

## INTRODUCTION

The failure of modern man to grasp the nature of religion has served to perpetuate its effects . . . We persist in disregarding the power of violence in human societies; that is why we are reluctant to admit that violence and the sacred are the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

## TRUTH

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century activist-prophet Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) stated that *God is Truth*. They are the same thing.

At first glance, this looks like one of those throwaway lines about God's attributes, such as "God is Great," "God is Love" or "God is Omnipresent." Something that we hear often, yet rarely think too much about.

However, if we sit with the idea that "God is Truth" for a few minutes, it quickly becomes unsettling. Truth and our conception of reality are often very much at odds. Truth is not found by sifting through polling data or by agreeing with a generally accepted opinion. It has nothing to do with objectivity — which often simply splits the difference between opposing views — or with history, or precedent, or even our deepest held intuitions and beliefs.

Given the chasm that sometimes exists between perception and reality, Truth can be very difficult to disentangle from desire, wish, hope, political exigency and accepted objective reality. The Florentine political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli (d. 1527) realized this dynamic, stating: "The great majority of humans are satisfied with appearances, as though

they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem rather than by those that are.”<sup>3</sup>

The greatest spiritual thinkers have appreciated this difficulty. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov noted: “What does it mean when people say Truth goes over all the world? It means that Truth is driven out of one place after another, and must wander on and on.”<sup>4</sup> And Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz (d. 1791), a Hasidic master, said: “For the sake of Truth, I served 21 years. Seven years to find out what Truth is, seven to drive out falsehood and seven to absorb Truth.”<sup>5</sup> Very few of us have the energy and dedication to undertake this rabbi’s program of discovery!

*America: A Case Study in the Difference between Truth and Reality*

The history of the United States offers fertile ground for considering the difference between accepted fact and Truth. Contrary to the national narrative, the United States of America is anything but a “peace-loving” nation founded on the inalienable principles of human rights and justice for all, which it gently exports around the world to other countries.

One Truth of the matter is that the United States was founded on genocide (of the Native Americans), and stealing (of their land), and then was turned into an empire on the backs of African slaves.

More recently, the history of the United States continues to veer from its self-image as a nation of peace and gentle suasion: It has been the single most bellicose international actor since World War II. In his book *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (1995), William Blum outlines 55 different military actions in more than 50 countries, describing the role played by the United States in overthrowing governments, perverting elections, assassinating leaders, suppressing revolutions, manipulating trade unions and manufacturing “news.” The United States is the only country that has ever utilized a nuclear bomb, dropping two of them on Japan in 1945.

Yet the country has a very different self-image. According to America’s most visible political leaders, the country is “exceptional” and “good.” This example, one of many which will be explored throughout this book, is from a speech by then Senator Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. It represents the American *zeitgeist*:

We gather to affirm the greatness of our nation not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy; our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over 200 years ago: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with

certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” That is the true genius of America.<sup>6</sup>

A recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution found that 58 percent of Americans agreed with the statement: “God has granted America a special role in human history.”<sup>7</sup> And this majority of countrypersons probably don’t mean to commit genocide, enslave humans and rain bombs down on countries as far flung as Yemen, Somalia and Colombia.

This book is one attempt to dig *through* all of the myth and wish that help shape America’s national as well as human narratives, to honestly explore two central facets of human society: organized violence — usually known as “war” — and the yearning for the sacred, also known as “religion.” Shorn of the usual political, emotional and social parameters that can separate Truth and reality, this examination will not be bound by accepted historical narratives. It explores in the clearest manner possible these central human institutions.

For if, as Gandhi maintained, *God is Truth*, then we owe it to ourselves to do our best to take an honest look at our institutions, our motivations and our failings — not as an exercise of self-flagellation but so that we might begin to live up to the maxims and platitudes that are so easily flung about in political and social forums.

### ONE TRUTH

There are many painful truths that we might have a difficult time understanding and internalizing. This book is about one of them: our fatal attraction to violence and war. And even more confusing, the manner in which war and God are intertwined, in most religions and throughout all human time, even into our own.

War represents the collision of our two most basic drives: the will to live and a violent and self-destructive aspect of our nature. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) explained, “Exploitation does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect and primitive society; it belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function. It is a consequence of the will to power, which is, after all, the will to life.”<sup>8</sup>

There is no greater manner of “exploitation” than to kill another human being or be part of a force or nation that does so. In so doing, the “will to live” is taken to its logical conclusion, through denying life to another. Little is so existentially satisfying, and nothing is so stubbornly at

the heart of human civilization, as this dynamic and the manner in which it plays out through war.

It is a perverse universe indeed that would fuse these two primal instincts in one being — the will to live and the need to destroy — but their centrality to the human experience cannot be denied.

#### A TIME-HONORED TRUTH

There are few rituals *more* basic to all states and all civilizations throughout human history than war. As the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu (c. 500 B.C.E.) said in *The Art of War*: “Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Tao to survival or extinction.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite its ubiquity, it is also the most *inhuman* of human institutions. How can it still be so stubbornly central to society, even though our armaments have grown to such grotesque efficiency that thousands and even millions of people can be killed during the course of a few weeks?

What’s more, as our ability to commit mass slaughter grows through technological advances, the percentage of non-combatants killed engorges to alarming proportions: from 15% in World War I to 65% in World War II, then 90% at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in “low-impact” conflicts in places such as the Sudan, East Timor and the Balkans<sup>10</sup> and, most recently, to an almost perfect 98% of those killed being innocent victims, with the advent of pilotless drone attacks<sup>11</sup> in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Palestinian Territories and other locales.

The stability of war as a central facet of society is undeniable. Today is certainly no different than one thousand years after the birth of Jesus, or a millennium before the birth of the Christian Messiah. For instance, during my own lifetime, the United States of America has been incessantly at war. I was born into the Vietnam War in 1963 and now, as I write this, my country is involved in various military engagements, in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and other regions.

Additionally, members of the United States armed forces are detailed to 150 nations around the world, from Korea to Uganda to Germany to Columbia, and all points in between. Over the past 50 years, the United States military has been involved in bloody conflicts in Cambodia, Laos, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Honduras, Iran, Panama, Grenada, Iraq (twice), Kuwait, Serbia, Colombia, Pakistan and Somalia, *just to name a few*.<sup>12</sup> An unbroken line of American military engagements whose dead might count out the minutes that I have lived in the course of nearly 50 years.

Things are certainly not getting better. An article in the Washington Post noted:

This is the American era of endless war . . . Today, radical religious ideologies, new technologies and cheap, powerful weapons have catapulted the world into a “period of persistent conflict,” according to the Pentagon’s last major assessment of global security. “No one should harbor the illusion that the developed world can win this conflict in the near future,” the document concluded. By this logic, America’s wars are unending and any talk of peace is quixotic or naïve.<sup>13</sup>

War cuts a bloody swath through all of human history with no less insistence than it has throughout my lifetime. War correspondent Christopher Hedges noted, in his gut-wrenching book *What Every Person Should Know about War*, that over the past 3400 years of civilization humans have been entirely at peace for only 268 of them.<sup>14</sup> The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Will Durant (d. 1981) calculated that there have been only 29 years in all of human history during which there was not a war underway somewhere in the world.<sup>15</sup> George C. Kohn was even more unforgiving, noting in his *Dictionary of Wars* that from roughly 2925 B.C.E. through today, an unbroken line of institutional violence can be drawn. And psychologist James Hillman stated in *A Terrible Love of War* that during the 5600 years of recorded history, 14,600 wars have been fought, more than two wars for each year of human civilization.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, it must also be acknowledged that war has been almost as intensively studied as it has been waged. From the first exploration of this human ritual, in Herodotus’s (d. 425 B.C.E.) *The Histories*, through the most recent reportage about the current war (whichever that might be as you read this), countless investigators, historians, pundits, poets and journalists have examined the causes of war in a myriad of ways. Yet all of their conclusions have failed to explain, once and for all, the genesis of this endemic human experience.<sup>17</sup>

This book is yet one more attempt.

#### A RELIGIOUS PEOPLE

The violent nature of our species is undeniable. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet Thomas Merton (d. 1968) pointed out: “Man is the only species besides the rat that wantonly and cruelly turns on his own kind in unprovoked and murderous hostility. Man is the only one who deliberately seeks to destroy his own kind.”<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the vast majority of people and societies throughout human time have considered themselves deeply religious. Even in our era,

the United States is said to be the most religious industrialized nation in the world. A Washington Post article noted: “92 percent [of Americans] believe in God or a universal spirit — including one in five of those who call themselves atheists.”<sup>19</sup>

It was this pairing in contemporary America of war and religion, spirituality and destruction, that inspired me to write this book. Shouldn't the one (religion) mitigate the other (institutional violence)? Isn't “peace” at the center of *all* religions? Yet the facts speak for themselves: a relationship between God and religion, not only in language but also in action, cannot be denied.

To examine the pairing of war and religion throughout human history is an academic study, but to look at it in terms of *my* country and *my* era is deeply emotional. How could it be that my nation, one of the most religious countries in the world, is also the most violent? Do God and war define the American spirit as much as apple pie and baseball? And if they do, how can that be? From what I have understood of religion, it leads to harmony — internal spiritual tranquility, as well as social well being between and among peoples.

The facts exhibit a different reality. With a country as religious and war-like as the United States, something else must be taking place. So I decided to delve not only into the history of war and religion, but also examine how the inseparable pairing of these two forces impact contemporary society.

#### UNCOVERED TRUTH

Most religions — not only the bloody monotheistic ones with which we in the West are more familiar (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), but also many primitive religions,<sup>20</sup> as well as Greek, Roman, Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu creeds — have, in addition to being sacred paths preaching internal peace as well as brotherly love, less well known and blood-thirsty histories. In many cases, as I explore below, these creeds demand complete bodily commitment, sacrifice and murder to further the cause of their god. As I delved deeper into the chronicles of these major faiths, I found that few were religions of peace. And that if a religion did preach peace in a meaningful manner, it was either swallowed up from the outside by a more warlike creed, or changed from the inside, as happened to Christianity in the fourth century (see below).

The mantra “(insert name of preferred religious path) is a religion of peace” is often simply not the case. Sometimes, it is little more than a

manner of papering over the violent history of a particular faith. Or, at the very least, it represents a selective view of the narrative of one's own spiritual path. Additionally, this construction has been used to justify violence against another, different religion that obviously *isn't* a religion of peace, or "they" wouldn't be forcing "us" to undertake these bellicose actions.

This dynamic is explored in detail below.

#### THE TRUTH SHALL NEVER DISSUADE

Human beings often do not allow facts to come between them and their deepest held beliefs. It is a dynamic that we see time and again, and one that is hidden in plain view.

Ronald Lindsay, president of the Committee of Skeptical Inquiry, was quoted in the Washington Post addressing the underlying motivation for people choosing their inklings over truth. He was discussing a question in American politics which will almost certainly be forgotten by the time you read this: whether or not President Barack Obama was actually born in the United States, otherwise known as the "birther" controversy. But this dynamic holds true for any set of deeply held beliefs, and religious beliefs are often the bedrock of a person's sense of "self":

If you have a pre-commitment to your view, and that point of view is important for your identity — if you are emotionally attached to it — your emotion is going to shape your reasoning process. You'll be presented with facts, but you'll find some way to minimize the significance of those facts.<sup>21</sup>

And so it is with religion: people often believe that *theirs* is a religion of peace, because they *want* to believe that they, and their god, are "peaceful." Many devout people will blame anything but their own creed for the history of blood and slaughter within their sacred path, violence often committed in service to that religion.

#### AMERICA THE BELLICOSE

In the study that follows, I review the violence of God tradition in six of the largest religious paths practiced in our world, representing nearly 90% of the world's faith community, as well as many bellicose precursor religions in primitive societies, the ancient Near East, Greece and Rome. The one thing that all of these religious paths share is a belief in *sacred* violence — and that violence and the sacred are at times so closely linked as to be indistinguishable.

After this exploration, I turn my attention to American culture and the manner in which the violence of God tradition influences its political sphere — how the United States, as a society, goes so easily to war as “one nation under God.” In exploring the language of the media, politics, religious speeches and popular culture over the decade or so from the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center — attacks which are themselves believed by some to be exemplary acts of religious ecstasy — I found that the tendency to fuse God’s will with institutionalized slaughter affected many facets of America’s public discourse. Closer examination uncovered the fact that this conflation of violence and God can be traced backward in the country’s history to the founding of the United States and even before.

The question that arose for me throughout this work — which I deal with in the epilogue — is which force is more powerful, and which *serves* which? Do religion and God exist simply to channel our aggressive impulses, with the fusion of violence and the sacred making civilization itself possible by preventing humanity from dissolving into an orgy of individual, anarchic destructive behavior? Are our sub- and pre-conscious aggressive impulses channeled through sacred violence into the institution of war, thereby protecting most of us while sacrificing the few, the warriors?

Or does it go even further than that, with war being one true human religion? With violence representing, for many, the ultimate expression, as Nietzsche averred, of the human will to live. And in this case, are God and Church sometimes subservient to our necessary, primal and genetically encoded violence?

I don’t know.

But I felt that these questions must be explored — and they had to be considered honestly and openly, focusing on the facts at hand, outside of the realm of wish and dream. Often, even in books that have examined the relationship between God and religion, I feel that conclusions have been softened, holy warriors have been shunted from the center of society (referred to as “terrorists” or miscreants) and the two energies — violence and the sacred — have been teased apart, with a sigh of relief.

In those studies, the desire for a certain outcome often appeared to influence the conclusion, clouding even the most penetrating studies of violence and God. After all, a book must give the reader what he or she wants, or it risks remaining an unpublished study, considered too depressing or unmarketable to be put into print.