

# Is Religion the Problem?

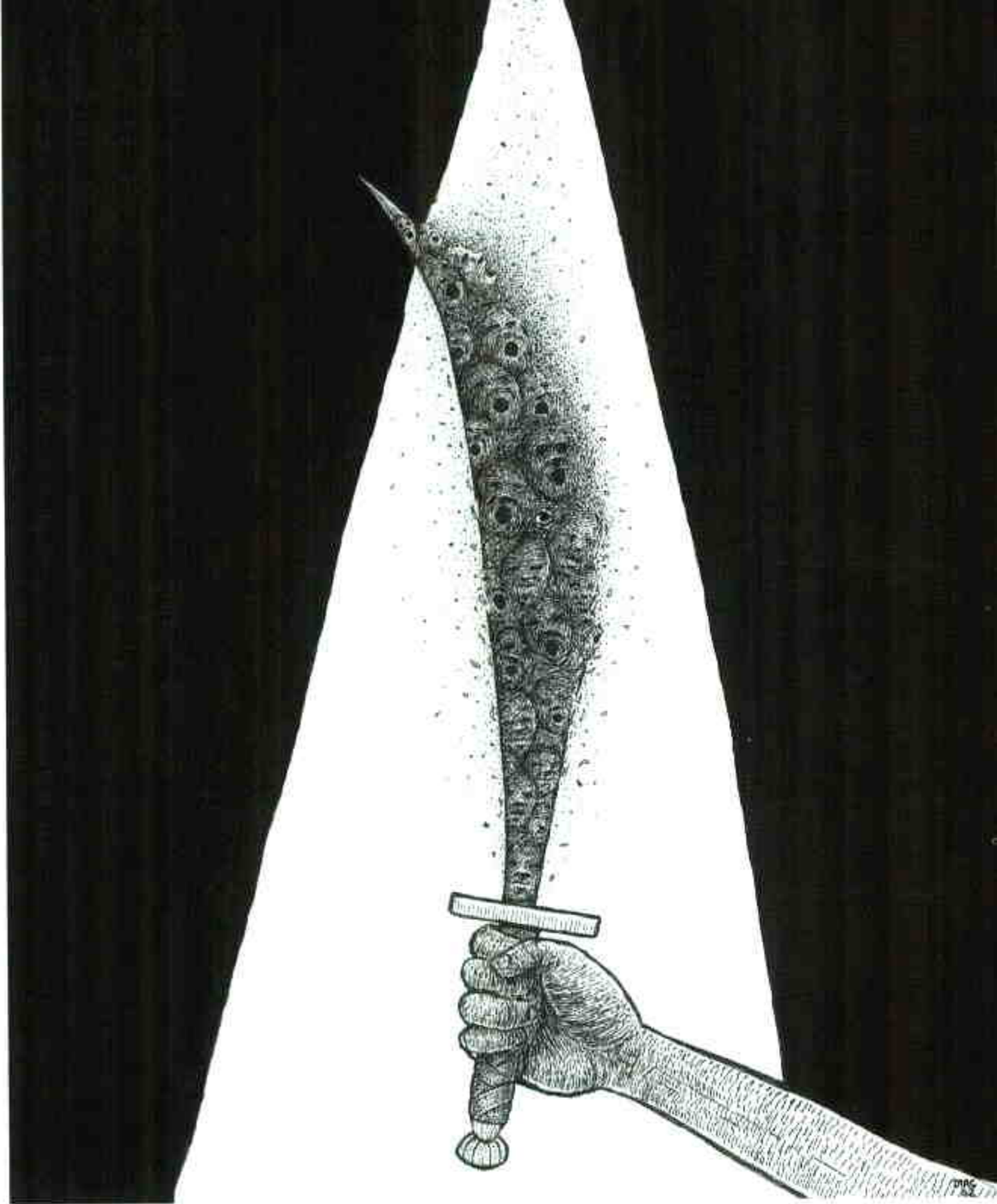
*Martin Marty*

**T**he year 2002 should find Americans looking ahead, despite our natural instinct to revisit the scenes of the year past. Yet past and future are wedded, and facing some unfinished business of 2001 can help us face, though of course not finish, some of the business of the years ahead.

The business I am most interested in is that of religion, which has been my profession and vocation. So preoccupied have we become with asking why religion has been so central to killing that most of us have neglected to explore the potential for people acting in its name to heal. In such times, it also seems particularly easy to single out one religious tradition for criticism. Islam appears to be the candidate of the moment, followed by the other monotheistic religions. However, having spent six years on the Fundamentalist Project, where my colleagues and I explored and compared fundamentalist-like movements in a score of religions, I can say with confidence that the killing dimension of religion is an interfaith phenomenon. It's not only something that "they" do, something that is only in "their" scriptures. Nor is the lethal side of religion a monopoly of monotheists, the peoples of the Book, as a quick look at religions of the world will reveal.

Thanks to Osama bin Laden, 2001 was the year in which awareness of terror in the name of God went global. But the voice you will hear next is not bin Laden's voice: "Take up arms and protect religion. When one is face to face [with the enemy] they should be slaughtered without hesitation. Not the slightest blame attaches to the slayer." Though these words may sound familiar, they are not said in the name of Allah, but in the name of a goddess: "Lay down your life but first take a life..." "The worship of the goddess will not be consummated if you sacrifice your lives at the shrine of independence without shedding blood."

Eighty years ago in India, Hindu extremists, using the *Bhagavad Gita* as a sacred script, used these words as they invoked Kali, the "Black Goddess," in their fight against the



British Raj. In 1948, a former member of one such extremist group, RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), assassinated Mohandas Gandhi. In 1992, led by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), some 200,000 Hindu militants destroyed the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya. Hundreds of Muslims were among those killed in subsequent riots.

Are Eastern religions peaceful? Some self-critical Westerners think so. Yet Theravada Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, long active in Sinhalese affairs, have been at war with Tamil Hindu separatists since 1983. The monk Anagarika Dharmapala (d. 1933) had urged "Young Buddhists of Asia" to "Arise, awake, unite and join the Army of Holiness and Peace and defeat the hosts of Evil." They did.

As for Sikhism, followers of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a Punjabi maverick preacher, believe their enemies "are perpetrating atrocities on us, ... burning our Holy Book... There is no need to get a license for arms." Bhindranwale, who was killed when the Indian government sent its army to attack the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1984, accused the Hindus of trying to enslave Sikhs and to commit atrocities, so he urged his followers to "prepare for war." He told them that the concept of "peaceful means" "cannot be found together in any part of the Sikh scriptures, in the history of the Gurus, nor in the history of the Sikhs."

Elsewhere in Asia, Japanese Buddhism "has never declared a holy war," says a scholar, yet "it has nonetheless proclaimed all Japanese wars holy." The religious atrocity of

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devotees of Shinto, which inspired Japanese militarism through World War II, is too notorious to be overlooked.

Does one look South for religious peace? Traditional or “tribal” African expressions characteristically invoke their gods and spirits to wage war, as do counterparts in Latin America.

Pointing a finger closer to home, at the “peoples of the Book”—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—finds a similar story. Monotheists, as mentioned, have no monopoly on violence. But it is true that scripturally revealed monotheism can serve those minded to be lethal in distinctive ways. Believe in one all-powerful God. Believe that this God has enemies. Believe that you are charged to serve the purposes of God against those enemies. Believe that a unique and absolute holy book gives you directions, impulses, and motivations to prosecute war. You have, then, the formula for crusades, holy wars, jihads, and, as we relearned in the year just passing, terrorism that knows no boundaries.

Thus, in Allah’s name, some Muslim fundamentalists have fought other Muslims, and, as everyone knows and in ways that need no further documentation at year’s end, non-Muslims.

The Muslim fundamentalists’ enemies in Israel, Jews in movements such as Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”), have in turn cited the Torah to define the boundaries of their Israel and to inspire militant policies and actions. They don’t need Muslims to point out the many Bible stories, such as those in the Books of Joshua and Judges, that tell of divinely sanctioned war for ancient Israel and were used for battle in the birth of mainly secular modern Israel.

As for Christians, Muslims, especially Arabs, retain a fresh memory of the Crusades, the blood-shedding disasters that, beginning in 1095, rallied troops with the cry “God wills it!” Modern Christians will protest that these desecrations occurred very long ago; indeed, some Christians contend that Christianity at its root lacks a tradition of violence. But even the Jesus of the gospels, who blessed the peacemakers, still did speak at times of bringing not peace but the sword. Later, followers sang, “Onward, Christian soldiers....” Christians have used Christianity to justify the slavery of Africans and the removal to reservations, or death, of Native Americans. In the American Civil War, the North acted with God’s “terrible swift sword” and the Southern cause came to be “baptized in blood.” Afterward, Protestants in the Ku Klux Klan employed chaplains, read Bibles, and mounted crosses as they set out against blacks, Catholics, and Jews.

Today, with the exception of some attackers of abortion clinics, almost no American Protestant Fundamentalists have appealed to arms. Fundamentalist rhetoric, however, is often violent in its calls for action against the infidel at home and abroad. Meanwhile, on the left, only two decades ago some Latin American Catholic “liberationists” allied themselves with terrorist movements in the name of God. For

decades Protestants and Catholics have fought each other in Northern Ireland.

So much for the map of sacred belligerency. Killers in all faiths cite their scriptures against those they attack. It is hard to find durable and complex communities of religious faith that in their extremes have never killed in the name of the gods. The faithful who admit that fact may seem guilty of contributing to bad public relations for religion. But the first call for the religious is to be honest and, honestly, the record is full of violent chapters.

Get rid of religion! counsel the weary and the cynical alike. And replace it with what? The twentieth century’s ideological replacements, Soviet Communism, Nazism, Fascism, Maoism, Shintoism, and the other ‘isms’ were the greatest ideological killers. The record of people acting in the name of Democracy and Capitalism is also not unstained.

Get rid of religion, faith, and spiritual communities? They will not disappear. They are in fact prospering in the new millennium, as year-end polls show. Why? Those of us who do commit ourselves to one or another of these faiths perceive that the positive side of each offers benefits to billions who would not do without them. In the name of God, millions minister to each other and serve publics beyond their circle. Their faiths offer patterns of meaning and community in a world of alienation. They comfort, console, offer hope, inspire humanitarian endeavors, and can inspire work for justice. Witness their roles in New York, Washington, and nationally after the destructions of September 11. Listen to the appeals by Christians to “the Prince of Peace” in this season to hear the dream of reconciliation repeated.

At the end of this year such citizens are busy trying to understand exactly what moves factions within faith communities to erupt with terrorism, as those in al-Qaeda’s version of Islam have done. The mix of motives behind such violence includes many impulses that are not particularly religious in themselves: the impulse for revenge against those who represent real or imagined threats; the desire to enlarge one’s own territory; the desire to rally behind charismatic leaders who promise a future full of hope in the face of manifest injustice; the all-too-human tendency to be seduced into blind followership, to succumb to simple hatred. Not all killing in the name of God *begins* with a claim on God’s will. Armies fight for whatever reason—to purge outsiders or claim turf or effect revenge—and *then* call on divine powers. Doggerel from World War I made cynical fun of such madness:

*Gott strafe Enland, England, and God save the King,  
God this, and God that, and God the other thing.  
“Good God,” said God, “I’ve got my work cut out.”*

Yet, if we are to be honest, we will find that some of the impulses to violence do have their roots in religion itself.

Religious people base their commitments on founding myths, decisive stories, inspiring narratives, and forthright commands in their scriptures. It is clear that in all religions that are durable and complex, these myths and stories display what I call a dark nether- or under-side. In the earliest records of religion, from Babylon and Assyria, theologies of war identify the Enemy with the evil powers that God has set out to vanquish. Ever since, some have heard God call for human allies, who are goaded to conquer the enemies and bring order where there had been chaos.

This “dark underside” survives because satisfying myths or stories must account for the full scope of good and evil, laughter and tragedy, despair and hope, and whatever else human existence brings. Sunny, pastel, promise-everything myths would not endure or satisfy.

Most scholars agree that religion has to do with awe, with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, with something like Moses at the burning bush hearing “Take the shoes off your feet, for the ground on which you are standing is holy ground.” That awe, that wonder, which can be transmitted through texts and oral traditions where there is no immediate experience, is empowering. The one who has something revealed is in possession of something others do not have, and can well be possessed by it.

That power can be used to reconcile or to kill.

Second, the religious follow up their response by forming community. The originating experience is too strong to be borne alone, or is in need of reinforcement. Did you see what I saw? And as community forms, it can easily create the “we” that heals as well as the “they” who become the repulsive other, the infidel, the abhorrent, to be distanced, persecuted, or killed.

Third, as already noted, religion gets transmitted through myths and symbols, rites and ceremonies. And these serve to bond the group and push the other, the different far away. Their stories get to be seen as second-rate, as threats to what one believes. But the same myths and rites almost always have healing dimensions which can be shared. They are also empowering.

Making war in the name of the gods is easy. People need justifications for their most vile acts, and crediting or blaming God is the strongest way to do it. Making peace in the name of the gods is difficult. It means going against the grain of conflicted societies and human impulses to protect and enlarge territory or to find evil in the other.

Fortunately, the dark underside of religion is not the only side.

Most adherents of religions envision ultimate shalom, peace, and reconciliation under a benign God or gods. They know they will not fully realize this peace within history, but they see themselves called to help produce it. They often

need and sometimes find allies. And at their best, people of faith drawn by their faith to a better, more peaceful world, minister to others in sick rooms, act as counselors, as empathic fellow-sufferers, and as institutors of healing agencies. And doing all that demands self-examination, repentance, and resolve.

Some features of political arrangement can help make possible the opportunities for healing. So many Americans have difficulty understanding sacred violence in others because they have seen religion moderated closer to home. The forces of “secularization,” “modernity,” and “Enlightenment” in the guise of “the American way of life” have, it is true, often made it possible for Americans to fail to examine themselves; yet these forces have also helped American Christians, Jews, and others of faith reach for latent resources that promote peace in their own scriptures and traditions. The outcome has been the development of freedoms and new forms of tolerance, of calls to “live and let live,” and, among believers, resolves such as “let’s understand each other; let’s cooperate.”

It is not likely that global militants in Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or any other faith will bow to the words of an American President. The words of Abraham Lincoln, however, should at least find some resonance among thoughtful Americans. He complained that “religious men” of his time opposed each other, “equally certain that they represent the Divine will.” In his Second Inaugural Address Lincoln dismissed the religiously self-confident with the simple statement: “The Almighty has his own purposes.”

Today citizens are being told by some that *we* represent that Divine will. In its name, we are told to counter-attack terrorists by converting our necessary military tasks into elements of a Holy War.

Americans who do this are not likely to acknowledge evils in their own religious past or present.

They will not find any resolve to go beyond the “dark side” of their founding stories and devote themselves to the positive or healing sides.

In one terse line of his First Inaugural Address, President Lincoln made an appeal, unheeded during the next five years, for people in the North and South to look for a time when they would be “again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” I like that phrase about human nature and like to apply it by analogy to the nature of their beliefs. Do the religions themselves have “better angels of their nature” on which followers might draw for inspiration? Those who profess faiths affirm that they do. The early years of this new millennium should find them acting on such affirmations. Otherwise, those who call on the dark underside will prevail unchallenged, and only devastation will result. □

