



14.4 Why Do People Kill Each Other in the Name of Religion?

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

To this point we have mostly focused on figuring out what people get out of religion and for whom religion is most important. Unfortunately, however, there is also a much darker side to the relationship between religion and society. In this day and age we have all heard of the paradox of people killing each other in the name of religion. Muslims killing Americans in New York, Jews and Muslims killing each other in Palestine, Catholics killing Protestants in Northern Ireland and vice versa; Buddhists and Hindus killing each other in Sri Lanka; Muslims and Christians killing each other in Nigeria; periodic eruptions between Hindus and Muslims in India; Sunni Iraq fighting a vicious war against Shi'a Iran in the 1980s; strict Muslims killing less religious Muslims and infidels (non-Muslims) in Syria and Iraq—all this and more in only the past few decades.

History is replete with religious wars. After all, people who are certain that their religion is the only correct one have every reason to spread that religion to other places, or defend it by force against heathens or heretics. In the first century after Mohammad's death, Islam was primarily spread by the sword. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christians launched the Crusades against Muslims. In the sixteenth century, Protestants and Catholics fought the Thirty Years' War over control of various parts of Europe. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Jews were slain in pogroms by Russian Orthodox Cossacks, and faced violent attacks in many parts of Europe. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Muslim Turks and Kurds probably killed from 1 to 1.5 million Christian Armenians. Even civil religion might be said to have its violence: During the Civil War, Northern soldiers sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they marched off to do their sacred duty to save the Union.

Distinguishing Religious Conflicts from Ethnic and Class Conflicts

14.4.1 Explain why it is difficult to distinguish religious conflict from ethnic or class conflict.

If most people are right to think that religion fosters morality, the fact that religious violence has been a repeated occurrence throughout history raises some weighty negative evidence to consider. But then, appearances can be deceiving. It is often hard to tell when a religious war is primarily a war about religion, as opposed to something else.

Consider the example of the Catholic-Protestant war in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. In a very telling sentence (supposedly a quotation from a nameless participant), Demerath (2003) describes the war as "Protestant atheists vs. Catholic atheists." He points out that with one or two prominent but really marginal exceptions, virtually all religious figures in Northern (and Southern) Ireland were against the killings and confrontations. Furthermore, one could easily argue that major class and ethnic conflicts were the real sources of the war. Northern Ireland was ruled by the well-off descendants of British colonialists. Thus, ethnicity and class, as well as religion, separated the sides.

In Sri Lanka, the Buddhists are overwhelmingly ethnic Sinhalese, and the minority Hindus (18 percent of the population) are ethnic Tamils. They speak different languages, and the Tamils have long considered themselves discriminated against economically and politically. For most Tamils, the war is about the need for secession so that they can have their own country. Neither group seems to think the other should change their religion. Perhaps this too is an ethnic and economic war rather than a religious one.

We could look at many "religious" wars and find ethnic or tribal conflict more central to the problem. Serbs (who