Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power

BY W I L L I A M T . C A V A N A U G H

The idea that "religion" is peculiarly prone to violence is not based in fact, but is an ideological justification for the dominance of secular social orders, which can and do inspire violence. The myth of religious violence leads us to turn a blind eye to the causes of non-Western grievances against the Western world.

The recent frequency of Islamist militant attacks in the name of God has added fuel to a long-standing Western notion that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence. The subject in this common notion is not just certain forms of Islamism or Islam in general but "religion," a category that is commonly held to include Christianity, Hinduism, and other major world faiths. The common Western notion is meant to be neutral with regard to particular religions; it does not discriminate against Muslims, for example, but sees religion as such as potentially dangerous. Any time disagreements are ratcheted up to a cosmic level, there is the danger of blood being spilled. For that reason, the Western liberal ideal has insisted on the domestic separation of church, synagogue, mosque, and so on from state, and the privatization of religion. And it has generally insisted that for-eign policy promote this ideal in non-Western countries whenever possible.

The notion that people kill in the name of God is undeniable. Arguments that try to pin all violence on other factors—economic deprivation or politi-cal marginalization—are easily refuted by the terrorists' own words; they also assume a clear distinction between religious and political and economic factors that is impossible, even in theory, to pull off, as I will argue below. Nor does it work, despite frequent attempts, to claim that the Crusaders

were not really Christians or Islamic terrorists are not really Muslims. Normatively, it is important for Christians and Muslims to claim that Crusaders and terrorists have gotten the message of Christianity and Islam all wrong. Descriptively, however, it is disingenuous for Christians and Muslims to absolve their own group from wrongdoing by disowning their bad co-religionists. We must do penance collectively for our collective sins.

People can and do commit violence in the name of God. But obviously people kill for all sorts of other things too. Behind the common tale of religion and violence, therefore, there must be a stronger claim: religion has a *greater* propensity to promote violence than what is not religion. What is not religion is called "secular." The idea that religion promotes violence depends entirely on this distinction between the religious and the secular.

> Religion is claimed to be incendiary because it allows reason to be trumped by passion. Arguments that religion foments violence come in three types: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, and religion is non-rational.

UNSTABLE CATEGORIES

Imagine a table with two columns, religious and secular, and a line separating the two. In the "religious" column are generally included Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and a few other "world religions." Under "secular" we find non-religious categories of human life such as politics and economics, as well as ideologies and practices like nationalism, atheism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism that might fall under such non-religious categories. The common notion that religion is peculiarly prone to violence depends on the idea that these secular matters have less of a tendency to promote violence; it is commonly assumed that this is so because they have to do with purely mundane affairs. Religion, on the other hand, is seen as peculiarly incendiary because it raises the stakes to another level, where reason is trumped by passion. In examining academic arguments that religion foments violence, I have found that such arguments can be grouped into three types: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, and religion is non-rational.[1]

Such arguments seem undeniable, to most of us living in liberal Western social orders, anyway. Terrorism, mostly of the Islamist kind, comes immediately to mind as confirmation. If we cast a glance over the extraordinarily bloody last hundred years or so, however, complicating evidence presses itself upon us. World War I, to which nationalism is generally assigned as primary cause, resulted in 38 million military and civilian casualties. Deaths

under Marxist regimes are estimated in figures that range as high as 110 million. The death toll under the three regimes alone of Stalin, Mao, and the Khmer Rouge ranges from a low of 21 million to a high of 70 million; all were militantly atheist. The last hundred years have seen frequent war waged for oil, land, flags, free markets, democracy, ethnicity, and a host of other "secular" causes. What becomes of the idea that religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence in the face of this evidence?

For some religion-and-violence theorists, the answer to this problem is simple: move the offending ideologies over the line to the other side of the table. Atheist Christopher Hitchens takes this approach in his bestselling book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Totalitarianism, he says, is essentially religious. According to Hitchens, "the object of perfecting the species—which is the very root and source of the totalitarian impulse—is in essence a religious one."[2] Even when they try to extirpate religion, totalitarian regimes show themselves to be religious. "All that the totalitarians have demonstrated is that the religious impulse—the need to worship—can take even more monstrous forms if it is repressed."[3] Thus do atheists like Stalin and Kim Jong-il find themselves—undoubtedly to their great surprise—on the side of religion. Hitchens is not alone in this move. Political scientist Rudolph Rummel—relentless chronicler of communist tyranny and promoter of the theory that democratic regimes are essentially peaceful—counts Marxism as the bloodiest of all religions.[4] Religion is violent because it is *defined* as violent. Religion poisons everything because everything poisonous is labeled "religious."

For other religion-and-violence theorists, secular ideologies are not moved as a whole to the religious side of the table, but whatever is violent about them is attributed to religion. Take for example political scientist David Rapoport's comments on nationalism and religion. One element in its disposition toward violence

> is the capacity of religion to inspire total loyalties or commitments, and in this respect, it is difficult to imagine anything which surpasses the religious community. Religion has often had formidable rivals; in the modern world the nation sometimes has surpassed religion as a focus of loyalties, though significantly there is increasing propensity for academics to speak of 'civic religion' when discussing national symbols and rites. In any case, the ascendancy of the nation has occupied but a brief moment in history so far, and in a limited portion of the world—all of which only more underscores the durability and special significance of religion.[5]

Here nationalism is not a religion, but it acts like a religion and is sometimes called a religion, and the violence of nationalism counts as evidence for the violence of religion. Another reason that religion is peculiarly linked to violence, according to Rapoport, is that it uses violent language. He illustrates

this point by giving examples of explicitly secular movements that have appropriated religious language in the service of violence. He quotes the secularist Abraham Stern:

> Like my father who taught me to read in Torah
> I will teach my pupils; stand to arms, kneel and shoot
> Because there is a religion of redemption—a religion of the war of
>   liberation
> Whoever accepts it—be blessed: whoever denies it—be cursed.[6]

Instead of concluding that "secular" liberation movements can inspire just as much passion and commitment and violence as "religious" movements can—or that the Stern Gang was, as Stern himself acknowledged, dedicated to a kind of "religion," which throws the whole religious/secular distinction into question—Rapoport offers Stern's poem as evidence that *religion* has a disposition towards violence. As with nationalism, here secular terrorism acts like a religion and is called a religion, but is not religious, even though it counts as evidence of religion's violent tendencies.

The argument that religion has a peculiar disposition toward violence depends upon a sharp dividing line between the religious and the secular, but religion-and-violence arguments engage in frequent smuggling across that border. Political theorist Bhikhu Parekh issues a blistering indictment of religion: "It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth."[7] Parekh confesses, however, that

> several secular ideologies, such as some varieties of Marxism, con-
> servatism, and even liberalism have a quasi-religious orientation
> and form, and conversely formally religious languages sometimes
> have a secular content, so that the dividing line between a secular
> and a religious language is sometimes difficult to draw.[8]

Violent and irrational impulses are popping up everywhere, even in liberalism, which inspires the creation of the category "quasi-religious" to try to corral them all back onto religion's side. Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer has made a career out of exploring the peculiar tendency of religion to contribute to violence, but the whole project seems to fall into confusion when he states flatly that "secular nationalism is 'a religion'"[9] and even that "the secular is a sort of advanced form of religion."[10] What becomes of the dividing line between "secular" and "religious"—upon which the whole argument depends—if the secular is a form of religion?

Some religion-and-violence theorists deal with the problem here by openly and consistently expanding the category of "religion." Richard Wentz's book *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* includes not only Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and the like, but also consumerism, secular humanism, football fanaticism, faith in technology, and a host of other

ideologies and practices under the rubric "religion." He concludes, "Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of (or as a representative of) religion."[11] Wentz has intuited correctly that people do violence for all sorts of reasons. Where he goes wrong is in thinking that he can obliterate the line between religious and secular and still end up blaming violence on religion. Instead of an argument for why religion has a greater tendency than the secular to promote violence, Wentz has simply taken everything for which people do violence and labeled it "religion."

Religion-and-violence arguments are rife with this kind of nonsense because they depend upon a stable dividing line between religious and secular that does not exist. The distinction between religious and secular is always in flux. It is a modern and Western distinction, a line socially constructed in different ways for different purposes, and not simply a feature of the way things are. Religion-and-violence theorists construct the distinction for their own purposes, to condemn certain things and ignore others. A brief history of the distinction shows that this has always been the case.

HISTORY OF THE DISTINCTION

Once there was no religious/secular distinction. Wilfred Cantwell Smith went looking for an equivalent concept to "religion" in ancient Greece, Egypt, India, China, and Japan, and found none.[12] The Romans had the term *religio*, but as Augustine writes in *The City of God*, the "normal meaning" of the term was "an attitude of respect in relations between a man and his neighbor."[13] This attitude is something we would consider to be "secular." In Roman society, obligations and devotion to civic duties, gods, friends, family, and civil authorities were all bound in a web of relations. There was no religion/politics distinction; how could there be when Caesar was a god? When the religious/secular distinction is introduced to Western society in

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the medieval period, it is primarily used to denote a distinction between two types of priests, those who are part of an order and those "secular" priests who belong to a diocese. There was no realm of purely secular and mundane affairs to which Christianity was indifferent or peripheral, and though there was a distinction between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the religion/politics distinction would have to await the modern era.

Timothy Fitzgerald finds no evidence in English of a religious/secular distinction in the way we use it now until the late seventeenth century. The religion/politics distinction is even later.[14] These distinctions first appear in the writings of figures like John Locke and William Penn. To make a long and complex story brief and simple, the distinction is the result of the struggle between ecclesiastical and civil authorities for power in early modern Europe.[15] The new territorial states arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in part by appropriating powers formerly in the hands of the church; ecclesiastical courts were abolished, and the rights to nominate bishops and abbots, control over church revenues, monopoly on the means of violence, and the primary allegiance of the people were trans-

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ferred to the nascent state. The first use of the term "secularization" was to indicate the transfer of property from ecclesiastical to civil control. Under these circumstances, the religion/secular and religion/politics divides were invented to exclude ecclesiastical authority from certain types of public power. Religion, as it became in Locke's writings, was invented as a universal and essentially interior impulse, completely distinct from the mundane business of politics and economics. The church would henceforth be confined to the ambit of religion.

Once the religious/secular distinction was created in the West, it was subsequently exported to the rest of the world in the process of colonization. In their first encounters with the natives, Western explorers reported back home with remarkable consistency that the natives had no religion at all.[16] Once they colonized the natives, however, the religious/secular distinction was found quite useful. Western scholars began to fit the locals' cultural systems—even those without gods, like Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism—into taxonomies of "world religions," despite resistance from native elites. Chinese elites in the late nineteenth century, for example, rejected the idea that Confucianism was a religion, because religion was seen to be otherworldly and individualistic.[17] Hindu nationalists today "refuse to call Hinduism a religion precisely because they want to emphasize that Hinduism is more than mere internalized beliefs. It is social, political, economic, and familial in nature. Only thus can India the secular state become interchangeable with India the Hindu homeland."[18] The religious/secular distinction, nevertheless, was imposed on colonized peoples in large part because it facilitated the quarantining of the local culture to the private

sphere of "religion." In the case of India, to make Hinduism a religion was to take everything it meant to be Indian and confine it to a non-public sphere; to be public meant to be British.

THE DISTINCTION AS AN ACT OF POWER

The point of this very brief history is to show that the religious/secular distinction upon which the common notion that religion promotes violence depends is an invented, contingent, and ever-shifting distinction, not simply a part of the way things are. Where the line gets drawn between religious and secular is, furthermore, dependent on what kinds of power one wants to authorize and what kinds one wants to exclude. This becomes especially apparent if we examine how the myth of religious violence is used today.

In domestic matters, the myth of religious violence is used to exclude certain kinds of practices from the public sphere. Until 1940 the Supreme Court invoked "religion" as a unifying force in American society. Since 1940, however, the Supreme Court has repeatedly raised the specter of religious violence in banning school prayer, banning optional religious education from public school buildings, banning public aid to religious schools, and so on. When the Supreme Court invoked the danger of religious conflict in *Aguilar v. Felton* (1985) to ban nonsectarian remedial education for low-income kids from taking place in parochial schools, Justices O'Connor and Rehnquist dissented, writing, "There is little record support for the proposition that New York City's admirable Title I program has ignited any controversy other than this litigation."[19] This dissent highlights the fact that these Supreme Court decisions are not based on any evidence of actual religious violence in American life. The period after 1940 saw interdenominational strife in the U.S. at historical lows; the use of the myth of religious violence has not been a response to empirical fact as much as it has been a useful narrative that has been produced by and has helped produce consent to the increasing secularization of the American social order.

In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence has been used to justify attitudes and actions towards non-secular social orders, especially Muslim ones. We assume that the reason for turmoil in the Middle East is religion. Muslims have not learned to separate mosque from state, religion from politics, and so the passions of religion continue to wreak havoc in the public sphere. Our foreign policy is geared toward moving them—by force, if necessary—toward liberal, Western style democracy, which is the key to peace. The Iraq War was meant to bring the blessings of liberalism to the Middle East. And so the myth of religious violence becomes a justification for war on behalf of secularism. There are many subtle versions of this secularist argument for military intervention; here is a blunt version by bestselling New Atheist author Sam Harris:

> Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary

claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion, while inspiring them to commit acts of extraordinary violence against others. There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense. This is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, at an even greater cost to ourselves and innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world. We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas.[20]

CONCLUSION

As this quote from Harris makes clear, people kill for all sorts of things. People are just as capable of killing for atheism or secularism as they are of killing for gods. The attempt to come to general conclusions about violent behavior is not illuminated but confused and obscured by trying to divide "religious" from "secular" ideologies and practices. Devotion to so-called "secular" ideologies and practices can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as devotion to so-called "religions."

The idea that "religion" is peculiarly prone to violence is not based in empirical fact, but is an ideological justification for the dominance of secular social orders, orders that can and do inspire violence. The myth of religious violence causes us to turn a blind eye to the causes of non-Western grievances against the Western world. We reduce the cause of Muslim anger at the West to their "religion," thus casting a convenient fog of amnesia over Western aggressions on behalf of Western interests: the 1953 overthrow of a democratic government in Iran, support for corrupt and tyrannical governments in the Muslim world, the plundering of Arab countries' oil riches, the Iraq War, support for Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, Abu Ghraib, "extraordinary rendition," and the rest of it.

Doing away with the myth of religious violence helps level the playing field: let's examine the violence fomented by ideologies of all kinds, including those we tend to regard as "secular" and therefore benign. Instead of dividing the world *a priori* into reasonable people (us) and irrational people (them), we can perhaps promote peace by doing away with such binaries.

NOTES

1 I examine nine such arguments in the first chapter of my book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 232.

3 Ibid., 247.

4 Rudolph J. Rummel, "The Killing Machine that Is Marxism," *World Net Daily* (December 15, 2004), *www.wnd.com/2004/12/28036/* (accessed January 29, 2016).

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

6 Ibid., 121.

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

8 Ibid., 74.

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

10 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 23.

11 Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 37.

12 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 54-55.

13 Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), X.1 (373).

14 Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

15 I tell the story in much greater detail in chapter two of *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

16 See David Chidester, "Colonialism," in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 427-428.

17 Peter Beyer, "Defining Religion in Cross-National Perspective: Identity and Difference in Official Conceptions," in Arthur L. Greil and David G. Bromley, eds., *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular* (Oxford: JAI, 2003), 174-180.

18 Richard S. Cohen, "Why Study Indian Buddhism?" in Derek R. Peterson and Darren R. Walhof, eds., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 27.

19 Sandra Day O'Connor and William Rehnquist in *Aguilar v. Felton*, 473 U.S. 402 (1985), 429.

20 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 52-53.

W I L L I A M   T.   C A V A N A U G H
is Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois.