

Unlike the rest of the developed world, which is either tepid on religion or is fiercely secular (France) or actively hostile (China), the United States can still be called a religious country. What is different about our religious history is that we have never had a state religion and we try to protect religious freedom (freedom to practice without government intrusion). Furthermore, our lack of a formal state religion has given rise to some very original new religions, such as Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Christian Science. We also have many fringe religions that borrow from the Sufis, Yogis, or cults.

It is important to define what a religion usually is: an organized system of belief and behavior that is deemed to have its origin with God or gods. The belief is based on faith, not on reason. The behavior aspect is sustained by group support and practice. The range of belief runs from benign (reverent awe and traditional community support) to poisonous ideology, a belief so passionate that its adherents are willing to kill or die for it. American religion is usually benign because it is voluntary, not enforced by government. However, when religions become ideologies, they can become very dangerous indeed.

The definition of a religious ideology also applies to doctrinaire Communists, whose deities were Marx and Lenin and, in the case of China, Mao. True believers in these ideologies were certainly willing to kill or die for them at one time. Nazism replaced God with Hitler, who was worshipped and obeyed as such. Our most poisonous cults, such as the Jim Jones cult and the Branch Davidians, worshipped their leaders and went to their deaths because of them. The Japanese, usually not a religious people, also had a cult that was willing to use Sarin gas in a Tokyo subway to carry out their ideology of ending the world.

But there is also danger today that blind support of religious tolerance fails to distinguish between benign and ideological religions. Christianity today is a generally benign faith, but it was not always so. The Crusades from the 11th to 13th centuries and the Spanish Inquisition (16th Century) were ideological Christianity. Followers believed that they would be rewarded in heaven for killing and dying for the faith (the Crusades) or be rewarded in heaven for torturing and killing "false" or "insincere" Christians (Inquisition).

These twisted forms of Christianity were in response to the great enemy of the day, Militant Islam, which swept through Africa and South Asia, in its most ideological form. Islam enforced conversions, executed apostates (people who converted to other faiths), and believed with ideological fervor that they were behaving as God ordained. The Crusades were a response in kind to Islam, and the Inquisition came after five centuries of Muslim rule in Spain. Ideologies are inclined to invoke counter-ideologies.

Today, our concept of religious tolerance needs to be revisited. Both the United States and Europe are faced by a real dilemma. Even Christianity has some fringe ideological cults today, those who have taken up the cause of being White American Christians, ready to kill or die for the faith. The mixture of Aryan Nazism and White Christianity is deadly.

But more dangerous is the flood of Muslims fleeing their failed states, failing because of a history of corrupt governance and the emergence of an ideological form of Islam. The entire Muslim world is being threatened by the conflict between dictatorial and corrupt rulers and violent ideological Muslim cults, out to kill or die for their belief. We must be able to distinguish between benign Islam and its murderous cousin. They are not the same.

While fighting the global conflict with militant Islam (ISIS, al Qaeda, and lone wolf terrorists), we must assist the benign Muslims among us to accept the secular culture that has made Western Civilization flourish. Muslims who are practicing their religion benignly (no compulsion, no ideological poisoning) can become good citizens of the Western world. This must be part of the immigration processing, both here and in Europe. Benign neglect could be deadly.

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