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The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies
University of Notre Dame
130 Hesburgh Center for International Studies
Notre Dame, IN 46556-5677
Phone: 574/631-6580
Fax: 574/631-6717
Web: kellogg.nd.edu

Working paper

THE VIOLENCE OF “RELIGION”: EXAMINING A PREVALENT MYTH

William T. Cavanaugh

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William T. Cavanaugh is Associate Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. His degrees are from Notre Dame, Cambridge, and Duke. He is the author of the books *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) and *Theopolitical Imagination* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), both of which have been published in French by Editions Ad Solem of Geneva. He is also the co-editor, with Peter Scott, of *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

ABSTRACT

This essay examines arguments that religion is prone to violence and finds them incoherent. They are incoherent because they can find no way consistently to differentiate the religious from the secular. After exposing the arbitrariness of the arguments, the essay goes on to examine why such arguments are so common. The hypothesis put forward is that such arguments are so prevalent because, while they delegitimize certain kinds of violence, they legitimate other kinds of violence, namely, violence done in the name of secular, Western states and ideals. Such arguments sanction a putative dichotomy between non-Western, especially Muslim, forms of culture on the one hand, which—having not yet learned to privatize matters of faith—are absolutist, divisive, irrational, and Western culture on the other, which is supposedly modest in its claims to truth, unitive, and rational. In short, their violence is fanatical and uncontrolled; our violence is controlled, reasonable, and often regrettably necessary to contain their violence.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina los argumentos que sostienen que la religión induce a la violencia y encuentra que son incoherentes. Son incoherentes porque no pueden encontrar ninguna manera de distinguir consistentemente lo religioso de lo secular. Luego de exponer la arbitrariedad de estos argumentos, el ensayo pasa a examinar por qué ellos son tan comunes. La hipótesis que se ofrece es que estos argumentos son tan frecuentes porque, en tanto que deslegitiman ciertos tipos de violencia, legitiman otros tipos de violencia, específicamente, la violencia ejercida en nombre de los ideales y estados seculares y occidentales. Tales argumentos establecen una supuesta dicotomía entre, por un lado, las formas culturales no occidentales, especialmente las musulmanas, que serían absolutistas, divisivas e irracionales y, por otro lado, la cultura occidental, supuestamente modesta en sus aspiraciones de verdad, unificadora y racional. En síntesis, la violencia de ellos es fanática y descontrolada; nuestra violencia es controlada, razonable y a menudo lamentablemente necesaria para contener su violencia.

The idea that religion causes violence is one of the most prevalent myths in Western culture. From first-year university students to media commentators, the view is widespread that religion, if it does not simply cause violence, is at least a significant contributing factor in a great many of the conflicts of human history. Academic studies of religion and violence seem to bear this out, and indeed the evidence seems incontrovertible. Blood sacrifices have been around from the earliest times. Holy wars, crusades, inquisitions, and pogroms have marked religious behavior. Religions were implicated in spreading European imperialism. Religion has legitimated the oppression of the poor and of women.¹ Oppressive political and economic structures have been seen as issuing from a divine will. “Thus religion was implicated in maintaining social structures of violence from the earliest historical records.”² Today, the readiness of the clergy to bless whatever war the United States is involved in is further evidence of religion’s violent tendencies.³ Add terrorism by Muslim fundamentalists and other religious groups, and the evidence against religion seems conclusive. In short, as a religious scholar writes, “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.”⁴

However, what is meant by “religion” is by no means clear. The author of the above quote, in a book entitled *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, gives a definition of violence but no definition of religion or religions, despite the centrality of the concept to his argument. As in the above quote, “religion” in this text sometimes becomes

“religion and culture” with no explanation of what, if anything, distinguishes the two terms from each other.⁵ This type of confusion is the norm. The arguments I examine attempt to separate out a category called “religion” which is prone to violence because it is absolutist, divisive, and non-rational, from a “secular,” or non-religious, reality that is less prone to violence, presumably because it is less absolutist, more unitive, and more rational. As we shall see, such arguments do not stand up to scrutiny, because they are based on a religious/secular dichotomy that is incoherent. There is no point to responding either affirmatively or negatively to the question “Does religion cause violence?” The question assumes a coherence that the concept “religion” does not have.

We are presented with a range of ideologies, practices, and institutions—Islam, Marxism, capitalism, Christianity, nationalism, Confucianism, Americanism, Judaism, the nation-state, liberalism, Shinto, secularism, Hinduism, and so on—all of which have been known to support violence under certain conditions. A careful examination of the varieties of each and the empirical conditions under which each does in fact support violence is helpful and necessary. What is not helpful is the attempt to divide the above list into “religious” and “secular” phenomena, and claim that the former are more prone to violence. As we shall see, such a division is arbitrary and unsustainable either on theoretical or empirical grounds.

If the arguments are so weak, then, why are they so common? My hypothesis is that they are useful. The argument that religion causes violence is so prevalent because, while it delegitimizes certain kinds of violence, it legitimates other kinds of violence, namely, violence done in the name of secular, Western ideals. The argument that religion causes violence sanctions a dichotomy between non-Western, especially Muslim, forms

of culture on the one hand, which—having not yet learned to privatize matters of faith—are absolutist, divisive, and irrational, and Western culture on the other, which is modest in its claims to truth, unitive, and rational. This dichotomy, this “clash of civilizations” worldview, in turn can be used to legitimate the use of violence against those with whom it is impossible to reason on our own terms. In short, their violence is fanatical and uncontrolled; our violence is controlled, reasonable, and often regrettably necessary to contain their violence.

I will begin by examining some of the most prominent academic arguments that religion is prone to violence, and show how the arguments fail. I will then examine some of the ideological uses of the argument. I do not suggest that arguments that religion causes violence are deliberately constructed with imperialistic purposes in mind. I suggest instead that—just as Timothy Fitzgerald, Richard King, Russell McCutcheon and others have shown that the development of the concept “religion” was linked with European colonialism—so the argument that religion causes violence continues to lend itself to the promotion of ideologies that favor Western culture over that of our supposedly less rational, non-Western others.

I. ARGUMENT TYPES

Over the past few years, I have read every academic version of the argument that religion causes violence I could find across a range of disciplines. For our purposes, ‘religion causes violence’ is simplified shorthand. No one, as far as I know, argues that the presence of religion necessarily always produces violence. Rather, the arguments see religion as especially *inclined* to produce violence, or as an especially significant factor

among others in the production or exacerbation of violence. All of the arguments derive their force from a corollary: religion on the whole is *more inclined* to produce or exacerbate violence than non-religious, or “secular,” phenomena. If this were not the case, then there would be no point in singling out religion for its peculiar tendency towards violence. This corollary is usually unstated, however: rarely is the attempt made to compare religious versus non-religious ideologies and their respective proclivities toward violence.

The arguments I have examined can be sorted into three somewhat overlapping types: religion causes violence because it is 1) absolutist, 2) divisive, and 3) insufficiently rational. Most authors on the subject make mention of more than one type of argument, but most tend to feature one of the three. In the following, I will examine each of the three types using one author’s work as a representative for each. If space permitted here, I could multiply examples. For the present, one prominent representative of each type will have to suffice. The figures chosen here are some of the most influential voices in the area of religion and violence, and were chosen because they fairly represent the state of the argument.

1) Religion is absolutist

In an essay entitled “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” pluralist theologian John Hick indicts claims of the uniqueness and ultimacy of revelation in Jesus Christ for inciting Christians to violence against Jews in Europe and non-Christians throughout the Third World. Claims of the unsurpassability of Christian revelation could only lead to treating non-Christians as inferior, in need of colonization to draw the unfortunate

heathen up to the same level as enlightened European Christians.⁶ Hick makes clear that this is not a dynamic unique to Christianity, but is endemic to religion as such. “It should be added at this point that the claims of other religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority have likewise, given the same human nature, sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance. A worldwide and history-long study of the harmful effects of religious absolutism would draw material from almost every tradition...”⁷ The problem is one of religion as such, and not just Christianity, because Christianity is just one species of a genus of “religions,” each of which orbits what Hick variously calls “ultimate Reality,” “the Ultimate,” or “the Real.” Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Mohammed, et al., all taught different ways to the same center. According to Hick, it is a constant temptation to mistake the way for the goal, the planets for the sun, to absolutize what is merely relative to the Ultimate. This temptation is by its nature a temptation to violence. Hick advocates what he calls a “Copernican Revolution” in which we begin to see that one’s own religion does not occupy the central place, but rather the various religions of the world in fact orbit around the Ultimate.⁸ Hick writes a great deal about recognizing the pluralism and diversity of religions. At the same time, however, he radically relativizes the particularity of each religion, for each one of them, whatever their differences, seeks to end up in the exact same place.

Hick is convinced that, throughout history, “religion has been a virtually universal dimension of human life.”⁹ But what is religion? In his 1973 book *God and the Universe of Faith*, Hick proposes a “definition of religion as an understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate way of living within it, which involves reference beyond the natural world to God or gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process.”

According to Hick, this definition includes theistic faiths such as Christianity, Islam, and theistic Hinduism, as well as non-theistic faiths such as Theravada Buddhism and non-theistic Hinduism. Hick confidently asserts that this definition excludes “naturalistic” systems of belief such as communism and humanism.¹⁰ By his 1989 book *An Interpretation of Religion*, however, Hick is no longer so sure that he can draw such sharp lines between what is a religion and what is not. He seems newly aware of the growing debate among scholars over whether the term “religion” is useful or should be scrapped altogether.¹¹ Hick admits the extreme difficulty of deciding whether Confucianism, Theravada Buddhism, and Marxism should be called religions; none has a deity, yet all share certain characteristics with what are normally considered “religions.”¹²

Hick tries to solve this problem by appealing to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the “family resemblance.” We call various activities “games” because each member of the group shares at least one characteristic with another member of the group, even though there is no one characteristic or “essence” that they all share that marks them as games. Likewise “religions” are a “complex continuum of resemblances and differences.”¹³ This is helpful, says Hick, but we still “need a starting point from which to begin to chart this range of phenomena.” Hick suggests Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern” as such a starting point. “For religious objects, practices and beliefs have a deep importance for those to whom they count as religious; and they are important not merely in the immediate sense in which it may seem important to finish correctly a sentence that one has begun or to answer the telephone when it is ringing, but important in a more permanent and ultimate sense.”¹⁴ Hick is thus able “to locate the secular faith of Marxism as a fairly distant cousin of such movements as Christianity and Islam, sharing some of

their characteristics (such as a comprehensive world-view, with scriptures, eschatology, saints, and a total moral claim) whilst lacking others (such as belief in a transcendent divine reality).¹⁵ Having thus “resolved—or perhaps dissolved—the problem of the definition of ‘religion,’” Hick declares that scholars are free to focus their attention on whatever features of religion interest them. Hick will focus on “belief in the transcendent,” though he hastens to add that this is not the essence of religion, since the “family resemblance” concept does away with essences. One of the merits of the “family resemblance” concept, says Hick, is that it leaves open the possibility of religions with no belief in the transcendent; it is not necessary to use “belief in the transcendent” as a litmus test for what is and what is not a religion.¹⁶

On the one hand, Hick rightly sees the flaws in trying to isolate an essence of religion, and thereby opens the door for seeing that there is no single meaningful category under which to group such widely varying phenomena as Christianity and Confucianism without including so many other institutions and ideologies—Marxism, nationalism, football fanaticism—as to render the category pointless. On the other hand, however, Hick continues to distinguish between cultural institutions that are “religious” and those that are non-religious or “secular.” Marxism, for example, is repeatedly identified as a “secular” phenomenon, even though Hick allows it the status of “distant cousin” within the extended family of religions.¹⁷ Marxism, Hick says, is excluded from “religion” when speaking of “the more central members of the religious family,” but is included “when speaking more broadly.”¹⁸ However, Hick never gives any criteria for distinguishing central from peripheral. Why are Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism included in the elite central group of “world religions” while Marxism is excluded? It is impossible to

make any such distinction between real religions and sort-of-religious-but-really-secular distant cousins without identifying a set of characteristics as central or essential to the concept of religion, which would be to return to the essentialism that the “family resemblances” theory is meant to escape.

Is it correct in any family to identify some cousins as central and others as peripheral? I can only do so by privileging my particular point of view. My immediate family is, of course, central to me, but my cousins whom I rarely see seem peripheral. As shocking as it may seem to me, my cousins probably think of themselves as rather more central, and think of me, if at all, only when speaking more broadly of family. This type of subjective bias unavoidably creeps into Hick’s analysis. His dilemma is this: if he defines “religion” too narrowly it will exclude things he wants to include, like Confucianism; if he defines “religion” too broadly it will include things he wants to exclude, like Marxism. His solution is to attempt to dissolve the problem of definition. If he does so consistently, however, the distinction between religious and secular dissolves too; all kinds of concerns can be ultimate concerns. Without a clear distinction between what is religious and what is not religious, any argument that religion *per se* does or does not cause violence becomes hopelessly arbitrary. Why focus our attention, for example, on the violence of Muslim and Christian “fundamentalisms,” and not on the monumental horrors wrought by Marxism and nationalism in the twentieth century, if all belong in the extended family of “ultimate concerns”? One can ignore the latter only by arbitrarily shuffling them off to a peripheral category of “secular” ideologies whose tendencies to absolutism are thereby minimized. The point is not that Christian and Muslim violence do not exist, or should be ignored or excused. The point is that the religious/secular

dichotomy operating within the “religion causes violence” argument arbitrarily focuses our attention toward some kinds of violence—those labeled “religious”—and away from others—those labeled “secular.” In condemning the evils of European colonization of non-Western peoples, for example, Hick focuses on Christian missionary zeal and passes over in silence the role played by “secular” ideologies such as capitalism and nationalism.

2) Religion is divisive

The work of sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer is perhaps the most prominent contemporary scholarship on the question of religion and violence. His most thorough work on the subject, the book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* has been issued in an updated edition with a new preface after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Juergensmeyer contends that “Religion seems to be connected with violence virtually everywhere.”¹⁹ This he claims is true across all religious traditions, and it has always been so.²⁰ He does not think this is an aberration. “Rather, I look for explanations in the current forces of geopolitics and in a strain of violence that may be found at the deepest levels of the religious imagination.”²¹ The argument, then, is built on a combination of empirical observations about some violent behaviors in the face of globalization on the one hand, and contentions about the transhistorical essence of religion on the other. For the latter, Juergensmeyer employs elements of the arguments about the absolutist and non-rational nature of religion, but he concentrates on the propensity of religion to divide people into friends and enemies, good and evil, us and them. More specifically, religious images of struggle and transformation—or “cosmic

war”—have a tendency to foster violence when transferred to “real-world” conflicts by “satanizing” the other and ruling out compromise or peaceful co-existence.

The first part of Juergensmeyer’s book consists of case studies of what he takes to be religious violence. Abortion clinic bombers, Timothy McVeigh, Protestants and Catholics in Belfast, Zionists, Muslim fundamentalists, Sikh militants, and the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo all come under scrutiny. This section is full of interesting interviews and empirical observations. Juergensmeyer does a good job being as fair to his subjects as possible and lets them present their own views. In the second part of the book, Juergensmeyer attempts to explain the underlying logic of religious violence. He begins by describing the acts of these groups as “performance violence.” Their acts are “deliberately intense and vivid,” “savage,” “meant purposely to elicit anger” and “deliberately exaggerated.”²² Juergensmeyer wants to distinguish between acts of violence done for utilitarian purposes and those whose main purpose is symbolic. “I can imagine a line with ‘strategic’ on the one side and ‘symbolic’ on the other, with various acts of terrorism located in between.” The takeover of the Japanese embassy in Peru in 1997 would be closer to the “strategic, political side” and the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack in 1995 would be closer to the “symbolic, religious side.”²³ One thing that distinguishes religious violence from secular violence is the former’s tendency to pursue symbolic targets—defined as those “intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate target”—rather than those with long-term strategic value. As such, acts of religious violence can be “analyzed as one would any other symbol, ritual, or sacred drama.”²⁴

This attempt to distinguish religious from secular political violence according to the symbolic/strategic axis begins to break down in the course of Juergensmeyer's own analysis, for he must admit the symbolic nature of politics. For example, Juergensmeyer states that symbolic acts can actually weaken a secular government's power. "Because power is largely a matter of perception, symbolic statements can lead to real results."²⁵ Here Juergensmeyer wants to maintain his distinction between the symbolic-religious and the real-political, but he gives the game away by admitting that "real" power largely rests on "mere" perception. Likewise, he refers with approval to Pierre Bourdieu's work on power and symbol, from which he gleans that "our public life is shaped as much by symbols as by institutions. For this reason, symbolic acts—the 'rites of institution'—help to demarcate public space and indicate what is meaningful in the social world."²⁶ Rather than conclude, as Bourdieu does, that the political can be just as symbolic as the religious, however, Juergensmeyer concludes that "Public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion, and this is one of the reasons that performance violence comes so naturally to activists from a religious background."²⁷ In the face of evidence that not just religion but politics is symbolic, Juergensmeyer seems to claim that whatever is symbolic about politics must be the purview of religion. The argument oscillates between saying explicitly "religion employs symbolism" and saying implicitly "if it's symbolic, it must be religious." Juergensmeyer's argument would be much clearer in this chapter if he simply dropped the term "religion" and set out to analyze the symbolic power of violence. Doing so would, among other gains, render explicable the appearance of the Unabomber in this chapter. The Unabomber is used to illustrate the way that symbolic violence today requires media exposure, despite the fact that the Unabomber would

appear to have had no affiliation with any group or ideas that Juergensmeyer would consider religious.

Once Juergensmeyer has made the symbolic/strategic distinction, he moves on to analyze the heart of the religious warrior's symbolic universe: the notion of "cosmic war." "What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless" is that it puts worldly conflicts in a "larger than life" context of "great battles of the legendary past" and struggles between good and evil.²⁸ Essential to religion is a larger drama of the establishment of order over chaos and evil. Worldly political conflicts—that is, "more rational" conflicts such as those over land²⁹—are of a fundamentally different character than those in which the stakes have been raised to cosmic proportions. If the stakes are thus set high, the "absolutism of cosmic war makes compromise unlikely," thus increasing the intensity of the violence.³⁰ According to Juergensmeyer, conflicts are likely to be characterized as cosmic war under any of the following conditions: 1) "the struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity," 2) "losing the struggle would be unthinkable," and 3) "the struggle is blocked and cannot be won in real time or in real terms." As an example of worldly political conflict turning into cosmic war, Juergensmeyer offers the Arab-Israeli conflict, which "was not widely regarded as a sacred battle from the perspective of either side until the late 1980s."³¹

Once again, however, keeping the notion of cosmic war separate from ordinary worldly political war is difficult or impossible on Juergensmeyer's own terms. What he says about cosmic war is virtually indistinguishable from what he says about war in general:

Looking closely at the notion of war, one is confronted with the idea of dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale... War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy whom one assumes to be determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is either crushed or contained, one's own existence cannot be secure. What is striking about a martial attitude is the certainty of one's position and the willingness to defend it, or impose it on others, to the end.

Such certitude on the part of one side may be regarded as noble by those whose sympathies lie with it and dangerous by those who do not. But either way it is not rational.³²

War cuts off the possibility of compromise, and in fact provides an excuse not to compromise. In other words, "War provides a reason to be violent. This is true even if the worldly issues at heart in the dispute do not seem to warrant such a ferocious position."³³

The division between mundane war and cosmic war seems to vanish as fast as it was constructed. War itself is a "worldview"; indeed, "The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control."³⁴ "Like the rituals provided by religious traditions, warfare is a participatory drama that exemplifies—and thus explains—the most profound aspects of life."³⁵ Here we have moved from religion as a contributor to war to war itself as a kind of religious practice.

At times, Juergensmeyer admits the difficulty of separating religious violence from mere political violence. "Much of what I have said about religious terrorism in this book may be applied to other forms of political violence—especially those that are ideological and ethnic in nature."³⁶ This is an important admission, leaving aside the question of what political violence that is *not* ideological would look like. Nevertheless, Juergensmeyer provides a summary of what distinguishes religious from secular violence. First, religious violence is "almost exclusively symbolic, performed in remarkably dramatic ways." Second, religious violence is "accompanied by strong claims

of moral justification and enduring absolutism, characterized by the intensity of religious activists' commitment." Third, cosmic war is "beyond historical control." Although some secular ideas such as class conflict seem similar, they are thought to take place only on the social plane and within history. So in Maoism, persons can be separated from their class roles and reeducated. In cosmic war, satanic enemies cannot be transformed, but only destroyed. Fourth and finally, secular conflicts have sought conclusion within their participants' lifetimes, but religious activists can wait for hundreds of years, or even for fulfillment in some transtemporal realm. Therefore there is no need for religious activists to compromise their goals, nor to "contend with society's laws and limitations" when they are "obeying a higher authority."³⁷

One could almost refute these four attempts to separate religious from secular violence using only Juergensmeyer's own words. First, Juergensmeyer himself states that all terrorism, even that of leftists and separatists motivated solely by political gain, exemplifies "performance violence."³⁸ There is no reason to suppose that Basque separatists killing policemen or the United States dropping nuclear weapons on civilian targets in Japan are any less symbolic or dramatic than Muslim Palestinians bombing Israeli buses, or Israeli punitive raids on Palestinian neighborhoods. Second, as we've seen above, Juergensmeyer himself writes of the absolutism of all war. Certainly the wars fought by nation-states for supposedly mundane ends are couched in the strongest rhetoric of moral justification and historical duty—witness "Operation Infinite Justice," the US military's first name for the war on Afghanistan. Nor is there any warrant for supposing that the commitment of a United States Marine—*semper fidelis*—is any less "intense" than that of a Hamas militant, as if such a thing could be measured at any rate.

Third, Juergensmeyer's own words quoted above indicate that war produces an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy one is determined to destroy. In the clash of civilizations we are currently witnessing, the Pentagon does not seem any more interested in reeducating the al-Qaida than the latter is in reeducating the Great Satan. Fourth and finally, again in Juergensmeyer's own words, "The concept of war provides cosmology, history, eschatology, and offers the reins of political control." US leaders have given every indication that the "war against terror" will stretch indefinitely into the future. As Juergensmeyer also points out, war shuts down the possibility of compromise. He offers no empirical evidence that the presence or absence of belief in a transtemporal realm has any effect on one's willingness to flout human conventions regarding the conduct of war. Nor, by Juergensmeyer's own standards, does belief in a transtemporal realm distinguish religion from non-religion; some of what counts as "religion" for Juergensmeyer—most Buddhist traditions, for example—have no such belief.

In a chapter on martyrdom, Juergensmeyer appeals to the work of anthropologist and literary theorist René Girard to explain the connection between religion and violence. Juergensmeyer has many interesting suggestions about violence, symbolism, and social order, but his analysis is hobbled by the term "religion." According to Juergensmeyer, martyrdom is a form of self-sacrifice, and is therefore linked with sacrifice, which is the "most fundamental form of religiosity." In Girard's famous work on sacrifice, intragroup rivalries are kept from threatening the coherence of the group by focusing the group's aggression on a sacrificial victim. Juergensmeyer accepts this analysis, but claims, *pace* Girard, that war is the context for sacrifice rather than the other way around. War is the basic dynamic that preserves group identity by erecting antinomies of we vs. they, order

vs. chaos, good vs. evil, truth vs. falsehood. Furthermore, “Warfare... organizes social history into a storyline of persecution, conflict, and the hope of redemption, liberation, and conquest.” In the next sentence, however, the subject changes from “warfare” in general to “cosmic war”: “The enduring and seemingly ubiquitous image of cosmic war from ancient times to the present continues to give the rites of sacrifice their meaning.”³⁹ Juergensmeyer seems to acknowledge that Girard’s theory—and Juergensmeyer’s own emendation of it—applies to societies in general, even supposedly secular ones.⁴⁰ Talk of sacrifice in war is endemic to modern nation-states; *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Nevertheless, Juergensmeyer wants to identify the social role of war in asserting order over chaos with “religion.”⁴¹ Again, the argument oscillates between “religion contributes to violence understood in terms of symbolism” and “if it’s violence understood in terms of symbolism, it must be religious.”

Juergensmeyer could stop this oscillation by providing a definition of religion that would help distinguish it from symbolism in general or public ritual in general, but he offers none. When he reports that Gerry Adams and the IRA leadership emphatically consider their struggle against the British to be anti-colonial, and not religious,⁴² it is unclear by Juergensmeyer’s standards how one would begin to decide this question. Juergensmeyer contends that those Catholics in Ireland who identified religion with the Church would not think of the struggle as religious, “But those who thought of religion in the broadest sense, as part of a society’s culture, saw the Republican position as a religious crusade.”⁴³ If the conflict in Northern Ireland only becomes a religious conflict when religion is construed as some unspecified dimension of culture in general, then it seems we are left with two choices: either reconfigure the book as an exposition of the

cultural or symbolic dimensions of violence, or, if something more specific is meant by “religion,” define “religion” and drop all the examples, such as that of Northern Ireland, that do not fit the more specific paradigm. Unfortunately, Juergensmeyer takes neither of these two roads to clarity.

If one takes the title of the book—*Terror in the Mind of God*—one might expect that “religion” might specifically denote belief in a God. However, of the three figures pictured beneath the title on the front cover—Aum Shinrikyo leader Shoko Asahara, Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, and terror mastermind Osama bin Laden—only the last one professes belief in a God. Aum Shinrikyo is a non-theistic mélange of Buddhist, yogic, Taoist and other practices, and McVeigh was a self-described agnostic. Juergensmeyer nevertheless identifies McVeigh as a “quasi-Christian” because he had some contacts with the anti-government militia group Christian Identity.⁴⁴ Though he was an agnostic, Juergensmeyer says McVeigh’s action was “quasi-religious” because it involved a symbolic target and was set in the context of a larger historical drama of government versus the people, slavery versus liberty.⁴⁵ Similarly, the two high school students who gunned down their classmates in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 were involved in the “quasi-religious ‘trenchcoat’ culture of gothic symbolism.”⁴⁶ How this tragedy could be associated with religion is anybody’s guess. Without some independent idea of what distinguishes religion from symbolism in general, the argument is always in danger of being thrown into reverse. Instead of showing how religion contributes to violence, whatever is violent and kooky gets identified as religious.

Juergensmeyer's work is full of interesting empirical studies of the ideologies of violent groups and individuals. The attempt to build a general theory about religious—as opposed to non-religious or secular—violence, however, is confused, and arbitrarily serves to focus our attention on certain kinds of violence and away from others. Juergensmeyer's treatment of McVeigh is a good example of how this dynamic works. McVeigh spent three and a half years in the US Army. After participating in the slaughter of a trapped group of Iraqi soldiers in the 1991 Gulf War, McVeigh is reported to have walked around taking snapshots of Iraqi corpses for his personal photo collection. When searching for the source of McVeigh's violence, however, Juergensmeyer does not mention his Army training, but hones in instead on the fact that, although McVeigh was not affiliated with Christian Identity, he read their newsletter and made several phone calls to their compound on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border. He also once got a speeding ticket on the access road to the compound.⁴⁷ On this, and the fact that McVeigh read William Pierce's novel *The Turner Diaries*,⁴⁸ Juergensmeyer builds the case for the agnostic McVeigh as a religious warrior.

One can imagine the reaction of a typical Middle Eastern Muslim, who well might wonder why we need to track down small bands of Christian survivalists for evidence of divisive ideologies of total struggle against evil, when the Pentagon—with its \$400 billion annual budget—is rife with such thinking. Indeed, as Juergensmeyer himself indicates, war and preparations for war require such a “worldview” and raise the stakes to an all-or-nothing battle of us versus them. This is not, of course, to say that there is no value in studying fringe groups that do violence in the name of their beliefs, including Christian beliefs. It is rather to indicate that the theoretical divide between “religious” and

“secular” violence is incoherent and distracts attention from the violence of, for example, the putatively secular nation-state.

3) Religion is non-rational

There is a third type of argument about religion and violence, one with affinities to claims of absolutism, but more focused on the subjective dimensions of religious belief. The claim here is that religion is especially prone to violence because it produces a particular intensity of non-rational or irrational passion that is not subject to the firm control of reason. “Fervor,” “rage,” “passion,” “fanaticism,” “zeal,” and similar words are used to describe the mental state of religious actors who are driven to violence. These terms not only pervade journalistic coverage of public religion, but are also found in much of the scholarly literature.

One of the most critically aware examples of the argument based on the non-rational aspect of religion comes from historian R. Scott Appleby. Appleby has been influential in countering the argument that religion *necessarily* tends toward violence. According to Appleby, religion has two faces, hence the title of his descriptively rich work on religion and violence, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Religion is indeed “powerful medicine,” but its driving passion can be and is used in the service of peace as well as in the service of violence. Both aspects of religion are traceable to the non-rational core of religion. On the one hand, religion has an “ability to sustain cycles of violence beyond the point of rational calculation and enlightened self-interest.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, “religious fervor—unrestrained religious commitment”⁵⁰ does not inevitably lead to violence. There are also many examples of peaceable believers “inspired by ‘sacred rage’ against racial, ethnic, and religious

discrimination”⁵¹ and a host of other social ills. “Both the extremist and the peacemaker are militants. Both types ‘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. In these ways they distinguish themselves from people not motivated by religious commitments—and from the vast middle ground of believers.”⁵²

Appleby is careful to provide a definition of “religion” to guide his analysis:

Religion is the human response to a reality perceived as sacred. In the next chapter I explore the various meanings of “the sacred.” At this point, suffice it to say that religion, as interpreter of the sacred, discloses and celebrates the transcendent source and significance of human existence. So ambitious an enterprise requires a formidable array of symbolic, moral, and organizational resources. In a common formula: religion embraces a creed, a cult, a code of conduct, and a confessional community. A creed defines the standard of beliefs and values concerning the ultimate origin, meaning, and purpose of life. It develops from myths—symbol-laden narratives of sacred encounters—and finds official expression in doctrines and dogmas. Cult encompasses the prayers, devotions, spiritual disciplines, and patterns of communal worship that give richly suggestive ritual expression to the creed. A code of conduct defines the explicit moral norms governing the behavior of those who belong to the confessional community. Thus religion constitutes an integral culture, capable of forming personal and social identity and influencing subsequent experience and behavior in profound ways.⁵³

Here questions could be raised about the absence of creeds, doctrines, and dogmas from some things Appleby would consider to be religions—Hinduism and Buddhism, for example. Nevertheless, the emphasis on creed does not seem to be central to Appleby’s definition. What appears to separate religion from other “integral cultures” that form personal and social identity is the perceived encounter with the sacred. It is the sacred that accounts for the ambivalent nature of religion, its capacity for extremes of violence and peace.

For a definition of the sacred, Appleby turns to Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*, published in 1917 and translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy*. Appleby uses the terms "holy" and "sacred" interchangeably as translations of Otto's term *das Heilige*. For Otto the sacred is a category of interpretation peculiar to religion. According to Appleby, Otto defines the sacred as "what remains of religion when its rational and ethical elements have been excluded."⁵⁴ The sacred is experienced as an undifferentiated power beyond the moral, neither good nor evil in its immediacy. The sacred projects a *numinous* quality that evokes extraordinary feelings in the devout. The feeling of the numinous may be a "gentle tide," "thrillingly vibrant," or it may erupt suddenly into "the strangest excitements" and "intoxicated frenzy." It has "wild," "demonic" and "barbaric" forms that can lead either to "grisly horror" or "something beautiful."⁵⁵ The overpowering and uncontrollable presence of the sacred is, in Otto's words, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*; it evokes both terrible dread and fascination. According to Appleby, this experience is translated into religion by limited human faculties, but as such it can never be fully domesticated by human reason or language. "[R]eligion is both powerfully disclosive of the sacred and radically limited in its ability to understand what it discloses."⁵⁶ The two-sided power of the feeling of the numinous, and the inability to capture the sacred with human faculties of reason, account for the fundamental ambivalence of religion, its ability to unleash powers of life and of death. Despite the title of the book, Appleby makes clear that the sacred itself need not be ambivalent; only the human perception thereof—that is, religion—is fundamentally ambivalent.⁵⁷

Appleby is very keen to emphasize the non-rational and uncontrollable power of the encounter with the sacred, more keen than Otto himself, in fact. Otto does not define

the sacred as that which remains when religion is stripped of its rational and ethical elements. Rather, it is the numinous that remains when *das Heilige*, the holy or sacred, is stripped of its ethical and rational elements.⁵⁸ A more serious difficulty is that Appleby defines religion in terms of the sacred, and the sacred in terms of religion; religion is a response to the sacred, and the sacred is what remains of religion when the rational and ethical elements are stripped away. Appleby's definition of religion depends on the acceptance of Otto's contention that at the heart of the sacred there exists a unique "numinous" category of value and state of mind that is essentially religious. Appleby's definition of religion would not be merely circular if Otto could provide independent verification of the existence of the numinous as he defines it. However, as Otto says, "This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined."⁵⁹ Otto contends further that *das Heilige*, in both its rational and non-rational components, is a "*purely a priori* category" of mind not subject to direct empirical verification.⁶⁰ Otto's way of investigation, therefore, is to describe the feelings of the numinous "by adducing feelings akin to them for the purpose of analogy or contrast, and by the use of metaphor and symbolic expressions, to make the states of mind we are investigating ring out, as it were, of themselves."⁶¹ For example, Otto tries to distinguish natural feelings of dread from those associated with the sacred.

We say: "my blood ran icy cold," and "my flesh crept." The "cold blood" feeling may be a symptom of ordinary, natural fear, but there is something non-natural or supernatural about the symptom of "creeping flesh." And any one who is capable of more precise introspection must recognize that the distinction between such a "dread" and natural fear is not simply one of degree and intensity.⁶²

This capability for precise introspection is not based either on revelation or empirical investigation but appears to be an intuitive skill that some people have and some don't, like mind reading or dowsing. Those of us incapable of such precise introspection are apparently left out of the rigorous study of religion.

For Otto, the sacred is a mysterious yet universal aspect of human experience that unfortunately cannot be directly studied. Otto's analysis prioritizes an internal, intuitive, essentialist and a historical category of experience that, by its nature, is secreted away in the heart of the individual and therefore unavailable to the researcher. To study institutions, bodies, symbols, political arrangements and so forth is not to study the religious object in itself. As an historian, Appleby is aware of the pitfalls of this subjective approach. After defining religion, Appleby registers this caveat:

It is erroneous...to imagine that some kind of transhistorical, transcultural "essence" determines the attitudes and practices of a religion's adherents apart from the concrete social and cultural circumstances in which they live. Thus I ask the reader at the outset to imagine invisible quotation marks surrounding and thereby qualifying every use of general terms like "extremist," "liberal," "militant," and even "religion."⁶³

This is a salutary warning, but it directly conflicts with Appleby's definition of religion in terms of Otto's sacred. Appleby seems torn between, on the one hand, a descriptive approach to the ways in which Muslims and Christians, for example, use symbols in the pursuit of violence, and on the other hand, the need for a transhistorical essence of "religion" in order to pursue a more general argument about "religion and violence."

Appleby's book is full of careful descriptions of the way that symbolism drawn from Christian, Hindu, Muslim and other traditions is used in the pursuit of both violence and peace. However, the analysis is often hampered, rather than helped, by his attempt to define religion. Such a definition makes it necessary for Appleby to say, for example, that

phenomena such as “political Islam” and “Hindu nationalism” are “hybrids” of religion and politics,⁶⁴ as if one could make sense of a purely religious Islam prior to its being “mixed” with politics, or a Hinduism unrelated to what it means to be Indian. Appleby acknowledges that Hinduism “lacks a strong historical sense of itself as an organized religion,” but he nevertheless treats Hinduism as a religion that secondarily “lends itself” to nationalist causes.⁶⁵

The attempt to safeguard an essential category of religion is especially imperiled when the term “ethnoreligious” is introduced into the study of contemporary violence. According to Appleby, three-quarters of the world’s civil wars between 1960 and 1990 were driven by “ethnoreligious” concerns, as national identity came to be based more on ethnic and religious lines. “Like religion, ethnicity is a notoriously open-ended concept,” but Appleby uses Weber’s definition of ethnic groups as “those human groups that entertain *a subjective belief* in their common descent because of similarity of physical types or customs or both, or because of the memories of colonization and migration.”⁶⁶ Under this definition it is not clear why Hindus or Jews or even Muslims would not qualify as ethnic groups. Appleby acknowledges that the “distinctions between religion and ethnicity as bases for nationalism are seldom clear in practice.”⁶⁷ As for the civil wars, “Many of these conflicts are called ‘ethnoreligious’ because it is virtually impossible to disaggregate the precise roles of religion and ethnicity.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Appleby still seems in places to regard such disaggregation as possible and necessary. For example, in this sentence—“religious actors may identify their tradition so closely with the fate of a people or a nation that they perceive a threat to either as a threat to the

sacred”⁶⁹—the sacredness of the nation must be attributed to the identification of the nation with a religious tradition, and not to nationalism itself.

Elsewhere, Appleby acknowledges that ethnic identity *itself*—stories of birth and blood, the feeling of attraction to one’s group and repulsion to outsiders—has a “normative dimension,” reveals “inexhaustible depths of value and meaning,” has a “transcendent dimension,” and invokes “sacred warrants.” In the face of this evidence that ethnicity qualifies as religion under his own definition of religion, Appleby nevertheless attributes these dimensions of ethnicity to the “role of religion” in ethnic conflicts.⁷⁰ On Appleby’s own terms, it would make more sense simply to acknowledge that ethnicity and nationalism evoke attachments that are just as non-rational and transcendent as Christian or Muslim faith. To do so would threaten the singularity and peculiarity of “religion” as irrational cause of violence, however, so Appleby seems compelled to pin the violence on “religion.” Appleby need not deny that ethnicity and nationalism can be irrational and violent too, but the more he does so, the less of an argument about religion and violence he has to make. So he must preserve something unique about religion; even if other things can be irrational and violent, religion is peculiarly so, because of the mystical, empirically unverifiable, encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

It would be absurd to try to exonerate Yugoslav Christians and Muslims and their faith commitments from complicity in the violence that rent their nation. Appleby’s analysis of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia gives a richly detailed description of Christian and Muslim participation in the violence, the use of Christian and Muslim symbols to legitimate violence, and the complicity of some churches and mosques in

condoning the violence. What it does not do is provide serious warrant for attributing violence to a *sui generis* interior impulse called “religion.” Appleby quite rightly criticizes those apologists who, in analyzing the conflict in the former Yugoslavia “downplayed the religious dimension of the war and argued that political, economic, and cultural factors were far more prominent in causing and sustaining it—as if ‘culture’ were a category somehow independent of religion.”⁷¹ Unfortunately, however, Appleby continues to treat “religion” as if it were a category somehow independent of culture. Responding to claims that the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were ethnonationalist and not religious, and that Yugoslavia had been extensively secularized under Tito, Appleby uses the violence itself as evidence of religion’s influence. “Indeed, one might conclude that the enormity of the aggressors’ acts, the demonic character of which one observer described as ‘beyond evil,’ indicates the presence of *intense* ‘religious impulses or emotion.’”⁷² If the very occurrence of intense violence can be used as evidence of the presence of religion, then we have moved from empirical evidence that religion causes violence to an *a priori* commitment to such a claim. As in Juergensmeyer, the argument gets thrown into reverse; if it’s violent and irrational, it must be religious.

Appleby continues on to show that under Tito religious practice fell, indifference and ignorance of religious doctrines rose, and the influence of official church representatives declined. Appleby acknowledges that this situation of “religious illiteracy” increased the likelihood of collective violence in the post-Tito era. Far from letting “religion” off the hook, however, Appleby asserts that, although “religiously illiterate,” the people remained “religious.” The religious sensibilities of the populace were driven underground, into the subconscious, drawing on “superstition, racial

prejudice, half-forgotten bits of sacred scripture, and local custom.” The manipulation of the volatility and passion of such “folk religion” for violent ends becomes, for Appleby, another element in the argument for the ambivalent nature of “religion.”⁷³ Here the argument takes the form of identifying religion with primitive, non-rational impulses that can be used in the service of violence. Despite his best historical instincts and careful descriptive work, Appleby is poorly served by the *a priori* and essentialist presuppositions of Otto’s definition of “religion.”

Much of Appleby’s book is devoted to examples of the power of religious belief being harnessed for peacemaking. This is helpful, but less helpful than it could be, because religion is still a product of non-rational impulses secreted away in the consciousness of the individual and unavailable to empirical observation. The danger is that, despite the author’s best efforts, his general theory of religion and violence will reinforce the tendency to denigrate some forms of violence as primitive and irrational, and thereby call our attention away from other supposedly more rational forms of violence. For Westerners it is comforting, for example, to find the source of Iranian Islamic militancy in some mysterious encounter with the sacred, instead of in the not-so-mysterious encounter of Iran with US and British military and economic might. In 1979 when our television screens were suddenly filled with black robed militants in Tehran chanting and pumping fists, it was more convenient to blame the matter on a mystifying irrational religious experience than examine the empirical data, which would include the US-backed overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government in 1953 and the installation of the Shah’s brutal regime. I am not advocating the reduction of Islam to political and social causes, but rather pointing out the impossibility of reducing Islam to a

core non-rational, non-empirical personal experience of the sacred, which is only subsequently surrounded by various social and political institutions. The irony is that such a reduction as Otto recommends is not based on empirical observation, and can be regarded as itself a form of mystification.

II. TESTING THE DISTINCTION

There is plenty of important empirical and theoretical work to be done on the violence of certain groups of self-identified Christians, Hindus, Muslims, etc., and there are no grounds for exempting their beliefs and practices from the causal factors that produce violence. For example, it may be that, under certain circumstances, particular construals of Muslim or Christian beliefs contribute to violence. The works discussed above—especially those of Juergensmeyer and Appleby—contain a wealth of empirical data on various ideologies and the production of violence. Where the above arguments—and others like them—fail is in trying to separate a category called “religion” with a peculiar tendency toward violence from a putatively “secular” reality. Hick does not come up with a coherent way of distinguishing religion from secular worldviews. Juergensmeyer undermines his own distinction between religious violence and secular violence. Appleby appeals to an *a priori* category of mystical experience unavailable to empirical testing in order to maintain a distinction between religious and other kinds of violence.

These three figures are not alone. Religious studies scholar Richard Wentz’s book *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* identifies “religion” not only with Christianity and Islam, but also with faith in technology, secular humanism, consumerism, and devotion to Monday night football.⁷⁴ Wentz defines “religion” so

broadly that he concludes “Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of (or as a representative of) religion.”⁷⁵ If this is the case, then “religion” picks out nothing more distinctive than “whatever people deem really important.” In a book on public religion, historian Martin Marty argues that religion has a particular tendency to be divisive and therefore violent.⁷⁶ When it comes to defining what “religion” means, however, Marty begs off giving a definition, since “[s]cholars will never agree on the definition of religion,”⁷⁷ and instead gives a list of five “features” that mark a religion. He then proceeds to show how “politics” displays all five of the same features. Religion focuses our ultimate concern, and so does politics. Religion builds community, and so does politics. Religion appeals to myth and symbol, and politics “mimics” this appeal in devotion to the flag, war memorials, etc. And so on down the list.⁷⁸ Marty offers five defining features of “religion,” shows how “politics” fits all five, and yet continues to act as if the five features help us distinguish what is religion from what is not.

What these studies make clear is that the attempt to separate out a “secular” sphere from a “religious” sphere with a peculiar tendency toward violence is incoherent. There is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God. As Marty himself implies, belief in the righteousness of the United States and its solemn duty to impose liberal democracy on the rest of the world has all the ultimate concern, community, myth, ritual, and required behavior of any so-called religion.⁷⁹ Recently revived debate over a ban on flag burning is replete with references to the “desecration” of the flag, as if it were a sacred object.⁸⁰ Carolyn Marvin’s book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* is a detailed

analysis of American patriotism as a civil religion—focused on the flag totem—whose regeneration depends on periodic blood sacrifice in war.⁸¹ “Secular” nationalism of the kind we are currently witnessing can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrationally fanatical as certain types of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu militancy.

An objection can be raised that goes something like this: certainly secular ideologies can get out of hand and produce fanaticism and violence, but religious ideologies have a much greater tendency to do so precisely because the object of their beliefs is claimed to be absolute. The capitalist knows that money is just a human creation, the liberal is avowedly modest about what can be known beyond human reason, the nationalist knows that her country is made up of land and mortal people, but the religious believer claims divine sanction from a god or gods who are, in some sense, *absolute*, far surpassing mere human creation. Indeed, nationalism only becomes fanatical when divine sanction is claimed, when it is believed that we live in God’s country. Upon this criterion of absoluteness (or sometimes “ultimacy”) we can distinguish between religious and secular ideologies and their respective proclivities toward violence.

The problem here is that what counts as “absolute” is decided *a priori* and appears immune to any empirical testing. How people actually behave is ignored in favor of theological descriptions of their beliefs. Of course Christian orthodoxy would make the theological claim that God is absolute in a way that nothing else is. The problem, as the first table of the Ten Commandments makes plain, is that humans are constantly tempted to idolatry, to putting what is merely relative in the place of God. It is not enough,

therefore, to claim that worship of God is absolutist. The real question is, what god is actually being worshipped?

But surely, the objection might go, nobody really thinks the flag or the nation or money or sports idols are their “gods”—that is just a metaphor. However, the question is not simply one of belief, but of behavior. If a person claims to believe in the Christian God but never gets off the couch on Sunday morning and spends the rest of the week in obsessive pursuit of profit in the bond market, then what is “absolute” in that person’s life in a functional sense is probably not the Christian God. Matthew 6:24 personifies Mammon as a rival god, not in the conviction that such a divine being really exists, but from the empirical observation that people have a tendency to treat all sorts of things as absolutes.

Suppose we apply an empirical test to the question of absolutism. “Absolute” is itself a vague term, but in the “religion and violence” arguments it appears to indicate the tendency to take something so seriously that violence results. An empirically testable definition of “absolute,” then, might be “that for which one is willing to kill.” This test has the advantage of covering behavior, and not simply what one claims to believe. Now let us ask the following two questions: What percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians would be willing to kill for their Christian faith? What percentage would be willing to kill for their country? Whether we attempt to answer these questions by survey or by observing American Christians’ behavior in wartime, it seems clear that, at least among American Christians, the nation-state—Hobbes’ “mortal god”—is subject to far more absolutist fervor than “religion.” For most American

Christians, even public evangelization is considered to be in poor taste, and yet many consider it their duty to go to war against whomever the president deems necessary.

We must conclude that there is no coherent way to isolate “religious” ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer “secular” counterparts. People kill for all sorts of things. We do not need theories about “religion and violence,” but careful studies of violence and empirically-based theories about the specific conditions under which ideologies and practices of all kinds turn lethal.

III. USES OF THE MYTH

If the myth of religious violence is incoherent, why is it so prevalent? In this last section, I want to suggest that we look for the answer to this question in the role that “religion” plays in the self-definition of Western identity. The violence of religion belongs to the founding mythos of Western identity because it helps establish an absolutist and irrational “other,” against which Western secular political and social arrangements appear modest and rational. The myth is used to legitimate the spread of Western ideals, even by violent means. I do not suggest that theories of religion and violence are constructed with this purpose in mind; to the contrary, I believe most theorists of the link between religion and violence are deeply concerned to understand and limit violence in all its forms. Nevertheless, the myth plays an important role, willy-nilly, in the “othering” of non-Western forms of politics and culture.

I will illustrate this approach with an article by Andrew Sullivan in the *New York Times Magazine* which is representative of the way in which mainstream commentators, both liberal and conservative, tend to deal with the supposed conflict between Western and Islamic civilizations. The article is entitled “This Is a Religious War.” In it Sullivan

justifies the overall war against terrorism—and the subsidiary wars of which it is composed—in terms of an “epic battle” as momentous and grave as the ones against Nazism and Communism.⁸² He labels it a “religious war,” but not in the sense of Islam versus Christianity and Judaism. It is rather radical Islam versus Western-style “individual faith and pluralism,”⁸³ or “a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity.”⁸⁴ For Sullivan, fundamentalism refers to the “blind recourse to texts embraced as literal truth, the injunction to follow the commandments of God before anything else, the subjugation of reason and judgment and even conscience to the dictates of dogma.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, fundamentalism is the refusal to acknowledge that religion is individual and private. “This is the voice of fundamentalism. Faith cannot exist alone in a single person. Indeed, faith needs others for it to survive—and the more complete the culture of faith, the wider it is, and the more total its infiltration of the world, the better.”⁸⁶ Because it needs others, fundamentalism will seek to coerce others violently into its own camp.

A fundamentalist, then, in Sullivan’s view, is someone who puts the commandments of God before anything else and also refuses to confine faith to an individual and private realm. Given that most Christians, Muslims, and Jews throughout history would therefore qualify as “fundamentalists,” Sullivan does not hesitate to cast his net as widely as possible, claiming “It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation.”⁸⁷ The problem seems to be too much faith, a loyalty to an absolute that excludes accommodation to other realities. “If faith is that strong, and it dictates a choice between action or eternal damnation, then violence can easily be justified.”⁸⁸

At root, the problem is epistemological. According to Sullivan, it took Western Christians centuries of bloody “religious wars” to realize “the futility of fighting to the death over something beyond human understanding and so immune to any definitive resolution.”⁸⁹ The problem with religion is that authoritative truth is simply not available to us mortals in any form that will produce consensus rather than division. Locke, therefore, emerges as Sullivan’s hero, for it was Locke who recognized the limits of human understanding of revelation and enshrined those limits in a political theory. Locke and the founding fathers saved us from the curse of killing in the name of religion. “What the founders and Locke were saying was that the ultimate claims of religion should simply not be allowed to interfere with political and religious freedom.”⁹⁰ In theory, we have the opposition of a cruel fanaticism with a modest and peaceloving tolerance. However, Sullivan’s epistemological modesty applies only to the command of God and not to the absolute superiority of our political and cultural system over theirs. According to Sullivan, “We are fighting for the universal principles of our Constitution.” *Universal* knowledge is available to us after all, and it underwrites the “epic battle” we are currently waging against fundamentalisms of all kinds. Sullivan is willing to gird himself with the language of a warrior and underwrite US military adventures in the Middle East in the name of his secular faith. Sullivan entitles his piece “This Is a Religious War,” though the irony seems to elude him entirely. On the surface, the myth of religious violence establishes a dichotomy between our peaceloving secular reasonableness and their irrational religious fanaticism. Under the surface lies an absolute “religious” devotion to the American vision of a hegemonic liberalism that underwrites the necessity of using

violence to impose this vision on the Muslim other. We must bomb them into the higher rationality.

The myth of religious violence has long had an important role in the foundational story of the modern state.⁹¹ When Europe was wracked by irrational fanaticism and violence, the story goes, the European state was the first political system to recognize that religion must be privatized, so that a public sphere of universal reason could be opened to everyone. When Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began killing each other over beliefs that are beyond rational adjudication, the state stepped in as peacemaker. The lesson learned by liberalism—a lesson to be exported militarily, if necessary, to other more “primitive” lands—is that there is something essentially irrational and therefore prone to violence in religion. A secular public order is to be preferred as a step toward peace. It follows from this story that those political orders that have not learned to separate out religion from an undue influence in the public sphere are therefore less rational than their Western counterparts.

This story is false in that it treats “religion” as an isolatable cause to which the state was a response. In fact, however, the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were about the triumph of the modern sovereign state over against a medieval ecclesiastical order that was as “political” as it was “religious.”⁹² As Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his successors have shown, religion was not simply separated out from politics but was *invented* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That is, the modern concept of religion as an essentially private, universal feature of human nature was invented at that time. The religious/secular dichotomy was a creation of the modern state that secured its unrivaled sovereignty by domesticating the Church. It is crucial to note that the origins

of the sovereign state *predate* the Reformation and the rise of Christian division. It is also crucial to note that the state did not arise as peacemaker. On the contrary, as Michael Howard sums up the evidence, “the entire apparatus of the state primarily came into being to enable princes to wage war.”⁹³

Nevertheless, the myth of religious wars and the modern state as peacemaker continues to mark the “clash of civilizations” worldview that attributes Muslims’ animosity toward the West to their inability to learn the lessons of history and remove the baneful influence of religion from politics. If my analysis is correct, then the myth of religious violence is one more element in the story of how the concept “religion” and its twin “secular” contribute to Western colonial ideology. Once the religious/secular dichotomy helps clear a space for the rise of the nation-state in Europe and America, it is only natural that the distinction would be found equally useful in colonizing less rational peoples. Religious studies scholar Richard King, for example, has shown how the creation of “Hinduism” as a “religion” went hand in hand with Westernizing efforts by the British in India. “Hinduism” was defined according to Christian categories as a “mystical”—and therefore non-doctrinal and non-rational—religion. As a religion, it had a transhistorical and transcultural reference which allowed it to be differentiated from politics, law, science, and power. In the eyes of the colonizing powers, Hindu culture became a “religion,” a sphere of individual, non-political, and otherworldly commitment that could therefore be privatized, clearing the way for the construction of a sphere of capital markets and natural rights that were seen as universal, rational, and public.⁹⁴ Friedrich Max Mueller, the famed godfather of the study of world religions, was instrumental in systematizing Western research into Hinduism in the nineteenth century.

It is not a coincidence that his translation of the massive Hindu text *Rig Veda* was financed by the British East India Company, one of the principal arms of British imperial rule.⁹⁵

Russell McCutcheon has suggested that we look not merely to the origins of the field of religious studies in European universities in the 19th century but its flourishing in twentieth-century American universities in the 20th for evidence of the link between colonialism and the religious/secular dichotomy. McCutcheon argues that it is not a coincidence that the center of the study of religion moved along with the center of imperialism from Europe to America in the 20th century. McCutcheon shows how, in many common American religious studies textbooks, a subtle dichotomy emerges between those cultures still bound by non-rational tradition and group identity, and the “modern” rationalistic and individualistic culture toward which the former are fated to evolve. Religious studies becomes a tool in the manufacturing and management of our Others, whom we are duty-bound to understand and to assist in their evolution toward the universality the West has already achieved.⁹⁶

Other scholars have pointed to the way in which the dichotomy of religious and secular have been instrumental in the creation of nationalism. Historian Peter van der Veer describes how nationalism is assumed to occur in a process of “secularization.” “Religion,” therefore, is atavistic; when linked with politics, it is described as a *resurgence* or *reemergence* of something more primitive and non-rational. The nation-state, by contrast, is seen as rational and universalizing, but van der Veer argues that nationalism is itself a kind of “religion.”⁹⁷ In the same vein, anthropologist Talal Asad argues that religion and the secular are twin creations necessitated by the rise of the

modern nation-state. The secular produces religion as a form of false consciousness, which is then shunted aside, in order to transfer the ultimate loyalty of the citizen from God to the nation. But nationalism, Asad argues, is every bit as ideological and “irrational” as any Christendom.⁹⁸

As I write, the US military is attempting, through the massive use of violence, to liberate Afghanistan and Iraq from religious violence. It is an inherently contradictory effort, and its failures will be attributed by some to the pernicious influence of religion and its tendency toward violence. If we really wish to understand its failure, however, we will need to question the very myth of religious violence on which such military adventures depend for legitimation.

Endnotes

¹ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 2.

² Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 14.

³ Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 28.

⁴ Lefebure, 13.

⁵ Ibid. See especially Lefebure's discussion of Girard, pp. 16–24. According to Lefebure, Girard's mimetic theory "does illumine a wide range of aspects of religion and culture," but it lacks the empirical evidence necessary to extend the theory to all times and all places. Nowhere does Lefebure explain what the term "religion" picks out that is distinctive from "culture" or the non-religious aspects of culture. Religion and culture are simply thrown together into the type of conceptual soup apparent in the following sentences: "The theory of the primal murders and the primordial origin of religion and all human culture in the surrogate victim mechanism is highly speculative because we lack adequate data from the period that Girard takes as foundational for all human culture. Girard seeks to reconstruct a form of mimesis prior to symbols, a mimesis that would be the first origin of human consciousness and culture and religious symbolism"; 21.

⁶ John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 16–20. Hick also makes this argument in his book *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 371: "the dogma of the deity of Christ—in conjunction with the aggressive and predatory aspect of human nature—has contributed historically to the evils of colonialism, the destruction of indigenous civilizations, anti-Semitism, destructive wars of religion and the burnings of heretics and witches."

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid., 34, and John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

⁹ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 133. He reiterates this position in his later book *An Interpretation of Religion*, 21.

¹⁰ Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 133.

¹¹ The debate began in earnest with Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), which traces the history of the term and finds that "religion" is a modern invention. Recently, Timothy Fitzgerald has made the most forceful case for the incoherence of the term in his *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also, Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, ed., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

¹² Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 3.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5–6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5, 22, 32, 33, 308, e.g.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xi.

²⁰ Ibid., xii.

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Ibid., 119–20.

²³ Ibid., 123.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 132–3.

²⁶ Ibid., 144.

²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁸ Ibid., 146.

²⁹ Ibid., 153.

³⁰ Ibid., 154.

³¹ Ibid., 161-3.

³² Ibid., 148-9.

³³ Ibid., 149.

³⁴ Ibid., 155.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 217.

³⁷ Ibid. Although Juergensmeyer does not divide this summary into four separate points, I have done so for clarifying my response to each point.

³⁸ Ibid., 216-17.

³⁹ Ibid., 169-70.

⁴⁰ According to Girard “There is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist.” Even “secular” societies are religious; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 221.

⁴¹ Juergensmeyer tries to tighten the link between war and religion by saying that “the task of creating a vicarious experience of warfare—albeit one usually imagined as residing on a spiritual plane—is one of the main businesses of religion.” In the next sentence, however, he acknowledges that “Virtually all cultural traditions have contained martial metaphors”; *ibid.*, 156. How then are we supposed to distinguish religion from other cultural traditions?

⁴² Ibid., 37.

⁴³ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid., xii, 30-6.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 127, 164-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30-6.

⁴⁸ Pierce’s novel describes a battle between patriotic freedom fighters and the US government. Although Pierce scorned Christian Identity, he founded another group called the Cosmotheist Community; *ibid.*, 30-3.

⁴⁹ Appleby, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Ibid., 11.

⁵³ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵ Ibid. These phrases come from Otto by way of Appleby’s quotation of him.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 5-6. At least in its “higher” forms, *das Heilige* is the numinous “completely permeated and saturated” with morality and rationality; 109. Otto counts Christianity, especially in its Protestant variation, as one of these higher forms, superior to other religions; see, for example, pp. 1, 56, 175.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 112-13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 12.

⁶² Ibid., 16.

⁶³ Appleby, 15.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

⁷² Ibid., 68.

⁷³ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁴ Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1993), 13-21.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁶ Marty, 25-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10-14.

⁷⁹ And yet for Marty, Ronald Reagan's designation of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" is evidence of the divisive tendencies of "religion" —as opposed to the more obvious candidates of nationalism or patriotism; *ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁰ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Given New Legs, Old Proposal is Back," *New York Times*, June 4, 2003: A28.

⁸¹ Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸² Andrew Sullivan, "This is a Religious War," *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001, 53.

⁸³ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁶ Ibid..

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 46-7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁹¹ Appleby puts it this way: "The core values of secularized Western societies, including freedom of speech and freedom of religion, were elaborated in outraged response to inquisitions, crusades, pogroms, and wars conducted in the name of God"; Appleby, p. 2. For this idea in classical liberal political theory, see John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 17; Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (South Bend, Ind.: Gateway Editions, 1954), pp. 153-62 [Bk. IV, ch. 8]. In contemporary liberal theory, see Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 241; Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 5; John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Summer 1985), p. 225.

⁹² I make this argument in more detail in my book *Theopolitical Imagination* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), chapter 1.

⁹³ Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 15. Charles Tilly says "War made the state, and the state made war"; "Reflections on the History of European State-Making" in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 42.

⁹⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mystic East'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), who states that "'religion' derives its plausibility and apologetics as a genuinely viable analytical category, in the face of a mass of contradictory evidence, from its mystifying function in western liberal capitalist ideology"; 6.

⁹⁵ Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Imperial Dynamic in the Study of Religion: Neocolonial Practices in an American Discipline" in C. Richard King, ed., *Post-Colonial America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 275-81.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 286-8.

⁹⁷ Peter van der Veer, "The Moral State : Religion, Nation, and Empire in Victorian Britain and British India" in Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-9.

⁹⁸ Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-state, Secularism" in van der Veer and Lehmann, ed., 178-91.

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Contact

Andy Gould, Working Paper Series Editor (2001–4)
(agould@nd.edu)

Bill Schmitt, Publications and Communications
Manager (wschmitt@nd.edu)