Part I

Topics

Chapter 1

The Specter of Religious Identity

1

In the first two chapters of this book I want to explore the idea of "humanizing religion." This chapter looks at actual conflicts found in religious life on the global scene, what can be called "the specter of religious identity." I isolate three responses to it, namely, religious terrorism, moral particularism, and theological humanism. The next chapter steps back in order to take a more general approach to the topic, one that also explores how we ought to think ethically about the life of faith and the relation of theological ethics to other forms of thought. Both chapters introduce the idea of theological humanism, but through different forms of inquiry. The chapters ask: how ought we to inhabit and to think about our religious convictions?

What I mean by the specter of identity is quite simple. People in our global times live with multiple identities. For example, I am male, white, a citizen of the USA, a Protestant Christian, a father, a fan of the Chicago Fire soccer team, a political progressive, and so on. My "identity" is a bundle of more specific ways of identifying who I am, and it is hard to imagine how just one of these attributes (father, Fire fan, Christian) could subsume the rest, so that I would be, for instance, only a Fire fan. Our lives are multidimensional and complex. Is the complexity of actual life a good thing or is it a problem? Maybe my identity should be unified under just one, absolute identity, say, that I am a Christian. Since religious convictions claim to be about what is most real and important, as we explore in the next chapter, it is not surprising that they are usually believed to trump other ways of identifying a community or a person. That is the argument of moral particularists, as we will see. Their contention is that one's identity should be formed by the beliefs and practices of one particular community, say the Church. Oddly enough, that is also an idea driving a good deal of religious conflict, including religious terrorism.

Theological humanism, conversely, thinks that the complexity of identity is a good thing, morally and religiously. It is a good thing partly because it is crucial for individuals and communities to have the freedom to fashion different kinds of lives, but it is good also because this complexity enables kinds of self-criticism that are important in our age. The freedom for self-criticism is at the root of the human problem *inside* of every human life. People tend to want to justify themselves, that is, to show that they are right and righteous. Of course, more will be said later about these options in current religious life, but again, the basic question is whether or not the complexity of identity is a problem or a possibility, religiously and morally. Theological humanism thinks it is a possibility; others see it as a problem.

The very idea of "theological humanism" might sound odd, or at least confusing. Tzvetan Todorov has noted that humanists believe that "freedom exists and that it is precious, but at the same time they appreciate the benefit of shared values, life with others, and a self that is held responsible for its action."[1] The point of "theological humanism" is to understand religious identity in relation to commonalities of human existence and the responsibility we have to respect and enhance the integrity of life with and for others. It denotes a third way beyond the usual divide between secular humanistic outlooks and those forms of belief and practice that seek to enfold life into one particular religious community.[2] The great Renaissance humanist Petrarch wrote that "theology is a poem, with God for [its] subject."[3] The task of Christian thinking is to understand and orient human existence within a divine poem. When we think about the moral life within a theological perspective, we interpret the divine poem in terms of human needs and meanings. So, I will use religious texts and stories not just to know those stories or somehow to try to live within them alone. These texts are a prism, the spectacles, in and through which one can grasp the actual structures of lived reality.[4] By the end of this chapter I hope to have shown the importance of theological humanism as a way of inhabiting religious identities in our age.[5]

2

It is important to realize that one decisive feature of our global age is that human identities are *internally complex*. After all, there are German Muslims in Berlin, south Chinese Christians as well as women Hindus who cheer for (say) Italy in the World Cup. The reasons for this complexity are many: migration of people due to war or economic plight, worldwide communication processes and the flow of cultural symbols and commodities that enable people to envision new identities, the global spread of the religions, and so on. Of course, this fact is not new in world history. People have always

moved around for various reasons, especially due to the forces of empire, colonization, and war. Nevertheless, a feature of global dynamics is the re-fashioning of traditional identities on a scale not previously seen.[6] This fact poses a problem to the religions.

Any religion includes many things: rituals, stories and myths, communal organizations, and ideas for how to live rightly. Religions also claim to be about what is unsurpassably important *and* real that connects human beings to "sacred" or "divine" powers.[7] For Christians the living God revealed by Christ is what is most real, most important. Yet if a religion is about what is of unsurpassable importance and reality, then the complexity of identity would seem to be *a problem*. It would mean that people's lives are wrongly formed if they are shaped by what is not unsurpassably important and real, say, around political beliefs, ethnic connections, or sexual identities. On this reasoning, in order to be religious one ought to fashion lives that unify existence under one dominant identity. One should just be a Christian or only a Jew or be prepared to stand before Allah on judgment day as a devout Muslim. In other words, it appears that the religions *require* that one's identity be unified under one category that designates what is unsurpassably important and real. My Christian identity must trump my cultural or political or ethnic identity, if I am to be faithful to the living God.

If this is true of religious convictions, then how can one live in a society where the authority that backs one's identity is not recognized as absolute? How can the religions avoid conflict since my Christian identity must be at odds with, say, your Buddhist identity? The Nobel Prize winner in economics Amartya Sen has wisely written that "many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity." The problem is "the presumption that people can be uniquely categorized based on religion or culture."[8] After 11 September 2001, the rhetoric was extreme, at least in the USA. We heard about "the Islamic Nation" or "international infidels," the "Christian" West, or the "axis of evil," terms which classify people under one description. Sen has put his finger on what I am calling the "specter of identity." Is it a good thing that people's identities are complex, and, further, how ought we to live with that complexity?

The specter of identity is a clue to the inner-meaning of terrorism used in the name of religion. In the attempt to protect an identity from criticism by others or from being polluted by other ideas and values within the flow of global reflexivity, some religious communities seek to enfold existence within one description and thus one way of reading their community's divine poem, as it were. They want their identity to become their destiny, a reality about which they have no choice. More precisely, they want to force an either/or choice: either one is a real Christian or a true Buddhist or a genuine Muslim, or one is unfaithful, untrue. This *can* lead to conflict,

even terrorism. And that is because terrorism is a way to form people's identities through violent means.

In order to get this point about terrorism and identity formation one needs to be clearer about terrorism and, more specifically, "religious terrorism." As it happens, the Bible is a great text to study in order to understand terrorism. (Texts of the other great religions could also be used, but that is another matter.) Recall two biblical stories as we proceed through the rest of this chapter. They are the lenses, the spectacles, the "divine poem," in and through which we are trying to get at the lived structure of contemporary reality. They are what the biblical scholar Phyllis Trible once called "texts of terror."[9]

The first text is the various plagues God sends upon Egypt in order to free the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh. God tells Moses that the people need to leave Egypt and go into the desert and worship. Pharaoh sees this request as a threat to his political power and also a religious challenge because he is the head of Egyptian state religion. After locusts, frogs, a bloody Nile and other horrors, God finally slaughters the first-born of Egypt, human and non-human. Then we read (Exod. 12:30–1):

> Pharaoh rose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites!"[10]

Later, in Deuteronomy 26:5–11, the Israelites are told to repeat this story, to see themselves within this divine poem, and so God's salvation of Israel. This is part of Passover celebration.

The second text is the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew's Gospel. Remember that King Herod gets wind of the birth of a king of the Jews, and in order to stop this "messiah" he sends his soldiers to slaughter all male children aged 2 years and younger. The prophet Jeremiah is quoted in Matthew's Gospel about the terror of the people:

> A Voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

But, in fact, Jesus escapes. His father Joseph is warned in a dream and he takes Mary and Jesus down to Egypt. To this day, Christians celebrate this flight of Jesus as part of the Christmas season. What about the slaughtered children?

These texts of terror portray horrific, even genocidal, violence and the death of innocent children that destroys the future of people. They shape the way the people in the stories see reality in and through a clash between

political powers, a king or a pharaoh, and divine power. They form identities: the people of Israel versus the Egyptians; those who worship the messiah against Roman might. But, of course, religious terror is not a thing of the past. The reality of terrorism is hard to miss in our current world. It fills the daily newspapers. While usually associated with fanatical Islam, terrorism is found among most of the world's religions. It is not just the monotheistic religions that are involved in terror, although it is very popular nowadays to think that somehow monotheism is uniquely linked to terror. For instance, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka who are part of the National Heritage Party have been fighting a war against Hindu and Christian separatists. Buddhist monks, usually thought of as peaceful, have in fact stood by kings and fought wars for centuries.[11]

Part of the problem is what one means by "terrorism." What looks like an act of terrorism from one perspective is seen by someone else as an act of faith or martyrdom or liberation. Further, terrorism does not denote just specific violent acts, say, a car-bomb, a suicide bomber on a city bus, or even acts of genocide. More profoundly, terrorism is a psychological reality. It is a way of shaping how people see and experience the world by forming their identities through pain and fear. Jonathan Glover in his book *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* cites a memo written in 1918 by Lenin about the suppression of an uprising and how it was to be crushed. The memo is graphic but important to cite. It helps us grasp the meaning of terrorism. Part of the memo reads:

1) Hang (and I mean hang so that the *people can see*) *not less than 100* known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers.
2) Publish their names.
3) Take *all* their grain away from them.
4) Identify hostages. … Do this so that for hundreds of miles around the people can see, tremble, know and cry: they are killing and will go on killing the bloodsucking kulaks …

<div align="right">Yours, Lenin.[12]</div>

Lenin and Stalin engineered the Soviet terror, but notice that features mentioned in this brief memo are found in most forms of terrorism, including the biblical texts: horrific violence, publicity, economic deprivation, hostage taking, and systematic, widespread and public action – killing the kulaks or every first-born in Egypt or all the male children aged 2 years or younger around Bethlehem. The effect of terror is to create a situation of ongoing fear and complacency. The purpose is to make people victims of force and thereby more easily subject to control. It is to form a unified identity through subjugation to one power and one description.

Religious terrorism is a *form* of terrorism. What *religion* adds to this business is a motivation for terrorist action. One is to be a prophet or a

martyr or is somehow being faithful to God and will be rewarded for one's faithfulness. Religious terrorism is psychologically powerful, because, remember, the religious are about what is *unsurpassably* important and real. There is supposedly nothing more important or more real for a Christian than the God known in Jesus Christ; there is nothing that is more real and more important for a Jew than the God of Israel known through Torah. Religious terrorism sanctions physical and psychological violence in the name of what is believed to be most important and most real, that is, the divine. In doing so, it forges an identity under only one description in relation to divine authority. Recently, the Saudi author Wajeha al-Huwaider wrote a poem titled "When." It powerfully makes the point about Islam, but it could be applied to other religions, such as fundamentalist Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism, as well. A few lines: "When you see people living in the past with all the trappings of modernity – do not be surprised, you are in an Arab country. … When religion has control over science – you can be sure that you are in an Arab country. … When fear constantly lives in the eyes of the people – you can be certain you are in an Arab country."[13]

The point here is not about fanatical Islam or Christian fundamentalism. The point, rather, is that religious terrorism often erupts because of a conflict over what ought to form people's identities. The attacks on reason and democracy we see around the world in militant forms of religion go together, of course. What is being challenged is the idea that one's identity can and ought to be formed by anything other than obedience to absolute authority. And the debate about religion, reason, and political authority is being played out in the popular media, in religious institutions, and also in think-tanks in the United States and elsewhere. It surfaces, for instance, in the question about the relation between "Europe" and Christianity hotly debated in the framing of the constitution of the European Union. Daily we see the tensions between traditional and secular "Jews" in Israel. The question is whether or not democratic states can accept the idea that some people will form their identities through obedience to divine authority, rather than secular political authority, and, conversely, whether or not religious people can accept and live by political institutions that have no religious backing or purpose.

The global debate about religious identity is really two-sided and this is part of the structure of contemporary social and global reality. On the one side is the question of whether or not religion requires identity to be categorized under just one description – say, that one is just a Buddhist, just a Christian, or just a secular humanist – and if that is so how then does one avoid conflict with others? The other side of the question is the relation of religious identity to political organization and freedom. These two sides of the question of identity seem to be on a collision course. If religion demands

that one's identity be unified under just one description, say, a Christian identity, and yet modern politics demands the freedom to question identities and to choose which one to live, then we should expect to see the conflicts we are now in fact seeing around the world. It makes us think that we are living in the midst of a "clash of civilizations," as Samuel Huntington famously put it.[14]

What then are we to do? It depends on how religious people read the "divine poem" in which existence is to be understood. There might be ways to see human existence religiously, to interpret the divine poem, which respect and enhance, rather than demean and destroy, the integrity of life. We could even identify types of religious freedom and reason. I will come back to those possibilities later. They are, obviously, important for theological humanism. Now we need to step back and dig deeper into the idea of identity itself and, more specifically, what is meant by a *religious identity*. That will enable us to isolate with more precision the problem that must be addressed.

3

I have isolated some features of current social existence. People's identities are being challenged and refashioned within various global cultural, economic, political, and religious dynamics. Around the world, people are increasingly interacting with each other; those who were distant are now near, either through immigration or communication. This is sometimes called "global reflexivity." The term designates the ways in which we increasingly know ourselves in terms of how we are seen by others and the capacity to adjust to that information. The perception of others bends back, reflects on us, and we must respond to that perception and recognition. Sometimes people respond violently to how they are perceived by others, as when, for instance, Muslims around the world reacted to the publication of political cartoons of the Prophet or when Catholics protested the showing of *The Da Vinci Code*. In these cases, people seek to shield their identities from those forces that would criticize and change them. In other situations, people fashion new identities, sometimes called "hybrid" identities, through immigration or because of freedom from previous colonial powers.

One needs to slow down and take stock of ideas. What, really, does *identity* mean? In order to answer that question, we have to engage in conceptual analysis and also careful description of experience. And this will be important for the conclusions I want to draw about theological humanism.

Most basically, to have an "identity" is to be able to be designated as someone distinctive and to be recognized as such. People fashion identities

in a number of interrelated ways. One way is to possess some attribute or collection of attributes – like race, class, or gender – that enables oneself and others to indicate, to recognize, and to identify someone as an individual and a member of some group. If you can imagine a middle-aged white male college professor typing away at his computer and looking forward to the Fire game, then you have a way of identifying me. I can also identify myself as that man. So, first of all, social recognition and particular attributes are important in identity.[15]

Next, at a linguistic level, we identity ourselves with "names": I am William Schweiker; you are designated by yourself and by others with your name, whatever it is. This is important because in many cultures names situate us within some family lineage; a name "identifies" an individual as distinct, our first names, and yet related, family names. But even that is not all, at least on the linguistic level. We also use pronouns as linguistic markers of identity. I am me. I can say that I am myself – but I cannot say that I am you. But you can (ironically) say the same thing, that is, you can say, "I am me," too. Oddly, these pronouns are reversible; both you and I can say you and me, but we designate someone different in the use of those pronouns. What I mean by you, you designate as "me," and vice versa. This linguistic fact shows us that there is something common between us: we can each refer to ourselves as individuals. It also shows us what is different: we cannot refer to each other in the same way we refer to ourselves. On the simple linguistic plane, there is human commonality and also difference.

There is even something more in terms of language use. Strangely, "I" can refer to "me." That is, I can in some respects make myself an object of description; it is me who is the white male college teacher now struggling with the computer. And I can, of course, make you an object of description. Importantly, when I identify me, it is not at all clear who that "I" is making the description of "me." While I can make myself an object of description, in another way I cannot. Curiously, "I" am different than "me," at least linguistically. "I" transcend the "me" that is an object of various descriptors: male, white, long-winded. Philosophers call that "I" the "transcendental ego" whereas the "me" is my concrete, embodied self. Given the reversibility of pronouns, I need to realize that you too transcend the various descriptions I can make of you. None of us is merely the sum total of descriptions. Something about a human being escapes complete description. That is part of the reason Christians believe that human beings are made in the image of God. Like God, there is something about human beings that escapes control, description, complete knowledge. It is why we are social creatures, but also something more.

Notice, then, that there are various ways we create and sustain an identity: through the use of linguistic markers, through the practice of name-

giving, and through social recognition. There is one more way we fashion an identity. This is through acts of fidelity or infidelity.[16] Part of who I am, my identity, is due to the commitments I make and to which I am true through time, some commitment of love, political loyalty, membership in a church, or, most profoundly, to God. My identity can be shattered by infidelity, either my own or when someone is unfaithful to me. This dimension of trust or fidelity is important because our sense of the world, our ability to be responsible for our actions, and the nature and purpose of our social and political communities require ways of identifying someone or some community through time and in patterns of fidelity. Acts of fidelity provide reasons to sacrifice immediate wants and desires because those acts represent higher, greater goods. These insights let us grasp the special connection between responsibility and identity that is absolutely crucial for theological humanism, as we will see later. Who I am, my identity, is profoundly tied to my actions and my relations within which I faithfully or unfaithfully bear responsibility. Our identities orient us in the world and find expression in our actions and relations; our actions and relations bend back, as it were, and help to shape our identities.

Now we can understand why identity is so important to any religion. In the world's major religions adherents are always uniquely identified. A Buddhist seeks refuge in the Dharma. A Jew is part of the people of Israel. A Christian is one who follows Christ. Muslims submit to the will of Allah. Whatever is common among the religions or among certain religions, say the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, they are also particular ways of life. Each religion shapes life in a distinctive way. If I say I am a Christian, that means trust and loyalty in Christ and his way. I see and evaluate the world and others in a certain way. At least I ought to assess and see the world and others in a specific way. That is why the Israelites had to separate themselves from the Egyptians in order to worship their God, as we have it in the text noted earlier.

What is more, the religions form identity in the ways we just explored. In some religions, say Judaism, one becomes a member through lineage, birth. In religions not bound to blood-ties, like Christianity, there is the need for a symbolic or ritual birth, in baptism as a new birth into the Church. Names are involved. God changes Abram's name to Abraham; Saul becomes Paul after his conversion; Adam and Eve name their children; a Christian is given a Christian name; in other religions one can also be given special names. Even the linguistic markers are important in some religions. When asked who he is, God answers to Moses, "I am who I am." God is also called LORD. Of course, Moses can say the same thing; he can say "I am who I am," but it means something different than when uttered by God. It is not reversible because only God is the LORD. But, interestingly, a Hindu can say that the deepest insight and liberation is to see that the "I,"

my innermost self, and Atman are one. St Paul, to use a Christian example, can say that it is not he that lives, but Christ in him. So too with the idea of trust or fidelity: one must practice the Dharma, a Jew must keep the Law, a Christian must have faith in Christ and follow his way.

Religions have ways to re-identify people. They endow members with a new identity that is laid-over and transforms other identities. This religious identity shapes the way the person sees existence and how they conduct life with others. A Muslim and a Buddhist might do the same action – say help someone in need – and yet in an important and real way they are not the same actions. Christian love, to use another example, is different from other acts of love because the identity of the Christian is defined by faith in Christ.[17] What makes a religious identity different from some other identity is that it claims, again, to be rooted in what is unsurpassably important and real. For a Christian nothing is more important and more real than the God whose grace is revealed in Jesus Christ. For the Hindu it is Atman, while for a Jew it is the God revealed at Sinai who is in covenant with Israel. This seems to mean, again, that a religious identity *ought* to trump other identities: one's gender, family, political, or ethnic sense of self and community. That is the logic, as it were, of certain forms of religious terrorism, as we have seen. But is there a way to have one's religious identity formed just through one description and avoid fanatical religion? This question brings us to Christian particularism and to the next step in these reflections.

4

Importantly, there are positions that think that identity should become destiny, but these take a different tactic than religious fanaticism. I want to explore these arguments, at least briefly. They are a contrast position to theological humanism. I will do so by looking at Christian churchly theologians, although one can find similar arguments in other religious traditions. They are forms of what is called "moral particularism." The core idea is that moral norms, values, and identities are particular to the community that holds them.[18] But Christian particularism is flawed, and, therefore, we need to pick up the banner of theological humanism. On the way to that conclusion, it is necessary to examine the Christian particularist argument in terms of what we know about the problem of identity.

Some current Christian thinkers argue that the point of the Christian life is to have one's identity enfolded within the story of Jesus and to develop the virtues and traits of character needed to live out that identity. The Church is to be a kind of counter-community to empire. As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

In the Christmas story we remember that Jesus was born just as "Caesar" (the emperor) sent out a decree. On Good Friday we participate in the echoes of the crowds, "We have no King but Caesar [the emperor]." Caesar is everywhere in the narrative. The emperor is highly visible and powerful. But the community gathered around Jesus dares to commit itself to that alternate narrative that "he was crucified/ he is raised to new life/ he will come again in power."[19]

The Church is a people formed by the story of Jesus and God's action with Israel, who, surprisingly, have knowledge of mercy unknown by those in the "empire." The nations of the contemporary world, and especially Western nations, are the new empire, driven by violence and war. Christians offer the way out of that lethal condition.

On this account, the threat to Christian existence is that one's identity might be strung between political commitment to a modern democratic nation and one's proper Christian identity. Christian particularists draw an exceedingly sharp line between the Church as a people of peace, and the world, a domain of violence. What is more, the Christian story – the divine poem – only makes sense once you are on the inside, as it were. It is not the case, they argue, that we have something called "reason" that is shared by human beings and that we can use to figure out political policy, scientific theorems, or ethical norms and values. Our ability to see and understand and evaluate the world is utterly dependent on the stories that have shaped our lives. If Christians have learned their story correctly, they will just see things differently than others. They will help people, tend to the sick, promote peace, but Christians do those things for different reasons than others who are doing the same actions. A Christian is to re-narrate their life in terms of the story of Jesus and gain the virtues necessary to see their life within the Christian story.

On this account, the Church is to enfold Christian identity within the poem of God's actions in Jesus Christ, and that poem alone. Identity ought to become one's destiny. The Church's ethical task is the business of identity formation, and, further, faithfulness is to have one's identity bounded by just one description. Theology becomes sociology. This means, in the thought of Stanley Hauerwas, that Christians do not have much at stake in democracy because that demands a different identity. As he writes:

To be saved is to be grafted into a body that constitutes us by making us part of a history not universally available. It is a history of real people whom God has made part of the Kingdom through forgiveness and reconciliation. Only a people so bodily formed can survive the temptation to become a "knowledge" in the name of democracy.

And after challenging both knowledge and democracy in the name of a saved people, he adds the chilling words: "Only such a people deserves to

survive [as the Church]."[20] This is just what we would expect once religion is linked to identity formation. If the story of Jesus is unsurpassably important and real, then one's identity should be refashioned within that story, and no other. When religion has control over science, you can be certain you are in the church!

One might puzzle over this argument in terms of whether or not its basic features are really any different from fanatical religion. How is it going to help us avoid the conflict between Christians who have their identity over-against the world and other religious believers who have different, but no less absolute, identities? One might also wonder about the oddity of assuming that only Christians know about mercy and that somehow the Church is not responsible for all the forms of violence and terror done in its name throughout history. These questions would miss the point of Christian particularism. Actually, these thinkers are trying to provide a picture of Christian existence that can stop Christian complicity with political violence. They are trying to provide a specific way to read the divine poem, as it were.

Their argument hinges on two points. First, for these thinkers the problem with modern forms of political thought is the belief that human beings are really the same and therefore democracy rejects real difference. That is what democracy is supposedly all about, namely, human *equality* before the law, stripped of particular and unique identities. This rejection of specific different identities, the particularist argues, is the background for violence since the nation must now stop deviance from its vision. Their second claim is that political communities are willing to use war and violence to assert their authority and unsurpassable importance. The church has a different story. It is not the story of God slaughtering Egyptian children or God saving Jesus while the boy children of Bethlehem die at the hands of Herod's soldiers. It is a story of peace and one that accepts difference, loves the other and even the enemy. Christians therefore need to be resocialized – grafted into the body of the church as Hauerwas put it – and one task, therefore, is to get clear about the radical distinction between that story and any other story. Only in that way will Christians avoid being drawn into the violence of the political world. In other words, these thinkers are trying to show Christians how to inhabit their faith in ways that challenge any form of religious or political violence and terror.

What is wrong with that argument? The problem is this: the Christian particularist argument defuses texts of terror by insisting on just one description of identity and in utter difference to other human communities. Its strategy of Christian self-criticism requires the rejection of truth that might be found in other communities. The human problem is a social one and theology is really a form of sociology: truth and identity are a function of membership. Theological humanism seeks another way to inhabit reli-

gious beliefs and practice, another way to read human existence within the divine poem, and other grounds for self-criticism.

5

In our global times people's identities are too often circumscribed within one description and this fosters the "illusion of destiny." Strategies of identity-formation arise in part because of the reflexive interaction among peoples on the global field.[21] No community is free from interaction with others that shape its own context of life; no one is sovereign over all forces, natural and social, that shape her or his existence. The failure to control the formation of identity readily leads to harsher and even more violent means to retain the boundaries or to reassert the right of self-formation.[22] Is it really surprising that when interactions among peoples increase in our global age, so too do conflict and violence? Through the media system hatred has gone global. In terms of the religions, the question, as I have put it, is how one can and ought to inhabit a religious identity, read human life within the divine poem. What is needed is a vision of the internal complexity of identities and the various ways one can and ought to live with that complexity in self, in community, and in the world.

The nub of the issue is this, really: is the complexity of actual human identities a religious *problem* or a religious *possibility*? While religious fanatics and Christian particularists reach very different conclusions, for both of them – and for many other people – the complexity of identities in our global times is the *problem*. The answer to that problem is to have one's identity unified within *one* description defined by a community's belief about what is unsurpassably important and real. Theological humanism takes a different stance. It sees the complexity of identity as a *possibility*. People have choices to make about their identities and the real job is to form them in a way that respects and enhances the integrity of life. Recall Amartya Sen one more time. He writes,

> The point at issue is not whether *any* identity whatever can be chosen (that would be an absurd claim), but whether we do indeed have choices over alternative identities or combinations of identity, and perhaps more importantly, substantial freedom regarding what *priority* to give to the various identities we may simultaneously have.[23]

Theological humanism is a distinct way to inhabit a religious identity. It involves a choice about how to integrate one's identities, living simultaneously with an actual religious identity and some humanistic identity while orienting one's existence by what respects and enhances the integrity of life.

Humanists have long held that there is a role for choice and reasoning in shaping human lives.

This brings us, at last, to the crucial point. There is a decisive connection between *responsibility* and *identity*. Christian particularists make moral responsibility a subset of identity. That is, moral responsibility is delimited by one's Christian identity. A Christian theological humanist insists, conversely, that *responsibility is the condition for and purpose of identity*. The claims of responsibility reach across the bonds of human existence and find their roots deep in freedom, reason, and conscience which testify to human dignity. One's responsibility is the capacity for an identity and that identity can and ought to serve the integrity of life rather than the unity of identity itself. The "good" of one's identity is not something bounded by just one description; if it is genuine it is not forced but rather the outcome of a lifetime of self-labor. This means – shockingly – that one's identities can and ought to serve a good beyond themselves. The troubling assumption of particularism from this perspective is that an identity is an end-in-itself rather than being oriented by the good of the integrity of life that transcends our dear selves, our identities.

Acts of horrific violence require seeing another human being *as lacking humanity*.[24] The strategies to dehumanize others, the social mechanism needed to engender ongoing violence, are many, sadly. Tribalism, revenge, terror, racism, the eroticism of violence and power in the media, and the will of God (to name but a few) have all been used, are being used, to dehumanize others and thereby to drive social life into fury and unending violence. In our world of global reflexivity what is most important, then, is the capacity to see the other as a human being with multiple identities, some of which are shared. This means that no specific identity, including one's religious identity, can trump the whole of existence and claim exclusive right to orient action. In some contexts I need to see myself as a human being who faces death, who loves his family, and who bleeds *just like, in principle, every other human being*. And I need then to see that the one suffering before me is also a human being. In this case, more distinct identities (say, Indian or Communist or White or Christian) are set in the background and are only judged valid when believed to support shared humanity. That commonality can and must delimit the scope and extent of violence, because, again, unending conflict requires the *dehumanization* of the other. Of course, there will be other situations where one must stress more particular identities, say, in the midst of theological debate with fellow Christians or among members of one's political group. Yet even in those cases, something shared is the condition for cooperation and persuasion and also limits coercive interaction.

Notice two things about this argument regarding responsibility and identity. It actually entails a practical rule and, more importantly, a specific

stance towards oneself, one's community, and the identities of others. First, at each point of encounter with others the task is to find the relevant *commonality* that is the condition for cooperation and the limit on coercive interaction. This is a procedural rule for decisions about what priority to give to one's various identities in specific situations. It requires that no specific identity be deified as the singular description of one's existence because one's life can and ought to be dedicated towards responsible relations with and for others. This is true of the religious community as well. The Church, for instance, is not only the gathered body of believers or the body of Christ (as Christians believe), it is also a human community, a treasure in *earthen* vessels.[25] Put otherwise, because our identities are complex, we can be self-critical; we can challenge parts of our lives that lead to conflict by other parts that bind us to others. That is the nature of moral freedom, we can say. And that freedom is why we can never completely describe ourselves or another human being. It is, we might say, the image of God in human beings.

Second, this rule implies and enacts a more basic stance possible in our time. The various beliefs, values, and traditions that shape identities are enlisted in the project of fashioning social existence dedicated to what respects and enhances the integrity of life with and for others. The rule for decision-making implies a moral and spiritual stance. Someone who accepts the stance ought also to abide by this rule. Anyone who can grasp the intelligibility of the practical rule thereby endorses, at least implicitly, the coordinate stance in life. Both the rule and the stance would seem to apply to individuals and to communities insofar as the idea of "identity" is analogically applied to persons and communities.

Theological humanism arises out of and provides orientation to the complexity of life: one is a religious person (of some sort) and a humanist (of some sort) and has other identities, too. Human beings are bound together in their mortality, their fleshliness, but also because we are social creatures and persons who seek some meaning in our lives, reflexive goods. These are all embedded in the aspects of "identity" isolated earlier. There is no justification for the charge made by Christian particularists that if a situation demands priority of one's humanity (or one's Christian identity) that is somehow a betrayal of the Christian confession (or humanistic convictions). Confessions, like identities, find their *point* in a way of life. One can and must treasure a life dedicated to responsibility rather than the particularities of our identities and the convictions one embodies. Later in this book we will isolate scriptural backing for this stance and thus counter the horrific "texts of terror" (see Chapters 3 and 4).

A possible misunderstanding of theological humanism needs quickly to be corrected. I am not saying that in all situations with all people one must find commonalities and only commonalities. Part of the joy of life is to

share in our differences. Further, there are situations in life when one must resist connection with others, resist – even the use of force – when actions and policies threaten utterly to demean and to destroy the integrity of life. Unlike Christian moral particularists, a theological humanist does not believe that pacificism is the one and only norm of the life of faith. That is because a theological humanist seeks to respect and enhance the integrity of life, a commitment that requires one to resist forces that demean and destroy the integrity of persons' and communities' lives as well as the fragile integrity of our planet's ecosystem. The point is that these acts of resistance – which can take a variety of forms – are a last resort when other means of communication, understanding, and concord have broken down. But the theological humanist is not committed to accepting works of destruction and evil in the name of a love of peace.

Theological humanists inhabit their particular religious, ethnic, gendered, cultural, and racial identities deeply and yet freely. While shaped by these identities we are not slaves to them. And it is that freedom, that capacity to take responsibility for the integrity of life, that is the inner-meaning of the divine poem, I suggest. This kind of freedom makes possible faithfulness as the religious meaning of responsibility. We should read the texts of terror not only to see the workings of violence and terrorism in the formation of identity. We can and must and may read those texts as a challenge to forms of oppression in the name of the freedom to be faithful in responsibility for the integrity of life.

6

In our global times it is possible to inhabit religious identities in ways deeply religious but also humane. The freedom to take responsibility for choices about priority in our identities is actually a form of faithfulness to the integrity of life. If we grasp that insight, then the divine poem is more than just the story of the Christian tribe or a text of terror.

Notes

1   Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 4.
2   For a non-religious option, see again Luc Ferry, *God Made Man: The Meaning of Life*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
3   Cited in Morris Bishop, "Petrarch," in *Renaissance Profiles*, ed. J. H. Plumb (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 14.
4   In other texts I have called this approach "hermeneutical realism." See William Schweiker, *Power, Value and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern*

Age (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998). The idea of scripture as "spectacles" is taken from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

5   Similar arguments have been made by prominent intellectuals in various traditions. See the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); the Indian-American economist Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton, 2006); as well as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002); the philosopher of African thought Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). Also see *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Ethics*, ed. W. Schweiker, M. Johnson, and K. Jung (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

6   On this see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

7   For a related if different treatment see Martin Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen* (München: C. H. Beck, 2007).

8   Sen, *Identity and Violence*, p. xv.

9   Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984).

10 At points throughout the text, extracts from the Bible are used. New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

11 "Sri Lankan Government Finds Ally in Buddhist Monks" by Somini Sengupta (*New York Times*, February 25, 2007) can be read online by TimesSelect subscribers at: www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/world/asia/25lanka.html?_r=1&oref=slogin. Also see Martin E. Marty, "Killing for Buddha?" on *Sightings*, March 5, 2007, at http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/sightings/archive-2007/0305.shtml.

12 Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 241–2.

13 Cited by Thomas L. Friedman in his editorial "The Silence that Kills" in *The New York Times*, March 2, 2007, A21. The poem was also posted on the Arab reform site (www.aafaq.org) and also the MEMRI translation site (www.memri.org). Even more pointed is the recent book by the Somali-born author Ayaan Hirsi Ali. For years she has been forced to live in hiding and under constant threat. An anti-Qur'an script that she wrote provoked the assassination of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. Her recent book *Infidel* is about the movement from religion to reason, as she put it. In the name of reason she attacks Islamic culture as "brutal, bigoted, [and] fixated on controlling women." See Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

14   Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993), 22–49.

15   On this see Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–73.

16   On this see William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

17   On this see Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994).

18   These arguments find expression in political theory in terms of what is called communitarianism. The argument here is that modern democracy requires that people bracket their deepest beliefs about the meaning of life or what is ultimately good and true. These must be held at bay when deciding norms of justice and public policy. Norms for justice must be defined without reference to comprehensive doctrines, as John Rawls calls them. But if that is so, then, the communitarians argue, it is hard to see how someone would hold any political convictions at all. Thinkers like Michael Walzer distinguish between thick and thin moralities. A "thin" conception of what is good and just is one that supports broad, but minimal, requirements for justice within pluralistic societies. In fact, a "thick" outlook is what everyone really inhabits, that is, a set of beliefs and practices about what is good and right and just. Without those commitments, it is hard to imagine why citizens would abide by the requirements of procedural justice. The question then is whether or not those "thick" commitments define social identity in terms of a process of realization rather than the long labor of conscience and choice. As Sen put it, if identity becomes a destiny, then we are trapped by who we are and how we have been shaped rather than being able to criticize and refashion identities.

19   Walter Brueggemann. "Alien Witness: How God's People Challenge Empire," *The Christian Century* 124:5 (March 6, 2007), 31.

20   Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 106. Also see his *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

21   On the problems and possibilities of constructing new identities, see Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores, and Herbert L. Dreyfus, *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Actions and the Cultivation of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); and Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

22   See Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: New Press, 1998).

23   Sen, *Identity and Violence*, p. 38.

24   For a powerful statement of this point see Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

25 This point has been made by many Christian theologians, thankfully. See E. Troelstch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1975); James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Thomas W. Ogletree, *The World Calling: The Church's Witness in Politics and Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004); and Kristine A. Culp, "The Nature of Christian Commuinity," in *Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock, Claudia Camp, and Serene Jones (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995), pp. 155–76.