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CHAPTER 14

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: FROM PAWN TO SCAREGOAT

Paul N. Anderson

Introduction

As I traveled through Europe several years ago, I was impressed that people there blamed religion for much of the violence in Western civilization. Historically, of course, the notion of the divine right of kings was used to certify national power and authority, whether just or despotic. Moreover, appeals to religion often got stronger the more questionable regal policies became. The Crusades pitted Christian against Islamic forces, as well as against other kinds of Christians, and the aftermath of those conflicts continues. Civil wars in England, continental Europe, and America, as well as the world wars on the European continent, during the twentieth century were bolstered by religious claims on all sides. Great atrocities were defended on religious grounds. Saddam Hussein, who was involved in the killing of hundreds of thousands of Iranians and other Muslims, called a challenge to his regime an attack against Islam. But is the assumption that religion itself is to blame for the violence in the world a valid assumption or a simplistic reduction?

Indeed, John Lennon’s song “Imagine” captured the hearts of a generation by posing a utopian ideal wherein “nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too” promised a new messianic age wherein the world could finally live “as one” if religion were put in its deserved, marginal place. But is this an adequate hope, or even a sound analysis? Religion has great organizing potential, both for good and ill,
and the attitudes of many people allow for the consideration of only the negative side of that reality. Furthermore, because religion has great power to motivate people, it is frequently and easily yoked to political plans and agendas. Religion is unlikely to disappear from the face of the earth. Thoughtful people must, therefore, come to terms with its uses and abuses.

The purpose of this chapter is to sketch a broad outline of reality we face here and attempt to discern where the truth lies in the matter of the role of religion in society. I wish to make some cogent observations about whether religion tends to be appropriately indicted or used as pawn and scapegoat within popular discourse. In so doing, Jesus' admonition for his followers to be as wary as serpents and harmless as doves seems worth some thoughtful reflection.

Exposition

Let me begin with an illustration. "For God and Country" is a slogan that has great organizing potential and effect. Throughout the world and its history the pitting of these religious and social values against an alien foe frequently marshaled the willing hearts of young men and women into the cause of war and violence. Appeals to these values seem to imply that they are threatened by a malevolent foe, at home or abroad. Has that usually really been the case, in practical fact? Probably not. And yet, these twin human loyalties sometimes are used as a myth for informing the conscience of our youth for violence and war. One could even argue that much killing has been done in the name of preserving such ideals, whether with culpability before God or honoring of God or country. The blame lies with none of the ideals. The fault lies with the posing of dilemmas wherein the contrived threat is not the real one.

This fact came to me vividly when as a young pastor in seminary, I stood in the doorway of a small Indiana Friends church greeting people on their way out after a Sunday morning service. As I greeted a young man only three years younger than myself, I asked him, "So what are you going to be doing next year?" He told me he was going to enlist in one of the armed services, whereupon I inquired how that squared with his Quaker upbringing. His response was interesting. He looked into my eyes and asked, "If the Russians were going to come and rape and kill your mother or grandmother, would you just stand there and let it happen; or would you use force to prevent it?" Well, as any red-blooded man who loves his family, I hoped such a
Religion and Violence

plight would never happen and would have taken some sort of action to ensure alternative outcomes.

Rather than falling into the trap of a concocted dilemma, however, I found myself asking why one value was being pitted against another. As my eyes scanned the cornfields of the Indiana countryside, visible from the threshold of the meetinghouse, I really could not imagine Russian armies invading Hoosier territory seeking to do harm to mothers or grandmothers. The threat was absolutely nonexistent! But why, then, would a fine young man consider learning violence and the skills of warfare to do damage to other people's mothers and grandmothers, or at least their sons and grandsons, in response to such a contrived threat? The answer, of course, had to do with the simple matter of what was championed as of a high value. One of the highest of God-given values is the sanctity of beloved family relationships; and the mythical threat to this value was being used as a pawn, to erode principled Quaker commitments to peaceable ways of life.

Now is motherhood or grandmotherhood to blame for the violence resultant from even well-meaning desires to protect beloved family members? Should motherhood be marginalized along with religion? Should we add to Lennon's song "and no motherhood too"? Nonsense! God, Mom, and Apple Pie, icons of ultimate and beloved values, can be used as instrumental pawns to motivate moral compromise among the unwitting. Ironically, though, upon subsequent reflection it seems to be primarily God and religion that get scapegoated, not country, motherhood, or apple pie. Why?

The first question we should ask deals with what is meant by the term religion. We might define religion as an organized system of beliefs and practices designed to embrace and advance spiritual ideals and experiences and their applications in the world. Obviously, religious approaches to life's problems assume some sort of understanding of the divine—monotheistic, polytheistic, or atheistic. Religious aspirants organize themselves in a variety of models of faith and practice. While this analysis could be applied to any religious movement, I want to target the three great monotheistic and biblical religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with a primary focus on Christianity. My reasons for doing so are threefold: first, these three great religions encompass over half of the world's population and have contributed most extensively to the rise of progress and Western civilization. Indeed, their power and impact are an obvious fact to any student of world history and culture. Second, violence and
good have also been extensively associated with these three religions, leading to a third factor; the rise of European Christendom has not been evaluated in this regard with adequate thoroughness. Devotees and opponents of any faith tradition often fail to realize the crucial importance of both a celebration of one’s faith and the necessary critical analysis of it. What often results is either the exaltation or the denigration of religion, while adequate analysis will produce a more nuanced appraisal. Consider the following ways that religion contributes to the difficulties in this issue.

The Psychological Power of Religion

Religious faith and spirituality are a great source of personal empowerment and psychological sustenance. Humans have long derived personal strength from their religious practices and beliefs; people have always drawn personal strength from religious and spiritual resources. Historically, humans faced with impending challenges have sought divine assistance. That will likely always be so. Religion is powerful because it affects the human psyche and becomes one of the greatest sources of personal direction and strength.

Understandably humans create mental portraits of deity commensurate with their perceptions of need. From animism to monotheism, acute senses of human need form the lenses through which people construct appraisals of the Transcendent, and elements of projection will always inform theological constructs. This is not to reduce theology to psychology or to anthropomorphism, but it is to acknowledge the place and function of psychological need and projection within any theological or religious system. The point is to distinguish between religion as a culpable source of violence, and religion as a more benign resource empowering human endeavors, including managing inter-group and intra-group conflict.

On this score, God may get more credit for victory and defeat in warfare than deserved. Consider the fact that more Christians killed and were killed by other Christians during World War I than the total number of humans killed by other humans in the history of civilization altogether. Unfortunately, this phenomenon was not limited to that conflict alone. Christians’ killing of other Christians has been a tragic historic feature of Western civilization, including the Thirty Years War, English and American Civil Wars, Spanish and Dutch wars, both world wars, and many other conflicts. The point here is not to suggest naively that religion makes people more violent.
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The point is to connect the constructive power of religion with the fact that warfare taxes all resources, physical, economic, industrial, and psychological. Humans are inclined, in extremity, to use their resources in evil ways. Like physical exercise, religious exercise will be accessed as a resource to the degree to which it is deemed beneficial. I suppose there might be less conflict if people would get less exercise and become less physically able to do harm to others, but blaming exercise and physical health for the devastating results of war misses the point. Food provides sustenance for doing violence or good, but depriving people of food is not the best way to avert conflict; they could then not do good either. Should food be blamed for damage done under the strength it affords, or should electricity be credited with fostering the death penalty, rather than crediting it with affording healthy light and useful power? Why blame religion when people use it monstrously to act unwisely or immorally, violently?

This relates to the theological problem that Islamic warriors on both sides prayed for victory to the same Allah in the Iranian-Iraqi war of the 1980s. What do we make of the fact that European Christians have prayed to the same God for victory against one another for the last 2,000 years, as did Christian Unionists and Confederates during the American Civil War? Do we ascribe victory to God’s favoring one side over the other? Whatever the case, one’s belief in God’s sovereignty conflicts inevitably with the tragedy of the warfare. Inhumanity is done to persons beloved of God, and this poses a striking theological problem. Does God take sides? While claiming divine assistance is appreciated on personal levels, crediting a just and loving God with the devastating outcomes of warfare, where victimizing is the center of the enterprise, remains problematic. One must acknowledge that people will draw on religious and spiritual resources in facing the great ordeals of life, which include the throes of warfare, but crediting religious resources for the conflict and its outcomes is quite another matter.

On the other hand, religion can contribute to violence on personal and psychological levels, and this tendency should be factored into the equation. An important aspect of religious power is that it creates an “us.” It solidifies group identity and appeals to religious certainty, eternal consequences, and principled loyalties. These shape individuals and groups. Indeed, Yahweh’s warfare against tribal adversaries in
Hebrew Scripture, the dehumanization of infidels in the Qur'an, and the temporal and eternal warnings against the unfaithful in Christian Scripture function to create an us-versus-them mentality common to prejudice and violence. In that sense, the organizing power of religion to create intra-group solidarity becomes a devastating contributor to inter-group opposition. Religious ideology or motivation, thus, can contribute to the planning for and the carrying out of violence; but within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, religion also makes claims for the humanity of “the other” and calls for loving regard and gracious behavior toward even the stranger and the enemy. So religion, while empowering the individual to meet obligations or needs, even if violence-producing ones, can also function to soften the hearts of combatants toward one another. This experience is attested to by many.

It is also a fact that personal rage and hatred in the name of God’s justice may emerge as one considers injustice and violence done against one’s people, or even against other groups. The impulse to right particular wrongs can be a deeply religious one, and some may resort to violence as a remedy to perceived transgressions. The point here is to consider that while religion has a great capacity to strengthen and motivate people on personal psychological levels, this does not imply that it is to be blamed when those energies are misused, or implicate God with what is done in God’s name. God, like Mom and Apple Pie, may provide strength for the day, psychologically and otherwise, but deeds performed in the name of religious aspirations can also transgress religious appeals for altruism and the humane treatment of others. The honest evaluator will see the difference.

Sociological Aspects of the Equation

Religion and appeals to God play significant organizational roles in society, and these factors are also worth considering here. Some may yoke the justice of God to the deserved treatment for perpetuators of violence and injustice. They would then be operating on what James Fowler calls the Stage Two level of Faith Development, and the societal organization of its energies against such perceived threats illustrates Stage Three, Synthetic-Conventional Faith. On this level, persuasive leaders foster group solidarity to mobilize energy for a particular course of action. Obviously, the names of God and religion offer great organizing potential in such ventures, and few values are as deeply held as religious and patriotic ones.
Such appeals can instill a sense of group solidarity, mobilizing an us-versus-them mentality, deprecating the values, objectives, and religious distinctions of the “enemy” while elevating one’s own. While there is much in the Bible and the Qur’an that speaks against this, the demonizing of other groups and their values energizes such destructive pathos and inspires a sense of superiority and hence self-justification in the spirit of the perpetrating group(s). When others become objectified and dehumanized, it becomes more tolerable to work for their demise. Ironically, however, the greatest oppositions against such devaluations are also religious ones. The anti-nationalistic rhetoric of Jonah and Ruth, for instance, call for Israel to consider God’s working within and through even the pagan nations of Assyria and Moab. Jesus’s dining with “sinners” and outsiders declared in the name of God an inclusive embrace of “the other” even before they offered any solidarity from their side. Indeed, if one takes Jesus’ actions and teachings on the love of enemies as representative of the divine will, one is struck by the fact that God does not regard any individual or group as “the other.” So why do Christians allow themselves to do this when the God present in Jesus does not? The answer may be found in the employment of particular biblical themes and texts to legitimate violence.

One of the primary ways that religion contributes to violence is that sacred scriptures and religious motifs are used as legitimators of violence, a significant reason religion needs critical evaluation. Texts that warrant wars and violence in the Bible or Qur’an in the name of a just and loving God raise the question as to how he could command such atrocities as those mentioned in the Hebrew conquest narratives of the books of Joshua and Judges. These are juxtaposed to clear teachings of Jesus on nonviolence and love of enemies. This kind of text is a difficult theological problem in the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Surely such narratives in any sacred scripture represent a confusion of the will of God with the foreign policy ambitions of the nation involved. It is useful to notice several features of Israel’s “Holy War” theology that we easily lose sight of when we appropriate the violence of the conquest narratives to justify our behavior today.

Israel’s view of Holy War stood in contrast to the plundering and subjugation practiced by surrounding nations. A second feature of biblical Holy War was that combatants were to be chaste in their dedication to God. Even relations with one’s wife were forbidden (see Uriah’s example in 2 Sam. 11), and the holy warrior was to be dedi-
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ated to fighting for Yahweh alone in the course of battle. Quite convenient, modern appeals to the conquest narratives omit these aspects of the biblical "precedent" for engaging in violence today. A third feature is the emphasis that Yahweh was doing the fighting. An explicit contrast was drawn between Yahweh's deliverance by means of powers of nature and other exceptional media (see Exod. 15) and the standing armies of Pharaoh, or even Saul. Indeed, Israel's Holy War hinges more upon trust in Yahweh than in its own ingenuity or military might.

Appeals to the wars of the Bible rarely take these features into account when these texts are appropriated for the purpose of legitimating violence. The mention of an event or topical development in the Bible does not imply its appropriateness for ethical practice today. Indeed, many times a sequence of events is narrated simply to emphasize the story, complete with its tragic outcomes, and many times narrations of violent events serve the function of warning against such in the future. Instructive asides emerge sometimes indirectly, and their adequate inference always requires a discerning interpretation.

A second biblical theme used to legitimate violence and force may be found in a narrower text, Romans 13:1-7. Here the Apostle Paul appears to be sanctioning the divine right of kings, advocating force and violence as divinely ordained if commanded by a magistrate. On one hand, Paul calls upon his readers to submit to the magistrates, arguing that their appointment as leaders is divinely ordained and that God has even granted some the "ministry of the sword." From such a passage, one might construe a theocratic model of governance by which God is thought to endorse whatever directives and laws a monarch commands, whether or not they are in keeping with God's ways as revealed in Scripture and represented by Christ.

Upon closer analysis, however, such is not the case. Within the larger context, the passage fits into the broader interest of Paul's seeking to win Gentiles to the faith by means of a loving and nonviolent witness. In the verses preceding Romans 13:1-7, Paul introduces the passage by calling readers to live at peace with all persons, as much as it is possible to do so, in order that by one's loving example "coals" of convicting fire will stir the conscience of others toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 12:9-21). In the passage following verses 1-7, Paul advocates the way of love as the means by which to fulfill the entirety of the law (Romans 13:8-10). The point to be noted here is that submission to authorities in Romans 13:1-7 is
called for as a means of distinguishing the Jesus movement as one characterized by nonviolence and love.

Where followers of the Galilean Jesus might be confused with followers of “the Samaritan,” or Theudas, or “the Egyptian,”9 or even Jewish zealotry, Paul calls for intentional distancing from such associations. This may have been called for owing to the fact that Jesus had been put to death on a Roman cross, the standard penalty for sedition and criminality in the Roman provinces. The point here is that extracting from Romans 13:1–7 a theological platform of the divine right of kings, where even the violent or idolatrous mandates of the magistrate are to be obeyed as the directive of God, misinterprets Paul’s content entirely. His primary concern was calling for upstanding living as Christians so as to be good witnesses to others.

A third example of how biblical content gets distorted involves the manipulation of Jesus’s teachings and deeds in order to support violence. Consider these misappropriations of Jesus’ presentation in the Gospels: “Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple with a whip; we’ll drive the Viet Cong out of South Viet Nam with napalm.” “Jesus said, ‘He who lives by the sword will die by the sword,’ and those Yankees/Rebels will pay for what they’ve done!”10 Notice how the first distortion infers that it is people rather than animals that are driven out? The text of John 2:15 says nothing about violence used against people, and the action was a dramatic prophetic action rather than a forcible program staking out territory and bringing injury to others.

The second example distorts a passage in which Jesus has just commanded his disciple to put away his sword (Matt. 26:52), stating clearly that the way of violence is not his way. The passage cited is a wisdom-saying emphasizing the futility of violence, not a command to violent action. If you kill you will be killed, especially by those wishing to dominate you. Does Jesus ever condone or command violence? No. He calls for the love of enemies, and he outlines the way of the Kingdom in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Here the ethos of God’s active reign is contrasted to the ways of the world. In contrast to conventional approaches to injustice and violence, Jesus called for his followers to love others unconditionally, to love even one’s enemies, to renounce the right to vengeance and to demonstrate a spirit of exceeding generosity, to seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, to turn the values of the world upside down, to embrace the cross, and be peacemakers in the world.11
In each of the above examples, the Bible does not advocate violence as our way of life. It advocates against it. Alongside these themes and passages appearing to support violence, most of the biblical witness calls for people to be more loving toward one another and to trust in God’s provision and protection rather than relying on forcible means. The Minor Prophets especially exhort Judah and Israel not to trust in Egypt and its chariots for defense, and from a political standpoint, they were right. Pacts with Egypt in the eighth through the sixth centuries B.C.E. ironically evoked retaliatory responses from the Assyrians, and later the Babylonians, and one wonders how history might have been different if Israel and Judah had trusted in Yahweh rather than chariots. What might have happened in Western civilization if Paul’s exhortation in Romans 13 would have been interpreted appropriately as an appeal for the advancement of the gospel rather than the institutionalizing of the divine right of kings?

Genuine theocracy has not been the problem in the violent history of Europe. Rather, equating any human regime with the transcendent reign of God was the error. Much evil and violence have been carried out in the name of a religious certification of abusive human leadership. Paul was calling believers to live within the law in order that by their loving and upright examples others might be won to Christ. Even the good name of Jesus has been used to justify violence, though his example and teaching are the greatest source of nonviolent social action in human history. How can these things be? Religious authority and, in particular, distorted biblical interpretations are often used to create social toleration of violence when such would otherwise be unconscionable. This feature is especially vulnerable to manipulation by propagators of violence within and outside of religious communities.

Religious Equity and Its Political Manipulations

A corollary feature of sociological factors in these matters is the fact that entire societies get yoked into conflicts, and members of those societies are often forced into structured dilemmas that have no good options. Like psychological power, sociological power can be harnessed and manipulated politically, so a critical analysis of our subject must distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic appeals to religion. When religion or any other asset is perceived as political equity, to be exploited and harnessed for some questionable scheme or program, it invariably becomes subject to corruption and misrep-
representation. Indeed, religious power at times gets yoked to political campaigns or objectives; and one of the prime means of eroding principled opposition to violence is to pit another principle, often a religious concern, against it, forcing the choice of one value over another. This is one of the most common ways in which religious objection to violence is subverted by political manipulation. People who might otherwise object to violence are often maneuvered into situations in which they must fight lest another value be threatened. One might comply with the national call to a questionable war lest one contribute to national disunity at a critical or precarious moment in a nation’s destiny, when the issues at stake are nonetheless quite ambiguous. If he or she does not go along with the prescribed actions a cherished value or commitment is jeopardized, and then that person becomes subject to villainization as a traitor or coward. This is how structural evil gets leverage. Good persons are forced into situations in which they must carry out harmful deeds, and moral persons become trapped in immoral societal structures.

This is also one of the reasons religion then gets interpreted as the source of the problem. Where political powers are the ones marshaling loyalty to a cause, using religion as a pawn, they will rarely construe the inevitable blame as being theirs in the aftermath of violent campaigns. Scapegoats will be concocted, and within the age of secularism, religion becomes an easy target. Is this a fair representation of the root cause of violence? Is this an honest critique? Moral persons within immoral societies will indeed draw upon all available resources for their sustenance and support, and notions of the good are often defined in provincial rather than universal terms. God’s name will be invoked and thanked for victory in the struggles of life, especially ultimate ones, and good and moral individuals and groups will connect the victory of God with their own. From a more transcendent perspective, however, victory at the expense of others whom God also loves must be considered highly problematic.12

The temptation to subvert and use religious authority for ulterior motives will always be a real one. Political powers cannot but see religion (or even irreligion) as a resource to be tapped in their campaigns, especially military ones, or those in which morally questionable economic or social policies are employed. For instance, in the hope of preserving a terribly unjust societal structure such as slavery, the Epistle to Philemon was employed by advocates of slavery. There Paul encouraged Onesimus, a fugitive slave, to return home to his master; and passages in Matthew and John portraying hoī Ioudaioi (either “the
Jews” or “the Judeans”) as those who rejected Jesus as the Messiah have been yoked to anti-Semitic campaigns in the Third Reich and elsewhere. Blaming the Bible or religion as the sole culprit in these grievous matters, however, is wrongheaded. Paul calls for Philemon also to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ and declares elsewhere that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave person nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3:28). John and Matthew are the most Jewish of New Testament writings. They were written by Jewish authors, and they both argue centrally that Jesus was indeed the Jewish Messiah. Nonetheless, the irreligious and even the marginally religious cannot but regard biblical and religious authority as societal equity to be yoked and leveraged, and such should be distinguished from more authentic and intrinsically motivated approaches to religion.

The fact that such subversion continues to be possible requires consideration, though, in and of itself. Why is it that programs of violence and injustice, when propounded with religious associations, also dupe the unwitting? A likely guess is that this is at least partially due to the uncritical character of religion. As the heart of religious experience centers in faith-related perspective and praxis, the faithful within any movement may be ill equipped to distinguish legitimate appeals to biblical and religious authority from their alternatives. As a step forward, religious appeals and all such claims should be subjected to the spotlight of critical scrutiny. Considering the implications and bases of religious appeals is an important step in considering effectively their authenticity. Here, Mark Twain’s short story “The War Prayer” illustrates this approach dramatically. After a pastor prays a great and moving prayer for the victory of sons and loved ones being sent off to battle, a mysterious stranger interprets the prayer before the group and asks if people really want to have their prayer answered. Any prayer for victory is also a prayer for defeat, and such will always involve devastating human costs. This mysterious stranger asked, as a messenger from the throne on high, whether indeed people had considered the other side of their requests. He humanized the reality of war and its effects and asked if people still desired such. The point here is clear. Even sincere and morally upstanding people can become engaged in conflicts, applying religious resources to a cause, without considering the devastating consequences of success, even if they are diametrically opposed to the central values of that religion. So religion gets used sincerely from the inside, as a pawn, often distortedly, especially when people do not consider the global and long-term consequences of their aspirations.
Twain concludes the story with a provocative, ironic twist. After showing the devastating carnage of what victory would bring, he described the congregation as not understanding a single thing the messenger from on high had communicated, for they thought he was a lunatic!

Because religion is powerful and authoritative, the temptation to subvert it by those with political motives will be irresistible. The Bible and religion may be used by the religious, but their yoking will also be attempted by the irreligious, even those who have no religious commitment or who are anti-religious. The latter may also be tempted to blame religious factors as scapegoats, either in motivating adherence to a program of violence or in failing to support it adequately. It may also be used for diverting blame for unsavory outcomes. The discernment of such ploys is central to a critical and adequate appraisal of the appropriate role, function, and claims of religion. Unfortunately, even religious people have at times accepted such blame uncritically rather than considering them from a more accurate perspective. Jesus’ admonition for his disciples to be wary as serpents and harmless as doves deserves consideration.

**Harmless as Doves and Wary as Serpents**

It may be that authentic, truth-seeking religion leads individuals or groups into violent conflicts in the world, but the majority of religious impulses evoke empathy for humankind. Self-sacrifice and commitments to justice and peace in the world are universal religious values. This being the case, a world with “no religion too” might not be a safer or a more humane one after all. While religion has indeed contributed extensively to violence against others, that has historically been the result of religious distortions; either a narcissistic religious focus, a misguided use of the Bible or Qur’an, or manipulation that yokes the personal and social power of religion to a particular political cause.

Jesus, however, called his followers to love their neighbors (Matt. 22:39) and even to love their enemies, refusing to return harm for harm sustained (Matt. 5:38–48). Why is it that these clear admonitions have gone unheeded? Many explanations may be posed, but a central factor in Christians’ sidestepping the clear commandment of Christ on nonviolence is the failure to distinguish authentic religious experiences and directions from false and manipulated ones. From the inside, religious adherents too easily fail to recognize their reli-
Religion and Violence

After religious loyalties being used as pawns designed to legitimate violence. On this matter, another commandment of Jesus is especially relevant, within Christianity and beyond: his calling to be *wise as serpents* as well as harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16).

At a major consultation of the National Council of Churches of Christ in 1995, Eric Gritch called for a recovery of “serpentine wisdom” among the faithful. Too readily, well-meaning Christians take the “harmless as doves” part of Jesus’ dictum as an injunction to doormat passivity, when it is not. The goodness of God cannot be furthered by evil means, and active engagement is indeed called for, but not in unwary directions or counterproductive methods. Here furthering the active reign of God in the world involves challenging the *cosmos* not by imitating its evil ways of manipulation and force, but by providing a third alternative. Elements of this wiser approach include the following:

- Challenge and expose concocted dilemmas that erode moral commitments against the use of violence and force. Ask why only two negative alternatives are being posed and assess critically whether there might be a third alternative providing a way forward.
- Examine critically appeals to the Bible or religion in which religious authority is leveraged toward the use of force or violence. Demand sound exegetical approaches to biblical citations, considering also alternative passages and interpretations, and ask whether appeals to religion represent the authentic teaching of that faith or a distortion of it.
- Expose the yoking of religious authority to politically motivated programs and platforms. Challenge the harnessing of religion as a pawn in a way that threatens to distort religious values at the expense of intrinsic religious loyalties. Consider whether there might be other parts of that religion’s ethos that militate against such actions.
- Challenge the use of personal and sociological religious power in support of programs of destruction. Find ways of preserving the value of the sustaining power of religion without blaming religious factors for the ways it may be used by others.
- Join together within and across faith community boundaries, refusing to dehumanize other faiths or persons in the name of God’s transcendent love, calling for authentic adherence to the highest of one’s religious values. Especially within one’s religious tradition, leaders and others should be willing to criticize and correct those religious spokespersons who yoke religious authority and the legitimation of violence or irreligious values and actions. Denounce
quickly and loudly attempts to subvert the faithful in any direction unbecoming of the central ethos of that religious tradition and clarify who speaks for whom.

Conclusion

In sum, religion shares a great deal of blame for violence in the world, but it also deserves greater credit for good and redemption in the world, and these features should be included in any balanced appraisal of the subject. Of particular interest is the question of why religion gets used so deceptively as a pawn, functioning to legitimate violence, especially when those same religions tend to teach and work extensively against violence. Especially the faithful may tend to be unwitting in their failure to detect the manipulation and co-opting of religious power and equity, and on these matters religious people of all faiths need to be wary as serpents and harmless as doves. In so doing, incisive questions need to be asked, and tendencies to use religion as a pawn must be radically diminished. In all of this it is important to bear in mind that much of the yoking of religious political equity to one program or another might not be conducted by the authentically religious, and the same should be considered when evaluating claims that religion is the culpable cause of tragic outcomes. In both cases religion is used as a pawn and a scapegoat when neither is entirely deserved.

Notes

1. It is estimated that as many as 60 million people lost their lives in the First World War, including noncombatants, and most of these would have considered themselves “Christian.” Further, casualties on all sides were inflicted by persons of Christian background, and it is the tragic irony of these facts that led Karl Barth and other Neo-Orthodox theologians to abandon the doctrine of modern liberalism that enlightened humanity had transcended Adam’s fall. Indeed, in the Christian involvement in both world wars, the depravity of humanity was exposed as never before, precisely because of the fact that Christians were so adept at lethal warfare, even at the expense of killing other Christians! It was this stark reality that led in 1948 to discussions for forming the World Council of Churches (WCC) in hopes of minimizing the likelihood of persons of faith being subverted into the massive lethal ventures of modern warfare.
2. Indeed, Christianity has contributed greatly to the endeavor to make the world less violent. One of the reasons the World Council of Churches was organized was to see if Christianity could contribute to world peace and justice more than it had in the first half of the twentieth century. At the first Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam (1948), the report of Section IV (on "The Church and International Disorder") began with the following point: "War is contrary to the will of God." (See *Man's Disorder and God's Design: The Amsterdam Assembly Series* [New York: Harper & Brothers, Volume IV, 217-228].) See also the following statement signed by 78 Christian leaders entitled "The Church, the Christian and War," first produced in *Fellowship* XIV, No. 8 (1948, 17-24) but reprinted in *A Declaration if Peace*, edited by Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop, and John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991, 79-91). In these and many other statements, Christian leaders have been the most insistent on nonviolent responses to correcting injustice.


6. See the companion essay within this collection: "From Conquest to the Teachings of Jesus: How Can the Same God Command Both Genocide and the Love of Enemies?"

7. In 1 Samuel 8, Israel's lust for a king like other nations is presented not as the abandonment of Samuel and the prophetic system of leadership (even though it was); it is portrayed as the abandonment of God and theocracy proper (see Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology if the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity if Disunity in the Light if John 6* [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997, 178, 229, 239]). Moralizing paragraphs punctuate the rest of the Samuel's narration of Israel's history with the following laments: This is why the kingdom eventually fell apart—Israel lusted for a king (envying the other nations), and God gave them their desire, tragic though it was. Along with standing armies, chariots, and royal entourage, Israel lost its sons and daughters to the king's service and became encumbered with burdensome taxation.

8. See Gideon's example, for instance, in Judges 7. Gideon reduced his army from 32,000 to 300, and the enemy was successfully routed, owing to
an ingenious surprise attack at night—an indication of Yahweh’s fighting
for Israel rather than its fighting on its own.

9. These were three messianic pretenders who arose in Palestine within
two and a half decades after the death of Jesus. Josephus mentions their
movements but also distinguishes John the Baptist as an authentic prophet.
For more on Jesus’ contradistinction from these first-century figures, see
Barbara Gingerich and Marlin Miller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994,
104–130, especially 105–109).

10. Consider the gripping Broadway musical Civil War, where all sides of
the conflict are portrayed graphically. For the appropriation of biblical
themes in the conflict, consider the songs “By the Sword” and “Judgment
Day.”

11. See the fuller treatment of this theme in “Jesus and Peace” by Paul N.
Anderson, especially 109–120.

World (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), where the Good News of
Christ is contrasted to the conducting of violence, especially where weapons
of mass destruction are involved.

13. A classic example of the contrast between using religion as a pawn
and adhering to the heart of one’s religious core is the contrast between the
ordinary German Christians, on the one hand, and the Confessing
Christians, on the other, in Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. Hitler’s moti-
vations cannot be construed adequately as authentic religious concerns;
rather, he used Christianity as a tool in his nationalistic expansion, distort-
ing the religion he co-opted. On the other hand, the Barmen Declaration of
1934 sought to recover the center of Christian faith and practice, the teach-
ing and example of Christ; and its adherents were willing to suffer for their
adherence to the truth as they understood it. One thing that is inexcusable
about the subversion of Christian Germany during the rise and fall of the
Third Reich is the way that even academics and biblical theologians did not
oppose the misappropriation of texts and theological authority. This fact
stands as a dark enigma in the history of biblical interpretation and theology.

14. The NCCC-USA Faith and Order Consultation, called “The
Fragmentation of the Church and its Unity in Peacemaking” was held at the
Notre Dame Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies on June
13–17, 1995. The “Learnings” in the final report include this paragraph
under point 8:

As Christians, many of us would endorse—instead of “fight or
flight”—Jesus’s way of creative nonviolence which confronts enemies
by unmasking sin and injustice. But we need to know just how to do
this. Formation or training in peacemaking, then, is important on an
ongoing basis, not just in times of crisis or war. Some consultation par-
ticipants recalled the missionary injunction of Jesus to “be wise as ser-
pents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16) as a call for healing and a summons to sharp discernment and vigilance against the sin of playing God (Gen. 3:5). Others recalled means and instruments of spiritual formation which can be drawn from Christian history—monastic discipline, penitential discipline for those who have killed as soldiers or guardians of the peace, or critical involvement in the affairs of the world.

15. On this matter, see the Powers Trilogy by Walter Wink, especially the award-winning Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).