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In Vain

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In Vain: Violence in God's Name

Jim Kenney

[Interreligious Engagement Project](#)

Part I: Key Analyses of Religion and Violence

Violence, terror, and war defaced the 20th century. Their awful discoloration of our era was heightened by the exacerbating role of religious (and ethnic) identity. The conjuring of evil in our time has all too often been intensified by the admixture of "good". That frames the questions at issue. What are the sources of violence, terror, and war? How does "good" intensify "evil"? Finally, when and how did religion become the most terrifying face of our age? When, in the modern period, did violence and religion become intertwined in the minds of so many thoughtful people?

And how, in the enlightened 20th century was God's name taken so often and so destructively in vain? Of course the concepts of religion and violence have hardly been estranged in human history. But by the early 20th century, the hope (at least in religious circles) was that religion would at last become a steadily flowing wellspring of peace and justice.

It wasn't to be. Try this question in your group, your family, congregation, circle of friends, or workplace: "What are the principle sources of violence in today's world?" I'll wager that "religion" places #2 or #3 in the tally. What would Jesus say? Or Moses, Muhammad, or Buddha? Well, of course, they knew the power of religion to unite and to bring harmony; but just as surely they knew religion's potential to divide. And each must have understood (as so many scriptures attest) the power of religion to conjure up violence.

Perhaps a better question would be, "What would Gandhi or King say?" Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King – or many of the tens of thousands of peace and justice workers giving their all and often their lives in the struggle – would attest to the power of religion to unite and to uplift. They would also testify to the power of pseudo-religion to incite, to inflame, and to enrage. Ultimately, a religious group, cult, or community can indeed become evil.

Charles Kimball

When that happens, says Charles Kimball (*When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*), the group begins to exhibit characteristic manifestations, "five warning signs".

1. Absolute truth claims made with rigidity and certainty.
2. Blind obedience to charismatic leaders.
3. Pursuing an ideal time. ("...groups that are certain when God's future

should happen – or is going to happen...”)

4. The end justifies any means.

5. Holy war.

I'd add another to his list:

6. Anti-intellectual and anti-scientific pronouncements.

Kimball, an expert on religion and Middle East policy, stakes out the cultic center of reference. The “truths” of the group attract followers, searchers desperate for solid “meaning claims”. The hunger for easily digestible truth, fed by cultic certainties, drives the modern religious far right. He notes, however, that just as the source of religious violence is to be found in the several traditions he explores, the antidote is to be found in religion as well. Kimball's concluding chapter introduces the concept of the spiritual compass, with God or the transcendent as “true North” and faith, hope, and love as the other cardinal points.

Jessica Stern

Jessica Stern (*Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*) spent many precarious months with terrorists of several groups (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim). Her extraordinary analysis distills from those encounters five grievances that drive religious terrorism, while offering a socio-cultural frame for Kimball's warning signs. Each grievance is examined in a chapter that focuses on a particular religious Jewish, Christian, or Muslim group engaged in acts of terror.

1. Alienation: the feeling that one (or one's community) is cut off from the larger social order by changing cultural values, injustice, declining morals, etc. (e.g., Christian anti-abortion movements)
2. Humiliation: real and perceived personal and national humiliation of one people at the hands of another leads to desperation and uncontrollable rage (e.g., Hamas and the Muslim suicide bombers in Israel / Palestine)
3. Demographics: dramatic population shifts (often government mandated) that upset regional religious, tribal, cultural balances (e.g., Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia)
4. History: the understanding and/or manipulation of ancient history as a powerful weapon in extremists' hands, including their efforts to expand national boundaries and to seek redemption (e.g., Jewish extremists like the Temple Mount Faithful)
5. Territory: long-standing political disputes over territory as *raisons d'être* for holy war (e.g., Muslim-Hindu violence in Kashmir)

Stern's timely perspective on the psychological dimensions of militant religion provides the foundation for the book's second half, an examination of the structures of terrorist organizations. Finally, Stern examines the particular vulnerability of Islamic states to terrorism, emphasizing rampant globalization, American support for Israel, the deepening of poverty, and the turbulence of the

movement toward popular democracy.

She concludes with a thought-provoking but unfortunately brief set of recommendations for the architects of modern western policy. The central question posed by this section: how can we address the crisis of religious violence without exacerbating hatred of the West?

Oliver McTernan

In *Violence in God's Name: The Role of Religion in an Age of Conflict*, Oliver McTernan offers a different perspective on the issues addressed by Kimball and Stern. A former Jesuit priest, broadcaster, and peace activist, he challenges two tendencies that weaken modern journalistic and scholarly analyses. The first is to deny the role of religion in terrorist violence, emphasizing instead factors such as perceived economic and social injustice, struggles over land, political power, etc. The second tendency exaggerates the role of religion, ignoring other contributing factors and cultural dynamics. He argues:

Religion does matter and... needs to be seen as an actor in its own right. The preciseness of role that religion plays will vary from conflict to conflict.

McTernan's chapter on "Religion and the Legitimization of Violence" is particularly powerful, demonstrating that "without exception" each of the world's great faith communities – when faced with a significant threat to its existence or with a dramatic opening to expansion – has sanctioned the use of violence in its own interest.

In each faith tradition one can find sufficient ambiguity in its founding texts and stories to justify killing for the glory of God. Each tradition has also its heroes who saw themselves as acting on divine authority as they plotted the destruction of those whom they perceived to be enemies of God. Today's religious extremists can find their rationale for inflicting terror in the name of their God in the ambivalence towards violence that is found in each faith tradition.

The book's closing passages may, however, be the most evocative of all. He quotes the Hindu sage, Swami Vivekenanda at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions.

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve its own individuality and grow according to its own law of growth.

Part II: Identity, Religion, and Violence

In our own age, many find the world-shrinking forces of globalization unbearably threatening to personal, family, religious, cultural, or national identity. In his remarkable book, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, Amin Maalouf offers a simple and moving reflection:

To tell the truth, if we assert our differences so fiercely, it is precisely because we are less and less different from one another.

He focuses on the tendency of the identity-challenged to *re-identify* themselves

over and against other groups. Maalouf recognizes the critical role of self-acceptance in interaction with the *other*, recognizing the dangerous temptation to define oneself in terms of the perceived vices of the other – rather than in terms of one's own virtues or aspirations. Thus, we encounter the familiar formula, "Thank God I'm not...(a Serb, a Croat, a Jew, a Muslim, white, Christian, black, a woman... the other)".

The remedy is to be sought in the conscious effort to nurture cultural diversity. (This, of course, is one of the essential themes of Globalization for the Common Good.) One of Maalouf's most powerful insights comes near the end of his book, as he reflects:

I do not deny that my recommendations for preserving cultural diversity call for a certain amount of effort. But if we were to let ourselves off this task and just let things take their course; if the world civilization taking shape before our eyes were to go on seeming essentially American, Anglophone or even occidental; then I think everybody would lose by it. The United States, because they would alienate a large part of the rest of the world, which already chafes at the present imbalance of power; the members of non-Western cultures, because they would gradually lose all that makes up their *raison d'être* and find themselves in a rebellion doomed to failure; and, perhaps above all, Europe, which would lose on both counts....

In each of the analyses I have sketched (Kimball, Stern, McTernan, and Maalouf) identity and identity crisis loom as central themes. The person or community caught in the throes of identity crisis is extremely vulnerable to manipulation by religious demagoguery and – often less obviously – by unscrupulous groups and individuals whose wealth and/or power has been challenged. Often, the forces of globalization not only shape the patterns of identity crisis but also generate the very significant threats to wealth and power. Ironically, these dynamics can combine in the "perfect storm" of religious violence.

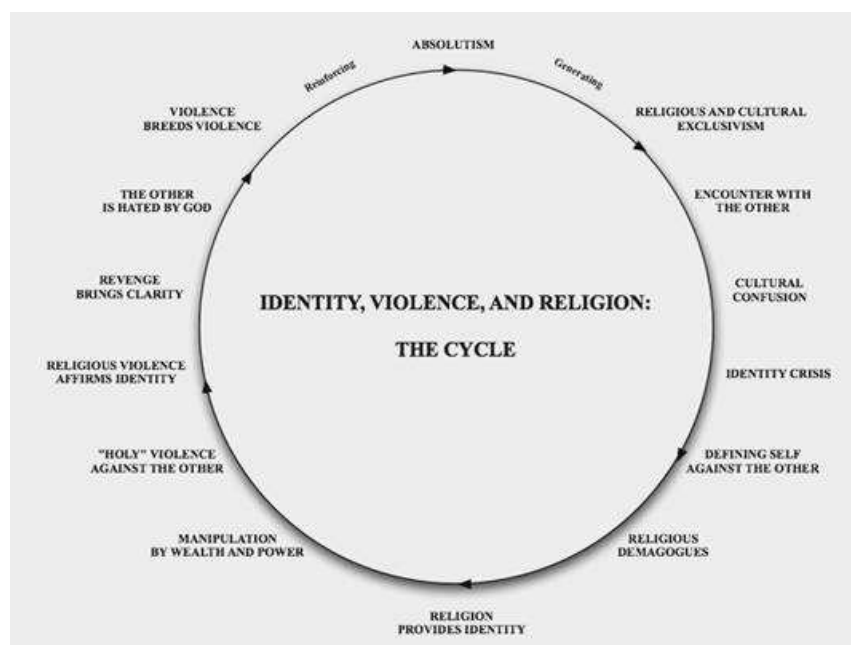
Religion has power to unite and to uplift. Just as surely, however, what Quranic scholar Dr. Irfan Ahmad Khan has termed "pseudo-religion" has the power to incite, to inflame, and to enrage. (See his paper, "The World is in Danger" in this collection.)

We can trace the incendiary cycle of religion, identity, and violence as follows. Cultural absolutism arises from ignorance of the other. It is often manifest in the charismatic leaders, absolute truth claims, and blind obedience that Kimball identifies as key symptoms of a religious community's turn toward evil. By its very nature, absolutism generates religious and cultural exclusivism. In a globalizing world, however, the ignorance of "the other" that absolutism requires is increasingly difficult to maintain. Inevitably, the encounter with the other becomes more intense. Each of Stern's key grievances is rooted in a failed encounter with some other. And each is fed by cultural confusion, identity crisis, and the growing tendency to define oneself (to carve out a new identity) *over against that other*. Pseudo-religion unfailingly abandons the core teachings of whatever community it infects.

Once a distorted religious understanding becomes an individual's or a community's ground of identity, manipulation by the forces of threatened wealth and power is a likely next step. At this point, the process surges into the deadliest

stage of the process, the sacralization of violence. Almost inevitably, it culminates in the seemingly perpetual exchange of atrocities and the regeneration of the entire cycle.

The key to ending the nightmare lies in understanding, slowing, and eventually halting the movement from absolutism to identity crisis to demagoguery to the crisis stage of religious violence. In this connection, the significance of the global interreligious movement and of a more nuanced understanding of globalization can hardly be overstated.



Part III: Globalization, Cultural Evolution, and Eddies of Resistance

At the 2006 Conference of Globalization for the Common Good, held in Honolulu, Hawaii, I argued that globalization can be viewed from at least two contrasting perspectives. As a "top-down" phenomenon, it is often marked by the locally destructive global interpenetration of markets, by a disconcerting cultural homogenization with a distinctive western and American flavor, and by a corresponding felt threat to social, political, economic, cultural, and religious identity in many regions of the world. Top-down globalization – as is evident in the astonishing range and complexity of current worldwide tensions – lends credibility to the otherwise questionable notion of an impending "clash of civilizations." On the other hand, considerable evidence suggests a countervailing phenomenon that we can call "globalization from the bottom up". It is manifest in an *emerging global consensus* of values with respect to peace, social and economic justice, gender equity, human rights, and ecological sustainability – a consensus that is observable among activists to be sure, but increasingly evident in significant segments of the larger world population.

In a time of major evolutionary culture change, as newer, more constructive values emerge, prevailing patterns are challenged and disrupted. In the process, a disturbance can be created in the life experience of individuals or groups. If the perturbation is severe enough – if a sufficient number of persons or groups are affected or if significant concentrations of power are challenged – a major counterflow can form, an eddy. When the rhythm of a smoothly flowing stream is disturbed, eddies can form, usually as temporary whirlpools, roiling the water in their immediate vicinity but not significantly affecting the prevailing flow.

The analogy is apt. A reaction like fundamentalism, for example, may create enormous (and dangerous) turbulence in a changing world; it is extremely unlikely, however, to reverse a powerful evolutionary flow. It is also extremely important to note that those who create and inhabit such patterns of resistance may often claim to be faithfully representing older traditions. In actuality, however, eddies usually involve extreme distortions of those older values. Religious exclusivism is a familiar (and essentially benign) feature of the modern culture complex. Extreme religious fundamentalism is decidedly not: it is instead a 20th-century reaction against early manifestations of the newer value wave. By the same token, patriarchy was, in its time, a relatively benign force; intensified intimate and societal violence against women is in large part a reaction against new wave gender-equity. Many of the most critical problems of our age need to be understood not as aspects of declining older values and certainly not as features of the newer value complex, but as phenomena of the our evolutionary moment, dangerous but temporary counterflows that can slow but not stem the new tide.

There are at least three categories of eddy, rooted in three very different aspects of human experience and behavior: *culture*, *identity*, and *power*. When any or all are threatened, dangerous and destructive patterns of counterflow or backwash can form. Each category is listed here with a few examples of its characteristic expressions.

Cultural Confusion	Identity Crisis	Threats to Power
Incivility	Identity Extremism	Corruption
Relativism	Fundamentalism	Unilateralism, Imperialism
Apathy, Anomie, Amorality	Religious Violence, Terrorism	Tyranny

Eddies of the first category ("Cultural Confusion") are patterns of resistance to changing life conditions and altered behavioral expectations. The decline of the older ways challenges or undermines a whole range of social / cultural patterns, etiquettes, and standards. The affected individual or group simply abandons all attempts to "go along" and wanders (in apathy, anomie, and/or amorality) through an unchartable new world.

The second category ("Identity Crisis") includes eddies of the most visible type: those born from individual or group identity crisis. When a long-ascendant complex of values and behaviors is suddenly challenged or even destroyed (as has happened in recent years in many troubled parts of the world), identity crisis is inevitable. Here again we encounter a dangerous but all too common response: defining oneself over against the members of some other group: "I am opposed to all that Americans (or Jews, or Serbs, or Muslims, or blacks, or women, or environmentalists) stand for." Identity crisis is the essential disturbance that gives rise to some of the most destructive eddies, including ethnic cleansing, fundamentalist intolerance, and most forms of religious violence.

The third category ("Threats to Power") includes the most powerful systemic eddies, born of disturbances in what might be termed the "power-grid" of the older order. Political and corporate corruption, new patterns of regional and global imperialism, and a new breed of 21st-century tyrannies and "illiberal democracies" are among the most characteristic of the eddies of resistance to cultural evolution. More disturbing still is the growing evidence that identity-challenged religious communities and their demagogues are frequently manipulated by powerful interests groups determined to secure their own

dominant positions. It's a bitter irony that the blunt instrument of religious violence may often be wielded by those who have no real interest in or commitment to the spiritual.

Conclusion

Though modern thinkers debate the merits of religion, it has been the principal wellspring of meaning and source of identity for most of humankind throughout prehistory and history. There can be no doubt, however, that religion as a cultural expression in the early 21st century is severely damaged. Among the worst of the eddies of our time are the rise of fundamentalism in every major tradition, the role of religion in destructive identity politics, and the awful modern rebirth of violence in the name of religion.

Religion, though, assumes a key role in the current cultural evolutionary dynamic. Those who suggest that humanity would be better off if religion were somehow erased from the historical record and absent from the present drastically underestimate the contributions that the world's religions have made to culture and its evolution. Naysayers often point to religion in the early 21st century as a clear source of evidence for devolution, rather than cultural advance. Yeasayers, on the other hand, tend to see genuine epochal movement in religious and spiritual circles worldwide and to argue that real cultural advance is underway.

Theologian Ewert Cousins and many others insist that ours is a "New Axial Period" that will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries." It is shaping and being shaped by the transition from *exclusivism* (complete denial of the truth of the other), toward *inclusivism* (acknowledgement of the possibility that the other's truth may be an acceptable variant of one's own, defining truth), toward *pluralism* (openness to the likelihood that religious truth may be found in many cultures and traditions).

Here I draw on my own experience over the last twenty years in the emerging field of interreligious engagement. This global effort encourages the world's many religious and spiritual communities to come together in encounter, dialogue, and constructive common action. I contend that a significant number of these communities are in fact increasingly engaged with the great issues of the age:

- non-violence and the building of cultures of peace,
- the nurturing of economic and social justice and human rights, and
- honoring and preserving the Earth and all her life systems.

This engagement represents what one of the deepest reserves of hope in a troubled time.

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