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Imagining the Kingdom: The Intersection of Religion and Violence

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Imagining the Kingdom: The Intersection of Religion and Violence

Abstract

"All religions must grapple honestly with issues of violence, both in terms of the limits and means of righteous zeal and in terms of the ultimate goals of the movement. One potentially instructive way for the monotheistic religions to do this may be to ask the question "How do we imagine the Kingdom of God?"

Posting about the intersection of religion and violence from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/imagining-the-kingdom-the-intersection-of-religion-and-violence>

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Comments

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Imagining the Kingdom

 [all in allthings.org/imagining-the-kingdom-the-intersection-of-religion-and-violence](https://allthings.org/imagining-the-kingdom-the-intersection-of-religion-and-violence)

Donald Roth

There has been significant debate recently over whether or not it is legitimate to link the reprehensible actions of groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda with the broader religion of Islam. We have run pieces on this here at *iAt*, authored by both [myself](#) and [Walker Cosgrove](#), and there have been numerous pieces across the internet, with quality articles at places like *The Atlantic* both [arguing for this connection](#) and [arguing against it](#). This whole debate brings us back to the often difficult issue of religion and violence. An argument developing today is that genuine religion is antithetical to violence, and we can and should disregard religious motivations in trying to understand and combat what are essentially just a bunch of violent psychopaths. While this is a clever attempt to remedy the opposite assertion that religion is inherently irrational and naturally tends to violence (particularly monotheistic religion), I think it goes too far.

All religions must grapple honestly with issues of violence, both in terms of the limits and means of righteous zeal and in terms of the ultimate goals of the movement. One potentially instructive way for the monotheistic religions to do this may be to ask the question “How do we imagine the Kingdom of God?” By tracing some issues with this through the development of Christianity, we may be able to more fully understand the challenges faced in our modern context.

“My Kingdom is Not of this World”

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the people of God were defined by an earthly kingdom. They were led by a pillar of smoke and fire, and they centered their religious life around the Ark of the Covenant, held at Shiloh and then at Jerusalem. On the one hand, when God was with a clearly delineated people in a physical way, He led them in conquest and the great violence of bringing judgment to the Canaanite people. However, this earthly dwelling of a holy God meant the people would also be required to be holy, something Israel proved woefully incapable of. Eventually, the Lord was divorced from this earthly kingdom (using the imagery of the prophet Jeremiah) and sent them into exile. Since that time, this frequently dispossessed people looked for a coming Messiah to restore their national fortunes.

When Christ came as Messiah, he upended these expectations. Speaking of strange things like rebuilding the temple in three days, Jesus was eventually brought before the Roman authorities, where he answered Pilate’s question about his kingship by saying, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”¹

So what does this have to do with violence? Look to Jesus’ own disciples, who often struggled with their own expectations of the coming kingdom: when the authorities came, Peter cut the ear off of the high priest’s servant, and yet Jesus rebuked Peter and healed the man. Jesus tells Pilate that his servants are not fighting, not because they didn’t have that impulse, but because this was not in accord with the true nature of the kingdom. Its temporal, political manifestation had been a sign and shadow of both the blessing to come and human’s inability to secure that blessing by striving for it (see Hebrews for more on this). Paul makes this explicitly clear later in Romans 12-13, explaining how the old order, with its provision of “an eye for an eye” and things like cities of refuge, has passed away, leaving vengeance in the Lord’s hands, a right God then carries out through governing authorities. The Kingdom of God, fully realized in Christ, defies national and ethnic boundaries (“there is no Jew or Gentile”) and it is rooted in a wonderful declaration of promise and reconciliation. Christ sends out his kingdom citizens to proclaim this message

with preaching, not the sword.

Yet Christianity has often struggled with how to imagine the kingdom. We often make it earthly, temporal, and, especially, political. Constantine brought about a formal enfranchisement of Christianity and the concept of “Christendom.” Charlemagne famously attempted to spread the Christian kingdom (and his own by proxy) by virtue of the sword, offering conquered people the choice of death or conversion. The Crusades sought to protect this kingdom’s holy sites with holy warriors, and the bloody history of the Thirty Years’ War saw the terrible cost of fighting for the religio-political identity of the Germanic region. When God’s Kingdom is imagined as something tied to land, power, and politics, like all other earthly kingdoms, it is all too easy to resort to the sword (the power of those earthly kingdoms) to establish it.

“The Kingdom of God in the Modern World”

I argue that when we imagine the Kingdom of God to look like or function just like other “earthly” kingdoms and institutions, there will always be a certain element who seek to establish this Kingdom by force. This does not mean this element is correct or that violence is necessarily the orthodox means for establishing the kingdom; however, it is something that should be honestly confronted and wrestled with by believers of any faith, particularly if those believers continue to emphasize an earthly kingdom.

We can see the fruit of the struggle for an earthly kingdom all around. It is one of the things that makes the Israel-Palestine conflict so intractable, and it creates very difficult issues for Christians who look for an earthly re-establishment of Jerusalem or who seek to re-establish their country as a “Christian nation.” It’s a driving force of what makes ISIS so violent, as it has been in many historical attempts to (re)establish the earthly [Ummah](#), particularly the Caliphate, after it collapsed some years after Muhammad.

As believers of a particular faith, we can and should point to our religious traditions to explain why we think this expression of the faith is wrong or misguided, even so wrong-headed as to put those violent people outside the true faith. Even Bernard Lewis, an expert in Islamic Studies who has been reviled by some for his criticisms of Islam, says that the Muslim tradition never legitimizes modern terrorism and the wanton killing of women and children² Although Islam commonly views the Kingdom in an earthly way, the vast majority reject the idea that this dominion should be expanded by the sword. We should accept this type of argument, and I think most of us do.

As people, we should not let our reasoning be guided by fear of how others might construe our faith. As members of civil society, we have a responsibility to respect the argumentation of those of other faiths and not make unwarranted inferences or to charge guilt by association. If that’s a problem in society, then let’s combat that problem, but as religious adherents, we should not turn a blind eye to religious violence as if it has nothing in any way to do with us. For Muslims, this means thoughtfully and theologically critiquing and condemning religious violence, something I think that they are, on the whole, absolutely doing. For Christians, we know that while Christ claims dominion over the whole earth, our kingdom is not off/from this earth. We live in the tension of the already and the not yet, and carefully thinking about how we imagine the Kingdom of God and what our Lord says about it can be an important corrective.

Footnotes

1. John 18:36 (ESV). ↩

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2. Lewis, Bernard & Churchill, Buntzie Ellis, *Islam: The Religion and the People* (Wharton Press 2008) at 151. [↩](#)