The Irony of the Secular
Violent Communication at the Limits of Tolerance

Ryan T. O'Leary

Ryan T. O'Leary is a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Iowa. He received his B.A. from the University of Wisconsin, his M.A. from Syracuse University, and came to the University of Iowa in 2006. His work centers on philosophical theology, religion and its modern critics, and deep green theology. Deeply connected to these interests are questions concerning the role of religion in an increasingly globalized American society.

> What makes so much contemporary debate pointless is that neither side realizes
> that secularity is a religious phenomenon, which grows directly out of the
> Judeo-Christian tradition as it develops in Protestantism. … Religion,
> moreover, is often most influential where it is least obvious.[1] --Mark C.
> Taylor, *After God*

An essay concerning the relationship of the religious, the secular, and conflict will need to be careful in its definitions. The definitions of "religion" and "secularism," however, are inherently fluid and problematic, making any discussion of their relationship doubly so. Indeed, contemporary thought is beginning to question the distinction between the religious and secular spheres altogether. This essay joins that conversation, and in particular suggests that the force of religiously motivated violent dissent reveals that the division between sacred and secular is porous in some very important ways. To make this argument, however, we must first clarify the problem of definition in general and isolate some key voices that have shaped, and continue to shape, the conversation.

To begin, then, let us look to the most basic and commonly understood meanings of the terms. In the English dictionary by Encarta, we find the following definitions:

- **religion (noun):** 1. beliefs and worship: people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of God, a god, or gods … 2. system: an institutionalized or personal system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine 3.

personal beliefs or values …

- **secularism (noun):** 1. exclusion of religion from public affairs: the belief that religion and religious bodies should have no part in political or civic affairs or in running public institutions, especially schools. 2. rejection of religion: the rejection of religion or its exclusion from a philosophical or moral system.[2]

Dictionary definitions do not, of course, give the final word on such difficult concepts. Still, these definitions reflect what is commonly meant by these terms in popular discourse as well as more sophisticated political discussions. Specifically, and most importantly for our purposes, religion is widely held to be a matter of belief, to have something to do with the supernatural or otherworldly, to be generally institutionalized, and to be a primarily personal affair. Just so, secularism is generally conceived of at least as the exclusion of religious institutions from the business of government.

Perhaps the most influential thinker to problematize the common understanding of religion is Jonathan Z. Smith. Responding to an academic discussion of religion in the mid-twentieth century that widely held "religion" as such to be a universal human category—whether it involved an essential human capacity to be nurtured or an illusory projection to be overcome—Smith famously declared that religion was an entirely constructed category. In fact, he wrote, "There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization."[3] The contemporary understanding of "religion," according to Smith, has a particularly Western history, traceable to roots in the sixteenth century, and colored in its application by colonialism. "Religion," he writes, "is not a native category. It is not a first-person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside."[4] Though many of us westerners today might categorize ourselves as religious (since we have inherited an uncritical use of the term, and since the term, being of Western origin, does not seem foreign to us), even we would primarily self-characterize as "Jewish," "Christian," or "Pagan." Smith's point comes home much more clearly, however, when we consider the history of colonialism, during which wide ranges of cultural practices, including ritual, epic stories, and social organization, were analytically and imaginatively compared and generalized in terms of a foreign concept.

The twentieth century philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, on the other hand, sought what was essential to religion. "Being religious means asking passionately the question of

the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers," he wrote. "Such an idea of religion makes religion universally human, but it certainly differs from what is usually called religion. It does not describe religion as the belief in the existence of gods or one God, and as a set of activities and institutions for the sake of relating one's self to those beings in thought, devotion and obedience. No one can deny that the religions which have appeared in history are religions in this sense."[5] This distinction is useful to us for, while it is not definitive, it does point to a distinction between the "religious" and what we usually think of as religion. Clearly, what Tillich means by "religions which have appeared in history" bears a marked resemblance the dictionary's definition. The fact that Tillich saw the truth of religion as an existential orientation rather than a set of beliefs and behavioral norms is important but not crucial to this project. What is crucial is that the very idea of religion works on multiple levels: it is a constructed category, it is a set of beliefs and norms, and it is the answer to pressing questions concerning the nature and meaning of human existence, often but not exclusively articulated with reference to the supernatural. Tillich widens the term and reveals an ambivalence in our ideas about religion.

Turning then to secularism, is it worthwhile to look to two scholars currently leading the conversation. The Catholic scholar and philosopher Charles Taylor has recently analyzed secularism in terms of a movement "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God" to one in which this belief is simply "one human possibility among others."[6] For Taylor, secularism is not simply a public space that has allegedly been "emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality," but involves "the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual, or religious experience and search takes place."[7] Still, I would argue that this broader understanding of the secular depends upon the existence of the "religiously neutral" public sphere as its necessary condition. Indeed, the thrust of my analysis shows precisely that this public sphere is anything but "emptied of God, or any reference to ultimate reality."

Like Taylor, though pointing more directly to the terms of my analysis, anthropologist Talal Asad holds that secularism is not just the requirement that religious and secular institutions be separated in government. Rather, secularism "presupposes new concepts of 'religion,' 'ethics,' and 'politics,' and new imperatives associated with them."[8] Secularism, by this understanding, is not simply a political mechanism "that allows religious diversity to flourish ... It can itself be a carrier of harsh exclusions. And it secrets a new definition of

religion that conceals some of its most problematic practices from itself."[9] This point will be a significant implication of my own analysis. Still, this tells us only what Asad thinks secularism is not. What secularism *is*, Asad argues, is a form of "transcendent mediation." In an effort to prevent violent religious conflict, "the modern nation state has to make citizenship the primary principle of identity"—citizenship becomes an identity marker that "must transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion," in a primary "unifying experience." Asad thus concludes, "In an important sense, this transcendent mediation *is* secularism."[10]

Finally, it is necessary to note the way Asad connects secularism and the relationship of power and exclusion: "When it is proposed that religion can play a positive role in modern society, it is not intended to apply to any religion whatever, but only to those religions that are able and willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of rational debate with opponents who are to be persuaded rather than coerced." He continues, "the public sphere is *necessarily* (not just contingently) articulated by power."[11]

The Religious Ideology of Secularism

With Smith, Tillich, Taylor, and Asad in mind, we can proceed to the twofold task of my analysis. First, this essay seeks to problematize the secular-religious dichotomy on its own terms, by using the terms of the dichotomy as an analytic tool to complicate the distinction itself. This analytical strategy is Nietzschean in nature: it depends upon the deployment of a "self-consuming" concept incorporating a binary opposition between interdependent yet contrasting categories. The opposition between "religion" and "the secular" is self-consuming in two ways: first, any attempt to rid oneself of the inherently problematic distinction requires as a condition of its intelligibility the very categories it seeks to overturn; second, the analysis that makes use of these mutually dependent categories at once shows how they define each other and how each subsumes the other.[12] This is because the distinction between secular and religious spheres can be turned back upon itself to reveal the implicitly religious claims and demands made by secularism as well as the religious nature and origin of the very idea of a secular sphere. Thus, problematizing the unreflective use of these terms in public discourse does not necessitate that we must abandon their use, but that we must resist their reification, making fluidity and porosity a typical feature of the dichotomy.

Second, this essay seeks to show that violent resistance to the a political ideology that posits distinct secular and religious spheres pushes that same ideology to its own limits and forces the ideology to transgress those limits. Religiously motivated violence—whether in the form of the suicide bomber (globally) or the abortion clinic bomber (domestically), for example —operates precisely as a mode of non-dialogical communication with two effects. On the one hand, it reveals the limits of the "religious neutrality" of the secular, public sphere against which it acts by bringing the specifically religious demands of the political ideology of the state, which requires a secular sphere, into focus. On the other hand, it does in fact open a space for dialogue, not with the violent resister but within the ideology itself.

My thesis is that religiously motivated violent resistance to a political ideology of secularism should be understood neither in terms of a sharp secular-religious distinction nor as a conflict between a system of religious beliefs and a political system. Rather, we should consider it a conflict between two fundamentally opposed religious worldviews. This thesis bears a number of important implications. First, it entails a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary global situation, and especially American engagement with the Islamic world. (It should be noted that the political ideology I am analyzing, though European in origin and broadly Western in practice, is most emphatically and perhaps most dangerously manifested in the United States.) Second, given an understanding of this conflict in terms of a fundamentally religious conflict, we must ask about the degree to which the rule of law— which is foundational to American political theory—necessarily entails the implementation of violence. Third, and perhaps most importantly, such an understanding requires that those who work for peace be self-aware and explicit concerning their own religious commitments and presuppositions and that they work to create a space for a nuanced and honest conversation concerning religion on both the national and international stages.

The Secular and Religious Spheres

This analysis works on all of the levels on which secularism and religion were discussed above, J. Z. Smith points out that secular, political activities help construct the very notion of religion. Talal Asad shows that the secular demands a form of citizenship transcending religious identity. Charles Taylor allows for the possibility of not being religious in the particular way secularism defines religion. Paul Tillich articulates an inherent ambivalence in the very term "religion," of which my analysis will make frequent use. More

fundamentally and productively, however, the terms religion and secularism are juxtaposed on the most basic and common level of understanding, according to which secularism is simply the political requirement that religious institutions be excluded from civil government. The analysis begins at this level for two reasons. First, it is the more common and basic understanding upon which the West divides society into public and private spheres. Second, it is this understanding and construction that all four of those figures are critiquing. We should also note that it is not the case that secularism, understood in this way, demands that religious institutions are to have no influence on government. Very few would deny that churches and the like regularly and legally espouse religious principles that are put into political action through accepted channels. What is decisive to my analysis is the fact that this very secularism determines the "accepted channels" thorough which religious engagement can run.

Now, the distinction between religion and the secular begins in a dichotomy, an implicit dualism that assumes, reifies, and ultimately obscures, and that is manifested in a whole cluster of related presuppositions. Among the most fundamental assumptions manifest in this assumed polarity is the idea that it is possible to create (or, perhaps, simply to isolate) a sphere of human experience, which, if not entirely devoid of religion, at least in certain important ways transcends religion in its particular manifestations. This sphere then creates its opposite, "religion" as such, which is understood as a primarily private concern. In other words, debates concerning the correct balance of church and state, for example, hide a dualism that makes each element of its dependant divisions correspond to one of two categories. These categories tend to remain hidden, for the very way of life they allow is so utterly dependent upon the distinctions they engender. Furthermore, each of the dependant set of categories reiterates the distinction even as they reciprocally support it.

This polarity has a specifically Western and largely Christian history. As the philosopher of religion Mark C. Taylor has pointed out, Western religious thought "rests upon a polar, or more precisely, a dyadic foundation … [that is] repeatedly inscribed in binary terms."[13] The secular-religious dichotomy is a child of that repeating dyadic foundation, a particular and unique result of the general trajectory of Western thought. The most basic dualism—the one that becomes reinscribed in all the rest—is the distinction between God and the world. In Platonic language a similar distinction is expressed in terms of being and becoming, rational and material, eternal and temporal etc., terms of which Christian

theology makes extensive use. That basic polarity is repeated in concepts that are inseparable from the distinction between religion and the secular.

For example, a key division along these lines is the separation between eternity and time, a difference that gives birth to the very term "secular" in pre-modern Catholic thought. "Secular," Charles Taylor informs us, "comes from 'saeculum,' a century or age. When it began to be used as one term in an opposition, like secular/regular clergy … the original meaning is being drawn on in a very specific way. People who are embedded in the saeculum are embedded in ordinary time; they are living the life of ordinary time, as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity."[14] Similarly, the polarity of permanence and change—the markers of the difference between eternity and time—is ingredient in the idea of inalienable rights so central to the liberal democratic project: these rights are our universal, God-given inheritance. The forms of government, which are meant to keep and protect them, can and do change, but the very fact that these rights are eternal justifies revolution when temporal governance no longer shelters them. Just so, the sacred and the profane—concepts that articulate the difference between God, eternity, and permanence on the one hand and the world, temporality, and change on the other—is employed to keep religion out of the hands of government.

No less a figure than James Madison invokes this understanding: "'The equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his Religion according to the dictates of conscience' is held by the same tenure with all our other rights. If we recur to its origin, it is equally the gift of nature . . . they are bound to leave this particular right untouched and sacred."[15] Civil government, which is entirely involved with this temporal and profane world, must protect but never interfere with that which is sacred. It is important to notice, though, exactly what Madison is calling sacred: the right to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience. Here we see a number of essential ideas: religion is fundamentally a matter of individual rights and the individual's conscience, that is, a primarily internal, private matter. Moreover, this understanding of religion is held to be natural, which is to say universal and is to be protected by the legislature as integral to citizenship, that transcendent mediator to which all else, including religion, is subordinate. The polarities increase, becoming more and more obviously constituent of the distinction between the secular and religious spheres. The human being is spirit and body; the government has jurisdiction over the body, but the spirit answers to God. The government has jurisdiction over our public life

and outward behavior, but the essential feature of our religious life is its internal, private character. The state, again, regulates our social and civic lives, but it is up to the church to guide us in our individual walk with God.

Thus the dualism expressed in the division of the secular and religious spheres is only one of a number of reinscriptions of that inherently religious dyad. On the one hand, the basic binary makes specific reference to the supernatural. As in the dictionary definition of religion, the dyadic foundation clearly involves "beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of God." As for the secular half of the dyad, the political ideology manifested in secularism represents an institutionalized "system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine."[16] On the other hand, though, we cannot forget that the "beliefs and practices" institutionalized in this way work to answer the "question of the meaning of our existence."[17] Thus the repeatedly inscribed binary is religious on both the surface and the depth levels, and fully partakes of the existential ambivalence Tillich exhibits. The very division of human experience into two mutually exclusive and mutually dependant realms, one of which is supposed to be protected from the danger of religious tyranny and one of which is supposed to be kept free of the corruption of politics, is itself a religious response to religious questions. These are questions concerning the nature of humanity, our place in the cosmos, and the proper organization of society. And these questions are answered in terms that continuously repeat a basic division between God and the world: the human being is both spirit and body, ultimately responsible to God even for his or her most private thoughts and beliefs; our place in the cosmos is determined by that relationship, as is our place in society, and our relations to each other need to be governed by keeping each side of the polarity in the proper balance.

The distinction between religion and the secular is a Western answer to religious questions with a Christian history, broadly conceived; thus we need to understand both the deism of many of the American founders as well as contemporary atheism as particular interpretations of fundamentally Christian tropes. Since this is the case, the political and ideological forms in which that answer manifests would be expected to incorporate more observably Christian understandings, and indeed it does; the liberal democratic ideology makes a number of closely related assumptions, which, though they may not be unique or limited to Christian thought, certainly are not shared universally. Among the most important of these assumptions is the basic idea that in his or her innermost essence, a human being is

an embodied soul. In philosophical (for instance, Cartesian) terms, this is the essentially free, unencumbered self, the transcendental "I" who judges representations and weighs conflicting motivations. And remember, the locus of the religious commitment is the individual conscience, reason, and belief. Again, no less a figure than Thomas Jefferson invokes this understanding when he says, "Almighty God hath created the mind free. … All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do."[18] The important point is not simply that the mind is free; the important point is that the mind is free because God created it free, and therefore religion is a matter of personal, private conviction. Moreover, the idea that religion is a matter of personal conviction and needs to be protected as a sacred right stems directly from the Christian (and primarily Protestant) emphasis on orthodox belief as the condition for salvation. Although belief has been emphasized throughout Christian thought—orthodoxy was a central concern as early as the Council of Nicaea in the Fourth Century—the Protestant rejection of Church hierarchy and the theology of merit made faith the sole means of salvation, the means by which the Christian accepts God's free gift of grace.

The problematic nature of the religious claims this makes may not be immediately obvious. In fact, this ideology is designed specifically to protect religious pluralism. Its constituent principles are not common to all ways of being religious, however. In the view of many Sunni Muslims, for instance, "The success of civilizations and cultures is directly related to the extent of their practice of the righteous way of life revealed in the teaching and commandments of God, and set forth in the monotheistic religions which are confirmed by *Islam*." To this way of thinking, religion "encompasses the whole of human life, individual as well as social. Thus all so-called secular activities become acts of worship."[19] Religious obligations are inseparable from social and civic organization and administration. Thus it is the Protestant view of justification by grace, central to relegating religion to the status of a private affair, that marks the fateful difference between these worldviews. A Sunni Muslim who adheres to this view would tend to see the world according to the foundational binary characteristic of Christian thought but would hold that salvation is earned in this lifetime, that it is dependent upon our actions, both individual and communal. The binary, in other words, is interpreted differently, and this is at the heart of what makes the current global

conflict a struggle between two related but divergent religious worldviews.

The Historical Roots of the Secular-Religious Distinction

Given its historical roots, it is hardly surprising that the political ideology that gives rise to the division of secular and religious spheres re-instantiates and institutionalizes specifically Christian ideas, and does so with a broadly Protestant tint. As Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, this understanding of religion can be traced to the sixteenth century, particularly to events surrounding and resulting from the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther's theology, formulated as a response to what he considered Church corruption and theological failings, stressed the individual's relation to God and the equality of all believers over the individual's subjugation to mediation and control of religious hierarchy. The resulting split between Catholic and Protestant communities led to more than one hundred years of violence and bloodshed, culminating in the Thirty Years War, which ended in 1648.

These events cast doubt upon all claims of religious authority and upon the idea that the world (or at least Europe) could be united in a common Christendom. At the same time, and throughout the next two centuries, expanded global trade, increasing literacy, and new scholarship allowed an unprecedented awareness of religious and cultural differences, an improved understanding of the sacred and philosophical texts of other civilizations, and incredible scientific progress. All that led to further doubt of received opinion, including the idea of divine revelation. In this context a new philosophical project arose, linked closely to fundamental questions of political theory and the basis of social organization. This Western project of modernity decoupled truth and certainty from religious authority and revelation and linked it to the free and rigorous exercise of reason and conscience. Individuals became the primary units of society, bound together in a social contract, and religion was relegated to the status of a private and voluntary affair.

This is not to say that Christian understandings of human nature were to disappear—these ideas are not so easy to undo, and many old assumptions remained, albeit in new garb. The ways that the religious assumptions we have identified came to form the basis of modern liberal democracy can be understood as the result of a Christian society coming to terms with a conflict over the power, role, and status of Christianity itself. It therefore stands to reason that the answers would make use of common Christian themes. Three and one half centuries into the project, however, these assumptions have largely come decoupled from

their Christian source. This is not to say that they are no longer Christian in origin and substance—rather, they are no longer recognized as functionally and essentially religious ideas.

Furthermore, not only are these assumptions unquestioned, they are in many ways unquestionable given the assumption of the model. Indeed, it is part of the definition of a theoretical system that the underlying assumptions making the system possible cannot be questioned from within the system. So long as society as a whole assumes the primacy and fundamental rightness of the system, these assumptions will tend to remain unrecognized, unquestioned, and unchallenged. As long as the surface-level assumptions (i.e., that religion is a private, voluntary affair, and that the individual is the primary unit of society) remain unchallenged, the dyadic foundation of the ideology will necessarily remain hidden. This is because the very way of life made possible by these assumptions is so utterly dependent upon them.

At the same time, however, the increasing encroachment of liberal, capitalistic politics upon the global range of possible religious expressions reveals the impossibility of a strict divide between secular and religious spheres— that is, the impossibility of a strict divide is illustrated by the increasing (and increasingly violent) resistance to the very ideology that separates the religious and the secular, and to the way of life dependant thereupon. The fact that the religious nature and demands of "secular," liberal democracy remain hidden is a central factor contributing to the widespread confusion on the part of Americans in the face of this resistance. The irony of the situation is that the political ideology in question was developed directly as a response to religious violence and is intended to minimize and even end violent religious conflict, yet it is precisely the ever-widening influence of this ideology, primarily through economic expansion, that is giving rise to increasingly violent resistance.

Religiously Motivated Violent Resistance

To fully appreciate this irony and its implications, we need to remember that the division between religion and the secular is not merely an abstract matter of theology and metaphysics. Specifically, the political model that makes the secular-religious distinction fundamental makes claims upon religious observance by delineating both the "right" way to

practice religion and the "correct" organization of society—and it enforces those claims through rule of law and systemic coercion. I have noted that contemporary liberal politics functions such that the religious assumptions upon which it is based tend to remain hidden. One of these assumptions, closely connected to all the rest, is the idea that public stability does not require the surrender of belief, nor does private religious interest preclude participation in the public sphere. That is, modern Western politics supposes that the primary purpose of government is to protect the secular interests of individuals, including such abstract interests as "liberty." Individuals (might) have an interest in spiritual matters, and thus their right to voluntarily join religious societies is to be protected by civil authority. Other individuals might not, and it is the function of the secular, religiously neutral, public sphere to allow for both positions. Yet this model of society is increasing its influence both geographically and culturally, and it is meeting increasing resistance from those who emphatically deny that public stability and the common good are independent of a common religious observance. Consequently, these assumptions are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Secularism holds that public stability does not necessarily entail the surrender of belief and that private religious interest does not necessarily rule out public participation— but this works only insofar as one accepts the idea that the secular and the religions can and should be separated in the first place.

Again, we are faced with irony. Contemporary violent religious dissent is regularly aimed at expressly secular targets. Therefore, it is clear that many people who engage in religiously motivated violent resistance feel deeply that the secular realm is encroaching upon particular forms of religious expression by delineating the acceptable range of religious observance according to a more fundamental ideological prejudice. For example, in the attacks of 9/11, the targets were secular, but the principles upon which "world trade" (not to mention American imperialism) are erected are bolstered by an Enlightenment liberalism that goes hand-in-hand with capitalism, and which entails its own religious presuppositions. Thus, the attackers of 9/11 were not explicitly making a statement about religion and secularity, but rather about political, military, and economic colonialism. On the other hand, this is precisely the point: such resistance is inherently both political and religious, and hence it reveals that there is no strict divide between the religious claims of secularism and the economic colonialism that exports them. Furthermore, by making this clear, such violence reveals directly what we have discussed analytically—the religious and secular spheres are separate neither inherently and conceptually nor universally and practically.

Just so, domestically, the American abortion clinic bomber makes much the same point. Again, abortion clinics are not explicitly religious targets—as medical establishments and businesses they are expressly secular. Yet the abortion clinic bomber, like the suicide bomber, is motivated in his violence by a particular understanding of religion. Now, the point that the Islamist militants who perpetrated the attacks on the World Trade Center attacked an economic target is quite revealing. On the one hand, the attacks were motivated by the fact that the global expansion of American capitalism directly causes social and economic hardship in the Middle East as well as in many other parts of the world. On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that global capitalism also exports a particular understanding of social organization, an understanding that is seen as inseparable from the economic violence. This, I believe, is at the heart of the fact that these attacks targeted an explicitly secular, economic target, and that the attacks were at the same time understood by the perpetrators as a religious act. In much the same way, the American abortion clinic bomber is reacting to the encroachment of a culture that he sees as alien and threatening, and he understands his actions as religious acts.

We noted earlier that Talal Asad sees secularism in terms of "transcendent mediation," in which religious difference (and, to a very real degree, religious identity) is subsumed into and made subordinate to the formulation of identity characterized by "citizenship." Further, this is necessary to the political, social, and cultural systems that depend upon secularism as a way of mediating and incorporating religious dissent such that it is not expressed violently.[20]However, when a person, like the abortion clinic bomber, becomes convinced that the secular, neutral sphere is actually a mechanism for disenfranchising him or her precisely on the basis of their religious commitments, citizenship will often fail to transcend and mediate religious dissent. The secular sphere, which is supposed to provide a neutral space for public participation, is instead felt more immediately in its religious demands, and these demands can become increasingly unacceptable. When religiously motivated resistance to secularism finds expression in violence that targets secular institutions and functionaries, these acts are seen by the perpetrator as martyrdom, as religious sacrifice, as divinely mandated and justified … as doing God's work.

Certainly, suicide bombers and abortion clinic bombers do not represent Christians or Muslims in general. Most find nonviolent ways to practice their religions, obey their scriptures, and come to terms with the imperfections of political life. In short, most people

find ways to live in a secular society and still be religious. I am not suggesting that religion is inherently or necessarily incompatible with secularism and the political ideology that depends upon it. Instead, I am pointing to a particular function of extreme transgressions of the religious demands made by the secular sphere.

In particular it is the function of such severe instances of religious dissent to make the religious assumptions and demands of secularism explicitly, emphatically visible in a way that is very difficult to ignore. Religiously motivated violent resistance today is often a direct response to the broadening encroachment of the free-market-competition model of society and to the increasing pluralism and tolerance of our culture over ever-widening segments of the world. It is precisely the nature of the target that renders the religious nature of secularism so explicit. The fact that the 9/11 attack was a response to an advancing free-market-competition model of society cannot be separated from the fact that it is precisely the "religiously neutral," secular sphere that makes the free market possible. Just so, the fact that religious violence in the form of abortion clinic bombings is a response to the perception that secular society denies the validity of certain religious positions shows that the secular sphere is seen as intentionally disenfranchising those who hold a particular religious view—a worldview that tends to see the collapse of American society as inseparable from America's abandoning of Christian values. Religious identity refuses to bow to the compromises of citizenship, emphatically disrupting the transcendent mediation of secularism.

This line of thought points not only to the limits of the secular-religious distinction, but also to the limits of religious tolerance—and religious tolerance is the axis upon which secularism turns. On the one hand, the division of the secular and religious realms is intended to create a space of religious tolerance for the purpose of minimizing religious violence. On the other hand, the success of secularism depends upon the very religious tolerance that it requires. It is for just this reason that the secular sphere must be understood by citizens as "religiously neutral." Yet when one believes that one's religion not only allows but in fact demands violence, this is precisely what religious tolerance cannot tolerate; the religiously neutral secular sphere must respond with its own violence. It is therefore revealed as anything but religiously neutral by the very extremity with which it is disrupted. In transgressing the limits that the religiously neutral sphere demands, religiously motivated violence forces the secular sphere to transgress its neutrality and become

exclusivist.

Thus, religiously motivated violence functions as a mode of non-dialogical communication: it communicates to us an awareness of the religious demands of secularism by showing us their self-transgression in a way that cannot be ignored. Since this communication is intentionally and categorically non-dialogical, religiously motivated violence cuts off the possibility of conversation with the transgressor; yet discourse is the only religious conflict the secular sphere allows. The response to religious violence can take the form of discourse only insofar as the response is forced into conversation with the ideology itself, at its own limits. The neutral sphere is being forced to converse precisely not with the violent resister qua conversational other but with its own transgression of its own limits. The violent resister communicates as an interruption, emphatically disrupting the polite conversation of the "neutral sphere."

Petty Politics and Global Conflict

"The time for petty politics is over," Friedrich Nietzsche prophetically wrote. "The very next century will bring the fight for the dominion of the earth—the compulsion to large-scale politics."[21] Richard Falk, the Princeton scholar of international law, reminds us of this passage and points out that, although the twentieth century may have brought the compulsion to global dominion, the battles will be fought in the twenty-first century:

> No matter how these issues are understood, it seems clear that the Middle East has become for the twenty-first century what Europe was in the twentieth century, that is, the pivot of geopolitical struggle for world domination. … It is here in the Middle East that the American semi-secular crusade on behalf of "freedom" has turned the cities of Iraq into wastelands of death and devastation. … It is here that the control of energy reserves and prices is likely to determine the course of the world economy for at least the next twenty years. … It is here that the viability of Washington's grand strategy of global domination is being tested by the strength of nationalist and cultural/religious resistance. … And it is here that the American public has been subjected to a propaganda onslaught to the effect that the sole purpose of US military presence in the Middle East is to defeat "terrorism," which itself is explicitly linked to Islamic extremism, as epitomized by the al-Qaeda attacks on the

World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001.[22]

America today is deeply involved in a global conflict for word domination most decisively and destructively joined in the Middle East. Those who would see the American enterprise of globalization moved in a more beneficent direction need to be aware of the religious foundation and structure of the conflict in order to effectively and intelligently affect American popular and political discourse in this crucial time.

Though he is no longer leading the global "War on Terror," President Bush clearly articulated an attitude that many on the right share, characterized by an inability to comprehend the motivation behind Islamist resistance to American military and economic encroachment. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this was not simply due to willful stubbornness and a lack of intelligence. President Bush represented a widespread confusion on the part of the American people; his repeated use of the term "crusade" to describe the American "war on terrorism" is a case in point. "For George W. Bush, crusade was an offhand reference," James Carroll recalled in The Nation. "But all the more powerfully for that, it was an accidental probing of unintended but nevertheless real meaning."[23] The historian John Ellis van Courtland Moon provides another account: President Bush "depicted this conflict in absolute terms: a crusade fought in the name of freedom, which is 'the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in the world.'"[24] Unmistakable echoes of the language of Madison and Jefferson: freedom is God's gift to each and every individual, a sacred inheritance, the protection of which justifies even war. This, then, gives us some insight into the right's most common explanation for terrorist resistance: Islamist militants attacked the Twin Towers and are fighting us across the Middle East because they hate our freedom. That explanation, when seriously defended, betrays a deep-seated confusion. It is simply incomprehensible to many of us that someone would resist living in a secularist, capitalist, democratic system to the point of terrorism and death. After all, we stand for individual rights and freedom, and this style of freedom is God's gift to all of us.

People on the atheist left, for their part, are not free of their own triviality. While the right tends to deploy explicitly religious language to support the ideology of secular liberalism, the left seems ignorant of the fundamentally religious nature of secularism. Sam Harris, for example, appeals to a coarse understanding by identifying secularists simply as people "who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy."[25] Richard Dawkins, though he

appeals to secularism religiously, never bothers to stipulate his definition of the secular—but it seems that he, too, accepts a common, surface-level understanding of secularism when he describes the American founders as "secularists who believed in keeping religion out of politics," and who believed that "the religious opinions of a President, or lack of them, were entirely his own business."[26] Yet the religious opinions of a president do not simply involve his explicit theological views on the existence or non-existence of a divine being, nor simply his choice of Christian denomination (or deism, or Christian atheism …). Many of the most important assumptions founding liberal ideology are inextricably bound up with religious concerns and commitments at the most basic level.

Therefore, there is a conversation taking place within the ideology at its own limits, but both extremes in the argument are flawed by limited views of the nature of secularism. The right sees liberty and freedom as both religious and secular commitments without taking account of the deeper dynamics of interdependence between the two, and it is therefore unable to properly identify the religious roots of extreme Islamist resistance as a response to the religious roots of our own political ideology. An opposite extreme takes for granted the idea that a radical separation of a religious sphere of human personal and social life is possible—so much so that it cannot properly understand its own religious pre-commitments precisely because it refuses to see them as religious commitments. Our failure to recognize the deeply religious nature of the current global conflict forces the dialogue, opened by religiously motivated violent resistance, to remain stuck in that opening without carrying it forward. This failure is not simply a matter of abstraction—the religious opinions of a president are anything but "entirely his own business," for he acts in the name of a political ideology that powerfully and often violently institutionalizes the most fundamental religious commitments of the West.

American involvement in the Middle East—as a theater in America's struggle for global dominance—is deeply religious in character, and it is meeting resistance expressed in the terms of a rival understanding of the nature of humanity, religious exercise, and society. It is for just this reason that Talal Asad can claim that when the state "attempts to forcibly establish and defend 'core basic principles,' when its courts impose a particular distinction between 'core principles' and 'background justifications' … [it] "always works through violence"[27] Thus, American global involvement necessarily does and will include a military aspect, insofar as the establishment of core principles always involves mechanisms

of violence, and insofar as the particular form of resistance, so specific to the contemporary struggle, forces that response by design. Yet violence comes in many forms, and the structural violence whereby institutions and organizations outside of a people's control systematically deprive them of their economic well being and social liberty can be just as devastating as overt military destructiveness. To begin to formulate a vision of American involvement that minimizes violence, we must think seriously at the limits of our own respective ideologies. American international involvement will require us to negotiate a complex network of competing identity markers and religious obligations, and it will require us to negotiate them specifically through the balanced deployment of mechanisms of violence.

We need to be aware of the religious foundation and structure of the conflict in order to effectively and intelligently affect American popular and political discourse and policy-making in this crucial time. The academy can play a key role in developing such an atmosphere by providing the wider public with the conceptual tools with which to understand our contemporary global conflict and by producing citizens capable of negotiating a conversational space located productively between the extreme right and left. Absent such an understanding, religiously motivated violence will be met with confusion and a reactionary rhetoric that entirely fails to understand the problem, and is thus in absolutely no position to guide policy-makers into any sort of solution. On the other hand, a conversation that takes account of the religious nature of the global conflict, the religious demands of secularism, and the competing religious commitment of the Islamist worldview can work more productively to negotiate an inextricable political violence in terms of a deep-seated religious conflict.

Scholars involved in the study of religion, conflict, and peace must self-consciously create nuanced and honest conversations in the public sphere concerning the role, power, and status of religion—this is a conversation we inherited from the birth of modernity. Although contemporary global conflict cannot be understood purely in terms of religion, we cannot afford to ignore the religious elements or to plaster over them with facile non-explanations. The religious assumptions hidden but still operative beneath the "religious neutrality" of secularism are real, they are powerful, and they structure American political ideology. Religion cannot be separated from violence any more than it can be separated from peace— those of us in America who would help to guide the twenty-first century struggle for global

domination into beneficent channels ignore these things at our peril. Ignoring the religious assumptions inherent in secularism inevitably leads to disaffection—and disaffection, sufficiently intensified and un-remedied, will all too often lead to violence motivated and justified by religion. The "transcendent mediation" of the secular can never overcome that final religious threat, for that threat is inherent in the secular mode of mediation. Such is the irony of the secular.

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