

# “Killing in the Name of God”<sup>1</sup>

William T. Cavanaugh

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The Lord God said “You shall not kill” and yet those who profess to be bound by these words do a lot of killing. Indeed, we are told, one of the most fundamental contemporary threats to world peace is the conviction of some that God not only does not forbid them to kill, but positively commands them to do so. Commentary on the war in Iraq and the ongoing “war on terrorism” often implies that a major source of the violence is religion, specifically the fanatical conviction that God commands acts of violence against the unfaithful. In common opinion in the West, killing in the name of God is subject to the most thoroughgoing distaste and reproach. In the “clash of civilizations” worldview,<sup>2</sup> a dichotomy is established between religious violence and secular tolerance. Secular societies still must resort to violence, but it is the kind of controlled and rational violence necessary to contain essentially irrational religious violence. In this view, killing in the name of God is always an outrage; killing in the name of the secular nation-state can be necessary and praiseworthy.

In this essay I will argue precisely the opposite: killing in the name of God is the only type of killing that could be legitimate. I will arrive at this conclusion by examining the commandment against killing in the context of the rest of the Decalogue and the biblical treatment of violence. I will consider the biblical conviction that life is God’s alone to give and to take. We are perhaps accustomed to applying this conviction to other of the “life” issues: abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, genetic engineering, and so on. I think we are less accustomed to applying the conviction that God alone is the Lord of life and death to the issue of war. I will focus on war because it is so timely and because too much of Christian reflection on war is based on applying just war criteria in abstraction from the crucial theological question of God’s command.

I will begin with an example of the common opinion that killing in the name of God is taboo. I will then show that, in the biblical view,

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was originally presented at the Ten Commandments conference sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, June 2003. The conference papers will be published in a volume by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jensen.

<sup>2</sup> This view was popularized by Samuel Huntington’s widely influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1998).

killing in the name of God is the only kind of killing that can possibly be justified. I will then examine arguments that religion exacerbates the problem of violence, and how the arguments themselves serve to legitimate the transfer of loyalties to false gods. Finally, I will examine what God actually commands of us with regard to killing, and argue that Jesus Christ takes the commandment against killing to its broadest and most complete extent.

### 1. Religious violence versus secular tolerance

A piece by Andrew Sullivan in the *New York Times Magazine* will serve as one example out of countless possible of the logic I seek to question. Sullivan justifies the overall war against terrorism – and the subsidiary wars of which it is composed – in terms of an “epic battle” as momentous and grave as the ones against Nazism and Communism.<sup>3</sup> He labels it a “religious war,” but not in the sense of Islam versus Christianity and Judaism. It is rather radical Islam versus Western-style “individual faith and pluralism,”<sup>4</sup> or “a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity.”<sup>5</sup> Sullivan operates with the same slippery and expansive definition of “fundamentalism” that is so common in public commentary on matters of faith. Fundamentalism need have no connection to those American Christians who trace their lineage to the early twentieth-century movement to identify five fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> For Sullivan, fundamentalism refers to the “blind recourse to texts embraced as literal truth, the injunction to follow the commandments of God before anything else, the subjugation of reason and judgment and even conscience to the dictates of dogma.”<sup>7</sup> Absent the word “blind” and the stark opposition of dogma to reason, I suspect many Christians, myself included, would be happy to identify ourselves in this characterization, even though we do not consider ourselves fundamentalists.

If a fundamentalist is anyone who takes the command of God seriously, a fundamentalist, furthermore, is someone who refuses to accept that religion is an individual thing. Sullivan quotes Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor as saying of humans “These pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find something that all would believe in and worship; what is

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “This is a Religious War,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001, 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the media misuse of the term “fundamentalism,” see Robert Jenson, “The God Wars” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 27–30.

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, 46.

essential is that *all* may be together in it. This craving for *community* of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity since the beginning of time."<sup>8</sup> Sullivan completely misses the fact that this craving for community was a cornerstone of Dostoevsky's own worldview. Instead, Sullivan comments, "This is the voice of fundamentalism. Faith cannot exist alone in a single person. Indeed, faith needs others for it to survive – and the more complete the culture of faith, the wider it is, and the more total its infiltration of the world, the better."<sup>9</sup> Because it needs others, fundamentalism will seek to coerce others violently into its own camp.

A fundamentalist, then, in Sullivan's view, is someone who puts the commandments of God before anything else and also refuses to confine faith to an individual and private realm. Given that most Christians, Muslims, and Jews throughout history would therefore qualify as "fundamentalists," Sullivan does not hesitate to cast his net as widely as possible, claiming "It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation."<sup>10</sup> Killing in the name of the one God has been a curse on history; Sullivan cites the usual litany of crusades, inquisitions, and religious wars. The problem seems to be too much faith, a loyalty to one God that excludes accommodation to other realities. "If faith is that strong, and it dictates a choice between action or eternal damnation, then violence can easily be justified."<sup>11</sup>

At root, the problem is epistemological. According to Sullivan, it took Western Christians centuries of bloody "religious wars" to realize "the futility of fighting to the death over something beyond human understanding and so immune to any definitive resolution."<sup>12</sup> The problem with obedience to the commands of God is that God's commands are simply not available to us mortals in any form that will produce consensus rather than division. Locke, therefore, emerges as Sullivan's hero, for it was Locke who recognized the limits of human understanding of revelation and enshrined those limits in a political theory. Locke and the founding fathers saved us from the curse of killing in the name of God. "What the founders and Locke were saying was that the ultimate claims of religion should simply not be allowed to interfere with political and religious freedom."<sup>13</sup> In theory, we have the opposition of a cruel fanaticism with a modest and peaceloving tolerance. However, Sullivan's epistemological modesty applies only to the command of God and not to the absolute superiority of our political system over theirs. According to Sullivan,

<sup>8</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, quoted in Sullivan, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 46–7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 53.

"We are fighting for the universal principles of our Constitution." *Universal* knowledge is available to us after all, and it underwrites the "epic battle" we are currently waging against fundamentalisms of all kinds. Sullivan is willing to gird himself with the language of a warrior and underwrite U.S. military adventures in the Middle East in the name of his secular faith. Sullivan entitles his piece "This *Is* a Religious War," though the irony seems to elude him entirely. The underlying message, crudely put, is this: "Lighten up, you Muslims! Taking God's command too seriously causes violence. Learn to privatize your faith. If you don't, we might just have to bomb the hell out of you."

## 2. Killing for God

A Christian who takes the Bible seriously as God's revelation must of course refuse such false epistemological modesty. The precise interpretation of God's Word is seldom a simple matter, but we undertake it in community with the whole church in the firm conviction and hope that God speaks to us in the Scriptures. The Ten Commandments are received as God's authoritative word to us. Taking God's commandments too seriously is not the root cause of violence; the problem is not taking them seriously enough. Killing in the name of God is not a peculiar problem to be dealt with by quarantining the will of God from the routine use of force. The reverse is the case: if any killing is ever justified, it can only be because God wills it.

The commandment against killing in the Decalogue is brief enough that its precise meaning is not simply obvious. The two Hebrew words – *lo tirtsach* – that comprise the whole commandment in both Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 evade simple translation. "You shall not murder" is the favored translation of some English versions of the texts, but the root verb *ratsach* is used elsewhere in the Old Testament (Deut. 4:41–3 and 19:1–13; Num. 35; Josh. 20 and 21) to refer to unintentional killing. The more traditional rendering "You shall not kill" is not unproblematic either, because there are clearly instances in which killing is not only accepted but commanded of the Israelites. Deut. 24:16 limits capital punishment to putting people to death for their own crimes, but the Law has no difficulty finding crimes for which death is the proper and required punishment. Slaughter in war is also mandated and congratulated. Samuel reports the following words of YHWH to Saul: "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (I Sam. 15:2–3). Similar examples abound in the book of Judges and elsewhere. It seems, then, that the commandment cannot cover all kinds of killing, for there are

clearly some kinds upon which YHWH looks favorably, or at least some circumstances under which killing is allowed or demanded.

An examination of the frequency of the verb *ratsach* finds its use in the Old Testament relatively rare. It appears 46 times, as opposed to 165 for *harag* and 201 for *hemit*, both of which are used to express killing. The latter terms have multiple uses, including murder, killing the enemy in battle, and putting someone to death according to the Law. *ratsach*, on the other hand, is used only once for killing someone guilty according to the Law (Num. 35:30), and never for killing someone in battle. As opposed to *harag* and *hemit*, the use of *ratsach* is restricted, according to Johann Stamm, to "illegal killing inimical to the community."<sup>14</sup> This is not much help, however, for it amounts to saying that *ratsach* is the kind of killing you shall not do. We know that already from the Decalogue.

If we are looking to unlock the meaning of the commandment, we might do better to concentrate not on the verb but on the subject of the verb. The subject of the verb "to kill" is you, the human members of the Israelite community. The speaker is God. What the commandment establishes is an absolute divide between God and humans in the issue of killing. If we humans must not kill, it is not because killing as such is always an evil deed. It is because killing belongs to God, and not to us. We know that killing as such is not evil because elsewhere God commands it. What the Decalogue establishes is the difference in authority over life and death between us and God. Our task is not to try to supply a detailed list of types of killing that are and are not permitted, a list that the Decalogue somehow forgot to include. Instead we are called to see that life is not ours to take, but belongs to God alone.

The structure of the Decalogue as a whole supports paying more attention to the subject than to the verb. In both versions, the Decalogue begins not with the law but with the Lawgiver: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2–3; Deut. 5:6–7). The first table of the Ten Commandments is about the subject of the Law, its giver, and what human subjects owe to God. Only after this is established can the second table begin to spell out what humans owe to each other. The first table is not simply supplemented in the second by a more or less arbitrary list of some important things that people ought not to do. All of the commandments of the second table, and most especially the commandment against killing, take their significance from the self-proclamation of a "jealous God" in the first table. You shall not kill for just the same reason that you shall not worship other gods: because there is only

<sup>14</sup> Johann Jakob Stamm, with Maurice Edward Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 98–99.

one God who is sovereign over life and death. The prohibition against idols especially establishes the absolute divide between the Creator and the created. All the things of the heavens, the earth, or the waters below the earth are mere creatures and can in no way represent the God whose power gave them life.

Karl Barth, Patrick Miller, and Walter Brueggemann<sup>15</sup> have drawn attention to the centrality of the Sabbath commandment to the vision of the Decalogue. In Exodus, the Sabbath is commanded as a way of remembering the creation account of Genesis 1 and God's rest on the seventh day. For Barth, the Sabbath is a concrete way that humans remember their status as creatures that depend utterly on God. According to Barth, "The Sabbath commandment explains all the other commandments."<sup>16</sup> It does so because it points us away from everything we can achieve and towards what God has done and is doing for us in creation and in redemption in Jesus Christ. The Sabbath is a recognition that we are here not because of our work but because of God's work. However, the Sabbath commandment does not merely point backward to Genesis but also forward to the Yes that God says to creatures in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The absolute divide that the commandments reinforce between the Creator and creatures does not therefore negate creatures but rather invites us to affirm life as a gift of God's grace. Life is affirmed precisely in the Son's relinquishing of control over life and death to the Father on our behalf.<sup>17</sup>

The key point of reference for the commandment against killing in the Decalogue is in God's words to Noah in Genesis 9:1–7. In the post-Fall world, provision is made for the shedding of animal blood where none had been made in the pristine condition of the original creation. Nevertheless, YHWH tells Noah, "For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind" (Gen. 9:5–6). Though it is here established that humans may shed the blood of other humans, they may do so only and precisely in obedience to God.<sup>18</sup> The shedding of human blood by another human is strictly prohibited, unless it is in punishment for killing another, a punishment mandated by God. Here God proclaims ownership over the lifeblood of humans. It is because

<sup>15</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "The Human Sabbath: A Study in Deuteronomistic Theology," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6 (1985), pp. 81–97; Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 72–81.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–4.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Walter Harrelson, "Karl Barth on the Decalogue," *Studies in Religion* 6, no. 3 (Winter 1976–77): 236.

humans are made in the image of God that lifeblood belongs to God, and may not be taken by a mere human acting on his or her own initiative. Because the killer was understood as taking possession of the victim's blood, the killer had to be executed to compensate the true owner, God.<sup>19</sup>

The basic conviction that life is God's alone to give and take is found not only in Israelite law regarding capital punishment but also in the way that war is presented in the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments are set within the remembrance of how YHWH has single-handedly delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh and his army. In Deuteronomy's version of the Decalogue, even the Sabbath command is explained with reference not to the Genesis account of God's rest on the seventh day, but to the mighty hand and outstretched arm that delivered the Israelites from Egypt. No credit is due to the Israelites for fighting their way to freedom. The entire account in Exodus is based on the conviction that vanquishing the Israelites' foes was entirely the work of YHWH. Thus Exodus 14:13: "Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'" The conviction that it is God who fights, and not the Israelites, is essentially the same even when the Israelites take up the sword. When the Israelites defeat the Amalekites in Exodus 17, their victory is not attributed to the skill of the Israelite warriors but to the intervention of YHWH. Israel only prevails when Moses holds the "staff of God" aloft; Amalek prevails when the staff is lowered. The account ends with YHWH telling Moses "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Ex. 17:14) and Moses' declaration that "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (17:16). It is YHWH who makes war; the Israelites do so legitimately only as proxies for YHWH.

This conviction holds firm through the many accounts of Israelite battles to take and keep possession of the promised land. As John Howard Yoder points out, pious Jewish readers of the conquest narratives would not have read them in terms of a general justification of war or reflection on the morality of different types of killing. The pious reader would instead have been struck by the promise that the occupants of the land would be driven out not by military might but by the hand of God.<sup>20</sup> The battle of Jericho was won by trumpet, not sword, for the LORD said, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you" (Josh. 6:2). The narratives of the historical books place little emphasis on military might and preparation. In fact, the emphasis is often on the military weakness of the Israelites. In I Kings 20:27, the Israelites were

<sup>19</sup> Anthony C. J. Phillips, "Respect for Life in the Old Testament," *King's Theological Review* 6 (Fall 1983): 32–5.

<sup>20</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 80–2.

encamped "like two little flocks of goats, while the Arameans filled the country." Nevertheless, the Israelites won a great victory, because YHWH said to them "I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the LORD" (I Kings 20:28). Once again in II Kings 6 and 7, the Arameans sent a huge army to surround the Israelites and lay siege to their city. Famine grew so great that the people were reduced to cannibalism. The siege was broken when YHWH caused the Arameans to hear the sound of a great army, horses and chariots, so that the Arameans thought that the Israelites had enlisted the help of the Hittites and the Egyptians to defeat them. The Arameans retreated in haste. The Israelites' vulnerability is not remedied by foreign allies and their armies, but by YHWH's trickery. YHWH is the only ally the Israelites need.

In the Old Testament accounts, military misfortune is invariably explained by Israelite self-reliance and refusal to obey the command of God. In II Chronicles, for example, the alliance of King Asa of Judah with King Ben-hadad of Aram against the Northern Kingdom is condemned by the seer Hanani in the following terms:

Because you relied on the king of Aram, and did not rely on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with exceedingly many chariots and cavalry? Yet because you relied on the LORD, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the entire earth, to strengthen those whose heart is true to him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars (II Chron. 15:7–9).

This motif is common in the prophetic literature. As Isaiah has it, "Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!" (Is. 31:1).

The commandment against killing is based in a respect for life as a gift of God. Human life itself, however, has no absolute value, but is always to be measured in relation to the will of God. The examples of the martyrs suffice to show that there are circumstances under which the preservation of physical life is not the highest value. The recognition that life is a gift of God may require under certain conditions that a free gift of one's life be made.<sup>21</sup> The authors of the Old Testament believed also that obedience to the will of God might require one not merely to surrender one's life but to kill. This can be squared with the Decalogue's "You shall not kill" only if we assume that killing may be done only when God commands it. If it is ever justified for a human to kill a fellow human, it can only be out of obedience to the word of God.

<sup>21</sup> See Barth, 334–5.

### 3. Rival loyalties

At this point one can imagine that the good, sensible, rational people at the *New York Times* are shaking their heads in disgust. They might not wish to quibble with my reading of the Old Testament narratives, but they might recoil nonetheless from the fanaticism and violence that such a view will, in their view, inevitably produce. Rather than see the Old Testament view that life belongs to God alone as a way of limiting violence, many today contend that such a view makes violence more intractable because it gives it divine sanction. The sense that one is operating on God's orders to kill produces an absence of constraint and an easy confidence in the justice of even the most frightening slaughter. One need look no farther than terrorist attacks by Islamic militants to see the awful consequences of such a view.

Over the last several years I have been reading, for another project, every book and article I can find arguing that religion causes violence. There are a great many, both academic and popular. Their arguments tend to be of three types: 1) religion is absolutist, 2) religion is divisive and 3) religion is irrational. The implication of these arguments is that the use of force should be secularized. Though I cannot in so brief a space give a full accounting of each type of argument, I will give one example of each.

*Religion is absolutist:* In an essay entitled "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," John Hick indicts claims of the uniqueness and ultimacy of revelation in Jesus Christ for inciting Christians to violence against Jews in Europe and non-Christians throughout the Third World. Hick makes clear that this is not a dynamic unique to Christianity, but is endemic to religion as such. "It should be added at this point that the claims of other religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority have likewise, given the same human nature, sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance. A worldwide and history-long study of the harmful effects of religious absolutism would draw material from almost every tradition..."<sup>22</sup> According to Hick, it is a constant temptation to mistake the way for the goal, to absolutize what is merely relative to the Ultimate. This temptation is by its nature a temptation to violence. Hick advocates what he calls a "Copernican Revolution" in which we begin to see that one's own religion does not occupy the central place, but rather the various religions of the world in fact orbit around the Ultimate.<sup>23</sup> The Word of God, both Christ and Bible, are thus relativized in the face of the unknowable Ultimate.

<sup>22</sup> John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

*Religion is divisive:* Here the indictment of religion is based on religion's tendency to form strong identities exclusive of others, and thus divide people into us and them. The famed historian of religion Martin E. Marty wants to allow a public political presence for religion, but only after it is chastened by evidence of its divisiveness. Under the heading "Religion Divides," Marty puts the argument this way:

Those called to be religious naturally form separate groups, movements, tribes, or nations. Responding in good faith to a divine call, believers feel themselves endowed with sacred privilege, a sense of chosenness that elevates them above all others. This self-perception then leads groups to draw lines around themselves and to speak negatively of "the others."...The elect denounce "others" for worshipping false gods and often act violently against such unbelievers.<sup>24</sup>

*Religion is irrational:* The claim here is that religion is especially prone to violence because it produces a particular intensity of non-rational or irrational passion that is not subject to the firm control of reason. "Fervor," "rage," "passion," "fanaticism," "zeal," and similar words are used to describe the mental state of religious actors who are driven to violence. The following passage from political theorist Bhikhu Parekh sums up much of this line of thinking:

Although religion can make a valuable contribution to political life, it can also be a pernicious influence, as liberals rightly highlight. It is often absolutist, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic, and impatient of compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth... It often breeds intolerance of other religions as well as of internal dissent, and has a propensity towards violence.<sup>25</sup>

Now, there is no doubt that absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality can lend themselves to violence. The problem that the above theorists and others like them have is in trying to separate out a religious violence that is absolutist, divisive, and irrational from a secular violence that is not. The problem arises in the dubious distinction between the religious and the secular. Hick, for example, is forced to admit that it is impossible to give a definition of religion or identify any essence of religion. If religion is meant to indicate belief in a God or god, Hick recognizes that some things called religions, such as Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism, have no such belief. As a result, some so-called "secular" phenomena such as Marxism are given the status in Hick's scheme of "distant cousin" within the extended family of religions. Hick tries to maintain the distinction between

<sup>24</sup> Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 25–6.

<sup>25</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, "The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse" in Leroy Rouner, ed., *Religion, Politics, and Peace* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 72.

religious and secular, but the border is constantly shifting depending on little else than what Hick wants to include or exclude. Hick claims Confucianism as a central "world religion" and Marxism as peripheral, even though, by his own admission, there is no essence of religion and therefore there are no criteria for separating center from periphery.

Martin Marty has similar problems. Although he wants to pursue an argument about the violent tendencies of religion in general, he admits that "[s]cholars will never agree on the definition of religion," and so he decides to forgo a precise definition and list five "phenomena that help describe what we are talking about": 1) religion focuses our ultimate concern, 2) religion builds community, 3) religion appeals to myth and symbol, 4) religion is reinforced through rites and ceremonies, and 5) religion demands certain behaviors from its adherents. Then, however, Marty proceeds to show how "politics" also meets all five of these criteria. For example, "ultimate concern," a term explicitly borrowed from Paul Tillich, applies not merely to belief in deities but more generally to answers to questions such as "What do we most care about? For what would you be willing to die?" Marty proceeds similarly through the rest of the five features. Religion builds community, and so does politics. Religion appeals to myth and symbol, and politics "mimics" this appeal in devotion to the flag, war memorials, and so on. Religion uses rites and ceremonies such as circumcision and baptism, and "[p]olitics also depends on rites and ceremonies," even in avowedly secular nations. Religions require followers to behave in certain ways, and "[p]olitics and governments also demand certain behaviors."<sup>26</sup> Marty is trying to show how closely intertwined are politics and religion. What he fails to do is provide any criteria for separating the two. If politics fulfills all the defining features of religion, why is politics not a religion?

Parekh does not define religion, but assumes the validity of the religious/secular distinction. Nevertheless, he admits that "several secular ideologies, such as some varieties of Marxism, conservatism, and even liberalism have a quasi-religious orientation and form, and conversely formally religious languages sometimes have a secular content, so that the dividing line between a secular and a religious language is sometimes difficult to draw."<sup>27</sup> If this is true, where does that leave his searing indictment of the dangers peculiarly inherent to religion? Powerful irrational impulses are suddenly popping up all over, including in liberalism itself, forcing the creation of the category "quasi-religious" to try somehow to corral them all back into the category of "religion."

<sup>26</sup> Marty, 10–14.

<sup>27</sup> Parekh, 74.

There is a growing number of scholars who would like to scrap the term "religion" altogether because it produces more confusion than clarity.<sup>28</sup> It is not my purpose to enter into that debate here. What I want to argue is that there is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in the biblical God. As Marty himself implies, belief in the righteousness of the United States and its solemn duty to impose liberal democracy on the rest of the world has all the ultimate concern, community, myth, ritual, and required behavior of any so-called religion. Recently revived debate over a ban on flag burning is replete with references to the "desecration" of the flag, as if it were a sacred object.<sup>29</sup> Secular nationalism of the kind we are currently witnessing can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrationally fanatical as anyone who believes he or she is responding to the will of the biblical God.

Let us consider the question of absolutism. The problem with this term is that it is vague and quantitative. It tries to gauge a depth of commitment or intensity that does not admit of easy measurement. Of course, Christians would want to make the theological claim that God is absolute in a way that nothing else is, just as the distinction of Creator and creatures makes all that is created merely relative to God. The problem, as the first table of the Decalogue makes plain, is that humans are constantly tempted to idolatry, to putting what is merely relative in the place of God. It is not enough, therefore, to claim that worship of God is absolutist. The real question is, what god is being worshipped? Today, Caesar and Mammon, even in their supposedly secularized forms of the liberal nation-state and capital, are just as prone to being absolutized as ever. In fact, if we try to measure absolutism with a neutral criterion, such as "What one considers absolute is that for which one would kill," then it is clear that, in our society at least, the nation-state is by far subject to the most absolutist fervor. We live in a society in which missionary work or spreading the Word of God in public is considered in poor taste, and yet most people would not hesitate to kill whomever the President asked them to make war against. For the most part, people are willing to kill, but only in the name of a false god.

The title of Andrew Sullivan's article has it exactly right: this *is* a religious war, one that pits the religion of liberal democratic capitalism

<sup>28</sup> See Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Given New Legs, Old Proposal is Back," *New York Times*, June 4, 2003: A28. See also Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Marvin and Ingle study American society just as anthropologists study "primitive" societies, and argue that American patriotism is a religion of blood sacrifice that has the flag as its totem symbol.

against the religion of Islam. If this is so, what we are witnessing is widespread idolatry, for the ideal of the liberal nation-state is to separate violence from the will of the biblical God and to put violence in the hands of the secular state. The argument that taking God's will seriously causes violence is used as a way of reinforcing the transfer of the Christian's ultimate loyalty to other gods. The nation-state is not only a false god, it is a jealous god: you shall kill only in the name of your country, and not in the name of the God who brought you out of Egypt. The vision of the Decalogue has been turned upside down. Rather than restricting the authority to kill to God's command, we now evacuate God's command of its authority and place our lethal loyalty only in human hands. The nation-state has become, as Thomas Hobbes said, that "mortal god" whose monopoly on violence is absolute.

#### 4. What our God commands

All kinds of people do violence for all kinds of beliefs – both "religious" and "secular" – that they hold as absolute. People kill in the name of all kinds of false gods. This does not necessarily mean, however, that those who kill in the name of the true God are acting rightly. Having argued that, if any killing is justified, it must be killing in conformity with the command of God, it remains to address the question, what does God actually command of Christians? Is there any killing that can actually be justified as in conformity with God's will?

The Christian must base the answer to this question in Christ. We must look at the overall trajectory of salvation history from Sinai to Calvary and beyond. What we see is a progressive broadening and deepening of the prohibition against killing. The commandment is seen by many Old Testament scholars in the context of the move beyond clan-based blood vengeance. The right to avenge the death of one's kin was removed from the clan and placed in the hands of tribal judges who were representatives of YHWH. The commandment against killing is set in the context of a widening of blood safety from the clan to the whole people.<sup>30</sup> Over the course of Israelite history, we see a progressive mitigation of capital punishment, beginning with the requirement that there be two witnesses for a capital sentence (Num. 35:30). In post-exilic Judaism, lesser punishments following the *lex talionis* were progressively converted into fines. By Jesus' time, capital punishment for cases other than murder had fallen into disuse.<sup>31</sup> When Jesus commands his followers to turn the other cheek (Mt. 5:39) and love their enemies (Mt. 5:44), he is moving

<sup>30</sup> John Howard Yoder, "Exodus 20:13 – "Thou shalt not kill," *Interpretation* 34, no. 4 (October 1980): 396.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 397–8.

with, not against, the grain of the revelation of God to Israel, not abolishing but fulfilling the Law (Mt. 5:17). The coming of the Messiah has broken open history, and radically expanded the idea of the sacredness of life. As Yoder says, "As the Decalogue had expanded blood safety from the family to the tribe, now love of enemy and the universalizing of the faith community make the concept of the outsider, out-law an empty set."<sup>32</sup>

With the coming of the Messiah in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God signals that human life has been definitively accepted into the divine life, and that human life therefore is to be respected and protected as belonging to God.<sup>33</sup> The cross is even more central to understanding God's command, for it is as an executed criminal that the retributive justice of God found final expression, and expiation accomplished. The forgiveness of all has already been achieved through the non-resistance of Jesus Christ to the homicidal intent of human beings. In Christ's death at the hands of others, death is abolished. Karl Barth asks, "From this standpoint, can we speak of the justifiable killing of one man by another? Can there be any necessary or commanded extinction of human life? What would be its purpose now that by the extinction of this one human life that which is necessary and right for all has already taken place?"<sup>34</sup>

If the killing of Christ does not put an end to killing, then it is difficult to see how the cross could be construed as a victory. It seems very difficult indeed to reconcile the kind of victory that the cross is with the kind of victory that we encounter in the books of Kings, where thousands fall in battle before the Israelites. They are reconcilable only if one bears in mind that it is God who fights in the Old Testament. The point of the narratives is that Israel is preserved not through military preparedness and strength, but through the miraculous hand of God. It is not unreasonable, then, for the New Testament church to have seen in the Old Testament stories a paradigm for how the Kingdom of God would be inaugurated not by military means, but solely by the worthiness of the slaughtered Lamb (Rev. 5:12). The early Christians seem not to have regarded the apocalyptic vision as something to be consummated outside of history. They did not regard the love of enemies as an "interim ethic" available to a few for a short time. They rejected all killing and refused, by and large, to serve in Caesar's army well into the third century, and often paid for their refusal with their lives.<sup>35</sup> They understood that the cross had changed history, and that the killing and resurrection of the Father's only Son had opened the commandment "You shall not kill" to its broadest and deepest extent.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 397.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, 397–400.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>35</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 86–9.

Where does that leave us as Christians today? Christian reflection on war must go beyond merely ticking off the just war criteria as a preliminary step to supporting the military adventures of the nation-state. Radical obedience to God's command must be the beginning and end of Christian reflection on war. Specifically, we must take seriously the teaching of Jesus that love of enemies is the fulfillment of the Law, that the prohibition against killing has been extended to the prohibition of anger and hatred, that the *lex talionis* has been fulfilled in the commandment to turn the other cheek (Mt. 5:17–48). All the ways we have of excusing Jesus' commands – they are meant for individuals, or only for the perfect, or only apply within the Christian community, or are meant as hyperbole, or are meant to set the bar unrealistically high in order to convict us of our unworthiness – must be regarded as attempts to evade the command of God, and therefore to violate not just the commandment against killing, but the prohibition against worshipping other gods.

In this light Karl Barth says that killing in war calls into question

the whole of morality, or better, obedience to the command of God in all its dimensions. Does not war demand that almost everything that God has forbidden be done on a broad front? To kill effectively, and in connexion therewith, must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander, and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience?<sup>36</sup>

Barth comments that even a qualified Christian defense of participation in a particular war must be even more difficult to make than exceptions to the ban on suicide and abortion. Barth admits that we must begin from the assumption that pacifism has "almost infinite arguments in its favour and is almost overpoweringly strong."<sup>37</sup> Barth does allow the possibility of exceptions to the ban on war. He believes that we cannot allow the letter of the law to restrict the freedom of the Spirit of God to make exceptions to the ban on killing.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Barth says we must always claim that war is an exception, never normal, always admitted only *in extremis*. Furthermore, the state exercises power only as an *opus alienum*, and never as a right to be claimed on its own. It is always the task of Christians to question the necessity for war, and go to war only if it is in obedience to the will of God, not to the state. The Christian must also be prepared to be a selective conscientious objector, and refuse to fight in any war that results from mere human command and not the command of God.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Barth, 454.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 456–63.

In admitting the possibility that the Christian might kill for the state, Barth seems to step back from the radical and logical conclusion of his own reflections on the command of God in the New Testament. In my judgment, Barth underestimates the idolatrous temptation at the heart of the modern nation-state, which is founded on war.<sup>40</sup> However, Barth is helpful for focusing our attention away from the state's fulfillment of just-war criteria and back onto the command of God. Pope John Paul II is helpful here as well, for in his reflections on war and the commandment against killing, the Pope makes it clear that killing is not a right to be exercised once certain minimum criteria have been met. As the Pope explains in *Veritatis Splendor*, the commandments do not simply establish minimal standards but are "a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love." The commandments are an invitation to follow Jesus, who has become the living Law. As the Pope says, the commandment against killing thus "becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one's neighbor."<sup>41</sup> The Vatican's extreme skepticism about the use of military force – even going so far as to question the very possibility of a "just war"<sup>42</sup> – must be read in this light.

According to a recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, only 10% of Americans said that their religious beliefs were the most important influence on their thinking about the war against Iraq. For those who attended religious services regularly, the number rose to only 17%. The overwhelming opposition of church leaders to the war against Iraq largely fell on deaf ears among the faithful; Christians supported the war by a large majority, and were apparently content to place the judgment of the state over that of the church regarding the justifiability of the war. If the argument of this paper is correct, then we have little choice but to warn against

<sup>40</sup> Michael Howard sums up the historical evidence of the origins of the state this way: "the entire apparatus of the state primarily came into being to enable princes to make war"; *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 15; Charles Tilly says, "War made the state, and the state made war"; "Reflections on the History of European State-making" in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 26. The connection between the liberal nation-state and war is not accidental, for liberal polity is based on tragedy, that is, the ultimate inability of people to agree on the good. In the absence of a shared conception of the good, there is no way to adjudicate disagreements among rival wills nonviolently, so violence can only be displaced, directed against a common external enemy in war.

<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*, paragraph 15.

<sup>42</sup> For an analysis of the Vatican's progressive tightening of conditions for justifiable use of force, see William L. Portier, "Are we really serious when we ask God to deliver us from war? The Catechism and the challenge of Pope John Paul II," *Communio* 23 (Spring 1996): 47–63. See also Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, interview with Zenit News Agency, "Cardinal Ratzinger on the Abridged Version of Catechism," May 2, 2003, at: <http://zenit.org/english/visualizza.phmtl?sid=34882>.

wholesale idolatry. If killing can only be justified if it comes from the direct command of God, then Christians have transferred the interpretation of God's will from the church to the secular state, and thereby have created an idolatrous "mortal god" in the nation-state. For many, the nation-state has become the god of life and death, the arbiter of who is allowed to live and who is required to die. It is for precisely this reason that arguments such as Andrew Sullivan's are so dangerous; in condemning killing in the name of the biblical God, they give free rein to killing in the name of a false god.

What, then, are we to conclude about the commandment against killing in the context of contemporary war? At the very minimum, we should conclude that the church, and not the state, should judge – with a great deal of skepticism – whether or not any particular act of mass slaughter is in conformity with the will of God.<sup>43</sup> If we move beyond the minimum, and see the commandment against killing, with Pope John Paul II, as an invitation to follow Jesus Christ, then we may conclude that it is simply not possible to reconcile the will of God with killing for a state whose *very ideal* is the separation of violence from the will of God.

*Professor William T Cavanaugh  
Theology Department  
2115 Summit Avenue  
St. Paul, MN, 55105  
USA*

<sup>43</sup> I make this argument in detail in my article "At Odds with the Pope: Legitimate Authority and Just Wars," *Commonweal* CXXX, no. 10 (May 23, 2003): 11–13.