religion these days is viewed as an entity separate from politics and cultural affiliations and the tussle and violence that at times ensues from this association. Religion and religious texts were not only fashioned to reflect all that was good in a society, but tend to betray anthropological details including whatever a society deemed requisite for protection or spread of their unique heritage and political influence. A representation of the culture could be accompanied by exhibition of implicit or explicit exclusionism and hostility towards other cults or clans or even their own people in case they are perceived as threats:

Religion is often invoked as a justification for war... .The nine Christian Crusades to the Near East, are... examples of this latter form of religiously sanctioned military campaign. Religious justifications are presented for the killing of many different species of animals, as sacrifices to supernatural beings. In some cases humans have been among the species sacrificed. Religious motives are invoked to try to justify the killing of individuals because they have attempted to leave a religion (apostasy), because they have tried to revise a religion (heresy), and because they have spoken or written disrespectfully about a religion (blasphemy). (Steve 6)

In an ideal universe religion would have been merely a way to follow proper tenets to live a moral life. But even in an increasingly scientific age, the divisive capabilities of religion are unhindered. Frequently religious institutions work out the quick way of luring the maximum number of people into following their cult or religion, by embedding elements of exclusivity and superiority into the very fabric of their dogma. Religion becomes a convenient avenue of personal aggrandizement by association. Through the creation of overarching narratives which have apparently unimpeachable historical evidence attached to them, this desire for personal aggrandizement becomes attached to an artificial higher purpose. That of maintaining one's legacy continued down one's fathers and forefathers from the initial heavenly beings one can claim to be associated with, or a descendent of. So much so, that in case of any question or threat to the shared religion, a sizeable host of people would feel called upon to defend their personal and shared faith and sense of importance, even to the extent of violence. When excessive exclusivity and insularity get associated with a religion, they inhibit its growth and within its own limits it begins to go bad. It is at this point that religious fidelity becomes a prime motivator for extremist action which reaches its culmination in terrorism. Rhys H. Williams in his "Terror in the Mind of God" talks about how Juergensmeyer, explores the "logic of religious violence" in his book which challenges the assumption that religion and violence are contradictory phenomenon:

The second section explores the 'logic of religious violence' and examines the ways in which the drama and ritual of religion have been well-suited to the theatre of terror, creating a plotline of cosmic war with designated roles of martyr, hero and demon. This world view has bifurcated wordly points into a transcendently significant battle that has a Manichean logic of absolute good and utter evil. (398)

Religion manipulates contradictory instincts in humans to build on its support base. While on the one hand it creates an awe-inspiring picture of religion so as to make people feel empowered by association , on the other it creates an atmosphere of paranoia and constant fearful suspicion of other sects. Williams in his paper also includes Mark Juergensmeyer's elucidation of extent to which the feeling of being threatened can affect certain followers:

Juergensmeyer identifies certain 'cultures of violence', via case studies along the spectrum of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. Such religious communities often perceive themselves and their way of life as under attack. In Japan, for example, a new branch of 'socially prophetic' Buddhists released toxic sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995, shattering their own nonviolent ethic and harming thousands because they had adopted millenarian prophecies about an imminent end to the world. (Williams 78)

Religious texts serve as, those over-arching meta-narratives which in a perverse way for some believers obscure the mundane moral and ethical considerations. While it is true that even a boon when in the hands of a wrongdoer will turn vile, the overriding importance attached unquestioningly, with religion makes the damage from such cases all the more extensive. Its influence reminds one of the phrase from literary criticism which talks about the temporary belief granted to a work of fiction voluntarily by an audience which is referred to as the 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The sad thing is that in the case of religion, this belief is not supposed to be temporary. Nor can it be undermined by any alternate belief system or as it is touted by usually all its followers as beyond scope of the manmade belief systems or methods of interpretation.

Don't people have a human right to follow their conscience and worship as they think they should? Here we reach a crux for those who adhere to a revealed religion. They can either accept ordinary human standards of morality as a limit on how they interpret divine teachings, or they can insist on total fidelity to what they see as God's revelation, even when it contradicts ordinary human standards. Those who follow the second view insist that divine truth utterly exceeds human understanding, which is in no position to judge it. God reveals things to us precisely because they are truths we would never arrive at by our natural lights. When the omniscient God has spoken, we can only obey. ( Gutting, par.5 )

In a post-industrialisation world, with lifestyles less centered around and dependent on religion, its overwhelming hold especially for the West has been perceived to have waned. Though not everyone believes this. The Islamic countries more or less are highly suspicious of the neo-colonial interventions of the largely Christian West. The resultant distrust and suspicion is enough to resurrect and sustain the ghosts of the Crusades. For them 'God's revelation' and defending the faith in the face of such challenge becomes paramount.

Meanwhile there are claims that religious violence usually has other motivations as well, the common ones that are trotted out to mitigate the criticism of religion are economic factors. While the claim might hold some credit, it isn't totally true as studies on terrorist activities reveal contradictions:

The most fanatical militants are more likely to be found in good schools and on the Internet than in the slums. They are part of a romanticised movement justified by religious doctrine. (Rahamim and Yashlavsky 235 )

In their book *Terror in the Name of Faith: Religion and Political Violence*, Rahamim Emanuilov and Andrey Yashlavsky also assert the possibility of holding religion culpable to some extent for religious violence as it provides the whole framework necessary for ideological constructs or movements of any kind:

We cannot ignore the fact that religiously motivated terrorists and extremists do not create their ideological constructs out of the blue – rather, these constructs are based on appeals to religious traditions, sacred texts, and the work of respected theologians.” ( 232)

Terrorism has become an increasingly persistent worldwide problem. It is all the more unfortunate as this kind of organised violence doesn't have qualms about targeting noncombatants and aim at maximum fallout for making gory, dramatic statements. The lack of any alternate system to counteract extremist religious indoctrination will only ensure a more stringent ideological control to hardline factions, enabling them to drive more and more people to the brink of terrorism. This is where secular literature becomes vital. Writers have in the past and continue to use literature as a tool to engender a healthy scepticism towards '-isms' and ideological constructs. It provides a valuable counterpoint to religious assertions. The exuberance of works by writers like Salman Rushdie, whose creations like " Midnight's Children " attack, attempts to " categorize and cordon off multiplicity ". Saleem the central character " who contains a multitude of experiences and sensitivities, stands in stark contrast to the protestors who demand their own language- based region, the strict monotheism of Pakistan, and Indira Gandhi's repression of contradictory dissension. " ( sparknotes )

This effort to reveal inherent hypocrisies in extremist stances is undertaken in either fact or fiction. Nick Cohen in his Forward to the book "Media, Religion and Conflict", talks about a long essay by Berlin in which he discusses so called "fascists", through the study of the beliefs espoused by a French intellectual De Maistre. It contains an exposé of such "dynamic" traditionalists, who despite their claim of working towards the "old order", are actually actively modern in their efforts to restore and maintain the old order. This incisive criticism reflects on hardliners from various cults and religions. Though fiction enjoys the benefit over fact, in this effort at alternative expression to hardline accounts, in being widely sought after and using an indirect method of persuasion.



Secular literature frequently seeks to undercut the transcendent stance of religious literature or teaching. This might not necessarily mean challenging practice of religion, but its misuse. It does so by elucidating examples of fallouts of extremist religious stances, criticising hateful religious expression and revealing hypocrisy within religious organisations. An article posted by Huffpost while discussing hypocritical characters in fiction, mentions the primacy of those under religious vows and exhibiting unapologetic holier-than-thou attitudes:

Two-faced protagonists are often (but not always) of the religious variety. One prime example is Mr. Brocklehurst in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Jane and the other unlucky girls at his Lowood school/institution are denied adequate food, heat, clothing and compassion while the "pious" Mr. Brocklehurst and his family live a life of luxury — even as he argues the "merits" of a miserable, austere life for the poor. Then there's minister Gabriel Grimes, in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, who preaches about exemplary behavior even though he himself fathered a child out-of-wedlock and left the mother to fend for herself... The evangelist title character in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* is another full-of-vices "religious" man who's an expert at "do as I say, not as I do." ( Astor, par. 5-7 )

The same paper goes on to showcase similar tendencies in the general public who envision themselves as defenders of their respective faiths. It does so by mentioning :

about the "moral" leaders and townspeople in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*? They force Hester Prynne to wear an "A" for adultery on her clothing, conveniently ignoring that forgiveness should be part of their Christian beliefs. ( Astor, par. 8 )

There are other narratives which voice a comprehensive protest against bias in general and by including religion as one of the criteria for bias, undercut exclusionist religious attitudes. In his work , *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglas, Written by Himself* Frederick Douglass speaks of the mindless acceptance of divisive religious stories

which are more fiction than fact. It is unfortunate to witness apparently mature, worldly wise people, to lay such stock in mere parables and symbolic stories. Fantastic and fanciful stories are considered to be meant to entertain children and it is usual to find grown ups ridiculing their overwhelming belief in such tales. But when we take a look at the vehement faith of believers in the various mysteries, miracles and absurdly divisive tales and their willingness at times to cross the bounds of humanity to prove their devotion, their beliefs seem more unfortunate than the fascination of the youngsters could ever be. Douglass' narrative as a commentator states brings out the vast gap between the ideal theory and actual practice of religion:

In his work, Frederick Douglass speaks of two kinds of Christianity: the "Christianity of the land" and the "Christianity of Christ"(2093). The `Christianity of the land 'is the religion that the southern slaveholders practice. They use the peace-teaching Christian religion to justify their right of ownership and their inhumane treatment of slaves. One example of justification can be found early in the Narrative. Douglass states that one way the slave owners justify their actions is with the misconception that the blacks are the descendants of Ham who have been cursed by God. If God has cursed these peoples then he would wholly approve of their being held in bondage by "better" men. This reason will soon be obsolete, states Douglass, because of the number of slave children who "owe their existence to white fathers" (2041). With the mulatto population on the rise, slaveholders are no longer oppressing those cursed by God, but those of their own kind who, by the white man's standards, are the chosen peoples of God. ( "The White Man's Religion" )

Amitav Ghosh in his fiction deals repeatedly with the shadowy nature of the divisions and categories we conjure for ourselves. We keep feeding these 'shadow lines', till they are successfully transformed into horrific specters which feed off into oblivion whatever little spirituality or humanity we have had to begin with. Also the storylines of fictional works, Ghosh's among them frequently follow the existential struggles of their characters, situating them as people beyond their social, cultural or national identities.

Their exploration of the identity of people beyond the faultlines of division, helps undercut those divisions and prepares ground for unbiased perception of our world. In "The English Novel and Terrorism", Meenakshi Bharat asserts a similar assumption when she talks about the creation of 'personal history' through works of literary fiction:

Such multiculturalism survives into Ghosh's most recent novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but in a way that explodes the idea of cultural, religious, national or other definitions of identity. The characters are uprooted and located in a zone where they are only connected by their links to the scientific and counter-scientific researches underway. In all these texts, there is a conscious intention on the part of the author to construct a history. It is a personal history in the sense of being motivated by the narrator's personal need for introspection to search for the origins of the present and it is alternative to the written or known "broadstrokes" of official history, consisting of "historical" events or people from which "ordinary people" and a more genuinely human experience has been left out. This task of recording an alternative history, I shall argue, has become identified with the role of the Third World post-colonial intellectual. (Wassef 76)

In these versions of history, religious beliefs come down from their thrones of irreproachable meta-narratives to the level of other secular beliefs, viewpoints, the pursuit of which are susceptible to faults, and inconsistencies like the people harbouring them. Bharat asserts the impact of terrorism on Indian English writing:

Our days seem to have indeed become marred by the sweep of rabid ideological politics, widespread acts of violence and a terrifyingly 'regular' outbreak of terror-generating riots. This has made terrorism one of the defining markers of our times, not only in the world, but quite relevantly, on the Indian subcontinent. Consequently, as a major and inescapable reality of our times, terror has come to establish a stranglehold on the minds of intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike; of both thinkers and creative minds. With the rising importance of this aspect of the contemporary, there is no way that it will not have a deep cultural impact with the roots and growth of creativity

necessarily coming to be located in these violent underpinnings....The novel, in particular, in a largely 21<sup>st</sup> century development, has responded to this contemporaneous terror and its continuing reverberations. I dub this deeply focused and involved novel the 'post-terrorist' novel, in that it identifies, problematises and analyses terror and terrorism to throw up a key to understanding the overall cultural make-up of the times. The isolation of this recurrent strain in contemporary literature from India finds its way into allied fields, facilitating the location of the deeply problematic, far-reaching impact of terror on the individual's sense of self and belonging to a particular nation in today's muddled, fractious environment. (Bharat, p.80).

Novels in India especially as the genre matured post-independence, have tried to deal with the evils plaguing the Indian society. One of the myths that were busted was, the saintly nature of the custodians of religion. This didn't necessarily involve, an out and out criticism of religion, rather it involved a sceptical approach. Various did their bit in trying to influence of 'godmen'. These self guardians have been also crucial in instigating followers to violence in the name of religion. Fiction can be an effective way of challenging their sway by illustrating the flip side of their nature as well.

## **Conclusion:**

"Ati Sarvatra Varjyeta" is a saying in Sanskrit which warns off against the side effects of anything in excess. This should ideally be applied to even to our favourite ideologies. We shouldn't immerse ourselves in our beliefs so much that it drowns out all other voices of human concern. "The war on terrorism is at its most fundamental level, a war of ideas." ( Emanuilov and Yashlavsky 237 ). Ignoring terrorism and denying its relation with religion is like the burying one's head in the sand and pretending that all is well. Emanuilov and Yashlavsky, stress the reach of reach and spread of terrorism:

Against a backdrop of globalization, the spread of new forms of mass communication, and the threat of uncontrolled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the problem of acquires a totally new meaning, becoming an important factor not only in the foreign policy of most countries, but also in the everyday life of billions of people all over the world. ( Emanuilov and Yashlavsky 7 )

Those who have a propensity for violence, will seek motivations and justifications from wherever they can find. However few ideologies will have the mass appeal across the whole of the world that religion enjoys. Hence it is imminent that all religious institutions bolster their ideological framework, so as to discourage extremists from hijacking it for their use. Yet it can be a daunting task considering that those paradigms themselves betray association with violence. Employing use of literature to undo some of the stranglehold of religion over human imagination, might be one of the methods at our disposal to challenge spread and rise of extremism. It can encourage a sceptical and discerning acceptance of religion. In his book *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*, Marc Gopin, talks about how a concept of universally appealing belief system is considered the ideal answer to parochialism and factionalism:

Among people of a secular, liberal religious, or cosmopolitan orientation, there is broad-based support for the notion that the best way to move society away from religious intolerance and toward pluralism is the development of a universal set of guidelines, such as those expressed in United Nations documents regarding political and civil institutions and individual rights. ( Gopin 18)

Though practically speaking it is almost impossible to create a universal set of beliefs and expect everyone to follow those as devoutly as they do their religion, but inculcating an atmosphere through literature to render divisions less acrimonious and absolute is a step in the good direction if not a panacea for religious violence. Also the usual mode of denial that religious bodies are in, about the contribution of their particular sect to terrorism is rectified by writers. They instead of trying to keep the

disease under wraps and indirectly allowing it to burgeon, reveal it since only after acknowledgement of a problem can its solution be eventually sought.

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