

The Pagan world had no problem with incorporating other people's gods. They managed to see comparable qualities and forms of foreign deities (love and war, for example) and never found it necessary to destroy these symbols, with only one exception: the gods of the Phoenicians, who demanded the sacrifice of first-born babies. That was more than Greeks or Romans could tolerate and they wiped out that worship and their worshippers (who were their economic rivals also).

Monotheists, however, had problems with polytheists. Beginning with Abraham, they destroyed idols and pagan temples, deliberately building their own temples and later churches atop Roman and Greek (and later Aztec, Mayan, and Inca) structures. Islam continued that practice, destroying what they could, and when the Christian structure was too solid or too beautiful to destroy, they painted over the art and imposed their own geometric mosaics, destroyed the bell towers and built their own slender towers for calling believers to prayer. The beautiful Hagia Sofia (Blue Mosque) in Istanbul (former Constantinople) is one of these. The same is true for lovely churches in Spain, once Catholic, then Muslim, and then Catholic again.

The Catholic structures were considered so sacrosanct that even kings could not (usually) go in to seize someone seeking sanctuary there. The one time that this sanctuary was violated created a scandal that nearly unseated a king.

I am an unbeliever in the texts of any religion, but a believer in the architecture of all of them. The magic of religious belief speaks to me in the structures, music, and arts that human beings have produced in their religious edifices much more than in their theologies. I feel as much spirituality in Notre Dame during an organ recital as I do in the remarkable Masjed-i-Sheikh-Lotfollah in Esfahan, Iran, which I think is the most beautiful Muslim structure in the world.

Two much older structures have also dazzled me with the same spirituality: Stonehenge and a recently uncovered one in Malta, long covered by a hill in a farmer's field. It is a perfect gem of a temple where people worshipped some 5,000 years ago, much like a little Stonehenge.

And until now, it has been a marvel to me that throughout religious conflicts that have roiled the world, the cathedrals of Europe have never been attacked, Catholic by Protestants (except sometimes with whitewash). And even through the bombing raids during the horrific World War II, care was taken to try to avoid destroying these world heritage treasures.

The Shiites and Sunnis have loathed each other for centuries, but for the most part have managed to get along with a minimum of bloodshed---until now. Suddenly, every day throughout the Muslim world, not only are Mosques attacked, but are deliberately attacked during religious services to kill as many people as possible. People are attacked at weddings and funerals. Bombings are inflicted not only during these rites, but a few minutes later when aide workers arrive.

This is something new and horrible. It seems like something smacking of a death spiral of the religion itself. What else can it be when someone conceives of a suicide bomber going into a mosque in Yemen full of men and boys, blowing himself up, and when the people flee, a second suicide bomber blows himself up killing the rest of the worshippers?

These horrors are being carried out in the name of people claiming the banner of religion, but it is increasingly difficult to see how that can be any more. They are carrying the banner of out-of-control street thugs who want to show how very bad they can be. Nothing is beyond them: rape, disrespect for the dead and dying, for the mourning, for prayer, for holy places, for the good people who come to the aid of the needy and desperate, for women and children in marketplaces, for civil life, for school busses, for journalists, and even for one's own people's history. They care for nothing. This is nihilism at its worst.

Even in Mecca, Mohammad's house is now a parking lot. Shame on them.

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