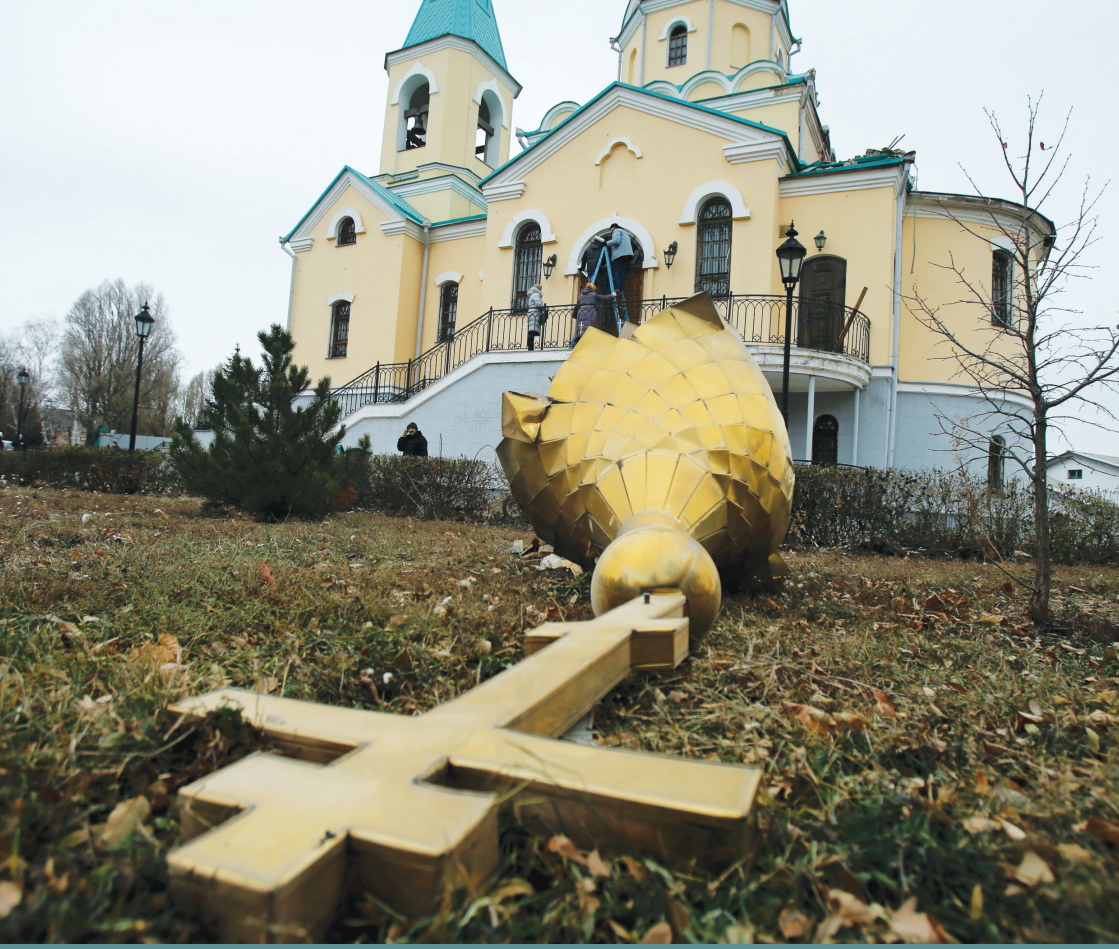

Terror in the Name of God: Confronting acts of religious violence in a liberal society

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Introduction: When people of faith turn to violence

Five people died and at least 50 were injured in late March 2017 when British-born, 52-year old Khalid Masood drove his car into pedestrians on London's Westminster Bridge before fatally stabbing a police officer outside the Houses of Parliament. Masood himself was then shot dead by armed police. The police initially suspected the attacker had acted in the name of an Islamist terror group. Subsequent enquiries failed to establish any link between Masood and Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda, although IS did claim him as one of their 'soldiers'. Masood, however, did appear to have a keen interest in jihad and is believed to have carried out his terror attack in the name of militant Islam.[1]

Acts of violence perpetrated in the name of religion have been reported with great prominence in recent times, especially in the opening years of the 21st century, due to the association — whether suspected or confirmed — that these acts frequently have with Islam. Those who commit acts of religious violence believe they are morally and theologically justified in doing so.

Governments in countries such as Great Britain and Australia invariably respond to acts of religious violence by enacting new, enforceable laws or regulations, tightening security arrangements in public areas, raising levels of electronic surveillance, and assuring the public that the violent actions are not representative of the religion in whose name the actors claim to have acted. These days, that faith is, more often than not, Islam. None of these responses, however, appear to be effective in stemming subsequent acts of religious violence, although police and intelligence work almost certainly foils some attacks.

Scholars of religion continue to weigh whether people who kill or injure others are really doing so in the name of their God, as they claim; or whether they are actors merely identifiable as followers of that God. Thus, the response to the Westminster attacks is reminiscent of the reaction of police, politicians, and commentators to the Lindt Café siege in Sydney in December 2014. Just as Khalid Masood was a Muslim, so was the Lindt Café terrorist, Man Haron Monis. Yet authorities in both those cases have been unable — or unwilling — to decide whether the culprit acted in the name of God, or whether one of the identifying features of the culprit who acted was, simply, that he was a follower of a particular God.

Speaking in the House of Commons after Masood's attack, Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, said, "It is wrong to describe this as 'Islamic terrorism', it is 'Islamist terrorism', it is a perversion of a great faith."[2] This sort of response is commonly made by politicians when confronted with acts of religious violence perpetrated by someone who is Muslim. It depends, however, on an assumption that Islam and Islamism are distinct religious forms. This distinction has frequently been called into question.[3]

Mrs May's reluctance to single out Islam as the religious motivation for Masood's attack — preferring instead to direct her remarks at 'Islamism' — did, indeed, attract criticism from commentators such as British columnist Matt Ridley, who said:

> While I completely accept that the sins of extremists should never be visited on the vast majority of moderate believers, I am increasingly uneasy about how we handle the connection between religion and extremism. Islamist terrorism has become more frequent, but criticism of the faith of Islam, and of religion in general, seems to be becoming less acceptable, as if it were equivalent to racism or blasphemy.[4]

Unease about how to respond to acts of religious violence is inflamed by uncertainty as to the place religion occupies — or ought to occupy — in a liberal society, and a consequent difficulty

in understanding there could even be a connection between religion and extremism.[5] For example, Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, has argued that violence has nothing, as such, to do with religion but has everything to do with issues of identity and life in communities. The social institutions and norms that once were undergirded by religion, such as marriage, the family, a shared moral code, and the capacity to defer gratification, have lost their force — and the result is that the shared social virtue of hope has decayed.[6]

Statements that an attack by a Muslim has "nothing to do with Islam", or, in Mrs May's words, is a "perversion" of Islam, indicate that politicians — and, indeed, also police forces, journalists, and even religious leaders — are unwilling, or unable, to understand that religious violence often has theological and ideological roots. They also indicate that those who perpetrate acts of religious violence are very serious about the claims they believe their religion makes.

Religious violence is a complex phenomenon and the causes of religious violence are varied. Failure to take seriously the religious component of religious violence amounts to a form of avoidance of the issue: yet to assume that because many people don't take religion seriously, *no* people take it seriously, is a mistake.

This paper sets out to examine some of the key problems posed for western, liberal societies by the commission of violent acts in the name of God. It begins by noting how the ideological neutrality of liberalism immediately sets up some challenges for dealing with religious violence. Then it will argue that acts of terror designated specifically as 'religious' present a particular challenge for liberal societies because of the ambivalence many such societies have towards religion. In considering how best these societies might approach the problem of religious violence, so as to mitigate the disruptive impact they invariably have on social cohesion and community wellbeing, the paper will conclude by arguing that freedom of religion, together with an open, accessible 'market place' for religious belief and practice, is essential.

Whose truth? Pluralism and meaning in a liberal society

Many people in Australia's secular and pluralist society are, today, comfortably of the view that there are many sources of truth; all of which can coexist more or less peacefully. We believe appeals to reason, tolerance, and other Enlightenment virtues will do the work of allowing us to live together in reasonable disagreement about the sources of value.

Pluralists are happy to live with ambiguity concerning the sources of meaning and value. Holding that there are many sources of value and not just one, pluralism rejects the notion of what philosopher Susan Mendus calls "a providential ordering of the universe."[7] However, it is a mistake to think this absence of an overarching providential ordering warrants an assumption about a wider societal acceptance of pluralism. Indeed, this is to miss the very problem presented by religious violence.

For religious believers — and especially those with fundamentalist or, worse, extremist views — for the most part reject pluralism. They say there is only one source of meaning and truth. While most religious believers are law-abiding, there are some fundamentalists and extremists who are violent and prepared to kill in the name of that 'truth'. They have no sympathy for their victims, whom they view as enemies of God; and are ready to sacrifice their own lives as martyrs. Dislodging such deadly ideas from the heads of those kinds of believers is extremely difficult.

Given that the world contains value pluralists and value monists, we might reasonably expect to find disagreement about questions of meaning and value. However, the secular, liberal state aspires to say nothing about such disagreement; a point made forcefully by Sacks:

The liberal democratic state does not aspire to be the embodiment of the good, the beautiful and the true. It merely seeks to keep the peace between contending factions. It is procedural rather than substantive. It makes no claim to represent the totality of life.[8]

Liberalism is the theory and practice of freedom. When religious violence erupts, liberalism needs to ensure that theory and practice come together to ensure a liberal society is able to 'keep the peace'. But the presumption of the liberal state's ideological neutrality is challenged when the issue that confronts its stability has specifically ideological roots.

Does religion sanction violence? A brief survey

Each of the world's five principal religions contends with the issue of religious violence; but even when nonviolence is an explicit teaching in those religions, exceptions can be found and used to justify violent action. This section gives a very concise overview of what each of these traditions teaches about violence, and how followers have interpreted those teachings.[9]

Christianity

The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are frequently interpreted as an uncompromising call to pacifism. However, the issue of whether — and if so, when — it is justifiable to use violence, has taxed theologians since the era of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century BCE. Theories about 'just war' remain central to Christian thinking about the moral use of violence. Yet even when employed in the pursuit of justice, violence is held by many Christians to be wrong.

Islam

Purity of existence is a central component of Islam. Believers are exhorted to engage in struggle or 'holy war' to defend the faith and this has allowed the word *jihad* (meaning 'striving') to become one of the concepts most familiar to non-Muslims. But Muslim theologians do not agree about the meaning of *jihad*: some argue that it only ever refers to an inner, spiritual struggle; others hold that it has martial implications and can justify militant political acts.

Judaism

Violence is endemic in many early books of the Hebrew Bible. The era of Rabbinic Judaism, by contrast, was largely nonviolent, despite some violent clashes with the Romans in the Maccabean Revolt (166-164 BCE) and the revolt at Masada (73 CE). Violence may be justified to defend the faith but is not to be used for purposes of political expediency. Some theologians justify the use of violence for the defence of modern-day Israel and to maintain its security.

Hinduism

Killing in warfare was deemed permissible in the Bhagavad Gita and Hinduism sanctioned violence in order to maintain social order. By contrast, in 20th century Hinduism, religious thinkers such as Mohandas Gandhi held that references to war in the Gita were allegorical references to the eternal conflict between good and evil. Hindu militancy has increasingly been justified as the political might of militant Hindu nationalism has grown in strength.

Sikhism

Literature portrays the 16th century founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, as a peaceful figure. Yet the peaceful precepts of Sikhism have been interpreted to allow exceptions used by recent militant activists to justify violent acts. Appeal has often been made to the doctrine of *miri-piri* which expresses the idea that religion is to be victorious in both worldly and spiritual realms. The symbol of Sikhism is a double-edged sword.

Buddhism

Nonviolence is a core principle of Buddhism expressed in the doctrine of *ahimsa*. Even traditional teaching allows for exceptions to the rule, however, which turn largely on the issue of intent. For example, armed response to a threat is not prohibited as long as it is a defensive action. Nationalist ideologies in Buddhist societies has been used to justify the use of violence in pursuit of political struggle.

Justifying religious violence

Even though all major religions appear to be capable of justifying violence, it is a mistake to assume such justifications necessarily draw upon contemporary socio-political factors — although those factors may certainly inform the way religious believers respond to circumstances. Religious violence remains so difficult for western, secular liberals to understand because it requires an attempt to explain "not only why bad things happen, but also why bad things happen for reasons purported by their perpetrators to be good."[10]

To that end, it is important to distinguish between factors used to *justify* religious violence and those claimed as the *cause* of such acts. Justification is largely based upon specific appeals grounded in the metaphysical and theological premises of the religious tradition.

There are three broad premises that serve as the means to justify religious violence, as identified by philosopher Steve Clarke. According to Clarke, these premises are: appeals to a belief that a state of 'cosmic war' currently persists; appeals to a belief in an afterlife; and appeals to sacred values. All three categories transcend immediate social, economic, and political concerns and, because — crucially — they involve the believer's relationship with God, outweigh those concerns. They appeal "to narratives about the intentions, needs, desires, and other mental states of supernatural agents."[11]

Thus, the justifications for violent action developed in the major religious traditions help explain how the practice of violence is reconciled, in the minds of some followers, with what the doctrines of those religions have to say about violence and nonviolence. However, contradictions and differences in emphasis remain, making it no less difficult to interpret the theological background to acts of violence committed in the name of religion.

Sacred and secular: a volatile mix?

The juxtaposition of 'religion' and 'violence' in discussions about religious violence frequently jars. Religious belief and practice is conventionally associated with the promotion or advancement of

peace and human well-being. Yet, as the foregoing brief survey of the five religions has shown, the problem of religious violence is, in fact, a very old one.

There have always been zealots who are impatient with the slow pace of history and with the social and psychological concessions that have to be made to it. The zealot demands perfection — perfect compliance with a divine law by individuals and societies — now.[12]

In western societies, the ways religion asserts itself are changing. One key factor in this development is globalisation, which gives greater influence to religious diasporas. This, in turn, has led to a new mix of piety and political struggle — a fusion of sacred and secular objectives — in religious institutions. As political scientist Scott Thomas has noted, where violent action leads to the killing of civilians in order to achieve such religious or political objectives, it can, appropriately, be described as 'terrorism':

> Globalisation has blurred the line between religious organisations involved in advocacy, proselytising, or social welfare — for example, Tablighi Jamaat or Hezbollah — and purely terrorist organizations. It is these kinds of both local and global social networks that allow people to support or facilitate the operations of al Qaeda, Hamas, and other illicit groups across the world.[13]

Whereas the blending of religion and politics is uncomfortable for many westerners, Thomas notes social, charitable, political, and even terrorist networks often overlap in the religious world of the global South.[14]

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 galvanised attention on the relationship, in particular, between Islam and violence. Not only did the attacks conform to a pattern of religious ritual, as scholar of religion Mark Juergensmeyer has noted, the commitment of the perpetrators also "touched religious depths, and their *jihadi* theology was suffused with the images and ideas of their religious history.[15] The determination of many western, secular politicians and commentators to avoid associating 9/11 with Islam showed how unprepared liberal democracy was either to confront the religious roots of terrorism or to comprehend their depth.

The religious roots of terror

Religious terrorism is often thought to be a new scourge, but until the 19th century most terrorism was, in fact, carried out by actors whose objectives were primarily religious — although they were seldom without at least some political or ideological objectives. Indeed, the English terms 'assassin', 'thug' and 'zealot' derive from ancient and medieval Islamic, Hindu, and Jewish terrorists.

Today, terrorism — a very difficult term to define accurately — is broadly understood to refer to violence directed at civilians in the pursuit of political ends, and therefore a secular phenomenon. As Daniel Philpott has remarked: "By 1968, following the global trajectory of secularisation, all of the world's then eleven known terrorist groups pursued solely secular ends."[16] It can, at times, be difficult to disentangle the religious motive from the political — as is the case in the conflict in Ireland where groups identifiable by religious affiliation nonetheless had clearly described political objectives.

However, when the *primary* aims and identities of the perpetrators of violence are specifically religious, it is surely correct to describe them as 'religious terrorists'. And even when their motives are mixed, religious terrorists tend to proclaim religious purposes.[17] Philpott dates the re-emergence of religious terrorism from 1980 when two of the world's 64 terrorist groups declared specifically religious objectives. By 2005, he estimates that "36 per cent of known terrorist groups were identifiably religious."[18]

Religious terrorism has become not only more common during the past 50 years or so; it is now also more deadly than secular terrorism, and Philpott has drawn attention to analysis which demonstrates the centrality of religious belief in influencing religious terrorists. This includes a particular — and, sometimes, peculiar — way of reading and interpreting sacred texts so as to justify the resort to violence:

> Common themes in these beliefs include divine sanction for indiscriminate killing, violence as sacramental or divine duty, opposition not just to a regime but to an entire 'corrupted' social order, an apocalyptic vision, and appeals to their own followers as an audience.[19]

The conviction that violence is both morally justified and a necessary expedient underlies, for example, the actions of conservative Christians in the United States and Canada who have launched deadly attacks against abortion providers.

Scott Roeder, convicted in the USA for the murder in 2009 of Dr George Tiller, a doctor who provided abortions late in pregnancy, told the court at his sentencing "that God's judgment would 'sweep over this land like a prairie wind'."[20] Another anti-abortion protester, former pastor Paul Hill, was convicted in 1994 of the murder of Dr John Britton. Before his execution in 2003, Hill said:

> I believe, in the short and long term, more and more people will act on the principles for which I stand. I'm willing and feeling very honoured that they are most likely going to kill me for what I did.[21]

A willingness to give up one's life for the cause being advocated, whether by execution in the case of the Christian anti-abortion militant, or by being killed in a suicide bombing in the case of those acting in the name of Islam, is a distinctive feature of religious terrorism. As Juergensmeyer has remarked, martyrdom and sacrifice — already important components in the history of many religions — are also highly significant features of religious violence as formal acts of self-renunciation.[22]

When acts of terrorism are committed in the name of religion, it is (as noted earlier) the religious component that is often the most perplexing for citizens of liberal societies. Secular commentators often fail to recognise either the extent to which acts of violence are an intrinsic part of the religious worldview of those who perpetrate them, or the extent to which they are endorsed by what Juergensmeyer and Mona Kanwal Sheikh describe as the "broad communities of support that share their same religious points of view":

> It is tempting to deny that such terrorists as al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, Israel's Yigal Amir [who assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995], or Norway's

> Anders Breivik were religious, because they clearly had political reasons for defending what they thought were attacks on their cultural communities. Yet they used the language of religion and religious history to defend their actions, and religious organisations have been their inspiration and support.[23]

The events of 9/11 in New York, of 7/7 in London in 2005, and of March 2017 in London, have brought to the attention of the world the willingness of determined zealots to die in the name of their religious beliefs. Islam has an inextricable political component; one of the objects of which is to establish Islamic law and governance in non-Muslim societies. As Mittleman notes, this development represents a significant, global mobilisation of zealotry at the edges of Islam which has "a problem with violent extremism that is out of all proportion to that of other religions today."[24]

Islamic (or Islamist) extremism is directed against those considered to be apostates. In recent years, a great deal of this violence has targeted Christians who have been killed or injured by Muslim extremists. Two Coptic churches were attacked in Egypt on Palm Sunday in April 2017; in March 2016, a Muslim man in Scotland was stabbed to death by another Muslim for having wished Christians a happy Easter.[25]

It is little wonder that many secular critics of religion have no hesitation in identifying religion as the principal cause of violence in human society — "the most prolific source of violence in our history", according to Sam Harris who thinks that, in addition to its history of violence, religion is inherently violent.[26] But is this criticism warranted?

Is religion inherently violent?

The claim that religion is inherently violent seeks to isolate a specific form of violence allegedly fuelled by theological beliefs; but the claim is overly simplistic. Even so, it has become part of conventional wisdom in western societies and continues to contribute to the formulation of policies affecting issues such as religious liberty and the public

manifestation of belief. But does the claim, persuasive though it may seem, have any substance?

One critic who has tested the claim made by commentators such as Sam Harris (and found it wanting) is theologian William Cavanaugh. He does accept that some religions do tend to promote violence under certain conditions; but he argues that any response to the argument that religion is *inherently* violent will depend on the way terms such as 'religion' (and 'secular') are used.

Cavanaugh argues, in the first place, that 'religion' cannot be understood as if it were a form of transcultural and transhistorical feature of human life essentially distinct from the 'secular':

The idea that there exists a transhistorical human impulse called 'religion' with a singular tendency to promote fanaticism and violence when combined with public power, is not an empirically demonstrable fact, but is itself an ideological accompaniment to the shifts of power and authority that mark the western transition from medieval to modern.[27]

Cavanaugh argues that to hold that religion is a form of life so easily demarcated from the secular, encourages the erroneous view that only by severely restricting its access to public power can religion be tamed. It is an argument used, for example, to justify restriction of state-funded assistance to religion or religious programs. A key component of this ideology is that "violence labelled religious is always reprehensible; violence labelled secular is often necessary and sometimes praiseworthy."[28]

It is to expose this erroneous view that Cavanaugh uses the term 'myth' to describe the idea — so readily adopted in western, secular societies — that religion has an inherent tendency to promote violence.

The 'myth' of religious violence

In addressing the proposition that religion is inherently violent, Cavanaugh compares and contrasts two approaches to defining religion. First, he considers *substantivist* definitions, by which he means those definitions that attempt to describe religion in terms of

specific beliefs about the nature of reality, the nature of God, or the nature of salvation.

The problem with substantivist definitions, however, is that even if 'religious' can be described as a category distinct from 'secular' by the use of terms such as 'transcendence' or 'providence', this tells us nothing helpful about the meaning of 'religion' itself. As Cavanaugh notes, "Excluding systems of belief and practices from the list of world religions becomes arbitrary."[29] Substantivist definitions are able to describe the content of belief systems, but do little to identify the causes of violence said to be provoked by such belief systems.

Cavanaugh then considers *functionalist* definitions of religion. These are accounts of religion based not on the content of a belief system, but rather on the way the system functions in terms of the social and political tasks it performs. They are constructed not from catalogues of beliefs, but from empirical observation of people's behaviour.

Functionalists say the conventional taxonomies are not what matter: what is important is to include everything that acts like a religion under the rubric 'religion' whether or not it would have been included by conventional accounts of religion. If it looks like a religion and acts like a religion, the functionalist would say, then it is a religion.[30] This, of course, allows for an expansion of the category of 'religion' to the point where it can lose meaning.

If the functionalists are correct, there is a case for saying that secular phenomena, such as nationalism, environmentalism or nationalism, are also really to be considered as forms of religion. If so, Cavanaugh argues, "there is no basis for including Islam and Hinduism in the indictment of religious violence while excluding US nationalism and Marxism."[31] The category of 'religion' can become so wide in functionalist accounts that its usefulness is, eventually, questionable.

The purpose of Cavanaugh's argument is to challenge the distinction between the categories of 'religious' and 'secular'. He argues that 'religion' is not to be thought of as a feature of human life with a fixed and immutable meaning. It is, rather, a construction on which the "myth of religious violence" is founded. Far from being a universal and timeless feature of human existence, religion is "a contingent

power arrangement of the modern west."[32] Perpetuation of the myth allows the secular nation-state to be thought of as an enduring and timeless guardian against the inherent dangers of religion.

The myth of religious violence tries to establish as timeless, universal, and natural a very contingent set of categories — religious and secular — that are in fact constructions of the modern West. Those who do not accept these categories as timeless, universal, and natural are subject to coercion.[33]

This ideological construction of 'religion', Cavanaugh argues, allows certain forms of power to be authorised by the secular nation-state in order to marginalise religion from public discourse and consolidate public allegiance to the state.

In advancing his thesis about the 'myth' of religious violence, Cavanaugh's primary concern is not so much with moral scrutiny of violent actions committed by people who subscribe to the doctrines of Christianity or Islam. Nor does he offer a theory of religion and violence. His aim, rather, by disproving the notion that the categories of 'religion' and 'secular' are trans-historical and timeless, is to show how the myth of religious violence serves to divert such scrutiny from other kinds of discourse and action:

> The idea that public religion causes violence authorises the marginalisation of those things called religion from having a divisive influence in public life, and thereby authorises the state's monopoly on violence and public allegiance.[34]

Moral scrutiny, accordingly, is directed at 'religious' forms of violence and away from 'secular' forms:

Loyalty to one's religion is private in origin and therefore optional; loyalty to the secular nation-state is what unifies us and is not optional. The problem with the myth of religious violence is not that it condemns certain kinds of violence, but that it diverts moral scrutiny from other kinds of violence.[35]

A reconsidered understanding of the categories of 'religious' and 'secular' should lead us to abandon the myth of religious violence. Once the myth has been exposed, proper attention can be given both to the power exercised by the state and to the ways the exercise of such power is justified.

Cavanaugh makes a significant argument about the importance of expanding the scope of moral scrutiny. Bringing light to bear on how the nation-state authorises its use of violence does, indeed, weaken the claim that were it not for the scourge of religion, humankind would live freed from the constraints of theistic tyranny in realms of Elysian peace.

Cavanaugh wants to cease categorising violence as either religious or secular.[36] Instead, the root of all violence should be considered ideological. In setting aside the religious/secular divide, Cavanaugh seeks to direct efforts towards finding the true, deep roots of conflict:

Rather than attempt to come up with reasons that a universal and timeless feature of human society called religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence, the question for researchers would be: under what circumstances do ideologies and practices of all kinds promote violence?[37]

Cavanaugh's analysis is important because it exposes as historically and philosophically questionable the idea that "there is something in the world that we understand to be religion and this thing is violent."[38] It is a foundational mistake and should make us more guarded about assuming that, if religion is inherently violent, any intervention of the liberal, secular state against religion is bound always to be just.

However, Cavanaugh does not state that acts of religious violence do *not* occur. They do, and he acknowledges this. Rather, he questions the conventional categorical distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' and, with it, the assumed primacy of the latter over the former. For Cavanaugh, the moral quality of violence perpetrated in the name of God is of the same order as that perpetrated in the name of the state; and, indeed, he holds that 'secular' is as much an ideological term as 'religious'.

Nonetheless, when confronted by situations where violent, religious ideological threats are made, the liberal, secular state, accustomed to ideological neutrality is bound to have to make some form of intervention. A key obligation of the state is to protect and strengthen society, but might its own studied neutrality hinder its ability to discharge this obligation? It is important to consider what kind of response a liberal state should appropriately make in circumstances marked by deep ideological disagreement.

Religion and the secular state: Can the phoenix of tolerance fly again?

Secular critics of religion often ignore the religious claims on which those who kill in the name of God base their actions. They do so because they dismiss the claims either as nonsense or as so inherently violent as to be lacking any moral merit.

Such a dismissal, however, represents, at the least, a failure to take seriously the fact that when religious actors claim to be acting in the name of their faith, they mean precisely that. If we fail to take seriously such claims, how well will we be equipped to address the issue? Susan Mendus is one thinker who has expressed concern about this:

> My hunch is that modern liberals do not have an accurate understanding of religiously motivated acts of violence and that that very fact makes them (us) more vulnerable to religiously motivated terrorist attacks. [They] have a tendency to reduce religious actions to political actions, but the former are not reducible to the latter and this is a fact which we ignore at our peril.[39]

Although liberals like to speak about the merits of pluralism, Mendus is concerned that "modern liberal political theory fails to take seriously the depth of disagreement that divides people in modern societies and, in particular, fails to take seriously the distinctive character of religious belief."[40] She insists religious actions are not reducible to political actions, and must be understood on their own terms.

At the heart of liberalism lies a recognition that reasonable people will disagree permanently, and even irreconcilably, about their conceptions of the 'good life'. Liberalism is a response to the reality of this reasonable disagreement; founding the principles of political association upon a core morality.

Political philosopher Charles Larmore uses the term 'reasonableness' to refer to the capacity to exercise reason in an area of enquiry but notes that it has "ceased to seem a guarantee of ultimate agreement about deep questions concerning how we should live."[41]

What does liberalism have to say concerning this absence of agreement about the sources of value? Liberalism does not *affirm* differences between people but simply acknowledges that the *existence* of disagreement is predictable; but it is a prediction founded on the assumption that the religious and the political are completely separate. Mendus believes, correctly, that this is a mistake.

John Locke's defence of toleration is usually cited as the basis on which a modern liberal society tolerates differences between those holding different points of view. Locke, however, did not draw a distinction between the religious and political in the way that modern thinkers do.

Locke's argument "sought to persuade religious believers that politics should distance itself from religious matters because God (*their* God) wished it to be so. For Locke, the tolerant state acquired both its authority and its scope from God Himself." [Italics in original][42] Modern conceptions of liberalism, by contrast, simply assert a clear distinction between religion and politics.

However, the clarity of that distinction may be more apparent than real. Just as Cavanaugh argued, in exposing the myth that violence can be described as specifically 'religious', so too Mendus argues there are important implications to be drawn from the fact that the line between the religious and the political is not as clear as is often assumed:

> It may be the case that what we see as political is not thought of in that way by the agents themselves, and indeed it may be inflammatory to insist on construing as political what is seen by the actors themselves as religious. [Modern liberalism] simply assumes that we know what counts as political, and that we know the political has priority.[43]

When coming to terms with the phenomenon of religious violence, the liberal state must not make the mistake of reducing the religious

to the political. Rather, it must recognise "the status of religious as a thing in itself, distinct from, and sometimes in conflict with politics."[44] Is the liberal state, in addition, able to recognise that sometimes this conflict will lead the faithful to assert the primacy of religious law over secular law? How is a secular state to respond to such an assertion?

Meeting Antigone's challenge: When the laws of God override the laws of the state

Religious actors who resort to violence are almost certainly expressing a rejection of secular, liberal norms of belief and conduct. Modern liberals tend to assume that if a religious individual is asked to weigh political and religious considerations against each other, the scales will tip in favour of the political. One response to the claim that our reasons to be liberal will always tip towards the political has been traced back to Sophocles by political scientists Matthew Clayton and David Stevens.

When she explains to her uncle, King Creon, why she disobeyed his law forbidding her to bury her brother, Antigone says: "Nor did I think your edict had such force that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions." For Clayton and Stevens, this response is of decisive importance: where the two conflict, according to Antigone, the laws of the gods override the laws of a liberal society.[45] Clayton and Stevens argue that, given the eternal nature of the believer's relationship with God, and the high stakes that turn on obedience to God's law, it is hard to believe liberal political authority would prevail for the believer who found herself in conflict with the state.

What response, then, is to be made to the believer who accords more weight to the religious than to the political? As Mendus has noted, the error often made by the modern liberal is to assume the religious must be understood as, in fact, the political. Clayton and Stevens agree

with her about this mistaken assumption. The appropriate response, they argue, is to say that the believer is wrong on *religious* rather than political grounds:

We must say that the believer's religious views are mistaken as political views, rather than mistaken in treating them as having more weight than they do. Because her religious views are mistaken they do not give the believer a reason not to support and comply with constitutional liberal arrangements.[46]

Who is to make such a response to the noncompliant religious believer and challenge their conception of religion? Clayton and Stevens argue that if politicians respond, they risk losing widespread support from citizens and, by weakening consensus, threatening their legitimate authority. They propose, instead, that the task of challenging unreasonable religious actions or teachings be delegated to citizens themselves — and, in particular, to those who share the same doctrinal beliefs:

> Reasonable religious citizens might, as part of the natural duty of justice, be permitted — perhaps even morally required in certain circumstances — to explain to fellow believers, including non-compliant believers, why religious belief is compatible with or support liberal norms. Not engaging with the religiously unreasonable may carry significant costs for the liberal project of building support for a conception of justice, and liberals also have a duty to be evangelical about their political morality.[47]

The key point in their argument is that challenges from the unreasonable, religious non-compliant must be addressed in *theological* rather than political terms. The criticism levelled earlier by Mendus against political liberals — that they often fail to accept that religious actors really are acting in the name of religion — is echoed by Clayton and Stevens. Political liberalism is not a free-standing conception: "instead, [it] may, at times, be more accurately described as a partially comprehensive conception."[48] Liberalism needs to recognise the reality of that partial conception, and to take religion seriously.

On keeping the peace: religious belief and rational choice

Taking religion seriously does not mean compromising ideological neutrality. Indeed, if Jonathan Sacks is correct, the liberal state has no business whatsoever in trying to embody truth, goodness or beauty. Rather, the state must simply aspire to keep the peace between contending factions. Liberalism "is procedural rather than substantive," says Sacks. "It makes no claim to represent the totality of life."[49]

Government action in the face of terror attacks waged by religious extremists is often accompanied by renewed calls from politicians, journalists, and academics for certain extremist religious groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, to be banned — as Hizb ut-Tahrir is, in fact, banned in the UK. In addition, there are calls for an entire and coherent system of religious belief to reform itself and embrace the Enlightenment principles according to which most westerners are accustomed to live.[50]

But banning organisations accomplishes little other than to heighten their attractiveness in certain quarters; and waiting for a reform-minded Muslim cleric to post a series of theses urging significant doctrinal reform can best be described as a long shot — probably also entailing a long wait. Yet the problem of religious violence remains: extremists kill those whom they believe are the enemies of God, and they hold to theologies that sanction such violence.

Acts of extremist violence are, of course, criminal acts and need to be punished by applying the sanctions of the criminal law. But violence is only one manifestation of religious extremism. Radical religious views may be espoused that conflict directly with the prevailing norms — and laws — of wider society.

This happened recently, for example, when the Australian branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir released a video in April 2017 claiming it was acceptable in Islam for a husband to hit his wife in a "managed" way.[51] The video was widely criticised by Muslims and non-Muslims, and a debate erupted about whether the *Qu'ran* does or does not sanction

striking. Soon enough, calls were also made for some kind of action, albeit unspecified, to be taken.[52]

When governments develop policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of religious extremists, they generally intend to forestall future acts of violence. But are these policies sound?

Two thinkers who have questioned conventional government responses to the threat posed by religious extremism to civil society are economists Lawrence Iannaconne and Eli Berman. They base their analysis, and the policy conclusions they draw from it, on the economics of the religious marketplace and argue that the behaviour of religious extremists must be viewed as rational — that is, as normal and reasonable.[53] It is a serious mistake, they say, "to view religious extremists as pathological drones enslaved by the theologies of hate."[54] Implications for the responses made by governments' extremist behaviour flow from this analysis:

To label religious extremism the product of ignorance, coercion or psychopathology is to foster misunderstanding. To combat extremism (as opposed to extremist violence) with the powers of the state is to invite conflict if that extremism represents a widespread unmet demand for some set of services. To support 'good' religion while repressing 'bad' religion is to invite violence.[55]

In any case, as Iannacone and Berman note, religious belief systems that have been successful in binding their members in cooperative and supportive agreement are very difficult to refute. It is not enough to argue that a belief system is untrue or wrong or misguided; what committed believer will be dissuaded by that?

Successful religious groups consolidate their positions by supplying with great efficiency essential goods, such as health care and education. For example, this is part of the appeal of, and widespread support for, Hamas in Gaza. The presence of strong, constitutional democracy, together with a healthy market economy, is one way to undercut the political appeal of such sects and reduce the incidence of religious violence:

Religious radicals are less likely to flourish and less likely to embrace violence when there is strong competition in their non-core markets: including education, health care, poverty programs, and political representation.[56]

Similar principles of religious competition to reduce religious violence can be applied in countries that already enjoy established constitutional democracies and vibrant market economies. Competition between sects in the religious marketplace, argue Iannacone and Berman, can be effective in inducing moderation. Reduction in state support for religion makes a nation's religious market much more open to entry and competition, and is accompanied by a reduction in the political activities of denominations. Why?

Because the stakes have been lowered. Absent the prize of government money and protection from competing groups, a religion finds political activity much less attractive. Open competition also leads to more groups, each of which has less capacity to influence government.[57]

Viewing religious behaviour as an instance of rational choice, as Iannacone and Berman advocate, can help to reframe responses to religious violence. Rather than seeing the option for religious violence as an aberrant and irrational form of behaviour, choosing violence is better thought of as a rational act that has desirable consequences for the actors — whether in the form of social esteem, supernatural vindication, or existential purpose.

Can governments address this rational behaviour by targeting beliefs and teachings? No, say Iannacone and Berman. Secular attacks convince no one and merely serve to antagonise many. Hence the futility of political leaders declaiming on the authenticity or inauthenticity of Islamic theology. "Indeed, if anyone is equipped to win theological debates with radical sectarians, it is leaders of *other* religious groups." [Italics original][58]

Conclusion: confronting religious violence in a liberal society

Committed in the name of God, religious acts of terror, continue to present a growing challenge for liberal democracies. The religious factor has, indeed, been one of the most perplexing elements in these horrific occurrences for citizens in countries such as Belgium, Spain,

Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia — nations long accustomed to the conventions of tolerance, pluralism and liberty.

These violent actions are not a new phenomenon; what has changed is the experience citizens of western democracies now have of those actions, whether as witnesses or victims.

Western societies feel themselves to be under increasing threat from those determined to destroy liberal societies. Writing in response to the terrorist attack in London in March 2017, British commentator Daniel Johnson observed that:

> The bloodbath on Westminster Bridge and at the Houses of Parliament is the price we pay for failing to instil the values of [western] civilisation into all those who claim the right to call themselves British citizens.[59]

Australia faces a similar threat, albeit on a smaller scale, where there is, in addition, an incidental and growing problem as some teenagers choose to express their individuality by committing — or threatening to commit — brutal terrorist attacks.

Recent reports indicate more than half of ASIO's investigations are directed at people aged 25 years and younger: three times what it was a few years ago. Intelligence agencies are working hard to tap into teenagers' social media networks, and governments are putting a lot of money behind them.

The growth of Islamic extremism, especially in public schools, is confronting governments with a significant problem because no one knows quite what to do. The challenge for 'de-radicalisation' programs intended to help schools to counter extremist behaviour, such as the NSW Government's *School Communities Working Together* program, is complex. As yet, there is little evidence that complying with the government's de-radicalisation guidelines will make it less likely that extremist acts will occur. No single program has successfully turned a radicalised teen back to being a good citizen.

Dislodging deadly ideas, whether from the heads of teenagers or from the heads of other kinds of religious extremist, requires more than government programs or stern speeches from political leaders.

Part of the problem, as identified earlier, is that a pluralist society lacks a "providential ordering of the universe."[60] There are many understandings of truth, and some religious extremists are prepared to kill in the name of that truth; but a liberal society can have no part in arbitrating between different conceptions of truth.

Responding to religious violence needs the determined effort of all citizens, especially those who have responsibility for leadership in religious communities. In describing the features of a liberal society, British commentators Richard Koch and Chris Smith are unequivocal:

> Liberal societies are marked by freedom of religion and conscience, openness, widespread tolerance, the ability to collaborate, and the willingness of citizens to take responsibility for their actions. Liberal societies are tolerant of new or unusual behaviour because there is a sense of common membership and identity uniting even the most disparate groups.[61]

There are no obvious answers to the problem of religious violence. Although it is not a new phenomenon, it has taken on a new, more deadly form that is provoking heightened concerns about the integration of Muslims into the wider society. In response to these concerns, it is clear governments must act to secure the safety of citizens. But draconian and illiberal measures, provoked by fear, should not be what guides political responses to religious violence as these can further harden and entrench extremist behaviour.

"War is the enemy of liberal values," Koch and Smith insist. "Terrorists win when we abandon the very principles of justice and democracy we are seeking to defend."[62] Even under severe provocation, it is important for a liberal society to maintain a sense of proportion and to uphold the fundamental principle of equality under the rule of secular law for all citizens.

Efforts to preserve what Koch and Smith describe as "a sense of underlying common identity and purpose" must include a renewed commitment to upholding the right to religious liberty, removing restrictions on freedom of speech — and emphatically resisting

calls to introduce religious belief as a ground for complaint in anti-discrimination legislation.[63]

Confronting religious violence effectively requires the preservation of strong bonds of trust and respect between citizens, the voluntary associations of civil society, such as religious communities, and the organs of government. It also requires an unfailing commitment to upholding the cultural, moral, and legal stability of a liberal society in order that citizens may freely challenge religious believers who advocate militant or illiberal teachings.

Encouraging an open and vigorous exchange of religious ideas, including criticism of doctrine, without fear of attack or legal action, will not, of course, eliminate the threat of religious violence; but it will temper and moderate the environment in which religious violence incubates.

Upholding and defending the principles of an open, liberal society needs to be a priority for all who are prepared to engage in the ideological contest provoked by religious violence. Citizens of liberal societies must learn to take religion, and the claims of religious believers, seriously. Those who place their ultimate trust and hope in God do so already.

Afterword

A short time after the manuscript of this paper was completed, two terrorist attacks were launched in England within as many weeks. The slaughter caused by a suicide bomber in the foyer of a Manchester arena, and then by three men armed with knives and using a truck in a busy area of south London, proves once again jihadi terrorists will stop at nothing to destroy our way of life. Only week or so after the Lindt Café siege inquiry handed down its report, we were faced, once again, with authorities scrambling to make sense of the sadistic destruction of more innocent lives.

Islamic State swiftly claimed responsibility for both attacks, lauding the actions of "soldiers of the Caliphate" and warning in videos "there

is more to come". Indeed, the three London attackers were, indeed, heard to cry "This is for Allah" as they stabbed their victims, thereby proclaiming the religious meaning behind their attack. The pattern in Manchester and Southwark is now all too familiar from other atrocities committed by Islamist terrorists around the world. Random, deadly attacks launched against ordinary members of the public are becoming commonplace in western democracies.

The British Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, was quick to condemn the Manchester explosion as a 'barbaric act'; and following the London slayings, Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, declared, "Enough is enough" — although she appeared to be hardening her stance towards extremism in general rather than towards Islamism. But despite the connection established between these attackers and radical Islam, there is a grave danger politicians will go out of their way to explain the terrorists were not, and could not have been, acting in the name of Islam. Islam and barbarism are incompatible, they are likely to tell us.

Fear of being branded 'Islamophobic' stifles many politicians, journalists, and community leaders from criticising Islam. They prefer to say attacks are a 'perversion' of Islam. But as this paper has argued, a harder question is whether jihadist violence actually has deep doctrinal, scriptural, and historical roots in mainstream Islam. However, there is great pressure to avoid asking that question.

Whatever the Qu'ran actually says about violence, it is clear Islam provides an ideological framework giving suicidal psychopaths the sense of purpose that motivates them to act. Jihadist attacks perpetrated by so-called 'lone wolf' killers — who intend to slaughter as many people as possible — almost invariably end with the death of the attacker. This is no accident.

The terrorist's death is not an unfortunate consequence of his or her action: it is a central part of the plan. Jihadists choose death and are determined to die. Their aim is rejection, not reform. According to Olivier Roy, an expert on political Islam and Islamist terrorism: "Violence is not a means. It is an end in itself. It is violence devoid of a future."[64] We struggle to understand what drives an individual —

usually male, often young, and with their whole life before them — to perpetrate such nihilistic and suicidal atrocities.

Acts of terror committed in the name of Islam pose a growing challenge for western countries long accustomed to the conventions of tolerance and liberty. The challenge we face is that terrorists hold the upper hand: security services simply cannot keep track of everyone who is of concern. Arrests frequently follow an attack, thereby forestalling further attacks; preventing an attack from occurring in the first place is much more difficult. Shortly after the Manchester attack, police in Adelaide detained a 22-year old Somali-Australian woman who has been charged with being a member of Islamic State. But for every suspect caught, many more are likely to slip through the net.

What is to be done? Ramping up security in all public arenas will continue, but in reality it can offer only limited protection – until the next attack, followed by yet more heightened measures. Increased security can only be part of a short-term response. Dislodging violent ideas from the heads of death-obsessed religious extremists takes more than imposing more bag checks or telling those being attacked to: "Run, Hide, Tell."

Rather, it means renewing our commitment to liberty, tolerance, and the rule of law. It means reclaiming the values of western civilisation, instilling those values in every citizen, and working hard to ensure newcomers to a country are integrated into the wider society. It also means encouraging open discussion about religious ideas — including criticism of religion — without fear of attack or legal action under the guise of stamping out 'Islamophobia'.

This is no quick-fix solution. It will take a long time, and it will not eliminate the threat of religious violence altogether. But it will temper the environment in which such violence breeds. Religious violence is provoking a deadly contest about our fundamental beliefs. Each one of us is now engaged in that contest — and we need to know what it is we must defend.

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5 A word about terminology is in order: the term "religious violence" will be used in this paper to refer specifically to violent physical acts motivated by religious beliefs, teachings or doctrines. It is a term with a very broad application. When violent acts are perpetrated in the name religion, it may be the case that other social and political factors have contributed to the disturbance. Although "terrorism" is widely held to refer to violent action in pursuit of secular, political objectives, when those objectives are religious, it is appropriate to refer to acts of "religious terrorism". As for the meaning of "violence", this paper defines it as "behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something."

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TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD: CONFRONTING ACTS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN A LIBERAL SOCIETY

Acts of violence perpetrated in the name of religion have been reported with great prominence in recent times. Scholars of religion continue to weigh whether people who kill or injure others are really doing so in the name of their God, as they claim; or whether they are actors merely identifiable as followers of that God. There are no obvious answers to the problem of religious violence. Although it is not a new phenomenon, it has taken on a new, more deadly form that is provoking heightened concerns about the integration of Muslims into the wider society. Confronting religious violence effectively requires the preservation of strong bonds of trust and respect between citizens, the voluntary associations of civil society, such as religious communities, and the organs of government. It also requires an unfailing commitment to upholding the cultural, moral, and legal stability of a liberal society in order that citizens may freely challenge religious believers who advocate militant or illiberal teachings. Upholding and defending the values of an open, liberal society needs to be a priority for all who are prepared to engage in the ideological contest provoked by religious violence. This paper sets out to examine some of the key problems religious violence poses for western, liberal societies.

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