

# Fields of Blood

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*Religion and the History  
of Violence*

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*For Jane Garrett*

of Madeleine Albright's when she was still Bill Clinton's ambassador to the United Nations. She later retracted it, but among people all around the world, it has never been forgotten. In 1996, on CBS's *60 Minutes*, Lesley Stahl asked her whether the cost of international sanctions against Iraq was justified: "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that is more than died in Hiroshima. . . . Is the price worth it?" "I think this is a very hard choice," Albright replied, "but the price, we think the price is worth it."<sup>104</sup>

On October 24, 2012, Mamana Bibi, a sixty-five-year-old woman picking vegetables in her family's large open land in northern Waziristan, Pakistan, was killed by a U.S. drone aircraft. She was not a terrorist but a midwife married to a retired schoolteacher, yet she was blown to pieces in front of her nine young grandchildren. Some of the children have had multiple surgeries that the family could ill afford because they lost all their livestock; the smaller children still scream in terror all night long. We do not know who the real targets were. Yet even though the U.S. government claims to carry out thorough poststrike assessments, it has never apologized, never offered compensation to the family, nor even admitted what happened to the American people. CIA director John O. Brennan had previously claimed that drone strikes caused absolutely no civilian casualties; more recently he has admitted otherwise while maintaining that such deaths are extremely rare. Since then, Amnesty International reviewed some forty-five strikes in the region, finding evidence of unlawful civilian deaths, and has reported several strikes that appear to have killed civilians outside the bounds of law.<sup>105</sup> "Bombs create only hatred in the hearts of people. And that hatred and anger breed more terrorism," said Bibi's son. "No one ever asked *us* who was killed or injured that day. Not the United States or my own government. Nobody has come to investigate nor has anyone been held accountable. Quite simply, nobody seems to care."<sup>106</sup>

"Am I my brother's guardian?" Cain asked after he had killed his brother, Abel. We are now living in such an interconnected world that we are all implicated in one another's history and one another's tragedies. As we—quite rightly—condemn those terrorists who kill innocent people, we also have to find a way to acknowledge our relationship with and responsibility for Mamana Bibi, her family, and the hundreds of thousands of civilians who have died or been mutilated in our modern wars simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

## Afterword

We have seen that, like the weather, religion "does lots of different things." To claim that it has a single, unchanging, and inherently violent essence is not accurate. Identical religious beliefs and practices have inspired diametrically opposed courses of action. In the Hebrew Bible, the Deuteronomists and the Priestly authors all meditated on the same stories, but the Deuteronomists turned virulently against foreign peoples, while the Priestly authors sought reconciliation. Chinese Daoists, Legalists, and military strategists shared the same set of ideas and meditative disciplines but put them to entirely different uses. Saint Luke and the Johannine authors all reflected on Jesus's message of love, but Luke reached out to marginalized members of society, while the Johannines confined their love to their own group. Antony and the Syrian boskoi both set out to practice "freedom from care," but Antony spent his life trying to empty his mind of anger and hatred, while the Syrian monks surrendered to the aggressive drives of the reptilian brain. Ibn Taymiyyah and Rumi were both victims of the Mongol invasions, but they used the teachings of Islam to come to entirely different conclusions. For centuries the story of Imam Husain's tragic death inspired Shiis to withdraw from political life in principled protest against systemic injustice; more recently it has inspired them to take political action and say no to tyranny.

Until the modern period, religion permeated all aspects of life, including politics and warfare, not because ambitious churchmen had "mixed

up” two essentially distinct activities but because people wanted to endow everything they did with significance. Every state ideology was religious. The kings of Europe who struggled to liberate themselves from papal control were not “secularists” but were revered as semidivine. Every successful empire has claimed that it had a divine mission; that its enemies were evil, misguided, or tyrannical; and that it would benefit humanity. And because these states and empires were all created and maintained by force, religion has been implicated in their violence. It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that religion was ejected from political life in the West. When, therefore, people claim that religion has been responsible for *more* war, oppression, and suffering than any other human institution, one has to ask, “More than *what?*” Until the American and French Revolutions, there were no “secular” societies. So ingrained is our impulse to “sanctify” our political activities that no sooner had the French revolutionaries successfully marginalized the Catholic Church than they created a new national religion. In the United States, the first secular republic, the state has always had a religious aura, a manifest destiny, and a divinely sanctioned mission.

John Locke believed that the separation of church and state was the key to peace, but the nation-state has been far from war-averse. The problem lies not in the multifaceted activity that we call “religion” but in the violence embedded in our human nature and the nature of the state, which from the start required the forcible subjugation of at least 90 percent of the population. As Ashoka discovered, even if a ruler shrank from state aggression, it was impossible to disband the army. The *Mahabharata* lamented the dilemma of the warrior-king doomed to a life of warfare. The Chinese realized very early that a degree of force was essential to civilized life. Ancient Israel tried initially to escape the agrarian state, yet Israelites soon discovered that much as they hated the exploitation and cruelty of urban civilization, they could not live without it; they too had to become “like all the nations.” Jesus preached an inclusive and compassionate kingdom that defied the imperial ethos, and he was crucified for his pains. The Muslim ummah began as an alternative to the jahili injustice of commercial Mecca, but eventually it had to become an empire, because an absolute monarchy was the best and perhaps the only way to keep the peace. Modern military historians agree that without professional and responsible armies, human society would

either have remained in a primitive state or would have degenerated into ceaselessly warring hordes.

Before the creation of the nation-state, people thought about politics in a religious way. Constantine’s empire showed what could happen when an originally peaceful tradition became too closely associated with the government; the Christian emperors enforced the Pax Christiana as belligerently as their pagan predecessors had imposed the Pax Romana. The Crusades were inspired by religious passion but were also deeply political: Pope Urban II let the knights of Christendom loose on the Muslim world to extend the power of the Church eastward, and create a papal monarchy that would control Christian Europe. The Inquisition was a deeply flawed attempt to secure the internal order of Spain after a divisive civil war. The Wars of Religion and the Thirty Years’ War may have been pervaded by the sectarian quarrels of the Reformation, but they were also the birth pangs of the modern nation-state.

When we fight, we need to distance ourselves from the adversary, and because religion was so central to the state, its rites and myths depicted its enemies as monsters of evil that threatened cosmic and political order. During the Middle Ages, Christians denounced Jews as child-killers, Muslims as “an evil and despicable race,” and Cathars as a cancerous growth in the body of Christendom. Again, this hatred was certainly religiously motivated, but it was also a response to the social distress that accompanied early modernization. Christians made Jews the scapegoat for their excessive anxiety about the money economy, and popes blamed Cathars for their own inability to live up to the gospel. In the process they created imaginary enemies who were distorted mirror images of themselves. Yet casting off the mantle of religion did not bring an end to prejudice. A “scientific racism” developed in the modern period that drew on the old religious patterns of hatred and inspired the Armenian genocide and Hitler’s death camps. Secular nationalism, imposed so unceremoniously by the colonialists, would regularly merge with local religious traditions, where people had not yet abstracted “religion” from politics; as a result, these religious traditions were often distorted and developed an aggressive strain.

The sectarian hatreds that develop within a faith tradition are often cited to prove that “religion” is chronically intolerant. These internal feuds have indeed been bitter and virulent, but they too have nearly

always had a political dimension. Christian “heretics” were persecuted for using the gospel to articulate their rejection of the systemic injustice and violence of the agrarian state. Even the abstruse debates about the nature of Christ in the Eastern Church were fueled by the political ambitions of the “tyrant-bishops.” Heretics were often persecuted when the nation feared external attack. The xenophobic theology of the Deuteronomists developed when the Kingdom of Judah faced political annihilation. Ibn Taymiyyah introduced the practice of takfir when Muslims in the Near East were menaced by the Crusaders from the West and the Mongols from the East. The Inquisition took place against the backdrop of the Ottoman threat and the Wars of Religion, just as the September Massacres and the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France were motivated by fears of foreign invasion.

Lord Acton accurately predicted that the liberal nation-state would persecute ethnic and cultural “minorities,” who have indeed taken the place of “heretics.” In Iraq, Pakistan, and Lebanon, traditional Sunni/Shii animosity has been aggravated by nationalism and the problems of the postcolonial state. In the past Sunni Muslims were always loath to call their coreligionists “apostates,” because they believed that God alone knew what was in a person’s heart. But the practice of takfir has become common in our own day, when Muslims once again fear foreign enemies. When Muslims attack churches and synagogues today, they are not driven to do so by Islam. The Quran commands Muslims to respect the faith of “the people of the book.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most frequently quoted jihad verses justifies warfare by stating: “If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is much invoked, would have been destroyed.”<sup>2</sup> This new aggression toward religious minorities in the nation-state is largely the result of political tensions arising from Western imperialism (associated with Christianity) and the Palestinian problem.<sup>3</sup>

It is simply not true that “religion” is always aggressive. Sometimes it has actually put a brake on violence. In the ninth century BCE, Indian ritualists extracted all violence from the liturgy and created the ideal of ahimsa, “nonviolence.” The medieval Peace and Truce of God forced knights to stop terrorizing the poor and outlawed violence from Wednesday to Sunday each week. Most dramatically, after the Bar Kokhba war, the rabbis reinterpreted the scriptures so effectively that Jews refrained from political aggression for a millennium. Such successes have been

rare. Because of the inherent violence of the states in which we live, the best that prophets and sages have been able to do is provide an alternative. The Buddhist sangha had no political power, but it became a vibrant presence in ancient India and even influenced emperors. Ashoka published the ideals of ahimsa, tolerance, kindness, and respect in the extraordinary inscriptions he published throughout the empire. Confucians kept the ideal of humanity (*ren*) alive in the government of imperial China until the revolution. For centuries, the egalitarian code of the Shariah was a countercultural challenge to the Abbasid aristocracy; the caliphs acknowledged that it was God’s law, even though they could not rule by it.

Other sages and mystics developed spiritual practices to help people control their aggression and develop a reverence for all human beings. In India, renouncers practiced the disciplines of yoga and ahimsa to eradicate egotistic machismo. Others cultivated the ideals of anatta (“no self”) and kenosis (“self-emptying”) to control the “me first” impulses that so often lead to violence; they sought an “equanimity” that would make it impossible for one to see oneself as superior to anybody else, taught that every single person has sacred potential, and asserted that people should even love their enemies. Prophets and psalmists insisted that a city could not be “holy” if the ruling class did not care for the poor and dispossessed. Priests urged their compatriots to draw on the memory of their own past suffering to assuage the pain of others, instead of using it to justify harassment and persecution. They all insisted in one way or another that if people did not treat all others as they would wish to be treated themselves and develop a “concern for everybody,” society was doomed. If the colonial powers had observed the Golden Rule in their colonies, we would not be having so many political problems today.

One of the most ubiquitous religious practices was the cult of community. In the premodern world, religion was a communal rather than a private pursuit. People achieved enlightenment and salvation by learning to live harmoniously together. Instead of distancing themselves from their fellow humans as the warriors did, sages, prophets, and mystics helped people cultivate a relationship with and responsibility for those they would not ordinarily find congenial. They devised meditations that deliberately extended their benevolence to the ends of the earth; wished all beings happiness; taught their compatriots to revere the holiness of every single person; and resolved to find practical ways of assuaging the

world's suffering. Neuroscientists have discovered that Buddhist monks who have practiced this compassionate meditation assiduously have physically enhanced those centers of the brain that spark our empathy. Jains cultivated an outstanding vision of the community of all creatures. Muslims achieved the surrender of *islam* by taking responsibility for one another and sharing what they had with those in need. In Paul's churches, rich and poor were instructed to sit at the same table and eat the same food. Cluniac monks made lay Christians live together like monks during a pilgrimage, rich and poor sharing the same hardships. The Eucharist was not a solitary communion with Christ but a rite that bonded the political community.

From a very early date, prophets and poets helped people to contemplate the tragedy of life and face up to the damage they did to others. In ancient Sumeria the *Atrahasis* could not find a solution to the social injustice on which their civilization depended, but this popular tale made people aware of it. Gilgamesh had to come face-to-face with the horror of death, which drained warfare of spurious glamour and nobility. The Prophets of Israel compelled rulers to take responsibility for the suffering they inflicted on the poor and lambasted them for their war crimes. The Priestly authors of the Hebrew Bible lived in a violent society and could not abjure warfare but believed that warriors were contaminated by their violence, even if the campaign had been endorsed by God. That was why David was not allowed to build Yahweh's temple. The Aryans loved warfare and revered their warriors; fighting and raiding were essential to the pastoral economy; but the warrior always carried a taint. Chinese strategists admitted that the military way of life was a "way of deception" and must be segregated from civilian life. They drew attention to the uncomfortable fact that even an idealistic state nurtured at its heart an institution dedicated to killing, lying, and treachery.

In the West secularism is now a part of our identity. It has been beneficial—not least because an intimate association with government can badly compromise a faith tradition. But it has had its own violence. Revolutionary France was secularized by coercion, extortion, and bloodshed; for the first time it mobilized the whole of society for war; and its secularism seemed propelled by an aggression toward religion that is still shared by many Europeans today. The United States did not stigmatize faith in the same way, and religion has flourished there. There was an aggression in early modern thought, which failed to apply the concept

of human rights to the indigenous peoples of the Americas or to African slaves. In the developing world secularization has been experienced as lethal, hostile, and invasive. There have been massacres in sacred shrines; clerics have been tortured, imprisoned, and assassinated; madrasa students shot down and humiliated; and the clerical establishment systematically deprived of resources, dignity, and status.

Hence secularization has sometimes damaged religion. Even in the relatively benign atmosphere of the United States, Protestant fundamentalists became xenophobic and fearful of modernity. The horrors of Nasser's prison polarized the vision of Sayyid Qutb; his former liberalism was transformed into a paranoid vision that saw enemies everywhere. Khomeini too frequently spoke of conspiracies of Jews, Christians, and imperialists. The Deobandis, bruised by the British abolition of the Moghul Empire, created a rigid, rule-bound form of Islam and gave us the Taliban travesty, a noxious combination of Deobandi rigidity, tribal chauvinism, and the aggression of the traumatized war orphan. In the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, the alien ideology of nationalism transformed traditional religious symbols and myths and gave them a violent dimension. But the relationship between modernity and religion has not been wholly antagonistic. Some movements, such as the two Great Awakenings and the Muslim Brotherhood, have actually helped people to embrace modern ideals and institutions in a more familiar idiom.

Modern religious violence is not an alien growth but is part of the modern scene. We have created an interconnected world. It is true that we are dangerously polarized, but we are also linked together more closely than ever before. When shares fall in one region, markets plummet all around the globe. What happens in Palestine or Iraq today can have repercussions tomorrow in New York, London, or Madrid. We are connected electronically so that images of suffering and devastation in a remote Syrian village or an Iraqi prison are instantly beamed around the world. We all face the possibility of environmental or nuclear catastrophe. But our perceptions have not caught up with the realities of our situation, so that in the First World we still tend to put ourselves in a special privileged category. Our policies have helped to create widespread rage and frustration, and in the West we bear some responsibility for the suffering in the Muslim world that Bin Laden was able to exploit. "Am I my brother's guardian?" The answer must surely be yes.

War, it has been said, is caused "by our inability to see relationships.

Our relationship with our economic and historical situation. Our relationship with our fellow-men. And above all our relationship to nothingness. To death.”<sup>4</sup> We need ideologies today, religious or secular, that help people to face up to the intractable dilemmas of our current “economic and historical situation” as the prophets did in the past. Even though we no longer have to contend with the oppressive injustice of the agrarian empire, there is still massive inequality and an unfair imbalance of power. But the dispossessed are no longer helpless peasants; they have found ways of fighting back. If we want a viable world, we have to take responsibility for the pain of others and learn to listen to narratives that challenge our sense of ourselves. All this requires the “surrender,” selflessness, and compassion that have been just as important in the history of religion as crusades and jihads.

We all wrestle—in secular or religious ways—with “nothingness,” the void at the heart of modern culture. Ever since Zoroaster, religious movements that tried to address the violence of their time have absorbed some of its aggression. Protestant fundamentalism came into being in the United States when evangelical Christians pondered the unprecedented slaughter of the First World War. Their apocalyptic vision was simply a religious version of the secular “future war” genre that had developed in Europe. Religious fundamentalists and extremists have used the language of faith to express fears that also afflict secularists. We have seen that some of the cruelest and most self-destructive of these movements have been in part a response to the Holocaust or the nuclear threat. Groups such as Shukri Mustafa’s Society in Sadat’s Egypt can hold up a distorted mirror image of the structural violence of contemporary culture. Secularists as well as religious people have resorted to the suicide attack, which in some ways reflects the death wish in modern culture. Religious and secularists have shared the same enthusiasms. Kookism was clearly a religious form of secular nationalism and was able to work closely with the Israeli secular right. The Muslims who flocked to join the jihad against the Soviet Union were certainly reviving the classical Islamic practice of “volunteering,” but they also experienced the impulse that prompted hundreds of Europeans to leave the safety of home and fight in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and Jews to hasten from the diaspora to support Israel on the eve of the Six-Day War.

When we confront the violence of our time, it is natural to harden our hearts to the global pain and deprivation that makes us feel uncom-

fortable, depressed, and frustrated. Yet we must find ways of contemplating these distressing facts of modern life, or we will lose the best part of our humanity. Somehow we have to find ways of doing what religion—at its best—has done for centuries: build a sense of global community, cultivate a sense of reverence and “equanimity” for all, and take responsibility for the suffering we see in the world. We are all, religious and secularist alike, responsible for the current predicament of the world. There is no state, however idealistic and however great its achievements, that has not incurred the taint of the warrior. It is a stain on the international community that Mamana Bibi’s son can say: “Quite simply, nobody seems to care.” The scapegoat ritual was an attempt to sever the community’s relationship with its misdeeds; it cannot be a solution for us today.