

What Kind of Religion Is Safe for Society?

BY DAVID CLOUTIER

Behind the debate about violence and religion lurks the question of how to evaluate our advanced society. Is it basically benign, or devoted to world hegemony? The three books reviewed here help clarify the central issues.

In the midst of the 2016 U.S. presidential primary, a curious phenomenon emerged. On the one hand, Americans saw a Republican contender forthrightly argue for a ban on Muslim visitors as a potential preventative measure in the wake of terrorist attacks, while at the same time, Democrats refused even to use the label “Muslim” for the groups perpetuating such violence, refusing to acknowledge that the violence was “religious” at all, and implicitly insisting that “true” religion is peaceful and good.

This exchange exemplifies how confused questions of religion and violence have become. The three books reviewed here offer three different approaches for dealing more carefully with the connections between violence and religion. The first is a moderate defense of “good” religion from a formerly-atheist philosopher. The second defends a traditional Christianity of peace, recognizing its historical failures but redoubling efforts to commit to its basic beliefs. The third challenges the whole idea of a timeless, ahistorical category of “religion” supposedly connected to violence, instead arguing that the “myth” of such violence is in fact a way of excusing violence by “secular” ideologies. In this review, I commend all the books for their ability to avoid the oversimplifications of popular discourse, and identify two key questions at the heart of the debate. I conclude by returning to the situation of 2016, to see how each book challenges the terms of the public debate.

Keith Ward’s *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 206 pp., \$16.00) squarely responds to the popular polemics of

the New Atheists such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. One of their common contentions is that religion is irrational and promotes violence, but Ward suggests these writers “refuse to investigate the question [of religion] in a properly rigorous way and substitute rhetoric for analysis...just what they tend to accuse religious believers of doing” (p. 7).

Ward begins by outlining the complexity of what counts as a religion, but the bulk of his analysis rests on two main points. First, *any* human phenomenon can become dangerous. Thus, the proper question to ask is not whether “religion” is inherently dangerous, but rather “what makes people pull [dangerous beliefs] out and make them decisive” for religious adherents, “for it is not anything in the religion itself that makes them do so” (p. 36). The logic of the connection is more complicated. For Ward, the cause of “dangerous” religion is not belief systems themselves, but rather some social oppression that allows groups to appeal to aspects of the religion as a kind of veil for the violence they advocate (p. 54). Again, Ward points out that any human phenomenon – such as patriotic nationalism or Marxism – is susceptible to this same pattern of corruption. In fact, religions may be in a better position, because the appeal to the complex religious tradition enables internal critique. In confronting violence done in the name of religion, then, Ward insists what is needed is to identify the real grievances of the group and then to encourage real education in the tradition, in order to unearth internal critiques (pp. 61-62). Second, Ward believes that religion “has often been the voice of moderation and reconciliation, and that is its true role, as scriptural documents of all the great world religions clearly state” (p. 81). Thus, the second half of the book is devoted to defending this “true role” by explaining how religion serves as a foundation for moral convictions about goodness and how even empirical studies suggests the benefits of religion, understood properly.

These two parts of Ward’s case stand in some tension with one another. On the one hand, he insists throughout on the necessity of appreciating the complexity and context of any given expression of religion: “The lesson is: do not generalise in abstract terms. See religious movements in their historical and social context” (p. 49). On the other hand, Ward’s book moves slowly but clearly to a case for a certain sort of religious belief as “true.” Near the end of the book, he outlines the major world religions, arguing that they all point toward “a developed conception of goodness and a deepening perception of the spiritual as the realm of the supremely good” (p. 181). Religions must be humble about their specifics, noting the need for believers to be “self-critical” and “open and responsive to the things that make for true reverence for the Supreme Good and for true human fulfillment” (p. 196). It seems obvious to him what “humane and liberal values” are, so much so that he claims, when discussing usury, that “no Christian today would dream of condemning lending at interest as immoral” (p. 50).



Insofar as he is speaking to today's choir of cultured despisers of religion, Ward's generalized spirituality is attractive. However, Christians like those represented in *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007 [2003], 256 pp., \$28.00), the collection of essays edited by Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, might be more wary. The anthology responds positively to Ward's first point while forthrightly rejecting his second. A number of essays in the collection do exactly the close contextualizing work that Ward recommends, analyzing events like the Crusades and the conquest of the Americas carefully to understand the complex role Christian belief played. Yet the collection opposes Ward's spiritualized definition of true religion; each of the authors in the final theological section "constructs his theological argument through a commitment to Christian uniqueness and absoluteness" (p. 16), rejecting the idea that critiquing religious violence means softening commitments to exclusiveness or to certain doctrinal commitments, such as the redemptive significance of the atonement.

For example, Richard Mouw argues that even the images of God's wrath and judgment, if understood properly, actually can call us to peace. But Mouw crucially notes that too often, the "satisfaction of God's wrath" is understood simply through the bloody, physical violence of the cross, when in fact Jesus' "suffering in the flesh" is understood to run throughout his life, and consists most of all in radical abandonment, not violence. It is in taking this radical separation of God on himself that Christ "makes it possible for us to find a new kind of reconciled unity...out of the unity of the Godhead" (p. 171). This is the unity of God that is ultimately stronger than anything the world can throw at it, even stronger than death. In the concluding essays of this collection, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank push each other's positions to explore the extent to which we can (or must) practice this ontological peace. But both authors, like Mouw, presume that this peace lies at the heart of all things, and is made accessible through the particularity of Christ. "He is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14a).



The essays in *Must Christianity Be Violent?* set up the even-stronger claims made by William T. Cavanaugh in *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 296 pp., \$56.00). Cavanaugh begins his deconstruction of "the myth of religious violence" by noting, like Ward, the sloppiness of the concept "religion," but his argument then turns to a more serious charge. It is not simply, as Ward suggests, that all human ideologies can be dangerous, but that the particular accusation against "religion" actually serves to shield and legitimate "non-religious" violence. Cavanaugh explains,

The myth of religious violence tries to establish as timeless, universal, and natural a very contingent set of categories – religious and secular – that are in fact constructions of the modern West. Those who do not accept these categories as timeless, universal, and natural are subject to coercion. (p. 6)

While his argument is largely negative, it serves an important purpose, unmasking the supposed “obviousness” of the religion-violence connection.

Cavanaugh makes three crucial points. First, the myth’s foundations are not very compelling, either historically (in terms of supposed “wars of religion”) or conceptually (in terms of a supposed “transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion essentially separate from politics” [p. 9]). Throughout the text, Cavanaugh exhaustively documents how all attempts to separate “religion” as a category are conceptually inadequate, at best reducing religion to a certain definition of something private, non-rational, and optional.

Then why does this “myth,” despite its flimsiness, have so much cultural power? This is Cavanaugh’s second crucial point: it serves to legitimate the monopoly on violence claimed by the modern nation-state, so as to contain forms of life “labeled” as religious. As he notes,

The religious-secular dichotomy...sanctions the condemnation of certain kinds of violence and the overlooking of other kinds of violence.... [W]hile it delegitimizes certain kinds of violence, it is used to legitimate other kinds of violence, namely, violence done in the name of secular, Western ideals. (p. 16)

The myth’s actual content is designed to serve a particular configuration of power: to “create public space for the smooth functioning of state and market interests” (p. 121).

Finally, this myth becomes operationalized in public policies with pernicious results. Domestically, these policies arbitrarily marginalize certain belief systems in favor of others. Internationally, they justify violence against certain “others” who are deemed “fanatical” because of their supposed refusal to understand religion as private and interior – that is, in the way our culture does.



What is really at stake in these three arguments, which do overlap but also emphasize different, sometimes contradictory, things? I think we see a disagreement on what might be called the “background characterization” of existing Western societies. Much of the power of Cavanaugh’s argument rests on the core recognition that supposedly peace-loving, secular societies are in fact deeply implicated in violence. In the Chase and Jacobs collection, John Milbank’s concluding essay makes this point by going beyond Cavanaugh’s example of Western violence against Islamic societies. Milbank describes the

violence of our society not simply in terms of its wars, but through all the ways it turns violence into a spectacle that fascinates and edifies the population. This recognition of pervasive violence marks a key contrast with Ward: for Milbank, everyday middle-class life is a “controllable economy of violence” offering “as much *simulated* violence as you like” (p. 190), which is supposed to eliminate real wars, but instead turns those “real” wars into spectacle. Such a claim is very far from Ward’s calm observations of “humane and liberal values” which “we” all share!

One wonders if Cavanaugh would view Ward’s book as a gentle but dangerous domestication of religions in service of the nation-state and personal fulfillment. The other two books do an admirable job of following Ward’s insistence on internal critique within particular traditions. After all, Cavanaugh admits, “I have no intention of excusing Christianity or Islam or any other set of ideas and practices from careful analysis. Given certain conditions, Christianity and Islam can and do contribute to violence” (p. 5). In the essay collection, theological conservatives like Mouw are willing to internally critique mistakenly bloody images of divine satisfaction, and writers like Milbank and Hauerwas are extremely critical of their own tradition’s complicity in violence. Perhaps this is really all Ward requires of any tradition.

However, what you *don’t* get is Ward’s alternative of a generalized spirituality at the heart of all traditions in their genuine form. This exposes the problem in Ward’s argument: genuine internal critique requires allegiance to the tradition, rather than an overriding generalized spirituality, aping the values of our own society.

Like the atheists he argues against, Ward’s argument is ultimately too simple. He thinks violent religion is always about some form of social oppression, and the cure is universal: judge all religions and their forms by a generalized sense of spiritual goodness, kindness, and pro-social altruism. If Ward actually wants careful context-driven analyses of religion and violence, he should let go of this oversimplified overlay, which ultimately seems to derive from the very overconfidence in the West’s current arrangements that Cavanaugh targets.

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Though appearing open to the universal temptation of corruption, Ward nevertheless draws seemingly very confident lines between a basic culture of peace and the appearance of destructive distortions of that culture. He is

not overly impressed by the Enlightenment view that religion is a relic of the past, but he is largely supportive of Enlightenment-style religion. He is clear that there are certain phenomena – like Nazism, militarized nationalism, radicalized Islamic groups – which are truly “dangerous,” but also clearly distinguishable from “normal” life. For example, Ward offers a lengthy and detailed critique of the radical version of Islam offered by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), which forms the basis for fighting jihad against any society not totally governed by sharia law. On Ward’s reading, Qutb’s version of Islam is ironically “a form of Islamicized Marxism, a Muslim theology of liberation that has capitulated to a secular agenda” (p. 59). This may be a correct conclusion, but it trades on a confidence that our own viewpoint is benign.

Thus, the differences among the authors about the desirability of religious particularity comes back to the question of how one evaluates our advanced society. Is it basically benign? Or is such a view used, as Cavanaugh writes, to establish “a dichotomy between our peace-loving, secular reasonableness and their irrational religious fanaticism,” which actually veils our “religious devotion” to American hegemony (p. 205)? Resolving this question is difficult. In actuality, it is possible to understand Western life as *both* saturated by violence *and* remarkably peaceable, not least because the abstraction “Western life” covers many things, from Little League baseball to violent video games, from social work reaching across diverse communities to widespread gun violence.

And this is why a second key question should really be the focus: how should Christians live? However violent the systems are, what steps are necessary for us to act as genuine peacemakers, whether in our neighborhoods or in international conflicts? In this regard, the essays by Kenneth Chase and Glen Stassen in *Must Christianity Be Violent?* are most important. Chase insists Christians take seriously two theological principles in considering any appeals to violence, whether “religious” or “secular”: the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice and the justice of God’s ultimate judgment. Christianity makes these claims, yet we often do not operationalize them, extolling sacrifice for the nation-state and insisting on taking judgment into our own hands. Instead, we must practice humility, which often requires that we be more skeptical of calls to perform violence for supposedly necessary reasons. Correspondingly on the positive side, Stassen outlines “just peacemaking” theory, which requires Christians not simply to step back from violence on the basis of their claims about God and Christ’s work, but also to figure out alternative actions that can resolve real conflict. These rich essays portray most vividly why a genuine commitment to a peaceful Christianity is a more robust response to religious violence than Ward’s generalized appeals to humane values.

Still, approaching the absurd debate of 2016, we see that *all* our authors represent a more sophisticated way of engaging real issues. For Ward, yes, radicalized Islam is a form of religion, but a form of religion which is a secu-

larized corruption. However, a sufficiently complex characterization of this corruption—even on Ward’s view—is likely to indict the actions of Americans and Europeans in the Middle East, actions which leaders in the West avoid facing, in part, because Christians in their populations are not committed to the peacemaking principles highlighted by Stassen. Such an analysis, especially if it pays attention to our shared dependence on certain natural resources, suggests exactly the kind of hidden and legitimized nation-state violence that holds our daily lives together. For Ward, it seems, the decades-long history of the West’s complicity in the violence of the Middle East is an aberration from our “humane, liberal values”; for Cavanaugh and Milbank, it is simply the normal way nation-states operate. But either way, the analysis is an improvement on either condemnation of religion or denial of its role.

Cavanaugh’s perspective sheds additional light, since the 2016 debate illustrates two different ways in which the nation-state arrogates the right to police acceptable religion. One way is direct and even crass: simply label a certain religion as dangerous. However, the other way is also a form of policing: by withholding the label of “religion,” enlightened Western politicians get to define who deserves respect under the label, as well as who is denied the label, and thus can be subjected to justified violence.

But what should most concern us is the fact that this debate is carried on among politicians who are at least nominally Christian. From these candidates, we see nothing of Chase’s humility before God’s work nor Stassen’s commitment to alternative forms of conflict resolution. And maybe that is the most important thing we can learn from these books: when we hear sloppy speech about religion and violence, we need to ask, where are the Christians speaking about and acting for real peace out of their deepest faith convictions?



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