



# Why Do the Nations Rage in the Name of Religion?

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## I. THE DEATH OF RELIGION?

**G**ABRIEL VAHANIAN WAS ONE OF THE MOST ARTFUL AND PROFOUND OF theologians working in that uniquely evidential decade of the twentieth century, the 1960s. In a collection of essays entitled *No Other God*, Vahanian discusses the circumstances of the Judeo-Christians of Antioch in the face of the apostle Paul's attempt to make the gospel accessible to the Graeco-Roman world. "The most important point," writes Vahanian, "was not so much the success of the operation but Paul's diagnosis: that it was in spite of religion as well as in spite of disbelief, however religious it might be, that the gospel must be proclaimed."<sup>1</sup> For Vahanian, as for Karl Barth, the word of God is a concealment, a forsaking of the religious assumptions of the human imagination in order that humanity and divinity may be seen for what they are. Vahanian spoke creatively of the death of God as Christianity's bequest to modern humanity. He wrote eloquently of the end of religion.

We, in turn, have forsaken the wisdom of theologians like Vahanian and Barth, and philosophers like Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev, who also understood the essential demise of religion in order that humans might know the enlightenment and liberation that occur when "God" is encountered in the suffering world. The emergence of the new field-discipline of religious studies since the

<sup>1</sup>Gabriel Vahanian, *No Other God* (New York: George Braziller, 1966)14.

RICHARD E. WENTZ is the author of *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (1993).

1960s has prompted a preservative mentality among academics. Religion must be preserved if it is to be studied; it becomes alive in the midst of study even if it is a “dead” religion. Many professors of religious studies have become scholarly Brahmins, maintaining an aloof and patronizing triumphalism in relation to their subject matter. They at least pretend to be beyond any personal and existential concern for the material that is the substance of their research and teaching. Yet they presume to assist people in understanding (standing under) what religion is. They seek to show the historical role of religion and its relationship to social formation and cultural development. Religion forms the context of their life’s work. In many instances, of course, the despisers of religion are those who perhaps “protest too much,” or those who think of themselves as “recovering Christians” of some variety. (It is almost startling to contemplate the tremendous power of those Catholic sisters who have intimidated so many with the slap of a ruler, only to send some of them to be disciplined by the slap of a Zen master.) Religion is important to professors of religious studies. In some ways, as some scholars have pointed out, religious studies is a new religion.

However, the theologians of the death of God and the end of religion did not prepare us well for the fact that religion of many traditional varieties is alive and well, thriving in this postmodern world of religious and cultural diversity where few are prepared to make any common sense of it all.<sup>2</sup> I, for one, would insist, in addition, that religiousness is very much at work outside the boundaries of traditional religion as well as within. The so-called “secular” world has its own religious vitality; and the intricate system in which corporate capitalism and technology combine to provide ultimate order and meaning to our existence is one of the astounding religious accomplishments of the past century.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is not as accurate to call attention to “religious resurgence” as it is to make the historical observation that religious phenomena have neither been dead nor in a state of decline, as cultured despisers religiously hope and evangelists find it necessary to declaim. Religious behavior and its systemic traditions have never disappeared from the human arena, even though they have frequently altered their rhetoric and conceptualizations in order to conform to the psychological disaffections of modernity. At the same time, the Puritan and evangelical traditions in America have shaped our thinking in order to remind us that, when we are convinced of decline, we may then be available for revival and second birth.

Whatever the observations and theories about the state and condition of religion in contemporary life, it is certainly a prominent factor in the raging of nations and peoples. Among the warring factions of former Yugoslavia, the brands of religion display their colors stained with the blood of righteous anger. In India, Pakistan, Ireland, and the middle east religion is often the banner of dispute and

<sup>2</sup>See Richard T. Antoun and Mary Elaine Hegland, eds., *Religious Resurgence* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1987). Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) discusses the subject of this essay in the context of resurgence.

<sup>3</sup>A somewhat different development of the argument of this essay may be found in Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1993).

violence. The political and reactionary religiosity of those mistakenly called Islamic “fundamentalists” storms across the deserts of north Africa. In the United States there are religious wars between pro-lifers and pro-choicers; and the Republican religion’s “contract with America” seems curiously like a contract to eliminate Democratic presidents and all who disagree with ourroboresque\* politics. Even in dispassionate Japan the raging millenarian, sectarian Buddhists slink repressively among the subways and train stations. Religion is very much alive and well; it is also alive and serving the human inclination to self-justifying violence. What are we to say?

## II. MODES OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

It is the thesis of this essay that the most basic form of religious expression is social, for *all of us*; and that the end of religion and the death of God provide the only adequate perspective from which to avoid raging in the name of religion. Now, lest I offend the reader’s theological sensibilities, let me hasten to explain what I mean. First, any serious attention to the history of thought and human behavior reveals the fact that there are three basic modes of religious expression.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the insights of Joachim Wach, I call these the verbal, practical, and social modes. Briefly stated, the verbal expression refers to the role of words in human experience. Words are used to think and to communicate. Communication by words depends upon speaking and hearing in a nonliterate\*\* society. Such societies as these are oral-aural and often depend upon primal sounds, storytelling, and stylized speech. The most fundamental ideas, concepts, and convictions tend to be expressed in story; and language is highly symbolic and holistic or that of implication.

In a literate society, communication by words depends upon writing and reading. Texts are written, not oral. We tend to forget that the modalities of thought and perception are quite different in nonliterate and literate societies. People think and perceive differently in one or the other society. In the modern world this difference is both compounded and complicated by the fact that hardly any society is completely literate or nonliterate. Certainly story is a more significant element in a literate society than its intellectual representatives are likely to admit. That truth that is communicated in storytelling cannot be communicated in any other way. If my wife asks me what kind of a day I had, I will have to tell her a story that will be charged with very nuanced thinking. And I will be telling the truth, because the truth of existence cannot be expressed in propositional statements—scientific, logical, or definitive. Science, logic, and definition use utilitarian speech, pragmatically focused upon abstract and problematic issues.

<sup>4</sup>For a more extended discussion, see Richard E. Wentz, *Religion in the New World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), especially chapter one.

\*[Ed. Ouroboros: the symbol of the snake devouring its own tail.]

\*\*Not to be confused with illiteracy, which can only exist in a society for which literacy is an essential element of communication.

The verbal expression of religiousness has to do with ideas, concepts, and convictions, whether they are formed in literate or nonliterate fashion. But human beings are not only thinkers, expressing themselves in words. They express themselves in actions, sometimes in highly stylized and repetitive actions. If the verbal expression of religiousness has to do with theories, doctrines, teachings, ideas, and “beliefs” that express how we respond to the ultimate order and meaning of existence, the practical expression has to do with actions that are responses to ultimate order and meaning. Practical here obviously means “practices” – things done in such a way that attention is called to them, by ourselves and others. It needs to be pointed out that the practical expression of religiousness is not *dependent upon* the verbal. It is not a logical acting out of the verbal. It exists on its own terms, may indeed be historically prior to the verbal. People may have danced with the sun and the raindrops before they ever shaped the stories of the kachinas or the “gods” or “spirits.” Christians probably shared the eucharistic meal some time before they formed a coherent “gospel” story of the last supper – certainly before they articulated a sacramental theology or definitive teaching about the practice.

The social expression of religiousness is the most difficult to describe, yet quite probably the most important. One of the rediscoveries of the postmodern mind is the relational character of human existence. Even the thinking of Alfred North Whitehead (whose notion that religion is what one does with one’s solitariness is highly suspect) posits the thought that existence is hyphenated. The individual is always the individual-in-community. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher of the mid-twentieth century, reminded us that the “I” only “exists” in hyphenated relationships. Existence is I-thou or I-it; there is no “I” by itself. We have also learned from our study of nonliterate and tribal societies that identity is relational and social.

To conceive of the social expression of religiousness is to realize that the ultimate order and meaning of existence are expressed in sociality, in relational form. For the Navajos to say, “We are Dinéh” (“we are *the People*”) is to make what we must call a religious statement. It is, in effect, to say that there is a world that includes this people *to whom we belong* and in which we are related in community with the turtle, the deer, and the coyote—related as persons are to persons. Even when the American says, “I am an American,” it is to a certain extent a religious statement, in spite of the prevailing myth of the private individual. This is illustrated by the bumper stickers that cry out fanatically, “My country, right or wrong!”, “America, love it or leave it!”

The social expression of our religiousness is an acknowledgment of the fact that identity is relational, that it is related to memory and belonging. The most important thing in life is to know that there is a community that shares itself among us, that this community has cosmic significance and that it has a tradition and a memory that make our belonging extend through the precariousness of time. It is perhaps easier to understand the primary nature of the social expression of religiousness among tribal and nonliterate societies. “World” religions like Christianity, particularly in the protestant varieties, have all been shaped in the context of

the modern world (c. 1500-1920?). They share modern assumptions about the primacy of the decision-making individual and his or her conversion or “beliefs.” Belief, we will remember, is *an aspect* of the verbal expression of religiousness. Modern and protestant emphasis upon belief has had profound effect upon our understanding of religion and the culture in general. We think of religion as “a matter of belief,” or even as a “belief system.” These notions are inadequate and misguided. There is ample evidence from the study of religion to permit the observation that religion is basically a recognition of the sociality of being. As the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued: “I began my studies...supposing like any modern Westerner that belief was a basic religious category; that believing was what religious people primarily do. It gradually emerged that this is not so: that an adequate understanding requires attention to the different matter of faith.”<sup>5</sup> Faith, Smith reminds us, is not the same as belief; and both words have a history, in which their meanings have undergone transformations. What is significant to the purposes of this essay is the discovery that “belief” is *not* the basic religious category, that faith has to do with that which a people *knows* and trusts in—their universe of meaning and order.

We belong to a particular religion either because we are born into it and do not even think of it as a religion (rather as *our* people, *our* way, *our* cosmos), or because we discern the community we so desperately need as social beings. In the modern world people tend to “convert” because they find in a certain religion the support they need. It is important to understand that the social expression of our religiousness gives power to the verbal and practical expressions. *We* believe these things, these propositions, *we* tell these stories because this is who *we* are. *We* do these rituals, abide by these rules and practices, because that is what our people do.

It should be evident from this rather brief discussion that people “rage” in the name of religion because they are defending their world, their identity, their memories. They are raging on behalf of the most important thing in existence, the relational symbols and realities that are the very heart of life. There is a sense in which every war is, in large measure, a conflict “in the name of religion.” Even the so-called secularist who rages for “human” (whatever that is), economic, or political “reasons” is doing so on behalf of his “cosmos,” his universe of order and meaning, his identity as one who belongs to an “enlightened” or magnanimous people. Secularism and humanism do not avoid the analysis of the scholar of religion. As a matter of fact, they, too, often rage in the name of religion—in the name of their particular way, their kind of people.

Now, we may not like the fact that Muslims rage against Hindus, or Hindus rage against Buddhists. We may not be willing to tolerate the rage often displayed in the encounter of Ukrainian Orthodox and Roman Catholics, or of protestants and Catholics in northern Ireland. We may wish to agree with those enlightened intellectual secularists who cry out, “See? See? This is what happens when you get

<sup>5</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1977) 39.

‘mixed up in religion!’” But we all know that we will be aggressive on behalf of our identity, our ideas, our memories, our world. Our world is all we have. And even though worlds change and collide—even though they are altered from generation to generation, from century to century, and place to place—they represent the perspective from which we know what is good and true. We live not so much in worlds as in perceptions of the world. They are the imaginative and conceptual frames of reference for our identity. Identity is basically relational (not collective) and is the essential element in human religious expression, whether we acknowledge it to be so or not.

### III. THE DEATH OF GOD

The problem facing us at this moment of our historical imagination is the one created by the multiplicity of the social expressions of our religiousness, a multiplicity that is jammed and hastened by the manipulations of transportation and communication in a techno-corporate order. A new religious reality is in the making, and the conception and birthing are both painful. The current social expressions of our religiousness are still largely the products of a history that has been simpler in its multiculturalism. The great world religions, in their varied forms, were all shaped in circumstances less traumatic than ours. The early history of Christianity, of course, represents a time much like our own. But the plurality of social religious forms was more readily regulated politically. Certain religions could triumph in their relationships to others because political power and a more cumbersome encounter of peoples made it possible.

What we face at this time is a social complex that is defined primarily multiculturally and pluralistically. But this social complex is itself the setting in which a new mode of the social expression of religiousness must take form. However, for the time being, we shall have to expect violent encounters between and among smaller worlds. And we shall have to arrive at some principles whereby we may evaluate the authenticity of religions and the civility of people as religious beings. I do not agree with those who advocate a relativistic multiculturalism. Sooner or later there will emerge those in a tradition who begin to ask why their practices and stories are different from those of another people, whether there is not some *essential* quality to *their* “nation” and its ways. We cannot be satisfied with a live-and-let-live attitude to the diversity of cultures. As a matter of fact, even to arrive at such an attitude is to base one’s judgment upon some aspect of one’s own tradition that points beyond the particularities of the tradition.

The death of God is a Christian legacy in the sense that it affirms truth as at once transcendent and incarnate. It assumes, with Paul Lehmann, that the decalogue is descriptive and not prescriptive.<sup>6</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me” means, in effect, “You shall have no gods,” inasmuch as it is impossible not to make graven images, or to think about God without reference to a “likeness of

<sup>6</sup>Paul L. Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

anything that is in heaven above, or...in the earth beneath, or...the water under the earth" (Exod 20:3, 4). A quality of life is being described; if it is transformed into prescription, it imposes an external standard upon human freedom in the relational order of things. Reality is social; it is characterized by "likenesses" – likeness to "others" that exist in "the heavens, the earth, the waters." Reality is expressed in images that are likely to become graven. But *in the midst* of it all (incarnate) is a reality that is not exhausted by any likeness or image. It is *in the midst*, but it is beyond what *is*. The Christian legacy of the death of God helps to describe religion as thought and practice that expresses itself in likenesses, in sociality, having to do with graven images, making gods. There is no escaping this activity because it is our lot as human beings. But the legacy reminds us that we do not ordinarily observe and appreciate the most basic aspect of this reality – its otherness. We do not see others or ourselves as we are because we are constantly at work on likenesses, graven images that serve our expectations. The truth is in the midst of us but we only recognize it when it is crucified by our expectations. Nevertheless, the truth will rise again, *in our midst*. "God" must die because he is always in our likeness. "God" must die because he allows us to create religions that sustain our sociality. We *will have* gods; we will have religions, but they must come to an end.

When I apply my understanding of the Christian legacy of the death of God and the end of religion to the violent raging of the nations, I know why they do as they do. I know also that no human beings are immune to this raging. I accept the multiplicity of religions and cultures; I expect conflict. But I do not accept all religions as true in the same sense. I want to know whether they understand not only the necessity of their own religion, but also the importance of the death of God and the end of religion. If they have that understanding, then they will know that their religion does not really want them to rage, but to see that the truth in their midst also is a truth that is beyond their loyalty to it. "Today's atheism is tomorrow's religion," wrote Ludwig Feuerbach. I suspect it is also true that today's religion must be tomorrow's atheism. ⊕