

## CHAPTER 1

# THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF RELIGION

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Religion is a source of remarkable consolation and hope. It accounts for human endurance through the long reach of our species' precarious history. It is stimulated by and at the same time drives our spirituality, that is, our hunger and quest for meaning in life. Religion responds to our innate sense that the ultimate meaning of our lives is transcendental, and it offers the worldviews and rituals, the ideas and programs, that help us formulate and express our sense of linkage with transcendental reality—with God.

Religion has taken many forms in human history. Those numerous forms have focused on a great variety of points, claiming each of them in various times and settings as the central meaning or truth for humankind. Some religion is formalistic and full of programs and projects. Other kinds are meditative, touching a very fiery personal inner thirst for meaning. Programmatic and project-oriented religions may be called extrinsic in their spirituality, while interior and reflective religions seem more intrinsic. Which suits each human best is a matter of style rather than one's degree of spiritual authenticity or genuineness.

Some religious practice is most focused on dogma or liturgy, some depends nearly completely upon intuitive illumination and psychospiritual interiority. As Toynbee is said to have remarked on history in general, it is certainly true of the history of religions. The formalistic aspects of religious institutions, creeds, dogmas, canon law; the notable records of bishops, archbishops, curias, and popes; and the decrees of councils, consistories, or confraternities, while of temporary usefulness, constitute the flotsam and jetsam that wash down the stream of history into the ocean of relative irrelevance.

The real history of religions is rather the variegated life that is at play deep in the stream of history, where all the unnoticed schools of colorful life forms gambol, and on the banks of the river where both simple and sophisticated folk from the hamlets, villages, and glass skyscrapers everywhere, live and move, sing and dance, fear and hope, touch each other with hands and hearts, love and make love, bear children and catechize them, comfort them in their losses, and bury their dead with faith, hope, and dignity.

It has long seemed to me quite clear that the authenticity of any form of religion or personal spirituality depends upon whether it will bury a child. Can the spirituality that shapes my sense of meaning, the religious ritual that comforts and consoles me, empower me to endure the terror of standing at the edge of the empty tomb into which I must finally lower my own little one? Humans have crafted this question in a variety of ways. Usually our way of saying that unspeakable sentence is designed to mask the horror of it, but neither the most intensely devout form of spirituality, nor the most prayerfully confident hope, protects us from this terror. If we can get through a lifetime without that broken child being our own personal progeny, it is some inexpressible grace, but, nonetheless, we do not get clean away. For me, and every sensitive person, every broken child is mine. That death is a form of terror. Can a religion speak spiritually to such a time of terror and save one's sense of meaning? What does that take?

## EXPOSITION

Too often religion has spoken with an opposite voice. We look to our sacred scriptures for the words of consolation and hope and we find them there pervasive, but many of the words in sacred scriptures express threat and violence. Western cultures have been shaped by religions that, at best, have sounded uncertain trumpets. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all forms of spirituality and religious practice that derive directly from ancient Israelite religion, and that religious tradition speaks with remarkable and disappointing ambiguity. It is my conviction that the main psychosocial and political problem in modern and postmodern culture arises from the apocalyptic worldview willed to us by that ancient ambiguous religion. From the Hebrew Bible's earliest cadences come the sounds of a world split apart. Good and evil are ranged against each other, and from the outset they are given cosmic dimensions. Good and evil quickly become God and devil, and the real arena of the problem becomes transcendent and hence all-encompassing. This ultimate dualism then becomes the model for explaining the meaning of everything, and this schizophrenia is internalized to the unconscious level in every aspect of Western culture and every Western person. It becomes the primal archetype of our understanding, reflecting a schizoid misunderstanding of the real way things are.

The notion that evil is cosmic and that reality is split, from the transcendental level down to our empirical experience, is profoundly untrue. There is no evidence on the basis of which to conclude that there is such a thing as cosmic evil or that some grand warfare between good and evil, God and devil, rages in the universe or in our personal worlds. We have no data in terms of which to conclude that any evil exists in this world except that which humans do to each other from illness, ignorance, or ill will. Tragedies happen, of course. Mud slides kill Columbians. Vesuvius killed Romans in 79 C.E. On January 21, 2003, an earthquake of 7.8 on the Richter scale killed at least 22 citizens of Mexico. Children die daily somewhere. These are tragedies, but not cosmic evil. They are evil in that they terrorize and torture humans, sometimes beyond what is supportable. They are inconveniences of the body, mind, or spirit. However, the suffering of this world arises from our actions or our failure to act, either from inadequate or bad will, or from inadequate or bad information, or from inadequate or inefficient effort, or from lack of power or ability to do better or differently.

Humankind is caught in a world that challenges us beyond our incompletely evolved human capacities, a world in which our incapacity to meet the challenge turns naturally back upon us with cruel pain. If you do not have enough men to lift the barn beam, it will fall upon you and crush you, not because the beam or the world in which it functions is evil, or because barn raising is evil, but because the challenge was still beyond you. A microbe infects a blade of grass munched by a cow whose dangerous milk is offered an infant and kills him. Great achievement for the parasite. Great tragedy for the child and his loved ones—not because the world is evil but because we have not yet imagined an adequate medical management of microbes.

So we live out our quest for meaning, spirituality, and authentic religion in a world of human pathos, vulnerability, and pain. There is no way around that. It is surely the best of all possible worlds, nonetheless, in which microbes, cows, babies, and their parents are free, although immature, inadequate, incomplete, and endangered species. The challenges are God-sized and our resources are only human, so the task could easily become overwhelming. For many it does. For all of us it would if we could find no comfort and consolation. The tragic side of human experience, therefore, is greatly and unnecessarily exaggerated when the main sources to which we look for consolation and empowerment, our religious traditions, are infested with ambiguity. The greatest tragedy is religion that sounds the trumpet of violence and champions the metaphors of abuse, exploitation, legalisms, and merely a conditional grace.

As I mentioned above, the Western religious traditions, which go back to the ancient Israelite religion of the Hebrew Bible, have internalized this violent metaphor of the cosmic contest between transcendental good and evil. It is an old pagan idea that derives from ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and

Canaanite legend, reinforced by the apocalypticism of Zoroastrian influences from the sixth century B.C.E. This violent metaphor of divine warfare and of a God who kills his son has become the central metaphor of the Master Story of Western culture. It has settled into the center of the psyche of the communities of faith we know as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through them it has shaped the unconscious psychosocial assumptions of our cultures. This set of unconscious apocalyptic assumptions forms the sources and stage set for what we find meaningful in our cultures, from the violent game machines in the arcades our teenagers frequent to the actions of the Islamic Fundamentalists who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center. It is a short psychospiritual step from the vicarious forms of wishful mythic violence in the arcade machine to the mythic wishes that hurled gasoline-laden flying machines into the workplace of twenty thousand New Yorkers.

The hero-touting movies, popular literature, money-making music, and crowd-gathering Fundamentalist TV evangelists are all pushing the same apocalyptic model. Cosmic good and transcendental evil are depicted as being in mortal combat on the battlefields of our political policy, our international relations, our social values, and our spiritual quests in the arena of the human heart. Meanwhile, the truth is that none of this is so. But how many of the movies produced in the last 10 years would have gained any audience or financial success, if they had not exploited this false apocalyptic vision? What would happen to a movie that simply told the truth that humans are up against some massive challenges to form a congenial world, safe for children and those who love them? Who would make money on a film that refused the apocalyptic vision and instead set before us the hardheaded enigmas of the creation of a more blessed world?

Apocalyptic evangelists, film producers, arcade machine purveyors, designers of the violent Disney videos, and those Fundamentalist Islamic terrorists are all in the same category in terms of the unconscious metaphors by which they are shaped, to which they appeal, and that they constantly reinforce in our cultures. Moreover, the Master Story from which they derive their unconscious metaphors is the tradition of Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Western world will need to decide whether it wishes to change this destructive story and its vicious core metaphors, or continue to wreak increasing psychospiritual havoc upon itself until the metaphor becomes so pervasive that we will all feel relieved with the impending prospect of a final cataclysmic Armageddon, closing out history. Does this seem far-fetched? It is the palpable vision of the Zionist Christian Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, of the Islamic terrorists, and can it not be of the Israeli Zionists who would rather fight than switch? Such folk are serious and sincere about their vision and are quite sure they are closer to God's truth than any of the rest of us who seek spiritual authenticity and religious integrity and peace. The metaphor of cosmic evil and violence has taken over their center.

It is of great interest that Western religions are the action-oriented religions. In this regard they differ greatly from the spirit and style of the historic Eastern religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Eastern religions are characterized by a movement inward, while Western religions tend to externalize their values in sociocultural influences. The inward-oriented religions of Asia and India emphasize the importance of individual and intrinsic spirituality that moves toward transcendence of self, society, and world. The outward-acting religions of the West emphasize human responsibility for the shape and function of society, and tend to make ethical claims in the name of religion and religions' God. This extrinsic spirituality is advantageous in many ways, especially in terms of attempts at managing material resources for the enhancement of the material comfort, safety, health, and quality of human life. One needs only compare the sewer systems of India and the United States to discern the difference a socially responsible extrinsic spirituality makes compared with an individualistic, interiorizing transcendental religion.

However, the underside of this very same extrinsic and action-oriented nature of the Western religions carries with it the monstrous danger that externalizing the metaphors and models of apocalyptic religion into culture building and social function produces enormous potential for violence at both the individual and societal levels. If the world is a stage for the cosmic battle between good and evil, God and devil, mediated through human agency, humans who want to undertake what they consider responsible courses of action are likely to resort to violence to win the war for God and the good. Each highly motivated religionist conceives of his or her religio-cultural stance to be the one that is on God's side. Thus those who have the posture of one of the other action religions tend to be placed in the religio-cultural category of the evil one—the other side of the cosmic conflict. Thus Fundamentalist Muslims resort to terror to oppose the influences of American culture and political presence in their world, the generally secular character of which is identified with Christian or Judeo-Christian traditions. It was these people who assassinated Anwar Sadat for his inclination toward American policy and toward peace.

So also Fundamentalist Jews tend to side with the aggressive right-wing politics in Israel today and demonize the Palestinian activists as belonging to the enemies of God and God's people. It was such Jews who assassinated Rabin because of his quest for peace and reconciliation. In like manner, American Fundamentalist Christians support Zionist causes, not because they hold to the original Zionist principles, but because they believe that doing so hurries the onset of the ultimate conflict between the cause of God, identified with their form of Christianity, and the cause of the devil, identified with Muslim religion and politics. Their ambition is to precipitate the ultimate conflict, bringing the world into a cataclysmic Battle of Armageddon.

This prospect is of high value to these Christian Fundamentalists because they are sure that the final battle will end the travail of history as we know it with its cosmic conflict, it will defeat the powers of the devil, and it will bring Jesus, as "the Son of Man, on the clouds of heaven, with all the Holy Angels, in the glory of his Father." It will give us a new heaven and a new earth, devoid of the tiring cosmic conflict.

All three of these action-oriented Western religions have a common psychological need and archetype. It is that of the quest for a final solution. This is not just the final solution to present practical political or social problems, not simply the final solution to misunderstandings between Jews and Arabs, not even the final solution to high threat levels in the oily Middle East, nor the definitive final solution to disagreements between Europe, Asia, and America on how to shepherd the world to peace and prosperity. This is not a conscious level quest for a strategy of political and social well-being. It is an unconscious urge, a psychological desperation, a sociopolitical lust for the final solution to the underlying cosmic conflict between God and devil, between all things good and all things evil.

If you asked human beings on the streets of our cities if this is their need and hunger, most would not be conscious of this as the driver behind their enthusiasm for the causes they espouse. Nonetheless, it is true for religionists and secularists alike. The deep-structure drivers behind the institutional and societal violence in our Western culture—political and economic manipulation and military action—are the psychological archetypes that compel us to lunge for those final solutions. Each war is the war to end all wars—although it never does and never will. These deep-structure psychological archetypes are shaped by the religious models of violent cosmic conflict that derive from ancient Israelite religious narratives in the Bible and lie at the core of all Western religions. This lust and lunge for final solutions express the weariness of Western humanity under the burden of the cosmic-conflict model of reality. It is a failure of verve and a failure of nerve in the West. It expresses a universal unconscious longing to get out from under this religio-cultural burden. It is a longing for the end—and for the relief of death.

## CONCLUSION

The central problem with which we are perpetually faced throughout the world today, given the prominent influence of Western culture nearly everywhere on this planet, is complex but relatively easy to outline. As we noted, it is rooted in the core metaphor of a violent cosmic contest between good and evil in terms of which all of reality is consciously viewed and that is derived from the ancient Israelite root of all of our religions. This metaphor appeals to our primal communal survival instincts and feeds those aggressive drives, giving form to unconscious psychological archetypes regarding us versus

them, those on the side of God and the good versus those on the side of evil and the demonic. This set of archetypes prompts the lust for comfort and safety gained by force: political, economic, or military; and the lunge for an ultimate resolution by cataclysm—an apocalyptic death wish. This is a particularly obscene state of affairs, since the root hypothesis is erroneous. There is no reason to claim that there is such a thing as ontological evil in this world, and there is no evidence for a transcendental cosmic conflict. There are just communities of inadequate, ignorant, and sick humans trying to find their way to meaning in a world of radical freedom, constant growth, the perpetual change attendant upon growth, and the pervasive pain that accommodating change always brings.

Some years ago, I am told, the cartoon editor of the *Kansas City Star* retired. He had served a long lifetime career for that paper, and they honored him with a congratulatory dinner. He had wielded a particularly cynical and acerbic pen all his long years as a cartoonist, severely lacerating the pomposity, presumptuousness, narcissism, acquisitiveness, and general bad manners of humanity. Now, at his dinner he was expected to make some memorable remarks. They asked him to comment upon what he really thought of the human race. He simply said, "I think we ought to be kind to it. It is the only one we've got!" I think it is time for us to begin to treat and nurture the human race and its pilgrimage with gentle kindness and enticing nurture, by providing it a vision of life as an intriguing, though painful, growth quest, in the congenial environment of simple pleasures, consoling love, and amazing grace. To do this we must rid ourselves once and for all of the great lie. We must transcend the awful betrayal in our earliest religious metaphors that make us feel unconsciously that we are up against cosmic evil, divine threat, inherent failure, insurmountable guilt, final resolution by calamity and cataclysm, and ultimate self-inflicted disaster. That is not the meaning of things. The meaning is in growth and grace.