

DOES RELIGION CAUSE VIOLENCE?

*Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence
and Religion in the Modern World*

Edited by SCOTT COWDELL, CHRIS FLEMING,
JOEL HODGE *and* CARLY OSBORN

Does Religion Cause Violence?

Violence, Desire, and the Sacred

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*The editors dedicate this volume
to their friends and collaborators in
the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COVR)*

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Introduction

*Dear God, sorry to disturb you but
I feel that I should be heard loud and clear.
We all need a big reduction in the amount of tears.
And all the people that you made in your image
See them fighting in the street,
'Cause they can't make opinions meet about God.*

—XTC, “Dear God”¹

British New Wave band XTC didn't initially intend for the song “Dear God” to be included on their ninth studio album, *Skylarking*. The song was originally just a B-side for the single “Grass,” but DJs across the United States picked up the song enthusiastically, and so it was included in all subsequent re-releases of the album. The song came to be seen by many as controversial, and so a number of retailers in the US refused to stock the album. Predictably, that controversy is now thought to be the principal reason that the band managed to crack the tough US market.

In some ways, this contains some of the signal elements involved in how much contemporary culture operates. We are sold supposed “heresies” that are said to challenge the status quo and provoke us to our very core—but the fact that such challenging messages often sell as well as Big Macs should give us pause to think about just how challenging they actually are. In a book that received favorable reviews in the mainstream press and spent a considerable time on the New York Times Bestsellers List, E. O. Wilson—inveterate tractarian, sociobiologist, and proponent of the “religion is violent” thesis—predicts that his “challenging” kind of thinking will upset people:

I know that true believers will be scandalized by this line of argument. Their wrath falls on outspoken heretics, who are considered at best troublemakers and at worst traitors to the social order.²

The scandalized kept a very low profile in this instance it seems.

At one level, it's very difficult to understand what people at the time saw as being provocative in XTC's lyrics. (Wilson's book, on the other hand, could only

hope vainly for a controversy that never came.) After all, the idea that violence and religion are joined at the hip is hardly unconventional. We might even call it The Reader's Digest View of Religion. The terms "violence and religion" seem to belong together like "country and western," "law and order," and perhaps "Abbott and Costello." *Everyone knows* that religion causes violence—which is also to say, nobody knows it. That is, this claim isn't so much a *truth* as a *truism*. And as scholars who are interested in questions of religion, culture, and social order, we cannot content ourselves with truisms. Hence the conference that gave rise to this collection.³

To question the links between violence and religion is not equivalent to denying that they exist. Surely one of the most pressing issues of our time is the outbreak of extremist violence and terrorism, much of it done in the name of religion. This volume critically analyzes the link made between religion and violence in contemporary social and cultural theory, particularly with reference to the mimetic theory of René Girard, and proposes that "religion" does not have an exclusive relationship to violence, especially when "religion" is a term used to demarcate a realm that stands apart from culture, ideology, or nationalism. To the contrary, religion and violence—and their links and fissures—must be understood with relation to fundamental anthropological and philosophical categories such as culture, desire, disaster, and rivalry.

Building on this theoretical perspective (explored in Part 1), the volume explores contemporary instances of religious violence in Part 2, particularly by analyzing and applying Girard's thought, as well as by examining the legitimacy and efficacy of modern cultural mechanisms, such as nuclear deterrence and the application of law, to contain violence. In Part 3, the volume turns to a case study of modern religious violence—focusing on the most prominent example of it—in Islamist terrorism and radicalization. This section analyzes Islamic extremism from multiple disciplinary perspectives, examining its various political, economic, religious, military, and technological dimensions. In particular, it focuses on the way in which violence is justified by Islamic extremists, and analyzes how scholars seek to understand the actions and perspectives of such adherents. In part, it explores the motivations and causes for Islamic radicalization and the way Islamic theology is being used for violence by Islamist groups whose connection to Islam is far more contingent than its proponents are apt to claim.

The present volume analyzes religious violence from multiple disciplinary perspectives, with experts from mimetic theory, theology, philosophy, terrorism

studies, and Islamic studies all bringing their expertise to bear on the questions and themes in focus. It brings together the insights of René Girard, arguably the premier theorist of violence in the twentieth century, with the most recent scholarship on religion, culture, and violence. A dialogue is opened utilizing Girard's sophisticated apparatus for understanding violence and the extant multidisciplinary scholarship on religious violence.

—Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, Joel Hodge, and Carly Osborn
Canberra/Sydney/Melbourne/Adelaide, March 2017

Notes

- 1 © Andy Partridge. Sound recording by Geffen Records, Santa Monica, 1986.
- 2 Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (London: Abacus, 1998), 274.
- 3 The conference was co-hosted by the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COVR) and the Australian Girard Seminar, at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia, on July 13–17, 2016. It was entitled “Violence in the Name of Religion ...”. COVR is an international and interdisciplinary scholarly association committed to developing, critiquing and commending the mimetic theory of René Girard (1923–2015). This COVR Conference, the first held in the Southern hemisphere, was organized by the editors.

Part One

Does Religion Cause Violence?

Girard and the Myth of Religious Violence

William T. Cavanaugh

There is something ironic about an address to the Colloquium on Violence and Religion by the author of *The Myth of Religious Violence*.¹ To an outsider it would appear that we are deeply at odds. Your learned society is dedicated to the exploration of the link between religion and violence, while I am dedicated to debunking that link. A few years ago, I was asked to contribute a chapter to *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*. I submitted an essay entitled “Why This Book Is a Very Bad Idea”: the editor changed my title. Some might suppose that I am here to tell you that the Colloquium on Violence and Religion is, likewise, a very bad idea, but that is not the case. In fact, I will argue that we are in fundamental agreement about what I call the “myth of religious violence.” I will explore the work of René Girard, around which the colloquium is organized, and argue that—far from supporting the myth of religious violence—the work of Girard, in fact, undermines it. It does so in two ways. First, there is an important sense in which the author of *Violence and the Sacred* undermines the religious/secular distinction upon which what I refer to as the myth of religious violence depends. Second, Girard critiques the scapegoating of religion by secularists. The myth of religious violence, as I define it, is a myth in the precise sense in which Girard uses the term: a story that encodes a *méconnaissance* or mis-knowing about how violence is actually cured. Rather than religion representing the cure for violence, as Girard would have it, the myth of religious violence proclaims a secular cure for the violence that religion uniquely embodies.

In the first part of this chapter, I will define what I mean by the myth of religious violence and briefly consider some misuses of Girard that support the myth. In the second part, I will give a very brief summary of my argument against the myth, showing how it depends on a transhistorical and transcultural

distinction between the religious and the secular that is untenable. I will then show how Girard, too, undermines that distinction, despite some ambiguities in his use of the term “religion.” Finally, in the fourth part, I will explain more fully how the myth of religious violence functions as a myth in Girard’s sense.

Misuses of Girard

What I have labeled the “myth of religious violence” can be summarized in three steps:

1. There is a transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion that distinguishes it from essentially secular phenomena like reason, or politics and economics; religions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are essentially different from secular phenomena like nationalism, consumerism, and Marxism.
2. Religion has more of a tendency to promote violence than secular phenomena have.
3. Therefore, religion should be marginalized from public power and secularism should be encouraged.

This myth is absolutely central to secular social orders. It is repeated daily by government officials, jurists, journalists, bloggers, and the proverbial common man or woman in the street. The actions of Islamist terrorists are widely held to confirm the myth, as if confirmation were even necessary. The myth is the basis for the marginalization of Christian and Muslim practices at the domestic level, and the basis for an aggressive foreign policy aimed at converting the Muslim world to Western-style secular social order.

Given Girard’s positing of a close bond between religion and violence, it is not surprising that some commentators have taken Girard as providing evidence for the myth. Mark Juergensmeyer, for example, has edited a volume in which various social scientists who write on the peculiar link between religion and violence interact with Girard’s work. Not all buy wholly into Girard’s theory, but most use various Girardian themes to illuminate various case studies of religious violence, trying to determine not if but why religion has a special propensity to encourage violence. According to Juergensmeyer, “Perhaps one of the reasons that Girard is regarded with such interest ... is that he supplies

a straightforward answer to a question that has vexed thoughtful observers of religion for centuries: why violence is so central to religion.”²

What counts as “religion” for that volume? The volume, Juergensmeyer writes, consists of examinations of religious violence caused by Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, and Buddhists, in conversation with Girard.³ Most of the chapters maintain a sharp distinction between religious and secular violence. David Rapoport’s contribution, for example, draws on Girard to give reasons why religion is peculiarly prone to violence, one of which is its ability to command loyalty. He acknowledges that “in the modern world the nation sometimes has surpassed religion as a focus of loyalties,” but instead of recognizing the nation as a font of secular violence, he claims that the fact that academics speak of the nation’s “civic religion” points to the “special significance of religion.”⁴ 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
Who ever accepts it—be blessed: whoever denies it—be cursed.⁵

Instead of concluding that secular violence can be just as virulent as religious violence, or that there is no essential difference between secular and religious, as Stern himself seems to acknowledge, Rapoport uses secular violence as evidence of the violence of religion. As with nationalism, secular terrorism acts like a religion and might even be called a religion, but it is not religious, even though it counts as evidence of religion’s violent tendencies.

Bruce Lawrence’s contribution to the volume is interesting and different because Lawrence contends that Islam is not an independent variable in Muslim societies like Indonesia⁶ and that it is in fact “the nation state which has implemented violence at a new level.”⁷ Juergensmeyer takes Lawrence’s argument to be that in Indonesia violence is political, not religious. “In Lawrence’s view, Girard’s theory, which initially emerged from the analysis of classical literary images, is not so much wrong in its own terms as irrelevant to the modern social situation.”⁸ In Girard’s own response to the volume, however, he—writing with Mark Anspach—commends the way that Lawrence resists demonizing Islam, commenting that, “Generally speaking, the object in focusing on sacrifice is

not to stigmatize the ‘other’ for primitive savagery, but to uncover the continuity among many distinct varieties of violence, including those our own societies practice.”⁹ By “our own societies” Girard means “secular” Western ones. In contrast to Girard’s attempt here to blur the line between religious and secular violence, Juergensmeyer, Rapoport, and others in the volume need that distinction to hold firm so that the indictment against the peculiar tendency of religion to encourage violence can hold.

Why the myth of religious violence is false

There is no question that Christianity, Islam, and other sets of beliefs and practices that are usually labeled “religions” can and do foment violence under certain circumstances. Arguments that Crusaders were not really Christians or ISIS fighters are not really Muslims might faithfully reflect normative Christian or Muslim beliefs, but descriptively they are specious, a form of special pleading.¹⁰ In other words, it is important for Christians to claim that the Crusaders misunderstood Christ and for Muslims to claim that ISIS has misconstrued Islam, but neither group can thereby excuse Christians and Muslims from complicity in violence. I also do not argue that the cause of such violence is really political or economic and not really religious. To argue this way assumes a sharp distinction between, for example, the religious and the political, which is precisely what I call into question. The myth of religious violence does not only say that religion foments violence, but that religion foments more violence than what is not religion, the secular. The myth of religious violence, therefore, depends entirely on the cogency of the religious/secular distinction as a basic way of dividing up human activities in all times and places. It is precisely this distinction that I call into question.

Imagine a line with religions on one side and secular ideologies and practices on the other. On the religious side stand what are usually considered religions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, and so on. On the secular side are politics, economics, the social, and political and economic and social realities like nationalism and capitalism and Marxism and liberalism, as well as antireligious movements like atheism and humanism. All proponents of the myth of religious violence must operate with such a line, though what ends up on each side varies widely. Atheist Christopher Hitchens, for example, recognizes that atheist ideologies like Stalinism and the Communism of North

Korea have caused tens of millions of casualties. He deals with this problem by simply moving the offending ideologies over to the other side of the line. Totalitarianism is essentially religious, he says, because “the object of perfecting the species—which is the very root and source of the totalitarian impulse—is in essence a religious one.”¹¹ Religion is violent because everything violent gets labeled as religion. At the same time, everything good ends up on the other side of the religious/secular divide. Hitchens says of Martin Luther King, Jr., “In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian.” Hitchens bases this remarkable conclusion on the notion that King was nonviolent, while the Bible preaches violence from cover to cover. What is not violent cannot possibly be religious, because religion is *defined* as violent.

As we have already seen in the examples of Juergensmeyer and Rapoport cited above, the myth of religious violence depends on the sharp distinction between religion and the secular, but things keep getting smuggled back and forth across the border between religious and secular, depending on what the author is trying to indict. In my book, I give example after example of this type of smoke and mirrors ploy. Juergensmeyer has made a career out of exploring the peculiar tendency of religion to contribute to violence, but the whole project falls into confusion when he states flatly that “secular nationalism is ‘a religion’”¹² and even that “the secular is a sort of advanced form of religion.”¹³ What becomes of the dividing line between “secular” and “religious”—upon which the whole argument depends—if the secular is a form 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.”¹⁴ Wentz has intuited correctly that people do violence for all sorts of reasons. But 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.”

Most of those who claim that religion promotes violence are substantivists, that is, those who define religions based on the substance of their beliefs in a god or gods or the transcendent or some such. “Religion” in this sense refers to a set of belief systems such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto, Daoism, and a few others. Things like nationalism, capitalism, Marxism, liberalism, and so on are considered secular. Those called “functionalists,” like

Richard Wentz, tend to follow Durkheim and regard whatever functions like a religion—including so-called “secular” things like nationalism or consumerism—as religions. Functionalist approaches are potentially helpful in showing that so-called “secular” ideologies and practices like nationalism can be just as violent as those usually labeled “religions.” Both substantivists and functionalists, however, assume there is a clear line between religious and secular, though they locate the line in different places.

The religious/secular distinction, however, is not transhistorical and transcultural; it is a contingent product of the modern West. What counts as religious and what counts as secular in any given circumstance depends on the political purposes of the one making the distinction. The distinction is commonly used to endorse as rational and peacemaking certain beliefs and practices, labeled secular, and to condemn others, labeled religious, as essentially irrational and prone to violence. The distinction does not simply describe the way the world is, but rather tells us about how the West distributes power.

In the wake of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Talal Asad, and others who are sometimes labeled “constructivists,” there now exist extensive genealogies showing conclusively that the religious/secular distinction is a contingent product of the modern West. Smith could find no concept equivalent to what we call “religion” in ancient Greece, India, Egypt, China, or Rome. The Romans had *religio*, but it referred to all kinds of binding civic duties, some referring to gods and some what we would call “secular.” Augustine says in the *City of God* that the “normal meaning” of *religio* is “an attitude of respect in relations between a man and his neighbor.”¹⁵ The religious/secular distinction in medieval Christendom was the distinction between two kinds of priests, those who belong to an order and those who belong to a diocese. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in 1400, the “religions” of England were the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and so on. There was of course a distinction between civil and ecclesiastical authorities, but the religious/secular distinction as we know it did not exist.

Timothy Fitzgerald has shown that the first use of the religious/secular distinction in the modern sense in the English language appears in the works of William Penn and John Locke in the late seventeenth century. The modern religion/politics distinction is even later.¹⁶ These distinctions were invented as a byproduct of the struggles for power between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in early modern Europe. The creation of the sovereign state meant that the ambit of ecclesiastical authorities would gradually be confined to religion—the

realm of belief—while the civil authorities would take charge of the political. The civil authorities appropriated 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 transferred to the nascent state. The religious/secular and religion/politics distinctions helped eventually to create the expectation that the natural place of the church was the private sphere. The Enlightenment distinction between religion and reason fortified this expectation, and the idea that religion tends to foment violence reinforces this demand that religion be removed from wielding power in the public sphere.

Once the religious/secular distinction was established in Europe, the same distinction was imposed on much of the rest of the world as a byproduct of colonialism. The distinction was entirely foreign to non-Western cultures. In their first encounters with peoples across the globe, European explorers reported home with remarkable consistency that the natives had no religion at all. Once colonies were established, however, Western scholars and bureaucrats began to fit indigenous cultural systems into taxonomies of “world religions.” Confucianists and Hindus protested that Confucianism and Hinduism were not religions. The religious/secular dichotomy was nonetheless imposed on non-Western cultures; as in Europe, the distinction encoded acts of power. There is an abundance of scholarly work done over the last few decades that traces in great detail the colonial uses of the religious/secular distinction. For example, David Chidester’s work on the concept “religion” in southern Africa shows how the British and the Dutch denied religion to the native peoples when they were at war with them, but subsequently discovered Hottentot, Xhosa, and Zulu religions once they had been subjugated.¹⁷ When subdued, attributing religion to the indigenous people was at once a way of depoliticizing their cultures and a way of entering their cultures into a comparative framework in which—compared to the norm of religion, Christianity—their practices would be found wanting. Likewise, Derek Peterson’s study of colonial government among the Gikuyu people of Kenya shows that the term “religion” artificially separated out certain aspects of Gikuyu culture: “naming a certain practice or disposition religious rendered it something other than real.”¹⁸

What I have offered here is the briefest of summaries of what I do over 120 pages in the first two chapters of my book. The point is that there simply is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion with a peculiar propensity for violence. The religious/secular distinction upon which the myth of religious

violence entirely depends is a modern Western creation that encodes certain Western arrangements of power, which are sometimes benign and sometimes not. The point is not only that people are just as likely to kill for secular things like Marxism and capitalism as they are for religious things like Islam and Hinduism. The point is that the religious/secular distinction is itself an act of power that labels certain things “religious,” and therefore essentially nonrational and potentially dangerous, while authorizing as “secular” other belief systems and practices whose violence is accepted as rational and peacemaking.

Girard and the religious/secular dichotomy

The question to which I now turn is “Where does René Girard fit into this argument? Whose side is he on?” I think he’s on my side, though it is not always easy to make the case, because Girard is not always clear on how he uses the term “religion,” and confusion around the term is common among commentators on Girard. It is worthy of note that the “Glossary of Key Girardian Terms” in the edited volume *René Girard and Sacrifice in Life, Love, and Literature* has no entry for the term “religion,” despite the centrality of the concept for Girard.¹⁹

If I were to write such an entry, I would need to acknowledge that Girard himself appears to use the term in several different ways. Girard sometimes speaks like a substantivist, as in his interview with Rebecca Adams when he seems to include Christianity as one of today’s religions,²⁰ or when in *Battling to the End* he acknowledges the archaism in Communism but writes “Leninism had some of these features, but what it lacked was religion.”²¹ Here there seems to be a sharp distinction between religion and Leninism, an atheistic ideology that is presumably secular, or nonreligious.

The predominant way in which Girard uses the term “religion,” however, is not to denote some set of religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.—that can be compared and contrasted with secular social arrangements. For Girard, “religion” most commonly denotes the myths and practices by which violence is legitimated and controlled in any social order. Girard writes, “Any phenomenon associated with the acts of remembering, commemorating, and perpetuating a unanimity that springs from the murder of a surrogate victim can be termed ‘religious.’”²² Religion, in this sense, is not a *sui generis* phenomenon that can be separated out from culture, reason, politics, economics, or society. *The Girard Reader* defines religion as simply “Indistinguishable from culture in