DOES RELIGION CAUSE VIOLENCE?

DELIVERED BY

DR WILLIAM CAVANAUGH

HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

29 MAY 2006

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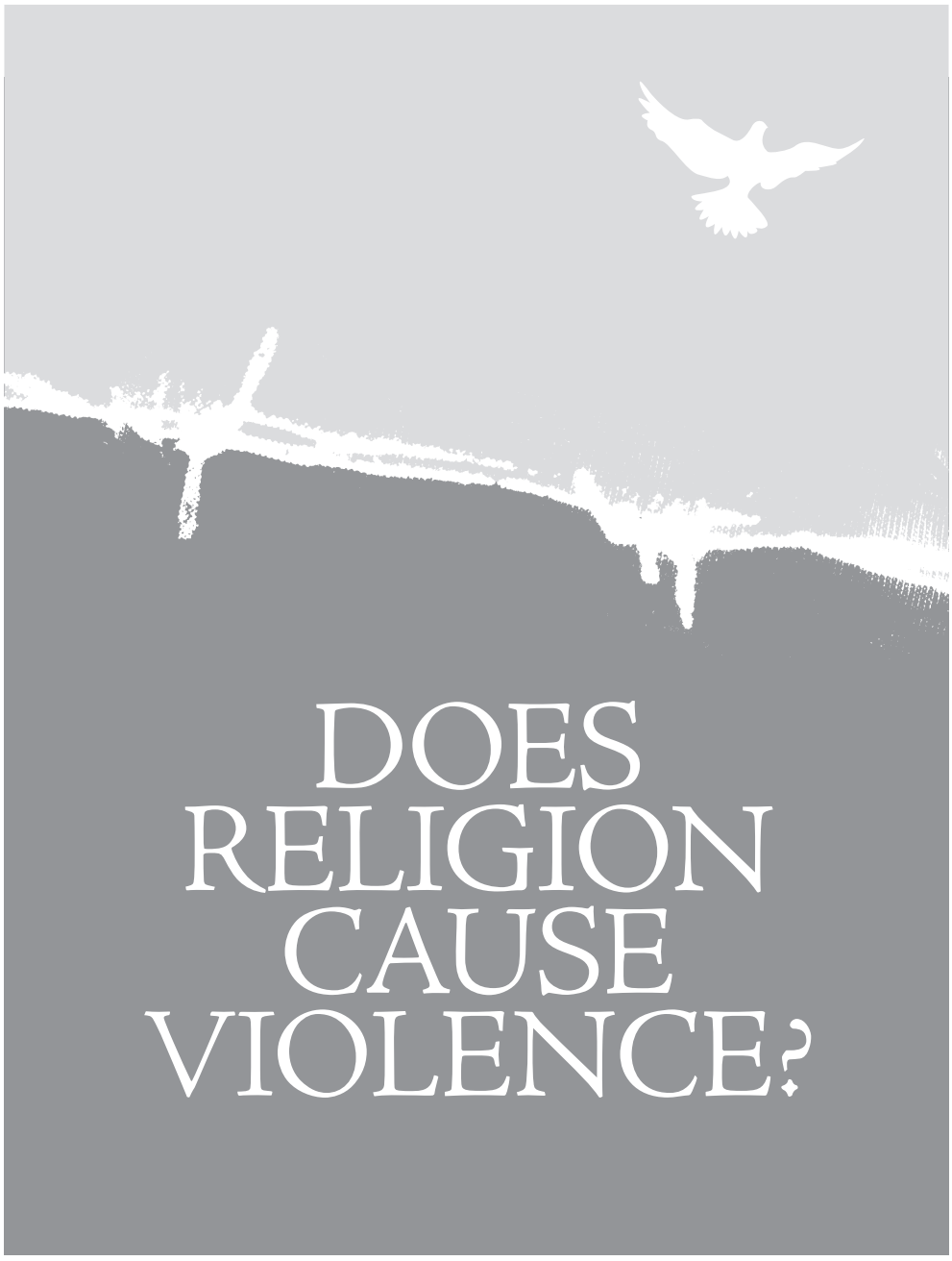

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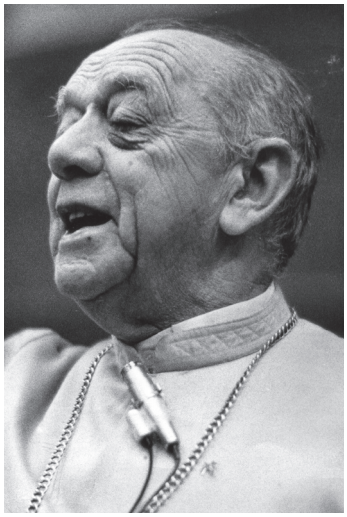
DOM HELDER CAMARA



Dom Helder Camara was one of the twentieth century's greatest Christians.

Born in Fortaleza in North East Brazil, 7 February, 1909, Dom Helder was ordained a priest at the age of 22. Twenty eight years of his life were spent in Rio de Janeiro – first in educational and then administrative work. When he became Archbishop of Recife in his own region, the North East, he quickly became the defender of the "flagelados" (the scourged ones) whose existence was continually buffeted by either years of drought or cruel floods. Millions of these were being (and are) driven from their land, only to end up in disease ridden slums on the outskirts of big cities like Recife and Sao Paulo.

In 1985, the Marist Brothers invited Dom Helder to Melbourne. Many people were deeply touched by Dom Helder's profound love of the Church and deep compassion for the suffering. There was a tangible sense that Dom Helder was a close friend of the Risen Jesus. This was especially felt by those who attended his celebrations of the Eucharist. All who met Dom Helder could not help but be deeply moved by the evangelical power and charisma of this tiny prophet of non-violent love. When he met children of many nations in the dusty bitumen quadrangle of Sacred Heart Primary school, Fitzroy, *The Sun* reported "…a stooped and tiny man, barely 1.5 metres high, but somehow a giant in stature. A wizened and ancient bettlenut-brown face from which gentle eyes shone a special kind of light. And as the multicultured children of Sacred Heart sang and danced for him, unashamed tears of hope and joy slid down the many wrinkles of Dom Helder Camara's cheeks."

In Recife, you would always find Dom Helder's door open – right up until his death in 1999. The same Jesus he met in prayer, he discovered in the constant stream of the poor and suffering who knocked on the battered green door leading to his humble quarters.

In a world full of violence and hatred, Dom Helder Camara stands as a beacon of light and hope pointing to the Dream of God for humanity. Afire with the love of God and people, by opening his home, his heart and his Church to the world of the poor, Dom Helder blazed new paths as we journey towards the Kingdom of Justice, Peace and Caritas. This lecture series aims to keep Dom Helder's witness and message alive in our blessed land of Australia.

Designed and produced by Ramesh Weereratne/Catholic Communications Melbourne. Photography © MDHC, Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

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BIOGRAPHY

Prominent US Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh was educated in theology and religion at Notre Dame, Cambridge and Duke Universities.

Dr Cavanaugh's dissertation for his PhD at Duke "Torture and Eucharist in Pinochet's Chile" drew on his experiences living in Chile in the 1980s. The dissertation became the highly-acclaimed book *"Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ"* which reflects on the Church, the Eucharist and politics within the context of the Pinochet regime following the overthrow of Allende in Chile. It is now being produced in French-language and Spanish-language editions.

A well known writer on theology , the church and politics, his other books include *"Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism"* and *"The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology"* edited with Peter Scott.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence. This story is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies, and it underlies many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of religion to efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East.

Tonight I am going to challenge that conventional wisdom, but not in the ways it is usually challenged by people who identify themselves as religious. Such people will sometimes argue that the real motivation behind so-called religious violence is in fact economic and political, not religious. Others will argue that people who do violence are, by definition, not religious. The Crusader is not really a Christian, for example, because he doesn't really understand the meaning of Christianity. I don't think that either of these arguments works. In the first place, it is impossible to separate out religious from economic and political motives in such a way that religious motives are innocent of violence. How could one, for example, separate religion from politics in Islam, when Muslims themselves make no such separation? In the second place, it may be the case that the Crusader has misappropriated the true message of Christ, but one cannot therefore excuse Christianity of all responsibility. Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrines, but a lived historical experience embodied and shaped by the empirically observable actions of Christians. So I have no intention of excusing Christianity or Islam or any other faith system from careful analysis. Given certain conditions, Christianity, Islam, and other faiths can and do contribute to violence.

But what is implied in the conventional wisdom that religion is prone to violence is that Christianity, Islam, and other faiths are *more* inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as "secular." It is *this* story that I will challenge tonight. I will do so in two steps. First, I will show that the division of ideologies and institutions into the categories "religious" and "secular" is an arbitrary and incoherent division. When we examine academic arguments that religion causes violence, we find that what does or does not count as religion is based on subjective and indefensible assumptions. As a result certain kinds of violence are condemned, and others are ignored. Second, I ask, "If the idea that there is something called 'religion' that is more violent than so-called 'secular' phenomena is so incoherent, why is the idea so pervasive?" The answer, I think, is that we in the West find it comforting and ideologically useful. The myth of religious violence helps create a blind spot about the violence of the putatively secular nation-state. We like to believe that the liberal state arose to make peace between warring religious factions. Today, the Western liberal state is charged with the burden of creating peace in the face of the cruel religious fanaticism of the Muslim world. The myth of religious violence promotes a dichotomy between *us* in the secular West who are rational and peacemaking, and *them*, the hordes of violent religious fanatics in the Muslim world. *Their* violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. *Our* violence, on the other hand, is rational, peacemaking, and necessary. Regrettably, we find ourselves forced to bomb them into the higher rationality.

I. THE INCOHERENCE OF THE ARGUMENT

The English-speaking academic world has been inundated – especially since September 11, 2001 – by books and articles attempting to explain why religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence. They come from authors in many different fields –sociology, political science, religious studies, history, theology. I don't have time tonight to analyze each argument in depth, but I will examine a variety of examples – taken from some of the most prominent books on the subject – of what they all have in common: an inability to find a convincing way to separate religious violence from secular violence.

Charles Kimball's book *When Religion Becomes Evil* begins with the following claim: "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."[1] Kimball apparently considers this claim too trite to need proving, for he makes no attempt to reinforce it with evidence. If one were to try to prove it, one would need a concept of religion that would be at least theoretically separable from other institutional forces over the course of history. Kimball does not identify those rival institutional forces, but an obvious contender might be political institutions: tribes, empires, kingdoms, fiefs, states, and so on. The problem is that religion was not considered something separable from such political institutions until the modern era, and then primarily in the West. What sense could be made of separating out Egyptian or Roman "religion" from the Egyptian or Roman "state"? Is Aztec "politics" to blame for their bloody human sacrifices, or is Aztec "religion" to blame? As Wilfred Cantwell Smith showed in his landmark 1962 book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, "religion" as a discrete category of human activity separable from "culture," "politics," and other areas of life is an invention of the modern West. In the course of a detailed historical study of the concept "religion," Smith was compelled to conclude that in premodern Europe there was no significant concept equivalent to what we think of as "religion," and furthermore there is no "closely equivalent concept in any culture that has not been influenced by the modern West."[2] Since Smith's book, Russell McCutcheon, Richard King, Derek Peterson, and a host of other scholars have demonstrated how European colonial bureaucrats invented the concept of religion in the course of categorizing non-Western colonized cultures as irrational and antimodern.[3] Now that we do have a separate concept of "religion," though, is the concept a coherent one? Jonathan Z. Smith writes "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study... Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy."[4] Brian C. Wilson says that the inability to define religion is "almost an article of methodological dogma" in the field of religious studies.[5] Timothy Fitzgerald argues that there is no coherent concept of religion; the term should be regarded as a form of mystification and scrapped.[6] We have one group of scholars convinced that religion causes violence, and another group of scholars who do not think that there is such a thing as "religion," except as an intellectual construct of highly dubious value.

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

2 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 19.

3 See, for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999); Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, ed., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

4 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) xi.

5 Brian C. Wilson, "From the Lexical to the Polythetic: A Brief History of the Definition of Religion," *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

6 Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The former group carries on as if the latter did not exist. Kimball is one of the few who acknowledges the problem, but he dismisses it as merely semantic. Describing how flustered his students become when he asks them to write a definition of "religion," Kimball asserts "Clearly these bright students know what religion is"; they just have trouble defining it. After all, Kimball assures us, "Religion is a central feature of human life. We all see many indications of it every day, and we all know it when we see it."[7] When an academic says such a thing, you should react as you would when a used car salesman says "Everybody knows this is a good car." The fact is that we don't all know it when we see it. A survey of religious studies literature finds totems, witchcraft, the rights of man, Marxism, liberalism, Japanese tea ceremonies, nationalism, sports, free market ideology, and a host of other institutions and practices treated under the rubric "religion."[8] If one tries to limit the definition of religion to belief in God or gods, then certain belief systems that are usually called "religions" are eliminated, such as Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism. If the definition is expanded to include such belief systems, then all sorts of practices, including many that are usually labeled "secular," fall under the definition of religion. Many institutions and ideologies that do not explicitly refer to God or gods function in the same way as those that do. The case for nationalism as a religion, for example, has been made repeatedly from Carlton Hayes' 1960 classic *Nationalism: A Religion* to more recent works by Peter van der Veer, Talal Asad, Carolyn Marvin, and others.[9] Carolyn Marvin argues that "nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States."[10]

At this point I can imagine an objection being raised that goes like this: "So the concept of religion has some fuzzy edges. So does every concept. We might not be able to nail down, once and for all and in all cases, what a 'culture' is, or what qualifies as 'politics,' for example, but nevertheless the concepts remain useful. All may not agree on the periphery of these concepts, but sufficient agreement on the center of such concepts makes them practical and functional. Most people know that 'religion' includes Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the major 'world religions.' Whether or not Buddhism or Confucianism fits is a boundary dispute best left up to scholars who make their living splitting hairs."

This appears to be a common sense response, but it misses the point rather completely. In the first place, when some scholars question whether the category of religion is useful at all, it is more than a boundary dispute. There are some who do not believe there is a center. In the second place, and much more significantly, the problem with the "religion and violence" arguments is not that their working definitions of religion are too fuzzy. The problem is precisely the opposite. Their implicit definitions of religion are *unjustifiably clear* about what does and does not qualify as a religion. Certain belief systems, like Islam, are condemned, while certain others, like nationalism, are arbitrarily ignored.

This becomes most apparent when the authors in question attempt to explain why religion is so prone to violence. Although theories vary, we can sort them into three categories: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, and religion is irrational. Many authors appeal to more than one of

7 Kimball, 15.

8 See Fitzgerald 17.

9 Carlton Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Peter van der Veer, "The Moral State: Religion, Nation, and Empire in Victorian Britain and British India," *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 3-9; Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-state, Secularism," *Nation and Religion*, 178-91; Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

10 Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 768.

these arguments. In the face of evidence that so-called "secular" ideologies and institutions can be just as absolutist, divisive, or irrational, these authors tend to erect an arbitrary barrier between "secular" and "religious" ideologies and institutions, and ignore the former.

Consider the case of the preeminent historian Martin Marty. In a book on public religion, Marty argues that religion has a particular tendency to be divisive and therefore violent.[11] When it comes to defining what "religion" means, however, Marty lists seventeen different definitions of religion, then begs off giving his own definition, since, he says, "[s]cholars will never agree on the definition of religion."[12] Instead Marty 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, and so on. Religion uses rites and ceremonies such as circumcision and baptism, and "[p]olitics also depends on rites and ceremonies," even in avowedly secular nations. Religions require followers to behave in certain ways, and "[p]olitics and governments also demand certain behaviors."[13] Marty offers five defining features of "religion," and shows how "politics" fits all five. He is trying to show how closely intertwined religion and politics are, but he ends up demolishing any theoretical basis for separating the two. Nevertheless, he continues on to warn of the dangers of religion, while ignoring the violent tendencies of supposedly "secular" politics. For example, Marty cites the many cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who were attacked, beaten, tarred, castrated, and imprisoned in the U.S. in the 1940s because they believed that followers of Jesus Christ should not salute a flag. One would think that he would draw the obvious conclusion that zealous nationalism can cause violence. Instead, Marty concludes "it became obvious that religion, which can pose 'us' versus 'them'... carries risks and can be perceived by others as dangerous. Religion can cause all kinds of trouble in the public arena."[14] For Marty, "religion" refers not to the ritual vowing of allegiance to a flag, but only to the Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to do so.

As you can see, we need not rely only on McCutcheon, Smith, King, Fitzgerald and the rest to show us that the religious/secular dichotomy is incoherent. Religion-and-violence theorists inevitably undermine their own distinctions. Take for example sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer's book *Terror in the Mind of God*, perhaps the most widely influential academic book on religion and violence. According to Juergensmeyer, religion exacerbates the tendency to divide people into friends and enemies, good and evil, us and them, by ratcheting divisions up to a cosmic level. "What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless" is that it puts worldly conflicts in a "larger than life" context of "cosmic war."[15] Secular political conflicts – that is, "more rational" conflicts such as those over land[16] – are of a fundamentally different character than those in which the stakes have been raised by religious absolutism to cosmic proportions.[17] Religious violence differs from secular violence in that it is symbolic, absolutist, and unrestrained by historical time.[18]

11 Marty, 25-6.

12 Ibid., 10.

13 Marty, 10-14.

14 Ibid., 24.

15 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146.

16 Ibid., 153.

17 Ibid., 154.

18 Ibid., 217.

However, keeping the notion of cosmic war separate from secular political war is impossible on Juergensmeyer's own terms. Juergensmeyer undermines this distinction in the course of his own analysis. For example, 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.[19]

War 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."[20] The division between mundane secular war and cosmic war vanishes as fast as it was constructed. According to Juergensmeyer, war itself is a "worldview"; indeed, "The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control."[21] "Like the rituals provided by religious traditions, warfare is a participatory drama that exemplifies – and thus explains – the most profound aspects of life."[22] Here war itself is 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."[23] In Juergensmeyer's earlier book *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, he writes "Secular nationalism, like religion, embraces what one scholar calls 'a doctrine of destiny.' One can take this way of looking at secular nationalism a step further and state flatly... that secular nationalism *is* 'a religion.' "[24] These are important concessions. If true, however, they subvert the entire basis of his argument, which is the sharp divide between religious and secular violence.

Other theorists of religion and violence make similar admissions. Kimball, for example, says in passing that "blind religious zealotry is similar to unfettered nationalism,"[25] and indeed nationalism would seem to fit – at times – all five of Kimball's "warning signs" for when religion turns evil: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, establishment of ideal times, ends justifying means, and the declaration of holy war. The last one would seem to preclude secular ideologies, but as Kimball

19 Ibid., 148-9.

20 Ibid., 149.

21 Ibid., 155.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 217.

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

25 Kimball, 38.

himself points out, the United States regularly invokes a "cosmic dualism" in its war on terror.[26] Political theorist Bikhu Parekh similarly undermines his own point in his article on religious violence. According to Parekh:

> Although religion can make a valuable contribution to political life, it can also be a pernicious influence, as liberals rightly highlight. It is often absolutist, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic, and impatient of compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth... It often breeds intolerance of other religions as well as of internal dissent, and has a propensity towards violence.[27]

Parekh does not define religion, but assumes the validity of the religious/secular distinction. Nevertheless, he admits that "several secular ideologies, such as some varieties of Marxism, conservatism, 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."[28] If this is true, where does it leave his searing indictment of the dangers peculiarly inherent to religion? Powerful irrational impulses are popping up all over, including in liberalism itself, forcing the creation of the category "quasi-religious" to try somehow to corral them all back under the heading of "religion." But if liberalism – which is based on the distinction between religion and the secular – is itself a kind of religion, then the religious/secular distinction crumbles into a heap of contradictions.

For some religion-and-violence theorists, the contradictions are resolved by openly expanding the definition of "religion" to include ideologies and practices that are usually called "secular." In his book *Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*, religious studies scholar Richard Wentz blames violence on absolutism. People create absolutes out of fear of their own limitations. Absolutes are projections of a fictional limited self, and people react with violence when others do not accept them. Religion has a peculiar tendency toward absolutism, says Wentz, but he casts a very wide net when considering religion. Wentz believes that religiousness is an inescapable universal human characteristic displayed even by those who reject what is called "organized religion." Faith in technology, secular humanism, consumerism, football fanaticism and a host of other worldviews can be counted as religions too. Wentz is compelled to conclude, rather lamely, "Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of (or as a representative of) religion."[29] Wentz should be commended for his consistency in not trying to erect an artificial division between "religious" and "secular" types of absolutism. The price of consistency, however, is that he evacuates his own argument of explanatory force or usefulness. The word "religion" in the title of his book – *Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religio*n – ends up meaning anything people do that gives their lives order and meaning. A more economical title for his book would have been *Why People Do Bad Things*. The term "religion" is so broad that it serves no useful analytical purpose.

At this point, the religion-and-violence theorist might try to salvage the argument by saying something like this: "surely secular ideologies such as nationalism can get out of hand, but religion has a much greater tendency toward fanaticism because the object of its truth claims is absolute

26 Ibid., 36.

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

28 Ibid., 74.

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

in ways that secular claims are not. The capitalist knows that money is just a human creation, the liberal democrat is modest about what can be known beyond human experience, the nationalist knows that a country is made of land and mortal people, but the religious believer puts faith in a god or gods or at least a transcendent reality that lays claim to absolute validity. It is this absolutism that makes obedience blind and causes the believer to subjugate all means to a transcendent end."

The problem with this argument is that what counts as "absolute" is decided a *priori* and is immune to empirical testing. It is based on theological descriptions of beliefs and not on observation of the believers' behavior. Of course Christian orthodoxy would make the theological claim that God is absolute in a way that nothing else is. The problem 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. The most relevant empirically testable definition of "absolute," then, would 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 is subject to far more absolutist fervor than Christianity. For most American Christians, even public evangelization is considered to be in poor taste, and yet most endorse organized slaughter on behalf of the nation as sometimes necessary and often laudable. In other countries or other traditions the results of this test might be very different. The point is that such empirical testing is of far more usefulness than general theories about the violence of "religion."

We must conclude that there is no coherent way to isolate "religious" ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer "secular" counterparts. So-called "secular" ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as so-called "religion." People kill for all sorts of things. An adequate approach to the problem would be resolutely empirical: under what conditions do certain beliefs and practices – *jihad*, the "invisible hand" of the market, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, the role of the United States as worldwide liberator – turn violent? The point is not simply that "secular" violence should be given equal attention to "religious" violence. The point is that the distinction between "secular" and "religious" violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and should be avoided altogether.

II. WHAT IS THE ARGUMENT FOR?

If the conventional wisdom that religion causes violence is so incoherent, why is it so prevalent? I believe it is because we in the West find it useful. In domestic politics, it serves to silence representatives of certain kinds of faiths in the public sphere. The story is told repeatedly that the liberal state has learned to tame the dangerous divisiveness of contending religious beliefs by reducing them to essentially private affairs. In foreign policy, the conventional wisdom helps reinforce and justify Western attitudes and policies toward the non-Western world, especially Muslims, whose primary point of difference with the West is their stubborn refusal to tame religious passions in the public sphere. "We in the West long ago learned the sobering lessons of religious warfare and have moved toward secularization. The liberal nation-state is essentially a peacemaker. Now we only seek to share the blessings of peace with the Muslim world. Regrettably, because of their stubborn fanaticism, it is sometimes necessary to bomb them into liberal democracy." In other words, the myth of religious violence establishes a reassuring dichotomy between their violence – which is absolutist, divisive, and irrational – and our violence, which is modest, unitive, and rational.

The myth of religious violence marks 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. Mark Juergensmeyer, for example, sets up a "new Cold War" pitting the "resurgence of parochial identities" over against "the secular West."[30] "Like the old Cold War, the confrontation between these new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state is global in its scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies."[31] Although he tries to avoid demonizing "religious nationalists," Juergensmeyer sees them as essentially "anti-modern."[32] The particular ferocity of religious nationalism comes from the "special relationship between religion and violence." The question then becomes "whether religious nationalism can be made compatible with secular nationalism's great virtues: tolerance, respect for human rights, and freedom of expression."[33] Given the war between "reason and religion," however, Juergensmeyer is not optimistic; "there is ultimately no satisfactory compromise on an ideological level between religious and secular nationalism."[34]

Despite its incoherence, the idea that religion is prone to violence thus enforces a binary opposition between "the secular West" and a religious Other who is essentially irrational and violent. The conflict becomes explicable in terms of the essential qualities of the two opponents, not in terms of actual historical encounters. So, for example, Juergensmeyer attempts to explain the animosity of the religious Other toward America.

Why is America the enemy? This question is hard for observers of international politics to answer, and harder still for ordinary Americans to fathom. Many have watched with horror as their compatriots and symbols of their country have been destroyed by people whom they do not know, from cultures they can scarcely identify on a global atlas, and for reasons that do not seem readily apparent.[35]
Nevertheless, Juergensmeyer is able to come up with four reasons "from the frames of reference" of America's enemies. First, America often finds itself cast as a "secondary enemy." "In its role as

30 Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*, 1-2.

31 Ibid., 2.

32 Ibid., 5.

33 Ibid., 8.

34 Ibid., 201.

35 Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 179.

trading partner and political ally, America has a vested interest in shoring up the stability of regimes around the world. This has often put the United States in the unhappy position of being a defender and promoter of secular governments regarded by their religious opponents as primary foes."[36] Juergensmeyer cites as an example the case of Iran, where "America was tarred by its association with the shah."[37] The second reason often given is that America is the main source of "modern culture," which includes cultural products that others regard as immoral. Third, corporations that trade internationally tend to be based in the U.S. Fourth and finally, the fear of globalization has led to a "paranoid vision of American leaders' global designs."[38]

Juergensmeyer acknowledges that "Like all stereotypes, each of these characterizations holds a certain amount of truth."[39] The fall of the Soviet Union has left the United States as the only military superpower, and therefore "an easy target for blame when people have felt that their lives were going askew or were being controlled by forces they could not readily see. Yet to dislike America is one thing; to regard it as a cosmic enemy is quite another."[40] The main problem, according to Juergensmeyer, is "satanization," that is, taking a simple opponent and casting it as a superhuman enemy in a cosmic war. Osama bin Laden, for example, had inflated America into a "mythic monster."[41]

The problem with Juergensmeyer's analysis is not just its sanitized account of colonial history, where America just happens to find itself associated with bad people. The problem is that history is subordinated to an essentialist account of "religion" in which the religious Others cannot seem to deal rationally with world events. *They* employ guilt by association. *They* have paranoid visions of globalization. *They* stereotype, and blame easy targets when their lives are disrupted by forces they do not understand. *They* blow simple oppositions up into cosmic proportions. Understanding Muslim hostility toward America therefore does not require careful scrutiny of America's historical dealings with the Muslim world. Rather, Juergensmeyer turns our attention to the tendency of such "religious" actors to misunderstand such historical events, to blow them out of proportion. Understanding Iranian Shiite militancy does not seem to require careful examination of U.S. support for overthrowing Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 and for the Shah's 26-year reign of terror that was to follow. Instead, Juergensmeyer puzzles over why "religious" actors project such mundane things as torture and coups and oil trading into factors in a cosmic war. Juergensmeyer's analysis is comforting for us in the West because it creates a blind spot regarding our own history of violence. It calls attention to anti-colonial violence, labeled "religious," and calls attention away from colonial violence, labeled "secular."

The argument that religion is prone to violence is a significant component in the construction of an opposition between "the West and the rest," as Samuel Huntington puts it.[42] Huntington's famous thesis about the "clash of civilizations" was first put forward by Bernard Lewis in an article entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage": "It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reactions of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide

36 Ibid., 180.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 181.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 182.

41 Ibid.

42 Samuel Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What?," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (November/December 1993): 192.

expansion of both."[43] As in Juergensmeyer, actual historical issues and policies and events are transcended by a consideration of the irrationality of the Muslim response to the West. The West is a monolithic reality representing modernity, which necessarily includes secularity and rationality, while the Muslim world is an equally monolithic reality which is ancient, that is, lagging behind modernity, because of its essentially religious and irrational character. This opposition of rational and irrational, secular and religious, Western and Muslim is not simply descriptive, but helps to create the opposition that it purports to describe. As Roxanne Euben writes in her study of Islamic fundamentalism, this opposition is part of a larger Enlightenment narrative in which defining reason requires its irrational other.

"[E]mbedded in the Enlightenment's (re-)definition and elevation of reason is the creation and subjection of an irrational counterpart: along with the emergence of reason as both the instrument and essence of human achievement, the irrational came to be defined primarily in opposition to what such thinkers saw as the truths of their own distinctive historical epoch. If they were the voices of modernity, freedom, liberation, happiness, reason, nobility, and even natural passion, the irrational was all that came before: tyranny, servility to dogma, self-abnegation, superstition, and false religion. Thus the irrational came to mean the domination of religion in the historical period that preceded it."[44]

The problem with grafting Islamic fundamentalism into this narrative, according to Euben, is that it is incapable of understanding the appeal of fundamentalism on its own terms. It dismisses rather than explains.[45] It also exacerbates the enmity that it purports to describe. As Emran Qureshi and Michael Sells put it, "Those who proclaim such a clash of civilizations, speaking for the West or for Islam, exhibit the characteristics of fundamentalism: the assumption of a static essence, knowable immediately, of each civilization, the ability to ignore history and tradition, and the desire to lead the ideological battle on behalf of one of the clashing civilizations."[46]

In other words, the opposition of "religious" violence to "secular" peaceableness can lend itself to the justification of violence. In his book *Terror and Liberalism*, *The New Republic* contributing editor Paul Berman's call for a "liberal war of liberation" to be "fought around the world"[47] is based on the contrast between liberalism and what he calls the "mad" ideology of Islamism.[48] Similarly, Andrew Sullivan, in a *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "This *Is* a Religious War," justifies war against radical Islam on epistemological grounds. 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."[49] The problem with the Islamic world seems to be too much public 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."[50]

43 Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *Atlantic Monthly* 266 (September 1990): 60

44 Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34.

45 Ibid., 14-15.

46 "Introduction: Constructing the Muslim Enemy" in Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells, eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 28-9.

47 Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 191.

48 Ibid., 182. Berman takes issue with Huntington's "clash" thesis, saying that only Islamists see the conflict in such epic terms. "They also looked upon every new event around the world as a stage in Judaism's cosmic struggle against Islam. Their ideology was mad. In wars between liberalism and totalitarianism, the totalitarian picture of the war is always mad."

49 Andrew Sullivan, "This is a Religious War," *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001, 44.

50 Ibid., 47.

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."[51] 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."[52]

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 U.S. 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. On the surface, the myth of religious violence establishes a dichotomy between our peaceloving secular reasonableness and their irrational religious fanaticism. Under the surface often 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.

Sam Harris' book about the violence of religion dramatically illustrates this double standard. Harris condemns the irrational religious torture of witches,[53] but provides his own argument for torturing terrorists.[54] Harris' book is charged with the conviction that the secular West cannot reason with Muslims, but must deal with them by force. In a chapter entitled "The Problem with Islam," Harris writes "In our dialogue with the Muslim world, we are confronted by people who hold beliefs for which there is no rational justification and which therefore cannot even be discussed, and yet these are the very beliefs that underlie many of the demands they are likely to make upon us."[55] This is especially a problem if such people gain access to nuclear weapons. "There is little possibility of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons... In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime – as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day – but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe."[56] Muslims then would likely misinterpret this act of "self-defense" as a genocidal crusade, thus plunging the world into nuclear holocaust. "All of this is perfectly insane, of course: I have just described a plausible scenario in which much of the world's population could be annihilated on account of religious ideas that belong on the same shelf with Batman, the philosopher's stone, and unicorns."[57] In other words, if we have to slaughter millions through a nuclear first strike, it will be the fault of the Muslims and their crazy religious beliefs. Before we get to that point, Harris

51 Ibid., 46-7.

52 Ibid., 53.

53 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004),87-92.

54 Ibid., 192-9.

55 Ibid., 128.

56 Ibid., 128-9.

57 Ibid., 129.

continues, we must encourage civil society in Islamic countries, but we cannot trust them to vote it in. "It seems all but certain that some form of benign dictatorship will generally be necessary to bridge the gap. But benignity is the key – and if it cannot emerge from within a state, it must be imposed from without. The means of such imposition are necessarily crude: they amount to economic isolation, military intervention (whether open or covert), or some combination of both. While this may seem an exceedingly arrogant doctrine to espouse, it appears we have no alternatives."[58]

58 Ibid., 151.

III. CONCLUSION

Harris' book is a particularly blunt version of this type of justification for neo-colonial intervention, but he is by no means isolated. His book is enthusiastically endorsed by such academic superstars as Alan Dershowitz, Richard Dawkins, and Australia's own Peter Singer. Indeed, Harris' logic is little different in practice from the Bush Doctrine that America has access to liberal values that are "right and true for every person, in every society," that we must use our power to promote such values "on every continent," and that America will take preemptive military action if necessary to promote such values.[59] Today the U.S. military – in coalition with Australia and other Western nations – is attempting, through the massive use of violence, to liberate Iraq from religious violence. It is an inherently contradictory effort, and its every failure will be attributed in part 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.

59 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, prologue and page 15.