

RELIGION, WAR & ATROCITY

The grisly deeds of IS in Iraq and Syria evoke once again the question as to the connection between religion and organized violence. Its companion question asks if Islam has a special affinity to such acts. Since the militants of IS, like their al-Qaeda counterparts, proclaim themselves to be Salafists, or devout fundamentalists, whose duty is to restore the purity of the Islam community of believers, the *ummah*, by destroying both false believers and the infidels with whom they are allied (as well as heretics), the claim is made that something about the religion is conducive to violence – or even promotes it.

The latter is today's burning issue due to headline events. It is a specious formulation of the issue, though. A cursory review of history reminds us that militants of all religions have committed atrocities in the name of their faith. The Crusaders celebrated their taking of Jerusalem by massacring its Muslim and Jewish citizens – after an arduous winter that included a bit of cannibalism. Then there were the *auto-da-fe* burnings, the mass slaughter of the Cathars, and on and on. The Israelites killed every man, woman, child (and beast) in Jericho at the command of their god Yahweh and performed other gruesome deeds in the confident belief that they were privileged by being His Chosen People.

(*Deuteronomy 6:21*) Judaism's great tradition of universal humanism did not emerge until much later, taking full expression with the Pharisees at Jesus' time. Jesus was the epitome of a radical strain in Pharisee theology – he was, after all, a Jew addressing a universalist message to other Jews. Even Buddhists have been comfortable on occasion gripping the bloody sword – as witness Myanmar, Sri

Lanka and, in the eighteenth century, the (Buddhist) Burmese razing of the great Thai Buddhist capital of Ayutthaya. Hindus, too, committed their share of atrocities during the Partition of 1947 and in subsequent communal riots as recently as 2002 in Gujarat. We also should recall that suicide bombing as a trademark of modern terrorism was inaugurated by the Tamil Tigers who committed hundreds of suicide attacks – including that by the woman who targeted Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi - because of India's intervention in support of the Sri Lankan Buddhist government's suppression of the Hindu Tamil rebellion. *

It is tempting to play the game of debating which religion is more or less violent than another. In truth, that exercise beggars the bigger and more important question. Namely, is it religious doctrine and loyalty that can motivate some persons to abuse non-believers OR are all dogmatic, doctrinal ideologies prone to do so? Religion can be viewed as a sub-category of those aggressive ideologies which can take secular forms. The twentieth century has witnessed the lethal effects of imbuing societies with the avowedly secular (indeed, anti-religious) ideologies of Nazism and Communism of the Leninist-Maoist-Pol Pot variety. Nationalism, too, is an ideology which has demonstrated great propensities for violence. They all stress the fundamental distinction between "we" and "they" conducive to the atrocious treatment of others. An ideology that embraces the two dualities of 'we/they' and "good/evil" produces the combustible brew that is fatal to a sense of shared humanity.

These non-religious movements share certain traits.

- They evoke passionate loyalty to a community of believers/communitarians.
- They subsume the individual in a collective movement that dictates behavior and sets tests of loyalty.
- They arouse feelings of sacredness without calling upon the supernatural.
- They promote bellicosity in dealing with others.

Fascism was a political ideology that transcended religious and cultural boundaries. The Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria were of this order – wholly secular and explicitly anti-religious. None of Saddam's crimes was committed in the name of Islam; he and Osama bin-Laden hated each other (Dick Cheney's self-serving fantasies notwithstanding). Then there are the hybrids that meld nationalism, Fascism and religion. The Spanish *Falange* stands out. World War II saw atrocities committed by the Hungarian *Arrow Cross*, the Romanian *Iron Guard*, the Croatian *Ustashi* and the Slovakian *Hlinka Guard*. The Iron Guard was Orthodox. The others were all fiercely Catholic – the Slovak President was a Catholic Priest Jozef Tiso who defied the Pope in his eagerness to deport Jews to the death camps. So, too, for the Lebanese *Falangists*.

Intense nationalist identities thereby took on a sacred quality while identifying as the evil "other" persons within reach of different faiths who were brutally sacrificed to the tribal gods. Religious ideologies and secular ones (with the exception of Nazism/Fascism) share another noteworthy trait. They hold out the promise of a glorious future for their adherents. In the case of the great universalist religions, the promise is offered to all of mankind. So does Communism. The former emphasize a blissful Afterlife, the latter Heaven on

Earth. Most religions also convey a message of benevolence, peace and good works that can alleviate suffering in this life even if the ultimate reward is in the next. That entails a code of ethical conduct, i.e. ethical conduct counts along with faith and belief. Those codes condemn individual violence among other forms of abusive conduct.

The contrast of a strict moral code abjuring violence with a clearly etched line of differentiation between the community of believers and non-believers generates contradictions that never have been satisfactorily resolved. For Christians, the teachings of Jesus would seem to stigmatize war and violence of any kind. That is not the way it worked out. Political compulsions overcame the imperatives of individual ethics. “Rendering” unto Caesar involved much more than dutifully paying taxes. Moreover, the institutionalization of Christianity in the hierarchical and highly disciplined Church mixed the temporal and the sacred irrevocably. At the theological level, Christians’ acceptance of the Old Testament as divinely inspired meant incorporating the spirit of Yahweh into the religion of Jesus the pacifist. If “vengeance is mine, saith the Lord” (ROMANS 12:18), the Church saw itself as properly His prime subcontractor.

The spirit of domination and suppression was brought literally into the New Testament with the official inclusion of the Book of Revelations in the canon early in the 5th century. Written by the Jewish exile John of Patmos, it gave Gospel status to the ghastly Apocalyptic visions of the Hebrew prophets. In a bizarre closing of the circle, End Times evangelicals in the heart of America, like Ted Cruz the [Dominionist](#), celebrate the Israeli assault on Muslim Palestinians, Operation Protective Edge, as a sign that the cataclysmic Armageddon - as prophesized by a

Jew of antiquity - will soon announce the return of Christ the Redeemer for the Day of Judgment and the Eternal Salvation of Christians while recalcitrant Jews and other rejectionists of Christ are damned to fire and brimstone. Jesus, after all, is the Latinized Greek name for Joshua who “fit the battle of Jericho.” (John argued that Jesus was the long-awaited *messiah* who would return to bring Salvation to the Hebrew people – destroying their oppressor Rome and all the unrighteous. On Judgment Day, all those who “overcome” will be granted the ultimate blessing of sitting beside the *Son of God* on His throne). (3:14–22).

Islamic holy texts contain these contradictions inherited from the Peoples of the Book along with the contradictory passages of the Koran, and the Hadith. There, one can find justification for a wide range of actions concerning violence and the treatment of believers as well as non-believers – from the most benign to the pernicious.

Some perspective on our times. Looking back over the history of the twentieth century, non-religious ideologies have killed tens of millions. The total dwarfs all those killed in religious violence over the centuries. In fact, religion overall was a minor contributor to the mayhem and murder that has marked the modern era. The current sense that we are living in an age of violent religious fanaticism stems from two causes. One is the emergence of radical fundamentalist groups in the Islamic world who use terror as an instrument to advance their cause. The other is the sharp difference between that phenomenon and the peacefully prosaic world of the Western democracies which have freed themselves from atavistic conflicts and war – at least among themselves. They also are secular societies; thereby,

they are inclined to indict those societies that remain infused with religion, especially the Muslim world. The religious mindset itself is difficult for them to comprehend. Many Europeans find *salafists*, their own ancestors and the extreme American evangelicals equally incomprehensible. Nor do they exert themselves unduly in trying to figure them out.

Post-war Western Europe has sanitized itself of all ideologies – religious, nationalist, political. Never have there been societies with so little passion in their politics. If America in the late eighteenth century was born against others' history, Western Europe in the mid-twentieth century succeeded in liberating itself from its own history. The shattering events of the first half of the century opened a way for the European peoples to change profoundly their ways of interacting.

Liberation entailed an emotional, philosophical and intellectual distancing from ingredients of political life that had been the hallmarks of public affairs. Internationally, it was the lethal rivalries of power politics. Domestically, it was ideologically driven factional conflict. The 'civilian societies' of today's Europe (especially at its western end) have transmuted themselves. The *polities* of this new Europe were made possible more by a process of political subtraction than political addition. That is to say, the domination of public affairs by prosaic concerns and tame ambitions is effect and reinforced cause of the Europeans shedding those parts of their make-up that could impede the process of integration. Nationalist passion, ideological inspiration, the impulse to draw lines of all kinds between 'us' and 'them' - all have dried up.

The peoples of these “civilian” societies see their peaceable, materialistic ways as the desirable norm. Hence, their great difficulty in coming to terms with passionate nationalism (as in the Balkans) or passionate religion. The contrast with the United States is instructive. America shares some of these traits. It differs, though, in other cardinal respects. Americans on the whole are more religious, some of the religious are Christian Salafists in the fundamentalist sense; it is more overtly nationalistic; and it is more comfortable with violence – whether domestically or in the fighting of wars. These characteristics are in the nature of correlations. They do not establish a causal connection.

The United States’ engagement in military action has more to do with geostrategic realities, and history, than it does church attendance or the omnipresent stars-and-stripes lapel pin. The tolerance for the resulting effects of war (casualties of Americans and casualties of foreigners both) derives as well from the unique American experience: never having had the homeland ravaged by other states (1813 aside); accustomed to victory; and the distinctive sense of mission that at once ascribes selfless virtue to its actions and promotes the idea of the United States as the agent as well as beacon of Progress.

This unique mix of national characteristics generates a constant tension in American foreign policy between the idealistic strain and the realist strain. In the “war on terror” era they have managed to reinforce each other so as to justify and generate domestic support for the audacious strategy of hyper-active, multiform engagements in alien societies. Concretely, the United States simultaneously plays the roles of social worker, policeman, law giver and judge. In

the process, it has killed a lot of people – most of them innocents. It also has committed atrocities – calculatingly as in its torture programs. Yet none of these baneful effects cuts very deep into the American psyche. Nothing basic is scrutinized. Self-image, sense of moral superiority, belief in the rightness of American actions – all remain intact.

This phenomenon cannot be explained in terms of ideological conviction impervious to evidence. The distinctive American civil religion, as political doctrine, is too abstract and enlightened. Neither instruction from the Deity nor solemn vows dictate the dubious actions mentioned above. Nationalism does exercise an influence but Manifest Destiny is no longer a potent motivator. Still, the combination of American attributes has produced a collective psyche that is reconciled with some types of conduct that we would and do denounce in others.

The contradictory elements in the American attitudes toward its use of organized violence are kept down to a tolerable level by two features of how we conduct wars, in particular the “war on terror.” First, by replacing the draft with a professional army, war and its consequences can be kept at a distance. Indeed, one can opt out entirely simply by not volunteering. Second, the growing reliance on high-tech weapons is changing the experience of killing. “Flying” a drone from an air-conditioned room in Nevada is not the same as cutting the throat of a suspected Taliban on the outskirts of some Afghan village. The psychological difference for the one doing the killing is enormous. The public at large also is affected differently. Some of this is visual. During the “war on terror” we have been shown very few graphic pictures or video of the dead and dying – on either

side. The contrast with Vietnam coverage is striking. No pictures of torture have been revealed – other than the most mild variety as occurred at Abu Ghraib. The CIA destroyed most of the rest.

Hence, the vivid pictures of beheadings by IS, publicized for their own propaganda purposes, make a dramatic emotional impact. One effect is to associate the gruesome acts with the Salafist doctrine (correctly) and with Islam generally (incorrectly). We are told that “Muslims do this kind of thing, things that we would never do.” Yet, we Christians and other non-Muslim Americans killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What might the reaction among Muslims, and devotees of other religions, have been were there photographers on the spot able to record the suffocated, the fried, the irradiated, the cremated? We did in fact see graphic images of many dead and maimed innocents in Gaza killed by the Israeli military, with these acts being excused by nearly the entire American political class of diverse religious affiliations. Does the nature of the cause in whose name these actions were taken make a crucial moral difference?

Islam, Christianity, Judaism and every other religion can influence our behavior – in varying ways, to varying degrees. So religion does count. But indictment for criminal acts should not be directed at one particular religion. The ultimate culprit is our human natures – individual and social. Or, if you prefer, the Heavenly Father who created such conflicted and flawed creatures.

- According to the [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#), LTTE was the first insurgent organisation to use concealed [Explosive belts](#) and vests. The specialised unit that carried out [suicide attacks](#) was named the Black Tigers. According to the information published by the LTTE, the Black Tigers carried out 378 suicide attacks between 5 July 1987, and 20 November 2008. Out of these, 274 were male and 104 were female.

