



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 American Religions and War
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 81-86)
- 📖 What Kind of Religion Is Safe for Society?
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 87-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Myth of Religious Violence

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 4:1-3

Reflection

“People can and do commit violence in the name of God,” William Cavanaugh admits. Confessing this is a step toward a more humble faith. But he challenges the stronger claim that there is something called “religion” that is more likely to cause violence than what is not religion. Seeing through that “myth” is a step toward a more accurate understanding of violence in our world.

Cavanaugh outlines three reasons to be suspicious of the idea that religion is peculiarly prone to violence.

- ▶ *The distinction between “religious” and “secular” is too unstable.* The “myth” is supported in this way: religious and secular things (that is, beliefs, institutions, causes) can be easily distinguished, and the religious ones are more violent because they are absolutist, divisive, and non-rational. When counter-examples to this line of thinking are raised—e.g., most wars and exterminations are spawned by nationalism, totalitarianism, ethnic rivalry, control of resources and markets, atheist ideologies, and other “secular” causes—some curious fudging occurs. Some religion-and-violence theorists simply reclassify the entire offending cause as “religious,” or say whatever is violent about it is “religious.” Others enlarge the idea of “religion” to include whatever they want: “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.”
- ▶ *The religious/secular distinction has a checkered past.* Historians do not find “religion” in ancient Greek, Egyptian, Roman, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese societies. In medieval Europe the terms identify two sorts of priests. By the late seventeenth century, they are used in European nation-states to “exclude ecclesiastical authority from certain types of public power. Religion...was invented as a universal and essentially interior impulse, completely distinct from the mundane business of politics and economics,” Cavanaugh notes. As these states colonized the world, they used the religious/secular distinction “to fit the locals’ cultural systems—even those without gods, like Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism—into taxonomies of ‘world religions,’ despite resistance from native elites.” Thus, in India “to make Hinduism a religion was to take everything it meant to be Indian and confine it to a non-public sphere; to be public meant to be British.”
- ▶ *The distinction continues to mask acts of power.* “Where the line gets drawn between religious and secular” depends “on what kinds of power one wants to authorize and what kinds one wants to exclude.” For instance, “Until 1940 the Supreme Court invoked ‘religion’ as a unifying force in American society. Since 1940,



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however, the Supreme Court has repeatedly raised the specter of religious violence in banning school prayer, banning optional religious education from public school buildings, banning public aid to religious schools, and so on." Religious violence has been at historic lows since 1940, but the myth is "a useful narrative that has been produced by and has helped produce consent to the increasing secularization of the American social order." Meanwhile, in foreign policy, the myth is used "to justify attitudes and actions towards non-secular social orders, especially Muslim ones."

Cavanaugh concludes, "Doing away with the myth of religious violence helps level the playing field: let's examine the violence fomented by ideologies of all kinds, including those we tend to regard as 'secular' and therefore benign."

Study Questions

1. What is the essence of the religious/secular distinction today? What does it mean that there is no word "religion" and no such phenomenon in ancient cultures?
2. How is the religious/secular distinction used to explain the current turmoil in the Middle East? Why should we be suspicious of this interpretive scheme?
3. According to Sarah Koenig, if U.S. wars are not spawned by religion, how and why do they take on religious meaning?
4. Discuss David Cloutier's observation: "Behind the current debate about the relation between violence and religion lurks the question of how one evaluates our advanced society. Is it basically benign, or devoted to world hegemony?"

Departing Hymn: "God of Grace and God of Glory" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient church's story,
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Cure your children's warring madness;
bend our pride to your control;
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss your kingdom's goal,
lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry E. Fosdick (1930), alt.
Tune: CWM RHONDDA

The Myth of Religious Violence

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the distinction between “religious” and “secular” arose in early modern Europe, and how it is being used today.
2. To examine the arguments for the myth of religious violence—i.e., the view that “religion” is more likely to cause violence than beliefs, institutions, and causes that are not religious.
3. To trace the relations between religion and warfare in American history.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Patterns of Violence (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Observation

In some circles of cultural discourse the Church’s prophetic analysis of the patterns of violence in the world and attempt to offer solutions for them has been muted because it is assumed that religions are peculiarly prone to instigating violence today. “Religion is dangerous,” is it said. “It undermines society by causing interreligious or intra-religious fighting.”

We may be hearing this claim more often today, William Cavanaugh notes, because “the recent frequency of Islamist militant attacks in the name of God has added fuel to a long-standing Western notion that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence.” But, he explains, the focus of the charge “is not just certain forms of Islamism or Islam in general but ‘religion,’ a category that is commonly held to include Christianity, Hinduism, and other major world faiths. The common Western notion is meant to be neutral with regard to particular religions; it does not discriminate against Muslims, for example, but sees religion as such as potentially dangerous. Any time disagreements are ratcheted up to a cosmic level, there is the danger of blood being spilled. For that reason, the Western liberal ideal has insisted on the domestic separation of church, synagogue, mosque, and so on from state, and the privatization of religion. And it has generally insisted that foreign policy promote this ideal in non-Western countries whenever possible.” (*Patterns of Violence*, p. 11)

In this study we examine the history and the basis of this “long-standing” and “common” Western notion about the relation of religion to violence.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members humility, charity, and insight during their study time.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 4:1-3 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Before the next studies consider the Church's prophetic analysis of and response to some dominant patterns of violence in the world, this study responds to the common accusation that the Christian Church, along with other religions, is especially responsible for human violence. This myth not only sidelines the Church's witness, but also (ironically) prevents us from properly identifying and repenting for those times that Christians have misunderstood the gospel in ways that have spawned violence.

If the group would like to extend this study of the myth of religious violence, they might study some of the books and essays that David Cloutier reviews in "What Kind of Religion Is Safe for Society?" To explore other relations between Christianity and violence, they might discuss some of the books reviewed in Sarah Koenig's "American Religions and War."

Study Questions

1. The essence of the distinction is that religion is "private" and secular is "public." William Cavanaugh writes, "To make a long and complex story brief and simple, the distinction is the result of the struggle between ecclesiastical and civil authorities for power in early modern Europe. The new territorial states arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in part by appropriating powers formerly in the hands of the church; ecclesiastical courts were abolished, and the rights to nominate bishops and abbots, control over church revenues, monopoly on the means of violence, and the primary allegiance of the people were transferred to the nascent state.... The church would henceforth be confined to the ambit of religion."
Ancient cultures did not have this concentration of power in a political entity. There was continuity and interaction between the economy, politics, family, devotion to the deity, and so on, but not in a single way. There was much diversity among ancient patterns of life.
2. Cavanaugh writes, "We assume that the reason for turmoil in the Middle East is religion. Muslims have not learned to separate mosque from state, religion from politics, and so the passions of religion continue to wreak havoc in the public sphere. Our foreign policy is geared toward moving them – by force, if necessary – toward liberal, Western style democracy, which is the key to peace." The New Atheist author Sam Harris bluntly summarizes this war on behalf of secularism: "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. ... This is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, at an even greater cost to ourselves and innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world."
Cavanaugh fears the myth of religious violence will obscure the threat of "so-called 'secular' ideologies and practices [which] can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as devotion to so-called 'religions.'" It paints Muslim anger as "irrational" and casts "a convenient fog of amnesia over Western aggressions [in the region] on behalf of Western interests."
3. Sarah Koenig notes Americans "have a difficult time separating nationalist aims and self-righteous crusades from genuine justice." They see their cause as a holy war that justifies increasing violence (and, in the Civil War, this was true on both sides). Some see "soldiers' deaths as salvific in and of themselves, irrespective of any prior religious faith," and believe the dead have submitted themselves to God's fatalist will. Some become "religious" and "spiritual" in ways that depart from and violate their faith tradition. Why do these strange theologies blossom? "It provided soldiers with ways of coping with senseless violence, language and symbols to make sense of death and suffering, and, perhaps most importantly, a model of masculine Christianity that made soldiering a noble and Christian calling."
4. David Cloutier distinguishes two responses to the myth of religious violence. First, Keith Ward would replace particular traditions with a generalized spirituality; while any specific religion can be misused for violent purposes, he would avoid this by adopting a "true" religion that promotes "humane and liberal values" and encourages us 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." Second, William Cavanaugh and the contributors to the Keith Chase and Alan Jacobs volume promote internal critique within particular traditions. Ward assumes the "humane values" of advanced society can be our guide. The others are more suspicious of our society, and turn to internally reformed religious traditions for guidance.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.