

An international ecumenical colloquium on the theme “Theology and Violence”

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the members of the ecumenical colloquium

On 24–27 October 2018 an international ecumenical colloquium on the theme “Theology and Violence: Discerning the Roots of Religious Conflicts” was held in Bose, organized by the Biblical-Theological Institute St Andrew of Moscow in collaboration with the community of Bose.

Christianity has always claimed to be a religion of peace and nonviolence (“blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God,” “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”). From its very beginnings the adherents of Christianity suffered from severe persecution for their faith, so that martyrdom has always been praised as the highest form of devotion to God and has become part and parcel of the Christian ideal. The theology of martyrdom still remains relevant and often helps Christians of different confessions to overcome their differences and come together (the “ecumenism of blood,” as Pope Francis has called it).

At the same time Christians themselves often admitted, supported and even initiated violence against other groups: non-Christians, “heretics”, even against those coreligionists who shared different political views or belonged to a different ethnic group. Some famous theologians including Augustine, Luther and Calvin could not escape the temptation to justify violence against those who they thought persisted in their “wrongdoings” or “wrong thinking.”

Violence, at least in its legitimate forms, underlies any political system (especially the state, as Max Weber emphasized in his *Politics as a Vocation*), so perhaps it is a kind of “necessary evil” present in every society as well as in international relations. But perhaps religion is also based on violence or at least has to resort to violence in order to preserve order in a society and restrain it from even greater violence?

René Girard has transformed the discussion of religion and violence by his provocative “mimetic theory”. He locates “the sacred” in the vulnerable instability of societies in crisis. “Religion” (especially where this involves sacrifice) is nothing other than the attempt by such groups to survive, caught as they are in a vortex of competing desires and the struggle for recognition. “Sacrifice” here is equivalent to the social expedient of “scapegoating”. Girard goes on to claim that only the “real” sacred of the gospel of peace can overcome the “false” sacred of violent transcendence centred on victimization.

What can theological reflection on violence and religion bring out today, especially in view of the world torn by conflicts in which religion is engaged? In the course of the conference the following issues were addressed:

- Is it possible to overcome religious violence or are religion and violence inseparable?
- How should religion react to the language of violence when it gains strength in a society, especially when religion itself is used to support this language?
- In a situation of conflict, should religion take the side of one of the conflicting parts (given that we can rarely discern who is right and who is wrong) or should it try to be neutral and to remain “above” the conflict?
- What are the theological implications of violence?

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