

# James Carroll

## *Why religion still matters*

The question put to religion by the secular Enlightenment in its Freudian and Marxist manifestations is asked in a different way in the age of terrorism. The old question was, *How can otherwise sensible people, in affirming God as a source of meaning, manifest such infantilism?* Now the question has become, *How can people committed to the democratic ideal embrace a belief system that underwrites intolerance and even violence?*

To be religious, in the view of many who are not, involves a form of psychological immaturity. But more troubling is the suspicion that religion itself is a fundamental source of radical discord – a suspicion that has its origin in the European wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but which has been broadly renewed since the 9-11 savageries were enacted in the name of Allah.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the suicide-murderers of Al Qaeda (and of Hezbollah, for that matter) are

not the only ones to justify violent absolutism by appeals to the divine. America's War on Terrorism is itself defined by a fervent Manichaeism that divides the world between good and evil. "God bless America," a formerly innocuous patriotic piety, has taken on the character of a truth-claim, an open assertion of the long-dormant exceptionalism that assumes a national anointing – a sacred destiny that elevates America above other nations. A religious self-understanding informs our nation's new imperial impulse, explicitly articulated in the Bush administration's 2002 "National Security Strategy."

The result is a drastic reordering of American relations not only with an Islamic adversary that is perceived univocally (Iraq is 'evil,' and so is Iraq's mortal enemy Iran), but also with an openly skeptical Europe, and an increasingly alienated Asia.

Meanwhile, Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan find religious justifications in their otherwise dissimilar traditions for apocalyptic brinkmanship – as if deities could will Armageddon after all. Many Muslim preachers, and not only in the Arab world, have resuscitated the ancient slanders of anti-Semitism – and even its modern corollary, which is the murder of Jews for being Jews. A similarly anti-Jewish structure of mind

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(old versus new; law versus grace; form versus substance) is rooted in supercessionist Christian theology – and while its effects have been widely repudiated by the churches, that theology itself remains more or less intact. At the same time, self-consciously religious, ultra-nationalist Jews, invoking God’s will as revealed in sacred texts, have staked claims to disputed land on the West Bank and in Gaza – land which is now valued above human life. A form of expansive Jewish sectarianism denigrates the lives not only of Palestinians, but of the broader population of Israel, whose entire project of democratic hope has been put at risk by the exclusionist theology of a restored biblical kingdom.

Equally troubling is the North Korean regime that, having been labeled ‘evil’ by President Bush, pushes back with a cosmic dualism of its own. Officially atheist, Pyongyang preserves the political amber in which a communist ‘historical materialism’ itself supplies a transcendental justification for nuclear recklessness – even if the transcendent end is purported to be purely secular. (North Korea reminds us that – after Marx – regimes animated by religious faith have no monopoly on the making of absolute claims to authority.)

In the context of the way such world developments call into question the character of religion as such, the simultaneous meltdown of authority in the Roman Catholic Church takes on special significance. At first glance, it seems the main tragedy of the priestly sex abuse scandal, apart from the personal devastation of its victims (and, of course, there is no ‘apart’ from that), lies in the discrediting of Catholic moral authority. But in fact the scandal has put on display, even for the most conservative-minded Catholics, the way in which an absolute exercise of expressly religious power, even from within a profoundly un-

fundamentalist tradition like Catholicism, can breed what also must be reckoned as fanatical violence, even if it is more psychological than physical, and even if it occurs on an intimate scale, in an apolitical context. Indeed, from the point of view of its underage and profoundly vulnerable victims, the pathology of priestly sexual abuse and the related cover-up by bishops are exactly that – fanatical violence.

While there is no moral equivalence between the suicide-murders of Muslim fascists, the exclusionary sacralizing of disputed land by religiously nationalist Jews in Israel, the apocalyptic transcendentalism of nuclear brinkmanship (be it Washington’s or Pyongyang’s), and the Catholic preference of clerical power even over the safety of children – all of these urgent problems from different orders are manifestations of something wrong in the heart of religion.

For detached spectators, the old question has become one question: *Would the world be better off without religion?*

But to ask such a question from *within* a religious tradition is like asking, *Would the world be better off without desire?* (Not quite an unthinkable prospect, since certain Buddhists aim to extirpate desire.)

An emphasis on the negative consequences of faith can blur the powerful consolations and challenges that religion sponsors. Indeed the impulse to honor transcendent being, and even to recognize it as personal, can serve as much as a check on hubris as a source of it. Yes, there have been Yahweh-sponsored slaughters of Canaanites, the holy wars of Crusaders, and the jihads ancient and recent. But where Pope Urban II declared “God wills it!” at Clermont in 1095, Pope Paul VI, before the UN General Assembly in 1965, cried “*Jamais plus la guerre!*”

The great religions, by inviting human beings constantly to surpass themselves,

are part of what makes the human project possible. Whatever else these phenomena foster, the three Abrahamic traditions, together with Hinduism, Buddhism, and other established world religions, are organized around compassionate love for the neighbor as the motivating ideal. The great world religions, that is, having been engines of humanistic social change, remain reservoirs of humane moral sensibility. To take an example from my own tradition: the modern Catholic Church's declared prejudice against violence (*Pacem in Terris*) could slow the world's current rush to war, while the Church's skepticism toward free market capitalism (*Progressio Populorum*) could mitigate the widening chasm between rich and poor.

Some religions give primacy of value to mystical union, some to works of charity, some to justice, and some to ritual observance. But all of the great religions have tracked the movement from God as unknown, to God as fearsome, to God as love itself. Here is how the great Roman Catholic theologian of the mid-twentieth century Karl Rahner articulated that broadly religious intuition: "God does not merely create something other than himself – he also gives himself to this other. The world receives God, the infinite and the ineffable mystery, to such an extent that he himself becomes its innermost life." Religious human beings are the creatures who instinctively respond to that innermost life. "This mystery," Rahner writes,

is the inexplicit and unexpressed horizon which always encircles and upholds the small area of our everyday experience . . . . We call this God . . . . However hard and unsatisfactory it may be to interpret the deepest and most fundamental experience at the very bottom of our being, man does experience in his innermost history that this silent, infinitely distant holy mystery, which continually recalls him to the limits

of his finitude and lays bare his guilt yet *bids him approach*; the mystery enfolds him in an ultimate and radical love which commends itself to him as salvation and as the real meaning of his existence.

Rahner is speaking from within Christianity, but his broad theological generalization applies with comparable force to each tradition, no matter what else separates them – or so it appears to this Christian.

Positing an encompassing horizon that is ever beyond reach yet exerting an irresistible pull – and daring to name it God – the religions both accommodate and explain the human interest in what lies beyond, even within. Mystery, far from alien or threatening, is thus accounted for as essential to life on earth. Religion helps humans not to flee mystery, but to plumb it.

But such is the human condition that in every way that religion can be sacred, it can be trivial; in every way consoling, threatening. A ready source of humility, religion embodies an impulse to triumphalism, too. And the political events referred to above define what is at stake in each religion's struggle with itself.

This complexity moves the question away from *Why religion?* to *What kind? What in each tradition promotes peace instead of war? Tolerance instead of contempt? Self-criticism instead of smug superiority?*

And these questions, far from abstract, are in fact being forced on religions by world conditions. Indeed, it is the shift in world politics – in demographics, in patterns of ethnic dispersal, in the explosion of information technology – that has transformed the situation of religion, especially of the formerly dominant religions of European imperialism.

"The West is no longer shut up in itself," Rahner wrote:

it can no longer regard itself simply as the center of culture, with a religion which . . .

could appear as the obvious and indeed sole way of honoring God . . . . Today everybody is the next-door neighbor and spiritual neighbor of everyone else in the world . . . which puts the absolute claim of our own Christian faith into question.

Absolute claims are the issue. The challenge for religions of all kinds, but perhaps especially for religions based on narratives of divine revelation, is to make positive assertions of faith that do not simultaneously denigrate the different tenets of faith held by others. Religious denigration is a source of violence. "There will be no peace among the nations," the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng has written, "without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. There will be no dialogue between the religions without the investigation of the foundations of the religions."

The new condition of world politics that has brought so much trouble with it is also the source of hope, because formerly triumphalist traditions now have no choice – precisely because of religious elbow-rubbing – but to encounter the truth claims of others. That means that the foundational assumptions of every religion must now be the subject of reexamination.

Just such a thing is going on inside Roman Catholicism. And if it can happen there, it can happen anywhere.

Since the Holocaust, fundamental tenets of Catholic belief have been called into question – especially aspects of the faith that have spawned the Christian anti-Judaism, which was so powerfully laid bare by its mutation into Nazi anti-Semitism. The important point is that the questioning is being done by Catholics *themselves* – a project that began on the margins of the Church with once suspect figures like Rahner and Küng,

then moved into the center of ecclesiastical identity with the Second Vatican Council, and has been continued in fits and starts ever since. The apology in 2000 by Pope John Paul II for various sins of Catholic triumphalism, especially Catholic contempt for Jews and Jewish religion, is an emblem of this process, and one that marks its beginning, not its end.

Now the Catholic Church, in response to the crisis tied to priestly child abuse and the bishops' cover-up, is openly grappling with such basic questions as its attitude toward sexuality, its clerical caste system, the place of the laity, the need for democracy – and, especially, the rights of women. Questions like these push to the heart of Catholic theology, which in fact had already been penetrated by the challenges tied to the Church's relationship to the Jewish people, to those of other faiths, and to those of no faith. Adjustments must follow in claims made for Jesus, in notions of who God is, in the way sacred texts are understood and taught, in the very structure of thought about what it means to be a Catholic. Even in the throes of crisis, the Church is invigorated by a fierce debate – and it is a debate with itself.

It is for adherents of each faith to define, but some version of this grappling with fundamental belief can be seen to be occurring in other religions – certainly in Judaism, where the question of what it is to be a Jew is being asked with new power. The political crisis of Israel, an entity regarded as originating as a sign of God's covenant, brings with it basic religious questions.

And so with Islam. The post-September 11 situation of Muslims seems marked by an urgent new introspection in response to the questions of reform, text, attitudes toward the other, and the tradition's relationship to violence that

have been forced by an expressly Islamic outbreak of terror. It is up to adherents of Islam to refute the broad Western suspicion that Islamic devotion may be incompatible with democratic liberalism. But in this task, Muslim reformers have a great resource in the Islamic tradition of *convivencia*, which, even for the West, was the very incubator of tolerance – political as well as religious.

All of this defines the new shape of religious commitment, and it suggests the kind of ‘investigation’ leading to reform that only the religiously committed can undertake. Each religion must seek ways of tapping into its reservoir of neighborliness, its foundational assumptions about the goodness of creation, its attitude toward God as the world’s innermost source of love.

Criticism of religion is necessary and, these days, inevitable. But what really counts now is religious *self*-criticism. Detached observers among those who are not religious make a mistake to regard this project cynically, because broad religious reform is essential now to the rescue of the world itself.

Democratic values, ideological openness, freedom of conscience, positive regard for those who are different (also known as pluralism), as well as the capacity to tolerate even those who remain intolerant: these pillars of the post-Enlightenment social order will not stand unless exactly equivalent pillars are erected to reform – and thus secure – the institutions of traditional religion.

In short, I believe that religion and the social order are inseparable – which will come as no surprise to anyone who shares my faith that God is inseparable from God’s creation.