

Tom Block is an author, artist, and activist whose book, [A Fatal Addiction: War in the Name of God](#), explores the relationships between religion, spirituality and institutional violence. In this post, Block (who you can follow on Twitter at [@tomblock06](#) and learn more about at [www.tomblock.com](#)) summarizes some of the book's core themes to debunk the notion that Islam is uniquely violent.



Tom Block

***War in the Name of God:
Christianity Is No Less Addicted Than Any Other Religion***

In a [recent op-ed](#) in the New York Times, Gary Gutting (a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame) argued concerning what some call “radical Islamic terrorism:”

Islam has not yet tamed, to the extent that Christianity has, the danger implicit in any religion that claims to be God’s own truth. To put it bluntly, Islam as a whole has not made the concessions to secular values that Christianity has.

This Western-centric, racist and arrogant attitude from the spiritually “advanced”

[Christian nations religion \[1\]](#) toward the unreformed and medieval Islamic ones is all too typical. As I write this, Christian nations (mostly our own) rain bombs down from drones onto weddings, schools and other secular places and events in Islamic lands. The difference between our bombs and their bombs, however, is (according to the narrative) massive: we drop our payloads in the name of peace and with a great sadness that they force us to, while they joyfully blow themselves up in evil acts of anarchy and murder.

[And further proving our effete religiosity, fAt \[2\]](#) least Christian killers value their own lives!

One needn't dig too deeply into the American story, or psyche, to discover specific examples of our country's Orwellian "war is peace" paradigm, all tightly supported by the loving vessel of American Christianity.

Christian language and imagery are explicit in the American call to arms. America's wars have almost always been – *and continue to be* – spiritual/religious affairs in which young men and women are called to sacrifice themselves for the Christian God. As was noted in an [article](#) in *Newsweek*:

In America, God and war have a particular kinship: evoking God in the midst of mass killing is inspirational. Divine sanction has been used to give meaning to the Constitution's promise of equality, as well as to license genocide. This impulse to blend God and war owes much to the American temperament: Americans have always feared one (today, nine out of ten call themselves believers) and loved the other (the United States has fought in dozens of armed conflicts in the nation's two-and-a-third centuries). Not a few old warriors have admitted to thrilling to the words of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

If you're not convinced that this defines a current American attitude, consider the United States' response to "Islamic terrorism" (the American existential threat *du jour*). "In the weeks after the September [11, 2001] attacks," Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist Christopher Hedges [observed](#), "communities gathered for vigils and worship services. The enterprise of the state became imbued with a religious aura. The state, and the institutions of state, became for many, the center of worship."

On the first anniversary of the attacks, seven months before the 2003 incursion into Iraq, President Bush [said](#): "Our cause is even larger than our country. Ours is the course of human dignity, freedom guided by conscience grounded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind." As the British newspaper *The Guardian* [reported](#):

George Bush has claimed he was on a mission from God when he launched the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Nabil Shaath, Palestinian foreign minister said: “President Bush said to all of us: ‘I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, “George, go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan.” And I did. And then God would tell me, “George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq.” And I did.’”

Bush’s politics of war were always framed for the public in a religious manner. As

Anglican Priest Jeremy Young [noted](#), for example, Bush suggested in his 2003 State of the Union address ““that America is Christ and that its role is to save the world.”

However, it is true that Bush hasn’t been president for nearly a decade, so it might be argued that now, finally, America has moved past the conflation of Jesus’s will and our military incursions.

Would that it were so. President Obama, winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, has continued the starry-eyed vision of an American Christ of the sword. Professor Robert H.

Nelson, writing for the mainstream PBS website, [notes](#) that Obama, too, has infused religious imagery into his speeches. And Obama has buttressed this faith with bombs.

According to [Politifact](#), by [the](#) spring [of](#) 2016, Obama had ordered 500 drone strikes in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen (as opposed to 60 by President Bush); 1000 drone strikes

in Afghanistan in 2014 alone; and a smattering of others in Syria, Libya, Iraq and other far-off, generally Muslim locales. [And as the](#) ^[3]Huffington Post [noted that](#), “nearly

90% of people killed in recent drone strikes were not the target,” allowing Obama’s scattershot Christian murders to be assured of killing Muslims, though rarely the

“correct” ones. Far from shying away from these actions, our Christian leader has

[bragged](#) about it: “There isn’t a president who’s taken more terrorists off the field than

me, over the last seven and a half years," he puffed in an interview with Fox News' Chris Wallace in April 2016.

None of that is to say that American Christians are in any way different or worse than contemporary practitioners of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, or even Buddhism. It is simply the case that Christianity is no better, no more evolved, no more peaceful than any of the world's religions – all of which (even Buddhism) are steeped within a tradition of sacred violence, and are *currently* involved in wars of choice in the name of God.

(While I am well aware that many will balk at the idea that Buddhism, too, is as bloodthirsty as the other world's religions – gasp! – Buddhist practitioner Brian Daizen

Victoria notes in his book *Zen at War* [that](#): “warfare and killing are described as manifestations of Buddhist compassion. . . . [The purpose of religion is to preserve the state and punish any country or person who dared to interfere with its right of self-aggrandizement.](#)” [and Buddhists are, in fact, committing violence today.](#)^[4]) *All* faiths

utilize war-like language and imagery to describe matters of the spirit; and exhort followers to religious catharsis through violence. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer stated in his [book](#), *Is Religion Killing Us*: “Religiously justified violence is first and foremost a problem of ‘sacred’ texts and not a problem of misinterpretation of those texts.” Since virtually all major religions have embedded within them violent images of God, people can selectively recall these texts and extract from them divine support for war, creating the foundation for what Nelson-Pallmeyer terms the “violence of God tradition.”

One central reason that contemporary leaders have such a willing audience when representing war as religiously sanctioned – and, in many cases, even a spiritual obligation – is [because of](#) the extensive history of uniting physical war and the spiritual

path *within* the sacred teachings of virtually all creeds. Though much of the religious language was undoubtedly meant as metaphor, the human mind runs quickly downhill to the literal, leaving reams of imagery and injunctions for leaders to utilize when discussing military campaigns within the secular culture, and influencing the minds of potential warriors.

American politicians, the media and even mainstream entertainers – like those of all other cultures and religions – do everything in their power to play up the similarities between the religious path and war, all for the poorly obscured purpose of exploiting human pawns to protect their own earthly power or to just simply make a buck (e.g., Boeing, General Electric, Northrup Grumman et al.). Perhaps, to some extent, they might even believe their own words; and, especially if they [5] themselves have fought in a war and come out more or less whole. In this case they will be forced to trust in the lie of a mystical war, if only to help justify the horrors they themselves witnessed and perpetrated.

We need only examine the words of a man considered an American hero, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), to understand how war language explicitly borrows from the religious and even mystical lexicon. Here's how he eulogized a soldier fallen in Afghanistan:

He loved his country, and the values that make us exceptional among nations, and good... Love and honor oblige us. We are obliged to value our blessings, and to pay our debts to those who sacrificed to secure them for us. They are blood debts... The loss of every fallen soldier should hurt us lest we ever forget the terrible costs of war, and the sublime love of those who sacrifice everything on our behalf.

Note how the very real horrors of war are euphemistically referred to in the language of mysticism: “sublime love,” “obligation,” “good causes,” “moral purpose,” “save the innocent,” “peace” and “sacrifice.” This presentation persuades the general population to bypass the intent of their religious teachings, concentrating instead on its sometimes-grisly content.

For those who waver, the dead soldier is held out as incontrovertible proof of the necessity and worth of the war. After all, how could one “force” the soldier to have died in vain, by questioning the worth of his action? The war becomes worthwhile because someone has died undertaking it, a reversal of the normal assignation of worth, which defines an action’s merit *before* the risk is actually taken. In a horrifying example of the “sunk costs” theory, the more people that die for a cause, however mistaken, the more religiously valuable the action, no matter what the true human or economic price really is. Through the sacrifice of human souls for political ends, war becomes enmeshed with a true God experience.

Perhaps as dangerous as the ongoing conflation of spirituality and war are assertions like those from Gutting, who declares that American Christianity has “moved past” religiously sanctioning state violence. This blindness allows our country to engage in wars for our victims’ own good – in much the same way that 12th-century Crusaders (a term [used](#) by George W. Bush in describing America’s response to the attacks of 9/11/2001) or 15th-century Spanish Inquisitors did.

It’s time for a dose of honesty: Christianity is in no manner more mature or less war-like than Islam or any other religion. To heal the illness of state-sponsored murder, we must first admit that.