

The Dutch Dilemma & American Divide: The Challenge of Exclusivist Religions to Pluralistic States, and Contemporary Education

Christopher Parr, Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Webster University

Abstract

Post-Reformation societies and states that thought they had put religious wars behind them have been caught unawares by the vehemence of religious dissent that has exploded in their midst, sometimes literally, since the 1970s. I maintain that key Enlightenment propositions that established the means for peaceful religious co-existence seriously misconstrue and underestimate the social potency of religious impulses.

My paper begins by sketching two distinct current impasses. The Dutch face the dilemma of a largely secularized society willing to be highly tolerant of difference — but as the brazen 2004 murder of provocateur-filmmaker Theo van Gogh has revealed, such tolerance is hard-pressed to accommodate those whose religious culture is not permitted to tolerate perceived intolerance directed at them. The United States presents an equally puzzling conundrum: a much more religious culture predicated on religious liberty, now challenged by versions of monotheism whose symbolic worldview convinces them they are persecuted, and must demand cultural supremacy. Highly dualistic, exclusivist and triumphalist versions of monotheism present militant challenges to the democratic state's ideals of tolerance. Taking these recent examples as symptomatic, I argue we must reconfigure civil post-secular societies' engagements with religious adherents, not least through actively educating all citizens about religions.

On the plane of history, the capacity of God to love intensely and exclusively is translated, as often as not, into the human capacity to hate intensely.

Martin S. Jaffee¹

On Tuesday November 2nd, 2004, shortly after I had spent just over a year teaching at our Webster campus in the historic and picturesque town of Leiden very near The Hague, something the Dutch must have found almost unthinkable happened in Holland. A 47 year old filmmaker, artist, social critic and provocateur, Theo van Gogh, great-grandnephew of the renowned painter Vincent, was assassinated while riding his bicycle in Amsterdam. I say assassinated because he'd been targeted for retribution in what was a religious act of classic *jihad*. Van Gogh had, in the eyes of many, insulted Islam in a recent short film shown on Dutch television. Titled *Submission*, it had been co-

¹ Martin S. Jaffee, 'One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 4 (2001): 774.

written with a Somali-born Muslim-raised woman, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch parliament who had become highly critical of Islam after 9-11.²

Theo van Gogh, it must be said, had drawn much attention over recent years for having mocked and shocked many people, especially religious believers by having pilloried both Jews and Christians.³ But he'd brewed up a particularly bilious dose of scorn for Islam and its followers. It's fair to say that Theo willfully tested the very limits of what is permissible as free speech in a democratic pluralistic society.⁴

I just described his murder as *almost* unthinkable for the Dutch. It was certainly shocking and unexpected. But only two and a half years earlier (May 6, 2002), maverick sociologist-turned-politician Pim Fortuyn had been shot dead by a radical environmentalist as he left a radio interview he'd given at the national media complex in Hilversum, so such a hit was not unheard of. Fortuyn's assassin, Volkert van der Graaf, later claimed (according to the prosecutor) that he acted in defense of "vulnerable sections of society" in Holland.⁵ With that assassination still raw in the public mind, Van

² Many summaries of the film can be found in news articles online, and the film itself can be viewed via the Internet. The following is the most descriptive synopsis I have found for understanding what Muslims might have found intolerable: "The film depicted four partially nude women in long, dark transparent veils, who had texts from the Koran written in calligraphy on their bare skin. Some of the women appeared to have reddened whip marks on their backs and legs, on which texts were written that described the physical punishments, sanctioned by the Koran for disobedient women. Not surprisingly, the highly controversial 10-minute film sparked outrage from the Muslim community" (from Rachael Bell, 'The Murder of Theo Van Gogh: Theo van Gogh – Free Speech Martyr,' 2006, <http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/famous/theo_van_gogh/index.html> pages 1-2). The whole set of web-pages from which it is excerpted, a product of CourtTV, provides the best summary I have found in English of van Gogh's murder and its aftermath. See also British Broadcasting Corporation Online, "Gunman kills Dutch film director," 2 November 2004, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3975211.stm>> (7 May 2006).

³ It is something of an irony that his name (which he shared with his great-grandfather, Vincent van Gogh's art-dealer brother) signifies 'God.'

⁴ Right before submitting this manuscript I obtained a copy of Ian Buruma's just-published book, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006). He provides almost no new details of van Gogh's murder, but, being Dutch born and an acquaintance of van Gogh's, provides a host of contextual details, particularly about Theo's scornful and attention-seeking provocations of his fellow Dutch, and his murderer's background also.

⁵ See the Environmental News Service account, "Animal Activist Admits Killing Dutch Politician," 26 November 2002, <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/nov2002/2002-11-26-03.asp>. The phrase quoted by the prosecutor has been interpreted as referring especially to immigrant Muslims, though I have found no reliable quote of van der Graaf

Gogh's assailant, a 27 year old Amsterdammer named Mohammed Bouyeri, would have known the shockwaves he'd create.

And indeed they came. Grisly details emerged from this second assassination with enough shock value to alarm almost any member of a society priding itself on the virtues of tolerance and non-aggression. But the detail that provoked the most astonishment was that Bouyeri had been born and schooled in Holland, was fluent in Dutch, and had even stabbed into Theo's chest a second knife bearing a five-page harangue in near flawless if rather stilted Dutch aimed at Ms Hirsi Ali and others. For the general Dutch populace, here suddenly was 'one of us' who is *not* one of us, because no contemporary Dutch person would ever likely take a *religious* disagreement to be grounds for killing someone else! Contemporary Dutch society has been consciously designed to eschew any such fanaticism. Holland is a highly secularized society, proud of its social tolerance and pragmatically open-minded views on life, willing to be highly tolerant of difference. But as van Gogh's murder revealed, such tolerance is hard-pressed to accommodate those whose religious culture isn't permitted by its own principles to tolerate perceived intolerance directed at them.⁶ The assassin's fluency in Dutch implied, according to the presumptions of Dutch immigration policy, that he should already be inculturated to conform with the tolerant rules of Dutch society. Clearly, dramatically, that was no longer a safe assumption.

mentioning Muslims specifically. I note that Buruma, who devotes three pages to describing him, makes no such claim regarding the assassin's motives, declaring "Exactly what prompted van der Graaf's action was never clear" (40).

⁶ There is a little noted but profound difference between Christianity and Islam here, which has probably influenced the cultures shaped by these two monotheisms more than most of their members realize. The very principle of *jihad* requires of Muslims that they must be willing to 'struggle' to defend their faith whenever it is challenged, insulted or defamed. Christianity, on the other hand, has at its very center a mocked, humiliated, crucified, and thus sacrificed 'Son of God.' In both religions, persecution by unbelievers is to be expected. But, while Christian cultures have a potent symbol for enduring and *forgiving* such rejection and humiliation, Islamic cultures have an equally potent symbol for resistance, defense of the faith, and even revenge of its honor. Intolerance and mockery directed at Islam should thus, on the religion's own terms, not go unanswered by Muslims.

1a. The Dutch Dilemma

In Holland, as in France after the November 2005 riots in French suburbs, the suggested remedies focused on social responses. It seemed evident that for some, such as the disgruntled Muslims with whom Bouyeri had become associated, Dutch tolerance either does not reach far enough to include them, or it tolerates attitudes among the general population that makes (some) Muslims feel targeted, disrespected, or disdainfully relegated to second-class citizenship. The implications of van Gogh's murder have been discussed largely as a problem of integration into Dutch society. The debate has turned on whether integration is truly possible and will be accepted by those being integrated, and what further measures the Dutch should take to address the hard feelings of young second-generation Muslim residents.⁷

As an admiring observer-participant of Dutch life and mores, however, and being trained in religious and cultural studies, I contend that Bouyeri's murder of van Gogh must be recognized as symptomatic of a more fundamental dilemma, one that strikes at the very logic of 'tolerance.' It brought to the fore a serious but *subterranean* and therefore largely obscured problem — a conflict in foundational religious worldviews regarding truth, authority, respect, and the status of dissent. *This is not just a dispute deriving from degrees of social comfort, from how well people feel they fit in a society, or don't.* It is a dispute between radically different 'maps of reality,' a tectonic disjunction in

⁷ Some remarks I have personally heard or read, reflecting nativist impulses for which Pim Fortuyn had provided political cover during his election campaign, have urged that disruptive immigrants from the Middle East be sent back where they came from if they refused to live by contemporary Dutch rules. This "love it or leave it" reflex blatantly fails to address the problem presented by the likes of Mohammed Bouyeri whose native land and first language are Dutch — and it is precisely that problem that got me thinking about my thesis in this article.

presuppositions about the very structure of life and its value-preferences.⁸ The Dutch worldview was forged in the aftermath of the wars of Reformation and the European Enlightenment so as to overcome horror and divisiveness through an accepting spirit of ‘live and let live’; whereas the Muslim worldview sought to overcome divisiveness, unruliness (*jahiliyya*) and social chaos through the assertion of monotheistic unity and social uniformity. The conflictual issues confronting the inhabitants of Holland (and many others in Europe⁹) are therefore at their heart *religious* in nature, more than just socio-political. As such, they need to be brought to conscious intellectual reflection, and all sides in the dispute, especially those who cherish political and religious freedom and dissent, must be willing to examine the deepest premises at work, to see what is really going on. But unfortunately, the Dutch social élites, like so many others in post-Enlightenment Western liberal-democratic societies, are so secularized, and/or committed to principles of privatized and tolerant religious freedom, that they are likely to miss what *is* really going on.¹⁰

In fact, let me get a little more polemical for a moment. My extensive search of published responses to van Gogh’s murder turned up commentary that falls into two

⁸ This article derives from a much larger book-length project of mine, studying the ‘religion effect’ in political conflicts. In using the words ‘subterranean’ and ‘tectonic’ at this point, I am referring to an idea I have developed at greater length in my book manuscript, that religious influences in a culture have three discernible levels of visibility and recognizability: surface or explicit, vestigial or implicit, and almost invisible but deeply underpinning a culture or worldview, the subterranean and tectonic level of presuppositions with which that worldview operates (Parr, chapter 3: ‘The Dialectic of Religion and Culture’). Some of the presuppositions on which Dutch tolerance and exclusivist monotheism are based lie at this fundamental but scarcely articulated level of religious information.

⁹ Certainly the 2006 controversy begun in Denmark over cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad and the on-going controversy in France over Muslim school students wearing the veil are two others that similarly involve deep-seated differences of religious presuppositions and religious histories as much as social disagreements and problems with integration.

¹⁰ Buruma has an interesting twist on this point. Speaking of Pim Fortuyn’s animosity towards Muslims, he writes: “To see it as the conflict of rival monotheistic religions is too simple. Fortuyn’s venom is drawn more from the fact that he, and millions of [other Europeans,] ... had painfully wrested themselves free from the strictures of their own religions. And here were these newcomers injecting society with religion once again. The fact that [Europeans like Fortuyn] ... were less liberated from religious yearnings than they might have imagined, made the confrontation all the more painful” (69). I certainly agree this is part of the dynamic suppressing articulate discussions of religious issues in so-called ‘secular’ societies.

categories. Centrist or left-leaning commentators emphasize integration issues, insisting that immigrant populations must adopt Western privatization of religious demands. A few of the more tolerant types are willing to consider some self-criticism in contemplating an assassination they acknowledge as symptomatic of a disconnect between the European Dutch (along with numerous foreigners who do willingly assimilate into Dutch society) and a minority who feel alienated and shut out. Yet far more commentary, coming from self-described ‘conservative’ sources, rails against Islamic radicalism as the new demonic Enemy set on destroying Our Capitalist Civilization¹¹ — all the while patently failing to acknowledge that the Religious Right, on whom they depend for so much electoral and propaganda power, manifests almost the *same* religious self-certainty and intolerance of other worldviews that they condemn so roundly in ‘radical Islam.’ Both kinds of commentary, therefore, manifest the endemic failure of Western intellectuals to take religious values and differences seriously: to recognize their structure and thus their *power* in people’s lives. For most Europeans, to do so would require — they assume — a reversion back to the medieval or even Dark Ages! For Americans on the other hand, blissful ignorance, or else shrill finger-pointing at the mote in the other’s eye, suffices.

Western societies have however reached a point, rather urgently, when we must energetically re-consider some of the most precious post-Enlightenment assumptions about the feasibility of including religious claims, perspectives and sectarian disputes into our public forums and standard social discourses. The social concords forged towards the

¹¹ Among the ironies in such commentary one can see that those who lambaste what they see as the suffocatingly restrictive rules of Islam lack the historical perspective (despite their claims to being ‘conservative’ of the past) to remember that as recently as the 19th-century Orientalist attitudes towards the Near East were endlessly titillated by these very same Islamic cultures, which looked salaciously *libertine* when compared to Victorian ‘conservative’ values!

end of the eighteenth-century in nations exhausted by fractious and bloody religious wars largely agreed that religious matters should be regarded as essentially irrational and therefore undecideable, honored at best as private personal commitments, and for practical purposes excluded as irrelevant from public discourse and legal or political adjudications. That neat social solution no longer holds, however. After some two hundred years when European-based cultures have generally managed religious differences peacefully, in the past two or three decades they have increasingly faced a resurgence of assertive religious commitments that present acute challenges to the broadly tolerant ideals of their contemporary liberal-democratic societies and states.

Given this new and unsettling reality, I contend that we must look to the methods and insights of academic Religious Studies to equip the members of what German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has recently dubbed ‘post-secular’ society¹² — in Europe, the Americas, Australasia and beyond — to include religious disputation in our social discourse, rather than marginalizing religious commitments as private, irrational, or irrelevant. I am deliberately emphasizing academic Religious Studies, as that discipline has developed in universities and scholarship, because it offers numerous ways to consider, discuss and analyze religious positions and phenomena respectfully yet critically. Its analytic approaches can be most valuable for examining religious claims within rational social discourse. Unfortunately, the media in particular seldom turn to religious studies scholars for an understanding of topical issues or unfamiliar faiths, when often such scholars might be more helpful than relying on political commentators or journalists, or even representatives of some faith (such as clerics or imams, who have a

¹² See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Faith and Knowledge’ in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2003), 101-115.

confessional obligation to present their specific group's viewpoint). In my last section of this article I shall expand on this thought in making the case that religious studies should also become far more commonplace in education generally, so as to equip the general populace and voting public to engage in informed rational discussions.

1b. The American Divide

Starting out with the Dutch dilemma enables me to put a distinctive twist on a serious contemporary problem: how can pluralistic societies genuinely integrate diverse religious worldviews? This problem could readily be dramatized by alluding to disputes in the headlines in virtually every Western nation that thinks of itself as a modern, progressive, pluralistic society and state. Indeed, I am concerned with the ability of Western governments, and the culturally- and religiously-diverse post-secular societies they represent, to function safely and effectively in the face of pressures exerted by highly-organized, self-convinced advocates of religious faiths — advocates who are typically designated in the media and elsewhere as radical Islamists, and the Religious Right. This article therefore intends to apply Religious Studies analyses to the threats posed by these particular religious activists to post-enlightenment liberal societies, so as to show the usefulness of such analytic approaches to rational social discourse. I hasten to add that I by no means wish to imply that all Muslims or all Christians present threats that confront liberal societies. Indeed, a good historically-based Religious Studies understanding can help us discern that these are very specific versions of the great monotheistic faiths, even though they tend to claim a monopoly on the public representation of Islam and Christianity respectively.

The central religious question, then, is this: **Why do some versions of monotheism lead to intolerant, coercive and even violent treatments of others, while some do not?** My answer lies in the problem I see in the ideologies of both radical Islamists and the Religious Right: that they manifest a highly dualistic, triumphalist and especially exclusivist view of their faith and place in the world. That claim will, however, take some time and analysis to support.

To cast the problem and my proposed analysis in manageable form, I limit my discussion in this article to the two societies I have been able to observe closely in recent years, Holland and the United States. In part this is because, on returning from Leiden to Saint Louis and the pre-election atmosphere of the U.S. in 2004, I found so sharply divided a nation and populace that I began to compare and contrast the American scene with the struggles over pluralism I had been observing among the Dutch (which Bouyeri's attack on van Gogh soon put into sharpest relief). In particular, I found myself making detailed comparisons with the challenges presented by those individuals and groups commonly designated in the media and elsewhere as the 'Religious Right.' But there is one telling difference: While the Dutch wrestle with worldviews that immigration has added to their social mix without sharing the histories that gave rise to the post-Enlightenment policies of tolerance, the American divide derives from a disintegration of social concord *from within*.

I am deliberately characterizing the American scene as being more ruptured than just faced with a dilemma. Both in people's political allegiances and in their attitudes towards social issues and priorities, one sees a very sharp divide. American society these days is so markedly split as to cause concern that its democracy has become

dysfunctional, with fissures and fault lines cutting right across the society, in some places very jagged. One of the most threatening fissures is that between the militantly moralistic intrusiveness of certain Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, along with some Jews, whose voices and organizations constitute on the one hand the Religious Right, and on the other the morally tolerant assumptions of a multi-cultural society predicated on the liberties guaranteed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.¹³

Perhaps a proviso is in order at this point. Some analysts argue that a distinction needs to be made between the American political public, who manifest a complex diversity of views that is often not consistently of one stripe or clear allegiance, and the more divisive ideological rhetoric of opinion-makers, policy advocates and politicians who frame symbolic issues in strident terms. The various essays collected by Rhys H. Williams, a sociologist of religion and politics, in *Cultural Wars in American Politics*, provide considerable data to suggest this distinction is important.¹⁴ Like ordinary voters in general, individual members of religious denominations or of partisan organizations of any kind often do not hold views and do not act in strict accordance with what their leaders declare is right. Such personal divergences make for a more 'democratic' and flexible social environment that the partisans might prefer. In light of this, I should be

¹³ For insightful studies of religious influences in what are commonly called 'the culture wars,' see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), and Robert Boston, *Close Encounters with the Religious Right: Journeys into the Twilight Zone of Religion and Politics* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000), among others. The analysis I express here in a very abridged form is largely based, however, on my own observations over the past two decades. The extraordinary street drama and congressional gymnastics with which several Religious Right organizations and their allies in Congress responded during early 2005 to the impending death of Terri Schiavo of Pinellas Park, Florida, who had been pronounced medically brain dead, was a dramatic recent example of the divisive tactics that convince me of the analysis I am making here.

¹⁴ Rhys H. Williams, ed. *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997). Cf. Kenneth D. Wald. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. 3rd edition. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), 176ff, for evidence that voters' religious and ideological allegiances don't precisely match their voting decisions.

careful to explain that much of both the content and the tone in ‘the American divide’ I am characterizing here may describe far more precisely the *public* voices of those people and groups framing the issues, choosing the symbols and battle lines, and articulating the positions, policies and attitudes being advocated, than they do those of ordinary Americans — even those who self-identify as being in the Religious Right. Williams actually expresses my focus very well when he says of one possible approach,

One must examine the “public culture” of politics: the rhetoric through which appeals are made, the symbols used to dramatize issues and mobilize partisans, and the logical structures of conflicting claims and the impact that structure has on conflict. This requires more of an “ideological” analysis, with the attendant recognition that public culture often gains its own momentum. This can produce a situation in which people feel locked into positions they do not fully support, and the public conflict feeds on itself.¹⁵

Put in these terms, my essay here is intended to bring to critical reflection some of the religious presuppositions that cause certain public conflicts to gain such momentum and feed on themselves. Still, I have my suspicions that, in the decade since the analyses in Williams’ book, the American public may also have become increasingly divided. Disputes in the arts especially (not much mentioned in those articles), along with lawsuits affecting education and religion, feed that suspicion. So too does the stridency with

¹⁵ Williams, 7.

Forum on Public Policy

which I have heard opinions expressed in the media and among those around me since I returned from Holland in 2004. Certainly Congress has become an increasingly divided and mutually uncooperative environment in the years beginning with the leadership of Newt Gingrich in 1994, through to Tom DeLay recently, with no signs of abatement yet.

The internally generated discord I am pointing to can reasonably be summarized in this way: American society has always understood itself as forged from disparate elements and origins — as signaled by the republic's original motto, 'E Pluribus Unum': 'Out of many, ONE.' The Religious Right expresses, and understands itself as *conserving*, the intentions of at least one prominent religious strand who sought religious freedom in the American colonies: the dissenters and Puritans of *Mayflower* fame and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But as recent political tremors such as the Terri Schiavo end-of-life spectacle, school board conflicts over evolution and 'intelligent design' and the efflorescence of state laws to prevent gay marriage all show, the Religious Right doesn't just want freedom to practise their version of religion and perhaps influence public policy — they want to restrict diversity so that all citizens must obey and live by *their* version of monotheism and morality. They insist on Unum without wanting to retain the 'Pluribus.' One ironic effect of this drive towards social and moral uniformity is that, while the U.S. Constitution was written to include protection of religious believers from the intrusions of government, in recent decades it has been summoned to protect government and the wider society from the intrusions of religious believers.

The United States has thus given rise to a conundrum as puzzling as the dilemma faced by the Dutch: it is a much more religious culture than anywhere else in the Western world, explicitly predicated on religious liberty and populated by numerous religious

refugees and their descendants. As one commentator at the Oxford Round Table recently put it, the First Amendment ensures that no government can *make* us be religious, and they can't *stop* us being religious. But these days those liberties are in jeopardy from assertive monotheists whose symbolic worldview convinces them they are persecuted, and must demand cultural supremacy.¹⁶ Thus the very constitutional and legal protections, as well as social practices of tolerance and acceptance, that in the past gave refuge to Baptists, Anabaptist and Puritan groups and later to immigrant Roman Catholics, are now under grave pressure from militant members of those same faiths, expressed in ways that manifest a righteous and self-validating intolerance of differences.

The religious rhizome of social conservatism is admittedly not at all a new phenomenon. It can readily be traced back throughout American history: in Nixon's 'silent majority,' the fear of 'godless Communism' in the McCarthyite Cold War '50s, the Scopes 'monkey trial,' revivalism as a socio-religious constant especially in the South, the two Great Awakenings, and back to the Puritan communities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony with their religious ideal of being the 'Saving Remnant.' Allowing for minor theological and social variations along this rhizomatic trail, its fundamental character endures throughout: a judgmental declamatory monotheistic faith, sure of its convictions and always feeling embattled by the surrounding culture. What has changed in recent decades has been a deliberate strategy, at all levels of electoral politics

¹⁶ The Religious Right's preference for the ballot box, letter-writing campaigns, and other methods of swaying the democratic process is, I admit, qualitatively different from assassinations and suicide-homicide bombings. However, the more coercive activities associated with events like the Terri Schiavo end-of-life spectacle in 2005 and "right-to-life" interventions by Operation Rescue and similar groups, along with the likes of convicted sniper-bomber Paul Rudolph and Tim McVeigh and his extremist-Christian cohorts who bombed the Oklahoma federal building in 1995, do match to some serious degree such actions of radical Muslims as van Gogh's murder and the London and Madrid train station bombings of 2003-4. Both sets of extreme activities appear motivated to a significant degree by the religious thinking I am seeking to characterize in this paper.

right up to the President, not just to influence the powerful but to win and wield power. From the 1980s on, with the potent rise of the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and then the Reverend Pat Robertson's and Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition, along with several other impressively coordinated and funded media-savvy political organizations, the Religious Right has maneuvered to gain ever more power, shrewdly using grass-roots mobilization, coalition-building, mass media capabilities and absolutist moralistic appeals.

The historical and demographic details in the various groups that make up the Religious Right certainly vary considerably from those of Muslim communities in Holland and Europe. Having said that, and while the differences matter, I want also to draw attention to certain features of those groups' exclusivist monotheistic faiths, and especially to why they believe their faith must provide the law of the land to which everyone is subjected, in ways that parallel extremely closely the views of radical Muslims. From those parallels we can see that in both cases it is the structure and expectations of exclusivist monotheism that is at odds with, and challenges the very foundations of, our liberal-democratic societies.

Consequently, we cannot assume, as most political and journalistic commentators do, that religious social conservatives can all be placed on the same *continuous* spectrum along with other American political commitments. Just as I have argued about Muslims and Dutch social presumptions, I see here too a fundamental break, a *rupture* — because many in the Religious Right hold to *religious* presuppositions that are not compatible with the rest of the political spectrum. I hasten to add that I by no means want to be seen as painting all Christians (or monotheists) — or even all those who think of themselves as

religiously ‘conservative’ — with the same broad brush. In fact, the crucial work of this article is to begin to discern precisely what distinguishes the more intolerant and even coercive versions of the great monotheisms from the more accepting versions that have been highly influential in shaping the West’s models of liberal pluralistic democracies. To begin this work, let me note two significant religious presuppositions of the Religious Right that I believe contribute to the American Divide, presuppositions that are surprisingly akin to stances held by so-called ‘radical’ Muslims.

Besides a remarkable tenacity and determination, the Religious Right’s leaders are self-assured to the point of being self-righteous, and above all *triumphalist* — they believe they are on the side of God, that God will win, and therefore they must be not only right, but eventually must triumph over all dissenters. They have shown a determination both to win at the ballot box, and more significantly by using the courts, school boards and other pressure tactics, to skirt the democratic mechanisms for creating a persuasive social consensus. Instead they wish to impose by fiat their social morality and vision of a God-controlled religious society. They represent a similar threat to the democratic personal liberties and social contracts that protect the various competing freedoms of the U.S.’s pluralistic society as conservative Muslim immigrants pose to the workings of Dutch and European society — precisely because they are already convinced they stand to win. Given that logic, it appears that Religious Right Congressmen like Tom DeLay of Texas and activists like Randall Terry and Paul Rudolph feel justified in using just about any means, no matter how marginally legal, in order to win — for God.

The second feature worth highlighting is one that the social linguist George Lakoff has identified as the ‘Strict Father’ model of government, but which I wish to

associate even more fundamentally with conservatives' model of God.¹⁷ Lakoff, through analyzing common metaphors and their political use, has drawn attention to a pattern of presumptions evident in conservatives' representations of authority that differs markedly from what he calls the 'Nurturant Parent' model favored by 'liberals.' Conservatives see the world as a threatening and often evil place, in which the father must set down strict moral boundaries, display strong moral leadership and example, demand obedience from his children and subordinates (especially women), and punish justly but severely anyone who proves weak, disobedient or prone to error. While Lakoff concentrates on the analogies by which this view of family dynamics becomes reiterated in political discourse and policies, one can readily see how it has been further reflected and reinforced in theological thinking. After all, God "our Father" is for Christians the supreme authority. And one doesn't need to consent to all Feuerbach's conclusions to recognize that monotheism's metaphorical models for God draw as much on imagery of the father or parent as they do on the monarch and ruler.

Conservative theologies, Calvinist and Jansenist as much as strict Muslim, embody Strict Father presumptions. The world is threatening, prone to evil, always liable to slip into chaos, and inimical to true religion. God, the Scriptures, and religious leaders must therefore be seen to set strict boundaries of acceptable behavior, to be vigilant in their surveillance of those boundaries, and swift in punishing evil-doers. Lax laws, lenient judgments, and tolerance of diversity allows nothing more than an array of slippery slopes, with religious chaos and moral turpitude as their inevitable outcome.

¹⁷ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). An earlier but useful synopsis by Lakoff of his overall arguments can be found online: 'Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In The Dust,' 1995, <http://www.wwcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html#STRICT> (7 May 2006).

Lakoff's analysis, which is detailed and much subtler than this near-caricature conveys, deserves much more consideration in the context of religions and politics.

Already by this point one thing is clear: the Religious Right seeks to impose policies based on a specific map of reality and religious assumptions that are theologically *contestable*, and at best are supported only by *disputable* selections from the Scriptures and religious teachings. If that is so, and we want to maintain the hard-won qualities of pluralistic consensus-based societies accepting of religious differences, then it follows that the educated populations in our societies must become far more adept at understanding those differences, the maps of reality that give rise to them, and be willing to undertake the *religious* contestations needed to protect our liberties. Moreover, we must learn to do so in a spirit of rational and respectful disputation about religious claims, consistent with the goals of a pluralistic accepting society. Retaining the liberal-secular bias that religious presumptions are not worthy of examination in rational social discourse has by now become tantamount to putting one's head in the political sand.

2a. Religious Studies and distinctions among Monotheisms

In our current political climate with its crudely-conceived 'war on terror,' interminably fractious 'culture wars,' and the refurbishing of Huntington's "clash of civilizations," some Religious Studies scholars, myself among them, feel the necessity to apply certain perspectives from our discipline so as to describe more precisely the dynamics at work in these challenging social ruptures.¹⁸ The present article stems from a

¹⁸ In the discussion that follows I refer to the insights of such religionists as Bruce Lincoln, Regina Schwartz and Martin Jaffee, as well as an excellent recent conference paper on monotheism by Robert Erlewine of Rice University, now at Illinois Wesleyan University. I wish to thank Dr Erlewine for bringing to my attention the excellent schema set out by Jaffee, and for sharing with me the manuscript of his conference paper, which he is now preparing for publication.

book-length project of mine, studying the ‘religion effects’ in political conflicts. In order to get at the dynamics in the Dutch dilemma and the American divide, let us consider more closely the acute clash between democratic ideals of liberty, tolerance and freedom (including freedom of worship) on the one hand, and certain religious principles that appear incompatible with those ideals — a clash provoked by exclusivist monotheisms. Monotheism as such is not necessarily the problem (just as not all monotheists or even all conservative monotheists provoke this clash). Rather, the problem lies with an emphatic style of monotheism, evident in various faiths, that shows little regard, respect or tolerance for any diversity of views of truth. Let me first define what I mean, and then explain the problem I’m drawing attention to here in relation to these definitions.

Martin Jaffee has proposed a useful distinction between what he terms “metaphysical” and “elective” monotheism. While “metaphysical” monotheism is primarily philosophical and intellectual, “elective” monotheism describes a more existentially-grounded relationship between a uniquely elected community and the God they choose to obey and love.¹⁹ This “uniquely elected community” is, of course, defined *differently* by various theologies within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Still, the presumed uniqueness of this community of the elect introduces claims and attitudes of exclusivity. What I and others are calling “*exclusivist* monotheism” is a further sharpening of the moral demands and terms of allegiance God is believed in “elective” monotheism to express. **Exclusivist monotheism is any faith in one God in which a believer declares that God’s revelation, as understood by that believer, is absolutely definitive and indisputably true, thus excluding competing views or truths as**

¹⁹ Jaffee, 757-60.

unacceptable. It leaves little or no room for divergence from His perceived will. In socio-political situations, this exclusivity regarding truth and judgment becomes manifested as *intolerance of views regarded as not consistent with God's*, an intolerance that can become highly militant and coercive.

2b. The horns of the Dutch Dilemma

A complex of factors could be enumerated to account for the discontent of young Muslims in Holland and Europe generally.²⁰ But the definitive rupture, lying at a tectonic and therefore scarcely perceptible level, is that between a secularized society that has learned to minimize the impact of religion, and a resurgent exclusivist version of a monotheism that explicitly demands to be expressed *socially*, and to be publicly defended when challenged. The Dutch principle of *gedoging*, of tolerant laws and policies, is proudly encouraged as an explicit ideology. But I have noticed as well and just as strongly a more unspoken social ethic I can express thus: **‘You can be as enthusiastic as you want to be about (almost) anything that appeals to you — and the Dutch mean that! — but DON’T force your enthusiasms on other people ... keep it to yourself and others who share it.’** I’ve seen this ethic at work in a myriad of ways while living in Holland. In fact, if all Muslims were like most Muslims in Holland (so many of whom come from Holland’s major ex-colony and the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia), then all members of the diverse cultures that are Muslim would be genuinely part of their tolerant cultural mix.

²⁰ They would need to include real and perceived discriminations, histories of colonial and post-colonial frustrations and humiliations, the embrace of radicalized versions of Islam in the face of failed modernist ideological movements, and a nostalgia for authoritarian ‘certainties’ that has its own Western parallel in the Religious Right.

But Islam is an elective monotheism that is often expressed as exclusivist too. Moreover, it has a strongly triumphalist streak — since God has already laid out for all to read His plan for the world till the end of time in the *Qur'an*, Muslims know and expect that they will win. God's plan and his people, the Ummah, *will triumph* — it's just a question of who stands in His way, and for how long! This religious logic means in principle that there is no need for Muslims to compromise or submit to other nations' mores, such as Dutch tolerance, since Muslims believe they know what is right, and they must submit only to God. Theo van Gogh's murder was really a sensational expression of a much larger disjunction, in which the failure to integrate, to abide according to the Dutch social ethics and expectations, is really a refusal to compromise their own worldview for a very different one.

The Dutch thus face in sharp relief a challenge most Western democracies are also struggling with: **How does a society based on Tolerance protect its principles, and even survive, when it tolerates in its midst a population and ideology that is patently intolerant and expects eventually to come out on top and do away with Tolerance?** More simply yet: **Should a tolerant society tolerate an intolerant ideology in its midst?**²¹

The converse questions from a Muslim viewpoint are just as unnerving: Why should we tolerate actions and behavior that are unacceptable to Muslim law and

²¹ It should be noted that religious views are more troubling than racial or totalitarian political ideologies of intolerance, since freedom of religion is generally viewed as a right, and an admirable ideal. Nonetheless, I also recognize, as my political science colleague Gwyneth Williams reminds me, that toleration of intolerant groups is an old question in U.S. constitutional law, given the First Amendment (conversation with author, Saint Louis MO., 5 September, 2006). The determination of the Religious Right to get 'conservative' judges appointed to the Supreme Court is a serious concern, however — because their aim is to weight the court's future judgments in favor of their own religiously-based non-permissive goals on a host of subjects. One can perceive something of a Strict Father triumphalist tone in such campaigns.

teachings, when God is the one to decide the rules to which all humanity should submit? And more pointedly: **Why should we tolerate what we perceive as *intolerance* directed at us under cover of Westerners' supposed Tolerance??**

What I want to contribute, starting with this article, is to sharpen our understanding of the religious roots and presuppositions of such non-cooperation and intolerance, because this is not just a political or ideological difference. Civil societies need to tease out the exclusivist and exceptionalist dynamics within rigid monotheisms, in order to better negotiate the conflict between the intolerance of radical Islam and the Religious Right and the intended tolerance of liberal-democratic societies.

3. Exclusivist religion's challenge to liberal-democratic civil societies

Bruce Lincoln and many others have observed that, as he says in *Holy Terrors*, “*disgust* at the unprecedented violence of the [post-Reformation] Religious Wars, which threatened Europe with ... disintegration of unprecedented dimensions” caused first philosophers and then political reformers to devise the means to restrict the scope and power of religion within civil society.²² In his brief but very insightful synopsis of these developments, Lincoln rightly credits Kant with fashioning the intellectual compromise that relegates religion to “a privileged, if marginal sphere of activity,” making way for the typical post-Enlightenment social arrangements where “the place of religion in culture has shrunk to ever smaller times, spaces, and topics.”²³ He designates this effect not as it

²² Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 57.

²³ Lincoln, 58. In a noteworthy example he points to the “transformation of Christmas from the high point of the liturgical year to the centerpiece of the shopping season” — where, we should note, the *religious* significances of the season are largely ignored, obscured by symbolism taken from pre-Christian paganism, and in many situations in the United States, declared unconstitutional and thus illegal.

is usually described, as ‘secularization,’ but as the ‘religiously minimalist’ culture most of us know today. He contrasts that with the ‘religiously maximalist’ forms of culture that typified traditional societies and pre-scientific medieval Europe.²⁴

Agreeing with his perspective, I see both Radical Islam and the Religious Right as constituting aggressive threats to Western democratic civil societies because of the militancy with which *they refuse to accept the restricted domain* (call it privatization, secularization, or minimalization) that the post-Reformation Enlightenment assigned for religion. For them, religion is still *social* in its expressions and domain of control, it *should* determine the communal ethos for believer *and* unbeliever alike, and it is the ultimate arbiter of Truth.²⁵ In two short paragraphs, Lincoln succinctly articulates this viewpoint and the striking similarities he also sees between radical Islamists (he names Sayyid Qutb, Mohamed Atta and Osama bin Laden) and key figures in the Religious Right (Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell) whose “goal is to restore religion to the controlling position it enjoyed ... Or as they put it, [to] ‘restore traditional, God-given values.’”²⁶

Given that robust religious energies have not willingly remained minimalized, I contend we must willingly take on the religious, and at times theological, task of engaging seriously with the exclusivist premises of these neo-maximalist dissenters. To show what I mean, I wish first to sketch five premises that together characterize the

²⁴ Lincoln, 59-60.

²⁵ The tenacity with which American believers in a six-day divine creation persist in seeking to have their view accorded equal status in classrooms and textbooks with scientific laws such as evolution is indicative of this conviction that religion is social, determinative, and decisive.

²⁶ Lincoln, 60-1.

militantly *exclusivist* style of monotheism, before raising some salient objections to these viewpoints²⁷:

(1) First, **religion** as such is *not* to be privatized, cordoned off from the rest of life, or minimalized. For exclusivists, faith plays a determinative role in every thought, word and deed: in what one knows, how one acts, and the judgments one makes.

[Most monotheistic believers might well profess this standard as their ideal. But as a matter of practical faith and daily living, by far the majority acknowledge the very secular aspects of so much of contemporary life, plus the compromises that must continually be forged between their own faith's ideals, the demands of modern life, and the perspectives presented by the sciences, business and commerce, cultural differences, and the differing faiths (or refusals thereof) among those around them. It is also one thing to pattern one's own life to meet certain religious expectations; it is quite another to demand that one's whole society do so too. Most sincerely committed Christians and Muslims in pluralistic societies like the U.S., Holland, Europe and New Zealand therefore do not accurately meet this first criterion that asserts an almost total overlap of social lived practices and religious norms, and thus they cannot be characterized as religious *exclusivists*.]

(2) **Truth** is not provisional, privatized, or treated as 'a matter of opinion.' Significant truths, those that are 'necessary for salvation,' are made divinely accessible through Revelation. Consequently they are 'absolute' and 'objective,' in that they hold

²⁷ Following the 2006 Oxford Round Table, I have added to some of these premises certain provisos [in square brackets] that would distinguish the attitudes and behavior of the vast majority of firmly committed monotheistic believers from those I am characterizing as exclusivists. I wish to thank two of my many interlocutors at the Round Table, the Rev. Dr. Ted Troutman, one of the respondents to my paper, and Dr Gerald Beyer, for raising specific objections that convinced me, out of respect for those with sincere religious commitments, to clarify these distinctions. Any failure to be sufficiently clear, however, rests entirely with me as author.

true for everybody, regardless of time, perspective, or individual circumstances, because they issue from the omniscient standpoint of God.²⁸

[Again, many believers would hold this view in principle, as an ideal. But most Westerners recognize competing perspectives and sources for truth in their regular lives and decisions, and do take such matters as differences of time, perspective, or individual circumstances into account. ‘Fundamentalists’ are distinctive in that they claim not to — though comparatively few are able to hold consistently to their own ideals of treating all accepted revelations as equally ‘inerrant.’ So again, most sincerely committed Christians and Muslims in pluralistic societies cannot on this count be characterized as religious *exclusivists*.]

(3) The principle of **election** singled out by Jaffee: God is said to have elected a distinct community of people as His earthly representatives of His Truth and Goodness. Robert Erlewine summarizes excellently the purpose of this “election”: “The mission entrusted to the community consists in bringing the human world in some form or another into accordance with the way God wants it to be, i.e. life according to the laws and statutes revealed in the Scriptures.”²⁹ (Shortly we shall consider the vexed problems this premise has presented historically for those who have claimed it, in deciding who truly belongs within the boundary of that elected community.)

(4) The fourth premise sharpens the claims about access to Truth and election of the blessed Community to the point of making them exclusive. Exclusive monotheism

²⁸ We should note that different faiths and sub-traditions hold *different* truths to have this ‘objective’ and ‘indisputable’ character, and thus hold the ‘truths’ that other traditions equally regard as ‘revealed by God’ to be in error, false, or worst of all, *heresy*! Still, exclusivist monotheisms all value the *indisputable* quality of their (disputed) truths.

²⁹ Erlewine, Robert. ‘Revealed Truths and Fissured Societies: Habermas and the Problem of Monotheism’ (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, PA. November 2005), 7. Cf. Jaffee, 759-60, 769-73.

sees God as presenting humanity with an inflexible *dualistic* Either / Or — He demands absolute acceptance of and obedience to His will, & casts out all nay-sayers to where there is “wailing and the gnashing of teeth.” Here is the ‘Strict Father’ model of God — ever watchful, judgmental, and mercilessly punitive about the (wrong) choices made. No room exists for the doubtful, the half-convinced, the timid, for compromisers or those who are merely allies, not members.

[A key test of whether a religious group or viewpoint meets this exclusivist criterion would be the attitude it holds towards those who are neither members, nor avowedly hostile towards its members. Expressed in terms found in the Christian Gospels, the question is: If they are not for us, are they against us?³⁰ Or if they are not expressly against us, can they be regarded as for us, as potential friends?³¹ Again, in modern societies most committed believers live with an attitude of cooperative acceptance of those who do not express overt hostility to their faith. The dualistic mentality of exclusivists, however, tends to make them highly intolerant of any who are not expressly members of ‘our side.’]

(5) The fifth and final premise carries almost equal weight in exclusive monotheism, providing much of the logic for violence against those whom believers deem to be Other, those existing outside the elective community. If the first three moments in Jaffee’s schema are Revelation, Election, and then History as the ‘lived time’ in which obedient relationship to God is tested, the fourth, the *Eschaton*, is truly decisive.

³⁰ See the Gospels of Matthew, 12:30, and Luke, 11:23, both of which statements are directly ascribed to Jesus.

³¹ This opposite and contrasting attitude is also directly ascribed to Jesus, only two chapters earlier in the Gospel of Luke, 9:50, and in a plural phrase in Mark, 9:40. Clearly context is very important if these opposing attitudes are to be reconciled.

Erlewine again summarizes skillfully, emphasizing the destructive logic of the end of times and final Judgment, the *eschaton*:

Here we see the intolerant foundations of the monotheistic worldview, in that when [History's] struggle between the elected community and all other communities ends, all is reconciled. However, the reconciliation consists in either the Other being incorporated into the elected community, converting to the 'true' religion, or the Other is simply annihilated physically and spiritually. Either way, the Other as such ceases to exist.³²

We must note that here resides the logic of Triumphalism, to which I drew attention earlier. Because this chosen community knows with absolute certainty God's will and purpose through Revelation, and thus knows the Future — at least the One Truth and Final Outcome of History — they can claim also to know that *they will triumph* as God's People in the end. (Osama bin Laden, the Reverend Pat Robertson and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad certainly appear equally convinced that this is true of them and their followers, despite their differences over what actually is the Revealed Truth or God's will.)

[Whereas most traditions within the Abrahamic monotheisms treat eschatological matters as more of a religious hunch or hope, or in some cases a general scheme of the end-times, fundamentalist and messianic groups treat such revelations in prescriptive rather than speculative terms. And based on their counter-intuitive but determined 'certainty' about

³² Erlewine, 8. Cf. Jaffee, 768-9, 773.

the future, their members sometimes presume to ‘kickstart’ the judgments and punishments of the *eschaton* by acting precipitously on God’s behalf.]

The critical corollary I wish to emphasize is that when the *eschaton* is earnestly desired to the point that its purifying fire is sought on earth *in our lifetimes*, exclusivist monotheism has supplied all the elements for a logic of immediate destruction of those who are condemned as Other — most essentially, the rationale for aggression.³³ Because, so as to hasten the *eschaton*, to bring God’s Rule on earth more urgently, and knowing (as we do — see (2) above) what God knows, we can act as the Agents, *here and now*, of God’s ultimate punitive judgment. This is the Strict Father become Judge, Jury and, by bloody proxy, instant Executioner.

It should be clear that the accumulated logic of these five premises creates a theology, and corresponding social ideology, of judgmental intolerance. Had we the time, several corollaries could be drawn.³⁴ For now, two refinements must suffice:

First, it must be stressed that by no means are *all* monotheisms exclusivist, either conceptually or historically. It is not *election as such* that generates radical exclusivism, since God creates, sustains and in some degree loves all beings, otherwise they could not exist at all. This significant ambiguity has historically allowed the “wobble room” for

³³ I thank my colleague Gary Kannenberg, a professor of behavioral and social sciences, for emphasizing to me that a distinction should be made between strictly selective views of election that don’t lead to overt conflict (such as the Adventists and separatist groups like the Amish), and the exclusivist styles of election I am discussing here. The difference lies in some motive for aggression. We would both argue that the immediate motives for aggressive conflict often come from influences that are not particularly religious, but I see in the *eschaton* and punitive Strict Father attitudes the legitimating *religious* logic for aggression and overt conflict (conversation with author, Saint Louis MO., 13 May, 2006).

³⁴ To name a couple: When members or principles of the elect community are mocked or vilified, exclusivists often regard that as an occasion, not for loving forbearance to be shown towards an outsider, but as an affront to be avenged or eradicated. Likewise, punitive action taken against those who do not submit to God’s will has historically been represented by the punisher as loving action designed to save the soul of a miscreant, even when their body is savagely, even sadistically brutalized — often another sign of the rigidly dualistic codes at the root of exclusivist monotheisms.

elective monotheists to be lenient towards unbelieving populations: for if God creates and sustains all nature and all human beings, and acts in history through his elected community to offer the rewards of conformity to His will, then those outside the elect must be of some value to God. Any defender of a tolerant pluralistic civil society seeking to find compromise with exclusivists would do well to dwell on this point. It is the enthusiastic longing for the *eschaton*, giving rise to impatience with compromises and triumphal expectations of imminent reward, that has too often pushed the elective to become exclusivist, and impatience to morph into savagery.

Elective monotheism does set up, however, a distinct anxiety that I call the ‘anxiety of chosenness.’³⁵ This anxiety is created by the interpretive problem of ‘Who’s In ... & Who’s Out?’ — who can be sure they *are* in the company of the elect, and what if we are wrong?! Just considering the three great monotheisms’ distinctly different definitions of who is elect dramatizes that this anxiety is justified, historically and existentially. How can one be *sure* they are among the elect? Are we in fact good enough for our God?³⁶ These and related questions about where the lines get drawn around who is elected and who is not generates a nagging anxiety. Under pressure from a rigid divine exclusivism, that anxiety too readily becomes pathological, expressed through aggression, judgmentalism and intolerance.³⁷

³⁵ Parr, chapter 8, ‘Who’s In / Who’s Out: The Inherited Hebraic / Biblical Paradigm.’

³⁶ When I have class time to consider the dynamics of this problem of election, we read a very insightful discussion by Michael Ignatieff drawing on Regina Schwartz’s analysis of the Cain and Abel story alongside Freud’s ruminations on sibling rivalry to set up what he calls “the narcissism of minor difference” as a possible explanation of the viciousness with which closely related peoples (in the Balkans, and the Middle East) at times insist on their difference (Ignatieff, Michael. *The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), 46-53. I give this notion of “the narcissism of minor difference” some extensive consideration in chapter 10 of my forthcoming book.

³⁷ Jaffee picks up on the same observation by Regina Schwartz that Ignatieff focuses on, that in the Cain and Abel text *scarcity* — the scarcity of God’s loving favor, because God does not extend his election to both brothers, for reasons

4. Countering the challenge of Exclusivist religions

From all that I have said, I conclude that highly dualistic, exclusivist and triumphalist versions of monotheism present militant challenges to the democratic state's ideals of tolerance and liberty. If the problem I am describing can be encapsulated in the question I asked in regard to the Dutch, 'How does a TOLERANT society TOLERATE an INTOLERANT religion in its midst?' the answer I see is that the religion's intolerance needs to be *exposed* and neutralized — not the religion itself, if possible. Because tolerant societies tend to value freedom of worship as well as freedom *from* religion, just ignoring religious issues has not been effective. That tactic cedes far too much ground to the intolerant. Rather we must reconfigure post-secular civil societies' engagements with religious adherents. In what space I have left, I propose two policy areas for such engagement. One is through better informed and more incisive disputation over the *religious* presuppositions unexamined beneath the explicit policies and statements of intolerant conservatives; and the other is to insist that education about the world's religions needs to become universal.

4a. Religious Disputation

I contend that some of the most prominent claims in Exclusivist Monotheism are extremely vulnerable to religiously informed counter-arguments, and therefore those committed to the acceptance and co-existence of religious differences in a pluralistic society must be willing to make these counter-arguments, respectfully but assertively. We must find ways to make our voices and actions prominent and persuasive, so neither the

left unexplained in the Biblical text — engenders the anxiety and envy which in Cain's case, and so often in human history, turns murderous. See Jaffee, 756 note 6, and Ignatieff, 47-8.

Theo van Goghs nor the Mohammad Bouyeris gain center stage. The following are strategies I recommend:

- reject the view that God's election is tantamount to exclusive selection. Singling out one group of God's creatures doesn't necessarily condemn all others as expendable. Those who are not actively against us may indeed be with us. (This shift in rationale would be analogous, I suggest, to religious Japanese being persuaded, after Japan's 1945 defeat by the allies, no longer to regard their Emperor as a Shinto *kami*, nor the Japanese people as destined to liberate (or subjugate, depending on your standpoint) the other peoples of Asia. Not all Japanese have accepted this modification, but by far the majority have been thus persuaded, in the interests of peace, national autonomy, and economic prosperity.)
- critique the 'Strict Father' presumptions. I strongly suspect they make for bad parenting, and certainly for bad theology. Perhaps my strongest objection is that their authoritarian premises strand the believer at the developmental level of about a five year old, with very little autonomy or independence of mind.³⁸ They also embody an excess of the Axial Age's negative valuation of this world, contradicting the creation theology both of *Genesis* and the *Qur'an*.
- disclose the pathologies inherent in the 'Who's In / Who's Out' dynamic. I believe some important conversations across the world's religious

³⁸ Much the same can be said of Fundamentalisms in general, given the ways they read and apply scriptural texts.

Forum on Public Policy

traditions would provide useful contrasts to the anxieties provoked by strict election.

- challenge the shoddy interpretive presuppositions in the claims of Fundamentalisms to be taking revealed scriptures “literally” or as “inerrant.” As numerous commentators point out, certain texts are always selected to be emphasized over others in the scriptures, and interpretive judgments are always involved, partly because human languages and texts are ambiguous, multivalent and plurivocal. Fundamentalist interpretations therefore always make ideological choices, and the scriptural text is seldom as transparent as it is claimed to be.
- question the claims implied in excessive emphasis on the *eschaton* — for instance, that revelation guarantees knowledge of the future (did it, for Jesus?); or that humans can judge for God (several scriptural passages assert that judgment and its timing should be left to God, and not abrogated by human hubris). Moreover, up to this point history has not borne out one single instance of those who believed the end-times were imminent, or inevitable within their own generation’s lifetimes. So no living person has the slightest inductive justification (and little if any other support) for becoming murderous agents of some anticipated Armageddon.
- perhaps most encouraging to rationalist moderns: re-affirm the epistemological critiques with which Enlightenment thinkers and since have challenged exclusivist, absolutist and authoritarian ideologies. One

can believe one is right or has the best description or policy for a given state of affairs, and remain tolerant *and respectful* of others who may have different perspectives, premises, or geese to cook — even when their alternatives appear mightily unpleasant to you. This is the basic democratic argument for persuasion towards consensus, rather than coercion based on self-righteousness.

In these and other respects I believe that religious disputation and acceptance of varied but not extremist religious differences can very much be part of public discussion, whether called in the American phrase ‘the marketplace of ideas,’ or, in terms closer to Habermas, ‘rational social communicative action.’

4b. Education about Religions as a necessary defence of Democracy

Finally, I maintain that Education has an extremely important role to play, in teaching young people — from an early age and on into their general college education — about the whole gamut of the world’s religions, and the ways in which these have been studied and understood. All religions need to be studied fairly and respectfully, in what I call the spirit of ‘sympathetic critique’ — sympathetically, to learn what their adherents have gained from them, and critically, to perceive their benefits and strengths along with their weaknesses and blind-spots. (This is in fact what educators in the humanities already do with all manner of cultural forms, whether in literature, historical accounts, or performances — and the academic discipline of Religious Studies has by now demonstrated a variety of ways in which it can be done also for religious traditions and groups.)

Even in communities and institutions that have particular religious allegiances, it is by now important to learn about a whole range of religious forms, in order to perceive human creativity and freedom at work, the wonders of imagination *and* manipulations of ideologies, and equally to learn the dignity of our differences. I know that some object that learning about lots of religions relativizes them all, until nothing is true — I don't agree that this happens necessarily; but it does relativize all exclusivisms: one comes to see how many there are! More importantly though, to be compatible with the principles of a pluralistic democratic society any universal position must show it can *include differences*, rather than exclude all but the acceptable ONE.

To conclude, then: Western societies, whether Dutch, American, French, British or Kiwi, must forego the post-Enlightenment assumptions that religion is minimalized, privatized, historically obsolete, irrational and therefore irrelevant. It is not. It is vitally and murderously part of the public square, the marketplace of ideas, the imaginary of those around us, the fabric of the symbolic systems we live amongst. To be a truly inclusive and functional post-secular society requires that, as citizens, we become informed and adept at religious discourse and debate, and vigilant about religious pathologies and impulses. Liberties and tolerance must be actively negotiated by and for everyone, so that their effects don't become intolerable for anyone — except the abjectly intolerant.

References

Forum on Public Policy

- Bell, Rachael. 'The Murder of Theo Van Gogh.' CourtTV Crime Library. 2006. <http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/famous/theo_van_gogh/index.html> (7 May 2006).
- Boston, Robert. 2000. *Close Encounters with the Religious Right: Journeys into the Twilight Zone of Religion and Politics*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Buruma, Ian. 2006. *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- "Gunman kills Dutch film director," British Broadcasting Corporation Online, 2 November 2004, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3975211.stm>> (7 May 2006).
- "Animal Activist Admits Killing Dutch Politician," Environmental News Service, 26 November 2002, <<http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/nov2002/2002-11-26-03.asp>> (7 September 2006).
- Erlewine, Robert. 'Revealed Truths and Fissured Societies: Habermas and the Problem of Monotheism.' Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, PA. November 2005.
- Habermas, Jürgen . 2003. 'Faith and Knowledge' Pp. 101-115 in *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 1998. *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Jaffee, Martin S. 2001. 'One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 4: 753-74.
- Lakoff, George. 1995. 'Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In The Dust.' <<http://www.wgcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html#STRICT>> (7 May 2006).
- . 2002. *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 2003. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- arty, Martin E. and R. Scott Appleby. 1992. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Parr, Christopher P. 2006. 'Religion in Political Conflict,' Saint Louis MO.
- Wald, Kenneth D. 1997. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. 3rd edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Williams, Rhys H., ed. 1997. *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006