

Religion is About Life

Religious and Political Discursive on the Role of Faith in Politics

The following commentaries by Right Reverend Peter Short, Dr. Peter Bisson and Dr. Shadia Drury were presented during a public lecture and panel discussion at Campion College, University of Regina, in April 2006. Dean Tom Chase of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina chaired the event.

INTRODUCTION

John D. Whyte

We rightly fear tyranny – tyranny that compels us to adopt commitments and take actions that violate our deepest values; or tyranny that forbids expressing and living out our moral imperatives. Yet, state regulation is necessary and inevitable and we learn to find compromises between our personal codes and the state's requirements. However, the practice of compromise rightly falters when the state stands in the way of free exercise of religious faithfulness or when it seeks to impose a religious identity on its citizens. It is not surprising that constitutionalism – the process of describing the basic principles of a political society – frequently offers this double guarantee, that persons have liberty to exercise religious beliefs and that the state will disconnect from serving a specific religion, or religion in general.

But this formula for accommodating religion in our politics does not resolve all conflict over religion; the liberal democratic state is inevitably challenged by religious belief. The state's grounding in individual and collective self-determination requires that it honour personal exercises of liberty and, most especially, the liberty of forming and acting

within one's own identity, including identity based on being a part of a community dedicated to worshipping a specific notion of God. On the other hand, this liberty to act faithfully is matched by the liberty not to subscribe to any specific idea of God or revelation and by the freedom to live in indifference to, or in rejection of, the God idea. The state, therefore, is bound to accept practices of faithfulness (at least those that do not directly inflict harm on others) and, at the same time, not become implicated in practices that would have the effect of drawing citizens into supporting a community of faith they wish no part of.

The line between tolerance for religious liberty and state support for religion is hard to navigate for three reasons. First, in the context of religious hegemony (as continues to be the case for Christianity in Canada) religious practices are often taken as social normalcy – reciting the Lord's Prayer at state functions, or carol singing in every sort of public institution, for example. These cultural practices wrongly implicate the non-religious in religion; they express state preference (perhaps only an implicit preference) for one form of revelation to the discredit of others; they give state validation to the God idea and to one God idea in particular.

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Second, religious belief is constantly marshalled in support of political values and political choices. One cannot object to this. It is at the very heart of being religious to be guided by notions about acting with faithfulness to God, and the state cannot – must not – seek to abridge ideas, including ideas about the right political goals, that flow from religious identity and fidelity. Yet, the effect of promoting political stances based on precepts of faith is constantly to place the state within the realm of theocracy, a position that defeats confidence in the state’s religious neutrality. This phenomenon becomes more pronounced, and less tolerable, the more specific and the more prescriptive of private moral choice the religious imperative is. For instance, if Canada were to renew social exclusion of homosexuals, or re-introduce a ban on abortions, the claim that government is in thrall to religious fundamentalism would be undeniable. The non-religious – and differently religious – would be drawn into living by beliefs that, in truth, they reject, and, wrongly, one concept of revealed truth would govern us all.

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Third, and most disturbing, the liberal state’s neutrality is placed at risk when public officials and elected leaders are bound by virtue of their religious membership to exercise governmental power according to the norms of their religion or the orders of their religious leaders. On the one hand, we can admire those who will not compromise their religious commitments in doing the work of the state, and, in fact, we often admire those whose sense of personal integrity has triumphed over state interests. Yet, those with public responsibilities

cannot be allowed to pervert the aims of government, including the aims of mercy, equity, inclusion and tolerance, just because the office holder believes that her God demands obedience, or judgment, or condemnation. Nor should our public policies be selected by legislators acting under direction from religious leaders and under threat of religious exclusion. The liberal state does not easily steer a consistent course between respecting faithfulness and insisting on the neutral exercise of public responsibilities.

These are the tensions that Peter Short, Peter Bisson and Shadia Drury, each in their own way, seek to tame. Peter Short offers two ways that religion serves politics without destroying conditions of political legitimacy. First, religion is, for many people, a part of life – a way to understand life, a way to navigate through our senses of hope and despair, a way to lead lives of respect and support within communities. This is so because the God narratives that give content to faith are exactly narratives of loss overcome, emptiness filled, pride humbled and death made connected to all of life. These are stories of inevitable passages from inevitable social conditions and we are not able to form ourselves as persons of community, especially of political community, apart from these faith-forming, life-affirming experiences. Second, he offers the specific salvific idea for political societies that God is present in all and absent in none and our differences and divisions are trumped by a common faith in the great mysterious stream of life. In both these ways faith is not just personal grounding, but an essential element of our social and political existence.

Peter Bisson also makes the latter point – if anything, more forcibly. He adds the view that the experience of having faith not only shapes our moral force, but brings us into love for all people and all things. The only abiding theme in the narrative of God’s world is love – love as redemption, empowerment, inclusion, forgiveness, acceptance, but at the core, love. Love only becomes palpable in our lives through faith – faith in an enduring, transcendent love – and then it becomes the effective mediator of all our different ways.

Shadia Drury’s preferred strategy would seem to be to expel faith from political society. But, although religious belief is a frequently destructive response to human needs, she acknowledges that humankind is

locked on to practices of faithfulness. Her proposal is that we reject the idea of the sacred or divine in the texts of religion and thereby free ourselves to take moral lessons from the narratives of goodness. At the same time, we must ignore the narratives of exclusion and harm and escape from faith's destructiveness. In proposing this strategy, she connects herself to a project not dissimilar to that urged by Peter Short and Peter Bisson – to search for that which is life giving, liberating, loving and affirming in the stories of transcendent presence and to reject those readings of our religious texts that are self-serving, aggrandizing and vile.

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Short and Bisson argue that it is faith in the reality of transcendent experience that will grant us the understanding to perform this sifting process, while Drury argues that it is faith that obscures this process of discernment. For the former, text and experience can guide us in grasping the deepest aspirations of our faith; for the latter, humankind is blinded by its own past religious vanities. All, however, yearn for the religious narrative to work towards strengthening the moral vision that constructs our political society as good – as embracing every person, meeting every need and understanding every condition.

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RELIGION IS ABOUT LIFE

Right Reverend Peter Short

Moderator, United Church of Canada

There is little use debating whether or not there ought to be religion in public life. There already is and will be as long as the rivers run to the sea.

In order to understand one another, politicians, citizens and religious institutions will want to recognize that religion is not really even about religion. It's about life. It's about the lump in your throat. It's about whether you will receive timely access to treatment for the lump in your breast. Great Canadian political and religious leaders from Tommy Douglas to Nellie McClung to Ted Scott have insisted on this.

Heaven is not about heaven. It's about a sweet jazz riff and the passing of bread from hand to hand around a table and the healing of people who've been broken and abandoned. Hell is about life, too, isn't it? It's about the strange thickening of the air we breathe and the ominous divide between north and south on the planet – two worlds in one earth. In medicine, two worlds in one earth is called bipolar. In religion it's called sin.

Because religion is not about religion but about life, every statement of faith is also a political statement. Every time someone says “I believe” they are making a statement that has political implications. Northrop Frye said that any statement of faith that is not an axiom of daily living is just useless mental lumber. Say what you will about creeds and philosophies of living, real faith turns out to be what you actualize in your daily life.

Useless mental lumber is what is carried about when religious folks forget that religion is about laughter and politics and food and war. It's about voting and love and poverty and water and steel mills and land and babies and dreams. This is why the Hebrew and Christian scriptures tell tales of God in a rainstorm and in a pregnancy; God in a cup of wine at a wedding and in an execution; God in a lunch of broiled fish on the shore. These are Jewish and Christian memories.

They are strands woven amongst the many religious memories in the Canadian fabric of life.

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Here’s something of what I think we are facing with respect to faith and politics:

The political doctrine we follow in Canada at present is the doctrine of multiculturalism. This doctrine attempts to honour all peoples, traditions and cultures in the Canadian citizenry. In practice the government of Canada has shown a willingness to tip the hat to all religions without taking any of them seriously. Multiculturalism seems to be working rather well, as long as it is confined to folkways. But culture is inseparable from religion, language, morality, law, history and visions.

Multicultural therefore means, among other things, multireligious. It does not mean many public cultures and no public religion. Canada has deep religious roots in First Nations spirituality, in Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and in many traditions that are only now being recognized. Failure to recognize religious roots and heritage is to be living with no spiritual memory. It is a form of senility, a being trapped in the present.

The core of the challenge at this time seems to be that we are uncomfortable and ill equipped to deal with the struggle for the trade name in religion. Who is the official spokesperson for Islam? Who speaks authoritatively for Christianity? Or for First Nations spirituality? Who owns the brand? What if we hear opposing points of view from different religious communities or even from within the same religious tradition? Since this question is endlessly debatable and there appears to be no answer, the conclusion is often drawn that religion is too divisive to be included

in public life. So let’s try to ignore this because it is too hard.

That is to suggest that there can be nothing of the sacred contributing to the purpose and the framework of meaning for our society. That is to suggest that the sacred is to be entirely privatized as a matter of lifestyle and of personal spirituality. Did we think we could address the challenges that face Canada with this thin soup for the soul of a country?

Militant atheists appear to be succeeding in erasing much spiritual memory from the public landscape of Canada. They say that religion ought not to be forced on people and therefore ought not to be visible in public life. They often point to religious fanatics and terrorists as examples of what too much religion can do. Witness Osama Bin Laden or Jim Jones. Rarely do they point to what too much atheism can do. Witness Joseph Stalin or Pol Pot.

It’s hard for Canada to learn how to honour its religious heritages, yes. It’s complex, yes. There is no map or formula at present, no. But this does not mean that removing faith from public presence is the answer. Avoidance may work for a time but it will not work for long. To banish faith and religion from the commons is to pretend that a deeply vital part of the lives of most Canadians doesn’t exist and has no validity in public life.

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This is not just about faith and religion. There are many dimensions involved in our learning to be multicultural. Multicultural means multilingual. How long can Canada hold on to the myth that there are two founding and official languages in this country? What reality past or present can sustain such a doctrine as this two languages proposition?

Multicultural means multimoral: witness the Supreme Court decision on swingers clubs. A multimoral context does not mean nonmoral or no public morality. It means moralities living together, being fully themselves without hastening to destroy the other. How will we do this?

Multicultural means multilegal. It means Jewish traditional law, restorative justice, First Nations healing and sentencing circles, Sharia Law. How will we do this?

Multicultural means multihistoric. Stan McKay, member of the Cree nation and past Moderator of the United Church, says that it's time to learn the real history of Canada. Which history of Canada do you go by? The one that began in 1867 or in 1504 or in 1000 or in time immemorial?

Multicultural means multivisioned. There are dreams rising in this country and they are not all the same dream.

The centrifugal forces in which we live are strong. Sometimes they threaten to cause us to fly apart. This is the last situation in which we would want to ignore faith and the great treasures of religion. What we will need in this country is the articulation of superordinate values that will hold the space in which multiculturalism might thrive in peace. Religions will have important contributions to make.

I suggest that our politics has not yet understood that multiculturalism itself is not a value. It is simply a number of cultures: multi, meaning many. We can't paint this emerging country's languages, peoples and visions simply by the numbers. We need something deeper, stronger, more ancient and more visionary to shape the crucible in which the "multi" might be formed.

As a gathering place for the disparate peoples of the planet, Canada is a great experiment among the nations. Canada is a hope-bearer for this increasingly smaller world. We have started on a hopeful and difficult road and we have to learn how to do this as we go. It will get harder before it gets easier. But we

must learn this art of living together. It's called conviviality – living together. We must learn in Canada how to be fully ourselves without being against someone else. The world is counting on us.

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Some day, if we are clear of mind and strong of heart, our children or our children's children will understand the many strands of our life not as a problem of centrifugal force but as a great weaving of the cloth of the one world and the one life we all share. Many hearts beating – one life. That's what Canada must become: many hearts beating – one life.

To become that will take courage. That will take faith. It will take vision. It will require the learning of the arts of conversation about things that matter. It will call forth all our patience and all our resolve to keep going when the way is blocked and hard. It will demand sacrifice and hope, hope being that gift of the spirit which is independent of the state of the evidence. This is going to take more than brains and policies. This will take a superordinate spirit, the same one that runs like an underground river beneath the ground on which we stand. We cannot do this without political and spiritual leaders who are willing to give their lives to the task – the vocation if I may say it like that.

The world is waiting. The world needs most deeply what we are attempting in this country. Leaving the spirit out will not contribute to our cause.

Right Reverend Peter Short was elected Moderator of the United Church of Canada in 2003. He graduated from Emmanuel College in Toronto and was ordained by the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada. Prior to his term as Moderator, Rt. Reverend Short served in a number of congregations in Canada, most recently in Fredericton, New Brunswick with the Wilmot United Church.

RESPONSE TO RIGHT REV. PETER SHORT
Dr. Peter Bisson, S.J.
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

I would like to thank the Right Reverend Peter Short for three things. First of all, I would like to thank him for inviting us to stroll in the landscape of his own faith, and in particular of his faith perspective on politics. Secondly, I would like to thank him for his insights into faith: that it is about becoming engaged in life, that it is about letting oneself be engaged by ultimate concern, that it means choosing the right crisis in life, and finally that a crisis worthy of such engagement today is multiculturalism. He makes the political suggestion that faith can help to build a space where different cultures, religions and moralities can live and work together. Thirdly, I would like to thank him for the evident passion, love and beauty with which he expressed everything he had to say, which meant his medium exemplified his message. Now let me express some of my own responses, most of which will consist in bringing out the assumptions that guided both his message and his medium.

To all who have been following the news in recent years, it has become obvious that religion has re-entered the public sphere, after having been relegated to the realms of the private and the personal after the Enlightenment, at least in the modern Western world. Indeed, many, including many religious people, have come to see this secularization of the public sphere and the corresponding privatization of religion as forms of progress. This is what a modern and rational society should be like. But is this the whole story?

Upon reflection, the resurgence of religion should come as no surprise to those who observe religion closely, for religion is fundamentally social, even while being deeply personal. If it is fundamentally social, then it is also fundamentally public; if it is fundamentally public, then it will be political, sooner or later, and one way or another. Rev. Short assumes this basic characteristic of religion, and at no point does he assert that religion is essentially and exclusively interior, subjective and private; at no point does he

assert that it is never appropriately political, and that politics has nothing to fear, or hope, from religion.

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Furthermore, the basic question inspiring Rev. Short’s talk is not whether religion should be involved in the public sphere, but rather how. More specifically, the challenge is how to relate the public character of religion with the autonomy of public, political life, which autonomy we have come to expect as part of the structure of modern rights and liberty. Rev. Short further encourages us to believe that the public character of religion not only need not suppress the autonomy of the public sphere, but that it can even enhance the public sphere’s ability to gather together many kinds of people and values, and be a forum for them to deliberate and together build a common good. While we have many examples of religion seeking instead to overpower the public space and shape it into its own image, Rev. Short by his example seeks to demonstrate for us that religion can be otherwise, that faith can be political in a way that is open-minded, empowering, encouraging of diversity, able to partner with others and not be the boss. In this way he hopes that faith can help to heal the damage caused by modernity’s overrationalization of life by re-enchanting the world, making it once more attractive for involvement, and hence healthily political.

Now I would like to quibble with Rev. Short’s presentation of his point. He expressed most of his case in terms of values, and hence, in terms of morality. I would suggest that this is a misrepresentation of what he was actually doing, and that instead, because of the passion with which we heard him engage his

topic, he was motivated not by values or morality but by faith and specifically religious faith. What we heard was a kind of being-in-love, a kind of being-in-love that seeks to be so not for one person or group, but for all things because it is responding to a love that is ultimate. It is ultimate because it places no limits on its love.

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To make my point, I invoke his first characterization of faith, that it is about being involved in life. Faith, and its embodiment in religion, as he explains it, invites involvement. This is always a characteristic of a good religious story or myth, such as the parables of the New Testament, or the Exodus story of the Torah. In varied ways the scriptures and sacred stories of religions invite participation in the divine activity in the world. One is more readily engaged by religion than by morality. Think of how much more attractive is the story of the Good Samaritan than the dry moral injunction, “love your neighbour as yourself”. While the story and the moral make the same point, the story engages one more readily and attractively to do likewise. This is how faith enchants the world and invites involvement. What we heard this evening was not Rev. Short’s ethics, but the feeling of his involvement in life, that is, his faith, and an invitation to be involved ourselves. Let me further explain my point with another example of involvement.

Two or three weeks ago, during the Stapleford Lecture in this same auditorium, when we listened to Nettie Wiebe, we heard an example not only of faith, but also of faith explicitly involved in politics. She is a farmer, a philosopher, an ethicist, an activist and, as she told us quite simply, a Christian in the Mennonite tradition.

Indeed, she teaches ethics in a United Church seminary in Saskatoon. Her area of specialization and her passion is food and the small farm. She told us about the global politics and economics of food, and how these growing global systems decrease the diversity and biological quality of our food, consume more energy than there is in the food itself, produce serious forms of social injustice, and damage the earth. She seemed at home in the classroom, on the farm, in demonstrations and at the UN. She understood, with scientific detail, the immensity of the problem. Yet not only was she hopeful, she was even joyful. She communicated the hope that, no matter the immensity of the problem, it is worthwhile to become involved in the issue, not because a successful outcome is assured, but just because it is a good thing. She was inviting political involvement in a concrete issue. While not telling us how we ought to be involved, she herself was involved because of her faith, and I further suggest to you that it was also because of her faith that she did not impose her own way of being involved. Because many of her own activist colleagues come from various ideological persuasions, and because one can imagine how her attitude would encourage them in their own involvements, we can say that her own politics demonstrate the kind of multiculturalism and conviviality that Rev. Short suggests that religious faith can facilitate. Indeed, from my own research and experience, I can testify that the faith-based non-governmental organizations involved in justice work generally have this same kind of openness and readiness to cooperate with others interested in the common good.

The faith expressed by Dr. Wiebe and Rev. Short is not primarily about beliefs, doctrines or any particular cognitive content, although these are part of faith. For each of them, faith is primarily a living relationship, and only secondarily about any kind of belief. While beliefs help to express the relationship, the relationship can never be entirely reduced to beliefs or be exhausted by them. This is the ideal in Christianity, which I both study and profess. Together with Jews and Muslims, we are called not to make idols even of our beliefs; rather our beliefs should serve as guides for faith. Indeed, the twentieth century Canadian Catholic theologian and philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the twentieth

century, also understands faith to be about being in love. He writes of five precepts for authentic living, in this order of increasing comprehensiveness: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible and, finally, be in love. The second to last precept, be responsible, is the moral level of life, and the last one, be in love, is the religious level. He does not specify what kind of religion. Thus, for Lonergan, faith is the kind of knowledge that is born of love, a relationship. Lonergan's ideas help us to explain the kind of faith that Rev. Short was exemplifying, and Dr. Wiebe's example helps us to identify the kind of politics that his faith led him to suggest.

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To conclude, I suggest that this kind of understanding of religious faith enables religion to use its own social and public character responsibly and not be used by it. If faith is primarily a relationship and a way of being in love, then it is easy to imagine how the social and public character of this kind of faith can contribute to politics without monopolizing or usurping the public realm. Faith, thus understood, can make the world inviting, even enchanting, and the invitation to get involved is always political. Faith can behave in this way because it takes seriously its own as well as others' subjectivities; it does so not out of politeness or strategy, but because it expects to be taught something about God or the transcendent in this way. Thus, it not only seeks to have an effect, it also allows itself to be affected. For this reason, it can partner with people or groups of other faiths. But faith does not lead directly to concrete political decisions and actions; the vision or

relationship of faith needs a mediating step. Just as the autonomy of politics depended on its modern differentiation from religion, economics and the social, so too has my own response to Rev. Short depended on the differentiation of faith or religion from ethics. The trick is to relate them while maintaining their difference. For faith to have an effect, it must be mediated by values and practicalities. What faith can contribute to politics and to the construction of a common good is an enchanting invitation to involvement, and an open-handed and pluralistic way of choosing and using values and practicalities – my understanding of what Rev. Short meant by choosing the right crisis in life.

Faith can do this because of its openness and because it transcends, and therefore relativizes, all particular values and beliefs; this constitutes faith's great power to either conserve or disrupt politics. Thus faith is deeply political, and it is so by grounding and empowering the very civility of civil society and hopefully disrupting things when life becomes uncivil.

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**RESPONSE TO RIGHT REV. PETER SHORT
& DR. BISSON**
Dr. Shadia Drury
Canada Research Chair in Social Justice

Despite the horrors inflicted on humanity by theocratic rule past and present, intelligent human beings—including Peter Short—continue to long for the rule of the alter over the throne. The reason is that there is something profoundly comforting about the illusion that justice reigns on earth as it is in heaven. It implies that the good will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished. This appeals to our deepest needs and desires—especially our need for justice. It gives us the illusion that the justice dispensed by our society is the true justice—the justice of God. It also appeals to our desire for order, harmony, and oneness. It gives us a sense of belonging to something bigger and better than ourselves—something divine and transcendent. It feeds the illusion that we are one nation under God—one people, beating with one heart, basking in the love of God. Peter Short claimed that the alliance of faith and politics was necessary to give Canada a soul. But why does any country need a soul? Supposedly, in order to give its life meaning. But is it the function of politics to endow life with meaning, magic, or mystery? I think not. In what follows, I will argue that these are grand and dangerous illusions.

Peter Short assumes that faith supplements politics and that religion is the source of order, justice, and morality. The assumption is that in the absence of God, man is lost. Mayhem and disorder will rule, and every vestige of goodness and morality will disappear from the surface of the world. As Dostoevsky put it, if God is dead, then all is permitted. I will maintain that the opposite is closer to the truth: God is in his heaven and nothing is well with the world. If God lives in the public domain, then all is permitted—to those who claim to represent him. Far from being a source of peace and order, religion has been and continues to be the source of strife, violence, and conflict in the world. Jesus understood this when he said, “I come not to bring peace, but the sword” (Mathew 10:34 and Luke 12:51-53).

There is at least one reason why religion destroys

political peace and order.¹ That reason has to do with the singularity, absolutism, and intransigence of the religious point of view. Politics is a domain of plurality and diversity. It is about how people who do not share the same understanding of ultimate reality, people who do not share the same matters of ultimate concern, people who differ about the meaning of life, can nevertheless live together peacefully. The religious desire for unity, oneness and homogeneity flies in the face of the reality of political life. It is a state of affairs that has never existed. In the twentieth and twenty first centuries, with all the migrations of population, it exists even less.

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So, to insist on oneness, unity, and homogeneity is to insist that our deep truths are the real ones and that all others are abominations. This is invariably a coercive posture. The peace and harmony in this picture of the world is the peace of dungeons and death. It is the sort of peace that can be achieved only by slaughtering everyone who does not agree with our picture of God, His truth, and His justice.

This is the view of the Islamic Radicals who see themselves as defenders of the true faith against the march of the infidels and their secular, materialistic, pornographic global culture. By the same token, the Catholic Church saw itself as the defender of the one and only true faith. Those who did not recognize her authority—such as the Cathars and the Waldensians—were dubbed as heretics and slaughtered by the thousands in the so-called Albigenian “Crusade”

(1208-1226). Finally, a heretic came along who had so many supporters that it was impossible to kill them all. His name was Martin Luther.

Neither Peter Short nor Peter Bisson can condemn the violent history of the Catholic Church without bearing witness against Jesus Christ. When Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me” (John 14:6) he gave expression to the classic Christian doctrine that there is only one route to God, only one right way to love and worship Him, only one manifestation of righteousness, only one set of correct beliefs, and only one faith that pleases God—all others are errors, abominations, and unrighteousness.

Jesus identified righteousness with believing in him and wickedness with not believing in him: “for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins” (John 8:24). And again: “he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten son of God” (John 3:18).

For Jesus, as for the Catholic Church, salvation requires having the right beliefs. Jesus told his disciples that those who believe in him will have everlasting life, while those who do not believe in him will be cast into “outer darkness,” they shall be “cast into the furnace of fire,” there shall be “wailing and gnashing of teeth” and their torment will last for all eternity. Talk of hell and damnation as the consequence of unbelief is repeated in every Gospel (Matthew 10:28; Matthew 13:50; Matthew 14:49-50; Matthew 25:30-46; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:5; John 5:28-29; John 6:30; John 6:51). So, not to believe in Jesus, not to believe that he is the only way to God, is a sin that merits damnation.²

In this age of Islamic terrorism, there is a certain smugness about the superiority of Christianity in comparison with Islam. Many Christians in the West, including Peter Short, imagine that freedom, the rule of law, and human rights, are gifts of the Christian tradition. They believe that the Christian idea of equality before God was the basis of the secular idea of equality before the law, universal human rights, and the abolition of slavery. But in truth, no

supernatural revelation is necessary to realize that equality before the law is a necessary component of natural justice.

“It may be argued that the separation of church and state is a recipe for the triumph of secularism and that secularism is a new religion in disguise. So, the separation of Church and state is just a means of establishing this new religion and giving it a licence to persecute other religions. And, despite its paeon to tolerance, secularism is intolerant of all other religions.”

Peter Short used the example of British politician William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who was inspired by his faith to join the campaign for the abolition of slavery. But there is nothing in Christianity itself that is incompatible with slavery. The otherworldly nature of the faith makes it logical to accept all sorts of abominations as appropriate for the fallen nature of the world, while waiting for redemption in the world to come. This explains why, despite its power and influence, the Church did nothing to end slavery. The anti-slavery movement was launched by people inspired by the utilitarian and atheistic ideas of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. The rule of law and the abolition of slavery in the West were accomplished in spite of the Church and not because of it.

It may be argued that the separation of church and state is a recipe for the triumph of secularism and that secularism is a new religion in disguise. So, the separation of Church and state is just a means of establishing this new religion and giving it a licence to persecute other religions. And, despite its paeon to tolerance, secularism is intolerant of all other religions. It discriminates against believers and requires a “religious test” for political office—namely, adherence to the secular religion. Believers can qualify for office only if they check their beliefs at the office door. So the argument goes.³

In response to this sort of objection, it is necessary to point out that secularism is not a religion because it has no sacred authority. It can rely only on persuasive arguments, and not on authorities whose legitimacy is a matter of dispute. The secular morality that should guide public policy must be the common denominator of all the different religious moralities; it must be the minimum required by all of them.

“Contrary to what Peter Short maintains, religion is not about life. It is mainly a human effort to deal with suffering and death. After all, the world was not designed to suit us. It is indifferent to our deepest needs and desires — especially our need for justice and our desire for love. The cold indifference of the world to human needs is difficult to fathom, so we invent myths to comfort us.”

Contrary to what Peter Short maintains, religion is not about life. It is mainly a human effort to deal with suffering and death. After all, the world was not designed to suit us. It is indifferent to our deepest needs and desires — especially our need for justice and our desire for love. The cold indifference of the world to human needs is difficult to fathom, so we invent myths to comfort us. To acknowledge that religion provides comforting illusions is not to condemn or reject it. On the contrary, religion may become a source of good instead of evil, if only it could understand itself as art, if only it could accept its sacred texts as fictions and stop feeling the need to insist on their truth and to kill or persecute those who question its truth.

Once we set aside the question of the truth of our religion, then we can tackle the really important question—the question of the goodness of our sacred texts. Are the stories any good? What is the moral of the story of Adam and Eve? What about the story of Abraham? Can Jesus be a positive source of moral inspiration? Do any of these characters in the Bible provide us with examples to live by? What about God himself? Is He a character worthy of emulation? Can we think of morality as the imitation of God?

Only by shifting the focus from beliefs to goodness, can religion be a positive force in the world. Only then can we have the freedom to indulge ourselves in whatever fictions will make us brave, strong, kind, and generous.

NOTES

¹ Politics also destroys religion, but that is a different argument that I will not be making here.

² I have provided a more detailed interpretation of the religion of Jesus in *Terror and Civilization: Christianity, Politics, and the Western Psyche* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

³ See for example, Charles Krauthammer, “Will it be coffee, tea, or He?” *Time*, June 15, 1999. See also Michael Wager, “Drury’s Dramatic Diatribe Against Christianity in Politics,” *The Council of Chalcedon*, August 2005.

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