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#### Review of doctoral dissertation

Author: rev. Anthony Chukwuebuka Ohaekwusi, MA, *Ethical Analysis of Religious Violence in the Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*.

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Department of Philosophy, Lublin 2020, 270 pages. Supervisor: rev. dr hab. Alfred Marek Wierzbicki, professor of CUL

In his dissertation, rev. Anthony Chukwuebuka Ohaekwusi took on one of the most important problems in the area of philosophy of religion – the relationship between religion and violence. It is a complicated issue, because on one hand one should pose the question about whether human violence originates from religion, on the other – whether religion in its very nature is a phenomenon that can exist without violence. The author ignores the first question, focusing on the other; presumably, the reason behind the decision is the belief that it is difficult to establish original sources of violence (and to locate them solely in religious behavior). However, even when limiting oneself to the second issue (whether religion is possible without violence) one is faced with an extremely complex problem, impossible to solve in an abstract way, detached from the history of religion; after all, violence is present in many religious practices (human or animal sacrifice), institutional religious structures based on authority (vow of obedience), religious doctrines (the history of salvation as bloody, violent history), as well as moral norms forced upon the believers (law revealed by God). Even though, as the PhD candidate rightly points out, the fact that there has been violence in every religion (e.g. persecutions of dissenters and people considered to be heretics) is not sufficient evidence that religion in its essence generates violence, it must be considered in philosophical studies of the relationship between religion and violence.

Although one could always hypothesize that the history of religion does not reveal its essence, the fact remains that so far there has been no religion free from violence and thus one could (at least hypothetically) assume that it is highly likely that violence is an inseparable trait of every religion. Even if religious violence is only the result of natural human cruelty, which is also expressed in other areas of life (politics, science, law, art), the very fact of its presence in history suggests that a belief in God does not eliminate our bad proclivities.



Rev. Ohaekwusi does not unequivocally settle the issue of links between religion and violence, aware of the complexities of the problem. He is actually dissatisfied with all three positions on the matter cited in the dissertation, that is absolutism (the very nature of religion leads to violence), separatism (religion and violence have nothing to do with each other), and instrumentalism (religion is only a tool of violence, whose roots and goals are not religious in nature). Aware that all these theories are at risk of being countered (pp. 66-73), the PhD candidate proposes a less radical solution, close to a weaker version of absolutism; while it does not identify religion with violence (pp.72, 212-213), it does acknowledge the existence of unique religious violence, which cannot be reduced to other types of violence (social, political, or economical). This interpretation is confirmed by the title of the dissertation, which includes the category of "religious violence" rather than using the two terms separately ("religion and violence") or linking them by accident, not in essence ("violence in religion"). Thus, one can say that the author on one hand points to the non-accidental and confirmed by many historical examples, links between religion and violence (p.147), on the other assumes that it is possible, at least in the sense of a logical possibility, for religion to exist without violence (even if there has been no such religion so far).

If I correctly interpret the PhD candidate's intentions, building a religion without violence would be conditioned on respecting the ethical Golden Rule (according to which one should not do upon others what they do not want done to them), supported by the personalistic norm, according to which a person is endowed with unique dignity and deserves respect (p.229). Rev. Ohaekwusi derives both the Golden Rule and personalistic norm not from Kant's moral philosophy, but from religious personalism, whose basics can be found in the Bible and even in the Quran (pp.218-221). Not to negate such an interpretation of texts which are considered holy within monotheistic religions, one should however note, that besides the Golden Rule and personalistic norm, other rules can also be found in these texts, including ones directly or indirectly calling for violence and killing (especially of dissenters, heretics, and enemies of religion). For this reason, rev. Ohaekwusi suggests that the best solution is to abandon (or at least limit) religious fundamentalism which would result in abandoning those rules which go against our basic intuitions and moral norms. This suggestion seems accurate, as it would mean the necessity of constant ethical review of all individual religions, from the perspective of the Golden Rule (and the personalistic norm). In practice it should lead to abandoning many traditional rituals (e.g. killing animals) and laws (e.g. refusal to grant full rights to people based on their sexual orientation), however this is not something that religious fundamentalists want to agree to. Therefore, the idea of a religion based on widely accepted moral norms, which



would prohibit any violence seems utopian. While the PhD candidate is correct that the starting point of building such a religion would have to be the pacifist elements of various religions (Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or even Islam), the end result would have to be a pluralistic religion, one where specific denominations do not matter; in this scenario at least some reasons for potential conflicts (belief that one has a monopoly on truth or means of salvation) would not generate persecutions of those who believe differently, because in the end everyone would be a member of a universal human religious community. Such a vision of pluralism is not included in the dissertation, even though it seems like a natural development of the candidate's ideas for abandoning religious fundamentalism and at the same time assuming constant ethical control of all religions (especially in the area of doctrine, rituals, and institutions).

A primary condition of any attempts to bring into being a religion without violence is a precise and detailed diagnosis of religious violence – especially in the areas of its origins, methods, motivations, and tasks; a detailed study of these issues (to which the first two parts of the dissertation are devoted) is, in my opinion, the candidate's most important achievement. Rev. Ohaekwusi did not limit himself to studying the narrow field of philosophy of religion or moral philosophy (only the third part of the dissertation is fully devoted to ethical issues) but presented a uniquely broad spectrum of the issue, including numerous links between religion and violence, both in the past and present. The candidate navigates, with impressive ease and expertise, not only contemporary issues regarding studies of religion, but also the political discourse and above all studies on terrorism (which are gaining significance in academia). The overview of various aspects of the phenomenon of terrorism presented in the dissertation (including specifically religious terrorism) is impressive as rev. Ohaekwusi points to various strategies and motivations of people who turn to terrorism as their main weapon. This empirical basis of the dissertation is invaluable for moral studies of religious violence; before it becomes possible to conduct a more or less comprehensive evaluation of the phenomenon, one must first recognize it in detail. This empirical aspect is also important because, as rev. Ohaekwusi stresses, contemporary religious terrorists often use history as the basis and moral justification for their actions (p.158).

It should be stressed that the candidate has perfect command of the gathered empirical material without losing sight of the main problem – the moral judgment of religious violence in the context of contemporary debates about terrorism. The author's analytical sense results in him not endorsing one definition of religious violence or terrorism, putting all of the terms in context. Pointing to the emotional, religious, and political meaning of the concept of terrorism depending on which side of the conflict the researcher stands is especially valuable (pp.109-



111, 146). Despite the uniquely delicate nature of the issues, he takes on, rev. Ohaekwusi does his best to consistently maintain the perspective of an unengaged observer. Due to this approach, the dissertation shows the moral complexity of religious violence; the same suicide attack is for believers in one religion an unprecedented crime, and for believers of another – an act of martyrdom which will open the gates of paradise. A comprehensive and objectified moral judgement requires one to consider both points of view, which at first glance may seem unseemly, yet is necessary from an academic perspective.

These research perspectives, utilized by the author, allow us to include the reviewed dissertation in a fruitful, yet too rarely exploited model in philosophy of religion, which uses both an empirical approach (most fully realized by William James in his famous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) and a linguistic conceptualism characteristic to analytical philosophy. As a result, the dissertation is not only significant for research on religious violence but is also an inspiring and worth following model of doing philosophy of religion as a field closely linked to empirical religious studies, ethics, historical, social, political, and legal studies. There is no doubt that the results of this research are not limited to the narrow issue of religious violence but have significance for the further development of philosophy of religion as a distinct field of studies. The dissertation is especially valuable in Poland, where we are still dealing with various religious taboos, especially those related to Christianity; any attempt to take a more critical look at the history of Christianity (especially at the not always praiseworthy history of the Roman Catholic Church) is met with accusations of antipathy towards national traditions or even (vaguely explained) christianophobia. Therefore it would be extremely valuable for rev. Ohaekwusi dissertation to be translated into Polish and published as a monograph; the institution which would undertake the translation and publishing of the dissertation in Polish would greatly contribute to the development of Polish humanities (especially philosophy of religion).

The central category of the dissertation is religious violence; when analyzing it the author does not limit it to physical violence, but points to various examples of symbolic violence which is the basis and justification for the physical persecution of followers of other religions. The candidate presents various contexts in which one can talk about religious violence, however certainly the most important of them is judging violence (including a terrorist act) as a morally praiseworthy act (p.7) dictated by God (or at least appreciated by God), which will guarantee eternal salvation to the one who committed it, as well as create the opportunity to absolve the sins of its victim (pp.20-21, 124, 134, 139). Religious violence is thus sanctioned as an act of sacrifice or even martyrdom (p.123) thanks to which a person not only defends God and the



inviolability of divine law but creates the opportunity of salvation for those, who according to the persecutor, do not know God or are not obedient to Him. Precisely this positive valorization of religious violence as a heroic act of sacrifice makes it very difficult to unequivocally condemn it on the basis of the religion itself; therefore if we are to give a neutral evaluation of religious violence, we must abandon the religious or political perspective and adopt an ethical one. This is what rev. Ohaekwusi does in his dissertation, correctly assuming that religion is not the source of morality but rather morality is the basis of judging religion. While the candidate is perfectly aware that religions function in many societies as the only (or most important) sources of morality (pp.80, 122, 211), there is no doubt that the opposite relationship where religions are morally judged, is the correct approach (p.191). It is not religion that should be the basis of moral norms that people must follow, but the other way around – ethics must be the basis of a moral judgment of religion; before we accept God as the source of our moral obligations, we must judge whether His dictates and prohibitions are morally correct (or at least acceptable). The main reason is not even the history of religious violence but rather the fact that appealing to God's will as a source of morality results in extreme relativism; for if God is the highest moral authority then every action dictated by Him must be considered good (even killing one's own child), which is an ethical absurdity. An attempt of a religious justification of moral norms also leads to creating a new and unjustified hierarchy of values, according to which defending religion is raised to the rank of the most holy of duties which can justify killing people considered the enemies of God. Rev. Ohaekwusi avoids these negative consequences precisely because he does not consider religion to be the source of morality but rather morality to be the basis of judging religion in all its aspects.

The broad historical overview of religious violence included in the dissertation bears witness to the fact that there has been no religion free of violence so far. Although the author rightly points out that in regard to doctrine and the founder's teachings, Buddhism would have to be considered the most pacifist of religions, even this religion (considering its complicated history) has not been free from violence; after all in many cases Buddhist monasteries have been military units (pp.29-31). Judaism is certainly the most violent of religions – according to its traditions Jahwe's dictates where the source of cruelty shown to other tribes; by offering His chosen people the Promised Land, He supported the military banishments (or even exterminations) of native inhabitants. Rev. Ohaekwusi presents many excerpts from the Hebrew Bible which may justify violence or even openly encourage it by way of divine dictates (pp.35-37, 95-95). However, it seems that the primary text of God sanctioning violence is the story of Cain and Able which suggests that human sin's (the killing of one's brother) primary origin



was the arbitrary and unjust decision by God, who accepted Able's sacrifice and rejected Cain's (p.154). Although this does not justify Cain's actions, it explains it because it shows that God allowed for the two brothers to fight for His reward (p.154).

One can also find praise for violence in the New Testament (p.99-102); one of the reason is the fact that Jesus approved the continued application of Jewish law which need not change by a single letter (Mt 5, 18). Although the candidate focuses more on the texts that call for violence authored by popes, holy people, or Doctors of the Church who called for crusades and the killing of Muslims as acts dictated by God (p.44-47), the actual source of Christian violence were some of Jesus' teachings who would sometimes use dehumanizing language, for example: calling people who did not belong to the Israeli tribe dogs (Mt 15, 26), the priesthood – a brood of vipers (Mt 12, 34), and Peter – Satan tempting him to do evil (Mt 16, 23). Another example of calling for violence may be the statement that one should remove the eye that is the source of sin in order not to lose one's chance of salvation (Mk 9, 47-48) or the warning to only be afraid of those who lose their souls (MT 10, 28) because merely killing the body, if it does not damage the soul, is not dangerous. An even deeper source of religious violence in Christianity is the commandment of love, which the candidate seems not to notice, instead seeing it as one of the possible routes to freeing religion from violence (p.218). Contrary to the dominant (and positive at their core) interpretations of this commandment (one should love even foes and enemies) it can also be interpreted negatively – in the name of God and neighbor, one should kill sinners and enemies of religion. The commandment of love positions God above all else, and humans in the second place. Therefore, if there is any conflict between a religious dictate (serving God) and the commandment to love thy neighbor, the good of the human has to be sacrificed in the name of obedience to God. Take for example the sentencing of Jesus by Jewish priests – they did not hesitate to sentence an innocent man to torture and death just because they decided he was depraved and a blasphemer who broke religious law. The fear of God's wrath turned out to be stronger than basic human justice and the commandment to love thy neighbor. The commandment of love also has another undesired consequence – after all to love thy neighbor means to care about his wellbeing. If eternal salvation is the height of wellbeing then one should do everything in their power for them to achieve it; thus, one should force their neighbor to accept the true faith even if it means persecution and death. The person may lose their earthly live, but they will gain eternal happiness in heaven.

Regardless of how the commandment of love is understood, the final source of religious violence in Christianity is the distinctive image of God in this religion; although the Creator and Savior is called perfectly good and merciful, there is clearly evil present in deeds ascribed



to Him. The most basic one is the cruelty of nature, meaning some species of aware and feeling beings may only survive at the cost of eating other aware and feeling beings. If God created nature, He cannot be a good and merciful Father who cares equally about all his creatures; by condemning some species to a fight for survival he turned out to be cruel and callous. The Christian history of salvation shows God's imperfections even more clearly, especially in the story of the Messiah who, as a complete innocent, had to take upon himself all the evil in the world and repent for it before his Father. After all, a God who did not save even his own son, but instead condemned him, despite his complete innocence, to torture and death, does not meet the basic principle of justice; no one would consider a court sentence, which resulted in an innocent person going to prison or to the gallows only to save the actual criminal from guilt and punishment, to be a just one. As a consequence of accepting such an injustice in religion, Christians turn out to be in fact moral relativists; while they do not accept injustice perpetrated by humans, they consider it a sign of the highest good and love when the God they believe in does it. If God can be openly unjust and cruel, one cannot be surprised that lawlessness, injustice, and cruelty are done in His name. This situation shows that Christian theologians are faced with a similar dilemma to the one faced by first Greek philosophers – they must cleanse their religious myths so that God in whom they believe is not morally worse than people. Unfortunately, this consideration is absent from the candidate's argumentation, and it is the biggest flaw of the reviewed dissertation; for if we do not see the cruelty of God in whose existence (and even goodness) we want to believe, we will not diagnose the primary origins of religious violence. The Roman Catholic Church is perfectly aware of the cruelty of Christianity and tries to replace the idea of embodied and resurrected Christ by Eucharistic Christ, who comes down to the altar in a bloodless sacrifice; if Eucharistic Christ works in the Church, there is no need to reference the salutary sacrifice on the cross, which is a radical revision of Christian doctrine. However, since this issue goes beyond the scope of the reviewed dissertation, I will not go into more detail, I just wanted to clearly state that a moral revision of the idea of God is a necessary condition of building a religion without violence, as postulated by the candidate. This was missing from the reviewed dissertation.

Focusing on the human aspect of religious violence, rev. Ohaekwusi is perfectly aware that both Judaism and Christianity too easily justify their history, citing the idea of the Fall (pp.76-77); for if we come to this world marked by sin, it is hardly surprising that also our religious behavior are not free from evil. However, according to the candidate, a more important source of religious violence is propaganda (characteristic to many religions, including Christianity and Islam) which divides people into believers and non-believers, kin and



strangers, belonging to God and possessed by Satan (p.206); so if Satan is absolute evil, one should kill all his representatives on Earth which leads to the sacralization of evil and crime (pp.203-204). This pathological dualism (p.205) leads to a permanent dehumanization (or even demonization) of believers in other religions (or atheists), which is a permanent element of religious propaganda (pp.192-194, 210). Although rev. Ohaekwusi limits himself to giving examples of using such language during the crusades or contemporary radical Islamic texts, there are also examples of Polish bishops, like calling LGBTQIA people a plague, that fit into the discourse which considers violence a sacred and dictated by God form of worshipping Him. Symbolic violence is very often an ideological preparation for physical violence; yet according to the candidate the latter only happens when the other becomes completely depersonalized and dehumanized. For this reason religious terrorists are not even blind to moral values, but blind to the humanity of others (pp.234-237). This means that by calling a specific group a plague, or not normal people who should not have basic and common human rights, one excludes them from what rev. Ohaekwusi calls an elementary metaphysical brotherhood, which should connect us all (pp.234-237). Exclusion, sooner or later, will result in physical violence or even terrorist acts aimed at groups of people stigmatized for no reason; thus, ironically, belief in a merciful God turns out to be a form of religiously ideological preparation to extermination.

The less typical examples of religious violence perpetrated by, for example, American supremacists who cite Christianity (p.171) or representatives of radical movements to defend life, pointed out by rev. Ohaekwusi are also an extremely valuable element of the reviewed dissertation. Especially worrying are the examples of acts of terrorism committed by supporters of a complete ban on abortion, which include bombing clinics where such procedures take place as well as executions of individual doctors who are abortion providers (pp.13, 8). However, even less radical groups of so-called “defenders of life” which limit themselves to verbal violence (calling everyone who does not support a complete ban on abortion a completely false name of “supporter of free killing of unborn babies”), also cite God’s (supposed) law protecting any form of human life. This strategy, also typical for the Roman Catholic Church, shows that unfounded moral rigor, blind to the often-tragic complexity of life, is also an important source of religious violence. However, contrary to naïve speculations by some philosophers, moral dilemmas exist and one of the invaluable advantages of this dissertation is acceptance of this fact; if I read the author’s argumentation correctly, one of the forms of religious violence he highlights is the demand of moral heroism (supposedly on the name of God’s law).

When diagnosing various sources and forms of religious violence (sometimes hidden under other forms, like moral violence), rev. Ohaekwusi also cites various attempts to explain



it, especially the theory of mimetic following developed by Girard (pp.154-155) and the conflict theory of social life (p.76). Not negating the validity of these explanation, the candidate points to deeper roots of religious violence, linked to the most primary experience that is the existence of other people. From the perspective of our most primary experience, which is shown by the biblical myth of Cain and Able, the other is not a neighbor to be love, but a stranger to be feared (or hated); on a social level this relationship is shown in the form of identifying with one's kin and rejecting others as enemies (pp.234-235). This form of dualism is strengthened by the (aforementioned and typical for religion) pathological dualism, according to which everyone who does not share our beliefs is considered an embodiment of the devil. In this case, as the candidate argues, the only way to prevent religious violence is to omit surface, and often external aspects of interpersonal relationships (nationality, race, gender, or religion) and focus on the deeper metaphysical level, from the perspective of which we are all people – without any additional qualifications (pp.236-237). Rev. Ohaekwusi sees this understanding of the idea of universal brotherhood as a chance to build a religion free from violence (p.238). This idea, despite certainly being morally righteous, may also seem utopian; the main reason being that none of us are capable of fully and honestly seeing another as a complete equal to ourselves. We are often indifferent to the fate of others, especially those who have no effect on our lives; a person is usually more worried about their own toothache than about their neighbor dying of cancer or thousands of children starving to death in many regions of the world. While this indifference does not necessarily mean we are ready to persecute or kill others, it does show that we are quite indifferent to their fate, not trying to help them.

Another obstacle in seeing the humanity of other people is that religious identity is often stronger than tribal, class, gender, or national identities (p.148); therefore, it can put a veil over other people's humanity, forcing one to see them not as bothers but as enemies, dissenters, apostates, or even children of Satan, which is supposed to justify their persecution (p.149). In this case, it may turn out that the only way to completely eliminate religious violence is not an attempt to build a universal human family of equals (as postulated by the author of the dissertation) but rather abandoning religion as such. The candidate will most certainly not agree to such a solution, for if I read his work correctly, rev. Ohaekwusi believes that people have a religious nature, which is supposedly proven by them searching for the meaning of life and action (pp.65, 232). However, even without negating the claim that we search for meaning in everything we do, one might doubt whether this fact is a sufficient argument in favor of the thesis that we are naturally religious. The meaning of human activity (and even life) does not need to have a transcendent and absolute nature, which would be guaranteed by a God who



offers everyone eternal salvation in a future life. On the contrary, our life and activity may be considered meaningful even if God does not exist and life ends for good at the point of death. Working to ensure that future generations have access to natural resources (especially water and oxygen), to peacefully solve global conflicts of interest, or to prevent any form of discrimination can also be the meaning of one's life. Therefore, one cannot claim that the lives of people who, without any religious motivation, devoted themselves to peaceful (and violence free) fight against racism, xenophobia, or homophobia, have no meaning. One also cannot dismiss as meaningless women's fight for their rights (including reproductive rights), even if they are not motivated by religion and are even faced with various forms of religious violence perpetrated against them. The fight of LGBTQIA people for their rights (at least the right to marriage and adoption) are similarly meaningful, even if their motivations are humanistic and not religious. Thus, it is not the mythical salvation guaranteed by God that is the source of meaning of human life; sometimes it is quite the contrary – the source of a meaningful life is the opposition to religion which (in the name of abstract norms or mythical promises) takes away people's right to freedom and dignified life. Therefore, just the fact that people are beings who look for meaning, as rev. Ohaekwusi writes (p.65), does not prove that they are naturally religious. It is just as difficult to agree with another justification of the thesis about natural religiosity of humanity, which references the fact that humans are ritualistic beings (p.218); ritual behaviors may also take non-religious forms, for example academic rituals (like awarding academic degrees) or political rituals (like celebrating transfers of power).

The reviewed dissertation also includes other claims which seem dubious, or at least not fully justified - as an example – the suggestion that every form of attack on a mosque or church should be interpreted as religious violence (p.77). It is indeed possible that in certain conditions a mosque or a church have a strategic or military purpose, and thus their destruction in the middle of war operations does not necessarily have a religious meaning. Similarly, the so-called “attacks on churches” during protests in Poland did not have a religious subtexts (and they were not a form of religious violence or blasphemy). Even if a religious ceremony was interrupted or a slogan was painted on a sacred building's wall, the goal was simply to demand justice for the clergy who committed crimes or covered them up. Even in the case of actions conducted as part of the Polish Women's Strike, the protests in churches were not an example of religious violence or limiting the rights of believers but were a symbolic demand for a particular religious institution to stop claiming the right to control the lives of all women (especially those who do not consider this institution's dogmas to be true).



Regardless of these polemic comments, which are a result of a differing philosophical perspective, I have no doubt that the dissertation prepared by rev. Ohaekwusi is a great contribution to studies of religious violence (especially in the context of its moral judgement). The author presented vast knowledge of contemporary debates about terrorism (especially religious terrorism) at the same time trying to show the possibility for a violence-free religion to exist. An especially valuable element of the dissertation is not only the broad usage of important ethical theories formulated based on Western philosophy (the dissertation includes numerous references to the works of Dietrich von Hildebrand, Hannah Arendt, or Zygmunt Bauman) but also referencing traditional African ethics as a form of practical use of the personalistic norm or the Golden Rule (pp;222-223, 241, 251-252). Personally, I would encourage the candidate to extend that last element in the published version of the dissertation, as African philosophy (also contemporary) remains largely unknown in the West; yet there is no doubt that such a fresh breeze of new and original ideas would be very beneficial for philosophy (on a global scale). Therefore, one should agree with the author that using traditional African ethics could be one of the foundations of a religion free from violence in the name of God (p.251).

**Conclusion:** the reviewed doctoral dissertation titled *Ethical Analysis of Religious Violence in the Contemporary Debates on Terrorism* meets all the requirements for such a dissertation (in fact, it considerably exceeds them and is on a level comparable to post-doc dissertations), therefore I recommend, with full conviction, that rev. Anthony Chukwuebuka Ohaekwusi be promoted to the next stage of the doctoral degree conferment procedure. Given the originality of the research project (especially from a philosophy of religion perspective), the scope and versatility of the research and the significance of its results regarding religious violence, I recommend that the Council of the Institute of Philosophy at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin considers awarding the PhD candidate a degree with honors.

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