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“Fixing Broken Societies: Religion and Purification”
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Christianity teaches that when an individual's life seems wrong, when he or she is overwhelmed with “sin,” salvation can fix that wrongness. Salvation provides a solution that puts the individual right with God.

But salvation does not work when the wrongness is society-wide. At times of social upheaval and stress, when the world in which people live no longer operates the way it should, when a government no longer does its job, then society as a whole needs saving. How does Christianity, or any other religion, accomplish that?

Religions frequently strive to fix a broken society through purification. If the society is under stress from war, famine, unrest or other disruption, then religions often attempt to purify it. If in salvation an individual turns his or her heart solely toward God, then, in purification, the people of a city, country or nation turn their collective heart toward the divine and follow his/her/its instructions.

If everyone takes part, purification results in communal unity. Everyone is oriented in a common direction, is led by the same leaders and follows them toward a solution to the social trauma. This works well in a society with a single religion.

When God made a covenant with the ancient Israelites, for example, He required them to follow His laws for organizing Israelite society and worship. He took a carrot-and-stick approach. When the Hebrews obeyed God, according to Deuteronomy 28, He blessed them with agricultural abundance and protected them from their enemies. When they disobeyed, He cursed them with famine, war and foreign oppression.

But, frequently, groups of people do not join in purification's social reorientation because they belong to a different religion. This causes a second stage of purification to take place -- namely, the purge of people who do not participate.

This purge can take a variety of forms, but its goal is always the same: to make invisible the people who do not belong to the dominant religion and who do not participate in the community's religious reorientation. Violence is often used to kill people or to frighten them into leaving the country, or at least going underground.

The Arab Spring succeeded in eliminating several dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, but it has been less successful in setting up new governments. Egypt seems to be in a continual state of upheaval because its people overthrew two leaders in succession, a dictator and a democrat, and are now under military rule.

So, it should not surprise us that the Sunni Muslim majority is attacking the religious minorities in the country in an attempt to purify its society. Just last week, members of the Muslim Brotherhood killed three people at a Christian wedding in a drive-by shooting. Since last's summer's overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim, Egypt's Coptic Christians have come under persistent persecution with the burning of churches and the killing of leaders and other individuals.

In Syria's civil war, persecution and massacres of both Christians and members of the Islamic Alawite sect take place regularly. Indeed, one reason for President's Assad's persistence is that he is an Alawite and fears his small religious group will be destroyed should the majority Sunni population win.

And don't forget Sunni persecution of Shiites in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and other countries.

Christianity, likewise, has been involved in social purification at times of upheaval. In its early centuries, pagans routinely blamed Christians for famines and other social stresses. After Christianity became the Roman Empire's dominant religion, Christians returned the favor, ultimately eliminating all pagan religions. The Church also persecuted members of different Christian heresies.

During the Crusades, Christian men, on their way to the Middle East, frequently attacked Jewish communities in Europe. Why, they thought, should we travel to the Middle East to eliminate “infidels” when they are right here at home? Such pogroms continued through the centuries and finally led to the secular Nazi campaign of social purification during World War II, called the Holocaust.

Is there a way to avoid such social purification? To date, only the United States and countries organized on similar lines have escaped it. Their common characteristics include: an open civil society that welcomes members of all religions; free speech and a free press; and a secular government hospitable to all religions (including non-religion), but favors none. It is not just the export of democracy that is important, but the formation of a society that is open to differences in religious belief and their expression.