

When Religion Gets It Wrong

By Michael A. Schuler

January 27, 2008

An Impression of the Problem in Poetry

"An Eye for an Eye" by Philip Appleman

"Are you saved?" he asks me,
Sunrise in the corner of his eye,
A snag at the edge of his voice.
In a blur of memory, I see the others:
The preacher who used to trounce on my tender
sins,
Kids at church camp, their brimstone choirs
Shrill with teenage lust gone underground,
True believers come knocking to tell me
That flaming hell is real.
And those twisted faces on the tube:
Christian gunmen in Beirut, their hot eyes
Exploding in the beds of sleeping children;
The righteous hatreds of Belfast, lighting
Irish eyes like a tenement fire;
The eyes of the Ayatollah, squinting with joy
At the blood of his blindfolded prisoners.
It smolders in the windows of the soul,
The holy blaze, never so bright
As in human sacrifice,
Never so proud as in crimson crusades,
The glorious, godlike destruction.

An Impression of the Problem in Prose

From Emo Philips

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, "Don't do it! There's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?" I said, "Well, are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious." I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

"Christian," he replied. "Me too," I said. "Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant," he said. "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist," he said. "Wow! Me Too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist Church of God." "Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God." "Me Too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915."

I said, "Die, heretic scum," and pushed him off the bridge.

An Appraisal of the Problem

From Walter Wink's *The Powers That Be*

The Myth of Redemptive violence enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world.

The belief that violence "saves" is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be in the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god. There is, then, a religious character to this violence.... In fact, it is the dominant religion in our society today.

The myth of violence plays out in the structure of children's cartoon shows, in video and computer games and in movies. We also encounter it in the media, in sports, in nationalism, in self-styled military groups and in televangelism.... The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has ever known....

The traditions, rites, customs, and symbols of Christianity are used to enhance this powerful myth. As one contemporary member of the religious right put it:

That it is a privilege to engage in God's wars is clearly seen in the Psalms, perhaps nowhere better than in Psalm 149 where the saints sing for joy on their beds while they contemplate warring against God's enemies. "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked...." Thus, the righteous are called by God to exercise a "holy violence" against certain of the wicked, thereby manifesting God's wrath.

From this perspective, salvation comes not by insight, repentance, or truth, but from the employment of pure military might.

The myth of redemptive violence claims to speak *for* God; it does not listen for God to speak....

Its god is not the impartial ruler of all nations but a tribal god worshiped as an idol. Its metaphor is not the journey but the fortress. Its offer is not forgiveness but victory. It is blasphemous. It is idolatrous. And it is immensely popular.

Reflections

The title of today's reflections, "When Religion Gets It wrong" presumes that religion doesn't *always* get it wrong—that in and of itself religion is not inimical to human and planetary well-being. A bevy of recent books have, of course, argued otherwise, with a number of authors concluding that a world *without* religion would be preferable to the one we have.

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins condemns religion as "overwhelmingly pernicious and a "very evil force in the world." He suggests that raising children with a religious orientation constitutes child abuse, and he finds nothing to praise even in an irenic tradition like Quakerism or the most rational incarnations of Buddhism.

Daniel Dennett offers a similar appraisal. In *Breaking the Spell* he blames religion for many of the worst evils of the last century. Terrorism aside, Dennett faults religious moderates for being insufficiently forceful in opposing the violent acts of the radicals. The author quotes with approval the physicist Stephen Weinberg: "Good people will do good things and bad people will do bad things, but for good people to do bad things—that takes religion."

Christopher Hitchens, who has written disdainfully about Mother Teresa of Calcutta, says that religion is a great multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, an opinion Sam Harris echoes in his best-selling book, *The End of Faith*. The problem with religion, Harris maintains, is its inescapable dogmatism. It is,

... that one front upon which we inevitably stop talking to one another and are not willing to have our beliefs about the world revised through conversation....

Critics such as these highlight not only the most obvious instances of religious malfeasance, but cast a disapproving eye even on behaviors that most casual observers would deem inoffensive. Thus Richard Dawkins contemptuously dismisses the Amish as not only backward but faintly ludicrous. "The rest of us are happy with our cars and computers, our vaccines and antibiotics," he writes,

But you quaint little people with your bon-

nets and breeches, your horse buggies, your archaic dialect, and your earth-closet privies.... Of course, you must be allowed to entrap your children with you in your 17th century time-warp, otherwise something irretrievable would be lost to us: a part of the wonderful diversity of human culture.

According to Dawkins, the Amish attempt to maintain a simple, serene, unostentatious, community-oriented and reverent way of life in defiance of the forces of modernity is utterly misguided. For this paragon of progressive thinking, there is nothing meritorious about maintaining unique, time-honored traditions.

I myself am less than satisfied with the way religion has been presented, promoted, and practiced over the centuries. But the fact that I have spent the last thirty years serving *religious* communities would suggest that my own appraisal is more positive, my judgments less severe. As someone who has studied the matter at considerable length, I'm reasonably familiar with the good, bad, and ugly aspects of religion. Thus, I will allow that injustice, intolerance, and inhumanity figure prominently in the religious record. However, that's not all the record reveals. My own impression of the problem is as follows.

I will allow that injustice, intolerance, and inhumanity figure prominently in the religious record. However, that's not all the record reveals.

First, I agree wholeheartedly with Walter Wink that religion gets it wrong when it embraces violence. This is not to say that only nonviolent or pacifistic religions are legitimate. What I am referring to are those religions in which not just an element, but an ethos of violence is present.

Regrettably, some of the world's most revered religious writings—the Koran, the Old and New Testaments, the Bhagavad Gita, to name just three—contain numerous passages that appear to sanction violence and that present the deity in the guise of a warrior. It is thus all too easy for those who take them seriously to cite chapter and verse in support of their desire for religious domination.

A long-standing tradition of what Eamon Duffy describes as "meritorious violence" is present in both Christianity and Islam. In recent years the world has become all-too familiar with the Islamic concept of *Jihad*—a word that literally means "struggle," but that radical Muslims regularly

invoke to justify terrorist attacks on enemies of all descriptions—Christians, Jews, secularists, even other Muslims. Because the prophet Muhammad himself commanded an army, and because the rapid dispersal of Islam in the 7th century was accomplished by military means, the principle of “meritorious violence” is deeply embedded in Muslim thought.

Christianity’s experience has been complimentary. The first Christian Emperors of Rome persecuted pagans and dissenters as mercilessly as Nero and Caligula had afflicted the early Church. But it was not until the Crusades of the 10th and 11th centuries that violence became morally acceptable. Heretofore, even Emperors who employed violence were obliged to repent of and atone for it lest they be denied a place in heaven. Now, however, the Popes proclaimed that those who fought heathens and heretics were sanctified. Violence was presented as a doorway rather than a barrier to salvation. Over the next few centuries, Papal forces ran roughshod over Muslims, Jews, pagans, and dissident Christians, each soldier secure in the knowledge that this grisly work was redemptive.

Both Islam and Christianity have too often treated violence as a holy necessity rather than a necessary evil. It has been a solution of *first* rather than last resort; an instrument of imperialism rather than a means of self-preservation. As such, religion has powerfully reinforced the Myth of Redemptive Violence that Walter Wink describes.

But this isn’t the whole story. When religion gets it right, Jesus’s statement, “he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword,” should cause the believer to pause and reconsider.

of his ethic. In its more peaceful manifestations, Islam treats the concept of *Jihad* as an inward affair. The true “struggle,” the one that really matters, takes place in the human heart, where we wrestle with our demons and hope to put them to flight.

Peace, then, is the preferred position of right-minded religion, and according to Mahatma Gandhi the *real* business of religion is this: to help human beings become critically conscious of their own conflicts and passions so that they lose the urge to

dominate and defile others and become eager to live respectfully on terms of compassion and equality.

Now, violence is closely associated with the dogmatic positions religion takes on questions of faith and values. Some religions, most notably Christianity and Islam, claim privileged access to the treasure trove of God’s truth. Each, as Jane Kramer puts it, likes to believe that “Heaven, and possibly earth, belong *exclusively* to them.”

Such belief gives the partisans of dogmatic religions license to impose their views on others—to censure, convert, and multiply, as Kramer observes. Because it is constitutionally incapable of honoring other perspectives, dogmatic religion will go to extraordinary lengths to propagate its own “saving” message.

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” Jesus commands in the last chapter of Matthew. The ambition is always to bring the whole world around to a single, correct point of view, preferably using the tools of gentle persuasion but, if necessary, with coercion.

Nevertheless, some religions exhibit very little dogmatism. Historically, Hinduism has been a radically *inclusive* religion, welcoming insights from abroad and embracing non-Hindu teachers like Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and Mahavira as “avatars”—incarnations of the divine. Many paths lead up the mountain to liberation, Hindus believe.

Next door in China the three classical religions of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism have existed harmoniously for many centuries. The Chinese see no reason to practice one religion exclusively, for each of these three plays a necessary role in individual and communal life. It would be foolish, therefore, to choose one over the other.

India and China have suffered through wars and revolutions, but rarely for religious reasons or to accomplish religious ends. I know of no Buddhist *Jihads* or Hindu crusades. Swami Vivekananda, perhaps the most celebrated Indian philosopher of the 19th century, describes what occurs when religion gets its right:

We say that if a temple, or a symbol, or an image helps you to realize the divine within, you are welcome to it. Have two hundred images if you like. If certain forms and formulas help you to realize the divine . . . have, by all means, whatever forms, temples, whatever ceremonies you want to bring you nearer to God. But do not quarrel about

them: the moment you quarrel, you are not going Godward; you are going backward toward the brutes.

According to its critics, religion can also be faulted for stymieing progress, clinging to old superstitions, and refusing to accept new and trustworthy information about the nature of the universe. From the Inquisition's censure of Galileo and its execution of Giordano Bruno, religion has tried to suppress science in order to maintain its own power and authority. Too often, then, religion appears to have abandoned wisdom for a pose of willful ignorance.

Religion gets it wrong when it clings stubbornly and dogmatically to mythological explanations of natural phenomena and human behavior; when it insists that its ancient, sacred writings be taken literally and are not to be reinterpreted.

In this regard, many of the complaints about religion are valid. Who can dispute that it has created obstacles to beneficial stem-cell research; that religious opposition to sensible family planning has contributed to over-population and resource depletion; that creationism has seriously compromised the teaching of biology and earth science to young people?

But is this preference for revelation over reason, fancy over fact, a flaw common to all religion? Not if we consider that some of history's most impressive thinkers were also profoundly religious: Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, and even Francis Bacon—the latter typically regarded as the “father” of modern science. Indeed, it was Bacon who famously proclaimed, “A *little* philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.”

The Dalai Lama has even allowed that if an ancient Buddhist truth collided with a scientific one, the latter ought to prevail.

Some religions are more receptive to new ideas than others. Mahayana Buddhism, for instance, has typically acknowledged that the search for truth is an ongoing, open-ended affair. That is why the Dalai Lama has agreed to collaborate with neuroscientists like Richard Davidson who are eager to understand the etiology of enlightenment. The Dalai Lama has even allowed that if an ancient Buddhist truth collided with a scientific one, the latter ought to prevail.

By insisting upon the inerrant nature of their own ancient scriptures, conservative Christians

and Muslims preclude the possibility of a constructive relationship with science. Conversations between the two become a zero-sum game—if one perspective is accepted as true, the other must be false. It doesn't have to work that way, however. Truth can be figurative as well as factual, and psychological truths can be just as valid, and more personally meaningful, than physical ones. The former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, makes this suggestion:

We should stop trying to market Christianity as a science that describes how God micro-manages the universe and acknowledge that it is a profound myth that can *still* teach us much about the archeology of our own souls.

Religion can be legitimately criticized, then, when it lends cosmic sanction to violence, when it makes singular, dogmatic assertions of its own superiority, and when it clings stubbornly to ideas that have outlived their usefulness. Religion also goes bad when it becomes authoritarian rather than instructive, or when it defends power and privilege at the expense of the dispossessed.

But the forgoing describes the *perversions* of religion, *not* religion itself. No human enterprise is immune to distortion, not even science. Remember those high-minded souls who wanted to make eugenics the basis for social policy? And what about companies whose scientists have created so-called “terminator seeds,” that would destroy the livelihood of legions of small Third-World farmers?

Yes, when religion gets it wrong, it can be utterly ruinous. But we also need to acknowledge how important religion can be when it gets it right—when, like Unitarian Universalism, it supports the untrammelled search for truth and meaning; when it encourages a reverent rather than exploitive relationship with the natural world; when it assists us in making wise choices about our vision and values. Above all, religion gets it right when it emphasizes the primacy of compassion. In the words of Karen Armstrong,

This was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, Muhammad, and the great Eastern sages. The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience or devotional practice is that it must lead directly to practical compassion....

Or, as the Dalai Lama humbly suggests, “my religion is simple ... it is all about kindness.”