Religion: Matrix of War and Peace

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Introduction

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1. Introduction: Resurgent Religion

It did not take the appalling events of September 11 last year to remind us that religion is currently undergoing a global resurgence, which carries with it unpredictable consequences for the future of our common humanity. Until quite recently, the assumption which ruled much of the Western academy, and its global outposts, was that religion had had its day. It was an idea whose time had gone. This assumption – the so-called "secularization thesis" pronounced by Western sociologists of religion – claimed that religion as a significant public influence would necessarily recede as societies underwent "modernization," even if it survived as a harmless private indulgence. As a writer in the current issue of *Atlantic Monthly* states it: "advances in the rational understanding of the world will inevitably diminish the influence of that last, vexing sphere of irrationality in human culture: religion." (February, p. 37) But this thesis was in tatters long before anyone had even heard of Al Qaeda. Sociologists of religion have taken stock of what the same writer calls, "the failure of religion to wither away on schedule," (p. 39) and they are now, instead reporting the "desecularization of the world" – to cite the title of a recent book edited by Peter Berger. As Berger remarks there, it's necessary for academics to have these things reported to them because many of them are so out of touch with ordinary life.

When intellectuals travel, they usually touch down in intellectual circles – that is, among people much like themselves. They can easily fall into the misconception that these people reflect the overall visited society. Picture a secular intellectual

from Western Europe socializing with colleagues at the faculty club of the University of Texas. He may think he is back home. But then picture him trying to drive through the traffic jam on Sunday morning in downtown Austin – or, heaven help him, turning on his car radio! (p. 11)

As those of us here will know, religion is undergoing a massive period of growth across most regions of the world. The major exception to this is Western Europe and those cultures historically shaped by it, including, of course, Canada. This global growth is not only in numbers of adherents, but also in diversity of expressions. But what is especially germane to our discussion is the heightened intensity of conviction of many religious adherents, and their readiness to express it in public life; indeed in some cases their unshakeable determination to do so – with results which can both enhance human community or shatter it.

How are we to understand the relationship between religion, peace and violence? Let me make clear that my remarks on this topic are not those of a specialist in either comparative religion or in interfaith dialogue. I'm a political theorist with a special interest in politics and religion, and I know far more about my own religious tradition, Christianity, than any other. So I won't presume to make comparisons with or judgments on other religions. I'll only speak of, and out of, my own faith tradition, and then listen to my fellow panelists speak of theirs. But I expect that at least some of what I say will resonate with adherents of different religions.

2. Religion, peace and violence

So I want to go straight to my own tradition to bring out an apparent paradox right at its very heart, one which may find parallels in other traditions. The Christian Scriptures record Jesus Christ as saying two seemingly antithetical things: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9) and "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). How can a single religious tradition embody both those sentiments? On the one hand, Christianity seeks to bring reconciliation and healing – *shalom* – to a divided and wounded humanity. And this isn't merely a *consequence* of faith: it's an *embodiment* of faith – by seeking peace (we dare to believe), we disclose

the heart of God, whose children we are. On the other hand, Christianity is committed to justice, and a justice grounded in universal truth-claims. We find ourselves compelled to say that *this* way of relating to our neighbour brings a just peace, while *that* way destroys it. So we are called to stand *for* loving human relationships and *against* destructive human relationships – and this will inevitably bring us into confrontation with forces which perpetuate those destructive relationships: whether individuals, institutions, or intangible but insidious ideologies. When confronted with these dehumanizing forces, we are called to speak, not first of peace, but of truth and justice. Peace cannot be attained at the expense of justice. The "sword" which Jesus refers to in the text I just cited is the "sword of truth," a sword dividing justice from injustice, and summoning us to take sides. It is not the sword of violence – so when one of Jesus's impetuous followers takes up a sword to defend Jesus from arrest, Jesus orders him to lay it down.

Now, I take it that no authentic religious believer seeks violence for its own sake. But it is easy to see how those once gripped by a Biblical vision of peace through justice – justice for the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized, the humiliated, the voiceless – can hold their vision of justice with such intensity that they become deaf to alternative readings of what justice requires. They become locked into an intolerant dogmatism. This is the tragic story of Irish Republicanism and British Loyalism in Northern Ireland, each originally inspired by Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. Such dogmatism is even more dangerous when it grips the minds of those in authority, those defending their own power and interests against demands for justice. For them the status quo *already is* a just order – and those challenging it often greeted with the "sword" of state repression. You won't need me to remind you that both these aberrations, and many more, have been amply present in the history of "Christian" societies. They are that much more odious when they are openly justified by appeal to Christian truth. The so-called "civilizing mission" of 19th century British imperialists, for example, was rationalized, in part, by a twisted version of Jesus's own missionary calling: and recent events in the Middle East and Afghanistan are, indirectly, among its bitter fruits.

But something else must also be said: it is not only those with obviously twisted readings of Christian faith who perpetrate injustice in the name of Christ. Let me give just one example. In the 1970s a certain Guatemalan General, Rioss Montt, was converted to Christianity by an evangelical group. I know something of the mindset behind such Protestant evangelical groups, since this was the tradition in which I was formed as a youth. In 1982, General Montt was asked to take power following a military coup. His Christian supporters hailed this as an answer to prayer and rallied support behind what they called "God's miracle in Guatemala." Shortly afterwards, Montt presided over a campaign of terror against the native population, wiping out entire villages in the process. Describing him as "like King David in the Old Testament," one prominent Christian supporter said: "The army doesn't massacre Indians. It massacres demons, and the Indians are demon-possessed. They are communists."

Christianity, like most religions, evokes an intense energy and firmness of conviction which can be turned to destructive and violent uses. But these drives have also been put to creative, constructive, transformative, and healing ends. This is true in all religious traditions, but let me simply cite examples from my own. Movements and visions inspired by Christianity have contributed decisively to the achievement of the relative peace and justice enjoyed by nations moulded by it. One of the crowning achievements of modern liberalism, constitutional government under the rule of law, has deeply Christian sources. And, in our own century, Christians have supported and in some cases initiated campaigns against racism, nationalism, militarism, fascism, communism, libertarian capitalism, and patriarchalism. Many have also thrown themselves into movements for democratization in recent decades. As one author puts it in a work called *Religion and the Rise of Democracy: "*For the democrat whose will has been fortified in the spiritual domain, the need to pursue justice through political means comes as a divine imperative." (G. Maddox, p. 12)

So Christianity, together with other religions, has had, and is having, a constructive public impact; and this is now being acknowledged in the academy, even, I'm encouraged to note, by political scientists. To illustrate this, let me simply list the titles of several chapters in a book on international relations,

published in 1994 by Oxford University Press, called *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft (*ed. D. Johnston & C. Sampson), each recounting examples of movements for peace and justice inspired by Christianity: "Religious Reconciliation between the Sandinistas and the East Coast Indians of Nicaragua," "Quaker Conciliation During the Nigerian Civil War," "At the Front Lines of the Revolution: East Germany's Churches Give Sanctuary and Succor to the Purveyors of Change," "Faith at the Ramparts: The Philippine Catholic Church and the 1986 Revolution," "The Churches and Apartheid in South Africa," and "Transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe: The Role of Religious Actors."

The predicament we are considering tonight, however, is that in these cases, the commitment to peace and justice was only possible because of a similar intensity of conviction, which, in the darker chapters of Christian history, has produced oppressive outcomes. So we face this dilemma: how is it possible to hold together – in Christianity or any other religion – passionate religious intensity and a commitment to peace, justice and tolerance? A zeal for truth with a readiness for community. A depth of faith possessing the resilience to confront injustice, with a capacity for constructive partnership with those who drink from a different well – who even *define* justice very differently? What are the conditions and prospects for cooperative respectful dialogue among those whose hearts beat to different drummers?

In the next part of my talk, I want to characterize briefly the context in which we explore these questions. Then I will reflect on the conditions for both interfaith *religious* dialogue and interfaith *civic* dialogue.

3. From faith to reason – and back?

I want to stress again that I can only claim to speak from within my own tradition of Christian faith; and indeed only one part of that tradition – a particular strand of modern European Reformed Protestantism, though one enriched by exposure to several other Christian traditions, especially Roman Catholicism. My faith tradition is part of my identity as a human being – I hope it's the deepest part. Through it, I hear the call of God to mould the entirety of my life. Though I'm conscious of how long a journey lies ahead of me and that I cannot travel it alone

– my faith is the faith of a community into whose story I have been inducted. So I do not pretend to, and I do not want to, stand outside my faith or my faith community as a detached observer. I can only speak about it, and from it, as an engaged, committed participant in a whole way of life. The faith I embrace, claims to embrace the whole of me. The aspiration I find myself summoned to, is to allow that faith to course through my veins at every point. My religious tradition, at least, views faith as comprehensive in its implications.

This tradition therefore tends to produce what Harvard political theorist Nancy Rosenblum has recently called an "integralist" type of believer: in her words (which would not quite be mine), integralists are "those who want to be able to conduct themselves according to the injunctions of religious law and authority in every sphere of everyday life, and to see their faith mirrored in public life." Integralists, she rightly notes, experience a sense of alienation when they are "forced to live what is described as the divided life of believer and citizen." (*Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith,* p. 15) In an integrated life, as my tradition views it, there is no religiously neutral ethical territory, no privatized zones of behavior. Perhaps this is a very specific understanding of the scope of faith; but I suspect not – I imagine that parallels will be found in many other religious traditions, and not only monotheistic ones.

The point I am working towards is this: not only are there no religiously neutral ethical zones, there is also no neutral intellectual territory – no arena of tradition-independent rational discourse to which we can migrate in order to look back and observe faith with cool, disengaged, disembodied objectivity. There is no "view from nowhere," to use philosopher Thomas Nagel's term. Like it or not, intellectual activity takes place in the context of faith – indeed of contending faiths. Such faith is not thrust to the forefront at every moment of academic life. Usually it is tacit, and therefore often hidden from view. So much of what I do as a would-be *Christian* scholar looks very much like what any other scholar does. But its overall ethos and content ought in some way to reflect that faith; or so my faith tradition proposes.

It's clear that this view of faith and intellectual activity implies a repudiation of some central convictions of what Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue)*, among others, has termed the Enlightenment Project characterizing modernity: the conviction that our shared possession of human reason makes possible such neutral territory; that in exercising universal human reason we can transcend our particular faith commitments; that such universal reason can serve as an assured criterion for objective truth; and, as I already noted, that religion and other ancient superstitions would progressively recede as the empire of reason extended its sway. But all these convictions are now under assault from a wide variety of quarters. Our culture's confidence in rationality, especially scientific and technological rationality, is badly shaken – we have seen that it, too, like religion, can not only produce conditions for peace but also unleash tremendous violence. Secularist liberalism is now revealed as itself based on particular faith commitments which cannot be justified rationally or independently of a faith tradition.

This collapse of faith in reason in late modernity and post modernity is beginning to affect – some would say infect – the public academy. It is not simply that scholars are now forced to confront new data – the fact of religion and its growing impact on culture and politics. It is that more and more scholars are finding that they cannot establish neutrally rational justifications for the basic assumptions on which their disciplines proceed. Let me stress forcefully that this does not imply a retreat from rational inquiry: I believe it is possible to speak about my faith and about the world in a way that meets all the requirements of intellectual rigour and integrity. Nor does it imply a lapse into academic irrationalism – that is always a danger, but it was present as much under the hegemony of the Enlightenment Project as it may be under the current demise of that project. Rather, the realization that intellectual activity is grounded in underlying faith commitments opens up a remarkable opportunity – to recognize that all of our lives, including intellectual lives, are in some sense a form of testimony, a confession – a disclosure, whether explicit or tacit, of what moves us most deeply as human beings.

And this opens up the possibility of a more honest dialogue, not only within but also outside the academy. Whether and how we might grasp that opportunity is a question to which I now turn. And I'll do that first in relation to interfaith dialogue, and then in relation to civic dialogue.

4. Respectful interfaith dialogue – or patronizing and oppressive multi-faith*ism?*

The point I want to make here is that a truly respectful dialogue between faith traditions requires the honest expression of what moves us most deeply. Merely seeking for a lowest common denominator among different faiths is no solution: the result will be an attenuated, eviscerated religion, lacking passion and integrity. Also inadequate is the kind of radical religious pluralism which denies, conceals or tries to explain away the deep differences between religious beliefs and practices. We may indeed aim for "multiculturalism" in public policy, i.e. a mutual public respect and equal treatment between different cultural communities. That will be a vital condition for the kind of *civic* dialogue I'll speak about in a moment. But a true religious dialogue between faiths will not be sustainable with an attitude which requires adherents to discard what THEY regard as most worthy of respect in their OWN faith. For example, a multifaith dialogue which invites me to diminish the person of Jesus Christ in the interests of dialogical harmony is not one that will engage me with respect.

What we must strive for is a full-hearted articulation of what most deeply moves us, in order then to safeguard the mutual respect which will be the condition of honest dialogue. For example, I would have to take the risk of sharing with followers of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and secular humanism or other faiths, why Jesus Christ is at the heart of my faith. And then I would have to listen respectfully when others tell me why they find what I say inadequate, wrong, perhaps even offensive, exclusive or oppressive. I am not suggesting that interfaith dialogue must concentrate on what divides us. On the contrary, much of it should seek to explore what we have in common. But if what divides us is ruled out of order in advance, our engagement with it will remain superficial. Enduring human bonds cannot be built on an oppressive leveling of what is most deeply human.

This is difficult, risky – and it comes with no guarantee of success. Such success depends not firstly on the procedure framing the discussion, though norms of respectful dialogue are of course necessary. It depends much more on whether we find, in dialogue, that particular religions actually contain the resources for listening, hearing, absorbing what the other says, and the courage to plumb the depths of one's own faith to test what is heard, to learn from it, and where possible to affirm it, or to live with the continuing differences. I won't make any judgment on the extent to which other religions have such resources. But I will record the many times that my own tradition has seemed to lack them, times when fear and ignorance of religious otherness combined with a blinkered zeal for "Truth," and underwritten by a lust for domination among those in power, have produced a tragic spiritual deafness and dogmatism. The Pope's recent apology for the "Crusades" of the Middle Ages is one small step in healing the wounds caused by such deafness. One more thing: the capacity and willingness to listen do not imply a hesitance about our own convictions, a failure of nerve in the face of secular pluralism. What they reveal is a capacity to love which springs from an inner confidence. It is those whose shrill voices drown out the voice of the other who disclose their own deep inner insecurity. Is it the case, perhaps, that only those who are at ease with God – who know the affirming love and acceptance of God – are able to be at ease with their human brothers and sisters? There is so much more to say on this most urgent and yet most delicate and mysterious subject. I look forward to hearing from others with more knowledge and experience in this area.

But now I want to turn, finally, to the public implications of our theme, the conditions for healthy *civic* dialogue between those of different faiths.

5. The Public Square: Naked or Clothed?

In Western societies, the character of civic dialogue and the institutions framing it have been dominated by liberalism; and in the 20th century, by an increasingly secular version of liberalism. In this version, religious faith has no business shaping the public square because it depends on particularist truth claims which cannot be shared by all. The condition for stable liberal democracy is the

acceptance by all citizens of universal, rationally grounded political principles as the basis for dialogue and decision. Even today, this position is repeated with confidence. It underlies the stance of John Rawls, the leading liberal thinker of our time, a secular-minded liberal who has wrestled honestly with how to accommodate religion into public debate. His solution is that political dialogue be conducted in terms of common political principles which all citizens can endorse, that all citizens speak in the language of "public reason." Religious believers, then, must subordinate their particular religious convictions to the requirements of common citizenship, in the interests of civic harmony.

But Rawls's solution can't work. It is very difficult to imagine how initiatives such as the American civil rights movement, the churches' resistance to apartheid, or the campaign against the slave trade, could ever have gotten off the ground apart from the religious convictions of those who supported them. Rawls's liberalism cannot account for or grant equal respect to what Rosenblum calls "integralist" religion.

More disturbingly, the liberal philosopher Richard Rorty recently made this chilling claim: "we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going," he says "unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty." (*Philosophy as Social Hope,* p. 171) In other words, the public square must be kept religiously "naked" (as Richard Neuhaus has put it). But this is not a deal that religious "integralists" can accept. Today the public square across the world seems to be clothed in a riot of religious colour. In fact, if we take a longer view, we could argue that the last two centuries during which modern secular liberalism rose to ascendancy in Western nations, and secular Marxism in communist nations, were a historical deviation. The "normal" state of affairs seems to be that religion makes its presence very much felt in public life, for good or ill. Perhaps we are now returning to "normalcy," with both its opportunities and its terrible dangers. For Western liberalism, of course, this return is a profoundly destabilizing affair. As Richard Gwyn put it in last Wednesday's *Toronto Star*: "We may be on the cusp of one of those radical transformations in human affairs – certainly the most radical in more than a

century – in which, this time, modernity tries to come to terms with religion." (January 23, p. A25)

Let me make it clear that the anxieties shared by many secular liberals about the impact of public religion are real ones. Some of them are mine too; and it did not take September 11 for many of us to develop them. And let me also record that the response of early modern liberalism to public religion was compelling and necessary. In the 17th century, religion was not only public, it was backed by force of arms. In such circumstances, we can see why moves to confine the public expression of faith seemed so necessary. In time, Christians who had stoked up religious warfare were humbled and had to allow liberalism to teach it again what its own deepest principles had always implied: that authentic faith cannot and may not be coerced. So a religious response to contemporary liberalism must begin by appreciating liberalism's vital historical contribution to religious freedom and democracy.

But the dilemma remains: how can we conduct civic dialogue and deliberation between many different public faiths within the circumstances of a liberal democracy which so often seems intent on marginalizing faith? Can faith traditions produce the civic virtues necessary to sustain civic partnership? Can they generate "*democratic* integralists" or will public religion once again tear the polity apart?

Let me suggest one obvious route to avoid. And that is for faith traditions to gang up on liberalism and seek to marginalize it, as liberalism has marginalized religion. Mrs. Thatcher once declared that her aim was to "eradicate socialism from British politics;" and she almost succeeded. Religious believers must never have that attitude towards secular liberalism. So we must emphatically decline the unsolicited advice coming from radical postmodernist Stanley Fish: that advice is that Christians, to be true to themselves, must abandon the search for political accommodation with secular liberalism and fight to win, to "extirpate" liberalism from the public realm: "a person of religious conviction," he says, "should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas but to shut it down …. The religious person should not seek an accommodation with liberalism; he should seek to rout

it from the field ….” (“Why We Can’t All Just Get Along,” *First Things*, February 1996, p. 21) Of course Fish isn’t advocating violence. But reckless sentiments such as these do little to cultivate the virtue of civic tolerance and respect on which interreligious political debate depends.

So religious believers should do unto liberalism as they hope liberalism will do unto them. Having said that, they may invite secular liberalism to reflect more honestly on what they believe is the fragility of its own foundations. In a remarkable article in the current issue of the British magazine *Prospect*, Edward Skidelsky warns that liberalism severed from its historical religious roots is losing its bearings and its appeal: Liberal freedom has become nothing more than “freedom from …” tradition, from authority, from Nazism. But in the absence of any positive ideal to support it, the liberal proclamation of individual freedom looks increasingly like a mere license to selfishness. This is often how it appears to members of other cultures; this is what they mean by the “decadence” of the West. Religious freedom, by contrast, is “positive freedom.” It denotes not only absence of constraint but a “positive ideal of holiness.” (January 2002, p. 15)

In the same vein, Robert Fulford, in last week’s *Saturday Post,* claimed that the dilemma of secular liberalism is that: “It doesn’t speak to the heart. It cannot evoke awe before the mystery of existence. It has no cure for the self-obsession that is a major infirmity of our age. It offers only reason.” (January 19) The civic dialogue on which liberal democracy rests, it seems, needs firmer, deeper, foundations.

What, then, might be a way forward? I don’t have the time, or the wisdom, to spell out any kind of detailed response. But let me draw a parallel between what I suggested were the conditions for interfaith religious dialogue, and those for interfaith civic dialogue. The possibility for constructive, respectful civic dialogue between adherents of differing religions depends finally, not on some neutral constitutional procedure coming from above the religious fray – especially not if it is imposed on believers against their will – but, again, on the factual question of whether faith traditions actually can with integrity, generate from within themselves, and through dialogue, support for democratic deliberation, civic

toleration and cooperation. The fatal mistake in Stanley Fish's position is that he fails to make the crucial distinction between the honest contest of faith convictions, which should indeed be robust – and in a crucial sense, "uncompromising" – and the political outworking of those faith convictions, where accommodation is an essential part of a peaceful and just community. And the prospects for constructive political engagement by faith traditions depend on them being able to make that distinction *from within the soul of their own traditions.* If they cannot, then the doomed liberal strategy of privatization will win support once again – as indeed is the case in the aftermath of September 11.

The "soul" of a tradition, of course, is never a static thing. Every faith tradition evolves and learns, sometimes through painful experiences. As I said earlier, early modern Christianity needed to learn a painful lesson about the wrongness of coercively enforcing religious uniformity. Now, almost everywhere, it espouses religious freedom. Part of the interfaith dialogue we need might be a mutual sharing of insights won through painful transitions like these. And no doubt Christianity would have new lessons to learn in such a dialogue.

So I think we must simply take up the challenge of both interfaith religious dialogue and interfaith civic dialogue in the confident expectation that each participating faith tradition can indeed find within its own soul the resources needed to make such dialogue work. And there is already abundant evidence that they can. I've already hinted at some of the norms which might guide such dialogue.

Let me conclude with a remark about why I, from within my own faith tradition, have that confidence. Such confidence is based on the fundamental Christian confession that we are all created in the image of God, that we share a common humanity, common hopes, fears, aspirations, joys, vulnerabilities, the same capacity to suffer. We inhabit the same creation as children of a loving God who desires our good and calls us to find each other across whatever may divide us.

Now that leads me to raise a different question: not, now, how we might find grounds for common dialogue within our religious traditions, but: *what kind of a world* do we need to construct in order to nurture the peace-loving impulses in

religion and to undercut its potential for fanaticism and violence? The only answer to that is: a world characterized by peace and justice, one in which, the needs of the oppressed, the marginalized and the voiceless are urgently attended to. We are far from such a world today, and one of its most dangerous features is the coincidence of religious division with radical inequalities of power and resources. Religiously-inspired violence has many causes, but one of the most important is the experience of oppression and humiliation. The consistent practice of justice and respect between nations and between religions is the best antidote to religiously-inspired violence. As always, the route to true peace must pass through justice. Now as I've suggested, there is no religiously neutral account of what justice actually requires. But from the standpoint of my own faith tradition, I believe that human beings, conflicted as we may be, most deeply long for peace and justice, because we all share the image of God. Perhaps it will be in the common struggle to discern the requirements of peace and justice, and to put them into practice together, that we will discover our deepest commonality. My faith tradition also teaches me that, at moments when that human struggle is successful, what we receive comes to us as a gift of God.