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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Violence*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

Does religion promote violence?

Many people believe that, as one writer said, “more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.”

William Cavanaugh calls this belief the “myth of religious violence.” Religion is believed to be inherently violent because it is absolutist, divisive, and irrational by nature. Accordingly, religion must be relegated to the private lives of individuals, and secular arguments must be given exclusive authority in any public debate about how we should use and respond to violence.

I find it difficult to parse the causes of any particular conflict into those that are religious and those that are secular. Disputes about God tend to be mixed in with arguments about land, money, and ethnicity.

Even in the so-called wars of religion in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, it is impossible to separate the battle over religious doctrine from the struggle for economic and political power.

How many people, for example, do you know who are willing to give their lives for their faith? And, how many people do you know who are willing to give their lives for their family or their country?

It gets even more complicated when you realize that we can't really tell what is religious from what is not. You might think we would know religion when we see it. But, when we start drawing definitional lines, we wind up including Marxism, communism, fascism, and so-called civil religion. These secular ideologies generate the same kinds of intolerance, fanaticism, and exclusive identities that people attribute to religion at its worst.

The real problem, though, is that blaming religion for violence makes our state sponsored response to violence less effective. If we convince ourselves that violence is the product of fanatical religionists, then we tend to overlook other causes. When we tell ourselves, for example, that Muslim extremists hate us for our freedom, we tend to overlook the other things that might be motivating their attacks.

While we may have had good reasons for doing what we did, and we certainly have the right to defend ourselves, we shouldn't forget that they have not forgotten that we were behind the Iranian coup in 1953 and subsequent support for the Shah; or that we supported Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and 1980s; or that we are funding the Israeli occupation and settlement of Palestinian land; or that we supported the corrupt and dictatorial regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia; or that we invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq.

So, in answer to your question, I do think that certain forms of religious practice promote violence, and they should be examined and criticized. But, as Cavanaugh notes, viewing our challenges through the lens of a “groundless religious-secular dichotomy” only makes the real challenges harder to see.

Your affectionate uncle,

Ames

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