

A few dangerous ideas in Christianity

Bruce Stevens

Actually there are more than a few. There are many dangerous ideas in Christianity.

We live in times when a claim to the sacred has routinely justified acts of hideous violence. It is not enough for any religion to claim to be 'peaceful' without a close examination of what it teaches and asking if particular beliefs might encourage a follower to violence. Personally, I have a traditional Christian faith, so it is the only faith I can speak about 'from the inside.'

Dangerous ideas

The Roman poet Lucretius (d. 55 BC) observed that 'religion can incite us to do much evil' (*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*). Psychologists Roy and Judy Eidelson¹ have developed the concept of 'dangerous ideas,' which has a religious application that I will explore in this paper. The Eidelsons have proposed five beliefs that propel groups towards conflict. Such beliefs contribute to worldviews that act as 'templates through which groups and group members interpret their shared experience.'² Naturally being committed to an ideology will have potential consequences in behaviour. Here are the Eidelsons' five dangerous ideas, which I will illustrate with reference to the Israel-Palestinian conflict:

- a. *Superiority*. This can be expressed in a collective worldview that expresses moral superiority, chosenness, entitlement and special destiny. This of course creates barriers with 'out-groups'. The

Professor Bruce A Stevens (PhD, Boston University, 1987) has the Wicking Chair of Ageing and Practical Theology at Charles Sturt University. He is director of the Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies. He attends Wesley Uniting Church in Canberra. The work of Professor Stevens is supported by a grant from JO & JR Wicking Trust. This article has been peer reviewed.

Jewish people have traditionally identified themselves as 'chosen by God' or the 'chosen people'. They are not unique in this; indeed, most ethnic groups claim some kind of superiority over others.

- b. *Injustice*. This includes historical grievances, often held for centuries, and breaking out in global hotspots. In the Middle East both Jews and Palestinians have a long history of being victimised. It is hardly surprising that the parties are so resistant to any proposals involving compromise.
- c. *Vulnerability*. There is insufficient control to guarantee safety. This is a common driver of ethnic conflict.³ Naturally this can result in hostility to perceived sources of threat—all for the purpose of ensuring safety. Both Jews and Palestinians have very good reasons to feel vulnerable.
- d. *Distrust*. This is shown in the perception that other groups are untrustworthy and have malign intentions. It can escalate into a collective paranoia. This is certainly a factor in Israel-Palestinian relations, again with some measure of historical justification.
- e. *Helplessness*. This leads the group to focus on its own weaknesses. Israel has always been surrounded by hostile nations. Perhaps feelings of helplessness also apply to the Palestinians, presently lacking even a homeland and facing the power exercised by Israel's military.

Each of these play out on an individual and group level. For example, an individual may feel socially disadvantaged because he or she is a member of an ethnic group. Additionally, such a person may have had experiences to support this perception. This sense of injustice may lead to acts of retaliation or in extreme cases terrorism and self-destruction.

These beliefs can be used to justify violence and even war. Roy Eidelson later applied the five themes to the appeals of US president George W Bush and his administration to justify invading Iraq.⁴ Appealing to such beliefs contains considerable rhetorical power. These five beliefs have also had currency in the Christian church, especially when Christians have been a persecuted minority in some societies. The claim to superiority, especially of various beliefs, has been relatively constant.

The notion of a dangerous idea is not well defined. It can be as innocuous as creativity in a business organisation,⁵ or a worthy cause such as non-violence,⁶ or the moral risk of scientific advances.⁷ Steven Pinker has considered what might comprise a dangerous idea, including the possibility that the ‘acceptance of the idea could lead to an outcome recognized as harmful’⁸ However, Lennard Davis, speaking in a context of higher education, has made the claim that ‘there are no ideas that are both true and dangerous. False ideas are dangerous because they spread misinformation, but a true idea can never be dangerous, although its application can have dangerous consequences.’⁹

Ideas, in my view, can be inherently dangerous. An example of such a dangerous idea is ‘transhumanism’, identified by Francis Fukuyama. It is the belief that advances in biotechnology can liberate humanity from our limits.¹⁰ Additionally there are many ideas, if believed, that can have violent consequences. One example is racial purity, which can justify violence as ‘ethnic cleansing’. There is no need to argue that strong links exist between belief in an idea, forming attitudes and acting in consistent ways. History is the proof!

While I am not attempting to define a dangerous idea, certain characteristics are obvious: a claim to belief; attractiveness to a group of people, perhaps with a seductive quality; and, for some followers, inspiration or justification for violence.

About Christianity

Now to embark on a dangerous path of my own, potentially offending everyone. In order to investigate the relevance to Christian beliefs I would ask for an initial suspension, not of belief, but of judgment. I want to examine a few distinctive Christian beliefs and consider how easy it might be to misuse these to justify violence.

I am not questioning whether a belief is true or not, or proposing that it be abandoned, but rather I am simply considering whether some religious beliefs might be assessed on their potential to inspire or justify violence. This is not to claim that all who hold such a belief might be inclined to act out in a given way. The question is whether a minority of believers, perhaps unstable emotionally and given to extreme views, might act in aggressive or potentially violent ways. Some zealous Christians, for example, have applied a belief in the sanctity of life to the foetus and then bombed abortion clinics.

A *justified* belief has a dangerous potential for action whether in a context of religious or political beliefs.

The following beliefs are offered as preliminary examples of those that might lead to violence. We need to address this at the level of ideas. As Miroslav Volf pointed out, 'It is too easy to blame corrupt human nature for religious violence. The connection between religion and violence is too tight not to examine the contribution of religions themselves to violence.'¹¹

Clearly dangerous

The notion of revelation is dangerous. While being rational is descriptive of most people, the content of revelation is available only to the select few.¹² God reveals his will, perhaps through a prophet in the Old Testament or through a spiritual gift being exercised in the New Testament church. 'Thus sayeth the Lord' is a claim for something higher than human authority and can easily be misused. It can also add weight to obscure Biblical texts, which might be simplistically applied to complex situations. There is always the potential in religious communities for cult leadership to emerge with a heightened authority based on individual revelation.

The Eidelsons' criterion of group superiority finds expression in the idea of God choosing a people. It is expressed in the covenant, 'You are a people holy to the Lord your God and the Lord has chosen you to be a people of his own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth.' (Deut. 7:6) This is especially dangerous when combined with notions of purity, with the obvious implication that other races are less pure. In the Old Testament this led to accounts of ethnic cleansing with a command to conquer and 'utterly destroy' the pagan people living in the promised land (Deut 20:17). In the New Testament the church comprises the elect of God (Mark 13:27) and this was linked to ideas of holiness (Eph. 1:4). This conjunction of racial superiority, purity and the revealed will of God is a potentially volatile blend, though of course there are counter messages in the New Testament with good news for all nations. No one is excluded.

Beliefs that might be classified as eschatological, such as the second coming of Christ, have inspired millennial groups over the centuries. This might justify political or revolutionary action, possibly even expectation of divine intervention to over-throw earthly powers. The 'this world' focus of the millennialist is both seductive and potentially violent, but the attraction need not end there. The idea of eternal life, with heaven or hell as the

eternal destination, can place a potentially exaggerated emphasis on acts in this world and in some cases may justify acts of violence.

There have been beliefs associated with the organisation of the state, such as the early modern doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. It is common to confer divine authority on leadership in the church. Popes in the late middle ages led armies in regional conflicts and called for crusades. The delineation of divine authority and human responsibility is fraught with difficulty.

Vulnerable to manipulation

The idea of humanity being fallen or inherently sinful is open to manipulation. It could justify seeing people as less than fully human. 'When religions become markers of group identity', observes theologian Miroslav Volf, 'they tend to exacerbate conflicts by providing groups with an aura of the sacred and thus energising and legitimising the struggles.'¹³ However, there may be counter-balances in doctrines such as that of humanity being created in the image of God.

Relatively neutral

There are possibly neutral beliefs. Some ideas do not strike me as carrying risk, for example that God created the earth and gave it life. The Christian view of God as a trinity can serve as a model for community and living in harmony. Yet creation theology has been used to justify the subordination of women, which indicates that even good theological principles can be misused.

Subversive non-violent ideas

Some beliefs seem to have the potential to be subversive of violence. Examples of this would include the incarnation and the suffering of God in Christ. These would seem at the very least to be antithetical to attitudes of triumphalism, whether human or divine. However, any belief can potentially be misused. The notion of identifying with a 'suffering God' has been used to justify not seeking any medical assistance for chronic pain. Or religious leaders have encouraged women to remain in violent homes on the basis that 'Christ suffered'.

A way forward?

There is no simple way forward because those most likely to take a violent path are hardly likely to read *St Mark's Review* or literature that critiques

dangerous religious ideas. Even those who might be given to extreme responses will presumably join in worship, hear sermons, gather in Christian fellowship and engage in some exchange of ideas. Not always, but sometimes. We are, after all, talking about those holding Christian beliefs.

So, the following steps might be kept in mind:

1. Resist platitudes that present Christianity as a 'peaceful' religion.
2. Acknowledge that there is a potential for violence in holding a number of our distinctive beliefs.
3. Insist that such beliefs are to be balanced with other more benign Christian beliefs.
4. Try to integrate such beliefs into a healthy system.
5. Encourage a more dialectical view of truth.

An example of this is our creeds or confessions of faith, where I would note that a set of propositions are equally acknowledged. There is no favouritism in beliefs—all are important and each balances the other. We can affirm that truth is, in some respects, dialectical. Consistent with a Trinitarian faith in one God but three persons, truths are affirmed but held in tension with other truths equally true. Maybe this will provide a safer way of believing.

A final thought about the vexed question of whether violence comes from religion or human nature. David Martin has argued that in Christianity there is a fundamental 'peace code' with an emphasis on conciliation and an attempt to bring the dynamic of redemption into the political realm.¹⁴ David Bentley Hart is vigorous in opposing so-called New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins, who argues that the certainty of beliefs in religion leads to violence.¹⁵ 'The truth is,' Hart asserts, 'that religion and irreligion are cultural variables, but killing is a human constant.'¹⁶ However, the truth is more nuanced. Of course there is violence in human nature, but certain beliefs encourage that innate trait to be more easily expressed. It is not a question of yes or no, but maybe. This should encourage Christian leaders to be more thoughtful in how we encourage the faithful to believe.

Endnotes

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3. On this point see also David A Lake and Donald S Rothchild, 'Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict', in D A Lake and D S Rothchild (eds), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion and Escalation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1998, pp. 3–32.
4. Roy J Eidelson, 'How Leaders Promote War by exploiting our Core Concerns', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, Vol. 25, 2013, pp. 219–26.
5. Alf Rehn, *Dangerous Ideas: When Provocative Thinking becomes your Most Valuable Asset*, Marshall Cavendish International, London, 2011.
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11. Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why we Need Religion in a Globalized World*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2015, p. 185.
12. Volf, *Flourishing*, p. 185.
13. Volf, *Flourishing*, p. 188.
14. David Martin, *Does Christianity cause War?*, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, 1997, p. 190.
15. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2006.
16. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009, p. 13.