

Religious Violence or Religious Pluralism: Islam's Essential Choice

William A. Galston

Introduction

The question of the hour is whether traditional Islam is compatible with democracy. Though important, that question is subordinate to another: whether Islamic traditionalists can make their peace with religious pluralism, whether their efforts to impose their practices on Muslims who reject them will engender unending conflict.

It is natural for Western observers to believe that the "irrationality" of religious violence is the problem and that rationality (or at least reasonableness) is the solution. I want to suggest a somewhat different approach. The diminution of religious violence in the West, I shall argue, is the product not so much of ideas as of concrete historical experiences that made populations more receptive to the reality of religious pluralism and the necessity of tolerance. These practices, in turn, lent support to the theory and institutions of liberal constitutionalism. The real issue today, therefore, is whether there are concrete processes underway within Islam that may over time make the politics of pluralism more acceptable and attractive, even to traditionalist Muslims unsympathetic to Western liberalism.

Politics, Religion, Pluralism

Speaking broadly and schematically, there are three possible relations between political and religious authority. First, political authority may be comprehensively dominant over religion, which is seen as serving state power (and for this reason is often called "civil"). One of many difficulties with this position is that it subordinates the religious content of faith—its theological claims—to its civil consequences. Recent controversies in France over religious garb and symbols in public schools reveal the continuing compatibility between the civic republican tradition and the consignment of religion to civil status.

Second, and conversely, religious authority may coincide with, or comprehensively dominate, political authority, yielding some version of theocracy. This

stance invariably represents the dominance of a particular faith at the expense of all others.

Third, political and religious authority may coexist without either enjoying a comprehensive dominance. One version of this position seeks to divide social life into different spheres, dominated by either politics or faith. (Maxims such as "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's . . ." provide the basis for such an understanding.) It is hard to come by such neat surgical divisions, however. More typically, the coexistence model implies overlapping and conflicting claims, generating the need for both theoretical clarification and legal adjudication.

Few individual believers or faith communities can be satisfied with the civic republican approach, which embodies an ordering of values antithetical to most religious commitments. As the history of European nations such as France and Italy with deep civic republican traditions shows, the effort to demote religion to purely civil status is bound to spark political conflict and, on occasion, actual violence.

The theocratic option fares no better. Whatever may be the case for homogeneous communities espousing a single faith (few of any size do so), the theocratic impulse creates grave difficulties for societies with multiple faith communities. In circumstances of diversity, a serious religious establishment (as distinguished from, say, the increasingly symbolic role of the Church of England) will inevitably use legal coercion to impose its views on faith communities that conscientiously reject them. Here again, political conflict will tend to spill over into episodes of violent resistance.

That leaves the coexistence model, a mode of pluralism that implies horizontal rather than hierarchical relations, not only between political and religious authority claims, but also among faith communities. By definition, this option is bound to leave both theocrats and civic totalists dissatisfied, but it holds out the hope of reducing coercion to a manageable minimum. The problem of religiously related violence can be addressed best, not through secularism, but rather through institutionalized pluralism.

Compared to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the level of religious violence originating in the West is low. It is natural for those who applaud this change to wonder how it happened, and whether it can serve as a template for reform in regions where religiously inspired violence remains high. And it is reasonable to conjecture that ways of thinking now pervasive in the West helped shape that template.

One might speculate that there exists a relationship between the pluralist approach, the reduction of religious violence, and the Enlightenment. For the purposes of this essay, I will presuppose what many deny—namely, that religion often serves as an independent source of conflict rather than as a rhetorical screen for violent antipathies spawned by oppression, deprivation, the memory of colonialism, or a deep sense of humiliation—not to mention very specific

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complaints. It is more gratifying and convenient for Americans to believe that we were attacked on September 11 because our adversaries “hate freedom” than because they oppose the presence of our troops in Saudi Arabia. At the least, we should remain aware of the possibility that our current concerns about religious terrorism reflect tensions considerably less exalted than faith-based disputes over the content of God’s law.

It is a mistake, I believe, to think of the Enlightenment (even in Europe, leaving aside the encounters of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam with Greek philosophy) as a single, unified historical phenomenon. We may identify a *radical* Enlightenment, atheistic in theory and aggressively secularist in practice. The early days of the French Revolution revealed what the politics of radical Enlightenment actually meant, leading many who initially sympathized with the revolutionary impulse to recoil.

But there was also a moderate Enlightenment that wished to open a social space for free inquiry and religious diversity without denigrating or expunging specific faiths. The majority of the American founders fell in this category; those who did not (think of Thomas Paine) tended to stand out.

I would argue that the proponents of moderate Enlightenment were in fact pluralists, even though they did not use the term. For example, James Madison’s depiction of rights of religious conscience, which became canonical for American political

thought and eventually American jurisprudence as well, rested explicitly on the coexistence of two different kinds of authority, neither of which straightforwardly trumps the other.

It is also a mistake to trace the reduction of religious violence in the West solely to the Enlightenment, however understood. Consider the theocratic argument, stripped to its essentials. IF (1) revealed religion X is true; and (2) to secure spiritual perfection or salvation, individuals and communities must live in accordance with that truth; and (3) law backed by coercive force is a permissible means of overcoming the inevitable resistance to living in that manner, THEN there is no objection in principle to establishing and enforcing religion X. But while a handful of daring Enlightenment thinkers such as Benedict Spinoza and Pierre Bayle were offering critiques of this argument’s first two premises, the most effectual response focused on the third premise, for reasons that had little to do with the Enlightenment.

By 1640, a century of religious conflict had left Europe exhausted and disillusioned. Ordinary people as well as distinguished thinkers were moving toward the conclusion that coercion in matters of religion was unacceptable, even in the name of saving souls. Their experience had led them to an historic judgment: violence in the name of religion was a greater problem than the political, moral, and spiritual ills it purported to cure. Modern scholars as diverse as political theorists Judith Shklar and Leo Strauss have documented how European attitudes shifted against what Machiavelli was the first to call “pious cruelty.”

This judgment sparked the development of new conceptions of religious toleration. Some argued that coercion in matters of faith was a contradiction in terms and therefore bound to fail. Others contended that Christianity, rightly understood, precluded such coercion. A few brave souls even speculated that precisely

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because it is given to mortals to see the divine only through a glass, darkly, there was more than one path to God and that religious controversies over which so much blood had been spilled should be regarded as matters of “indifference.”

This thesis could, and did, verge on an approach to religion that reflected more directly the influence of the Enlightenment—the idea of “natural theology,” or (in the title of Kant’s notable contribution to the genre)

Quality of Life and Human Difference Genetic Testing, Health Care, and Disability

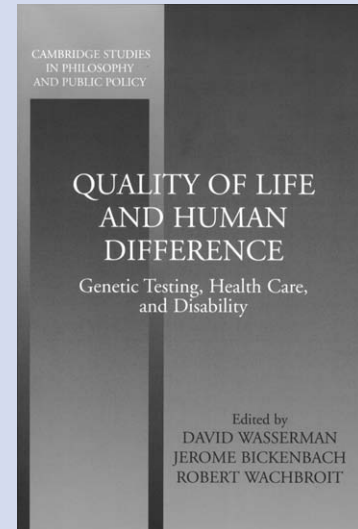
*Edited by David Wasserman, Jerome Bickenbach,
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"What is most interesting about this volume is that while addressing the central issues in the debate about disability and well-being, it sets this in a wide context of getting to grips with deeper theoretical issues. . . . In addition to addressing the particular topic at hand this collection makes a contribution more broadly to bioethics. The material on measuring health versus well-being, for example, has significant implications for the endeavors in population genetic databases that are currently being advocated."

—Ruth Chadwick, Lancaster University

This innovative volume brings together two important literatures for the first time. One concerns the role of quality-of-life assessments in social policy, and especially in health policy. The second concerns ethical and social issues raised by prenatal testing for disability; a theme of this literature has been the role played by controversial assumptions about the quality of life of people with disabilities.

Hitherto, these two literatures have had little contact with each other. Few scholars have written about both or have compared the two domains in a systematic way, and people with disabilities and disability scholars are underrepresented in recent discussions about health policy and quality-of-life assessment. This book brings to bear the perspectives of disability scholars on issues that have largely been the province of health methodology, policy, and philosophy, while focusing philosophical policy analysis on problems that have largely been the province of disability scholarship.



This volume will be sought after by bioethicists, philosophers, and specialists in disability studies and health care economics.

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religion within the limits of reason alone. But while this approach might vindicate the god and cosmos of the philosophers, it was bound to leave out most of what bound the pious to their particular faiths. Worse, it denied, tacitly if not explicitly, the core claim of most actual religions—that miraculous events of revelation or incarnation had pierced the barrier between God and man, making known truths beyond the bounds of reason. Even Kant felt impelled to remark that his famous critique of pure reason had limited reason's reach in order to make room for faith. It seems safest to say that while philosophy can try to understand the

conflict between faith and reason, it cannot surmount or abolish that conflict. Because there is no final solution, any viable political response must somehow embody this tension without overcoming it. This is what liberal constitutionalism at its pluralist best is able to achieve.

"Religion" and "Violence": Some Distinctions

"Up to now, I have conjured with "religion" and "violence" as undifferentiated concepts. At this stage of my argument, I need to offer some distinctions.

Religion

For my purposes, I want to propose three dimensions of variation among religions. (1) Religions differ in their basic structure. Some focus on inward states, while others give greater emphasis to external behavior, in the form of worship rituals as well as laws governing daily life. (2) Religions differ in the share of human existence over which they claim primary jurisdiction. Some view their domain as partial (Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's . . .), while others make totalizing claims to direct every aspect of life. (3) Some religions make universalistic claims, to be the one true faith for all human beings whoever and wherever they might be, while others are more particularistic.

My suggestion is that each of these dimensions bears on the ability of a specific religion to live with moral and religious plurality. In the first place, acceptance of pluralism comes more easily to religions that emphasize inner conviction, because they need ask little of politics beyond being left alone. By contrast, religions that take the form of law, as do traditional forms of Judaism and Islam, are forced to take seriously the content of public law. The terms of engagement between religious law and public law then become critical.

Second, religions that view their domain of jurisdiction as restricted are likely to coexist more comfortably with pluralism than are those with unlimited claims. Practitioners of a religion in which everything matters, from the consumption of food to the organization of politics, will feel compelled to use public power to mandate, or at least protect, their preferred practices. And this is bound to repress free expression and free exercise for other believers, not to mention nonbelievers, within that political community.

The difficulties for plurality engendered by comprehensive faith claims are deepened whenever a religion propounds the seamless unity of all existence. According to a leading traditionalist scholar of Islam, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islam rejects the distinction (characteristic of Christianity) between the religious and the secular, or the sacred and the profane: "In the unitary perspective of Islam, all aspects of life . . . are governed by a single principle." From this standpoint, the idea of a secular realm of freedom and plurality, independent of religion, is a leading modern example of the "mortal threat of 'polytheism'" against which Islam has struggled since its inception.

Finally, universalistic religions are likely to have a less accommodating stance toward plurality, wherever it may appear. At the very least, they will proselytize, raising the hackles of religious communities subjected to their messengers. And if they view the use of more forceful modes of conversion as limited only by prudential considerations rather than moral norms, then universalistic claims can be (and during the past two millennia, have been) translated into outright coercion.

My hypothesis is this: the more a religion expresses itself in external law, the more extensive its scope, and the more universalistic its claims, the less accommodating will be its stance toward plurality, and the more likely it will be to resort to violence to overcome or eliminate plurality. Thus, the universalism of many Protestant denominations is counterbalanced by their inward focus, and in some cases by more than prudential restraints on religious coercion as well. While classical rabbinic Judaism emphasizes external observance (and must therefore engage with public law), its claims

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are particularistic and (as we shall see) partial as well. Of all the "Abrahamic" faiths, my hypothesis suggests that Catholicism and Islam should have had a much harder time accepting plurality and eschewing violence; Islam the hardest of all, in that it holds *Shari'ah* to express the direct, unalterable will of God to a greater extent than does civil or canon law for Catholics.

Violence

The distinctions between restricted and unlimited domains, and between particularist and universalistic faiths, allow us to distinguish between religious violence that is essentially *defensive* in nature and violence that is *offensive*.

Particularist faith with limited domains are content to withdraw from the arena of power, or to participate in it on equal terms with others, so long as they are free to practice their faith. They may not accept other faiths as equal to their own. They may deplore the copresence of "foreign" or "strange" gods within their political community. But they are prepared to accept competing practices, out of necessity, as the price for being left alone. They will resort to violence only to defend themselves against other religious communities or public power seeking to restrict the free exercise of their faith.

Offensive religions, by contrast, seek and use power to impose their way on others. Four characteristics render them especially dangerous: their outlook is intolerant; their stance, uncompromising; their aspirations, totalist; their tactics, coercive when necessary. These are the faiths that pluralist societies and

those seeking to build such societies have good reason to fear.

There is another distinction that I introduce more tentatively. Some religious violence is *instrumental*—that is, consciously and deliberately chosen as the most effective way of advancing the one true faith. By contrast, another kind of religious violence is *instinctive*, when believers spontaneously lash out at practices they experience as degraded or disgusting.

My speculation is that it is easier to deter instrumental violence (through incentives and disincentives that rational actors must consider) than to restrain instinctive violence. Religions that experience diverse practices—for example, in gender relations—as impure and defiling are especially likely to be violence-prone. Consider the case of Sayyid Qutb, arguably the father of modern Islamist fundamentalism. As a graduate student at the University of Northern Colorado, he

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was revolted by what he felt to be the licentiousness of relations between young American men and women—a wanton intermingling (while dancing, for example) rather than the strict division ordained by God. Describing his US experiences years later, his prose remains suffused with disgust. Radically divergent visions of gender relations may be close to the heart of the conflict between traditionalist Islam and social forces (within as well as outside the Islamic world) that have been influenced by Western modernity.

Pluralism and Religious Violence in Traditionalist Islam

At the outset of this essay, I suggested that more than ideas (let alone something as diffuse as the Enlightenment) it is concrete historical experiences that prepare the ground for religious pluralism and tolerance. In this concluding section of my essay, I offer the case of traditionalist Islam to illustrate this thesis.

Those who believe that there are many paths to God, or that it is not given to finite humans to know which is the right path to the Infinite God, will find it relatively easy to embrace religious pluralism. Islamic traditionalists cannot accept either of these beliefs. They may, however, believe that other faiths are on the same (right) path although they cannot reach the end—the one true faith. They may also believe that it is wrong to use coercion as an instrument of religious conversion.

Each of these beliefs finds textual support as well as opposition within Islam. For example, in the Koran we find the following: “Verily, those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” And even more famously, the Koran declares that “There can be no compulsion in religion.” In a recent article, Reza Aslan argues that

Islam is and always has been a religion of diversity. The [Wahhabist] notion that there was once an original, unadulterated Islam that was shattered into heretical sects and schisms is a historical fiction. Both Shiism and Sufism in all their wonderful manifestations represent trends of thought that have existed from the very beginning of Islam, and both find their inspiration in the words and deeds of the Prophet. God may be One, but Islam most definitely is not.

Much depends on the ability of the proponents of a genuinely Islamic pluralism to broaden public support for a generous and accommodating interpretation of their shared tradition.

This will not be easy, in part because there are important historical differences between Judaism and Islam that make traditionalist Muslims more receptive to theocratic claims than are most traditionalist Jews. Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, Jewish populations sought to maximize communal autonomy and to minimize conflict between the law of secular authorities and the commandments of the Torah. Efforts to enforce the fundamentals of the religion were invariably *defensive*, never *offensive*. And when, after World War II, Israel was established, it was barely thinkable that the religious law developed over centuries of political marginality in the diaspora could serve as civil legislation for the new state. For the most part, Orthodox communities and political parties in

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Israel ranked other goals ahead of the aspiration to rest civil legislation on Torah law, in part because applying it to political power wielded by a Jewish majority might well require sweeping revisions in the content of that law.

In contrast to Talmudic law, *Shari’ah* (Muslim religious law founded on the Koran and the conduct and statements of the Prophet) developed in an extended period during which Muslims wielded political power, often over populations that were overwhelmingly Muslim. The structure of that law thus reflects the expectation that it would have political as well as com-

munal authority. The idea of a secular state in which *Shari'ah* is both distinct from and subordinate to political authority stands in uneasy relation to this ideal, and many Muslims experience that idea as an alien (Western) imposition.

For example, in 1959, Iraq's new revolutionary ruler, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, promulgated a Code of Personal Status that contradicted *Shari'ah* in areas such as polygamy and inheritance. Clerical resistance to the Code helped undermine General Qasim's regime, and the repeal of the Code was among the first acts of the new government that took power in 1963 following a successful coup. (After taking power, Saddam Hussein instated a code that contradicted *Shari'ah* and permitted a substantial degree of gender equality.)

In the wake of the recent Iraqi elections, the new Shia majority is pushing for the restoration of *Shari'ah*-based codes, especially in the area of family law. "Our position on the family status law is non-negotiable. It will be based on *Shari'ah*," said Sheikh Kashef al Gatta, an influential Shiite politician who is expected to play a central role in drafting a new permanent constitution for Iraq. If this happens, traditionalist religious courts will make most decisions concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and the status of women. In this event, US policy makers would be faced with an unpalatable choice between honoring the results of a democratic election and defending what most Americans regard as basic human rights. Said one US official when asked about the possible majoritarian imposition of *Shari'ah*, "There is a vision of where we want Iraq to be that would make sense in terms of the resources we've put into this place and our overarching goal for democracy." The official's clear implication was that a coercive, theocratic family code would fail that test.

It would be too hasty to conclude, however, that Islamic traditionalism must entail some form of theocracy or always take a violent and intolerant form. One might well imagine an Islamic version of the Netherlands, a state in which a number of different faiths enjoy public funding and public standing, especially in the arena of education. Another possibility is a new version of the multi-confessional structure of the Ottoman Empire (reproduced to some degree in Israel), in which a dominant religious group shares civic space with other faiths that enjoy substantial autonomy and authority, especially over family law.

In short, there is no reason in principle why a moderate official "establishment" of Islam need eventuate in religious persecution and repression. As Noah Feldman, author of *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*, has written:

If many in the West cannot imagine democracy without separation of church and state, many in the Muslim world find it impossible to imagine legitimate democracy with it.

Fortunately, democracy does not require an absolute divide between religion and political authority. Liberty of conscience is an indispensable requirement of free government—but an established religion that does not coerce religious belief and that treats religious minorities as equals may be perfectly compatible with democracy.

Feldman is right, at least in principle. The most effectual cure for religious violence within Islam (or any other faith tradition, for that matter) is not grafting on some external concept of enlightenment, but rather mobilizing the resources within the faith that can open up social space for religious pluralism. But as the experience of early modern Europe shows, it can take a very long time indeed before the combatants conclude that the costs of religious violence exceed its benefits. In the process, instability reigns, and blood spills in profusion. It is not yet clear that the brave proponents of pluralism within Islam are speaking for anyone except themselves.

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Sources: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001). Reza Aslan, "From Islam, Pluralist Democracies Will Surely Grow," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 11, 2005). For the quote of the US official asked about the possible majoritarian imposition of *Shari'ah*, see Farnaz Fassihi, "Iraqi Shiite Women Push Islamic Law on Gender Roles," *Wall Street Journal* (March 9, 2005).

