



Fundamentalism & militancy: Religious violence outside the Abrahamic faiths

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(ABP) -- The three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are the most violent of the world's religions, scholars say. But all faiths can resort to violence on occasion, even the normally peaceful Hindus.

A common characteristic of violence among the Abrahamic religions is radical end-times expectations. The apocalypticism of the Taiping Rebellion in China (1845-1963) was taken directly from the book of Revelation and led to more than 20 million deaths. But apocalypticism also surfaced in the syncretistic beliefs of the contemporary Aum Shinrikyo cult, which also borrowed from Revelation.

-- Aum Shinrikyo

Aum Shinrikyo was a destructive doomsday cult centered in Japan. Their name was a combination of Aum, which is a sacred Hindu syllable, and Shinri Kyo, which means "supreme truth." It appears to be a syncretistic religion combining elements of Buddhism with Christianity. As an illegitimate Buddhist group, it has been rejected by Buddhist leaders in Japan.

Aum Shinrikyo terrorists released the nerve gas sarin in a Tokyo subway station March 20, 1995. The gas killed 12 passengers and injured over 5,000. Over 100 Aum members were charged, including its leader, Shoko Asahara.

Asahara was born partially blind in 1955 as Chizuo Matsumoto. He was trained as an acupuncturist, operated a folk-medicine shop, and opened a yoga school. He traveled to the Himalayas to study Buddhism and Hinduism. This led him to organize the Aum Shinrikyo in 1987, which reached a peak membership of about 20,000 worldwide, many drawn to the group's rejection of Japan's corruption and materialism.

Using the book of Revelation and the writings of Christian astrologer Nostradamus, Asahara predicted major disasters for the final years of the last millennium. He called for the group to fight in a final world revolution against the enemies of Japan, including the United States. The group established chemical factories and stockpiled various chemicals, as preparation for this Armageddon, and launched at least nine biological attacks on different Japanese targets, including the legislature, the Imperial Palace, and the U.S. base at Yokosuka.

After the arrest of Shoko Asahara and others for the sarin attack, Aum Shinrikyo changed its name to Aleph in 2000. Rika Matsumoto, third daughter of Asahara, has now taken charge of the cult.

-- Sikhism

Sikhism combines elements from Bhakti Hinduism, Advaita Hinduism and Sufism, with an emphasis on tolerance and coexistence between Muslims and Hindus. Sikhism grew on the borders between Islamic and Hindu regions of India, which have been violently contested areas for centuries.

Between 1981 and 1994, thousands of young men and perhaps a few hundred women were initiated into secret fraternities of various rival radical Sikh organizations. Their enemies were secular politicians, police, Hindu journalists and community leaders.

In June 1984, Sikh terrorists seized a Sikh holy shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. When Indian security forces retook the temple, 500 or more people were killed, including many innocent worshippers. Six months later, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards as revenge for this act of profanity. On the following day, more than 2,000 Sikhs were massacred in Delhi and elsewhere.

In 1991, over 3,000 people were killed during disturbances in the Sikh-dominated province of Punjab. Sikh extremists then attacked the Indian ambassador to Romania. The Romanian government helped to capture the Sikhs. Later that year militant Sikhs kidnapped a Romanian diplomat in Delhi in retaliation.

-- Hinduism

Hinduism is generally viewed by outsiders as a peaceful religious system. However, there have been violent incidents, such as the 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, a champion of non-violence, by Hindu fundamentalist Nathuram Godse.

Believers in the doctrine of Hindutva asserts that Hinduism, as the 'indigenous' faith of India, must be dominant and that all 'foreign' religions must be subject to the will of the majority. For a time, a certain form of fundamentalism has exerted considerable impact on Indian mainstream politics. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was formed in 1980 as the political expression of Hindutva.

Hindu fundamentalism is manifested in the family of Hindu nationalist organizations known as Sangh Parivar. In 1992, Sangh Parivar activists stormed and destroyed the 16th century mosque in Ayodha, India. The act sparked riots between Muslims and Hindus, which killed thousands.

In late 2007 and early 2008, Hindu fundamentalists in the India's rural region of Orissa attacked Christian churches and villages, burning many and forcing thousands of people to flee into the forest. Hindus in the region say Christian mobs responded in kind. Some people blame anti-Christian rhetoric of politicians and residents; others say it is a social and not religious problem.

-- Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka

Tamil Tigers are fighting for independence for the Tamils, a mostly Hindu ethnic population in north and east Sri Lanka, the island nation southeast of India. Tamils have suffered persecution by Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist majority for decades. An estimated 70,000 people have died since 1983, 5,000 in the last 18 months. Violent opposition to the Tigers is now led by hard-line Buddhist monks.

-- Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia

While Christians have been persecuted in other parts of Muslim-dominated Indonesia, they were once the majority in the island chain of Maluku because of settlement by colonial Dutch, Portuguese and English traders seeking valuable nutmeg and other spices of the islands. More recently, deep fear and mistrust between Muslim and Christian residents of Maluku's main island, Ambon, has led to violence on both sides.

The history of Ambon is very similar to what has taken place all over Southeast Asia after the collapse of colonial rule, including conflicts in Nagaland, India, and the situation of the Karen people in Burma. While the violence is often dubbed religious sectarian, there are larger political and economic issues at stake. In many cases, "religious identities" are simply ways to mark identities and form alliances between tribal and ethno-linguistic communities.

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