

CGCM NEWS

Center for Global Christianity and Mission

Number 22, Summer 2016

www.bu.edu/cgcm



Fr. Vincent Machozi: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr

1965-2016

Fr. Vincent Machozi gave his life while serving as a voice for the voiceless in the war-torn eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). On Sunday, March 20, 2016, government soldiers interrupted the peace talks between several Nande chiefs, demanding Machozi and others. When they found him, they shot him. His last words were, “why are you killing me?”

This edition of the CGCM news focuses on the question of religious violence. One of our colleagues recently lost his life serving as a voice for the voiceless in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (page 1). Likewise, the editor asks if we as scholars should be doing more to address questions of religious violence (page 2). As always, the upcoming events are posted on page 4.

Indeed, Machozi questioned violence throughout his entire life. He was a Roman Catholic Assumptionist Priest who worked as an educator and studied in France before taking holy orders in 1994. The Assumptionists assigned him to DRC capital Kinshasa, which was then in state of civil war after the collapse of the Mobutu regime. There, Machozi worked for peace and reconciliation among the various factions.

Facing a number of death threats, Machozi came to the United States in 2003. He enrolled at the BU School of Theology in 2006, and he worked closely with the African Studies Center as well as the CGCM. During his time as a graduate student, he launched Beni Lubero, a website that documents the atrocities in eastern DRC. In his reporting, Machozi did not shy away from implicating various government leaders in the violence.

In eastern DRC, a power vacuum has led to different government and rebel forces fighting over the resource rich region. Caught in the crossfire are the men, women, and children who have become victims of the terror tactics. Most notoriously, soldiers rape women and girls, often in front of their families
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Detail from Alexander van Wagner, *The Self Sacrifice of Titusz Dugovics*, 1859, Magyar Nemzeti Galeria Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest Hungary. This painting depicts a legendary scene from the 1456 Siege of Belgrade—an event in which religion, politics, and violence came together in a complicated web of influence.

Are we doing enough to address religious violence?

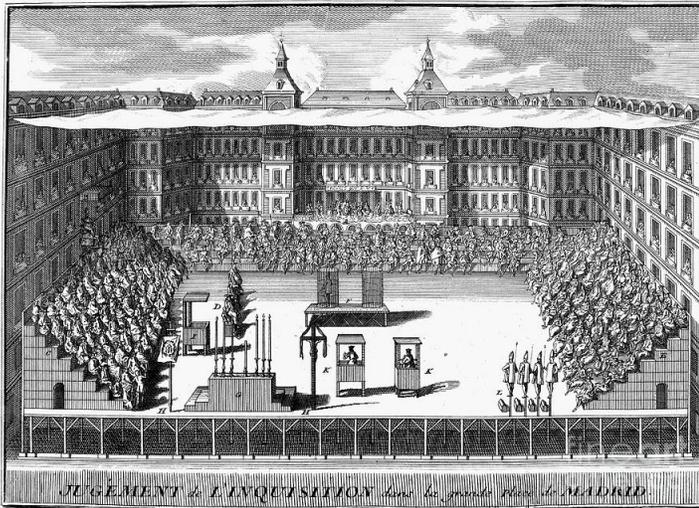
Stephen Lloyd

As scholars of religion, we tend to shy away from questions of violence. This is, in part, because we seek to reject the association between radical extremists and our particular field of study. Nothing is more frustrating to the scholar than popular perceptions held by many Americans that “all Muslims are terrorists” or that all Christians are “backward, misogynistic, racist homophobes.” Karen Armstrong discussed her frustration with hearing the oft-repeated mantra, that “Religion has been the cause of every major war in history.”

Our gut reaction is to say, “Not all Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, etc. are ‘like that!’” Scholars often point out that religion is not the problem, but rather something else is. William Cavanaugh, for example, discussed the “Myth of Religious Violence,” suggesting that rather than religion, the secular nation state is at the root of violence. Journalist Bill Berkeley takes a similar line of argument in his book, *The Graves Are*

Not Yet Full. He suggests that neither “religion” nor “tribalism” *per se* are drivers of conflict in Africa, but rather an often western-educated elite use these social ties as tools to divide people in the quest for resources and power. In recent months, many news articles have suggested that young Muslim men join movements like ISIS and Boko Haram because their prospects are otherwise limited, not necessarily for any inherent religious reason.

These arguments are certainly valid. People who practice different religions are able to coexist with each other quite peacefully. Problems often only arise when political, economic, or other social factors are brought into the mix. When states seek to consolidate power, when businesses attempt to gain access to resources, or when radical groups seek to overthrow governments, they can use religion as a tool for mobilization. Religion *qua* religion, therefore, is not the problem.



The Spanish Inquisition will always be remembered as an instance of Christian persecution of Jews. The “Catholic Monarchs,” however, used the inquisition for the political goal of consolidating the Spanish nation. Historian John Boswell argued that Jews, artists, and sexual minorities were often persecuted in Europe at times when rulers attempted to centralize power.

Yet this point is often pushed too far. Religious people are not passive pawns in the hands of a national state, globalized economy, or struggle for power. While they are sometimes coopted and even coerced by these larger forces, other religious people willingly endorse violence, and they articulate their position using the resources of their tradition. Some Christians have used the Bible to support policies of racial segregation, to justify coercive state practices, and to excuse the excesses of armed opposition groups. Scholars must also contend with the ambiguous legacy of Christian missions. While some missionaries championed rights of indigenous peoples against colonialism, others welcomed the security and opportunities that colonial armies offered western missionaries throughout the world.

Unfortunately, no religious tradition has been completely devoid of persecutors. CGCM visiting researcher Jesudas M. Athyal has recently been raising concerns about Hindutva ideology, a right wing form of Hindu Nationalism. In his recent Huffington Post Article, “Muslims and the Marginalized in India Increasingly Live in a Shadow of Fear,” Athyal argued that an increasingly aggressive Hindu nationalism has not only put religious minorities and outcastes (*Dalit*) at risk, but has called into question the nature of Indian democracy. He wrote, “The very survival of the

democratic and secular ethos of the Republic of India is now under siege. It remains to be seen if India’s democracy can withstand the religious fascist forces that seem to now reign supreme.” The question of Hindu nationalism also has academic ramifications. At a UC Irvine lecture, Athyal discussed how Hindutva activists have been financing US universities, thereby prejudicing against other Indian religions, including Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity.

While it is highly inaccurate to suggest that religion is inherently violent, it is equally problematic to excuse religion completely from the question of violence. We cannot shy away from the question of why religious people at times heartily endorse oppression, genocide, and wars. Dostoyevsky wrote that “Nothing is easier to denounce than the evildoer; nothing is more difficult to understand than him.” It is not enough for scholars to condemn “religious extremism,” or to suggest that fringe groups have perverted the “original” meaning of a religious tradition—however much that is the case. We have the duty as scholars to understand religious violence better. This is not to say that we excuse it. On the contrary, we need to be able to offer the wider world tools that will open conversations for a path to reconciliation. 🙏



Jesudas M. Athyal is editor of *Religion in South East Asia: An Encyclopedia of Faiths and Cultures* and *The Indian Presence in the Ecumenical Movement in the Twentieth Century*. He is author of numerous books about mission and theology in India, and he has been an advocate for religious minority and *Dalits*.

Upcoming Events

June 17-19. **American Society of Missiology 2016 Annual Meeting.** *Mission and Public Life.* University of Northwestern – St. Paul.

June 23-25. **Yale-Edinburgh Group.** *Responses to Missions: Appropriations, Revisions, and Rejections.* New College, University of Edinburgh.

September 1. **Bruce Yoder and Ruth Padilla DeBorst.** *Dissertation Defenses.*

September 22. **Jeff Pugh.** *Mission and Reconciliation.*

October 7-9. **Bartolomé de Las Casas: History, Philosophy & Theology in the Age of European Expansion.**

October 14. **Eva Pascal.** *Catholic Missions and the Creation of Buddhism.*

October 21-22. **American Society of Missiology, Eastern Fellowship.** Maryknoll, New York.

November 8. **Glen Messer.** *A New Ecumenism?*

November 15. **Nelson Jennings.** *Korean Megachurches.*

December 1. **Old and New in Shona Religion.**

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and/or community members, while many others are simply killed. In the face of this almost inconceivable violence, many people choose to flee as refugees, becoming extremely vulnerable to starvation and hunger. Estimates of fatalities range between 5 and 6 million, but countless more lives have been destroyed.

Knowing that this was the situation, Machozi put his graduate studies on hold and returned to DRC, where he could document these abuses first hand. This is a testament to his great faith and courage; he put himself in harms way so that the world could know what was happening to innocent people. His cries for justice ultimately cost him his life. After he wrote an article that implicated DRC president Joseph Kabila in an outbreak of violence, government forces assassinated him.

Machozi's life and death is a testament to the cost of discipleship. Those who work for justice, reconciliation, and peace in violent times are too often themselves victims of violent ends. While his life and courage are deeply inspiring, his tragic death is beyond saddening; we have suffered a great loss. But the work he began did not die with him—it goes on. No government or armed group will ever be able to stamp out the call for justice. Wherever there is violence, there were always be peacemakers, and where there is hatred, there will be those who seek reconciliation. Our thoughts and prayers are with Machozi's friends, family, and coworkers as well as with the people of DRC. May the cause of peace, for which our friend gave his life, finally triumph. 🙏



Photograph taken at Fr. Machozi's funeral.

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