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RETHINKING SECULAR AND SACRED

On the Role of Secular Thought in Religious Conflicts

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Preface

In early 2001, as I began exploring the role of religion in conflict, I came across a declaration by a then little-known leader, Osama bin Laden, and his fellows. That declaration was of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.[1] Many analysts now see it as one of the founding documents of al Qaeda, the amorphous terrorist umbrella group. The purpose of the declaration was to issue a fatwa that, because United States troops were stationed in the holy Arabian peninsula and threatened Muslims, particularly in Iraq, it was every Muslim's duty "to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – ... in any country in which it is possible to do it." Of course, the first thing that struck me, as an American, was that here was a group that wished to kill me solely because of my birthplace. They did not seem to care that I might not support specific actions of my government, even if I supported that government generally. Nor was there any discussion of whether methods other than violence might be more useful in persuading my fellow citizens as to the justice of their cause. I wondered, as a student of peace studies, what I could do in the face of such seemingly implacable hatred.

The second thing that struck me about the declaration was its language. I noticed, in particular, a certain flourish that one does not often find in political analysis. The image that "nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food" has always stayed in my mind because the simple image has such rhetorical power. I also noticed, in accordance with my research interests, the use of religious teachings as a justification for violence. Yet poetic rhetoric and religious dogma were not the only contents of that declaration. Bin Laden and his fellows made coherent political points. They cited as

1 bin Laden, Osama; al-Zawahiri, Ayman; Taha, Abu-Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad; Hamzah, Mir; Rahman, Fazlul, 1998, "Nass Bayan al-Jabhah al-Islamiyah al-Alamiyah li-Jihad al-Yahud wa-al-Salibiyin" ("Declaraton of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders"), *al-Quds al-Arabi* (UK) 9(2732), 23 Feb.: 3, <data.alquds.co.uk/Alquds/1998/02Feb/23%2520Feb%2520Mon/QudsPage03.pdf>. Cornell University Library hosts an English translation and a photocopy of the original at <www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/wif.htm> and <./fatw2.htm>, respectively (all web addresses as at 27 Jan. 2005).

examples of the harm caused by the United States: the post-Gulf War presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia, "dictating to its rulers [and] humiliating its people;" the continued bombing of Iraq "even though all [Saudi] rulers are against their territories being used to that end;" and, finally, the way that these actions contributed to the security of Israel by weakening Arab nations.

Thus, beneath its religious expression the declaration contained political points with which I could engage. Now, as I categorically oppose the use of violence, I unreservedly reject the conclusion of the fatwa. Moreover, I do not assume that a single statement is evidence of this group's true intent. It may very well be the case, as analysts more versed in their politics than I have argued, that al Qaeda's real goal is the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Its affiliation with Afghanistan's Taliban certainly supports this argument. In spite of these things, though, their use of political arguments meant they were trying to reach an audience that cared about such things. I could address that audience as well, and try to propose different courses of action that would address the same concerns. Thus, I could step outside of my original framework, in which I envisioned implacable hatred, and argue for nonviolent ways of addressing the issues. Yet the religious idiom of the declaration was also an important factor. Given that the declaration addressed Muslims as Muslims, by only trying to argue political points with them I might alienate people for whom the religious language meant a great deal.

Already in my research I had come to the conclusion, drawing on R. Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*,[2] that the people best placed to show the peaceful potential of a religion are believers in that religion. I am not, however, religious. Thus, this conclusion left me with no recourse in the face of the religious aspects of conflict. I began to wonder what role a nonreligious – or, as I came to think of myself, a secular – person could play in peacemaking when religion is an element of a conflict. Moreover,

2 Appleby, R. Scott, 2000, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield).

I saw that different seculars would have different reactions to bin Laden's arguments. Some would reject the message because of the religious medium. Some, like I first did, would perceive the sociopolitical elements but continue to ignore the religious language. Others, as I also briefly did, might consider the religious element but leave out the issue of their own secular nature. Yet no perspective provided a good model for what I, as a secular, might do. Thus, the goal of my thesis became to analyze the various models of secularity, find the most beneficial principles, and construct from these a model for secular best practice.

That Osama bin Laden's words should catalyze this thesis brings me to two important points. First, this is not a thesis about Islam. If a disproportionate number of the examples that I use throughout the thesis focus on Islam, this should not indicate that Islam deserves special attention concerning conflict and violence. Rather, the focus here is always on secularity and secular responses to religion in situations of conflict. However, particularly after September 11th, the largely secular policy and scholarly establishments of Europe and North America have produced a great deal of material concerning Islam. Thus, while I sought out more diverse sources dealing with secularity, I often used the religion most commented on by secular sources as an exemplar. That leads to the second point, which is that this is not a thesis about terrorism. Given its scope and the place of religion in it, most obvious case study to use in this thesis is the "war on terror" – which I call such for ease of use, as that is what the Western media generally call it, not because I think it is an adequate designation. I will cover this topic in the final chapter, but because the thesis is about peace and violence in conflict, and not about specific forms of violence, it will not figure elsewhere.

Because this thesis is concerned with violence and, specifically, with the promotion of peace, it has an overt prescriptive element. This stems in large part from my Peace Studies background. Peace Studies entails a normative commitment to pursue peaceful situations through nonviolent means. Thus, at several points I actively enjoin readers to

take or not take certain types of action because, by my analysis, that is the best way to promote peaceful relationships. More generally, by the title of this thesis, I ask readers to "rethink secular and sacred" – both what these terms mean, and more importantly how they relate to one another. In particular, this goal leads me to avoid discussing the concept of tolerance. Tolerance is often held to be a virtue by those who seek to promote nonconfrontational religious interaction. However, as many other writers have pointed out, the word "tolerance" itself stems from physiological and biological studies, where it means the ability to withstand negative factors, such as poisons or drugs.[3] Thus I find that its social meaning is essentially negative, denoting forbearance of what one finds repugnant. While in a very limited sense I feel that tolerance is necessary, it is only as a first step to actively engaging with what one might *at first* find off-putting. By itself, tolerance does not encourage one to rethink one's relationship with something, and thus a nonconfrontational situation is not necessarily a peaceful one. As I researched the thesis, although I was aware of academic work concerning tolerance, I found that none of it contributed to my goals. Thus, the thesis took shape in such a way that a treatment of tolerance was unnecessary.

As a final note I would like to mention another topic that did not fit into this thesis, which I regard as something of a loss – gender. During my research, I was also aware of work in this field, and, again, the structure of this thesis is such that it was not necessary to mention it explicitly. However, if there is one single issue that cuts across religious and secular groups, as well as the conflicts I analyze, it is the effect of gender roles and issues. Yet the very breadth of the topic put me in a bind – either I could thoroughly treat it and produce a much different thesis, or I could cursorily treat it, perhaps in the chapter on theory and methodology. I chose to do neither, because the first option would have obscured the value that this thesis does have, and the second would have been a paltry treatment of such a weighty topic. However, the theoretical schools I use

3 See, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1st 1933), Simpson, J.A., and Weiner, E.S.C., co-eds., in. al. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1989), v. 18, pp. 199-200.

in this thesis are amenable to a gendered interpretation. This is particularly the case with integral theory, the chief proponent of which, Ken Wilber, has addressed gender issues in a number of his primary works. One can easily discern what I define in this thesis as a strong-open analysis in his analysis of feminisms. He notes both the strength of the radical feminist perspective that champions female distinctiveness as well as the desire of liberal feminists to open social and political spheres traditionally closed to women, and seeks to bring them together.[4] Thus, I am confident that this thesis can bolster future research that specifically addresses gender issues as they arise in conflicts with a religious element.

4 Wilber, Ken, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (1st 1995) (Boston, MA: Shambhala), pp. 165-167 and 186-187, in. al.