The Myth of

Religious Violence

*Secular Ideology and the Roots
of Modern Conflict*

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH

Introduction

The idea that religion has a tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies, and it underlies many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of churches to efforts to promote liberal democracy in the Middle East. What I call the "myth of religious violence" is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from "secular" features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence. Religion must therefore be tamed by restricting its access to public power. The secular nation-state then appears as natural, corresponding to a universal and timeless truth about the inherent dangers of religion.

In this book, I challenge this piece of conventional wisdom, not simply by arguing that ideologies and institutions labeled "secular" can be just as violent as those labeled "religious," but by examining how the twin categories of religious and secular are constructed in the first place. A growing body of scholarly work explores how the category "religion" has been invented in the modern West and in colonial contexts according to specific configurations of political power. In this book, I draw on this scholarship to examine how timeless and transcultural categories of religion and the secular are used in arguments that religion causes violence. I argue that there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion and that essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence

are incoherent. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power. The question then becomes why such essentialist constructions are so common. I argue that, in what are called "Western" societies, the attempt to create a transhistorical and trans-cultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state. The myth of reli-gious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. This myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labeled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence serves to cast nonsecular social orders, especially Muslim societies, in the role of villain. *They* have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. *Their* violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. *Our* violence, being secular, is rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence. We find ourselves obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy.

Especially since September 11, 2001, there has been a proliferation of scholarly books by historians, sociologists, political scientists, religious stud-ies professors, and others exploring the peculiarly violence-prone nature of religion. At the same time, there is a significant group of scholars who have been exploring the ideological uses of the construction of the term "religion" in Western modernity. On the one hand, we have a group of scholars who are convinced that religion as such has an inherent tendency to promote violence. On the other hand, we have a group of scholars who question whether there is any "religion as such," except as a constructed ideological category whose changing history must be carefully scrutinized.

There is much more at stake here than academics haggling over defini-tions. Once we begin to ask what the religion-and-violence arguments mean by "religion," we find that their explanatory power is hobbled by a number of indefensible assumptions about what does and does not count as religion. Certain types of practices and institutions are condemned, while others—nationalism, for example—are ignored. Why? My hypothesis is that religion-and-violence arguments serve a particular need for their consumers in the West. These arguments are part of a broader Enlightenment narrative that has invented a dichotomy between the religious and the secular and constructed the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in pub-lic to rational, secular forms of power. In the West, revulsion toward killing and dying in the name of one's religion is one of the principal means by which we become convinced that killing and dying in the name of the nation-state

is laudable and proper. The myth of religious violence also provides secular social orders with a stock character, the religious fanatic, to serve as enemy. Carl Schmitt may be right—descriptively, not normatively—to point out that the friend-enemy distinction is essential to the creation of the political in the modern state.[1] Schmitt worried that a merely procedural liberalism would deprive the political of the friend-enemy antagonism, which would break out instead in religious, cultural, and economic arenas. Contemporary liberalism has found its definitive enemy in the Muslim who refuses to distinguish between religion and politics. The danger is that, in establishing an Other who is essentially irrational, fanatical, and violent, we legitimate coercive measures against that Other.

I have no doubt that ideologies and practices of all kinds—including, for example, Islam and Christianity—can and do promote violence under certain conditions. What I challenge as incoherent is the argument that there is something called religion—a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species—which is necessarily more inclined toward violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular. Unlike other books on religion and violence, I do not argue that religion either does or does not promote violence, but rather I analyze the political conditions under which the very category of religion is constructed.

This book, then, is not a defense of religion against the charge of violence.[2] People who identify themselves as religious sometimes argue that the real motivation behind so-called religious violence is in fact economic and political, not religious. Others argue that people who do violence are, by definition, not religious. The Crusader is not really a Christian, for example, because he does not really understand the meaning of Christianity. I do not think that either of these arguments works. In the first place, it is impossible to separate religious from economic and political motives in such a way that religious motives are innocent of violence. How could one, for example, separate religion from politics in Islam, when most Muslims themselves make no such separation? In my second chapter, I show that the very separation of religion from politics is an invention of the modern West. In the second place, it may be the case that the Crusader has misappropriated the true message of Christ, but one cannot therefore excuse Christianity of all responsibility. Christianity is not simply a set of doctrines immune to historical circumstance, but a lived historical experience embodied and shaped by the empirically observable actions of Christians. 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. War in the Middle East, for example, can be justified not merely on behalf of oil and freedom,

but on the basis of a millenarian reading of parts of the Christian scriptures. Christian churches are indeed complicit in legitimating wars carried out by national armies.

But what is implied in the conventional wisdom is that there is an essential difference between religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, on the one hand, and secular ideologies and institutions such as nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism, on the other, and that the former are essentially more prone to violence—more absolutist, divisive, and irrational—than the latter. It is this claim that I find both unsustainable and dangerous. It is unsustainable because ideologies and institutions labeled secular can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those labeled religious. It is dangerous because it helps to marginalize, and even legitimate violence against, those forms of life that are labeled religious. What gets labeled religious and what does not is therefore of crucial importance. 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.

I use the term "myth" to describe this claim, not merely to indicate that it is false, but to give a sense of the power of the claim in Western societies. A story takes on the status of myth when it becomes unquestioned. It becomes very difficult to think outside the paradigm that the myth establishes and reflects because myth and reality become mutually reinforcing. Society is structured to conform to the apparent truths that the myth reveals, and what is taken as real increasingly takes on the color of the myth. The more that some are marginalized as Other, the more Other they become. At the same time, the myth itself becomes more unquestioned the more social reality is made to conform to it. Society is structured in such a way as to make the categories through which the myth operates seem given and inevitable.

All of this makes the refutation of a myth particularly difficult. Linda Zerilli's comments about what she calls "a mythology" apply here:

> A mythology cannot be defeated in the sense that one wins over
> one's opponent through the rigor of logic or the force of evidence; a
> mythology cannot be defeated through arguments that would *reveal*
> it as groundless belief.... A mythology *is* utterly groundless, hence
> stable. What characterizes a mythology is not so much its crude or
> naïve character—mythologies can be extremely complex and sophis-
> ticated—but, rather, its capacity to elude our practices of verification
> and refutation.[3]

Particular configurations of power in society may be groundless, but that is precisely why they are difficult to argue against, because they were not established by argument to begin with. The religious-secular distinction, for example, was not established as a rational theory about how best to describe human social life; as I show in chapters 2 and 3, it was established as the result of some contingent shifts in how power was distributed between civil and ecclesiastical authorities in early modern Europe. It was established through violence, not by argument. The only way I can hope to refute the myth is to do a genealogy of these contingent shifts and to show that the problem that the myth of religious violence claims to identify and solve—the problem of violence in society—is in fact exacerbated by the forms of power that the myth authorizes. The myth of religious violence can only be undone by showing that it lacks the resources to solve the very problem that it identifies.

The definition of "violence" that I will assume in this book is therefore the same one that theorists of the supposed link between religion and violence appear to use, although only one of the figures I examine in chapter 1 offers an explicit definition of violence. "Violence" in their writings generally means injurious or lethal harm and is almost always discussed in the context of physical violence, such as war and terrorism.[4] I will assume the same general definition when discussing violence.

When I write of the myth of religious violence as a "Western" concept and discuss how it functions in the "West," I do not mean to imply that I think that such a monolithic geographical reality exists as such. The West is a construct, a contested project, not a simple description of a monolithic entity. The West is an ideal created by those who would read the world in terms of a binary relation between the "West and the rest," in Samuel Huntington's phrase.[5] The point of my argument is, of course, to question that binary.

When I use the terms "religion," "religious," and "secular," I recognize that they should often be surrounded by scare quotes. I have nevertheless tried to keep the use of scare quotes to a minimum to avoid cluttering the text.

Because of the pervasive nature of the myth of religious violence, I have tried to be as thorough as possible in showing the structure of the myth, providing a genealogy of it, and showing for what purposes it is used. Some readers may wonder if it is really necessary to examine nine different academic versions of the myth in chapter 1, for example, or to cite more than forty different instances in chapter 3 where Protestant-Catholic opposition in the "wars of religion" did not apply. I have tried to be thorough and detailed to show how pervasive the myth is and to dispel any objections that I am picking out just a few idiosyncratic figures. I have also found it necessary to be thorough precisely because such a pervasive myth will not fall easily. The more a myth

eludes our ordinary practices of verification and refutation, the more sustained must be the attempt to unmask it. It is not simply that the myth is pervasive, but that the very categories under which the discussion takes place—especially the categories of religious-secular and religion-politics—are so firmly established as to appear natural. Only a thorough genealogy can show that their construction is anything but inevitable.

This book consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, I examine arguments from nine of the most prominent academic proponents of the idea that religion is peculiarly prone to violence. The examples range widely across different scholarly disciplines and give different types of explanations for why religion is prone to violence: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, religion is irrational. They all suffer from the same defect: the inability to find a convincing way to separate religious violence from secular violence. Each of the arguments I examine is beset by internal contradictions. Most assume a substantivist concept of religion, whereby religion can be separated from secular phenomena based on the nature of religious beliefs. I show how such distinctions break down in the course of each author's own analysis. One of the authors discussed, seeing the contradictions involved in substantivist concepts of religion, employs a functionalist concept of religion and openly expands the definition of religion to include ideologies and practices that are usually called secular, such as nationalism and consumerism. As a result, however, the term religion comes to cover virtually anything humans do that gives their lives order and meaning. In that scholar's work, the term religion is so broad that it serves no useful analytical purpose.

After thus examining nine different examples of the religion-and-violence argument, I show how such arguments immunize themselves from empirical evidence. What counts as "absolute," for example, is decided a priori and is impervious to empirical testing. It is based on theological descriptions of beliefs and not on observation of believers' behavior. In response, I propose a simple empirical test to discover which ideologies and practices are in fact prone to violence. I argue that so-called secular ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those called religious. People kill for all sorts of things. An adequate approach to the problem would be resolutely empirical: under what conditions do certain beliefs and practices—jihad, the "invisible hand" of the market, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, the role of the United States as worldwide liberator—turn violent? There is certainly much useful work to be done on concrete empirical cases. Where the authors discussed go wrong is in trying to construct an argument about religion as such. The point is not simply that secular violence should be given equal attention to religious violence. The point is that the very

distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying.

Many of the authors I examine in the first chapter—including John Hick, Martin Marty, Mark Juergensmeyer, David Rapoport, and Scott Appleby—are eminent in their fields, and all have important insights to share on the origins of violence. The reason that their arguments fail has to do with their use of the category of religion. In the second chapter, I undertake a genealogy of the concept of religion, building on the growing body of work on how the concept has been formed in different times and places according to different configurations of power.

Claims about the violence of religion as such depend upon a concept of religion as something that retains the same essence over time, retains the same essence across space, and is at least theoretically separable from secular realities—political institutions, for example. In the second chapter, I give evidence for two conclusions. The first conclusion is that there is no such thing as a transhistorical or transcultural "religion" that is essentially separate from politics. Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority. The second conclusion is that the attempt to say that there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West. In this context, religion is constructed as transhistorical, transcultural, essentially interior, and essentially distinct from public, secular rationality. To construe Christianity as a religion, therefore, helps to separate loyalty to God from one's public loyalty to the nation-state. The idea that religion has a tendency to cause violence—and is therefore to be removed from public power—is one type of this essentialist construction of religion.

This chapter has five sections. In the first two sections, I show that religion is not a transhistorical concept. The first section is a history of ancient and medieval *religio*; the second section is a history of the invention of the concept of religion in the modern West by such figures as Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, Herbert of Cherbury, and John Locke. In the third section, I cite work by David Chidester, S. N. Balagangadhara, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others to show that religion is not a transcultural concept, but was borrowed from or imposed by Westerners in much of the rest of the world during the process of colonization. In the fourth section, I show that, even within the modern West, the religious-secular division remains a highly contestable point. In the fifth section, I conclude by arguing that what counts as religious or secular depends on what practices are being authorized. The fact that Christianity is

construed as a religion, whereas nationalism is not, helps to ensure that the Christian's public and lethal loyalty belongs to the nation-state. The idea that religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence must be investigated as part of the ideological legitimation of the Western nation-state. In the West, the religious-secular distinction has been used to marginalize certain practices as inherently nonrational and potentially violent, and thus to be privatized, in order to clear the way for the more "rational" and peace-making pursuits of the state and the market. As the following two chapters show, however, the pursuits of state and market have a violence of their own which is obscured by the myth of religious violence.

In chapter 3, I examine one of the most commonly cited historical examples of religious violence: the "wars of religion" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. The story of these wars serves as a kind of creation myth for the modern state. According to this myth, Protestants and Catholics began killing each other over doctrinal differences, thus showing the intractability and inherent violence of religious disagreements. The modern state was born as a peace maker in this process, relegating religion to private life and uniting people of various religions around loyalty to the sovereign state.

In this chapter, I question the standard story by looking at the historical record. The case is not as simple as the standard story implies. Christians certainly did kill each other, marking a signal failure of Christians to resist violence. But the transfer of power from the church to the state was not simply a remedy for the violence. Indeed, the transfer of power from the church to the state predated the division of Christendom into Catholics and Protestants and in many ways was a cause of the violence of the so-called wars of religion. The shift from medieval to modern—from church power to state power—was a long, complex process with gains and losses. Whatever it was, it was not a simple progressive march from violence to peace. The gradual transfer of loyalty from international church to national state was not the end of violence in Europe, but a migration of the holy from church to state in the establishment of the ideal of dying and killing for one's country.

The first section of chapter 3 shows how the story of the wars of religion is told by early modern thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau and by contemporary political theorists such as Judith Shklar, John Rawls, and Francis Fukuyama. Despite variations, all these thinkers present the cause of these wars as strife between Catholics and Protestants over religious beliefs, and the solution to these wars as the rise of the modern secular state. In subsequent sections of chapter 3, I break down the myth of the wars of religion into four components and show how each is historically misleading and inaccurate.

I show how much of the wars of religion involved Catholics killing Catholics, Lutherans killing Lutherans, and Catholic-Protestant collaboration. To cite only one example: Cardinal Richelieu and Catholic France intervened in the Thirty Years' War on the side of Lutheran Sweden, and the last half of the Thirty Years' War was essentially a battle between the Habsburgs and the Bourbons, the two great Catholic dynasties of Europe. Historians generally acknowledge—as political theorists do not—that other factors besides religion were at work in the wars of religion: political, economic, and social factors. The question then becomes: what is the relative importance of the various factors? Are political, economic, and social factors important enough that we are no longer justified in calling these wars "of religion"? I show how historians are divided on this question. To decide between these two groups of scholars, one would need to be able to separate religion from politics, economics, and social factors. I argue that such attempts at separation are prone to essentialism and anachronism. In the sixteenth century, the modern invention of the twins of religion and society was in its infancy; where the Eucharist was the primary symbol of social order, there simply was no divide between religious and social or political causes. This means that there is no way to pinpoint something called religion as the cause of these wars and excise it from the exercise of public power. The standard narrative says that the modern state identified religion as the root of the problem and separated it from politics. However, there was no separation of religion and politics. What we see in reality is what John Bossy describes as a "migration of the holy" from the church to the state. Ostensibly, the holy was separated from politics for the sake of peace; in reality, the emerging state appropriated the holy to become itself a new kind of religion.

With this contention in view, I show the implausibility of the idea that the transfer of power from the church to the state was the solution to the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The process of state building, begun well before the Reformation, was inherently conflictual. Beginning in the late medieval period, the process involved the internal integration of previously scattered powers under the aegis of the ruler and the external demarcation of territory over against other, foreign, states. I draw on the work of a range of historians, such as Heinz Schilling, J. H. M. Salmon, R. Po-Chia Hsia, Mack Holt, and Donna Bohanan, to show that much of the violence of the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries can be explained in terms of the resistance of local elites to the centralizing efforts of monarchs and emperors.

The point is *not* that these wars were really about politics and not really about religion. Nor is the point that the state caused the wars and the church was innocent. The point is that the transfer of power from the church to the

state was not the solution to the violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but was a cause of the wars. The church was deeply implicated in the violence, for it became increasingly identified with and absorbed into the state-building project. My conclusion in this chapter is that there is ample historical evidence to cast doubt on the idea that the rise of the modern state saved Europe from the violence of religion. The rise of the modern state did not usher in a more peaceful Europe, but the rise of the state did accompany a shift in what people were willing to kill and die for. *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori* would take on normative status. I argue that the legend of the wars of religion is not simply objective history, but is itself an ideological accompaniment to shifts in Western configurations of power, especially the transfer of lethal loyalty to the emergent state.

In the fourth and final chapter of the book, I ask: what purpose does the idea that religion causes violence serve for its consumers in the contemporary West? I show how useful the myth has been in the United States in authorizing certain types of power in both domestic politics and foreign policy. In domestic politics, it has helped to marginalize certain practices such as public school prayer and aid to parochial schools. At the same time, it has helped to reinforce patriotic adherence to the nation-state as that which saves us from our other, more divisive, identities. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence helps to reinforce and justify Western attitudes and policies toward the non-Western world, especially Muslims, whose primary point of difference with the West is said to be their stubborn refusal to tame religious passions in the public sphere. It is important to note that arguments about religion and violence are not necessarily antireligion, but are anti–public religion. Although the majority of Americans consider themselves to be religious, the overwhelming majority also regard the secularization of politics as foundational to any rational and civilized society. Muslims are commonly stereotyped as fanatical and dangerous because they have not learned, as "we" have, to separate politics from religion.

In the first section of chapter 4, I examine the use of the myth of religious violence in U.S. Supreme Court decisions since the 1940s. Previously, religion was generally seen as a unitive force, a glue that helped to bind the nation together. Beginning in the 1940s, however, the specter of religious violence was cited in case after case involving the religion clauses of the First Amendment, as the Court moved to ban school prayer, state aid for parochial schools, public religious displays on government grounds, and other practices. I note that the myth of religious violence was found useful at a moment in U.S. history in which the threat of the kind of sectarian violence against which it warned had never been more remote. I show as well how patriotism has been

invoked by the Court as the cure for religious divisiveness. Patriotic public invocations of God are specifically excluded from the category of religion and are therefore not subject to the kind of restrictions put on religion. Once again, what counts as religion and what does not is not dependent on the presence or absence of belief in God, but on a political decision about the inculcation of loyalty to the nation-state.

In the next two sections of chapter 4, I analyze the way that the myth of religious violence helps to construct non-Western Others and to legitimate violence against them. I examine both academic and journalistic uses of the myth by such figures as Mark Juergensmeyer, Bernard Lewis, Andrew Sullivan, and Christopher Hitchens and show that the argument that religion is prone to violence is a significant component in the construction of an opposition between the West and the rest. If religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence, then societies that have learned to tame religious passions in public are seen as superior and more inherently peaceable than societies which have not. Muslim societies, in particular, are seen as essentially problematic because they lack the proper distinction between religion and the secular. Indeed, Islam itself is seen as a peculiar and abnormal religion because it "mixes" politics with pure religion. Clashes between Western and Islamic governments and cultures can therefore be explained in terms of the inherently pathological nature of the latter. In attempting to understand why, for example, Iran since 1979 has seen the United States as its great enemy, U.S. support for the coup that installed the Shah's brutal, secularizing regime in 1953 can be overlooked in favor of "deeper" causes, in particular the inherently volatile nature of religion and its poisonous effects on Iranian politics. I show how the myth of religious violence is commonly used to bypass actual historical events and to find the answer to the question "Why do they hate us?" in the pathological irrationality of religiously based social orders.

In the next section, I give examples of how this kind of logic is used to justify Western military actions in the Islamic world. The logic is impeccable: if we are dealing with inherently violent and irrational social orders, there is not much hope of reasoning with them. We must be prepared to use military force. The hope is that, through both gentle and forceful means, we may spread the blessings of liberal social order to the Islamic world. Thus is the myth of religious violence used to justify violence. A strong contrast is drawn between religious and secular violence. Violence that is labeled religious is always peculiarly virulent and reprehensible. But violence that is labeled secular hardly counts as violence at all, since it is inherently peace making. Secular violence is often necessary and sometimes praiseworthy, especially when it is used to quell the inherent violence of religion.

I do not wish either to deny the virtues of liberalism nor to excuse the vices of other kinds of social orders. I think that the separation of church and state is generally a good thing. On the other side, there is no question that certain forms of Muslim beliefs and practices do promote violence. Such forms should be examined and criticized. It is unhelpful, however, to undertake that criticism through the lens of a groundless religious-secular dichotomy that causes us to turn a blind eye to secular forms of imperialism and violence. Insofar as the myth of religious violence creates the villains against which a liberal social order defines itself, the myth is little different from previous forms of Western imperialism that claimed the inferiority of non-Western Others and subjected them to Western power in the hopes of making them more like "us."

I do not have an alternative theopolitics of my own to present in this book. The purpose of this book is negative: to contribute to a dismantling of the myth of religious violence. To dismantle the myth would have multiple benefits, which I summarize in the conclusion to the final chapter. It would free empirical studies of violence from the distorting categories of religious and secular. It would help us to see that the foundational possibilities for social orders, in the Islamic world and the West, are not limited to a stark choice between theocracy and secularism. It would help us to see past the stereotype of nonsecular Others as religious fanatics, and it would question one of the justifications for war against those Others. It would help Americans to eliminate one of the main obstacles to having a serious conversation about the question "Why do they hate us?"—a conversation that would not overlook the history of U.S. dealings with the Middle East in favor of pinning the cause on religious fanaticism.

Bridging the threatening gap between *us* and *them* requires that we not only know the Other, but know ourselves. This book is intended as a contribution to that pursuit.