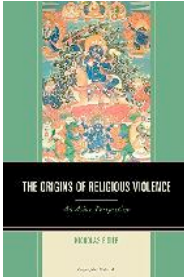


REVIEW: *THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE*

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Gier, Nicholas F. 2014. *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective*. Lanham: Lexington Books. xxvii + 295. ISBN 978-0-7391-9222-1 (hardcover 100USD).

Nicholas S. Gier, professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Idaho, has published widely on comparative philosophy and ethics, particularly Asian and Western. His last book, *The Virtue of Nonviolence* (2004), develops an understanding of nonviolence as "virtue ethics" by comparing Buddhist, Jainist, Hinduist, and Confucianist traditions, as well as the thought of prominent activists such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Following this lead, Gier's new study is dedicated to violence and militancy in Asian religious traditions. Because this relationship is comparably less known to most readers, Gier's book is an important contribution to the study of faith-based violence.

The book is arranged in two parts with chapters one to nine discussing religiously motivated violence and militancy in several South and East Asian regions including India, Śri Lanka, Burma, Bhutan, Tibet, Japan, and China. In addition to this multiregional approach, Gier also analyses violence in Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Chinese Taiping Christian contexts. Summarizing and analyzing the empirical chapters, Part Two (chapters ten to eleven) provides explanations for religious violence, as well as an approach to overcome militant fundamentalism and religious violence.

In general, Gier shows that apart from violent traditions in Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhism, premodern Asian societies knew very little religious violence. In contrast, he asserts that they generally enjoyed a great amount of religious tolerance and harmony. According to his definition, "religiously motivated violence" is
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understood as "the violence committed for the purpose of converting the enemy to the conqueror's religion, systematically oppressing those who resist conversion, and destroying their temples and religious artifacts in the process." (2). Gier's primary hypothesis is that most religious violence must be credited to the impact of colonial modernity on the development of modern national and/or ethnic identities which he terms "essential identities". He argues that the process of creating these identities can be traced back to the modernist idea that drove religions apart during the Protestant Reformation and which basically leads people to essentialize ethnic, religious, and other identities (4f.). One important result of this process is the attempt to exclude all alleged "others" in order to homogenize the ethnic, national, or religious group. I will return to this hypothesis below, but let me first sketch the content of the book.

Chapter One discusses relatively peaceful and harmonious Hindu-Muslim relations in medieval India. Gier shows that Islam spread rather peacefully in South Asia, initially adopting moderate rule aimed at politically integrating Buddhists and Hindus as trusted advisors and military officers (8). The destruction of temples and mosques observed prior to the twentieth century were overwhelmingly instigated by Muslims, not by Hindus, but not in a significant manner (14). In striking contrast to modern India, which is discussed in Chapter Two, personal identity and political allegiance in pre-colonial India were primarily ethnic and social, not religious.

Chapter Two describes the development of nationalist discourses and Hindu nationalism centered on the concept of "*hindutva*" ("Hinduness"). Adopting colonial discourses about religious and national identities, nineteenth and early twentieth century Indians began assuming that Islam was not a true part of the Hindu motherland because it was alien to India (27). In a process that Gier labels "reverse orientalism" Indians took over the Western idea of decline of India, but found a glorious past - a "Hindu Empire" free of Islam and Christianity which then was projected as the final goal of the true Hindu nation (26f.). This partially racist world view that some proponents viewed in close relationship to Nazi ideology, is portrayed as the primary reason for the aggressive exclusion and violent persecution of Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. An example is given in the concluding pages of this chapter (38-42) which describes anti-Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat in 2002 when approximately 2,000 Muslims were killed and 250 mosques destroyed by a mob of raging Hindu nationalists. The explicitly religious nature of these brutal acts can be observed in the fact that in many instances, the Hindu symbol "Om" was carved into the victims' bodies and statues of Rama's faithful servant Hanuman were placed

in many of the ruins (40).

Chapter Three discusses the history of religious violence in Śri Lanka which, as a modern phenomenon, may be characterized as an ethnic/ religious antagonism between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese. Following the same narrative of relative premodern harmony versus modern disharmony, Gier describes a similar process of "reverse orientalism" in which the Sinhalese adopted the Theosophist "affirmative orientalism" discourse that proclaimed the spiritual superiority of South-Asian civilization as well as the full compatibility of Buddhism with European science and rationalism (57-60). As in the case of India, Buddhist nationalists such as Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) propagated the identity of "race" (Sinhalese) and "religion" (Buddhism), thus excluding Tamils (Hindus) and Christians from their project of modernity. The militant and often outright racist discourses finally led to an armed conflict between hard-line nationalists on both sides that resulted in a loss of 60,000 to 100,000 lives between 1983 and 2009. In addition to stressing the modern nature of this problem, Gier points out that already during the reign of Buddhist king Dutthagamani (r. 161-137 BCE) there were strong anti-Tamil sentiments (53).

Chapter Four shows a similar situation in Burma where the Buddhist-Muslim harmony of the precolonial era changed dramatically. Since 2001, Burma has experienced a series of anti-Muslim pogroms that caused about a thousand casualties and left 140,000 people homeless. As in the case of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, Anti-Muslim sentiments are spread and perpetuated by leading Buddhist monks such as the Venerable Ashin Wirathu who has been called "bold Bin Laden" and who contends that "You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog" (67). According to Gier, the current anti-Muslim violence has both religious and racial origins and motivations that again have much to do with the colonial experience. The latter section of this chapter deals with the political history of modern Burma and the activities of national hero Aung San (1915-1947) and his even more prominent daughter and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi (*1945). While this is interesting, it is not always relevant to the topic under discussion. It is important to note, however, that after the Burmese parliament made Buddhism the state religion in 1961, violent actions of monks, state actors, and other activists against Muslims, Indians, and other minorities continued and intensified.

Chapters Five and Six deal with the violent traditions of Buddhist lamas, "war magic", and political militancy in Bhutan and Tibet. In striking contrast to the religious harmony that Gier assumes for premodern India, Śri Lanka, and Burma, Bhutanese and Tibetan

history shows major lamas waging sectarian war and supporting expansionary military campaigns. Most frequently, conflicts arose from competing parties that aimed at putting forth their candidates into incarnational succession of religious leaders. These conflicts sometimes turned into full-fledged war. They often also included "forced conversions, the burning of scripture, hate speech and cursing of other sects, or the destruction of monasteries, temples, and statues" (114f.). They may thus be considered religiously motivated violence according to Gier's aforementioned definition. Buddhist lamas and local militias used different sorts of "war magic" (e.g., creating armies of wild animals and natural disasters; or Voodoo-like "magic") to subdue their enemies. The rivalry and bitter fighting among the monasteries is particularly obvious in Tibetan history, which Gier considers "one thousand years of war magic". In a very detailed manner, Gier describes the constant struggle over religious and political power by powerful lamas, monasteries, private armies, and political actors that even led to political murders, such as the assassination of alleged anti-Buddhist king Lang Darma (r. 838-842).

Chapter Seven focuses on Japanese nationalism and Buddhist involvement in the war effort of the expansionist Japanese Empire (1868-1945). As it is the case with Sinhalese, Indian, and Burmese nationalisms, Gier assumes the same forces at work that may be considered the primary cause for religious violence: the fusion of religious and national identity (84, 183). The modernist discourses of the evolving empire served a racist and nationalist interpretation of "Japaneseness" that helped Japan perceive itself as a world power with a divine mission to conquer and transform the world according to the superior nature of Japanese culture and religion. Gier argues that Buddhist complicity with Japanese militarism and expansionism can be understood as an effort to prove one's belonging to the nation after Buddhism was persecuted during the early Meiji era (1868-1911) for being not Japanese. Subsequently, Japanese monks such as Rinzai Zen priest Shaku Sōen (1860-1919) volunteered as army chaplains. Shaku Sōen further declared "what is shed by Buddhists is not blood [...] but tears issuing directly from the fountainhead of loving kindness" (190). Others such as prominent scholar of Zen Buddhism DT Suzuki (1870-1966) claimed that only Zen provides the will power and martial spirit required for a warrior. Furthermore, Gier claims that Suzuki insisted that Japan's declaring war on China in 1895 was a just and necessary "religious action" because the Chinese were violent and unruly, and interfered in Japan's need to trade and acquire resources (192f.). Zen abbot Hata Eshō (1864-1944) was delighted that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941 coincided with the Buddha's day of enlightenment

(not his birthday as Gier erroneously claims) and called it "a holy day for eternally commemorating the reconstruction of the world" (193).

An important exception to this "sad chronicle of complicity" is the lay Buddhist Sōka Gakkai organization, which rejected the nationalist readings of Buddhism. Here as elsewhere (see below) the book would have profited from a closer reading of more recent literature on Buddhist militancy in modern Japan, particularly in regard of the work of Brian Victoria whose pioneering study *Zen at War* (1997) is not only Gier's chief reference, but has attracted many criticisms since its publication (such as in the case of Suzuki's statement about the "violent and unruly Chinese" mentioned above, cf. Satō 2008:70f.).

In Chapter Eight, Gier returns to India to discuss the emergence of nationalist Sikh discourses and militant Sikh separatists in 1980s and 1990s India. According to Gier, the notion of a distinct Sikh identity separate from the Hindu majority was established during the colonial era and then developed into claims to establish an autonomous Sikh state. The tensions between the Indian state and Sikh militants culminated in the storming of the Sikh Golden Temple, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) by her Sikh bodyguards, and subsequent anti-Sikh pogroms causing thousands of deaths in 1985. Here, as in the case of India, Śri Lanka, and Burma, Gier assumes that Sikh fundamentalism and militancy emerged only as a result of colonial modernity.

As the last empirical study, Chapter Nine provides a discussion of Hong Xiuquan's (1814-1864) Christian-inspired uprising that led to the establishing of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (*Taiping tianguo*) from 1851 to 1865. The self-proclaimed "brother of Jesus Christ" and his followers initiated what has been called one of the deadliest military conflicts in world history. It resulted in the death of at least twenty million people. Besides its militant nature, Taiping followers also destroyed traditional Chinese temples and were anti-Confucian. Albeit admitting indigenous Chinese progenitors, Gier argues that the Taiping's rigor and fundamentalism must be attributed to Christian influences. Completely ignoring recent studies on Chinese sectarianism and Buddhist violence (cf. Seiwert 2002; Broy 2012:59-65), however, Gier assumes that "the idea that God would lead a heavenly army, or that any human could arrogate the Mandate of Heaven as Hong did, is alien to the Chinese mind." (225).

Following the empirical section of the book, Chapter Ten provides eleven hypotheses on the reasons of religious violence by comparing Abrahamic (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and Asian religions. Building on his general impression that the Abrahamic

religions have the worst record in religiously motivated violence (xi) and echoing what is stated throughout the book, Gier claims that this affinity between religion and violence must be attributed to the nature of the monotheist Abrahamic religions: They are primarily religions of obedience to God as the "axiological" ultimate (the highest good); they are very much concerned with following his commands, emphasize the authority of written scripture, and have been more concerned with maintaining the purity of divine revelation (241-246). He further postulates that religions with a future messianic ruler and strong apocalyptic visions cause more violence (251f.). On the other side, the emergence of widespread religious violence in modern Asia is attributed to the fusion of religious and national identities. Thus, summarizing Gier's explanation, religious violence is primarily found (1) in the Abrahamic religions and (2) in the modern context of evolving nation-states and their search for identity.

Chapter Eleven returns to a topic Gier developed in his 2004 book *The Virtue of Nonviolence*. Building on British philosopher Richard Swindburne's concept of "weak belief" as well as on "constructive postmodernism", Gier proposes an antidote to religious nationalism and fundamentalism. The "Gospel of Weak Belief" aims at responding to the "strong belief" of fundamentalism by assuming that a certain creed is *probably* true while others are *probably* not (257). According to Gier, this view can be observed in the teachings of Jesus, Mahāvīra, Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Gandhi. In addition, Gier employs the notion of "constructive postmodernism" that wishes to reestablish the

premodern harmony of humans, society, and God without losing the integrity of the individual, the possibility of meaning, an affirmation of history, liberal political values, and the intrinsic value of nature (266).

In order to counter the absoluteness of fundamentalist approaches, Gier offers the notion of "virtue ethics". They must be understood as an emulative process and stand in contrast to "rule ethics" that involve strict conformity and obedience to a set of codified norms: "The emulative approach engages the imagination and personalizes and thoroughly grounds individual moral action and responsibility." (269).

In summary, Gier's book provides a detailed description and analysis of religiously motivated violence across the borders of region and religion in both premodern and modern Asia. There are a number of issues related to his approach that I will now take up.

First, his analysis is limited to a very narrow understanding of religiously motivated violence in the sense of violent coercion directed towards others in order to achieve their conversion to the conqueror's religion. This narrow scope is fine, but it should have been reflected in the title of the book. One may imagine other religiously motivated acts of violence that follow different objectives. These other types, however, are not discussed in the book at all. Secondly, and more importantly, this observation leads me to suspect that Gier's explanation for the emergence of religious violence in Asia is slightly circular: Instead of showing, as he claims, that premodern Asian societies did not know violent religions in a significant manner (as compared to the Abrahamic religions), he merely demonstrates the absence of this particular type of religious violence that, according to his interpretation, was produced to a large extent only under the conditions of colonial modernity. This, however, does not mean that premodern Asian societies did not experience other forms of religious violence (see below).

Readers may also wonder why other Asian countries such as Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and many more were included into what is entitled "An Asian Perspective". The book might have done better in promising merely a South and East Asian perspective. In addition, Gier omits a considerable amount of scholarship, particularly on violence in the Buddhist traditions of Asia that has been published in the past decade. Besides the seminal studies of such prominent scholars of Buddhism as Paul Demiéville (1973; transl. Kendall 2010), Bernard Faure (2008), and Christoph Kleine (2002; 2003; 2006), Gier has neither consulted the important work on monastic warfare and intersect violence in medieval Japan (Kleine 2002; Adolphson 2007), Buddhist nationalism in modern Thailand (Jerryson 2011), Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 2002), and China (Yu 2005), nor monastic martial arts and warfare in premodern China (Shahar 2008; Broy 2007; 2012). He also does not mention other important edited volumes on the subject (Zimmermann 2006; Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; Tikhonov and Brekke 2013). Furthermore, particularly with regard to Chinese and Japanese names and *termini technici*, the book has a number of orthographic flaws such as writing "Soka Gakkei" rather than the correct "Sōka Gakkai" (183-199) and a constant mixing of standard Pinyin and other romanizations for Chinese such as Qing/Ching Dynasty (222), Chang Chueh [Zhang Jue] (224), and cheng [zheng] (230).

These objections notwithstanding, Gier offers an intriguing comparative account of the reasons and motivations for religious violence that bring together the studies of numerous scholars who

have worked on one particular region or religious tradition. Consequently, his study has two primary benefits: First, Gier demonstrates to all non-specialists in the field of Asian Studies that violence and religion have an important yet sad relationship in Asia. Second, he provides one of the first overall comparative accounts of religious violence in an Asian context across religious and cultural boundaries. I find Gier's hypotheses about the origins of religious violence in specific features of the Abrahamic religions not absolutely convincing. If, for example, Gier is correct in maintaining that monotheist absoluteness is a primary reason for militant intolerance, then why did most "Christian" violence occur in medieval and early modern Europe and America, but not in the countless Christian communities established during the first centuries CE in the Middle East?. Nevertheless, his comparative approach should be highlighted because it provides valuable reading for students and scholars interested in the study of religion and violence.

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