

A red-toned illustration of a classical temple with columns and a large statue, with people in the foreground.

CHRISTIANITY,
POLITICS, AND THE
WESTERN PSYCHE

TERROR *and*
CIVILIZATION

SHADIA B. DRURY

TERROR AND CIVILIZATION

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THE WESTERN PSYCHE

BY
SHADIA B. DRURY

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TERROR AND CIVILIZATION
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TERROR AND CIVILIZATION

For My Sister

Wafaa

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PREFACE

The relation between terror and civilization has been seriously misconstrued in the history of the West. Two contradictory theories have flourished side by side—the naïve and the cynical. Interestingly, both have their roots in biblical religion. The naïve view is simple-minded. It assumes that terror and civilization are deadly enemies that stand in stark opposition to one another. This view is profoundly dualistic. It divides the world into good and evil, God and Satan, the defenders of civilization, and the enemies of civilization.

Side by side with this naïve and dualistic view is a deeply cynical, but more sophisticated view, which has also informed the Western understanding of the relation between terror and civilization. The Christian assumption that human nature has been profoundly corrupted by the mythical Fall has led to the view that repression, terror, and tyranny are necessary to civilize a fallen and thoroughly wicked humanity. Far from being opposites, terror and civilization are intimately linked. The assumption is that terror—spiritual, political, and psychological—is the secret of the success of civilization. Supposedly, fear of violence and death—fear of the executioner, the pedagogue, and the strap—keeps violence in check. In other words, civilization succeeds because it fights brutality with even greater brutality. But, as society becomes stronger, it manages to turn man's savage instincts inward against the self. In this way, its grip on the instincts becomes more complete. As a result, it is able to relax and dispense with its more gruesome punishments—drawing and quartering, boiling in oil, and the like. Power seems to be less terrible. But one should not be fooled by appearances. Terror has not disappeared; it has merely been internalized and transfigured into a spiritual and psychological terror. The result is the creation of an inner state of siege—a garrison in a conquered city. This is the more sophisticated view.

In this book, I will challenge both the naïve and the sophisticated view of the relation between terror and civilization. But in doing so, I will not deny that terror and civilization are intimately linked.

My claim is that the connection between terror and civilization has been seriously misconstrued. It is not for love of evil or love of self that human beings commit murder and mayhem. The worst atrocities have their source in the zealous pursuit of a sublime ideal that is believed to be so majestic, so magnificent, and so grand, that it is worthy of every sacrifice, every hardship, and every abomination. Christianity and Islam are examples of these exalted ideals. Only a grand ideal can combine treachery with a clear conscience. In other words, what is intended to civilize us can also make us monstrous.

Defenders of Christianity (and of Islam) believe that the evils done in the name of these religions are the work of opportunists, rogues, and scoundrels using religion to conceal their iniquity. These apologetic arguments have been used to excuse the Crusades, the persecution of heretics, the burning of witches, the killing of gynecologists, the persecution of homosexuals, the attack on the World Trade Center, and compulsory celibacy. Supposedly, neither Christianity nor Islam is to blame. But it is time to reconsider this view. It is time to critically examine the assumptions of these Biblical religions and their sacred texts. It is time to ask if these sacred texts do not lend themselves to the political extremism, violence, and intolerance perpetrated in their name.

I am not denying that Christianity and Islam have inspired people to do good work in private and public life. It seems to me that these religions have also inspired people to behave in ways that are more cruel and immoderate than they would have otherwise. It is not simply the case that wickedness hides behind the goodness of religion. Some of the evil deeds that are committed cannot be made sense of in the absence of religious beliefs and assumptions. In contrast to the cynicism about human nature that is characteristic of Christianity, I believe that people genuinely seek the good. But religious beliefs and superstitions often cloud and distort the already difficult search for the good and the right.

In examining how religious beliefs inspire pernicious and malevolent conduct we should begin with Christianity because it is our own, and because the Republicans who are in power in the United States are eager to re-empower the Churches. After 300 years of secular liberal revolutions in the West, re-empowering the Churches would be a serious mistake. The reason is not just that there are bad people running the Churches; the reason for resisting efforts to re-empower the Churches is that people who believe much of what Jesus believed are not likely to behave well in positions of power—unless they are willing to keep their religion out of politics as Jesus did. Any suggestion that the Churches should be re-endowed with political power has its source in

historical amnesia. In my view, the political crimes committed in the name of Christianity were not historically contingent accidents; they were a logical consequence of Christian beliefs.

The resurgence of militant Islam has led some Christians to imagine that Christianity is a civilized religion of love and peace in comparison to the violent barbarism of Islam. It is time for the West to stop fooling itself into thinking that Christianity is superior to Islam. It is neither more moderate nor less zealous. My aim is to show that the freedom and prosperity of the West have been achieved in spite of Christianity and not because of it. It is because we have dethroned Christianity that our societies are more free and prosperous than the Islamic societies.

Instead of feeling smug and superior, Christians should be determined to save their religion by keeping it scrupulously out of politics. It seems to me that the Christian Right is perversely blind to the dangers of religion in politics. But anyone born in the Middle East (as I was) cannot ignore the disastrous effects of the mixture of religion (especially Biblical religion) and politics. In the Middle East, everyone is brought up to believe that their religion is just fine; all the problems of the world have their source in other people's religion. This is a terrible mistake. The world in general and the Middle East in particular, would be much improved if everyone were more cognizant of the flaws of their own people and religion. This explains my admiration for the likes of journalist Rick Salutin, historian David Noble, film critic and novelist Maurice Yacowar, theorist and playwright Chana Cox, and political scientist Richard Falk. We need more Arab writers critical of the Arab world and its religion. Of course, they risk having a *fatwa* on their heads. And that may explain why they are not as visible as they might be.

In Part I, "Metaphysics of Terror," I give a critical account of the religion of Jesus. Unlike other critics, I do not focus my critique on the Church; instead, I focus on the religion of Jesus as represented in the sacred texts and their canonized interpreters. Both the critics of Christianity and its defenders have focused their criticisms on Saint Paul and the Church. They blame Saint Paul for darkening the message of sweetness and light imparted by Jesus. They blame the Church for perverting the original teachings of the Gospels. In contrast, I argue that from its earliest and supposedly most idealistic beginnings, Christianity betrays a bleak austerity behind the apparently genial personality of Jesus. I focus on the major elements—faith, salvation, sin, death, and damnation. I explain why the religion of Jesus is zealous, immoderate, and unwise. And this is why Jesus cannot be totally absolved of the savage history of the Church.

In Part II, "Politics of Terror," I make the case against Christianity in politics. My argument is intended as a response to those who believe that Christianity has a salutary effect on politics—from Saint Augustine to George W. Bush. It has often been observed that Christianity oscillates between political resignation and militancy. On one hand, it assumes a passive and resigned attitude to political affairs. Overwhelmed by the enormity of human depravity, it resigns itself to the horrors of the world and awaits supernatural redemption. But as soon as Christianity gained political ascendancy in Rome, resignation gave way to militancy. But in my view, the two postures—resignation and militancy—are equally disastrous from a political point of view because they are equally antithetical to political moderation, sobriety, or restraint. It stands to reason that those who believe that they are in possession of the one and only truth necessary for salvation are unlikely to be generous, pluralistic, or just. In short, Christianity cannot be vested with political power without courting disaster. The political success of Christianity, then and now, invites the worst tyrannies—tyrannies that seek dominion not only over the actions of the body but over the thoughts, dreams, and longings of the mind.

In contrast to many of his followers, Jesus was apolitical. He did not aspire to political power; nor did he offer a political philosophy. He provided moral and spiritual guidance for the private lives of individuals. And even if we reject his religious doctrines, we must admit that his moral teaching is not without allure. Part III, "Ethic of Love," is a critical examination of the moral teaching of Jesus. I argue that the Jesus ethic is not simply a prudential ethic, as critics contend—if it were, it might be more palatable. I think it is more austere, but more fascinating than critics recognize. In contrast to Nietzsche, I do not think that Christianity has trumped fate or eclipsed tragedy. Whatever its shortcomings, the morality of Jesus is rich in tragic gloom. And far from coming into conflict with the metaphysics of terror, it is intimately connected with it, for reasons that I will explain.

In Part IV, I examine the "Psychology of Terror." It is my contention that the ethic of love has unwittingly fostered a conception of conscience as an inner state of siege. I argue that both psychoanalysis and postmodernism are the heirs of Christianity. In other words, our self-styled liberators are trapped within the Christian horizon. So much so, that it is no exaggeration to say that Freud has provided Christianity with scientific, historical, and psychological justification. He shares the Christian preoccupation with sin, sex, guilt, and expiation. Nor are Nietzsche and his postmodern troops free of the yoke of Christianity.

Like Freud, they assume that there is a profound conflict between human nature and civilization, and that the latter depends for its success on psychic terror. This understanding of the relation of terror and civilization is what I aim to challenge. I believe this worldview has deep Biblical roots, which have the effect of deprecating morality, inviting a Promethean revolt, and romanticizing evil.

In Part V, "Terror, Ideals, and Civilization," I reject both the naïve and the cynical approaches to the relation of terror and civilization. I argue that terror is neither the opposite of civilization nor the secret of its success. The relationship between terror and civilization is much more complex. I believe that ideals and their zealous pursuit, are at the heart of both the sweetness of civilization and its terrors. Christianity and Islam are examples. What makes the conflict between Islam and the West so deadly is not the radical difference between the antagonists but their similarity—both live in the shadow of Biblical religion, which accounts for the radical and polarizing nature of the conflict. Transcending the Biblical horizon is therefore the first step in the quest for political moderation and sobriety.

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PART I

METAPHYSICS OF TERROR

In an age of test-tube babies, cloning, and stem cell research, many Christians believe that we are living in a "culture of death." Frankenstein has become a reality. Monsters are being created in laboratories by mixing the genes of humans with animals. Embryos are being manufactured only to be "harvested" for the purposes of "research." Not surprisingly, some feel that even though Hitler lost the war, his culture of death has triumphed.¹ Human life has become a commodity and a plaything to satisfy the insatiable scientific desire for conquest—the desire to be God.

In these frightful circumstances, Christianity has enjoyed a revival. Many believers imagine that Christianity alone can rescue us from the crude scientism to which we have fallen prey. They imagine that a return to the biblical idea that man is made in the image of God will bring back a reverence for human life. And in the absence of faith, they are willing to use the power of the state to enforce conformity to Christian morality and beliefs. In my view, this is a desperate tactic.

In an age that is disenchanted with science and technology but is hungry for authority, we long for the towering moral authority of the Church. Without realizing it, we long for a romanticized version of the Middle Ages. We long for a world in which the Church represented a transcendent moral order to which the state was subject. We long for a day when the Church provided a moral compass that sets limits on the power and iniquity of the state. We long for a time when submitting to the authority of the Church was proof that the state is legitimate—that it is more than the incarnation of force and fraud. We dream of a Church that can curb the immorality of society. We imagine a Church that can play the role of an international umpire, upholding justice and settling disputes between secular powers.

After the catastrophic turn of the French Revolution, reactionaries and Romantics longed for the age of faith and chivalry. They were convinced that reason and modernity led directly and logically to the guillotine. But we must resist this inclination to demonize reason and

romanticize the Middle Ages. The latter was indeed an age of faith and chivalry but it was also a barbarous age, and the power of the Church was integral to that barbarity.

It behooves us not to forget this in a rush to re-empower the Church. We should also not forget that the Church is a master of dissembling. Despite her wretched history, she has always managed to present herself as the "bride of Christ." This ingenious symbol has been instrumental in concealing her crimes. It has allowed her to pretend that she has never wielded any secular, political, or coercive power. It has allowed her to promote the illusion that she is the representative of God on earth—a representative with *no will of her own*.

Christianity has a remarkable capacity for self-renewal and self-purification. Despite a history of terror—Crusades, Inquisitions, and witch burnings—it has displayed unusual resilience. It has managed to remain pure and untouched by the iniquities of its highest officials. Unlike other ideals, it seems untarnished by their crimes. No one says of Christianity what everyone says of Marxism—it is finished, forget it; it has been tried. On the contrary, there is reason to believe that the twenty-first century is on the cusp of a religious revival, if not also on the verge of religious wars.

1. The Apologetic Argument

The resilience of Christianity is ultimately a mystery. But at the heart of the matter is the capacity of the Christian ideal to separate itself from its historical incarnations. There continues to be faith in a pure, perfect, and pristine Christianity that transcends history. Christianity has been brilliantly adept at separating the ideal from its historically flawed manifestations. Appeal to this pure and pristine ideal of Christianity has been the cornerstone of the arguments of Christian apologists. In this chapter, I will make the case against the apologetic argument.

In my view, this argument contains a small truth but it also has serious limitations; and it has been more successful than it deserves to be. The apologetic argument appeals to a pure Christianity that transcends the dark history of the Church. Supposedly, Christian principles are flawless because they are inspired by Jesus Christ. But the Church is made up of mortal men who are not perfect.

The most recent example of Christian apologetics is the highly acclaimed book *Papal Sin*, by Garry Wills. In his book, Wills documents the moral decrepitude and intellectual bankruptcy of the Catholic Church in our time.² He thinks that the pope and the hierarchy of the

Church are monstrous, and that they have perverted an original, moderate, tolerant, and pluralistic Christianity. Like all apologists, his argument depends on faith in a pure and pristine Christianity that is forever distinct and separate from its own profoundly flawed manifestations. At the very minimum, Jesus is the cornerstone of this pure and perfect Christianity. But in some cases, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and other Church Fathers are included. Wills is one of the many admirers of Saint Augustine and considers him a champion of an unspoiled Christianity.³

The success of the apologetic argument has its source in the fact that it contains a partial truth. The argument rightly points to the tension between any original ideal and its founders on one hand, and the process of institutionalization on the other. There is definitely a certain conflict between the teachings of Jesus on one hand and those of Pope John Paul II on the other. The institutionalization of the ideal has no doubt led to a serious corruption of the original. But as I will argue, the original cannot be totally divorced or absolved from its decadent manifestations.

The tension between the original ideal and its institutional representations notwithstanding, the apologetic argument is nevertheless seriously flawed. Is it possible to believe that Christianity is not to blame for the horrors inflicted in its name? Is it possible to believe that all these evils wrought in the name of Christianity were the work of bad men whose wickedness was not inspired by Christianity itself? Consider the Catholic priesthood. Could its infamy have nothing to do with the policies, practices, and beliefs of the Church? What are we to make of all those priests who have abused the children entrusted to their care? Are we to believe that all this depravity has nothing to do with the sexual obsessions of Christianity and the Catholic enforcement of celibacy? Is the original Christianity as pristine as the Christian apologists would have us believe? Is Christianity altogether removed from the evils that are carried out in its name and under its banner?

In what follows, I will make the case against the apologetic argument. I will argue that Christianity is seriously flawed and that these flaws become particularly apparent whenever the Church manages to acquire political power. If the Church were to be empowered once again, the results are certain to be just as disastrous as they were in Rome, in the Middle Ages, in Calvin's reign of terror in Geneva, in the Puritan rule of England and dominance of New England. My argument is intended as a response to those who believe that the revival of Christianity in our time would have a salutary effect on the world in general and on politics in particular. In making this argument, I will refrain from laying the blame exclusively on the Church, which allegedly contains many bad