“Religious Violence and the Threat to Democracy”

University of Otago Centre for Theology and Public Issues

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Ladies and gentlemen, honorable ministers, fellow citizens, friends, colleagues, neighbors, welcome. Mr. Clark, thank you for your generous invitation to host this lecture here in these distinguished halls. Professor Tombs, thank you for your kind invitation to deliver a lecture on this timely topic. And thank you all for coming out on a weeknight to listen, and I hope, to converse, about the matter of religious violence and the threat to democracy. As a newly appointed Lecturer in Theology and Public Issues at University of Otago, I am grateful to you all for coming. As a member of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, I am deeply gratified that my posting here in Wellington already proves itself to be fruitful.

But what *is* a Lecturer in Theology and Public Issues? And why does a university have one in its employ? I’m glad you asked.

The answer to these questions has two parts. The “academic” part, is that I am a scholar whose research and teaching focuses on religion. That is why the University has appointed me to the faculty of the Theology and Religion Department. The “public” part of the answer is that, my research and teaching extend beyond the textual, historical, and doctrinal dimensions of Christianity. I am a scholar who studies the social, ethical, and political dimensions of Christian religion. This is why the Centre for Theology and Public Issues has sent me here in the capitol, Wellington, rather than keeping me on campus in Dunedin.

This is what makes me a public theologian. But, more specifically, I am a moral theologian. More plainly, I am a Christian ethicist. Now, when you strip away the finery of those titles, when you take away the fanciness of those academic disciplines, what I do boils down to these two things. First, I describe and evaluate human action. Second, I assess the descriptions and evaluations that others make of human action, both their own actions and those of others.

In other words, I am a student of human behavior and language. I study what you and I do. I study what we say about what we’re doing and what we’ve done.

I ask if what we’re doing is *right*. I ask if what we say about what we’ve done is *correct*. And that is what I would like to with you this evening.

May I safely assume that most of us have read George Orwell at some point in our lives? Most likely in secondary school or at university? Maybe, *Animal Farm* and/or *1984*? Has anyone read his essay, “Politics and the English Language”? I expected as much. Orwell is, of course, most well known as a novelist and satirist. But he also was a social critic who, like a public theologian, commented on the issues of his day, albeit without doing so from a religious or theological perspective.

As a social critic, Orwell too was a student of human action and human language. This is the subject of his essay. At first glance, his talk of the linguistic politics of English appears to be a bit of aristocratic condescension. He sounds like Matthew Arnold in a bad mood. Orwell worries that the English language has fallen on hard times, and that the collapse of Anglophone civilization might soon follow. He begins by presenting several examples of what he takes to be bad English. But he not only points out bad writing. Orwell calls out bad writers. He names names, so to speak; some of whom were prominent intellectuals and politicians at the time.

Orwell continues by proposing lists of verbs and adjectives to be prohibited. He comes across as a cranky grammarian who is overly fond of his red pen. He sounds like a grumpy old man, complaining about “kids these days.” If only they would dress neatly, preferably in tweed coats and corduroy trousers. If only they would drink their tea politely, with their pinkies raised at just the right angle. If only they would speak plainly and write clearly, using proper diction and correct enunciation. If only….

However, such politesse banality is not what Orwell is on about. Midway through the essay, it gradually becomes apparent that the “politics” he has in mind is not that of British propriety and upper-class respectability. Orwell has in mind the rough and tumble world of power politics and ideological conflict. His worries about our words are really are motivated by worries about our deeds. He fears that laziness in our speaking leads to laxness in our thinking. In particular, Orwell finds that a lack of conscientiousness in our political statements lapses into a reduced state of consciousness that encourages political docility and social conformity.

In a word, Orwell is anxious about the politics of euphemism. He tells us that euphemism is political speech employed “in defense of the indefensible.” It is “language formed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.” Elaborating on the violence of his own times, Orwell catalogs the euphemistic blasphemies meant to lend barbarity an aura of dignity:

Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck, or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.

The parallel between Orwell’s times and ours, I think, is rather obvious. This may be because, as a lifelong citizen of the United States, I cannot help but approach the topic of religious violence and the threat to democracy with the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the War on Terror in mind – especially, with the commemoration of their fifteenth anniversary just this past Sunday. As a recently arrived denizen of New Zealand, I cannot say how those events figure here. On one hand, New Zealand has never experienced such an attack on its own soil. On the other hand, two Kiwis were killed in the Twin Towers, as were half a dozen others in attacks in Bali, Jakarta, and London. And ten soldiers of the Defense Force have been killed in action in Afghanistan. Although the War on Terror is primarily a fight to protect the American homeland, I think its fighting hits home even here.

Recall Orwell’s litany of euphemisms. Bombing civilians and burning villages is called “pacification.” Displacing refugees is called “rectification of frontiers.” Dispossessing peasants is called “transfer of population.” Incarceration without trial and execution without sentence are called “elimination of unreliable elements.”

To these we can add a catalog of more contemporary euphemisms. Civilian deaths, including those of children, are called “collateral damage.” Torture is called “enhanced interrogation.” Military casualties are called “force depletion.” Mercenaries are called “private security contractors.” Bombing raids and missile attacks are called “surgical strikes.” The extrajudicial kidnapping and imprisonment of foreign citizens is called “extraordinary rendition.” Waterboarding is called “torture lite.”

You get the point. Most basically, euphemism is a form of lying. When we compare these – quite literally – *bloodless* descriptions to the actions they are meant to describe, we see that they not only miss the point. They obscure the point. Their woeful misdescription is willful misdirection. This is Orwell’s deeper point. “Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things *without* calling up mental pictures of them.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Euphemism calls something by a name that does not call up an image. It is saying without seeing. And this, as Orwell sees it, is speaking without thinking.

Orwell’s deeper point about saying without seeing is my point of departure. As the American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas remarks, “Morally speaking, the first issue is never what we are to do, but what we should.” This is because, “We can only act in a world we can see. And we can only *see* a world we can *say*.” Let me repeat that. We can only act in a world we can see. But, we can only see a world we can say.

Before developing that point, in good parliamentary fashion, I must make a point of order. This is a lecture: a talk about religious violence and the threat to democracy. But this evening, following Orwell and Hauerwas, in what follows I will not only say some things to you about this topic. I also will show you some things. These things are not easy to look at, to say the least. Each of the images I’ve selected is distressing. Many are disturbing. I’ve chosen them very carefully. I’ve chosen to show them to you quite soberly. Even so, my showing and telling are meant to persuade you, not to coerce you. You may close your eyes. You may leave the room. I leave it to your discretion.

Now, when we speak of *religious* violence and the threat to *democracy*, we’re drawing a line. On one side of that line, there is something called religious violence. On the other side, there is something democracy. In between stands a threat. This threat is not only to our lives, but to our very way of life. Resurgent and violent religious fundamentalism overshadows our headlines and darkens our doorstep. It is an omen of an erosion of long-established democratic values like secularism and pluralism. It is the harbinger of an implosion of deeply-cherished civic virtues like freedom and peace.

Speaking this way is perfectly sensible, so far as it goes. But, it doesn’t go far enough. There *is* a measure of truth in saying these things. But, we need to take the measure of these things. For in dividing religious violence from democracy, we’re dividing “them” from “us.” In saying that *they* pose a violent threat to us, *we* strike a pose of innocence.

Alongside euphemism about our own actions, there is sensationalism about their actions. We use words in such a way as to say things about what we’re doing without seeing what we’ve done. At the same time, we use images of things they’ve done that are simply unspeakable. Our words about ourselves leave us blind. Our images of them leave us mute.

When we speak about religious violence and its threat to democracy, we imagine things like this. [<https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/189423/20st-isis-butcher-known-as-the-bulldozer-beheads-iraqi-boy-15-for-listening-to-pop-music/>] Here, we see the notorious ISIL headsman known only as “the bulldozer.” We see a crowd of Syrian citizens enthusiastically spectating the execution. And we see this image above a headline that reads, “Barbaric Execution Plunges Middle East Further Into Dark Ages.”

Here, seeing and saying go hand in hand. Beneath this image and this headline, we read that the man is being executed for practicing witchcraft. We hear that the accusation and conviction for his crime were conducted by an imam – an Islamic cleric. “See,” we say. *Religion*, particularly *their* religion, is barbarity. Such fundamentalism belongs to the Dark Ages. *This* is what threatens our democracy. Our secular pluralism has left such militant fanaticism behind in our primitive past.

Let me be clear. We absolutely should condemn what we see here. How can we not? Yet, even as we do, we must recall that democracy too can be violent.

Secularity has been similarly militant, as we see in this image of the execution of King Louis during the French Revolution [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Execution_of_Louis_XVI#/media/File:Hinrichtung_Ludwig_des_XVI.png>]. Democracy too has had its Reign of Terror. The secularism of the West once demanded that, “The last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” This was not the declaration of Europe’s Dark Ages. This was the demand of its Age of Enlightenment.

Even so, we might dodge this comparison. We can say, “That was then, this is now.” What’s passed is past. We also can say, that was French excess. The English and American revolutions never resorted to such extreme measures. Once again, “us” and “them.”

Times have changed we say. And so have we. Insofar as our enemies still commit the sorts of atrocities that we have renounced, we can comfortably denounce them.

They do things like this [<http://storage.canoe.com/v1/dynamic_resize/?src=http://cnews.canoe.com/CNEWS/World/2015/08/31/isisvideoscreenshot1000.jpg&size=650x366&quality=85> ].

We see here, four Iraqi prisoners strung up by their arms and legs. Torture by *any* name, regular or lite. What we don’t see, what I’ve chosen not to show, is their being set alight and burned alive a few moments later. I might say that this represents a fringe view of Islam. I must say, is that once upon a time, mainstream Christianity did much the same. The Church burned heretics and witches at the stake, much to its shame.

I also must say that even today—and by some reports, to this very day—the United States continues to do much the same. We see here one of the infamous photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3690097.stm>]. We see prisoners, not only stripped of their clothes, but stripped of their humanity. We see stark betrayal of the Geneva Convention’s promise of “benevolent quarantine” for enemy captives. Their captors smirk at the camera, as if pulling some humorous fraternity prank, rather than committing a scandalous crime against humanity.

Of those involved in the incidents at Abu Ghraib and similar incidents at Guantanamo Bay, many enlisted personnel were dishonorably discharged. Several were convicted of “dereliction of duty” and “abuse,” and served time in military prison. Though, none served their full sentences. A few high ranking officers were demoted. But, the senior military intelligence officer in Iraq was exonerated and then promoted. And of the two Department of Justice lawyers involved, the one who advised CIA interrogators at Guantanamo Bay went on to serve as Cabinet Secretary of Homeland Security. The one who signed the controversial memos authorizing so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” still serves as a Federal Judge. No one, not one single person at any level of military, legal, or political service, was tried, let alone convicted, for a war crime.

As of January 2009, the United States officially discontinued its practices of torture. And since then, it has drawn down its forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, at the very same time, it is ramped up its drone operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. Afghanistan and Iraq have been liberated. Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden have been terminated. Nevertheless, the “op-tempo” of the drone campaign has only accelerated.

Today, the War on Terror is a “war without warriors.” Strikes are carried out by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [ <https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/predator-firing-missile4.jpg> ]. UAV’s—or drones—are piloted remotely from thousands of miles away. The principal advantage of these weapons are, first, that they pose zero risk to our troops, and, second, that they pose *little* risk to civilians. Drones have the twofold advantage of keeping their pilots out of harm’s way, while, and the same time, allowing those pilots to go out of their way not to harm civilians.

In a word, drones are “precise.” From thousands of feet in the air they can pick out a single individual, or a small group, as we see here [ <http://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/vzpihq9ugkl61hoi07uj.jpg> ]. Put differently, and with the bravado characteristic of their operators, drones allow us to “put warheads on foreheads.” Even so, these weapons are not foolproof. And we must not allow ourselves to be fooled by their technical capabilities. We must remember that the two models most widely employed are named “Predator” and “Reaper.” We dare not forget that the missiles they launch are called “Hellfire.” These names are *not* accidental locutions. Indeed, Orwell would likely approve of them, because they say just what they mean. More, these names elicit images of what they depict.

But, talk of their “precision” strays toward euphemism. The word both says too much and too little. It says too much, because it implies that these weapons hit *only* what they aim at. It says too little, because it denies that they hit anything *other* then what they aim at. This, simply is not the case. The kill radius of a Hellfire missile is 15 meters. Its wound radius is 20 meters. So if, at this very moment, a drone put a warhead on my forehead, most of you would be killed or maimed. The word “precision” is conspicuously silent about this.

Now, to be fair, many strikes are conducted while their targets are in relative isolation from noncombatants. In the case of what are called “targeted strikes”—strikes whose targets are known by name, and known to be terrorists or militants—these drones and their operators wait and watch, sometimes for weeks and months on end, before pulling the trigger. Even so, they cannot wait indefinitely. And so they strike targets of opportunity, even when the opportunity cost is paid by the deaths of the innocent.

Targeted strikes are the best case scenario. However, they are not nearly the most common scenario. The most common case is what as known as “signature strikes”—strikes whose targets are not known, but whose activity and locality have been shown to fit a “pattern-of-life analysis” conducted by a computer algorithm. A pattern of life analysis is a mathematical sniff test. It’s a computational practice of “It looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, so let’s shoot it like a duck.” When such behavior is detected, pilots are authorized to open what is quite accurately called a “kill box”—a geographical window in which they may fire at will. In the most disturbing cases, it has been determined that any “military-aged male” in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan is a legitimate target. And, by “military-aged male,” I mean any boy or man aged 15 to 50.

The results of such calculations? We see them here [ [https://images-onepick-opensocial.googleusercontent.com/gadgets/proxy?container=onepick&gadget=a&rewriteMime=image%2F\*&url=http%3A%2F%2Fasiantribune.com%2Fsites%2Fasiantribune.com%2Ffiles%2Fimages%2F2012%2FDrone\_Attack\_1.png](https://images-onepick-opensocial.googleusercontent.com/gadgets/proxy?container=onepick&gadget=a&rewriteMime=image%2F*&url=http%3A%2F%2Fasiantribune.com%2Fsites%2Fasiantribune.com%2Ffiles%2Fimages%2F2012%2FDrone_Attack_1.png) ]. Even when we hit who we’re aiming at, as in the case of targeted strikes, we inevitably hit *more* than we’re aiming at. And when we don’t bother to know who we’re aiming at, we most certainly hit those we’re not permitted to aim at. We willfully and knowingly violate the *legal* restraints of international treaty and the *moral* constraints of just war theology. By modest estimates, there have been over 1,000 strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia alone. These strikes have killed some 7,900 people. Of those, approximately 1,200 have been civilians; over 200 of those, have been children. Fewer than 100, have been high-value terrorist or insurgent leaders.

[<https://www.rt.com/op-edge/247089-us-isis-syria-terrorism-drones/>] One civilian for every seven combatants killed. Two children for every high-value leader killed. In the case of Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, it took sixteen strikes killing 260 people in order to finally kill him.

*These* are what we call “surgical strikes.” *This*, is what we call “collateral damage."

It may be true that drones are no less precise than other guided munitions and smart weapons. But, as presently employed, neither are they much more precise. And we are tragically misguided if we think that their relative precision and the comparatively low numbers of noncombatant deaths excuse our flagrant disregard for noncombatant immunity. As Jewish philosopher, and arguably the world’s leading expert on the ethics of war, Michael Walzer, reminds us, we can neither aim *at* noncombatants, nor can we aim *through* them. And no euphemism can say otherwise. Not unless we turn away and refuse to see.

Legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron—himself a Southlands native now teaching in New York City, and one of Otago’s most distinguished alumni—puts the point like this:

Living safely in the knowledge that our security was purchased on the back of a waterboard, the muzzle of a snarling dog, or the live end of an electrode is a hideous thing.…[T]ake away the rule of law and introduce brutality and the infliction of torment, and our personal safety or the safety of our streets is a reproach to us, a tainted and clammy form of satisfaction that we can enjoy only with our consciences turned off.

Waldron is talking about torture in the United States. But he could be talking about drone strikes around the world. He could even be talking about security policy here in New Zealand. But, whatever he may be talking about, what he is saying is this.

The greatest threat to democracy is *not* religious violence itself. That *is* a danger. It is clear and present, even when it is not imminent. Even so, that danger is limited. The more pressing and pervasive danger is not *their* religious violence. It is *our* undemocratic response. The real threat to democracy is not *those* people over there. It’s you and me, *us* right here.

What Waldron is saying—what I am saying—is this.

If, in response to the unjust aggression of religious violence we permit ourselves unjust means of prevention and protection, then that means—whether we win or lose the geopolitical war against terrorism—we’ve already lost the moral battle for democracy. Indeed, we have forfeited. We resort to what Albert Camus called the “casuistry of blood…by which we justify [ourselves] by relying on the other’s crime, and through which we return to the jungle where the sole principle is violence.”

If we do this in order to protect ourselves, then, as Waldron puts it, we can enjoy such safety and security *only* with our consciences turned off. As Orwell puts it, we can do so *only* with our eyes closed.

The task of citizens—of *each* of as as individuals, and *all* of us together—is to stay awake and to keep watch.

The task of ministers of parliament and ministers of the Church alike is, in no small measure, to open our eyes and to turn our consciences back on.

Though I myself am not a minister of either type, I take it that this is the task of public theologians as well.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)