

ARE MODERN WARS NOT HOLY WARS?

CSS-2017

There is no denying the fact that there were some countries that remained stubbornly religious — including the United States. But these were exceptions. Religion was an atavistic way of thinking which was gradually but inexorably losing its power. In universities, grandiose theories of secularization were taught as established fact, while politicians dismissed ideas they didn't like as “mere theology.” The unimportance of religion was part of conventional wisdom, an unthinking assumption of those who liked to see themselves as thinking people.

Today, no one could ask why religion should be taken seriously. Those who used to dismiss religion are terrified by the intensity of its revival. Karen Armstrong describes the current state of opinion in the following words:

. “in the West, the idea that religion is inherently violent is now taken for granted and seems self-evident.”

She further says:

“Religion has been the cause of all the major wars in history. I have heard this sentence recited like a mantra by American commentators and psychiatrists, London taxi drivers and Oxford academics. It is an odd remark. Obviously the two World Wars were not fought on account of religion. ”

Experts in political violence or terrorism insist that people commit atrocities for a complex range of reasons. Yet so indelible is the aggressive image of religious faith in our secular consciousness that we routinely load the violent sins of the 20th century on to the back of

“Religion” and drive it out into the political wilderness.

The idea that religion is fading away has been replaced in conventional wisdom by the notion that religion lies behind most of the world's conflicts. Many among the present crop of atheists hold both ideas at the same time. They will fluorinate against religion, declaring that it is responsible for much of the violence of the present time, then a moment later tell you with equally dogmatic fervor that religion is in rapid decline. Of course it's a mistake to expect logic from rationalists. More than anything else, the evangelical atheism of recent years is a

Symptom of moral panic. Worldwide secularization, which was believed to be an integral part of the process of becoming modern, shows no signs of happening. Quite the contrary: in much of the world, religion is in the ascendant. For many people the result is a condition of acute cognitive dissonance.

It's a confusion compounded by the lack of understanding, among those who issue blanket condemnations of religion, of what being religious means for most of humankind. Modern Western conception of religion is idiosyncratic and eccentric.

In the West, people think of religion as a coherent system of obligatory beliefs, institutions and rituals, centering on a supernatural God, whose practice is essentially private and hermetically sealed off from all 'secular' activities. But this narrow, provincial conception is the product of a particular history and a specific version of monotheism. _

Atheists think of religion as a system of supernatural beliefs, but the idea of the supernatural presupposes a distinct sort of cosmogony that is found in only a few of the world's religions. Moreover, the idea that belief is central in religion makes sense only when religion means having a creed. Until the British started classifying the people of the Indian Subcontinent by their religious affiliations, there was no such thing as "Hinduism." Instead there wa's an unfathomably-rich diversity of practices, which weren't seen as separate from one another or from the rest of life, and didn't define themselves in terms of belief. The same was true in pre- Christian Europe. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans ever separated religion from secular life.

They would not have understood our modern conception of 'religion.' They had no authoritative scriptures, no compulsory beliefs, no distinct clergy and no obligatory ethical rules.

Throughout much of history and all of prehistory, "religion" meant practice — and not just in some special area of life. Belief has not been central to most of the world's religions; indeed, in some traditions, it has been seen as an impediment to spiritual life. Vedanta, Buddhism and Taoism caution against mistaking human concepts for ultimate realities.

A religious tradition is never a single, unchanging essence that compels people to act in a uniform way. It is rather a template that can be modified and altered radically to serve a variety of ends. In one form or another, religion is humanly universal, but it is also essentially multifarious.

One of the founders of liberalism, John Locke, found it intolerable that the "wild woods and uncultivated waste of America be left to nature, without any improvement, tillage and husbandry." involved in his own right in the colonization of the Carolinas, Locke argued that" the native 'kings' of America had no legal jurisdiction or right of ownership of their land."

Again, the Spanish Inquisition is a notorious example of the violence of religion. There can be no doubt that it entailed hideous cruelty, not least to lewys who had converted to Christianity, often in order to save their lives, but who were suspected of secretly practicing their faith and consequently, in some cases, burnt. Yet in strictly quantitative terms, the Inquisition pales in comparison to later frenzies of secular violence. Recent estimates of the numbers who were executed during the first 20 years of the inquisition range from 1,500 to 2,000 people. By contrast, about a quarter of a million people were killed in the Vendee (out of a population of roughly 800,000) when a peasant rebellion against the French Revolution was put down by republican armies in 1794. And some 17,000 men, women and children were guillotined in the purge that ended in July that year, including the man who had designed the new revolutionary calendar. It is indisputable that this mass slaughter had a religious dimension. In 1793, a Goddess of Reason was enthroned on the high altar at Notre Dame Cathedral; revolutionary leaders made great use of terms such as "credo," "sacrament," and "ser1-non" in their speeches.

Few movements have been as single-minded in their commitment to modernization as Lenin's Bolsheviks, and few have been so virulently hostile to mainstream faiths. Yet as Bertrand Russell observed in his forgotten 1920 classic *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, written after he travelled to Russia and talked with Lenin, Soviet communism was from the beginning BS much a religion as a political project. Oddly, though it was a re-run on a vaster scale of the French revolutionary terror. Together with Nazism, these 20th-century state cults plant a question mark over the very idea of secularization. Certainly there has been a decline in the old authority churches, but that does not mean religion is becoming weaker. Simultaneous with the retreat of the mainstream faiths, there has been a rise of a plethora of political religions and an explosion of fundamentalism, sometimes fused in a single movement.

The ambiguities of secularization are especially prominent in the Middle East. What does Islamic State stand for — an ultraviolent type of religious fundamentalism, or a radically modern politics? Clearly, it represents both. The background to the emergence of IS can be traced back to Wahhabism, the 18th-century Islamic movement whose founder, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, helped establish the first Saudi state. Since the influx of oil wealth, the Saudis have promoted Wahhabism worldwide. IS is one of the offspring of this project an ogre that is now a deadly threat even to the Saudi state. A potential for violence was present in Wahhabism from the start. But it was not inherently violent; indeed, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had refused to sanction the wars of his patron, Ibn Saud, because he was simply fighting for wealth and glory. The clear implication of the founder's statement is that war would have been justified if it had been waged in the service of faith.

Religion is not the uniquely violent force as demonized by secular thinkers. Yet neither is religion intrinsically peaceful — a benign spiritual quest compromised and perverted by

its involvement with power. The potential for violence exists in faith-based movements of all kinds, secular as well as religious. Evangelical atheists splutter with fury when reminded that a war on religion was an integral part of some of the 20th century's worst regimes. How can anyone accuse

a movement devoted to reason and free inquiry of being implicated in totalitarian oppression? It- is a feeble-minded and thoroughly silly response, reminiscent of that of witless believers who asking how a religion of love could possibly be held to account for the horrors of the Inquisition.

Conventional distinctions between religious and secular belief pass over the role that belief itself plays in our lives. We are meaning-seeking creatures and unlike other animals we fall very easily into despair if we fail to make sense of our lives. We are unlike our animal kin in another way. Only human beings kill and die for the sake of beliefs about themselves and the nature the world. Looking for sense -in their lives, they attack others who find meaning in beli different from their own. The violence of faith cannot be exorcised by deroonizing religion goes with being human.