
War as Love: How the Mystic's Quest has been Co-opted to Sell War

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Given the importance of war to statecraft, a method of convincing citizens of its necessity is essential. For this reason, politicians conflate war and God, which become hopelessly entangled with each other in the public square. Bringing God and religion together, however, is not such a difficult task. Most humans grow up in religious systems that utilize warlike language to outline the spiritual quest; it is not much of a leap to find religious justification for war itself. This paper looks at specific instances of politicians' conflating mystical language with war for the purpose of selling it to the American public. As well, I look at the ways in which war packaging and, to some extent, war itself can mimic the mystic's quest, by comparing religious language from various traditions, with that of social and political leaders.

Given the importance of war to statecraft, a method of convincing citizens of its necessity is essential. For this reason, politicians conflate war and God, which become hopelessly entangled with each other in the public square. To convince a nation that a gruesome and inequitable political alternative is necessary, social leaders need a means that will break through the rational resistance towards war that exists in all of us. The use of God and religious terminology in selling war to society does just that.

This is not such a difficult task. Most humans grow up in societies whose religious systems utilize war and warlike language to outline the spiritual quest; as such, it is not much of a leap to find religious justification for war itself. The mystical path, which

leads an aspirant beyond the experience of a personal ego and separateness, towards an appreciation of the unity of all being and an interior experience of grace, is often described within religious traditions by war terminology. Whether described as Jihad, the Crusades, or a Divine Right to the Holy Land, virtually all religions conflate war and love and the religious path with the obligation to follow leaders into an armed conflict.

Given the predominance of this imagery, it should come as no surprise that war and the religious path are fused in popular culture, the media and politicians' speeches. After all, if one is asking young men (and more recently, woman) to sacrifice their lives to safeguard the rights of an economic elite, a powerful sales job is called for. And what greater inducement can there be for an action than the love of God, and perhaps even the promise of eternal life?

While this is certainly true – that politicians and social pundits cynically intertwine God, love, and war to sell the grisly institution to the general public – this dynamic is hardly new or confined to the secular world of politics and power. War and the mystic's way have been confused with each other since the beginning of human time. Virtually all faiths utilize warlike language and imagery to describe matters of the spirit, and exhort followers on to religious catharsis. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer states in his book, *Is Religion Killing Us*: “Religiously justified violence is first and foremost a problem of ‘sacred’ texts and not a problem of misinterpretation of those texts.” Since virtually all major religions have embedded within them violent images of God, people can selectively recall these texts and extract from them divine support for war, creating the foundation for what Nelson-Pallmeyer terms the “violence of God” tradition” (qtd in Austin 5).

It is not difficult to discover this dynamic in the world's largest and most important religions. Hinduism, a religion reaching nearly 8000 years into the past, is our contemporary world's third largest sacred path, boasting nearly one billion adherents. For Hindu practitioners, war imagery and religious observance are deeply intertwined. In the Rig Veda, a 3500 year-old Hindu text, we find this statement: “May your weapons be strong to drive away

the attackers, may your arms be powerful enough to check foes, let your army be glorious, not the evil-doer” (1-39:2; qtd. in Austin 5).

The Bhagavad-Gita, another central Hindu text that pre-dates Christianity, goes even further in bringing war and God together: it represents a morality play set on the field of battle. The duty to destroy his own kinsman and teachers is the task of Arjuna, the main character. The teacher, Krishna, convinces Arjuna of the necessity of this duty, explaining the relationship between death, sacrifice and devotion: “If you fail to wage this war of sacred duty, you will abandon your own duty and fame only to gain evil. If you are killed, you win heaven; if you triumph, you enjoy the earth; therefore, Arjuna, stand up and resolve to fight the battle!” (Bhagavad-Gita 34). This intertwining of war and religious necessity dramatizes the Hindu ideal that one must heroically confront death in order to transcend the limits of worldly existence (Bhagavad-Gita 1). Underscoring the manner in which war and the spiritual path are intertwined, this religious tract is subtitled, “Krishna’s Counsel in a Time of War,” and is drawn from the much larger war epic, the *Mahabharata*, which traces a legendary confrontation that took place around 3100 BCE.

Hardly confined to Eastern religions, war imagery is found at the core of the three Abrahamic faiths. The Jewish Torah, precursor of both Christianity and Islam, has many instances of injunctions from God to smite Israel’s enemies in His name. For instance, this passage in Deuteronomy couldn’t be more explicit about the religious obligation to destroy non-believers: “When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you ... and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them and show them no mercy” (7:1-2).

Later, in the book of Joshua, we find that the Israelites have learned this lesson well: “And so Joshua defeated the whole land, and the hill country and the Negeb, and the lowland and the slopes and their kings. He left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord of Israel commanded” (10:40). Even

the God of Israel Himself takes part in the carnage, as seen, for instance, in the Exodus story of the flight of the Hebrews, when the Lord slaughters every non-Jewish, first-born in Egypt, including cattle, house pets and even wild animals. Not content to simply let this story fade, it marks one of the most important holidays on the Jewish calendar, “Passover,” so named because God “passed over” the Jewish households on his way to smiting all the rest.

The God/war entanglement hardly waned with the later religions born of the initial Abrahamic covenant; the wrath of Israel’s God fueled the righteous indignation of the two other faiths emerging from the Middle East. Christianity, though founded by a renegade Jew attempting to disentangle religion and human destruction, turned definitively towards the Old Testament view of God and war at the fourth century Council of Nicea (325 CE), when the Roman Emperor Constantine codified Christian practice, and brought it under the umbrella of the state.¹

This intertwining of God and politics quickly led Christianity towards the same bloody language and imagery as other world religions. Fewer than 100 years after the Council of Nicea, St. Augustine (d. 430) was parsing war into acceptable and unacceptable instances – a far cry from Christ’s maxim to “turn the other cheek.” St. Augustine stated, “Even those who want war want nothing more than to achieve victory; by warring, therefore, they desire to attain a glorious peace. . . . Consequently, the desired end of war is peace” (qtd. in Reichberg 78-79). Augustine even went so far as to justify the infantryman’s following of illegal orders, stating, “A just man, if he should happen to serve as a soldier under a human king who is sacrilegious, could rightly wage war at the king’s command, maintaining the order of civic peace, for what he is commanded to do is not contrary to the sure precepts of God” (qtd. in Reichberg 82).

Linkages between Augustine’s “Just War Theory” and contemporary Christian thought are not hard to uncover. This justification was debated in opinion pages during the run-up to the Iraq War (2002-2003), with all manner of judgments being issued by American pundits on whether this campaign was “justified” according to the Christian saint or not. An article entitled “God

is Pro War,” published under the moniker of Christian leader Jerry Falwell, stated,

Just as there are numerous references to peace in the Bible, there are frequent references to God-ordained war. Many present day pacifists hold Jesus as their example of unvarying peace. But they ignore the full revelation concerning Jesus pictured in the book of Revelation 19, where He is depicted bearing a “sharp sword” and smiting nations, ruling them with a “rod of iron.” ... One of the primary purposes of the church is to stop the spread of evil, even at the cost of human lives. If we do not stop the spread of evil, many innocent lives will be lost and the kingdom of God suffers.

Christianity’s ensuing history of bringing war and God together followed Augustine’s lead, sharing with humanity both the Crusades (1095-1272) and the Inquisition (c.1184-1834), whose echo can be found in the United States’ recent sanction of torture as a legal foreign policy instrument. A Pew Research Center poll taken in 2005 revealed that those who self-identified as Christian were more likely to approve torture as sometimes or always justified in fighting the “War on Terror,” than those who identified as “secular” (Carney).²

Islam, following its religious cousins, wove enough war imagery into its sacred texts to provide plenty of justification for those inclined to resort to bellicosity in God’s name. In Islam, we read of lesser and greater Jihad – lesser Jihad being the battle for God within the physical world (often taking the form of a declared war against “infidels”) in holy war, while greater Jihad represents the interior struggle that it takes to achieve a true God consciousness:

For some Muslims, jihad is the sixth pillar of Islam. It is a duty that all Muslims must carry out. The controversy is how it is to be carried out, which depends on one’s interpretation. Some fulfill “lesser” jihad in the militant aspect. In the militant aspect, one must be prepared at all times to defend

Muslims, particularly by armed struggle. (Pender)

The conception of Lesser Jihad hardly emerged out of thin air; it can be traced back to the Muslim holy book itself:

The Koran does appear to command evangelical war – that is, war to convert non-Muslims to the faith. The text often cited from the Koran is: “Fight against those who do not believe in Allah or the last day – until they pay the *jizya* from their own hand” [*Jizya* is a tax paid to indicate submission to the dominance of Islam.] (Austin 11)

It is also important to note that the Prophet Muhammad was himself a warrior, and commanded forces in battle on nearly 40 separate occasions. Hundreds upon hundreds of people were killed during his campaigns, and the wars of Islamic domination that he spawned killed hundreds of thousands over the next several centuries, throughout Arabia, the Middle East, North Africa, and southern Europe. The Muslim military policy was to kill all those who resisted Islamic domination (see Austin 21).

Given this predilection for wrapping war and religion together, the marketing of armed conflict today in religious and even mystical terminology is not surprising. The current collection of state and religious leaders are simply building onto an age-old habit of equating humanity’s highest drives and basest desires, wrapping mass military campaigns and God together into a terrifying and unbreakable clench.

One central reason that contemporary leaders have such an easy time in representing war as religiously sanctioned and, in many cases, even a spiritual obligation, is because of this extensive history of uniting physical war and the spiritual path *within* the sacred teachings of virtually all creeds. Though much of the religious language was undoubtedly meant as metaphor, the human mind runs towards the literal, leaving reams of imagery and injunctions for state leaders to utilize when discussing military campaigns within the secular culture, and influencing the minds of potential warriors. “Again and again, in churches, temples, mosques, meeting houses, synagogues and homes, the violence-of-God traditions are passed

down through generations, molding our individual and collective psyche” (Austin 5).

The tendency to bring God and war together allows our politicians and keepers of the social status quo to “market” the institution of war to potential participants as the *ultimate* manner of becoming greater than oneself, and reaching a new, mystical consciousness. War represents the glory of the spiritual path, solely for the price of signing up and going along.

Most difficult for the un-indoctrinated to understand, perhaps, and most disturbing when thinking about how to stem the horrific tide of worldwide wars, is that so much of the actual practice of war *does* mimic the mystic’s quest. As war correspondent Chris Hedges notes,

War makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. All bow before the supreme effort. We are one. Most of us willingly accept war, as long as we can fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher good, for human beings seek not only happiness, but also meaning. And tragically, war is sometimes the most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning.

This is how it so captivates the population: War gives humans the illusion that they are fighting for a power greater than the self, which “makes the world understandable.” Before this power, “all bow and become one.” These exact words could easily be applied to the mystical path towards divine realization, which leads an aspirant to an appreciation of and respect for the God-nature hidden in everything, both living and inanimate. However, the issue tips when we look at just how war accesses meaning – it does so by *bypassing* the rational thought process and accessing the animal aspects of the human psyche.

Where war bleeds irrevocably into the lower strata of human nature is represented in the statement that “war suspends self-critical thought” (Hedges). After all, self-critical thought is the only thing

that truly separates us from animals – without it, we are little more than dexterous rats, killing machines with ever more efficient tools of destruction. As Thomas Merton pointed out, “Man is the only species besides the rat, that wantonly and cruelly turns on his own kind in unprovoked and murderous hostility. Man is the only one who deliberately seeks to destroy his own kind” (196-97). Here is the horror of the lowest aspect of the human spirit: mistaking the emotional catharsis provided by mass destruction for spiritual realization!

It is this disconnect between self-critical thought and action that allows for humans to entertain the political “solution” of war. Virtually all mystics from all major systems propose that the path to God leads directly through the self. Confucius said, “Attack the evil that is within yourself; do not attack the evil that is within others” (169). The Prophet Muhammad stated that the first stage of worship is silence. The Jewish Kabbalists believed that humans are literally the microcosm of God – and that the surest way to learn about God is to learn about oneself. As the 13th century Kabbalistic text, *Sha'are Emunah* stated, “Blessed is he or she who knows that within and above are synonymous” (qtd. in Patterson 230).

But the average person hardly takes the time to apply these spiritual maxims; even less so the political leader. Today, it is not difficult to discern the age-old dynamic of bypassing the most important aspect of true mystical realization – self-critical thought – and offering war as the quickest way to a spurious holy catharsis. In our current social and political milieu, we can easily discern how the history of fusing God with war continues to persuade the most recent generation of child warriors into believing that patriotism and the love of God are one and the same thing.

As was recently noted in *Newsweek*, in an article entitled “God, War and the Presidency,”

In America, God and war have a particular kinship: presidents in time of conflict invoke the Lord’s name as a way to rally the people ... Evoking God in the midst of mass killing is inspirational ...

Divine sanction has been used to give ... license [to] genocide. The impulse to blend God and war owes much to the American temperament: Americans have always feared one (today, nine out of 10 call themselves believers) and loved the other (the United States has fought in dozens of armed conflicts in the nation's two-and-a-third centuries). Not a few old warriors have admitted to thrilling to the words of "Onward, Christian Soldiers." (Thomas)

And as war *does* offer so much of God to humans, through its sense of obligation, sacrifice and shared purpose – and the struggle it presents is so much more basic ("a black and white tableau" [Hedges]) and psychologically less challenging than the true search for spirituality – a majority in the society turn to it with an almost relieved sigh. It is far simpler to be part of this something greater (war), than to start out on the arduous path of true spiritual realization, a terrifying pursuit with virtually no visible rewards. There are no "Purple Hearts" awarded to the quiet and realized mystic; no long, fawning, posthumous articles in the newspapers are written about heroism, sacrifice and sublime love for those who yearn towards a profound humility.

Politicians, the media, and even mainstream entertainers do everything in their power to play up the similarities between the religious path and war, all for the poorly obscured purpose of using human pawns to protect their own earthly power, or just simply make a buck. Perhaps, to some extent, they might even believe their own words; and, if they themselves have fought in a war and come out more or less whole, they will be forced to trust in the lie of a mystical war, if only to help justify the horrors they themselves witnessed and perpetrated.

We need only examine the words of a man considered an American hero, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), to understand how war language does explicitly borrow from the religious and even mystical lexicon, as he eulogized a soldier fallen in Afghanistan:

He loved his country, and the values that make us exceptional among nations, and good. ... Love

and honor oblige us. We are obliged to value our blessings, and to pay our debts to those who sacrificed to secure them for us. They are blood debts. ... The loss of every fallen soldier should hurt us lest we ever forget the terrible costs of war, and the sublime love of those who sacrifice everything on our behalf.

One can easily find similar sentiments among history's greatest mystics, which helps explain how this latter day politician can convince his audience by talking about war in such a manner. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century Christian thinker stated, "True and perfect obedience is a virtue above all virtues" (qtd. in Jones 153). The 20th century mystic Simone Weil stated, "Where there is a need, there is an obligation" (99). To the cynical, ignorant or simply uncaring, it is an easy step to apply these spiritual precepts to the lowest of human actions, war.

President George W. Bush, hardly one to shy away from equating his own motivations with those of God, utilized this same religious/war conflation to advance his political agenda. An "analysis of the speeches of President George W. Bush, especially those commenting on the war on terrorism, show that many are laced with religious language and imagery. For example, terrorists have been repeatedly referred to as 'evildoers'" (Austin 29). Hardly shocking, as his word usage simply mimics terminology utilized by religious texts from the Rig Veda to the Torah, and then systematized by St. Augustine.

President Bush's reference to "evildoers" is not difficult to understand when we consider what Christian religious leaders have been saying about Islam. "The Reverend Franklin Graham, Reverend Billy Graham's son and successor, has repeatedly called Islam an 'evil' religion. Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson described Muhammad as an 'absolute wild-eyed fanatic ... a robber and a brigand ... a killer.' The Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, called Muhammad a 'demon possessed pedophile'" (Cooperman).

This kind of absurd, hateful language by religious leaders

is hardly constrained to Christians. Osama bin Laden, who most in the Western World would argue “started” the whole thing in the first place with his various attacks on American interests, culminating in the events of 9/11/2001, stated in 1998 that “it is the duty of the Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to terrorize the enemies of God” (qtd. in Austin 27). After the successful attack on the World Trade Towers, he averred, “Almighty hit the United States at its most vulnerable point ... I swear by Almighty God ... that neither the United States or he who lives in the United States will enjoy security before ... all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad” (qtd. in Austin 28).

Clearly, both sides have reasons for bringing God and war together to promote their own interests. However, it is striking how the United States government was willing to utilize religious rhetoric in promoting its bellicose agenda:

The president outlined a far-reaching moral-mission for his presidency: “I will seize the opportunity to achieve big goals – there is nothing bigger than to achieve world peace. We’re never going to get people all in agreement about the use of force, but action – confident action that will yield positive results – provides kind of a slipstream into which reluctant nations and leaders can get behind and show themselves that there has been – you know, something positive has happened towards peace.” (See *Washington Post*, 11/16/02 and 11/19/02.)

War is peace; destruction is morality. Religious language is but another hammer in the toolbox of power, the easiest manner of selling the public on a potentially unpopular political “program.” Most distressingly, this language is simply building on religious language of almost 1500 years ago, when St. Augustine averred that the ultimate goal of war *was* peace, and if the war was “justified,” than perhaps it was the single most expedient course towards “peace.”

Once the highest temporal leaders have conflated God, love and war, it is easy, and perhaps necessary, for their inferiors

to follow. To craft his God of war imagery, President George Bush had much help from his main speech writer, Michael Gerson, who currently writes opinion pieces for the *Washington Post*:

Gerson, an evangelical Episcopalian who said he is reading a biography of the Apostle Paul for “escape,” shares Bush’s willingness to talk publicly about the centrality of the Christian faith to his life. The result was a president whose public words were laced with Biblical undertones ... “We have tried to employ religious language in a way that unites people,” [Gerson] said. “Martin Luther King Jr. did it all the time during the Civil Rights movement. He was in this tradition, going all the way back to Old Testament prophets, that says God is active in history and, eventually, on the side of justice.” (Allen)

From the President’s inner circle, the ripples of bringing together contemporary politics, God, and religious history spread out. George Weigel, a staunch supporter of George W. Bush and a biographer of Pope John Paul II, has been a strong proponent of the “Just War Theory” in conjunction with the ongoing Iraq campaign. Going beyond simply asserting that this conflict met all of the traditional criteria for a “Just War,” he argued that, “classic (religious) doctrine treated war not as a moral anomaly that had to run a gauntlet of moral tests before it could be justified, but as a moral category, a neutral instrument of statecraft that could be used for good or ill” (see *New York Times* 4/14/07).

Fluid moral thinking has infected virtually all followers of this President, as they attempt to wrap God, Jesus, and the military together into a 21st century Holy War. This notice seeped out in the alternative press:

A major defense contractor for the military and Homeland Security claimed that the United States is morally obliged to maintain a permanent presence in Iraq for the sake of God. “If we stay and rebuild Iraq, we will demonstrate to the world that we remain the best force for good in the world,” Charles

Patricoff, Sr. Contract Manager for Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corp, said. “More importantly, we as Christians can better influence that region for the Kingdom of God.” (*Pres Esc*)

In another instance, Lt. General William Boykin put on his dress greens and spoke before an American Christian group, following some of our country’s most important religious leaders (see above) in attacking Muslims as “idolaters” and “forces of Satan.” He also said that when he found himself in a battle against a Muslim warlord in Somalia, he knew he would vanquish his enemy because, “Well you know what I knew, that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol” (“US is ‘battling Satan’”).

Even at the level of popular culture and entertainment, we needn’t dig too deeply to see the way in which these myths are perpetrated and disseminated. Recently, an article about the college football coach (and one-time professional National Football League coach), Jerry Glanville, began with this lead:

Jerry Glanville can pinpoint the instant his life changed forever. In March 2004, on a morale-building trip to Iraq and Kuwait set up by the NFL, he was standing in the last latrine along the Highway of Death when a sentence scribbled on the wall hit him right between the eyes: “I’d rather live a day with the lions than a thousand years with the lambs, the American Soldier.” “I thought, ‘Wow, you’ve got to coach these kids,’” says Glanville. ... “They don’t question the mission, just ‘Let’s get it done.’” (Steeg)

Here, we see echoes of St. Augustine, who averred that “a just man, if he should happen to serve as a soldier under a human king who is sacrilegious, could rightly wage war at the king’s command, [for following orders] is not contrary to the sure precepts of God” (qtd. in Reichberg 82). One need not tweak St. Augustine’s teachings too much to see how sports, religion, unquestioning fealty to secular goals and war are all wrapped together and presented as heroic.

This religious and even mythic presentation of war persuades the general population to bypass the intent of their religious teachings, concentrating instead on its sometimes grisly content. The public is asked – using an argument based in images that they know from their religious past – to disregard that which makes them most human (their self-critical thought), and either give in to the powerful, and spurious spiritual catharsis they offer – which is represented as doing God’s will – or become (supposedly) separated from their own “higher” spirit.

For those that waver, the dead soldier is held out as incontrovertible proof of the necessity and worth of the war. After all, how could one “force” the soldier to have died in vain, by questioning the worth of his action? The war becomes worthwhile because someone has died undertaking it, a reversal of the normal assignation of worth, which defines an action’s merit *before* the risk is actually taken. In a horrifying example of the “sunk costs” theory, the more people that die for a cause, however mistaken, the more valuable the action, no matter what the true human or economic price really is.

Through the sacrifice of human souls for political ends, the sublime nature of war becomes enmeshed with a true God-experience. The very real horrors of war are euphemistically referred to in the language of mysticism: “sublime love,” “obligation,” “good causes,” “moral purpose,” “save the innocent,” “peace,” and “sacrifice.” The “fog” of war begins in the language of the powerful, and then overtakes the thought processes of the general population.

Given the historic intertwining of the mystic’s path and war imagery, the easy manner in which humans turn to bellicosity, and the long history of equating heroism and the field of battle, we must question whether war is, in fact, entirely natural to the human condition. Are those who find war abhorrent little more than delicate and hopeless dreamers, beating their impotent fists into their breasts while the massive machinery of war grinds on through the centuries? Can anything be done to stem the red tide of death spouting from ever-more horrifying war machines, often in the name of God?

Until religion and war are disentangled, there can be but little hope. As has been shown, this dynamic is not confined to a single time period, or just one of the world's religions. It appears across all time periods and in virtually all-religious institutions. It seems to be endemic to the human condition.

With political and religious leaders from George W. Bush to Osama bin Laden, from the Jewish God of the Torah to Arjuna's spiritual leader in the Bhagavad-Gita all tightly interlacing God and war, spirituality and destruction, we must consider with dread the words of the American historian and social critic, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who said on National Public Radio on September 29, 2004, "There is no one more dangerous than someone who is absolutely certain that they are doing the will of God."

If political leaders from all geographic areas and religious backgrounds are thusly convinced, where does that leave the rest of us?

Notes

¹"The Council of Nicea took place in 325 A.D. by the order of the Roman Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine. Emperor Constantine presided over a group of Church bishops and leaders with the purpose of defining the true God for all of Christianity and to eliminate all the confusion, controversy, and contention within Christ's church. Constantine, a converted Christian (debatably), called for a council meeting to be held in Nicea with the bishops of the Christian church to resolve escalating quarrels and controversy mounting to a bitter degree of disunity amongst the church leadership and congregates concerning theological issues. The failing Roman Empire, now under Constantine's rule, could not withstand the division caused by years of hard-fought arguing over doctrinal differences. He saw it not only as a threat to Christianity but as a threat to society as well." (*What occurred*)

²According to the poll, the numbers of people of each group that sometimes or always approved of the use of torture as a legitimate tool for gaining information were 56% of Catholics, 49% white Protestant, 49% white evangelical, and 34% secular. Include people who think torture is "rarely" justified, and you have two out of three Americans justifying torture under certain circumstances (Carney).

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