Violence Committed in the Name of Religion
Phenomena, root-causes and practical responses

Violence incited, perpetrated and justified in the name of religion is a shocking reality in different parts of the globe, and the brutality displayed in such acts frequently leaves observers speechless. Violence with religious undercurrents, moreover, is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon; it inter alia exists in the shape of terrorism, communal violence, civil war and even international aggression.

While attracting much public attention in political debates and media reports, violent incidents occurring in the name of religion at the same time puzzle observers and commentators. What is the actual role of religion in such violent acts? Do certain religions, e.g. the monotheistic religions, display an inherent propensity towards violence, possibly originating from their dogmas, superiority claims and foundational scriptures? Or are acts of violence always “political” in nature? Do political and other entrepreneurs of violence merely “abuse” religion for justifying acts of aggression whose real causes lie elsewhere? If so, however, how can politicians utilize religion to whip up aggression without receiving some support from within the respective religious communities themselves?

The PhD course (professional training) organized by the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights tackles such questions consistently from a human rights perspective. This specific perspective is not only relevant when it comes to sketching out practical answers on how to cope with violence occurring under the auspices of religion. Already the description of relevant phenomena and root-causes of violence requires a particular sensitivity based on human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. One important contribution of the human rights approach is that it takes human agency systematically seriously, thus avoiding essentialist ascriptions.

In discussions on religion and violence, one frequently faces two attitudes, both of which obfuscate human agency. The first reaction can be called “evasive”, as it denies any substantial involvement of the religions, thereby trivializing the responsibility that religious communities – their members, representatives and intellectual supporters – have to face in the fight against violence. The second type of reaction, by contrast, reads an inclination towards violence immediately into the “essence” of certain religions, in particular Islam. While pushing religion into the centre of the critical debate, this essentialist approach is in danger of nourishing fatalistic thinking, since it ascribes a propensity for violence to the very “DNA” of the followers of certain religions, thereby marginalizing the relevance of internal diversity, reform movement, theological learning and societal adaptation processes.

The title chosen for this PhD course, “Violence Committed in the Name of Religion”, signals critical distance towards both of these typical reactions. While there is in fact a relevant relationship that should not be dismissed, this relationship cannot be reduced to a simple equation between only two factors: religion and violence. The passive wording “committed in the name” accommodates additional factors, the most elementary of which is
human agency. Just as it is human beings who bring about the connection between religion and violence, it is again human beings, who can also actively challenge and overcome this connection.

A comprehensive and contextual analysis of diverse root-causes of violence occurring under the auspices of religion is important in order to become aware of the different facets of human agency and thus responsibility in this field. Religious communities – their leaders, intellectual supporter and ordinary followers – face a particular responsibility to speak out clearly against any acts of violence perpetrated in the name of their faith. However, the responsibility of religious communities cannot be exclusive, because in virtual all cases of violence political factors and variables, too, play important roles.

Depending on specific situations, political factors can include difficult historic legacies, a climate of authoritarianism, social inequalities or caste hierarchies, ethnic fragmentation, rapid demographic changes, migration processes, a widening gulf between urban and rural development, the break-down of meaningful public discourse, precarious political legitimacy, a misogynic and homophobic “macho” culture, the weakness of civil society organizations, experiences of racist exclusion, fear of economic and social decline in a shrinking middle class, lack of perspectives for youths in the face of mass unemployment, endemic corruption and political cronyism, a general loss of trust in public institutions, a climate of impunity as a result of inefficient State reactions, international arms trade, proxy wars and other problems.

Religious communities may function as additional actors and factors of violent escalation, for instance, when turning group loyalty into a sacred duty, celebrating the “martyrdom” of war heroes and invoking apocalyptic pictures of perpetual enmity. Religious images of heroes, martyr and demons can become the matrix for interpreting contemporary conflicts, which often leads to far-reaching and dangerous misperceptions. In extreme situations, political hysteria and religious apocalypse may mutually reinforce each other, thereby speeding up the vicious spiral of mistrust, paranoia and violent escalation. Religious communities should therefore engage in a self-critical scrutiny of their own history of involvement with intolerant attitudes, aggressive superiority claims, national hegemonies and entanglement with power politics. A comprehensive analysis of the issue will also pay adequate attention to positive examples of peace work undertaken by religious actors or organizations, such as the movement Sant’ Egidio, the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone or the World Conference on Religions for Peace, to name only a few examples.

Human rights provide the binding normative framework for policies aimed at preventing or overcoming violence occurring in the name of religion. When elaborating the significance of human rights, the course particularly focuses on the contribution of freedom of religion or belief. In conjunction with other human rights, freedom of religion or belief is part of the rule of law, which must guide security measures in the area of anti-violence. Freedom of religion or belief furthermore calls upon opinion makers in the public debate that they should avoid all forms of essentialism, which would ascribe to the followers of a religion – in particular, Muslims – a closed collective mentality, thus obfuscating the relevance of internal pluralism as well as individual faces, voices and positions. Another crucial function of freedom of religion or belief is to build or rebuild trust by encouraging inter-religious and
inter-convictional dialogue. In conjunction with freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief finally facilitates reform agendas that subject religious sources and tradition to critical scrutiny. Many religious reformers working for anti-violence agendas, at the same time, understand themselves as human rights defenders, which demonstrates yet another facet of the facilitating role that freedom of religion or belief can play in this field.

**Time and venue**
The course will take in the premises of the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights from 1 to 3 March, 2018. Participants are expected to study beforehand the course material. These reading materials will be made available upon registration.

**Course fee**
Participants to the course will be charged a **3,500 NOK (Norwegian kroner) fee, lunches included.** PhD candidates from Norwegian universities are entitled to a fee exemption, except for a small payment for lunches of **500 NOK.**

**Academic assessment**
The PhD candidates taking the course are expected to write an essay of 4,000 words on an assigned, or approved topic by one of the course lecturers.

**Target group**
While the course is primarily aimed at PhD candidates doing research on this area, it is also open to professionals (with different backgrounds) who have an interest or are working with issues concerning religion and violence.
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Tentative schedule

Thursday, 1 March

09.00-09.30  Lena Larsen: Welcome and general introduction
- Mutual introduction of the participants
- Introduction to the NCHR and the Oslo Coalition
- Overview of the entire course

09.30-10.30  Heiner Bielefeldt: A thorny field full of pitfalls – thematic introduction
- Grave misunderstandings and their fatal consequences
- Human rights violations in the context of fighting “religious extremism”
- The significance of the human rights approach

Coffee break

10.45-12.15  Sturla Stålsett: “The ambivalence of the sacred”
- Topics to be specified.

Lunch break

13.30-15.00  Iselin Frydenlund & Gina Lende: Case studies from Sri Lanka and Nigeria
- Buddhist militarism beyond texts: The case of Sri Lanka
- Violence and Christian-Muslim Relations: The case of Nigeria

Coffee break

15.15-16.45  Tore Lindholm: The myth of religious violence

Friday, 2 March

09.00-10.30  Bård A. Andreassen: The human rights approach
- Defining characteristics of human rights
- Sketchy overview on standards and procedures
- Why human rights are important for tackling violence in the name of religion

Coffee break
10.45-12.15  Heiner Bielefeldt: the human right to freedom of religion or belief

- Empowering human beings in the area of religion and belief
- Highlighting diversity between and within religions
- Contributions of freedom of religion or belief to efficient anti-violence agendas

Lunch break

13.30-15.00  Parallel working groups: methodologies in human rights research

- Discussion on the basis of selected chapters of the handbook on research methods in human rights (ed. by Bård A. Andreassen et al.)
- Brief poster presentations by the participants

Coffee break

15.15-16.45  Inga Bostad: Ethics and hermeneutics in human rights research

- Important hermeneutical insights for academic human rights work
- Implication of the human rights approach for research methodologies
- Responsibilities of the researchers

16.45-17.00 Lena Larsen: Concluding remarks of the day

Saturday, 3 March

09.00-10.30  Stener Ekern: Violence at the boundaries: The sacralization of collective identity

Coffee break

10.45-12.15  Margareta van Es – Muslim responses to violence (TBC)

- Internal diversity within religious communities concerning the issue of violence
- Issues for religious and theological self-criticism
- Media representations

Lunch break

13.30-15.00  Gentian Zyberi: Upholding international and domestic law when countering terrorism

- From internal disturbances to armed conflicts with religious connotations
- Counter-terrorism measures and religious freedoms
- Real and imagined tensions between religious freedoms and national security
- Positive contributions of international human rights and humanitarian law to enlightened security policies
Coffee break

15.15 -16.45  
Heiner Bielefeldt / Trond Bakkevig / Hilde Salvesen: Peace-building potential of interreligious dialogue

- Different formats of interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue
- Trust-building through communication
- Conservative mobilization against progressive gender provisions
- Experiences from Colombia, Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Moldova, Palestine/Israel, and Sierra Leone

16.45 – 17.30 General discussion: the tasks ahead of us

17.30- 17.45  Concluding remarks by Lena Larsen
Required Reading


Recommended Literature


ICRC, How Does Law Protect in War, Religion (a short bibliography).


Annual Reports of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.