

SINS OF OMISSION: WHAT “RELIGION AND VIOLENCE” ARGUMENTS IGNORE

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A TRUISM IN ONE AREA OF THE study of religion meets up with an uncertainty in another area? The truism in question is the idea that religion has a dangerous tendency toward violence. It is treated as a truism both in academic circles and in the broader American culture. So many books and articles have been published promoting this thesis, especially since the terrorist attacks of 2001, that I have had difficulty keeping up.¹

The uncertainty in question is about the nature of religion. The inability to define “religion” has been described as “almost an article of

¹ A few examples are R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name: Religion in an Age of Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003); and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?: Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003).

methodological dogma" in the field of religious studies.² There is a significant group of scholars who think that the term "religion" is so problematic that it ought to be scrutinized for ideological baggage or dropped entirely. On the one hand, then, we have a group of scholars who are convinced that religion has a lamentable tendency toward promoting violence. On the other hand, we have a group of scholars who are not sure that religion even exists, except as an intellectual construct of highly dubious value. The first group of scholars carries on as if it did not know that the second group even exists. In this essay I want to bring the two together.

This may sound like I am setting up a tedious border skirmish among academics who thrive on haggling over definitions, but I am convinced that there is much more at stake. 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 are arbitrarily 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 invents a dichotomy between the religious and the secular and constructs the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in public to rational, secular forms of power. The danger is that, in establishing an Other which is essentially irrational, fanatical, and violent, we legitimate coercive measures against that Other. In contemporary discourse, the Muslim world especially plays the role of religious Other. *They* have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. *Their* violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. *Our* violence, by contrast, is rational and peacemaking, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence.

² Brian C. Wilson, "From the Lexical to the Polythetic: A Brief History of the Definition of Religion," *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

Rather than try to address many different examples of these arguments in this brief essay, I will focus on one book, Charles Kimball's *When Religion Becomes Evil*. Kimball is an academic, but his book was chosen as the Top Religion Book of 2002 by *Publishers Weekly*, and it has reached an audience beyond the academy. It is a generous, well-intentioned, and balanced book, full of evidence of violence done in the name of faith, but also of more hopeful signs that the "major religions" have resources within them to prevent evil done in their name. Nevertheless, the book is marred by the principal problem from which the "religion and violence" genre suffers: its inability to provide any convincing way to distinguish the religious from the secular. As a result, certain kinds of violence may be, willy-nilly, tacitly condoned.

The Problem of Definition

The force of Kimball's argument rests on the following claim that appears in the first paragraph: "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."³ One would think that the rest of the book would be devoted to proving such a claim, but Kimball apparently considers it too trite and obvious to need proving. The rest of the book is devoted to finding the root cause of the violence of religion and is organized around five "warning signs" to alert us to when religion is about to unleash its capacity for evil.

What would be necessary to prove the claim that religion has caused more violence than any other institutional force over the course of human history? One would first need a concept of religion that would be at least theoretically separable from other institutional forces over the course of history. Kimball does not identify those rival institutional forces, but an obvious contender might be political institutions:

³ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) 1. Henceforth citations of this book will be given parenthetically in the text of this essay.

tribes, empires, kingdoms, fiefs, states, and so on. The problem is that religion was not considered something separable from such political institutions until the modern era, and then primarily in the West. What meaning could we give to either the claim that Roman religion is to blame for the imperialist violence of ancient Rome, or the claim that it is the Roman "state" and not Roman religion that is to blame? Either claim would be nonsensical, because there was no neat division between religion and politics; Roman religion was largely a matter of duty to the emperor and to the gods of Roman civic life. Similar comments apply to ancient Israel, Confucian China, Charlemagne's empire, Aztec civilization, and any other pre-modern culture. Is Aztec religion or Aztec politics to blame for their bloody human sacrifices? Any attempt to prove Kimball's "trite" claim about the destructive influence of religion in history would get bogged down in hopeless anachronism.

It is not simply that religion and politics were jumbled up together until the modern West got them properly sorted out. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (to whom, with two others, Kimball's book is dedicated) showed long ago in his landmark 1962 book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, "religion" as a discrete category of human activity separable from "culture," "politics," and other areas of life is an invention of the modern West. In the course of a detailed historical study of the concept "religion," Smith was compelled to conclude that in premodern Europe there was no significant concept equivalent to what we think of as "religion," and furthermore there is no "closely equivalent concept in any culture that has not been influenced by the modern West."⁴ Smith still contends that it is possible to be "religious" without the concept,⁵ but other scholars have taken the anti-essentialist implications of his historical study to their logical conclusion. Richard King, Russell McCutcheon, and many others have focused on the way that the concept of religion was invented by modern Western scholars and bureau-

⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 19.

⁵ Smith 19.

crats, often in the interests of colonialist pursuits.⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith argues “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.... Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”⁷ Timothy Fitzgerald argues that there is no coherent concept of religion, and the term should be scrapped as itself a form of mystification.⁸

Fitzgerald’s conclusion is controversial, but it represents one increasingly significant solution to the problem of the definition of religion, a problem almost universally recognized by those who study religion. After two hundred years of *Religionswissenschaft*, the “scientific” study of religion, there is nothing close to agreement on what religion is. Yet very few of those who argue that religion has a tendency towards violence even pause to consider the problem.

At the beginning of his first chapter, Kimball describes how flustered his students become when he asks them to write a definition of religion. Kimball acknowledges the problem, but treats it as a merely semantic difficulty: “Clearly these bright students know what religion is”; they just have trouble defining it. After all, Kimball assures us, “Religion is a central feature of human life. We all see many indications of it every day, and we all know it when we see it” (15). Well, no we don’t. A survey of religious studies literature finds totems, witchcraft, the rights of man, Marxism, liberalism, Japanese tea ceremonies, nationalism, sports, free market ideology, and a host of other institutions and practices treated under the rubric “religion.”⁹ Kimball, on the other hand, recognizes none of these practices as religious. He deals with the problem of the

⁶ See, for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and ‘The Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999); Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, ed., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) xi.

⁸ Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ See Fitzgerald 17.

definition of religion by recommending a comparative empirical analysis that begins by “[g]athering data and organizing the facts about a particular religion” (18). After doing so, we may make some conclusions about what all religions have in common (22–3). The problem with this approach is that it begs the question about what qualifies as a religion to begin with. How do we know which phenomena qualify as religions so that we may begin our comparative analysis of them? Kimball mentions Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Native American religions and “indigenous tribal religions” (21–3). How did he arrive at this list? Why Shinto, when there is widespread scholarly doubt about its status as a religion, even among those who accept the usefulness of the category “religion”?¹⁰ Why Native American “religion,” when scholars acknowledge that Native American tribes do not traditionally distinguish between religion and the rest of life?¹¹

Some might wish to excuse Kimball and others on the grounds that virtually every scholarly concept has some fuzzy edges. We might not be able to nail down, once and for all and in all cases, what a “culture” is, or what qualifies as “politics,” for example, but nevertheless the concepts remain useful. All may not agree on the periphery of these concepts, but enough agreement on the center of such concepts makes them practical and functional. Most people know that “religion” includes Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the major “world religions.” Whether or not Confucianism or Shinto fits is a boundary dispute best left up to scholars who make their living splitting hairs.

This appears to be a common sense answer, but it misses the point rather completely. In the first place, when some scholars question

¹⁰ M. R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson, ed., *Religion and Society in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993) 4.

¹¹ For example, G. Cooper writes, “No tribe has a word for ‘religion’ as a separate sphere of existence. Religion permeates the whole of life, including economic activities, arts, crafts and ways of living” (G. Cooper, “North American Traditional Religion,” *The World’s Religions*, ed. Stewart Sutherland [London: Routledge, 1988] as quoted in Fitzgerald 81).

whether the category of religion is useful at all, it is more than a boundary dispute. There are some who do not believe there is a center. In the second place, and much more significantly, the problem with the “religion and violence” arguments is not that their working definitions of religion are too fuzzy. The problem is precisely the opposite. Their implicit definitions of religion are *unjustifiably clear* about what does and does not qualify as a religion. Kimball, for example, subjects the violence of Hinduism to close scrutiny, but passes over the violence of other kinds of nationalism in silence, despite a telling acknowledgment that “blind religious zealotry is similar to unfettered nationalism” (38). How are they different? Forms of “secular” nationalism do not appeal to God or gods, but neither do some of the institutions Kimball includes in his list of religions, such as Theravada Buddhism.

Kimball is typical of those who make the argument that religion is prone to violence in that he assumes a sharp distinction between the religious and the secular, without explicitly analyzing or defending such a distinction. This is not a peripheral issue; the entire force of the argument rests on this distinction. In making this assumption, however, Kimball and others ignore the growing body of scholarly work that calls the distinction into question. The case for nationalism as a religion, for example, has been made repeatedly from Carlton Hayes’ 1960 classic *Nationalism: A Religion* to more recent works by Peter van der Veer, Talal Asad, Carolyn Marvin, and others.¹² Kimball and others who make the “religion and violence” argument might wish to defend the religious/secular distinction against these other lines of argument, but in fact they do not. The argument that religion is prone to violence goes on as if “we all know religion when we see it,” while arbitrary and undefended decisions are made as to what constitutes a religion and what does not.

¹² Carlton Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Peter van der Veer, “The Moral State: Religion, Nation, and Empire in Victorian Britain and British India,” *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 3–9; Talal Asad, “Religion, Nation-State, Secularism,” *Nation and Religion*, 178–91; Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

We need not accept the judgments of the authors I have cited to see the problem. We need only to look at Kimball's own "warning signs" for when a religion is apt to turn evil. The middle five chapters of Kimball's book are each devoted to one of these warning signs, with an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter added at each end. According to Kimball, religion is likely to turn violent when it displays any of these features: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, the establishment of the "ideal" time, the belief that the end justifies any means, and a declaration of holy war. Religion does not necessarily exhibit these features, but "[t]he inclination toward these corruptions is strong in the major religions" (6). At the same time, Kimball holds out hope that correctives from within the religions will be marshaled to prevent violence (6).

What happens if we take seriously Kimball's own passing reference to the similarity between religious zealotry and nationalism, and search nationalism for the five warning signs? The first, absolute truth claims, is a regular feature of the discourse of nation-states at war. As Kimball himself states, George W. Bush, while "determined to keep the 'war on terrorism' from descending into a conflict between Christianity and Islam," invoked a "cosmic dualism" between good nations, led by the United States, and the forces of evil: "You had to align with the forces of good and help root out the forces of evil or be counted as adversaries in the 'war on terrorism'" (36). Are not claims to the universal goodness of liberal democracy absolute truth claims? If not, what distinguishes them from being "absolute"?

The second warning sign, blind obedience, depends on the rather subjective adjective "blind." Obedience is rigidly institutionalized for those whose job is to do violence on behalf of the nation-state. In the armed forces there is, for example, no allowance for selective conscientious objection, that is, the individual soldier deciding on the basis of conscience that any particular war is unjust. Once inducted, the soldier must fight in any war his or her superiors deem necessary, and the soldier must fight as he or she is ordered. Is this "blind" obedience in the service of violence?

The remaining three warning signs also seem to apply to nationalism. The third warning sign, the establishment of the “ideal” time, is so broadly defined that “making the world safe for democracy” or Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history”¹³ would seem to qualify. The history of modern warfare between nation-states is full of evidence of the fourth warning sign—the belief that the end justifies any means—from the vaporization of innocent civilians in Hiroshima to the practice of torture by over a third of the world’s nation-states, including many democracies.¹⁴ As for the fifth sign, the declaration of holy war, what counts as “holy” is unclear, but arguably the battle of good versus evil that President Bush believes his nation is leading would fit. “Secular” nationalism, then, would appear to exhibit—at times—all five of the warning signs.

Although I am focusing on one book for brevity’s sake, I want to give some indication that Kimball is not alone in having problems of definition. Richard Wentz’s book *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* identifies “religion” not only with “the world religions,” but also with faith in technology, secular humanism, consumerism, and devotion to Monday night football.¹⁵ Wentz defines “religion” so broadly that he concludes: “Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of (or as a representative of) religion.”¹⁶ If this is the case, then “religion” picks out nothing more distinctive than “whatever people deem really important.”

¹³ U.S. State Department official Francis Fukuyama argues that with the fall of communism history has now ended, in the sense that there are no viable alternatives remaining to the dominance of liberalism. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free, 1992).

¹⁴ In May 2004, photographic evidence of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers touched off an international furor, and brought to light the U.S. Army’s own findings of the beating and torture of Iraqi prisoners. See Douglas Jehl and Eric Schmitt, “Army Reveals Other Abuses,” *The New York Times* (5 May 2004): A1.

¹⁵ Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1993) 13–21.

¹⁶ Wentz 37.

In a book on public religion, historian Martin Marty argues that religion has a particular tendency to be divisive and therefore violent.¹⁷ When it comes to defining what “religion” means, however, Marty begs off giving a definition, since “[s]cholars will never agree on the definition of religion,”¹⁸ and instead gives a list of five “features” that mark a religion. He then proceeds to show how “politics” displays all five of the same features. Religion focuses our ultimate concern, and so does politics. Religion builds community, and so does politics. Religion appeals to myth and symbol, and politics “mimics” this appeal in devotion to the flag, war memorials, etc. And so on down the list.¹⁹ Marty offers five defining features of “religion,” shows how “politics” fits all five, and yet continues on as if the five features help us distinguish what is religion from what is not.

At this point, seeing the wall between “religious” violence and “secular” violence begin to crumble, the “religion and violence” theorist might try to shore up the distinction by arguing that the above warning signs *primarily* pertain to “religion,” meaning Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the other “world religions” commonly cited. The argument might go something like this: “Surely secular ideologies such as nationalism can get out of hand, but religion has a much greater tendency toward fanaticism because the object of its truth claims is absolute in ways that secular claims are not. The capitalist knows that money is just a human creation, the liberal democrat is modest about what can be known beyond human experience, the nationalist knows that a country is made of land and mortal people, but the religious believer puts faith in a god or gods or at least a transcendent reality that lays claim to absolute validity. It is this absolutism that makes obedience blind and causes the believer to subjugate all means to a transcendent end.”

¹⁷ Martin Marty, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000) 25–6.

¹⁸ Marty 10.

¹⁹ Marty 10–14.

The problem with this argument is that what counts as “absolute” is decided *a priori* and is immune to empirical testing. It is based on theological descriptions of beliefs and not on observation of the believers’ behavior. Of course Christian orthodoxy would make the theological claim that God is absolute in a way that nothing else is. The problem is that humans are constantly tempted to idolatry, to putting what is merely relative in the place of God. It is not enough, therefore, to claim that worship of God is absolutist. The real question is, what god is actually being worshipped?

But surely, the objection might go, nobody really thinks the flag or the nation or money or sports idols are their “gods”—that is just a metaphor. However, the question is not simply one of belief, but of behavior. If a person claims to believe in the Christian God but never gets off the couch on Sunday morning and spends the rest of the week in obsessive pursuit of profit in the bond market, then what is “absolute” in that person’s life in a functional sense is probably not the Christian God. Matthew 6:24 personifies Mammon as a rival god, not in the conviction that such a divine being really exists, but from the empirical observation that people have a tendency to treat all sorts of things as absolutes.

Suppose we apply an empirical test to the question of absolutism. “Absolute” is itself a vague term, but in the “religion and violence” arguments it appears to indicate the tendency to take something so seriously that violence results. The most relevant empirically testable definition of “absolute,” then, would be “that for which one is willing to kill.” This test has the advantage of covering behavior, and not simply what one claims to believe. Now let us ask the following two questions: What percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians would be willing to kill for their Christian faith? What percentage would be willing to kill for their country? Whether we attempt to answer these questions by survey or by observing American Christians’ behavior in wartime, it seems clear that, at least among American Christians, the nation-state—Hobbes’ “mortal god”—is subject to far more absolutist fervor than “religion.” For most American Christians, even public evangelization is considered to be in poor taste, and yet most endorse organized slaughter on behalf of the nation as

sometimes necessary and often laudable. In other countries or other traditions the results of this test might be very different. The point is that such empirical testing is of far more usefulness than general theories about the violence of “religion.”

Perhaps at this point Kimball would want to acknowledge the difficulties with claiming that “religious” ideologies have a greater tendency toward violence than “secular” ideologies, and simply claim that his book is only meant to be about one side of the problem. In other words, “yes, secular ideologies can be violent too, but this is a book about how to deal with religious violence. Someone else can write a book about other types of violence.” This answer would be inadequate, however, for the very distinction between “religious” violence and “secular” violence is what needs to be explained and defended. Without such an explanation and defense, there is no reason to exclude putatively “secular” ideologies, as Kimball has done, from his analysis of absolutism, blind obedience, and the rest. If the five warning signs also apply to “secular” ideologies, why not frame the book as an analysis of the circumstances under which *any* institution or ideology becomes evil? What purpose is served by framing the argument the way Kimball and others do? To this last question I will now turn.

Violence Condemned, Violence Legitimated

Nothing in my discussion of Kimball’s book takes anything away from the power of his many examples of violent acts committed throughout history by Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others. There are no excuses possible for these atrocities, and we cannot attempt a defense of Christianity, for example, by claiming that the Crusaders who sacked Jerusalem were not *really* Christians or did not *really* grasp the essence of Christ’s teaching. Kimball quite rightly reminds the reader that Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrines but a lived historical experience embodied and shaped by the empirically observable actions of Christians (26–9). The same applies to other traditions, institutions, and ideologies. Kimball’s indictments of a range of violent actions ring true. The reader gets a strong sense from the autobiographical comments that Kimball inserts into the narrative that these indictments are

motivated by a deep commitment to stop violence and create peace among warring peoples (e.g., 8–13).

Unfortunately, Kimball's indictments only apply to *certain kinds* of violence, and I fear that the argument as a whole can be used actually *to legitimate* other kinds of violence. In his chapter on holy war, for example, Kimball tells the story of the development of Christian thinking and practice on war as a fall from an original commitment to non-violence to a compromised stance of justifying bloodshed. According to Kimball, the "overwhelming evidence suggests that the followers of Jesus were pacifists for the first three centuries" (158). The ensuing story of Christian attitudes toward war is one of "how the religious ideal is easily compromised and antithetical behavior justified" (157). As the Just War doctrine developed, it served to support those in power and furthermore, says Kimball, it "also had no obvious connection with the Christian faith" (161). He quotes historian John Ferguson's conclusion that the Just War doctrine is "a replacement of the teaching of the New Testament by Greek philosophy or Roman law. There is nothing, literally nothing, distinctively Christian about the result."²⁰ According to Kimball, these justifications of violence came in handy during the Crusades, the era "when the behavior and example of many Christians was furthest removed from the teachings and example of Jesus" (161).

Given this narrative of the Just War tradition as a falling away from the original pacifism of Jesus and the early Christians, one might expect that Kimball—a self-identified Christian—would count himself a pacifist. He says otherwise in the same chapter:

Perilous situations, at times, may indeed warrant the decisive use of force or focused military action. But such action must not be cloaked in religious language or justified by religion. There is no doubt, in my view, that the attacks of September 11 and the prospect of additional mass murder

²⁰ John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 111, as quoted in Kimball 161.

through terrorism required swift and decisive action. The immediate potential for catastrophe—from the loss of life to widespread suffering resulting from economic and political instability—was, and remains, a real and present danger. While there are legitimate bases for collective military action in the community of nations, an appeal to religion is not one of them. (156)

Though Kimball is not a pacifist, he is clearly trying to limit violence, not justify it. His criticism of the Just War tradition should be read in this light; the Just War criteria have been used by Christians and others primarily as a way of giving cover to acts of violence, not restraining violence. He wants to proscribe religious justifications of violence because he believes that religion, with its absolutist tendencies, is prone to fan the flames of violence.

The problem is that there remain, in Kimball's view, perfectly legitimate non-religious, or "secular," ways of justifying violence. Far from a condemnation of violence, Kimball's analysis results in a selective condemnation of *certain kinds* of violence, labeled "religious." The problem is not violence as such; there are still, occasionally, good reasons for bombing and shooting people. To qualify as good, these reasons must be "secular." "Secular" violence, however regrettable, is sometimes necessary. "Religious" violence, on the other hand, is always reprehensible.

There are two related—and, in Kimball's case, almost certainly unintended—dangers to this hierarchization of kinds of violence. The first is that beliefs that are characterized as "religious" may be subordinated in the matter of violence to beliefs that are "secular," thereby weakening the possibility of "religious" resistance to violence. The "religious" believer is admonished "You have to learn to think for yourself!" (98), to take a critical distance from religious beliefs because of their tendency to dogmatism and absolutism. Are "secular" beliefs subject to such scrutiny? Is patriotism equally prone to absolutism? Kimball would probably want to say that religion is unwelcome in the public square only when it is being used to justify violence, but if that is the case, then it falls to secular reason to make the difficult decisions about when violence is necessary and when it is not. It would be hard to escape the

conclusion that religious beliefs have no place in decisions about the use of violence. It is possible, then, for a Christian to recognize the normative status of pacifism in the Christian tradition, but nevertheless trust the judgment of the putatively secular nation-state in matters of war. If, as Kimball suggests, “dangers abound when people take direction uncritically from religious authorities” (84), then it falls to secular authorities to decide when violence is necessary. Christian beliefs are effectively privatized in deference to loyalty to the nation-state, so that Christian resistance to the violence of the nation-state is muted. So, for example, a majority of American Christians supported the 2003 war in Iraq, despite the nearly-unanimous condemnation of the war by the leaders of the major Christian bodies.

The second danger in the hierarchization of types of violence is that there is a pro-Western bias built into the analysis. Those who have not yet learned to disassociate religion from the use of force are threats to the peace of the world and must be dealt with as such. *Their* violence—being tainted by religion—is uncontrolled, absolutist, fanatical, irrational, divisive. *Our* violence—being secular—is controlled, modest, rational, beneficial, peacemaking, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence. It is no secret who the primary “they” are today. In the “clash of civilizations” worldview, we in the West are threatened by a Muslim culture whose primary point of difference with ours is its stubborn refusal to tame religious passions in the public sphere. We in the West have long ago learned the sobering lessons of religious warfare and have moved toward the secularization of the use of force. Now we only seek to share our peaceful solution with the Muslim world. Regrettably, it is sometimes necessary to bomb them into democracy.

Kimball would certainly reject this crude program. He is a scholar of Islam who has spent many years amongst Muslims and others in the Middle East trying to foster mutual understanding. Despite his sympathy for Muslim ways, however, he is clear that the Muslim world must change, and it must look more like our world:

While many Muslims call for some type of Islamic state, others work toward other goals. Given our pluralist, inter-

dependent world, some Muslims argue for secular democratic states as the best model for the future.... Muslims living in Western democratic countries have an especially important role to play in openly discussing and debating viable, alternative social and political structures for the future. All of the above begs the question: Is it really possible to fashion an Islamic state in the twenty-first century? We will likely find out in the coming decade. Having spent a great deal of my professional life at the intersection of religion and politics in the Middle East, I have grave doubts. At some level, any state in which rights and status are tied to a particular religious tradition will relegate some of its citizens to second- and third-class status. (111)

The problem is not that Kimball has certain views about what is best for the Muslim world. The problem is that those views help frame the argument about “religion and violence” that masquerades as an objective, descriptive analysis of certain kinds of violent behavior. The framing of the argument is determined by a built-in bias toward condemning only certain kinds of violence. The choice of which kinds of violence are condemnable is arbitrary and based on a deep bias toward the Western Enlightenment way of narrating the world. Violence on behalf of the Muslim *umma* is always reprehensible. Violence on behalf of the Western nation-state is sometimes necessary and often praiseworthy.

This bias is seen in the way Kimball’s warning signs favor a kind of procedural liberalism. According to this view, the problem is not just that various religions hold certain beliefs that can lend themselves to violence. The problem is that religious people take their beliefs too absolutely. Their obedience to authorities is too uncritical or blind. This fanaticism leads to valuing ends over means and other excesses. The problem with religion is a problem of *degree*. In good liberal fashion, we cannot argue about the actual *content* of ultimate beliefs and values, because this is beyond the ken of reason. In liberalism, individuals have a right to believe anything they want, and we cannot adjudicate between true and false. We can merely ask that these beliefs not be taken too seriously in public. At the same time, there is no limit on the

degree of one's obedience to the secular nation-state. Those who make the "ultimate sacrifice" for the flag, to the point of killing and dying for it, are not called "fanatics," but "patriots."

If we really want to address the problem of violence in the contemporary world, we must treat violence as the problem—violence as such, that is, not absolutism, blind obedience, and the rest. Only in this way can we tell the difference between the abbot of a Trappist monastery and Jim Jones. Both command obedience, but only the latter does so in service to violence instead of peace. Only if we treat violence as the problem can we also tell the whole truth about the violence of putatively "secular" ideologies and nation-states.

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? The point is not simply that "secular" violence should be given equal attention to "religious" violence. The point is that the distinction between "secular" and "religious" violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and should be avoided altogether. Self-identified Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others would still be subject to scrutiny, but a fuller and more adequate picture of violence would emerge. The beliefs of the Jim Joneses and Osama bin Ladens of the world are a significant part of the problem of violence in the 21st century. At least equally significant is the evangelical zeal with which "free trade," liberal democracy, and American hegemony are offered to—or forced upon—a hungry world.