

**THE ZERO-SUM LOGIC:
A RATIONALE FOR VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE**

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ABSTRACT

Title: The Zero-sum Logic: A Rationale for Violence in the Bible

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My thesis analyzes selected biblical passages to argue that the zero-sum logic formed an integral part of people's understanding of conflict in the Bible. The characters in these passages perceived the world to exist in finite quantities and already fully distributed so that one person's gain meant another's loss. This logic often influenced how conflicts unfolded in biblical times, and why they broke out in the first place.

In the process of the dissemination of the Bible, the same logic has shaped the worldview of many people who have looked to the Bible as the inspired word of God and the primary source of instruction for daily living. This worldview has largely influenced the negatively defined way of thinking about identity, ethnicity, religion and Nationalism in terms of 'us' vs 'them' and the all or nothing nature of religious conflicts. Informed by the zero-sum logic, religiously defined groups tend to perceive themselves to have mutually incompatible interests with other groups. This fosters an insider/ outsider ideology which creates a marginalized other who is perceived as a threat to the existence of the group and as such any violence orchestrated against this other is justified as necessary for the survival of the group.

My study further contends that the perception of a limited universe nuanced in the selected biblical passages is fundamentally rooted in and influenced by the cultural and socio-economic realities of the Agrarian world in which the Bible was born.

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Chapter One Introduction

The pupils of a Primary School in Kitui county Kenya were excited and could express their elation to anybody in sight. When asked the cause of their delight, two girls quickly quipped: “We have a tour to Nairobi tomorrow. That bus [pointing at the school bus] will take us early tomorrow morning.” “When will you visit Uganda?” I asked them. “Uganda is very, very far” they answered “and we fear bombs in planes. No, we can’t fly!” Pointing at another girl nearby, “these Muslims...” Though the girl protested the accusation, the two were sure they had communicated the message to the stranger.¹

The legacy of religion is sometimes tainted with gruesome images of violence that some would with immediacy perceive their lives threatened at a sight of a group of religious people on their way from a religious event.² There seems to be an endemic dark attraction between religion and violence which pervades religious images and practices, from sacred swords to mythic conquests, from acts of sacrifice to holy wars.³ From forms such as just wars, conflict over sacred grounds, notions of cosmic war to particular forms of violence like sacrificial rites and militant martyrdom, religion has sometimes been a fertile ground for violence.

Charles Kimball points to the irony that religion, albeit being a source of motivation for individuals and communities to pursue higher values and transcend self-interest holds a dark legacy—a legacy of violence. He writes:

Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. The record of history shows that noble acts of love, self-sacrifice and service to others are frequently rooted in deeply held religious worldviews. At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has been linked directly to the worst examples of human behaviour. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil is perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.⁴

Whereas studies suggest that the degree of interreligious tension and violence has significantly declined globally, from 91 countries experiencing violence tendencies due to tensions between religious groups in 2007, to 57 countries by 2017, there has been a rise in the reported cases of harassment by individuals and social groups, religious violence by organized groups, and

¹ Simon Bwambale and David Kajoba, “Christianity and Islam: Symbols of Love and Commitment to God; Prerequisites to Meaningful Neighbourliness” (paper presented at the conference on Role of Religion in Peace Building of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, Kampala, 11 August 2016), 1.

² Christopher Hitchens holds and gives reasons why he would feel threatened if he saw a group of religious men from a religious gathering approaching him in the dusk. See; Paul S. Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200.

³ Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson, “Introduction: The Enduring Relationship of Religion and Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

⁴ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002), 1.

hostilities related to religious norms. In the United States alone, religious based hate crimes went up by 23 percent in 2017.⁵

Although conflict, indeed, is at a centre of all human interaction,⁶ and for some contemporary Weberian theorists, “conflict, not consensus is the normal condition operative in any society,”⁷ one would expect religion to be and/ or present an antidote. The responsibility of every human person for moral action is arguably imbued in the core teachings of all world religious traditions. The well-being of individual persons and society in general is foundational to all religious experience.⁸ One therefore wonders; how is it that religion, having peace, justice and the well-being of every human person at the core of its teaching, has been and still is so culpable for acts of violence? Why is history stained with scores of victims of violence at the hands of religion? What is it about religion that ends in conflict even when the sacred writings emphasize peaceful living? The burden of this thesis is to work towards an understanding of the mindset undergirding the perpetrators of religious violence in biblical monotheistic traditions.

There are a variety of scholarly debates about the relationship between religion and violence.⁹ One school of thought argues for a principal relationship between religion and violence by suggesting that the promotion of violence is a salient aspect of all religions.¹⁰ A second school of thought denies any such relationship by arguing that peace is a fundamental emphasis of all religions. As such, the real motivations behind so-called “religious violence” are anything but religious and the actions of perpetrators indicate a disqualifying lack of understanding of what it means to be part of the community.¹¹ There is also a line of thought that holds that religion can neither be absolved against the charge of violence, nor is it the problem. For these, religion is not necessarily the problem, but it can be problematic in regard to violence.¹² Additionally, there is a

⁵ See Pew Research Centre, “How Religious Restrictions around the World Have Changed over a Decade”, Religion and Public Life (July 2019) <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>. Accessed on 01/12/2019.

⁶ Rick Linden presents conflict and Marxist arguments that human beings interact on a basis of conflict rather than consensus. Thus, where there are different views, there will be conflict. Rick Linden, *Criminology: A Canadian Perspective* (3d ed.; Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 293.

⁷ For Weberian theorists, any society displaying a high degree of consensus should be considered abnormal. See Linden, *Criminology*, 298.

⁸ Drawing from the works of Jonathan Watts, Arvind Sharma, and Walter Rauschenbusch, a case can be made that whereas the expressions are different in these different traditions, social justice is a core principle in Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity; see Jonathan S. Watts, “Karma for Everyone: Social Justice and the Problem of Re-Ethicizing Karma in Theravada Buddhist Societies,” in *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice* (ed. Jonathan S. Watts; Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2009), 13–34; Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); and Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1913). The same case can be made for Islam and Judaism.

⁹ A selection of the arguments concerning the relationship between religion and violence are discussed more comprehensively in this chapter one.

¹⁰ For this line of thought, see for example; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005); Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, The Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

¹¹ For such arguments see for example, Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹² For this line of thought see; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (4th ed.; Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017); Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2002).

line of argument that undermines the idea of “religion” as a transhistorical and transcultural category that is inherently more violent than secular phenomena as a constructed ideological category.¹³

My study, however, is burdened neither with whether religion either does or does not promote violence, or the degree to which religion is to be blamed, nor do I analyze the parameters of the category “religion” and how it is constructed. Rather, my thesis is burdened by the reason why anyone can look to religion as either a cause, a justification or a means to conduct violence. Precisely, why is religion part of the violence discourse in the first place? This thesis proceeds from the hypothesis that entrenched in some biblical texts is the zero-sum logic which is precursory to violence in monotheism.

In this thesis, I examine selected conflict narratives in the Bible in light of the zero-sum theory, to demonstrate that the structure of these conflict narratives is largely zero-sum: the actors in these stories perceive the most desirable things in their individual universes to be inelastic and in limited supply, so that one person’s gain is equal to another person’s loss.

Through a social analysis of certain patriarchal conflict narratives, this thesis asserts that the zero-sum logic formed an integral part of people’s understanding of conflict in the Bible. Importantly, the thesis evinces that the cognitive orientations in biblical monotheistic traditions are largely informed by this zero-sum logic. The zero-sum logic, I demonstrate, fosters an insider/outsider ideology that creates a marginalized “other” whose interests are perceived as mutually exclusive with the insider and as such a threat to the existence of the insider. This renders any violence orchestrated against this other justifiable and necessary for the survival of the group.

By arguing for a zero-sum understanding of conflict in the Bible, this thesis is by no means claiming a biblical origin of the zero-sum thinking as embraced in the world. It rather upholds that the biblical depictions fortify and consolidate the zero-sum logic because through its dissemination, the Bible has had some negative effect on ethnicity, religion and Nationalism in terms of an “us” vs “them.” Notably, this thesis avows that the mindsets at play in religiously motivated violence are not unique to religion but rather are a demonstration of underlying anthropological concerns. Drawing on George Foster’s “Peasant Society and Image of Limited Good,”¹⁴ I posit that this zero-sum framing in the biblical narratives attests to the worldview of the Agrarian world in which the biblical writers were socialized.

The definition of “religion” continues to defy scholarly consensus.¹⁵ For example, Hector Avalos defines religion as “a mode of life and thought that presupposes the existence of, and relationship with, unverifiable forces and/or beings.”¹⁶ John Hick, for his part, defines religion “as an understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate way of living within it, which

¹³ For this such arguments see; William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

¹⁴ George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293–315.

¹⁵ For disagreements about the definition of religion see; Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 45–46.

¹⁶ Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 19.

involves reference beyond the natural world to God or gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process.”¹⁷ This, for Hicks, includes both theistic and nontheistic faiths, but excludes “naturalistic” belief systems like communism and humanism.¹⁸ In politics, religion and the common good, Martin Marty, gives over fifteen different definitions of religion to make a case that “scholars will never agree on the definition of religion.”¹⁹ He instead chooses to give five features of religion, which features are—ironically displayed by other categories like politics²⁰

Mark Juergensmeyer, while discussing religion’s peculiar relationship with violence suggests that “the secular is a sort of advanced form of religion”²¹ and “secular nationalism is a religion.”²² When charging religion with all sorts of evil, Christopher Hitchens declares that regimes like those of Stalin and Kim Jong-II—though seemingly nonreligious²³— are religious too, because totalitarianism is essentially a religious impulse.²⁴ While Richard Wentz expands the category religion to include consumerism, secular humanism, faith in technology, football fanaticism, and many other ideologies and practices that other scholars consider secular.²⁵

As demonstrated above, the scholarly literature—particularly that which argues that religion promotes violence does not offer a coherent distinction between what counts as religion and what does not.²⁶ On the other hand, some scholars like William Cavanaugh,²⁷ Karen Armstrong,²⁸ and Timothy Fitzgerald²⁹ reject the very idea of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural category apart from politics and/or the secular. For this thesis, religion is discussed in the basic monotheistic terms of exclusive allegiance to one God. Particularly, I focus on the Bible because through its dissemination, the Bible has had unequalled influence on western thinking and has enjoyed more reception in human history and its impact arguably exceeds any other book in human history.³⁰ Additionally, the biblical teachings are embraced by a significant fraction of the world’s population and for many, it forms the principles than govern daily living.³¹

¹⁷ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), 133.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Martin E. Marty, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 10.

²⁰ William T. Cavanaugh, “Religious Violence as Modern Myth.” *Political Theology* 15, (2014): 487.

²¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

²² Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 15.

²³ Cavanaugh, “Religious Violence as Modern Myth,” 488.

²⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 232–48.

²⁵ Richard E. Wentz, *Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 13–14, 37.

²⁶ Cavanaugh, “Religious Violence as Modern Myth,” 488.

²⁷ See, William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2009).

²⁸ See, Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. (New York: Knopf, 2014).

²⁹ See, Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁰ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, x.

³¹ Ibid.

Now when it comes to the issue of “violence,” there are numerous theories of violence ranging from premodern theories to modern theories.³² Here, I briefly concentrate on some of the modern theories of violence, for it is impossible to exhaustively discuss all of them. For purposes of this thesis, however, I provide a brief overview of some of the modern theories—specifically, Biological, Psychological, Sociological, and Anthropological theories—that are relevant to my thesis. The intensive and extensive wars of the twentieth century fueled unprecedented academic efforts to explain conflict, war and violence. Furthermore, while the rapid advancement in science and technology made war more disastrous and terrifying, it also made knowledge and research in human biological, sociological and psychological behaviour more accessible and feasible.³³ A combination of these factors gave rise to several new theories about war and violence.³⁴

Biologist Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) in *On Aggression*³⁵ notably theorized that various “nonhuman species are imprinted with instinctive aggressive impulses but also inhibitory feedback mechanisms, such that lions can playfully fight and wrestle, but hardly injure each other.”³⁶ These aggressive impulses exist in human beings, however, unlike in the case of nonhuman species, humans lack control of the inhibitory mechanisms.³⁷ Additionally, Luigi Valzelli built on Lorenz’s thesis to conclude that aggression functions as a preservation mechanism for species. He writes:

Aggressiveness is that component of normal behavior which, under different stimulus-bound and goal-directed forms, is released for satisfying vital needs and for removing or overcoming any threat to the physical and/or psychological integrity subserving the self- and species- preservation of a living organism, and never, except for predatory activity, initiating the destruction of the opponent.³⁸

He, however, notes that due to human evolution, aggressive behavior has metamorphosed toward “self- and species annihilation.”³⁹

Psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) had initially⁴⁰ suggested that human beings were born with opposing, namely, life instinct and a death instinct, which built up in the body and had

³² For further discussion of the theories of violence, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 39–86.

³³ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 53.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson; New York: Bantam Books, 1966).

³⁶ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 55.

³⁷ Some critics have since challenged Lorenz’s theory citing factual errors regarding animal behavior. See; R. B. Zanovic, “The Zoomorphism of Human Collective Violence,” in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* (ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 222–38.

Others have rejected the notion that the explanation of aggression in animals also explains aggressive tendencies amongst humans. See; Pierre Karli, *Animal and Human Aggression* (trans. S. M. Carmona and H. Whyte; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³⁸ Luigi Valzelli, *Psychobiology of Aggression and Violence* (New York: Raven, 1981), 64.

³⁹ Ibid, 63.

⁴⁰ Freud’s ideas significantly evolved overtime, thus, his early ideas should not be perceived as his only or permanent ideas. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 58.

to be released in a kind of cathartic process. While the death instinct essentially targeted the bearer, “catharsis sometimes was redirected at outsiders, manifesting itself as violence or aggression”.⁴¹

John Dollard⁴² deduced that “aggression is always a consequence of frustration.”⁴³ In other words, aggression is a likely outcome where frustration abides regardless of the magnitude of the source of frustration. In line with Dollard, Leonard Berkowitz proposed that any kind of obstacle to one’s goal, real or perceived can breed frustration and hence makes aggression more likely.⁴⁴ Consequently, aggression can be directed towards the “obstacle” in order to satisfy the aggressive impulse.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Walter Garrison Runciman situates the cause of aggression in what he calls “relative deprivation.” By this he means that deprivation is always comparative. He writes that, “if A, who does not have something but wants it, compares himself to B, who does have it, then A is relatively deprived with reference to B.”⁴⁶ More elaborately he highlights it as follows, “A is relatively deprived of X when; (i) he does not have X (ii) he sees some other persons as having X ... (iii) he wants X, and (iv) he sees it as feasible that he should have X.”⁴⁷ For Runciman, such perceptions of deprivation can lead to violence.

Sociologists Richard B. Felson and James Tedeschi propose a “social interactionist” approach to explaining violence. This approach perceives violence as a means to an end, i.e. an instrument to achieve certain goals or values.⁴⁸ Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, for their part, state that “aggressive or violent acts are explicable as acts that produce immediate benefits and entail long-term social costs for the actor. Such acts are usually defined as criminal by the state and as deviant by society and are the very acts that social control theory is designed to explain.”⁴⁹

While observing chimpanzees, Anthropologist Jane Goodall discovered that chimpanzees tended to divide themselves into subgroups. Consequently, she observed, conflicts would emerge at the boundaries of their territories, and ultimately, they would go to war.⁵⁰ Goodall’s discovery resonates with Robert Ardrey who points to territoriality as a main cause of violence. Ardrey

⁴¹ On the death and life instincts in Freudian theory of violence, see Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a Freudian approach to violence in relation to religion, see Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 58–59.

⁴² John Dollard proposes arguably one of the most influential psychological theories of aggression. For more on Dollard’s theory of aggression, see John Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁴ Leonard Berkowitz, "Aversive Conditions as Stimuli to Aggression," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 15 (1982): 249-88.

⁴⁵ For further details on Berkowitz’s ideas on aggression, see Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: Its Causes, Consequences, and Control* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

⁴⁶ W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth Century England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See, Richard B. Felson and James T. Tedeschi, eds., *Aggression and Violence: Social Interactionist Perspectives* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1993).

⁴⁹ See reference to Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, "A Control Theory Interpretation of Psychological Research on Aggression," in *Ibid.*, 63–64.

⁵⁰ For a detailed inquiry into her study, see Jane Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

postulates that human beings, like most animals, “possess a biological need to maintain and defend bounded spaces.”⁵¹

The review of some of the modern theories of violence point to violence as an important adaptation for human survival. Importantly, the theories above highlight that the principle of scarcity and the resultant competition for scarce resources can be a cause of violence. Deductively, when people perceive the most desirable things in their universe to be in limited supply, such that for some to gain, others must lose, violence is a likely outcome. Conclusively, we can infer from the survey of the above theories that the zero-sum logic may be a cause of violence.

This thesis uses the term violence in the broad sense such as the shedding of blood, physical harm, forcing against personal freedom, passionate conduct or language, or emotions such as fury and passion.⁵² By religious violence, therefore, this thesis refers to violent behaviour where allegiance to God is the cause, one of the causes, the justification or the means to conduct violence. This thesis assumes that there is a connection between religion and violence—people can and have orchestrate violence in the name of God.

This inquiry is significant because we live in complex times, where the world is dangerously polarized, yet humanity is more closely interconnected—politically, economically, and socially—than ever before. “If we are to meet the challenge of our time and create a global society where all peoples can live together in peace and mutual respect, we need to assess our situation accurately.”⁵³ The apparent notion that religious violence is peculiar and more obstructive as opposed to secular violence has, for example, fueled a rigid secularism that seeks to promote policies that restrict the public role of religious institutions and entrench the stance of the Western powers against Middle East nations.⁵⁴ We, therefore, cannot afford oversimplified assumptions about the nature of religion or its role in the world,⁵⁵ neither can we oversimplify the apparent appeal of violence to religion.

Zero-sum Logic

Zero-sum theory is a concept in game theory developed by von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944.⁵⁶ Game theory can be defined in technical terms as “the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers”.⁵⁷ Descriptively, it is an interactive decision theory which analyses the behaviors of rational decision makers in interactive situations, where one’s decision affects the outcomes of other players.⁵⁸ Game theory analyzes (by means of mathematical reasoning) a conflict of interest to find the optimal choices for reaching the

⁵¹ For a comprehensive look at Ardrey’s work, see Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative* (New York: Atheneum, 1966).

⁵² Ralph E.S. Tanner, *Violence and Religion: Cross-cultural Opinions and Consequences* (Concept Publishing Company, 2007), 5–6.

⁵³ Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 15.

⁵⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

⁵⁵ Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 15.

⁵⁶ John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (3d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

⁵⁷ Nicola De Nitti, “An Introduction to Game Theory and its Applications,” *Numero* 21 (2014): 31.

⁵⁸R.J. Aumann, *Game Theory in The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition. Edited by Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, 2008. 1-2

desired outcome, under given conditions. Basically, it is the study of the ways to ‘win’ in a situation given certain circumstances.⁵⁹

Zero-sum refers to “a model of a situation in which a participant’s gains (or losses) is exactly balanced by the losses (or gains) of the other participant(s): therefore, if the total gains of the participants are added up, and the total losses are subtracted, they will amount to zero”. In zero-sum games there is no point in cooperation or joint action of any kind because “if one outcome is preferred to another by one player, then the preference is necessarily reversed for the other.”⁶⁰ The preferences of the players are opposed because the sum of the two payoffs is zero. It therefore follows that the interests of the actors are directly opposed⁶¹ because when you add the gains of both players, the answer is zero.⁶² A situation is zero-sum if resources gained by one party are matched by corresponding losses to another party.⁶³ This thesis uses the term *zero-sum logic* to mean the intuitive rendering of a situation to be zero-sum;⁶⁴ it is the assumption that for one party to win the other party must lose.

Game theory has been applied in a wide range of fields. Notably it is applied in population dynamics to describe, model, and predict the behaviour of human population; in Economics and Business for modelling the patterns of behaviour of interacting agents in various phenomena such as auctions, bargaining, fair division, social network formation, voting systems; in Political Science where it focuses on the areas of fair division, political economy, war bargaining, terrorism theories and social choice theory; in Biology, where it is mainly applied to the study of “biological altruism,” a behaviour that occurs when an individual (“the donor”) performs an action in order to help another organism (“the recipient”) with no apparent advantage (or even at a cost) to itself; and in Philosophy to aid in the interpretation of the thoughts of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other social and political theorists.⁶⁵ Recently, Leah Dodell applied the game theory in studying the biblical story of Jacob’s deception of his father Isaac.⁶⁶

Daniel Meegan, of the Department of Psychology at University of Guelph employed the zero-sum theory in a psychological experiment to assess students’ perception of the grading criteria, i.e. whether students perceived that students’ grades are determined by how the quality of their work compares to a predetermined standard of quality or to the quality of the work produced by other students. Participants were shown the grade distribution after most of the students in a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ R.J. Aumann, *Game Theory in The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition. Edited by Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, 2008. 2

⁶¹ Robert Leonard, *Game Theory in Economics, Origins of in The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition, Edited by Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, 2008. 2

⁶² R.J. Aumann, *Game Theory in The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition. Edited by Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume, 2008. 3

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Using a pie as an example, the zero-sum mind assumes that the “pie” can not be expanded and thus there is little sense exploring value-creating options. For this reason, each party fights to get the lions share. There can not exist a win- win situation. It’s a win lose situation. It’s either a win or a loss. And because losing isn’t a desirable option, one does all that can be done to win. It’s the end that justifies the means.

⁶⁵ For a detailed discussion of the application of game theory, See De Nitti, Nicola. *An Introduction to Game Theory and its Applications*. *Matematicamente.it Magazine*. 198 (2014), 33–36

⁶⁶ Leah Dodell. “A Bayesian Blessing: A Biblical Decision Explained by Game Theory.” *Decyzje* 30 (2018): 53–61.

course had completed an assigned presentation. When tasked to predict the grade of the next presenter, there was a corresponding increase in low grade predictions in instances where many high grades had already been given.⁶⁷ This pointed to zero-sum thinking, where students perceived high grades to be limited resources. If some students were awarded high grades, it meant that others would be awarded low grades.

Jonathan Cohen of the University of Florida Levin College of Law, indicts the zero-sum mindset as the genesis of conflict and argues this mindset “can lead to undesirable results, both because it can make disputes harder to resolve and because people with such a mindset are more likely to get into conflicts to begin with.”⁶⁸ For Cohen, the framing of conflicts in zero-sum terms “has very deep cultural roots tracing back to at least the biblical stories in Genesis.”⁶⁹ He analyzes selected Genesis stories through the lenses of the zero-sum mindset, and highlights the importance of raising awareness of the zero-sum mindset as a step toward conflict prevention and resolution in the legal field.⁷⁰

Summarily, the zero-sum theory—although proposed by a modern scholar studying mathematical models of strategic interaction among rational decision makers—has direct relevance to the study of socio-psychological behavior and the interpretation of the biblical texts. The discussion above demonstrates the application of the game theory, and particularly the zero-sum logic to various fields of academia, including biblical studies and conflict studies which confirms the utility of using this theory for interpretation of biblical passages in my thesis. The ancient expressions of the zero-sum worldview in biblical passages can help us understand the contemporary zero-sum tendencies.

Structure of this Thesis

Chapter one serves as the introduction of the study. In this section, I state the thesis statement and highlight the hypothesis of my study. Furthermore, this section discusses the theories applied in the study.

Chapter two seeks to establish the state of the question by discussing the scholarly discussions of the relationship between religion and violence. In this section, I discuss scholarly arguments in categories: (1) I assess scholarly arguments that contend that religion is inherently violent; (2) I evaluate arguments that contend against the violent nature of religion and those also discuss arguments that challenge the concept of “religion” as a category prone to violence; (3) I deliberate on the scholarly work that acknowledges the role of religion in violence, albeit suggesting that religion is “not the problem.” This chapter also discusses the scholarly work that addresses the question of why religion is and/ or can be violent. In here, I present the work of Regina Schwartz⁷¹ who explains how violence is rooted in the process of identity formation in Abrahamic monotheism. Furthermore, I deliberate on the work of Hector Avalos⁷² who builds on

⁶⁷ See, Daniel V. Meegan. “Zero-Sum Bias: Perceived Competition Despite Unlimited Resources.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 1 (2010): 1

⁶⁸ Jonathan R. Cohen. A Genesis of Conflict: The Zero-Sum Mindset, *Cardozo J. of Conflict Resolution* 17 (2016): 426.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ See, Jonathan R. Cohen. “A Genesis of Conflict: The Zero-Sum Mindset”, *Cardozo J. of Conflict Resolution* 17 (2016): 426–44

⁷¹ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁷² Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005).

Schwartz's work to elaborate his *scarce resource theory*, as that which explains religious violence. The goal here is to lay the foundation and situate my argument in the broader discourse on religion and violence.

Chapter three seeks to establish the cogency of the hypothesis. Here, I apply a sociological reading⁷³ of selected conflict passages in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, to establish the zero-sum logic as an undergirding principle in these passages. The following texts are considered: In the Hebrew Bible; Genesis 11–17: the story of Abraham's household, and Genesis 25–27: the story of Esau and Jacob. The selected passages are examined in their final form i.e. as they appear in the Bible for general readers. My approach to these texts is therefore synchronic. The choice of these passages is illuminated by the centrality of the personalities involved to both Ancient Judaism and Christianity. In the New Testament, I focus on; Mark 7:24-30: The story of the Syrophenician woman, and Mark 10:35-45: The request of James and John. I examine these passages because the scenes depict interactions between general people and Jesus—the most central figure in Christianity, and the apostles, who walked with Jesus and told the story of Jesus after his death.

Chapter four pursues the implications of the study. In this chapter, I provide a synthesis interpretation of the findings in Chapter three. I discuss the image of “limited good” as a salient feature of the Ancient Israelite world as well as the New Testament world. By analyzing the selected conflict passages through a sociological framework, the study demonstrates how the zero-sum logic is nuanced in these texts and establish that the zero-sum logic informs the image of “limited good” in these stories. I draw on George Foster's “Peasant Society and Image of Limited Good,”⁷⁴ to posit that this zero-sum logic in certain biblical stories corresponds to the Agrarian worldview of ancient Israel and Late Antiquity.

Additionally, the chapter assesses and discusses how the zero-sum logic can influence both why conflicts arise and how they unfold. Lastly, I conclude my expedition with a recap of the important findings of the study and make suggestions and recommendations on the way forward in dealing with the global problem of religious violence and work towards peaceful global, regional and local human coexistence and neighbourliness amidst religious diversity. Also, I make some recommendations about areas for further studies and research.

⁷³ My thesis will not be a work of exegesis and/ or syntactical analysis, rather, I follow in the footsteps of scholars who focus on the socio-cultural setting and implications of the text. See for example; Jerome H. Neyrey and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “He Must Increase, I Must Decrease (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001): 464–83; Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (vol 1. trans. John Bowden. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994).; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

⁷⁴ George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293–315.

Chapter Two: State of the Question

1. Religion Causes Violence

The events of September 11, 2001 were a watershed moment in the study of religion. Particularly, it ushered in unprecedented scholarly interest in the “violent nature of religion” from various disciplines in the humanities. One of the voices argues for a dark attraction between religion and violence by highlighting that while on the one hand, Scripture largely exhibits an invitation to love, peace and harmony, on the other hand, the history of great world religions is plagued with stories of war, sacrifice, and martyrdom.⁷⁵

The conception that religion promotes violence has enjoyed considerable reception in contemporary Western societies. Several books, media programs and articles have attested to this idea to the extent that, to say that religion is prone to violence is, in the words of William Cavanaugh, part of conventional wisdom.⁷⁶ In fact, “the idea that religion and violence are joined at the hip is hardly unconventional. We might even call it The Reader’s Digest View of Religion. The terms ‘violence and religion’ seem to belong together like ‘country and western’, ‘law and order.’”⁷⁷

Christopher Hitchens for instance unequivocally declared in his book, *God is not Great*, that “Religion kills”.⁷⁸ Additionally, Hector Avalos proposes that the world would be a better place without religion, albeit admitting that this can hardly be attainable.⁷⁹ Avalos, in fact, proposes—perhaps the *last nail into religion’s coffin*—that “the most ethical mission of academic religious studies may be to help humanity move beyond religious thinking.”⁸⁰ Sam Harris, also, mounts a fierce and passionate attack on religion after the events of September 11. He states it in unequivocal terms that “faith is the mother of all hatred, as it is wherever people define their moral identities in religious terms.”⁸¹ He contends that “the men who committed the atrocities of September 11 were certainly not ‘cowards,’ as they were repeatedly described in the Western media, nor were they lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith—perfect faith, as it turns out—and this, it

⁷⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson, “Introduction: The Enduring Relationship of Religion and Violence,” in *Violence and the World’s Religious Traditions* (ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

⁷⁶ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

⁷⁷ Scott Cowdell et al., eds., *Does Religion Cause Violence? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2018), 2.

⁷⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 1.

⁷⁹ Hector Avalos, “Religion and Scarcity: A New Theory for the Role of Religion in Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 567.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 31.

must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be”.⁸² For Harris, “it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions.”⁸³

Additionally, Leo Lefebure burdened by the violence that he sees as an integral part of Christian history, postulates that religion and violence are mutually involved to the extent that the subscribers of religion often become victims of religion’s destructive nature. He writes that “the brutal facts of the history of religions impose the stark realization of the intertwining of religion and violence: violence, clothed in religious garb, has repeatedly cast a spell over religion and culture, luring countless ‘decent’ people—from unlettered peasants to learned priests, preachers, and professors—into its destructive dance.”⁸⁴

John Hick problematizes Christianity’s claim to absoluteness and superiority as a predisposition to violence.⁸⁵ He contends that religions sanctify violent aggression, exploitation and intolerance.⁸⁶ For Hick, Christianity is particularly guilty of lending itself to “the validation and encouragement of political and economic evil.”⁸⁷ While according to Avalos, the violence caused by religion is particularly immoral because it is grounded on “the acquisition or loss of a nonexistent entity.” It is nonexistent because it is unverifiable by the five senses; Avalos’ epistemology is therefore empirical in nature. In his work, Avalos examines Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and their texts to demonstrate how these religions create what he calls “scarce resources” which can generate violence. He suggests that the instances of violence attributed to secularism, unlike religion, do not show secular philosophies as having a clear motive for violence.⁸⁸

1.1 Assessment

Sam Harris rightly points out that the perpetrators of September 11 were men of faith.⁸⁹ Indeed, they were men of faith—or at least *they said they were*. He further takes it “to be self-evident that ordinary people cannot be moved to burn genial old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran, or celebrate the violent deaths of their children, unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe.”⁹⁰ He then deduces that faith is the mother of all hatred; in fact, Harris relates religious belief to mental illness.⁹¹ One then wonders whether Harris thinks that violence expressions such as xenophobic violence, apartheid, slavery, etc., are somehow acceptable, or perhaps he perceives them as religious too. It is reported, for example, that there had been 529 reported incidences of xenophobic attacks in South Africa alone by October 2019, resulting in over 500 deaths of people whose only crime was being immigrants.⁹² Perhaps one

⁸² Ibid, 67.

⁸³ Ibid, 72.

⁸⁴ Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 14.

⁸⁵ John Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 17–18.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 67.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 31.

⁹¹ Ibid, 72.

⁹² BBC News, “South Africa: How Common Are Xenophobic Attacks?” 2 October 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47800718>

would argue that the orchestrators of such incidents too were “men of faith,” for certainly, faith in one’s nation or one’s race is also faith indeed—it is, however, probably not religious faith.

Hick, Lefebure, and Avalos’ arguments for religion’s divisiveness, absoluteness, claim to superiority, and special appeal to violence are grounded on a clear division of what counts as “religious” and “secular,” a distinction that remains questionable.⁹³ The sacred-secular dichotomy is a fallacy because a human person exists as a unit that cannot be sundered into the political and the religious. One cannot certainly draw a clear line between when an individual is being political and when he is being religious, which undermines any effort to insulate religion from the charge of violence. It also challenges any attempts to define religion as an exclusive category prone to violence apart from other human expressions. Additionally, Munson pushes back:

It is also important to recognize that some movements widely perceived to be driven by strictly religious motives also articulate secular grievances. Bin Laden was indeed a reactionary Muslim who saw the world in terms of a fundamental dichotomy of good Muslim versus evil infidel. But there was also an anti-imperialist dimension to his rhetoric... To ignore this dimension is to ignore an important source of his appeal. The religious dimension of the movements often called ‘fundamentalist’ should not be reduced to a mere reflection of social or nationalistic grievances. But if the available evidence suggests that such grievances are significant sources of their appeal, they should not be ignored.⁹⁴

Avalos, unlike most scholars in the “religion causes violence camp,” does not simply assume that religion causes violence.⁹⁵ He makes a comprehensive exposition of *how* and *why* religion causes violence, through a ground-breaking application of “scarce resource” theory. Religion indeed produces new resources (Inscription, Sacred Space, Group Privileging, and Salvation)⁹⁶ that are scarce and highly valuable, something that causes violence as people fight for these resources.⁹⁷ Avalos then concludes that moving beyond religious thinking would somehow solve the problem of violence.⁹⁸ The issue with his suggestion lies in his very argument of verifiability. Firstly, it cannot be verified that moving beyond religious thinking would lead to eradication of violence—in any case, it may lead to more violence if one is to go by Avalos’ analysis of the irrationality, absoluteness and divisiveness of the nature of religion.

Secondly, Avalos’ depiction of the relationship of religion to violence over and beyond secular ideologies is only partially correct. It is partially true because indeed religions can

⁹³ Cavanaugh and Armstrong challenge any such clear separation of the secular and the religious. See William T. Cavanaugh. “Religious Violence as Modern Myth,” *Political Theology* 15 (2014): 488.; Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 232.

⁹⁴ Munson, review of Juergensmeyer, Kitts and Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, 182.

⁹⁵ The view that religion causes violence is more implied by its many proponents than explained. Whereas several scholars have highlighted the proof that religious violence exists, few, surprisingly, have laboured to essentialize it. There is overwhelming work demonstrating that violence is essential to religion, but little to explain the essence that is religious violence.

⁹⁶ Each of the “scarce resources” will be defined below.

⁹⁷ My thesis discusses and builds on Avalos’ “scarce resource theory.” This will be discussed more in this chapter.

⁹⁸ Hector Avalos, “Religion and Scarcity: A New Theory for the Role of Religion in Violence” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, (ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 567.

sometimes be prone to violence due to their absolutist and divisive nature, but secular ideologies can likewise be absolutist and divisive. Avalos' argument is problematic because it reduces the complexity of violence to their visible expressions. Granted that moving beyond religious thinking would eradicate religious violence, violence would still find expression in other human expressions—surely it is debatable that World Wars I and II, arguably the most disastrous wars in world history, were caused by religion.⁹⁹ It is also unverifiable that religion has served “to dehumanize and legitimate the slaughter of the Other, any more than nationalism, capitalism, racism, and various secular ideologies.”¹⁰⁰

Avalos critiques J. Harold Ellens that, “such scholars as Ellens represent the continuation of an apologetic approach to religious violence. Religious violence is acknowledged but seen as unrepresentative, while ‘the real God’ is described as being distorted by the human portrayal of violence...., all religious viewpoints about the role of religion in violence perpetuate or endorse the very fundamental elements that create the violence; otherwise they do not recognize the elements that are responsible for the violence...”¹⁰¹ However, Avalos seems to miss that in arguing for the immorality of religious violence while absolving secular violence on grounds that it is never a clear cause of violence, he becomes entangled in his charge against “the apologetic approach” because he seems to endorse elements such as nationalism, capitalism etc. that have through history been responsible for violence.¹⁰²

2. Religion does not cause violence

A considerable number of scholars and observers have fervently contested against the charge that people engage in systematic violence in the name of religion, arguing that religion is a victim in the religious violence matrix. For these, religion is fundamentally peaceful and as such any instances of perceived violence amount to the abuse of religion or the use of religion for political purposes.¹⁰³ It follows, therefore, that those who engage in extremist and violent acts in the name of religion are not “that religious.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, people who do violence are, by “definition, not religious. The Crusader is not really a Christian, for example, because he does not really understand the meaning of Christianity.”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ See Henry Munson, review of M. Juergensmeyer, M. Kitts and M. Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence. Politics, Religion & Ideology* 15, (2014): 180–82.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. To this day, it is still unsafe to be a person of color, a woman or an immigrant in many parts of the world especially the United States. Certainly, such violence is immoral and illogical, but not religious. There are arguments that the racism one finds in the U.S. is Christian slaveholder religion, however such arguments can not suffice and are desperate at best because the problem of slavery precedes Christianity. Studies have shown that slavery has always existed in ancient communities.

¹⁰¹ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 86.

¹⁰² Certainly, violence, whether ‘immoral’ or ‘moral’ is violence, nonetheless. To seemingly downplay certain kinds of violence on grounds of ‘morality’ is to give them a free gate pass. Violence is immoral by the very fact that it is violence, not because of what causes it.

¹⁰³ Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Global Rise of Religious Violence,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31 (2018): 88.

¹⁰⁴ For arguments that extremist groups are essentially deviant from true religion see; Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Harold J. Ellens ed., *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (4 Vols.; Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Karen Armstrong, on the one hand, draws on the Day of Atonement motif in ancient Israel to argue that modern societies have made a scapegoat of faith to bear the faults and misdeeds, and defuse the rivalries that plague our world.¹⁰⁶ She seeks to undermine what modern society perceives as the violent nature of religion through history, by highlighting the contextual difference between the modern approach to politics and religion and that of the ancient world. She writes,

... when premodern people engaged in politics, they thought in religious terms and that faith permeated their struggle to make sense of the world in a way that seems strange to us today. ... In religious history, the struggle for peace has been just as important as the holy war. Religious people have found all kinds of ingenious methods of dealing with the assertive machismo of the reptilian brain, curbing violence, and building respectful, life-enhancing communities. But as with Ashoka, who came up against the systemic militancy of the state, they could not radically change their societies; the most they could do was propose a different path to demonstrate kinder and more empathic ways for people to live together.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, Armstrong undermines the contemporary understanding and usage of “religion” as a category and argues that “religious” wars are fought for social and political motivations; religion is simply the means of expression, not the cause. For her, it is essentially anachronistic to brand violence as exclusively religious when it is often more political and economic and less theological.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Armstrong even opposes the idea that fundamentalism is inherently violent and suggests that, “only a tiny proportion of fundamentalists commit acts of terror; most are simply trying to live a devout life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith.”¹⁰⁹ For Armstrong, violence lies deep in human nature—an indispensable element for the development of civilizations.¹¹⁰

William Cavanaugh, on the other hand, maintains that the argument that religion is violent depends on the “religious/secular distinction” that conceives of religion as a “transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon—a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species—which is necessarily more inclined toward violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular.”¹¹¹ Highlighting that his is not an argument about whether or not religion promotes violence,¹¹² he contends against the essentializing of religion as a category—more absolutist, divisive, and irrational—and more prone to violence than the secular category.¹¹³ Cavanaugh, unlike many religious apologists, estimates that religion has been and continues to be

¹⁰⁶ Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁰⁹ Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 303.

¹¹⁰ For Armstrong, “all our motivation is always mixed” and therefore, modern cases of ‘religious violence’ are more personal and political than religious. She writes: “Until the modern period, religion permeated all aspects of life, including politics and warfare ... because people wanted to endow everything with significance. Every state ideology was religious ... [and thus every] successful empire has claimed that it had a divine mission; that its enemies were evil... And because these states and empires were all created and maintained by force, religion has been [wrongly] implicated in their violence. Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 202.

¹¹¹ Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence*, 3.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

culpable for acts of violence, but avows that religion is not any more prone to violence than any ideology. He writes:

My argument if properly understood, cannot be used to excuse Christianity or Islam or any other faith system from careful analysis. Given certain conditions, they can and do contribute to violence. My argument is not a defense of ‘religion’ or Christianity or Islam or anything else from the charge of promoting violence. What is implied in the conventional wisdom is that Christianity, Islam, and other faiths are inherently more inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as ‘secular.’ It is this story that I attempt to refute. Put in simple terms, there is no reason to suppose that people are more likely to kill for a god than for a flag, the universal spread of freedom, oil, the workers’ revolution, or a whole other host of ‘secular’ ideologies and practices that behave in the way that ‘religions’ do.¹¹⁴

According to Cavanaugh, the categories “religious” and “secular,” onto which the myth of religious violence premise, are invented for political reasons by the modern West.¹¹⁵ He adds, “the idea that something called religion is essentially prone to violence is an ideological justification that can be used to justify the violence of so-called secular orders.” For Cavanaugh, the framing of religion in such terms creates a “secular other” who is “rational and peacemaking” against an “irrational,” absolutist and divisive “religious other.” It, therefore, follows that any violence orchestrated by the “secular other” towards the “religious irrational and divisive other” is justified as peacemaking and rational.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Cavanaugh challenges the perceived “distinction between what counts as religion and what does not”¹¹⁷—a distinction he renders incoherent. Religion, he presses, is not any more prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism.¹¹⁸

2.1. Assessment

The argument that people who engage in extremists acts in the name of religion are not “that religious” is apologetic or naïve at best and disingenuous at worst. Indeed, as Gagné observes, religious belief plays a pivotal role in the recruitment process and provides the motivation for recruits into extremist groups.¹¹⁹ Concerning ISIS, Gagné records:

The relative weakness of someone’s knowledge of the Shariah does not necessarily say much about how religious they are or want to be [...] a depth of knowledge of Shariah is not particularly common for observant Muslims, and it is in many ways a construct of outsiders to think that it should be [...] Limited knowledge of an area of Islam traditionally left to dedicated experts says little about the contours of individual belief [...] we should not discount the role that faith plays in motivating the decisions of ISIS recruits, a faith that

¹¹⁴ William, T. Cavanaugh, “Religious Violence as Modern Myth,” *Political Theology* 15 (2014): 486–7.

¹¹⁵ Cavanaugh, “Religious Violence as Modern Myth,” 487.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 488

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ André Gagné, “Tyranny of Political Correctness and Religious Violence,” in *The Global Impact of Religious Violence* (ed. André Gagné, Spyridon Loumakis and Calogero A. Miceli; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 2.

may not be dependent on specific religious knowledge or that may actively discount certain interpretations over others.¹²⁰

Therefore, the efforts to insulate religion against the charge of violence on grounds of discounting the religiosity of extremist with such claims like the “perceived limited religious knowledge” and/or understanding of the “true religious teaching,” however passionate, cannot suffice. For one’s religiousness is not qualified by their understanding of religious teachings, but their active participation in a given society. The very fact that religious traditions employ clergy and faith teachers is indicative that the community is not necessary expected to boast expert knowledge of the truth claims by their members.

Armstrong, much like Cavanaugh, argues that the understanding of religion varies over time and place, and thus, one cannot analyze ancient religious practices with modern ideas about religion. She, however, consistently uses the same term “religion” to generalize about religion in every historical period. In a bid to absolve religion and condemn the secular, Armstrong attempts to separate the religious from the political and secular hence using the very distinction she insists cannot be made. This is something which Cavanaugh would consider to be incoherent.¹²¹ Furthermore, the conjoining of religion with the state does not render it ineffectual, neither do multiple causes diminish the accountability of religious influence.¹²²

Armstrong commendably reminds that most religions are arguably founded on the principle of peace and nonviolence,¹²³ and that politics and religion are often so intertwined that the dividing line is blurry and nearly unnoticeable. It is also true that instances of violence attributed to religion often involve other factors beyond religion¹²⁴ —there is certainly a good reason why Bin Laden attacked America and not any other country of “infidels.” However, the fact that a religion founded on the principle of peace and nonviolence can be the cause or one of the causes of violence, or simply a coating to inspire people to violence is disturbing, and such is the concern of this thesis. This thesis does not suggest that religion is ever the single cause or primary cause for that matter, it, however, proposes that biblical monotheism is strikingly suited to and particularly capable of inspiring violence.

Cavanaugh makes a convincing argument that “religion—a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species—which is necessarily more inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular is incoherent,”¹²⁵ and should be understood as a western construct.¹²⁶ Some years ago, G. W. Anderson, for example, noted that “the history and religion of Israel are inseparable.”¹²⁷ He writes,

¹²⁰ See Gagne’s reference to Lebovich, “How ‘Religious’ are ISIS Fighters?” *Ibid*, 2.

¹²¹ David Nirenberg, “Power and Piety,” *Nation* 20 (2015): 28.

¹²² Kenneth Krause, “Religion, Violence, and Terrorism,” *Skeptic* 20, (2015): 49.

¹²³ Armstrong, 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

¹²⁵ Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence*, 4.

¹²⁶ From my lived experience in Africa, particularly Uganda, there existed no such exclusive and/or independent aspect called “religion.” The daily life of individuals and societies was about appeasing the gods. Kings and chiefs ruled over the people on behalf of the gods, and any calamities that befell the community were understood to be a warning from the gods that something had gone wrong and the gods were angry. That which is commonly referred to as African Traditional religion was but a way of life of the African people. Africans did not have politics apart from religion, or neither nationalism apart from the religion. The entire culture is embedded in the sacred.

¹²⁷ George W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (London: Oxford U.P., 1966), 1.

It is, of course, true that wherever religion has existed it has been in some measure a factor in history and has itself been influenced by political, social, economic, and other factors. It is also a fact that in the ancient world of which Israel formed a part religion was not simply a department of life but permeated all human activities in a way which is less obvious today. Religion was so intimately connected with other fields of experience that when, Israel settled in Canaan and adopted agricultural and urban ways of life, the change necessarily had a momentous impact upon religion.¹²⁸

Although I hold Cavanaugh's argument to be sound, the fact that religion is a "constructed category" does not negate the idea that people have committed atrocities in the name of God. To dismiss the body of work on religious violence on semantical grounds seems to cast a blind eye towards a problem so critical to our existence in the modern world. The discourse about religious violence ought to be situated in the fact that people commit atrocities in the name of God, *not* what counts for religion as a category.

3. A Middle Voice

Charles Kimball holds to a "yes" and "no" answer concerning whether religion is the cause of violence. He highlights that even if he does not consider religion to be evil, there are aspects of religion that are likely to birth evil behavior.¹²⁹ He points to the instances of religious triumphs while also acknowledging the pitfalls. He notes that while "one finds the life-affirming faith that has sustained and provided meaning for millions over the centuries within the religious traditions that have stood the test of time", we can, at the same time, "identify the corrupting influences that lead toward evil and violence in all religious traditions."¹³⁰

Mark Juergensmeyer also steers away from freeing religion from the charge of violence. He acknowledges that religion has a significant role in religious violence; in fact, he associates every religious tradition with violence. He, however, steers clear from labelling religion as the problem. For Juergensmeyer, therefore, religion is often *a problem* in the religious violence discourse, but not *the problem*. He writes,

It is not easy to answer the question about the role of religion by an all-or-nothing answer. As anyone who has ever taken a multiple-choice test knows, there is a dilemma when presented with such absolutes. The clever students will often hedge their options by choosing c) none of the above, or d) all the above. These are the best answers, I think, for the question about religion and violence – "none and all of the above." I do not think that religion is solely the problem. Nevertheless, I do think that the involvement of religion in public life is often problematic.¹³¹

In his analysis of the Sikh violence, for example, Juergensmeyer discovers that it was a political conflict that was seen in religious terms—a religionization of politics.¹³² "The template

¹²⁸ Ibid, 2.

¹²⁹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 7.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹³¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Global Rise of Religious Violence," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31 (2018): 92.

¹³² Ibid, 93. Juergensmeyer expounds this more comprehensively in Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (4th ed.; Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

of religious drama,” he adds, “was imposed on social situations, and what might otherwise be seen as a secular conflict with government was lifted to the high proscenium of religious drama.” He elaborates that the people’s grievances against the secular state were branded in religious terms and religion became a medium to mobilize the opposition. For Juergensmeyer, this is the same pattern that translates globally, in that religion assumes the shape of an ideology of protest, but in most cases, there are “real grievances at issue—economic and social tensions” beyond religion that affect the people.¹³³

Juergensmeyer sums that, “religion is not the problem. Yet the fact that religion is the medium through which these issues are expressed is problematic.” He elaborates that,

... religion brings new aspects to conflicts that were otherwise not a part of them... religion personalizes the conflict. It provides personal rewards to those who struggle in conflicts that otherwise have only social benefits... provides vehicles of social mobilization that embrace vast numbers of supporters who otherwise would not be mobilized around social or political issues... it provides an organizational network – into which patterns of leadership and support may be tapped... gives the legitimacy of moral justification for political encounter... it provides justification for violence that challenges the state’s monopoly on morally sanctioned killing.¹³⁴

Religion, therefore, while it is not the root cause of the contemporary scenes of violence expressed in religious terms around the world, it is an important aspect of these conflicts. Religion allows room for demonizing the enemy and gives justification to the perpetrators, as soldiers of God whose actions would be spiritually rewarded.¹³⁵

Summary

The review of the scholarly literature above highlights the complexity in the religious violence discourse. Firstly, there is no consensus on the definition of “religion” and what counts as religious or secular. The issue of religion’s relationship to violence is so complex that neither argument, for nor against religion, is defensible to say the least. They are right in what they propose, but wrong in what they deny. It is not easy to answer the question about the role of religion by an all-or-nothing answer.¹³⁶ What stands out in the discourse from either side of the spectrum, however, is that there is a connection between religion and violence; people can kill and have killed in the name of God.

Consequently, my study is burdened neither with whether religion either does or does not promote violence, or the degree to which religion is to be blamed, nor do I analyze the parameters of the category “religion” and how it is constructed. Rather, my thesis is burdened by the reason why anyone can look to religion as either a cause, a justification, or a means to conduct violence. In other words, why is religion part of the violence discourse in the first place?

¹³³ Juergensmeyer, “The Global Rise of Religious Violence”, 92.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 95.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 92.

4. Why Religion is associated with violence.

Richard Wentz suggests that religion causes violence because it has a tendency towards absolutism. For Wentz, the perpetrators of religious violence often justify their actions because “they have taken a phantom of reason and fashioned it into an absolute,” which turns them into fanatics, crusaders and fundamentalists who then orchestrate violence as a testimony to the absolute.¹³⁷ Also, Kimball points to Christianity’s claim to absolute truth—a claim that is found in Judaism and Islam, and to a lesser extent in other religious traditions—as a form of “rigid exclusivism” which is foundational to tribalism.¹³⁸ While Martin Marty indicts religion’s divisive nature as a cause of violence, he argues that religion fosters strong identity formations, which identities birth insiders and outsiders.¹³⁹ He writes:

Those called to be religious naturally form separate groups, movements, tribes, or nations. Responding in good faith to a divine call, believers feel themselves endowed with sacred privilege, a sense of closeness that elevates them above all others. This self-perception then leads groups to draw lines around themselves and to speak negatively of “the others.” ... The elect denounces “others” for worshipping false gods and often act violently against such unbelievers.¹⁴⁰

David Rapoport postulates that religion tends to lend itself to violent behavior because it inspires total loyalties and commitments to the extent that the religious community becomes the end beyond which there is no other. While he recognizes the role played by other circumstances and contexts, Rapoport asserts there are elements seemingly intrinsic to the nature of religion—particularly, the propensity of religion to inspire total loyalties or commitments. This, for him, makes “it difficult to imagine anything which surpasses the religious community.”¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, for Bhikhu Parekh, despite its probable positive contributions, religion can be malevolent because:

...it is often absolutist, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic, and impatient of compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth. Since it is generally of ancient origin, it is sometimes deeply conservative, hidebound, insensitive to changes in the social climate and people’s moral aspirations and harbors a deep antifemale bias. It often breeds intolerance of other religions as well as of internal dissent and has a propensity towards violence.¹⁴²

Scott Appleby looks to what he refers to as the militant nature of religion. He interestingly launches a stinging attack on both the “peacemakers” and the extremists and categorizes them in

¹³⁷ Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 67–70.

¹³⁸ Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 28.

¹³⁹ Martin E. Marty, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 25–26.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 25–26.

¹⁴¹ David C. Rapoport, “Some General Observations on Religion and Violence,” in *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*, (ed. Mark Juergensmeyer; London: Frank Cass, 1992), 120.

¹⁴² Bhikhu Parekh, “The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse,” in *Religion, Politics, and Peace* (ed. Leroy Rouner; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 72.

the same precise terms of militancy. He suggests that both the militant and the peacemakers in religion “go to extremes of self-sacrifice in devotion to the sacred; both claim to be radical, or rooted in and renewing the fundamental truths of their religious traditions.”¹⁴³ This, for Appleby, is the point of distinction between religious and non-religious actors, strong believer and ‘middle ground believers.’¹⁴⁴

Paul Rowe notes that religion has the potential to spark violence because the ideals fronted by it are “self-legitimizing and must be followed over and above any other contending belief because it promises rewards that transcend mortal life and it helps to make sense of suffering.”¹⁴⁵ The spiritual implications promised by religion make the sacrificial demands of violent conflict and all the resulting excesses easily justifiable.¹⁴⁶

4.1. Summary and Assessment

Scholars have laboured to explain why religion tends to be associated with violence. As highlighted above, a number of explanations have been suggested by scholars among which are the following: religion’s tendency towards absolutism;¹⁴⁷ the divisive nature of religion; religion’s ability to foster strong identity formations and¹⁴⁸ inspires total loyalties and commitments;¹⁴⁹ religion’s tendency towards self-righteousness, dogmatism, intolerance and non-compromise;¹⁵⁰ the militant nature of religion;¹⁵¹ religion’s self-legitimizing spiritual implications that make the sacrificial demands of violent conflict and all the resulting excesses easily justifiable,¹⁵² etc.

The scholarly discussion makes a commendable diagnosis of the traits of religion that predispose it to violence. Their discussion, however, does not address explicitly why religion—with strong ethical imperatives imbued at the foundation—nurtures the dangerous characteristics they so commendably identify. My study seeks to contribute towards filling this gap. In this thesis, I propose that the zero-sum logic was firmly entrenched in people’s imagination in ancient Israel and Late Antiquity. This, I argue, explains why religious expression in biblical monotheism tends to be absolutist, divisive, dogmatic, uncompromising etc.—features which can spawn violence.

¹⁴³ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics*, 200.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*, 67–70.; Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 28.

¹⁴⁸ Marty, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*, 25–26.

¹⁴⁹ Rapoport, “Some General Observations on Religion and Violence,” 120.

¹⁵⁰ Parekh, “The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse,” 72.

¹⁵¹ Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 11.

¹⁵² Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics*, 200.

5. Monotheism and violence

5.1. Regina Schwartz

Regina Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain* indicts the sense of collective identity in monotheism as articulated in the notion of exclusive worship as a breeding ground for violence.¹⁵³ Particularly, she locates the origins of violence in identity formation arguing that the acts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence. She writes,

...imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing, is the most frequent act of violence. Violence is not only what we do to the Other. It is prior to that. Violence is the very construction of the Other... on the one hand, the activity of people defining themselves as a group is negative, they are by virtue of who they are not. On the other hand, those outsiders—so needed for the very self-definition of those inside the group—are also regarded as a threat to them.¹⁵⁴

For Schwartz, the self-assertion of “we are,” inherently embodies a sense of aggression and confrontation with the “we are” of the other group. It, therefore, arouses the fears of persecution and consequently engenders a sense of risk and potential violence.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, Schwartz contends that while the Hebrew Bible is permeated with resounding ethical imperatives, these imperatives tend to be rendered obsolete in order to protect the collective identity of Israel. She writes;

...where the Bible both inspired and seemed to fail me, then, is on ethics: a moving accountability for the widow, the orphan, and the poor and commitment to liberation from oppression is joined to obliterating the Canaanites... when the narratives become preoccupied with Israelite identity, with defining Israel and non-Israelites, insiders and outsiders, the paramount definitional urge compromises the ethical imperatives. There is concern for the well-being of a neighbour up to a point, and that point is where the neighbour is regarded as posing a threat to the identity of ancient Israel—and that point is most often the very existence of the neighbour.¹⁵⁶

Importantly, Schwartz posits that this need for a “distinctive collective identity” tends to spawn violence because, central to most thinking about identity is the “principle of scarcity.”¹⁵⁷ She highlights that the biblical narratives often portray a God that is strangely withholding rather than infinitely giving.¹⁵⁸ This for Schwartz is exemplified in biblical motifs like divine blessings and divine election.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, Schwartz accentuates the principle of scarcity through the biblical principle of oneness;

¹⁵³ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, X.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 179.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, Xi.

¹⁵⁷ Schwartz elaborates that “when everything is in short supply, it must be all competed for—land, prosperity, power, favor, even identity itself.” Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, Xi.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ She notes, “everyone does not receive divine blessings. Some are cursed—with dearth and with death—as though there were a cosmic shortage of prosperity. Some are chosen while others are rejected. Ibid.

Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion. When that thinking is translated into secular formations about peoples, ‘one nation under God’ becomes less comforting than threatening.¹⁶⁰

Schwartz draws on the story of Cain and Abel to point to the monotheistic God as an exclusive God who prefers some, casts out others, demands exclusive allegiance and favours selectively and to conclude that like Cain, people kill due to scarcity.¹⁶¹ She surmises that,

...we are the descendants of Cain because we too live in a world where some are cast out, a world in which whatever law of scarcity that made that ancient story describe only one sacrifice as acceptable—a scarcity of goods, land, labor, or whatever—still prevails to dictate the term of a ferocious and fatal competition. Some lose.¹⁶²

This principle of scarcity results into unfriendly rivalry, inexplicable competition that results into alienation between siblings and creation of outcasts. Concerning the rivalry between Esau and Jacob, Schwartz deduces that the two brothers are the “eponymous ancestors of peoples” whose enmity grows and is nurtured for centuries, who define themselves and their prosperity under the principle of scarcity, and who conceive of the others as cursed and murderous”.¹⁶³

5.1.1. Assessment

Schwartz laudably situates the origins of violence in the process of identity formation, which is, for her, mediated by the principle of scarcity encoded in oneness.¹⁶⁴ While monotheism is not necessarily entirely exclusive,¹⁶⁵ and the Bible has many framings of divine plenitude,¹⁶⁶ a strong case can be made that biblical monotheism is largely exclusive. My thesis is, thus, principally an adaptation of the insights articulated by Schwartz. I build on Schwartz’s argument to propose that Schwartz’s “mysterious law of scarcity” is informed by the zero-sum logic. Importantly, my thesis situates the zero-sum logic in the sociocultural and socioeconomic world of ancient Israel and late antiquity.

5.2. Hector Avalos

Avalos builds on Regina Schwartz’s principle of scarcity to elaborate his scarce resources theory and posit that scarce resources, real or perceived, are a major factor in violence.¹⁶⁷ He defers with Schwartz in that he widens the scope of the scarcity to argue that “religion—not just monotheism—is fundamentally engaged in the creation of scarce resources.”¹⁶⁸ Avalos focuses on

¹⁶⁰ Schwartz clarifies that while the Bible does offer glimpses of a monotheistic plenitude instead of scarcity, it is the myth of scarcity that has enjoyed more command. *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁶³ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, x.

¹⁶⁵ Diana V. Edelman, *The Triumph of Elohim: from Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 24–25.

¹⁶⁶ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, xi.

¹⁶⁷ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 93.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

how scriptures, salvation, and sacred space are scarce resources created by religion. He, additionally, provides an ethical framework to compare religious violence and nonreligious violence.¹⁶⁹

Avalos begins his thesis by problematizing the garden of Eden episode where the first couple are permitted to eat of all the trees in the garden except of the tree that brings forth the knowledge of good and evil—that they will die on the day that they eat of that tree (Gen. 2:17).¹⁷⁰ He then points to chapter 3 of Genesis where “Yahweh fears that the human couple will now eat of the tree that provides an even scarcer resource, eternal life.” This, for Avalos, means that “Yahweh Elohim purposely makes knowledge and eternal life scarce resources.”¹⁷¹ Concerning the couple’s expulsion he illuminates:

In the Near Eastern religions, immortality was one main feature that distinguished gods and human beings. Yahweh Elohim does not want human beings to have eternal life. It is a scarce resource, and seeking it caused the fall of mankind. Violence, in fact, is said to be one of the consequences, as the deity predicts enmity between the serpent and womankind and prescribes pain for the woman on childbearing (Gen. 3:16). In this case, it is the deity, Yahweh Elohim, who is portrayed as defending and laboring to maintain the scarce resources of knowledge and eternal life for himself and his divine retinue.¹⁷²

To provide history and context for his thesis, Avalos points to Thomas Malthus who, earlier, contended against the idea that human beings could live in a perfected state and suggested that there has always been a “prodigious waste of human life occasioned by the perpetual struggle for room and food.”¹⁷³ He further highlights the resurgence of the scarce theory in the 20th century through the works of the environmentalists Harold and Margaret Sprout when they argued that “most, if not all, human activity is affected by the uneven distribution of resources.”¹⁷⁴ Further, Avalos reminds us about David Bishop’s survey of world conflicts which concluded that, “there are significant casual links between scarcities of renewable resources and violence.”¹⁷⁵

Additionally, Avalos importantly highlights that scarcity can be found at all levels of human organization.¹⁷⁶ He, for example, points to power and status as resources that cause conflict in a family because they are often unevenly distributed as exemplified by the first born who is either often privileged or burdened with responsibilities that other siblings may not have.¹⁷⁷ He further discusses various scholars in criminology, economics, immigration, conflict theory, international relations to establish that competition for scarce resources lies at the centre of conflict from the smallest social units to the largest sociopolitical entities.¹⁷⁸

¹⁶⁹ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 83.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 96–100.

Avalos postulates that people fight over religion for the same reason they fight over resources, territory, and power. For Avalos, religion causes violence because it generates “new scarce resources.” He states that, “religion represents assets (spiritual teachings, sacred places, privileges, assurance of salvation) that are scarce and hence highly valued,” and adds that “religion is particularly prone to violence because its premises are unverifiable and therefore competing claims cannot be adjudicated by any objective means.”¹⁷⁹

Avalos deduces that religion creates conflict and violence when it creates scarce resources of such perceived value that people are willing to fight and die for them, especially when there is perceived imminent loss of these resources.¹⁸⁰ For Avalos, the scarce resources created by religion include: Inscripturation—the creation of a written account of what is believed to be authoritative information about or from supernatural forces and/or being;¹⁸¹ sacred space—a bounded space whose value is placed above that of surrounding spaces for purely religious reasons and thus its access is limited to certain people;¹⁸² group privileging—the fact that certain groups have privileges and rights not granted to those outside of the group;¹⁸³ and salvation—the idea that one receives certain more permanent supernatural status or benefit by joining a particular religion.¹⁸⁴

5.2.1. Summary and Assessment

My thesis is indebted to the insights articulated by Avalos, particularly, his scarce resources theory. Avalos avows that scarce resources, real or perceived, are a major factor in violence.¹⁸⁵ He contends that religion is inherently violent because it fundamentally engages in the creation of scarce resources.¹⁸⁶ He demonstrates how scriptures, salvation, and sacred space are scarce resources created by religion and how these scarce resources spawn violence.

Where I differ with Avalos is in the provenance of the scarce resource framing in the Bible. I elaborate that the expression of these valuable resources in scarce terms points to underlying anthropological concerns—not to the nature of religion. Particularly, my study suggests that resources produced by religion are expressed in scarce terms because throughout history, human persons, religious and nonreligious, ancient and modern have imagined the universe in zero-sum terms. Importantly, Avalos indicts theological aspects such as sacred space, scriptures, and salvation. I propose that his indictment of these theological concepts falls short because it seems to ignore the sociocultural bearings on theology. It seemed to have eluded Avalos that “theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the role of a religion in that matrix.”¹⁸⁷ In my thesis, I examine the sociocultural and socioeconomic matrix that gave rise to the theologies he is problematizing.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 110.

¹⁸¹ Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 104.

¹⁸² Ibid, 106–107.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 108.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 109.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 93.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 83.

¹⁸⁷ Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky, eds., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Method in Theology* (Toronto: Published by University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 2017), 3.

Chapter Three Zero-Sum Logic in the Bible

The conception of human interaction as a zero-sum affair is implicit in many of the popular Patriarchal stories in Genesis. From the story of the fall of man (3:1–24) where Adam lays the blame onto Eve—if one of us must be at fault, it is she, not me!—to the first biblical murder (4:1–8), the nature of these conflicts points to a zero-sum mindset. The zero-sum approach to conflict continues in the stories of the half-brothers, Isaac and Ishmael where whereas God promises to make a nation out of Ishmael’s descendants as well (21:9-13), thus rendering the fabric of the story not completely zero-sum, the fact that it is either one of the two sons to receive the inheritance and the absence of any possibility of sharing in the inheritance casts a very vivid zero-sum savour to the story. In this chapter, I discuss selected passages in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament to highlight how the zero-sum mindset permeates people’s thinking not only about conflict, but also of their world.

1. Zero- Sum Logic in the Hebrew Bible

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the zero-sum mindset as expressed in the stories about Abraham’s household and of Esau and Jacob.

1. Abraham’s Household

Abraham and Lot (Gen 11–14)

Genesis 11 unveils a story of a landless Abram and his nomadic household migrating from Ur to Haran (11:28,31), traveling down the fertile crescent, to the land of Canaan.¹⁸⁸ One’s ability to lay claim to any land was a fundamental requirement for greatness in the ancient world. Therefore, for a landless foreigner, land was critical to gaining a reputation as a great leader.¹⁸⁹ He takes stops first in Shechem, then in Bethel and in Negeb (11:4–9), the southern border of Canaan, pitching their tents on the outskirts of the Canaanite cities—in keeping with the nomadic practice of establishing temporary structures.¹⁹⁰

Upon his expulsion from Egypt, Abram and his retinue retrace their path back towards Canaan (13:1-18). On their return, both Abram and Lot have accumulated great wealth in the form of livestock, precious metals, and tents.¹⁹¹ The increase in the number of animals, meant an increase in the grazing land required to feed these animals. As a result, the need for more grazing land causes tension between uncle and nephew.¹⁹² While the quarrels were not between Abram

¹⁸⁸ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 42.

¹⁸⁹ Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier, 2013), 42. Cited 9 May 2020. Online:

<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1052556&site=eds-live>.

¹⁹⁰ Nicholas K. Rauh and Kraus E. Heidi, *A Short History of the Ancient World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 108–109. Cited 9 May 2020. Online: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/971267524>.

¹⁹¹ Perhaps ‘the herds of animals received from Pharaoh account for the wealth Abram brought back with him’. Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 44.

¹⁹² Joan E. Cook, *Genesis: Volume 2. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 20. Cited 9 May 2020. Online: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1444624&site=eds-live>.

and Lot, but between their herders,¹⁹³ the tension was significant enough to warrant a separation between Abram and Lot.

To curb the situation, Abram offers his nephew an unprecedented proposition. Lot is to take whatever part of the land he wishes.¹⁹⁴ The scuffle is therefore resolved as Lot chooses his preferred area and Abram stays central.¹⁹⁵ This provides a glimpse into the social and economic world of Abram. Bergant notes that, “the herders are quarreling over grazing land. Such disagreement implies that Abram and his clan are neither camel-riding Bedouins nor aimless wanderers. They are nomadic herders who live a kind of dimorphic existence, that is, semi-settled in places as they follow their herds in search of new pasturage.”¹⁹⁶

This story “particularly highlights the importance of land, the character of which notably impacts the lives of the people.”¹⁹⁷ For the ancient near eastern peoples, the different ecological precincts in the region implied specific habitation, means of survival and forms of cultural expressions, since these precincts presented different opportunities and challenges to human existence.¹⁹⁸ Thus, for this nomadic clan, the issue of land was of such great importance that matters could perhaps have escalated had Abram not solved the situation commendably. For a people inhabiting a land that turns out to be insufficient with the increase in livestock—in an area already inhabited by the Canaanites and Perizzites—the world exists as a zero-sum game. In this episode, we see the principle of scarcity bring about a separation between relatives. Each respective group of herders perceives the other to be a threat not only to the well-being of their livestock, but their own individual wellbeing.

The Tale of the Two Sons (Gen 15:1–17:27)

Chapter 15 presents a patrilineal narrative where the lineage is traced through a son—as the continuity of the household, the cultic figure and the head of the household.¹⁹⁹ The heir was of such importance that he not only consolidated the wealth within the family or clan, but also ensured that all the needs of the aging parents were met satisfactory in accordance with the cultural norms.²⁰⁰ Such importance attached to the heir, a son, accentuates the magnitude of Abram and Sarai’s childlessness. Bergant notes,

...the inability to bear children was a grave hardship for any woman in a patriarchal society, since the survival of the clan or tribe depended on the expansion of individual families. It was a particular affliction for the wife of the patriarch, for it was her responsibility to

¹⁹³ “This point offers a glimpse into the social conditions within an ancient nomadic clan. Though Abram was the head of the clan, the sons—or in this case the nephew—of the leader, led relatively independent lives, overseeing their own families, possessing their own flocks and herds, and employing their own herders.” Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 44.

¹⁹⁴ The custom of the time dictated that the older has the first right of selection. Cook, *Genesis*, 20.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 44.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 42.

¹⁹⁸ Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scripture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁹⁹ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 47.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

provide the next leader of the group. Thus, Sarai's barrenness was both a personal affliction and a condition that jeopardized the entire group.²⁰¹

In keeping with the need to have an heir, and as it were the custom in many ancient Near Eastern cultures, Sarai offers Hagar to Abram to bear a child (16:1–3).²⁰² Hagar, Sarai's maid, begins to despise her mistress as soon as she conceives (16:4). Sarai is enraged by Hagar's behavior and she indicts her husband who re-establishes her dominion over Hagar. Sarai sets out to punish Hagar, and Hagar responds by running away (16:5–6).²⁰³ Bergant emphasizes that "this conflict is much more serious than a simple rivalry between women over a man. It threatens the inner harmony of a patriarchal family and challenges the structures that ensure inheritance. The vocabulary chosen indicates this."²⁰⁴

Hagar did not stay away for too long as the passage says that she was soon back to the household—pregnant with child:

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."...And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (16:7–16).

The tension between Sarai and Hagar is re-ignited through their respective sons. As Abraham celebrates Isaac's passage from infancy to childhood,²⁰⁵ conflicts of old re-emerge (21:8–21). The story articulates a rivalry between two women, a rivalry between social classes—a legitimate wife and the other is a slave woman who has become a concubine, and a rivalry between two peoples, the Israelites and the Ishmaelites,²⁰⁶ all of which are expressed as Zero-sum affairs. Sarah sees Hagar's son laughing at Isaac, perhaps while he was playing.²⁰⁷ Sarah then

²⁰¹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰² "The extant law codes of several ancient Near Eastern cultures state that a barren wife could engage a surrogate to bear a child in her place. This child would then be adopted by the barren woman and thus become the legal heir of the husband." Ibid, 48.

²⁰³ Bergant explains that "as a slave, Hagar has no power to make decisions about her own life. Without being asked, she is given to the patriarch in order to produce a child that will not even be considered hers. The child will be adopted without her consent. She is raised in status from slave to concubine, not because of any merit on her part, but because of the child whom she will bear. Since a woman's importance is determined by her ability to bear children, it is understandable that she might disdain a woman who is barren, even if that woman is her mistress. Such behavior is not acceptable, however, and it is reported to Abram, who reduces Hagar back to the status of a slave. Once again, she is handed over without her consent, this time to an angry mistress." See Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 49.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ The infant mortality rate was high at the time. Weaning was therefore considered a very important milestone. Ibid, 61.

²⁰⁶ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 61.

²⁰⁷ Some translations use "scoffing" (New King James Version), "mocking" (Amplified Bible) etc.

demands Abraham to “cast” away Hagar and her son. Abraham grudgingly obliges, upon intervention from God (vv. 8–14). It then raises a question of how bad Ishmael’s transgression was to warrant expulsion from the household. Why is Sarah so angered by to the extent that she demands the dismissal of Hagar and her child?

Bergant argues that the reason for Sarah’s reaction can be found in the social customs of the day. She highlights that “the Code of Hammurabi stated that the child of a concubine could inherit along with children of free wives.”²⁰⁸ For Bergant, Sarah understands the implications of such a possibility. It is unfavourable both to her son and for herself because she will have to be dependent on her son for care and protection in her later years. She does not want this to happen, not only for Isaac’s sake, but for her own as well.²⁰⁹ She, therefore, must protect all the inheritance. The same woman whom Sarai offered to Abram as a surrogate for the sake of the continuity of the patriarch’s household is now unwelcome. The son, Ishmael, who was conceived as a solution to the future of the clan, is now perceived to be a threat to the future of the very clan he was born to uphold.

Additionally, as a patrilineal society, a son was the continuity of the household, the cultic figure and the head of the household.²¹⁰ With two sons being in the picture, and Ishmael being the older son, he was a likely heir, yet there could only be one heir.²¹¹ Perhaps this explains Sarah’s reaction. If the desirable honor of head of the household is this exclusive, it must be competed for. If Ishmael gained it, it meant that Isaac would have lost it. This was an undesirable outcome for Sarah. The problem had to be sorted sooner rather than later. But why is this honor so exclusive? Could not the brothers coexist and manage the father’s estate together? While God’s promise to make a nation out of Ishmael (21:9-13) suggests that the framing of the story is not entirely Zero-sum, the fact that it is either one of the two sons to receive the inheritance and the absence of any possibility of sharing in the inheritance, casts a very vivid zero-sum savour to the story.

2. Esau and Jacob (*Genesis 25–27*)

The Jacob and Esau story presents arguably the most vivid example of Zero-sum logic.²¹² This internal family story marred by parental favoritism, deception, and sibling rivalry brings to bear important social practices such as the rights of the firstborn, the power of a deathbed blessing, and endogamous marriage.²¹³ It follows the plot of the barren mother type scene and a request model, in which Isaac turns to God in search for a son for his barren wife.²¹⁴ As it were with Sarah (11:30), Rebekah is childless (25:21). Rebekah’s childlessness is however short-lived as the Lord grants Isaac’s request, permitting her to conceive (25:21). The author highlights that the conception is effectuated by the Lord which underscores the uniqueness of the unborn child (25:21).²¹⁵ Rebekah’s pregnancy is complicated and uncomfortable, which the difficulty is explained by the

²⁰⁸ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 61.

²⁰⁹ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 61.

²¹⁰ A patrilineal society is characterized by a system of kinship in which an individual's family membership derives from and is recorded through their father's lineage. See; Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 47.

²¹¹ The custom suggested that the older son would be the most likely heir to the head of the household. Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 74.

²¹² Jonathan R. Cohen, “A Genesis of Conflict: The Zero-Sum Mindset,” *Cardozo J. of Conflict Resolution* 17 (2016): 437.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 77.

²¹⁴ Cook, *Genesis*, 30.

²¹⁵ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 74.

Lord: *Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger (25:23).*

This response foreshadows an unusual arrangement of the younger having dominance over the older.²¹⁶ The explanation envisages not only a troubling future for the unborn twins, but also a violent encounter between their descendants.²¹⁷ Precisely, the fate of an entire generation is a life of conflict and strife.²¹⁸

The offspring of these famous biblical characters were destined for a world of inequality and mutually incompatible interests, where some would be masters over the others.²¹⁹ Their conflicting future was predestined, and the grandeur of one's identity is expressed in terms of inferiority of the other. A world where Jacob's might is hinged on Esau's inferiority is a world prone to animosity and tends to culminate into violence. One then wonders: Could not Rebekah have carried the two nations in her womb without them being necessarily in conflict, and coexist without one being a master over the other? The story suggests that for some mysterious reason, God's plan for these unborn is a future of conflict, not cooperation.

The saga continues in Genesis 27 when Isaac, already very old, eyes dim, and conscious of his imminent death, plans to bless his older son, Esau (vv. 1-4). The "death blessings determined the destiny of the son by transferring the father's own vitality and by promising the son good fortune."²²⁰ Isaac is candid in his instructions: "...take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die (v. 4)." Isaac's apparent plan of secrecy²²¹ is thwarted by the uninvited Rebekah (v. 5).²²² She responds by making plans of her own (vv. 5-10). Ultimately, Jacob, being aided by his mother, tricks his eye-deemed old father into blessing him (vv. 11-27):

²¹⁶ The prominent social custom in the ancient Near Eastern families was the dominance of the elder over the younger. See Cook, *Genesis*, 30; Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 74.

²¹⁷ Bergant notes; "In traditional societies, multiple births are considered an anomaly. Since human births are normally single and animal births are multiple, the character of the infants is often questioned. Are these infants really human? Are they some kind of animals? Or might they be somehow divine? In this story the twins are definitely considered human, but they are also symbolic of something else. Since the firstborn of a family or clan was considered the first fruit of the womb and was awarded unique rights and privileges, the birth of twins often brought confusion. How can there be two first born? This matter does not seem to be a problem here." *Ibid*, 74-75.

²¹⁸ Concerning vv. 24-26, Bergant expounds; "Creative imagery is used to describe the twins at their birth. Their names are determined by appearance in the case of the first one born and by behavior in the case of the second. The details of Esau's appearance suggest Edom, the land that his descendants eventually will inhabit. The second infant is born gripping the heel of the first. The contrast between the brothers is also found in their manner of living and, like Abel and Cain before them, in their choices of occupation. Esau prefers the open field, a place of uncultivated land; Jacob is less adventurous, choosing to live in tents. Esau is a skilled hunter; though it is not explicitly stated, Jacob is probably a shepherd. Isaac prefers Esau because of the game he provides his father; no reason is given for Rebekah's preference of Jacob. Most likely, the distinct profiles of the brothers are meant to characterize the two future nations that they represent, namely, Edom and Israel." *Ibid*, 75.

²¹⁹ Cohen, "A Genesis of Conflict," 437.

²²⁰ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 77.

²²¹ The custom dictated to have all the sons present at such a time. His choice of a private arrangement perhaps points to favoritism on his part. *Ibid*.

²²² Bergant notes, "In ancient Near Eastern patriarchal societies, the women of the household were normally neither consulted nor informed about the plans made by the men. Confined to the inner sanctum of the tents, they frequently discovered these plans by overhearing discussion of them." Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 78.

...And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (vv. 27–29).

Esau arrives, with his father's savoury food in hand, shortly after Jacob had just left his father's presence (vv. 30–31). Upon realizing that Jacob had been blessed in his stead (v. 33), Esau cries to his father for a blessing of his own (v. 34), to which Isaac responds that Jacob had taken the blessing. "Indeed, I have made him your master, and all his brethren I have given to him as servants; with grain and wine I have sustained him. What shall I do for you, my son?" (v. 37) Agonizingly, Esau asks, "do you have just one blessing? Bless me too father" (v. 36). He pleads to no avail because "Isaac bestowed the entire primogeniture blessing onto Jacob, who can now claim the blessings of abundance and the privilege of dominance."²²³ Furthermore, Hillel reminds that the Code of honor at the time demanded that a blessing invoking Yahweh Elohim, once given could not be withdrawn, regardless of how it was obtained.²²⁴

Esau's continued plea yielded the exact response he loathed the most—perhaps more of a curse than a blessing.²²⁵ Isaac tells Esau, "away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother (vv. 39–40). The blessings that Isaac speaks over Jacob and Esau, respectively, have a dual focus. While Jacob's blessing includes fertility of the land (v. 28) and authority over other nations as well as within his own family, Esau's blessing includes dwelling away from fertility (v.39) and a life of servanthood (v. 40). Esau is enraged and consumed with anger (v. 41) in a manner similar to that of Cain toward Abel (4:5), and like Cain before him, he elects to resolve the problem by fratricide: *Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob (v. 41)."*

The story suggests that there is only one blessing; it is limited and cannot be augmented. Only one of the two brothers could receive a blessing. There was a competition to obtain it. When Esau loses out on this scarce blessing; he must settle for a life of servanthood. In rage, he resolves to kill his brother. The questions then arise: why is the father's blessing so limited? Why is it that only one son can receive it? Why is the blessing so exclusive? Why is Jacob's superiority expressed in opposition to Esau's inferiority? How different would the brothers' relationship be if only the blessing could be shared?

In this story, Jacob's blessedness resulted to Esau becoming a servant. Jacob's identity as the chosen and blessed one appears to be imagined in an act of distinguishing and separating from Esau the "rejected" one. Jacob's position is here in established negatively by *who he is not: He is,*

²²³ Ibid, 79.

²²⁴ Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 71.

²²⁵ Cohen, "A Genesis of Conflict," 437.

only by virtue of who he is not. Esau is thus an outsider who is important for the self-definition of Jacob, the insider. He is needed to establish the very boundary that is meant to exclude him.²²⁶

Summary

The stories discussed allude to the competition model in which the resources that were perceived to be so essential were in short supply; some are chosen, and others rejected.²²⁷ In the case of Abraham, the competition is framed between Sarai and her concubine and later Ishmael and Isaac. Unlike Sarah, Rebekah does not have a rival wife, but she carries the strife between her two sons even before they are born.²²⁸ The identity of Isaac and Jacob as the chosen people is expressed in opposition to Ishmael and Esau. The same can be said of Cain and Abel. Thus, the rejected characters are needed *in order to establish the boundary that is meant to exclude them.*

The fabric of these celebrated stories is largely Zero-sum. There were *not enough* blessings, *not enough* parental love, there was *not enough* divine favour and acceptance, there was *limited* honour, *insufficient* rank and *inadequate* status.²²⁹ There is only so much land for grazing, only one person can receive the inheritance, there is only one blessing and it cannot be shared. When one is blessed with fertility, the other's place is away from the fertility of the earth. There cannot be cooperation.

It is a Zero-sum world in which the only way to rid oneself of competition is having some cast away, and households getting divided. Thus, Esau, like Cain before him, understands that the only way to rid himself of being a subordinate of his younger brother is to kill him. In a Zero-sum world where there is *no compromise*, conflicts are most likely to end in estrangement, violence and bloodshed. The nuances in these stories have lived on for long in the memory of religious peoples and they have, for centuries, continued to approach the conflicts and the world in general in the same manner, hence the violence. As Schwartz deduces, these patriarchs are the “eponymous ancestors of peoples whose enmity grows and is nurtured for centuries, who define themselves and their prosperity under the principle of scarcity, and who conceive of the others as cursed and murderous.”²³⁰

2. The Zero-sum Mindset in the New Testament

The New Testament, albeit being celebrated for its emphasis on a peace and love for all humanity as demonstrated by Jesus who lays down his life for all, did not remain immune to the permeation of the Zero-sum mindset. In this section, I discuss selected passages in the *Gospel according to Mark* to posit that the Zero-sum flavour is present in some of its narratives. Two stories are here in considered: the story of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), and the request of James and John (Mark 10:35-45).

2.1. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30)

Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and takes shelter in a house with no intention of being recognized (v. 24). His desire of a silent cameo is however disrupted as a petitioner somehow recognizes Jesus. The story suggests that the petitioner was a woman whose little daughter had an

²²⁶ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, XI.

²²⁷ Cook, *Genesis*, 30.

²²⁸ Cook, *Genesis*, 30.

²²⁹ Cohen, 446

²³⁰ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 3–4.

unclean spirit (v. 25). She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter (v. 26). Her request portrays the confidence she had in Jesus as the solution to her need.²³¹ Mark's description of the woman is in no uncertain terms; it is centered around her ethnicity. She is a Gentile of Syrophenician origin (v. 26). The woman's ethnicity takes center stage in a dialogue that perhaps one would expect to focus around the request for the exorcism of her daughter.²³² The author is therefore inviting the reader to consider the ethnicity of the woman. She was a Gentile, not one of the children, but a dog (vv. 27–28).²³³

The woman's request is met by an initial response: "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*" (v. 27).²³⁴ This is arguably the harshest response Jesus makes to someone in genuine search of help in the entire *Gospel according to Mark*.²³⁵ Different interpreters have labored to *blunt the sharp edge* of Jesus' response by offering various explanations suggesting that these were not Jesus' actual words, but rather those of the author.²³⁶ However, as Guy Sayles notes, all such efforts however fail as, "it is nearly impossible to believe a largely Gentile Church would invent such a jarring phrase."²³⁷ Iverson notes that the blessings of the kingdom were understood as belonging to the children of Israel, not to Gentile "dogs."²³⁸ He writes,

It is presumptuous for a Gentile 'dog' to impose on the 'bread' (i.e. blessings of the kingdom) that rightfully belongs to the 'children' of Israel... Scholars typically understand the saying as an insulting rejection of the woman's request. Jesus calls the woman a dog, an unclean animal according to Jewish tradition that scavenged around the countryside consuming garbage, vomit, and corpses (Exod. 22.31; Prov. 26.11; 1 Kgs 21.23; 22.38; 2 Kgs 9.36), and hence were considered 'the most despicable, insolent, and miserable of creatures'. While the term also referred more broadly to peoples that were enemies of Israel

²³¹ Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: "Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs"* (T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies. London: T&T Clark, 2007), 47. Cited 22 May 2020. Online: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=378376&site=eds-live>.

²³² "In comparison to other exorcisms and miracles, Mark provides almost no description of the actual healing. The dialogue in v. 27-29 is an important Markan text for understanding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles." Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 45.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Some scholars like Dowd, do not consider this dialogue to be a controversy with opponents like those in 2:1-3:6; 7:1-23; or 11:27–12:34. Although most of the comment on this pericope has focused on the problem of Jesus' apparent insult to the Gentile woman, this concern misses the point of the story. Jesus is not testing the woman's faith; unlike the author of Matthew, the writer of Mark never mentions faith in this story. In any case, the woman has already demonstrated adequate faith according to the Markan understanding of faith; she has come with a request, confident of Jesus' power to cast the demon out of her daughter; see Sharyn E. Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel. Reading the New Testament Series* (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 77. Cited 22 May 2020. Online: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1876834&site=eds-live>.

²³⁵ Guy Sayles, "Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other: An Expository Article on Mark 7:24-30," *Review & Expositor* 114 (2017): 113.

²³⁶ Some commentators suggest that 'he spoke these words in a playful tone; that he intended his words to be a riddle which invited further conversation; or that he referred to "puppies" rather than dogs, so that he compared the woman to a beloved household pet.' See; Sayles, "Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other," 113.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 48.

(1 Sam. 17.43; Ps. 22.16; Isa. 56.10-11), dogs became an apt metaphor for Gentiles, the rabbis declaring that ‘the people of the world are like dogs.’²³⁹

Whether or not the nuance is meant literally, and whether Jesus used the exact words, or it was simply the author’s own choice of words, it is undeniable that the woman’s ethnicity is the issue here. Her request is denied because she is an “other.”²⁴⁰ The woman’s otherness is expressed here through her ethnicity, status, and gender.²⁴¹ The blessing of God made manifest in Jesus is meant for Israel, the “children.” The available bread was insufficient and only belonged to the children. Giving any of it away to the “dogs” presents a risk of the children not getting enough or some would miss out.²⁴² Perhaps after the chosen people have been served then the Gentile could receive some of the remains.²⁴³ The story’s reference to bread is also telling. The theme of bread is a recurring symbol of God’s blessing in Mark’s gospel.²⁴⁴ Therefore, the Markan Jesus is alluding to the privileged status of Israel as God’s elect. They are the “descendants”, whose bread must not be tossed out to the dogs.²⁴⁵ Once again, as already discussed in the Hebrew Bible, *there is not enough blessing*. A Gentile’s claim to the blessing threatens the chosen people, the descendants of Abraham.

The woman answered, “yes Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28). The woman’s response seems to suggest that she was aware of her position as an outsider. She clearly understood exactly what Jesus was talking about. She perhaps appreciated her position as unfavoured and recognized her status. Rather than argue against her implied position as outsider, she makes a compelling case for her inclusion.²⁴⁶ In claiming that “yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28), the Syrophenician woman challenged the cultural context of the day.²⁴⁷ Sharyn surmises that, “by changing the cultural context, the Syrophenician woman solves the problem of priority by replacing the image of sequence and implied scarcity with an image of simultaneity and abundance. The puppies will do fine on what the children feed them from their own plates.”²⁴⁸

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 49.

²⁴¹ Sayles, “Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other,” 110.

²⁴² Jerome H. Neyrey and Richard L Rohrbaugh, “‘He Must Increase, I Must Decrease’ (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001): 11.

²⁴³ Iverson notes that “while Jesus’ response is of some comfort to the Gentile nations yet to hear the good news, but it is of little consolation to the woman’s immediate concern. At best, the saying of Jesus seems to offer theoretical possibility rather than practical assistance. Jesus’ response offered neither comfort nor hope for the woman whose time as a Gentile by her own admission (7.28) had not come!” Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 49.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 50.

²⁴⁵ Dowd emphasizes the importance of the choice of vocabulary. He notes that while the noun *teknon* can be used figuratively as a term of affection or compassion, its literal meaning is descendant or offspring. He further points to its use in reference to Abraham’s son Isaac in the Septuagint (Genesis 17:16 and 22:7–8 and of the subsequent descendants of Abraham (John 8:39) and Sarah (Gal 4:28, 31) in general; see Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 77.

²⁴⁶ Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 50.

²⁴⁷ Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 77.

²⁴⁸ Unlike the Jews, the Greeks and Romans kept house dogs, as we seen from literary sources (e.g. Plutarch, Aemilius Paulus 10, 4; Pliny Letters 4, 2.3), relief sculptures (Payne 1931, 302, pl 27, n. 780), and vase painting (Becatti 1967, 33). In reliefs and vase paintings of meal scenes it is common to find a dog depicted as sitting or lying under the diner’s couch or table, sometimes munching on a tidbit apparently claimed from its master; Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 77.

But what if the puppies had plates of their own, just like the children? Why would some have to feed from the remains of others? Why would the Gentiles have to eat only after the chosen people have eaten? Why are the Gentiles secondary in the blessing equation? Neyrey and Rohrbaugh suggest that the story depends on the audience's understanding of "limited good" to grasp both Jesus' words and the woman's argument.²⁴⁹

The framing of this story suggests that even at Jesus' time, the Zero-sum mindset was at play. The response given by Jesus implies that resources were perceived to be scarce and sharing some bread with the 'dogs' meant a loss to the children. Similarly, the woman's response suggests that she was aware of this Zero-sum reality. In a zero-sum world such as this, plates are not meant for everyone. Some can only feed from the remains of others.

2.2 The Request of James and John (*Mark 10:35–45*)

In this remarkable passage, James and John approach Jesus with a request after he declared that the Son of Man would come in the glory of his Father (8:38). Their starting point highlights their determination to have their request granted: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you (v. 35)." Jesus asks what their request was, to which they respond: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory (vv. 36–37)." The exact wish of the brothers is not clear at this point until later in the episode when it becomes clear that the issue about status (vv. 42–45), the contrast between the highly and lowly placed, between those wanting to be served and those who serve.²⁵⁰ Maurice Casey further underscores the magnitude of their request:

...What we have got is thus quite extraordinary: the twelve will judge Israel. Not Abel, not Abraham, not Moses, but the twelve. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and much of the diaspora would be there, reclining as at feasts (Matt. 8:11-12//Luke 13:28-29), but not judging Israel. This puts Jacob and John's request at Mark 10:37 in its proper perspective. They merely ask for seats of honour when every man of the twelve, not God himself or the patriarchs, will judge the twelve tribes of Israel.²⁵¹

It is worth noting that the brothers already enjoyed centrality in the ministry of the Markan Jesus. They are among the first to be called into discipleship after Peter and his brother Andrew (1:16–20). It is they that go with Jesus to the house of Peter and Andrew after Jesus' first miracle in Mark (1:29) and are mentioned next to Peter in Mark's list of the twelve (3:16–17). They, along with Peter, will be taken by Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane to watch and pray with him (14:32).²⁵² We can therefore infer that the Sons of Zebedee intended to attain exclusive status and honor not just among the twelve, but also over and beyond all—including the Patriarchs—in the soon to be ushered in Kingdom. Casey argues further:

Given their position among the twelve, Jacob and John must surely have sat on his right and left from time to time. It may have been their usual place when Peter was absent. Their

²⁴⁹ Neyrey and Rohrbaugh, "He Must Increase, I Must Decrease," 11.

²⁵⁰ Bastiaan M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary. Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 333. Cited 22 May 2020. Online: <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=378193&site=eds-live>.

²⁵¹ Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel. Society for NT Studies Monograph Series* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 197. Cited 22 May 2020. Online: <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/49726109>.

²⁵² Ibid.

request makes sense only if taken literally. If heaven, or the kingdom, were a purely spiritual realm without place, space or time, being on Jesus' right and left would make no sense as a memorable request... At his final Passover with his disciples, Jesus expected the kingdom to come soon, and to drink new wine in it (14:25). That would be a very suitable occasion for Jacob and John to be on his right and left... We must conclude that Jesus' 'glory' refers to his supreme position in the kingdom of God, after the resurrection, when the twelve would judge the twelve tribes of Israel.²⁵³

Jesus' response to their request seems to suggest that he is not opposed to the idea of having "someone on his right and someone on his left in his glory." He instead asks whether they have what it takes to shoulder the implications of their requests:²⁵⁴ "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized (v. 38)?" They respond emphatically, "we are able (v. 39)."

While some commentators point to the seemingly rash response by the brothers to suggest that they misunderstood what Jesus meant, such an argument cannot suffice considering that Jesus' response confirms the correctness of their response: "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized."²⁵⁵ Casey points to the chronological order of Mark which places this incident after some passion predictions, to contend that the brothers must have understood the metaphorical references to Jesus' death. Furthermore, their response suggests that they were cognizant of the magnitude of their request and thus understood the sacrifice that would come with such a request; i.e. to sit on Jesus' right and left in his glory would entail suffering and death for them in the present life.²⁵⁶ Additionally, it was not uncommon for Galileans to be ready to die when they perceived it to be for God.²⁵⁷

The reaction of the other disciples suggests that they were absent when James and John presented their request to Jesus. "When the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John (v. 41)." Modern readers are tempted to invoke democratic assumptions as the grounds for their indignation. Such a proposition, however, is based on a misconception that the peoples of the

²⁵³ Casey further presses, "this gives us a somewhat better idea of what James (he uses Jacob) and John meant when they referred to Jesus' glory. They had in mind the events of the last times. They would sit at table with Jesus and the rest of the twelve, when they had risen from the dead. Jesus would be the decisive witness before the heavenly court in the judgement of people who had been faced with his decisive and divisive earthly ministry, and the twelve would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the cultural context for their request to sit on Jesus"; see Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, 199–201.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 193.

²⁵⁵ Iersel points to the argument that the brothers probably were taking the baptism metaphor to refer to the baptism of conversion that Jesus had received at the hands of John the Baptist. Iersel notes; "at this point a present day reader may well wonder if the author/narrator and his first readers did not know what later readers knew from other sources, namely, that James had meanwhile been beheaded by Herod Agrippa I, and so had drained the cup to the last drop. After all, James is the only one of the twelve whose martyrdom is related in the New Testament (Acts 12.1-2), and there is no reason to think that this event, which had taken place a few decades before Mark was written, was not generally known among Christians. In retrospect, this can also explain the resolute tone of the assurance that the narrator puts on the lips of the two disciples. See; Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*, 334. However, Iersel's argument doesn't undermine the implication of the brothers' response for as Casey points out, Galileans were famous for their readiness to die, in circumstances which they saw as service to God. See; Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, 205.

²⁵⁶ "That two of the inner circle understood this ought not to be a surprise. That it is a surprise stems partly from overliteral interpretation of Jesus' initial comment"; see Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, 205.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

time were concerned with notions of democracy, which is unfitting of the culture at the time and is anachronistic at best.²⁵⁸ The argument that it was “Peter’s primacy which felt challenged is perhaps more likely,”²⁵⁹ but the most obvious argument is probably that the ten are angry because the brothers have tried to secure the best and most desirable places for themselves.²⁶⁰ They are angry because they want the same positions for themselves. The fact that Jesus intervenes suggests that it was no small matter, they made their displeasure known to Jesus.²⁶¹

Jesus’ handling of the matter (vv. 42–45) is quite telling in that it suggests that he was conscious of what was at stake. He seems to have been aware that these desired positions were scarce resources, i.e. they were limited in supply and exclusive—a notion that is nuanced by the actions of two brothers and the reaction of the other disciples. Jesus’ response to the situation neither challenges the existence of the privileged positions, the desirable positions on “his right and on his left,” nor does it challenge the conception that these desired positions are scarce. He rather redefines the roles in that, “*whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (vv. 43–45).”

The framing of this Markan account suggests a Zero-sum logic. The implication of being at the side of an important person was the same in Antiquity as it is today, meaning that the two brothers asked for a truly unique and special honour from Jesus.²⁶² It is thus little wonder that the rest of the disciples became indignant towards James and John (v. 41). The reaction of the disciples shades a vivid Zero-sum image which makes perfect cultural sense in terms of limited good, in that, the reception of special status of the two brothers would mean there is little, or no special honor left for the other disciples.²⁶³

The epitome of honor in this case was understood to be attained next to Jesus. *There was not enough room at the side of Jesus.* There could only be room for two. John and James claiming these limited spots meant that the ten were to miss out. They were not about to accept that and became angry and enraged towards the two brothers. Not even the presence of Jesus would stop his disciples from getting angry. The attainment of the two was understandably perceived to be at the peril of the ten disciples, hence, it was not to be ignored.²⁶⁴ Whereas the situation does not escalate because Jesus intervenes commendably (vv. 42-45), the Zero-sum logic in the story is undeniably very strong. One wonders how the story would have unfolded had Jesus not mediated the situation commendably.

Summary

Summarily, we can infer from these two examples from the *Gospel according to Mark*, that some New Testament stories present the world as a zero-sum game where the most valuable resources were perceived to be scarce, limited and inelastic. It, therefore, followed that one would only gain these valuable resources at the detriment of others. In the case of the Syrophoenician

²⁵⁸ See; Ibid, 209.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*, 335.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Neyrey and Rohrbaugh, “He Must Increase, I Must Decrease,” 12.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

woman (Mark 7:24–30), she is presented as an outsider whose search for her daughter’s healing is framed as an encroachment on the privileges reserved for insiders. There was not enough blessing for the Jews and the Gentiles. And as the metaphor suggests, there was not enough food for the children (Jews) and the dogs (Gentiles). In a Zero-sum world such as this, some are excluded or secondary at best in the blessing equation. Additionally, the framing of the episode where the sons of Zebedee present a special request to Jesus (Mark 10:35–45), paints a vivid zero-sum logic in that there was not enough honor. The special and highly coveted honor of sitting on Jesus’ right and left was expressed in zero-sum terms. There could only be room for two. It created disharmony—even in the presence of Jesus.

In a Zero-sum world of the New Testament, we have children and dogs, insiders and outsiders, limited and exclusive blessings, limited and exclusive honor, and exclusive claim to the name of Jesus. Such a world is a fertile breeding ground for envy, and conflict. These New Testament examples of exclusivism have for ages been invoked to justify despicable evils like slave trade, colonialism, racial segregation, marginalization of women etc., as will be discussed in chapter four.

Chapter four Analysis

Zero-Sum in the Genesis Accounts

The Genesis stories are permeated with themes and motifs reminiscent of the political, socioeconomic and geographical realities of the Ancient Near East—the region within which the Bible evolved.²⁶⁵ Hillel reminds that the Ancient Near Eastern region is the first known or recorded region where humans made a transition from “a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting, gathering, and scavenging to a more or less settled lifestyle based on domesticating and cultivating plants and animals.”²⁶⁶ The biblical narrative nuances a process by which disparate cultural elements from the Ancient Near East were transformed and fused to create a unique worldview, national identity, religious faith and ritual, and a code of law.²⁶⁷ Hillel importantly notes:

The development of human culture, wherever it takes place, is shaped by the environment that prevailed at its inception. That environment encompasses all the features of a region’s physical geography (location and geologic structure, topography, climate, and soils), biotic community of plants and animals, and cultural geography (the character of the human population, past and present). As such, the environment is not merely a passive and static stage on which cultural evolution takes place, but, indeed, a set of dynamic processes inducing that evolution. At the outset, the environment conditions the material life of a society. Reciprocally, a society’s responses to the opportunities, challenges, constraints, and hazards presented by the environment tend to modify the environment. Thus, a society’s interaction with the environment inevitably affects its values and attitudes—indeed, its entire worldview.²⁶⁸

The culture and attitudes expressed in the biblical narratives are therefore largely influenced by and are in tandem with socioeconomic and geographical realities of the Ancient Near East.

The book of Genesis points to an agrarian economy for humankind.²⁶⁹ From the story of man being created from the soil (Genesis 2: 7), to being placed in the Garden of Eden with water springs (Genesis 2: 6–15), human flourishing is conceptualized in an agrarian economy. Moreover, the first couple is spoken of as living peacefully and free, cultivating the garden at their leisure, and enjoying the companionship of their God until their act of disobedience (Genesis 2:6–3:7). Also, upon their disobedience, Yahweh condemns them to a lifetime of hard agricultural labor (Genesis 3: 17–23). It remains a point of debate in scholarship concerning the exact time when the

²⁶⁵ Cook, *Genesis*, 8–9. See also; Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 26–27.

²⁶⁶ Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 13.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁶⁹ Bergant notes, “the stories in the book of Genesis describe beginnings: the beginning of the world, the beginning of humankind and fundamental social practices, the beginning of clans and cities, the beginning of agriculture and invention. They also recount the beginning of rebellion, murder, licentiousness, and other forms of dissolute living. The stories in these first chapters reach deep into the human psyche and describe some of the struggles that every human being faces, regardless of generation or culture”; see, Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 16.

Hebrew Bible assumed its final state,²⁷⁰ but it remains that the authors and/or redactors conceptualized their world in Agrarian terms.

Foster earlier on conceived that “all normative behavior of a group is a function of their particular way of looking at their total environment, their unconscious acceptance of the rules of the game implicit in their cognitive orientation.” He argued that the members of every society share a common cognitive orientation which is, in effect, an un verbalized, implicit expression of their understanding of the “rules of the game” imposed upon them by their social, natural, and supernatural universes.²⁷¹ The basic premises of a certain culture are unconsciously accepted by individuals through their constant and exclusive participation in that culture. “It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity”.²⁷²

Foster holds that a cognitive orientation provides the members of the society it characterizes with basic premises and sets of assumptions normally neither recognized nor questioned which structure and guide behavior in much the same way grammatical rules unrecognized by most people structure and guide their linguistic forms.²⁷³ The cognitive orientations determine what people do, what is of value, and how they respond to various situations. The participants in the community think, act, and reason within the paradigm that the cognitive orientations establish, which paradigms become the measure of reality because the society is structured to conform to them. These orientations, though often not consciously formulated and articulated, are basic premises to all behavior.²⁷⁴ Importantly, all behaviour of members of a group is considered rational in as far it conforms to the philosophical context of the cognitive view.²⁷⁵

Ultimately, the community of one’s socialization determines one’s context, and one’s context formulates their worldview. The worldview informs their beliefs and norms, and these determine their practices. The Israelites, like other ancient near eastern peoples, depended on the unpredictable nature of their environment for their survival.²⁷⁶ They, unlike modern peoples,

²⁷⁰ For a summary of the contemporary understanding of the Documentary Hypothesis regarding the book of Genesis, see; Cook, *Genesis*, 9–10.

²⁷¹ “These cognitive orientations largely exist at a subconscious level in the minds of the members of the group. The average man of any society cannot describe the underlying premises of which his behavior is a logical function any more than he can outline a phonemic statement which expresses the patterned regularities in his speech... Cognitive orientations are recognized by most members of a society only in the sense that they make choices with the orientations as unconscious but determinative backgrounds.” See; George M. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 294.

²⁷² Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” 293.

²⁷³ Most of the people are not conscious of why they behave the way they do any more than an average person is conscious of why he/she constructs a sentence in a particular way in their native language. Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” 293.

²⁷⁵ Since all normative behavior of the members of a group is a function of its particular cognitive orientation, both in an abstract philosophical sense and in the view of an individual himself, all behavior is “rational” and sense-making. “Irrational” behavior can be spoken of only in the context of a cognitive view which did not give rise to that behavior. Ibid, 295.

²⁷⁶ Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 13.

lacked the resources to shield them from the changing moods of their environment.²⁷⁷ Thus, their national identity, collective and individual behaviour, modes of livelihood, and their entire perception of the world was informed by their perceptions and responses to their natural environment.²⁷⁸ The ecology²⁷⁹ of the region dictated agriculture—farming, pastoralism, and seafaring occupations— as the most suitable mode of livelihood, and shaped their cultural attitudes, worldview, national identity, religious expression, morality and a code of law.

In traditional agrarian societies, land shortage—the most important article of production—was applied to all desired aspects of life.²⁸⁰ For such societies, the social, economic, and natural universe is perceived to exist in finite quantity. Therefore, all good things such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honour, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety exist in finite and limited quantities, and it is not within their power to increase the available quantities.²⁸¹ ‘Good,’ like land is finite, limited and cannot be augmented i.e., there is not enough to go around, it can only be divided and re-divided.²⁸²

Traditional agrarian societies were largely closed systems, and thus, individuals largely understood their survival and existence to be determined and limited to and/or by the natural and social resources of their village and immediate area.²⁸³ Consequently, because the system is closed, and desirable things are finite and limited. Without a possibility of expansion, one person’s gain is someone else’s loss. Therefore, any apparent relative improvement is met with suspicion and is considered a threat to others.²⁸⁴

The ancestral history of Israel is expressed through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. An important theme at the heart of the narratives about Israelites’ origins is lineage, which is traced through the father, land, and divine protection.²⁸⁵ These stories particularly highlight the importance of land, the character of which notably impacts the lives of the people.²⁸⁶ The Hebrew Bible paints vivid depictions of agricultural life. The history of Israelites as nomadic or seminomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers is well engraved in the nation’s memory and is

²⁷⁷ “...Five natural ecological zones can be identified: (1) the mountains in the north stand in the path of the cloud-bearing winds, thereby providing an abundance of rain needed for the prosperous farming; (2) at the foot of the mountains, semiarid lowlands make farming a risk, yet the land is ideal for pastoral herding; (3) water flowing in the river valleys is dependent on runoffs from the humid highlands and varies in strength from season to season, thus making agriculture an unreliable occupation; (4) the extended narrow coast along the Mediterranean Sea links aquatic and land plants and animals, allowing seafaring occupations to thrive in this region; and (5) the arid land in the south, always subject to the possibility of drought, threatens the nomadic people of the area with famine.” Ibid, 26–39.

²⁷⁸ Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 13.

²⁷⁹ Ecology is concerned with “how human societies interact with the Earth, including its soil, landforms, underlying mineral resources, overlying atmosphere, water (quantity, quality, and spatial and temporal distribution), climate, and entire panoply of organisms that share habitats. The historical study of human ecology considers how the environment shaped or conditioned the material and cultural development of a civilization; and, how a civilization viewed (understood or interpreted) the environment”; see, Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 26.

²⁸⁰ Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” 296.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 42.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

often nuanced in figures of speech and allusions woven in the Israelite culture.²⁸⁷ Some scholars, for instance, suggest that the story about the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel characterizes the prominent ways of life—herding and farming—at the time; the deadly enmity that existed between these different ways of life resulted from their respective claim to the exclusive use of land.²⁸⁸

Additionally, Abram is contrasted as a landless sheikh in relation to landed kings and the Egyptian pharaoh; little wonder the promise made to him by God involves Land.²⁸⁹ Also, the blessing that Isaac pronounces unto the two brothers highlights the centrality of land and how its nature shaped the socio-economic world of the time. The blessings were two-fold, focusing on the fertility of land and the social status. Concerning the fertility of land, Isaac says to Jacob, “*May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine* (v. 28),” while to Esau he says “*Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high* (v. 39).” About social status, Isaac says to Jacob, “*Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother’s sons bow down to you* (v. 29).” And unto Esau he says, “*By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother* (v. 40).” The nature of the blessings suggests that desirables such as honour, respect, status, power and influence were attached to land ownership. He who wielded authority over the fertile land, was the master over others. In such a society, ownership of land is very critical, without which, one would be destined for a life of servanthood.

The Ancient Near Eastern region largely consisted of the humid highlands, the semiarid steppes, the river valleys, the seacoasts, and the deserts, which meant unstable climatic conditions.²⁹⁰ Given the climatic conditions of the region, favourable/fertile land, vegetation, and water were *scarce resources* for which one had to compete.²⁹¹ This is demonstrated by the conflict

²⁸⁷ For example, Psalm 23 refers to Yahweh as a shepherd. The major leaders of Israel—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David—were shepherds as well. The image of green pastures and still waters expresses every shepherd’s longing for soul-restoring security, just as the image of the valley of the shadow of death expresses the solitary shepherd’s haunting fear of the dangers that may lurk in the narrow ravines of the semidesert. See Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 54.

²⁸⁸ Bergant writes: “The story echoes a common ancient theme—the hostile brothers—and is reminiscent of a Sumerian myth, *Dumuzi* and *Enkimdu*: The Dispute between the Shepherd-God and the Farmer-God, which describes the conflict between a farmer and a herder, a conflict that is clearly cultural rather than strictly familial. Some scholars suppose that the choice of the shepherd (Abel) over the farmer (Cain) may be a reflection of the nomadic life of patriarchal Israel in opposition to the settled agricultural life of the neighbouring urban cities.” Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 26.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹⁰ “The region within which the Bible evolved, the ancient Near East encompasses parts of northeastern Africa and southwestern Asia. Ecologically, it constitutes an intermediate zone between the humid or sub-humid environments of southeastern Europe and the hyper-arid environments of the great desert belt that extends from the Sahara in the west through the Arabian Peninsula to the Thar Desert in the east.” See; Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 26–27.

²⁹¹ Concerning the climate, Hillel notes; “As a rule of thumb in this region, semiarid areas receive, on average, less than 6 inches (400 mm) of rain a year, as against a potential evaporation of 60 inches (500 mm) or so. During the rainy season (October to April), which is the growing season of wheat and barley, the balance between potential evaporation and rainfall amount is much more favorable, however. Areas that receive between 2 and 6 inches (300 and 400 mm) of rain permit extensive grain production in most years, but with a risk of failure in, say, one year of three or four, because of the unstable nature of the climate and the periodic occurrence of drought. Such areas constitute the zone where semisedentary farming and seminomadic herding may be practiced conjunctively or, conversely, where separate communities of farmers and herders compete for limited resources of land, vegetation, and water.” See, Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 55–56.

that arose between Abraham and Lot’s shepherds because “*the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together*” (Genesis 13:6). Basically, they soon discovered that the carrying capacity of the land was limited even when there was no drought.²⁹² In addition, a rivalry develops between Abraham’s men and Abimelech’s men over the right to a well. In an arid region, where water—a prerequisite for herding animals—is so scarce, contention is inevitable.²⁹³

Furthermore, the contention is manifested when Isaac—practicing both farming and grazing—encountered resistance from the natives who perceived his growth and expansion as an encroachment on their own fragile domain.²⁹⁴

And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy. He had possessions of flocks and herds and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him. Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father. And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we.” (Genesis 26:12–16)

Access to water became a point of contention because Isaac’s large flock required not only a lot of land, but more water sources. Water is a source of serious contention especially in such a region as ancient Canaan which was often threatened by drought, resulting into famine.²⁹⁵ Water was needed not only for animals but also for the survival of people and crops.²⁹⁶ In an environment characterized by limited access to water and unstable climatic conditions, Isaac’s progress was justifiably threatening. He, therefore, had to be sent away.

As we can see, for most people in ancient Israel—like others in the Ancient Near East—the world existed as a zero-sum game. Like land, everything good (manliness, divine election, blessings, honour, etc.) is in limited quantity, cannot be increased, and is fully distributed such that for some to gain, others must lose. There is *only one* blessing, *only one* favoured son, *only one* heir, and *only one* chosen nation. A world viewed in these terms is a world prone to conflict, casting away, and alienation between siblings. Some must lose.

Zero-sum in the New Testament Accounts

The New Testament, like the Hebrew Bible, was born in an agrarian world.²⁹⁷ The Mediterranean and Middle Eastern economy, the birthplace of the New Testament, was largely comprised of peasants, governed by a dominant political group in an agrarian economy based on

²⁹² Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 61.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 65.

²⁹⁵ “The fragility of the region is nuanced throughout Genesis. Genesis 26, for example opens with a report of a famine in the land of Canaan. This was particularly common in the southern part of the land where Isaac lived (24:62). So, as it were with his father Abraham before him (12:10) and his descendants after him (42:1), Isaac probably turned to Egypt for relief. The rest of the chapter traces the itinerary of the people as they move from place to place in search of water.” See; Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 75.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

²⁹⁷ Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 195.

land ownership and farm production.²⁹⁸ In such an agrarian setting, wealth accumulation was largely through the acquisition of more land,²⁹⁹ such that landowners were mainly absentee landlords who lived in cities and demanded rent and taxes from the peasants.³⁰⁰ Those who were landless either had to rent from the landlords and pay a portion of their farm produce to the absentee landlord or they were relegated to a life of servanthood.³⁰¹ Consequently, the society in which the New Testament was born was characterized by high levels of peasant indebtedness, an issue that placed more burden on the peasants and benefited the elites of society.³⁰² The plight of indebtedness is nuanced, for example, in the Parable of the Debtors (Luke 7:41–43; Matthew 18:23–34), and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21–35), and Luke 16:1–12 which speaks of debts of 100 measures of oil and 100 measures of wheat.

Landlessness meant living a life of patronage and emasculation because it made one susceptible to more indebtedness which put one at the mercy of the creditors.³⁰³ This resulted into increased enslavement due to failure to pay loans and rent, and therefore a loss of honor, since men were supposed to be in control of their own lives.³⁰⁴ Land, therefore, for such a society meant life itself and as such to become landless was a dreadful plight.³⁰⁵

Ultimately, for most people in the New Testament world—like the Ancient Near Eastern people before them, the world existed as a zero-sum game, where all desirables of life existed in finite quantities.³⁰⁶ When people view the world in such terms, any apparent increase in status—real or assumed—generates envy and suspicion because someone is losing—whether they realize it or not. Thus, to gain is to steal from another, and since such an occurrence is perceived to be injurious, anger and/ or envy is the plausible reaction.³⁰⁷

In view of the discussion thus far, it is conceivable that Christianity and Judaism were both born, bred and socialized in the world of Zero-sum thinking. While the Zero-sum worldview is neither caused by nor unique to the Bible,³⁰⁸ the Biblical depictions fortify and consolidate the zero-sum logic because the Bible has had unequalled influence on western thinking. Whereas the zero-sum logic is nuanced in the writings of ancient philosophers, the biblical narratives have

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ In the economy of the time, one could possibly become wealthy as a merchant, but most wealthy people acquired their wealth through land. Thus, great wealth implies large estates. Ibid, 197.

³⁰⁰ Jesus reflected this system in his parable of Mark 12:1–8 where an absentee landlord plants a vineyard and leaves tenant farmers to take care of the crop and harvest the grapes Luke 17:7 refers to a man's servant plowing his field for him. Matthew 20:1–15 narrates about a large landowner who has so much land he must hire day laborers to work it. Luke 12:42–43 alludes to a wealthy man who has a bailiff to run his estate. Matthew 13:24–30 describes a farm which requires several slaves to work it. Luke 15:11–32 pictures an estate with day laborers and slaves.

³⁰¹ The amount of rent the tenant farmers paid to the landlords ranged from one quarter to one half of the crops. Neufeld and DeMaris, *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 217.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, eds., *The Social world of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2008), 63.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Neufeld and DeMaris, *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 198.

³⁰⁶ Neyrey and Rohrbaugh, "He Must Increase, I Must Decrease," 465.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 468.

³⁰⁸ This view existed in the ancient civilisations both during the Biblical times and long before the Israelites wrote about it. Neyrey and Rohrbaugh, "He Must Increase, I Must Decrease," 12.

enjoyed more reception in human history and have been more impactful than the classics.³⁰⁹ The Biblical narratives are embraced by a significant fraction of the world's population and for many, these narratives form the principles that govern daily living, while the classical works are mainly appreciated in the ivory tower of academia.³¹⁰

From the perception of humankind's place in the world filled with nature to gender relations, western thought is deeply grounded in these biblical passages.³¹¹ Indeed, as Schwartz emphasizes, "no book has enjoyed unrivaled reception during its dissemination like the Bible. Whereas Protestantism theologically took the Bible out of the hands of the clergy and placed it into the hands of the masses, print technology materially took the bible out of the hands of the scribal monks and put it in the hands of the masses. Europe acquiring literacy was Europe learning to read the Bible and Europe gaining print culture was Europe reading the Bible."³¹²

The Zero-sum logic is encoded in the Bible through the principle of monotheism.³¹³ Monotheism is linked to collective identity and an exclusivity of worship.³¹⁴ The Hebrew Bible paints a picture of a God who has "a people"³¹⁵ and demands exclusive worship from "His" people.³¹⁶ "His people" are collectively identified by their allegiance to His precepts.³¹⁷ Consequently, there can only be one correct path just as there is only one true God.³¹⁸ Such a worldview not only creates an "other," but can be prone to demonizing that 'other'. It is an exclusive world in that, *if mine is the only correct path, then yours is either a wrong path or no path at all*. It, therefore, makes for a complex task at best, a hopeless one at worst to imagine the possibility of overcoming the zero-sum mindset in monotheism.³¹⁹

The Hebrew Bible narratives present a God who is "strangely withholding,"³²⁰ through the vivid mappings of the victory of a people at the hands of their God but with no regard to their

³⁰⁹ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, x.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 17.

³¹² Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 7.

³¹³ Monotheism is founded on the idea of the one true God beyond whom there is no other. This God demands allegiance and worship from all people and those who do not oblige are considered evil and destined for destruction. The theme of exclusive allegiance to Yahweh permeates through the entire Hebrew Bible. This same theme of oneness is at the core of the New Testament teaching.

³¹⁴ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, x.

³¹⁵ "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." Deuteronomy 7:6–8.

³¹⁶ Exodus 20:3 presents Yahweh who demands exclusive allegiance and worship. Elsewhere in the Bible, God is presented as one who tolerates no other gods. People have to choose either to serve him or not to (Joshua 24:14–15). There is no room for compromise. You are either for Yahweh or for the enemy.

³¹⁷ "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine": Exodus 19:5.

³¹⁸ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, xi.

³¹⁹ Cohen, "A Genesis of Conflict," 16.

³²⁰ Whereas some instances in the Bible point to God as being infinitely giving, such narratives have not received overwhelming reception in human imagination and world culture like their opposite. The generally embraced view is of a God who is strangely withholding rather than infinitely giving. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, xi.

victims and their gods. The exodus narrative of God's ethically justifiable move to liberate "His" people from oppression and servitude was joined to the elimination of the Canaanites.³²¹ In the Bible we see a God who chooses one sacrifice over the other,³²² who favours some and rejects others.³²³ When Israel's identity in the narrative is defined in terms of Israelites and non-Israelites, insiders and outsiders, it implicitly raises a point of concern for the well-being and the very existence of the "other" especially if that other is perceived to pose a threat to Israel.³²⁴

In addition, the New Testament writers presume that the world is dominated by the forces of good and evil, and that people are controlled by one side or the other. Consequently, dissidents and outsiders are not only wrong, but controlled by evil, and if nothing changes, eternal damnation awaits them. There is little respect for other possibilities of appreciating God or humanity.³²⁵ Such a zero-sum understanding creates an uncompromising "either/or" situation. This undermines any efforts towards dialogue between different groups and makes peaceful co-existence nearly impossible and merely a theoretical discussion to say the least.

The "us versus them" perspective is developed by reinforcing the one's sense of belonging on one hand and by setting others apart, and on the other. The apostle Paul emphasizes, with particularity, the boundaries by highlighting the advantages of being an insider and the liabilities of being an outsider.³²⁶ Whereas this perspective is not accompanied by an exhortation to inflict violence on the outsider, it portrays a lack of respect for another person's right to exist and be different. When one insists that all those who refuse the "good news about Christ" are inherently lesser, evil, damnable individuals, isn't this an abuse of their fundamental right of self-determination and a form of violence inflicted on them?³²⁷

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² In Genesis 4, Cain angrily kills his brother because his sacrifice was rejected, and Abel's was accepted by God.

³²³ This is demonstrated in the story of Jacob and Esau (see Genesis 25).

³²⁴ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, xi.

³²⁵ Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 100.

³²⁶ Ibid, 101.

³²⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

This study finds that the negatively defined way of thinking about identity, ethnicity, religion and Nationalism in terms of “us” versus “them” — we are “us” because we are not “them”—in the western world is largely informed by the Zero-sum logic and has considerably been inspired by a certain reading of the Bible. The biblical narratives of a people who inherit at the expense of others have over the years been employed to justify hatred and marginalization of women, blacks, Jews, “Pagans” etc. Many slaveholders, many of whom studies show were professed Christian, quoted the Bible (“the curse of Ham” Genesis 9:18-27, and the teachings of the Apostle Paul on slavery) to justify their actions. Additionally, many have pointed to Genesis 3 and many other biblical verses to justify the oppression of women. Furthermore, history has shown that the Bible was an effective front runner for colonialism in Africa. Precisely, the gun followed the cross.

The effect the Bible has had on western culture and political life can be fairly expressed in history, in that it was quoted extensively during the French revolutions, during the civil wars in Great Britain and America, it was invoked both to justify slavery and to abolish slavery, it was invoked for missionary imperialism, colonialism and revolutionary response, it has been central to the birth of various nationalisms and its verses have formed the rhetoric of Zionism, civil rights movements and even the liberation theologies of Latin America and South Africa.³²⁸

To this day in many countries around the world, Presidents and constitutional leaders take the oath of office by placing their hand onto the Bible. Just recently, the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, was seen on live television holding a Bible in front of the St. John chapel in a form of Christian symbolism. It is fair to conclude that the Bible has had a deeper influence on the way we think about peoples, nations, religions, ethnic groups, and races, and the fact that we think in those categories at all.

While the Zero-sum theory does not explicitly spell out that Zero-sum situations turn violent, in the attempt to restore balance and to stop the real or perceived loss violence is highly likely especially when the perceived loss involves the identity of individuals. The Zero-sum logic fosters the formation of antagonistic fronts which perceive their interests and identity to be opposed to each other. Furthermore, it nurtures an insider/ outsider ideology that creates a marginalized other who is perceived as a threat to the existence of the insiders, and as such any violence orchestrated against this other is justified as necessary for the survival of the insiders.³²⁹

The Zero-sum logic is particularly perilous in case of religion because religious groups tend to be socially defined by their beliefs and practices. The Zero-sum religious ideas and performances are usually all-embracing and encompassing the total identity of the individual participants of the religious group. Religiously defined groups tend to perceive their interests to be mutually incompatible with those outside the group, often involving looking at outsiders as

³²⁸ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 9.

³²⁹ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 9.

potential threats to the very survival of the group.³³⁰ All individuals adopt this mindset through their active participation in the group to the extent that it subsumes the totality of their identity. The all-embracing religious ideals subsume a significant part of the member's identity that an individual's sense of who they are as a person is heavily shaped by their membership in their religion.³³¹ Ultimately, any threat to the religious group—real or perceived—is a threat to the very existence of the individual. Thus, religious related conflicts, tend to assume the same absolute quality that adheres to religion as a social process. In such cases, violence is not only necessary, it is often inevitable.

Conclusively, the Zero-sum logic forms an integral part of people's understanding of conflict in the Bible. This logic often influenced how conflicts unfolded in biblical times, and why they broke out in the first place. The same logic has shaped the world view of many people who have looked to the Bible as the inspired word of God and the primary source of instruction for daily living. It is this zero-sum logic that rationalizes the all or nothing nature of religious conflicts.

Some Recommendations

The nature of conflict shapes the dynamics of dealing with the conflict.³³² The Zero-sum mindset presents characteristics that make peace very hard to achieve. Consequently, some have considered a radical secularism that seeks to restrict the role of religion in the public sphere as the solution.³³³ The problem with such a solution is that it is also motivated by the same Zero-sum logic and thus runs into the same problems it is labouring to solve. Certainly, the solution to “bad” food is “good” food, not no food at all. It is indeed needless to deny that many injustices and atrocities have been and continue to be orchestrated in the name of religion,³³⁴ but religion can nonetheless be part of the solution.

Disfranchising religion would escalate the problem because it creates a “secular me” against a “religious other” and fosters an environment of insiders and outsiders. This increases suspicion and mistrust and consequently helps to consolidate the Zero-sum mindset. Stigmatization is more dangerous than acceptance.³³⁵ Education on the other hand, helps to intellectually challenge and demythologize certain ideals that were hitherto unchallenged and held firmly. All human beings face challenges which, to be met wisely and faithfully, require an expanding and deepening of their worldview.³³⁶ Through education, people can be encouraged and

³³⁰ John D. Brewer, “Justice in the Context of Racial and Religious Conflict,” *Logos - Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 41 (2004): 81.

³³¹ A person's affiliations to a religious group in settings where religion retain its grip becomes all-embracing and comes to define nearly the total identity of the person. Brewer, “Justice in the Context of Racial and Religious Conflict,” 81.

³³² Brewer, “Justice in the Context of Racial and Religious Conflict,” 80.

³³³ The events of 9/11 became a watershed moment in the discourse about religion, that has seen some scholars propose the de-francization of religion from public sphere as a lasting solution. Hector Avalos notably makes this proposition in his “Fighting Words” as highlighted earlier in the thesis.

³³⁴ Paul S. Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 218.

³³⁵ Abrahamic traditions paint a picture of heroism all through its pages and every hero needs an enemy. People are taught to perceive themselves in some form of cosmic battle. There is a sense of victory and overcoming. For one to overcome, there ought to be an obstacle which rationalizes every aspect of opposition and battle.

³³⁶ Guy Sayles, “Jesus and the Challenging Gift of the Other: An Expository Article on Mark 7:24-30.” *Review & Expositor* 114 (2017): 110.

challenged to examine their entrenched ideals, broaden their group affiliations and have a different view of who they are beyond what is offered by their religious beliefs.

There is need to educate people that life is not necessarily a Zero-sum game and that conflicting situations are not always a Zero-sum affair—there can be a win-win situation.³³⁷ Whereas any attempt at mindset change is always a complex task, it is not only important but critical especially where the goal is a peaceful society.³³⁸ The deeply rooted convictions at the heart of religion contribute to its association with violence.³³⁹ Religious imperatives have the ability to justify all sorts of injustices despite what all the major religious creeds understand to be the obvious responsibility of every human person to respect human life. Religious imperatives are so strong that some people are willing to kill and to die for them. Education can help to deconstruct many of these theologies of confrontation and retribution and re-establish the central themes of peace and love, to enhance global neighborliness.

Violent tendencies, like all human behaviours are born out of certain convictions that individuals adopt through their active participation in their respective socializations. Whereas these behaviors are socially unacceptable to some, they are nonetheless logical and justified as far as the cognitive orientations that give rise to them are concerned. Consequently, a change in violent behavior ought to be sought through a facilitation of a deliberate process towards a redefinition of cognitive views. Therefore, a reduction in the instances of religious violence can be hastened not by merely preaching a need for peace, but also instigating a societal change through stimulating a new psychological process—a new cognitive process that will encourage the society to abandon the traditional and increasingly costly cognitive view of looking at the world in Zero-sum terms. To foster behavioral change, one must seek change the cognitive orientation/ worldview.

Whereas I maintain cognizance that Zero-sum situations indeed exist—some situations are realistically Zero-sum ones, it is also true that some situations and arguably the majority have both Zero-sum and non-Zero-sum or positive some elements.³⁴⁰ The New Testament stories and the story of Abraham and Lot in the Hebrew Bible are good reference points. Abraham's handling of a potentially precarious situation de-escalates matters between his shepherds and Lot's. In the New Testament, John the Baptist turns around a seemingly Zero-sum situation into a win-win situation. Whereas to his disciples the situation was zero-sum, John pointed them to the fact that his mission was different from that of Jesus and that by Jesus being exalted, John was winning (John 3:26-36). The same thing happens when Jesus' disciples are angered in (Mark 10:35-45). We see Jesus turn around a situation that had a potential of violence. Whereas for the disciples it was an all or nothing situation, Jesus helps them look at the situation in a different light. In both situations, however, we see a mediator willing to patiently listen and consider the feelings and ideals of all parties involved.

³³⁷ Cohen makes mention of Strachey a former defense minister in the British government who until it was pointed out to him at a very late stage in his life never realized that nonzero-sum conflicts could exist. Cohen adds that for a person of such a stature not to know that conflicts could have positive-sum elements indicates how dire the situation could be. Cohen, "A Genesis of Conflict," 19.

³³⁸ Raising awareness of the zero-sum mindset may not only aid the resolving of conflicts and ensuring limited devastating injustices, but also it could help to prevent such occurrences all together. If religiously motivated social injustice is to be controlled, mindset change or perhaps deconstruction and reconstruction is not only necessary, but critical.

³³⁹ Rowe, *Religion and Global Politics*, 218.

³⁴⁰ Cohen, "A Genesis of Conflict," 18.

It is thus as important to listen, as it is to respond while dealing with such situations in order to promote peaceful coexistence and global neighbourliness.³⁴¹

For further study, I recommend research be conducted to assess how and/ or whether Zero-sum thinking manifests itself in non-monotheistic and atheistic traditions. Furthermore, a study needs to be conducted to investigate the problem of violence as an issue deeply entrenched in the self that manifests itself in religion like the way it might find expression in other human systems and forms of expression.

³⁴¹ Cohen emphasizes the need to foster a culture of dialogue rather than debate. Cohen, “A Genesis of Conflict,” 18.

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