

Dangerous illusions about religion

By WILLIS ELLIOTT

Illusions about religion – sad, tragic, increasingly dangerous – thrive amid ignorance about religion. For their own purposes, propagandists manipulate these illusions, poisoning the public with prejudices, fanning the flames of hostility to the white heat of terrorism, lulling people's minds with sentimental falsehoods.

In Toronto recently, 8,000 religion scholars gathered for their annual meeting. We are enemies of illusions about religion, knowing such illusions are enemies of truth and therefore of humanity.

Here is one religion scholar's list of illusions now clouding the public mind, hindering civil discourse and endangering peace.

- 1 **Religion is itself illusory, an airy nothing, to be replaced by reason.** The illusion that humanity can rid itself of religion arises from the fact that some abandon their birth religion seemingly in favor of no religion at all. But that "no religion" functions as a surrogate way of seeing and living in the world – which is a definition of religion.
- 2 **Unlike politics, business, sports and entertainment, religion is peripheral to life.** Do you know no one whose religion is sports? What gets your attention gets you, and what holds your attention is your religion. What effects will society suffer from secularism's sidelining of "institutional religion" and the religious heritage of America?
- 3 **If the religions can't settle their differences, world peace is impossible.** This illusion is fed by the fact that sometimes religion gets co-opted and corrupted by armed power, but religious differences do not in themselves make for bad neighbors. Besides, the

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religions could "settle their differences" only at the loss of their integrity, the comprehensive vision and claim of each.

- 4 **Religion is unfriendly to freedom.** Libertines think so, but do not end up free. From the Mayflower compact on, religion has been the foundation of American freedom.
- 5 **Freedom can exist without religion.** Some philosophers have thought so; no government has demonstrated it.
- 6 **Belief in a creator is insupportable by reason.** The notion that the universe came into being and order randomly, just by itself, is gradually losing intellectual respectability.
- 7 **Religion teaches faith; science is based on knowledge.** The faith/reason, faith/knowledge splits fade as science is better understood as based on faith and religion is ever more accepted as a way of knowing.
- 8 **One religion's sacred scripture is as**

good as another's. You cannot believe that if you believe humans, as equally created in God's image, are entitled to equal rights, including freedom of worship/speech/press/assembly – a conviction supported by only one sacred scripture, the Bible.

- 9 **Everything real is material.** This Western nonsense, and the Eastern nonsense that everything is spiritual, cancel each other.
- 10 **Religion is a private matter and should be kept out of public affairs, including public education.** Impossible. Public figures ground their rhetoric in world-views that are foundationally religious. Our "civil religion" (In God we trust, etc.) is foundational to the American way of life.
- 11 **America's religious liberty means religion is optional.** While our Constitution's First Amendment guarantees freedom from a federal-government-imposed religious "establishment" (that is, an official national church), nothing can free human beings from trying to make overall sense of their lives and of the world and the universe. Those who do not take responsibility for this religious obligation suffer the consequence: Some religion they did not choose is imposed on them.
- 12 **In public life or on public property, nothing religious that anyone finds offensive should be permitted.** Since there is nothing religious that nobody finds offensive, this stricture reduces to "nothing religious should be permitted in public life or on public property." The ultimate absurdity of this is the tyranny of a minority of one: One California atheist was enough to eliminate "under God" from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance.

- 13 **The Crusades were unprovoked attacks of Christians against Muslims.** Muslim armies overran and conquered most of Christendom, and the Crusades were attempts to recoup part of the loss.
- 14 **All religions are basically the same.** Not from hostility but by the very nature of each religion as intended for everybody, every religion excludes rivals. Only those with little or no commitment to a religion fail to understand this plain fact.
- 15 **Islam is a religion of peace.** "Islam" means submission, so a resultant meaning is "peace": Those who submit are peaceful. Mecca did not submit to Muhammad, so he took it by the sword, and it has been peaceful ever since.
- 16 **The root of religion is nothing but fear.** And awe, wonder, love, yearning for transcendence.
- 17 **Religion is ethics rendered impressive by ritual.** Or it's only really psychology with a blessing. Or an anodyne for pain and suffering (Marx's "opiate of the people"). Religion is not reducible to something else.
- 18 **The United States is not a Christian nation.** We are the most Christian nation in percentage of population and in church attendance, but the Founding Fathers had the wisdom to form a government that is neither secular nor religion-neutral. If the founders had intended the government to be religion-neutral, they would not have used biblical expressions; and if secular, they would not have appointed chaplains in government and the military.

Willis Elliott of Craigville taught world religions at the University of Hawaii; and elsewhere, the languages of the Bible.

Commentary

The numerals are from the column (over).

3 I publish in newspapers because I want to use this medium to say "Jesus" to the public, & publishers often bowdlerize the word (i.e., drop it, to avoid offence to nonChristians). So here. I ended the paragraph thus: "While I cannot surrender my vision of Jesus as the ultimate 'Lord of all,' that exclusive claim--far from making me a bad neighbor--obligates me to obey Jesus' call to 'love your neighbor' and even 'love you enemy'." To trope a great hymn, "How sour the name of Jesus sounds / in nonbelievers ears." But Jesus is, post-9/11, making a public comeback.

6 I capitalized "Creator." The editor dropped "Scientist-author Michael Crichton asks whether it is reasonable to think nobody put into the Big Bang everything that has come from it. The rationally inferior notion...."

8 I had "the Bible stands behind and.... While 'bible' is used metaphorically of other sacred scriptures, 'the Bible' means the Old Testament plus the New Testament."

10 Here is my text after "Impossible. In persuading to particular ways of seeing/valuing/deciding, public figures (teachers, politicians, the media) ground their rhetoric in world-views (cultural paradigms)....Our civil religion ("In God We Trust," etc.) is foundational to the American way of life, as all our founding fathers agreed (even Jefferson, despite his infatuation with the French Philosophes)."

12 The editor has me saying that "One California atheist was enough to eliminate...." Here is my qualification: "one California atheist was enough, in the Ninth Circuit Court,...."

14 In the first sentence, the editor dropped this ending: "all paths lead to the mountaintop." The dominant metaphor for this conviction is too important, too clarifying, to suffer elision. And the editor, after "this plain fact," dropped the rest of my ¶: "For example, Islam divides the world into lands under Muslim control ("dar al-islam") and lands that by "jihad" will come under Muslim control ("dar al-harb" [war]). The Qur'an obliges Muslims to try to destroy any non-Muslim government on land that was once under Muslim control: Arafat's religion forbids his accepting the existence of the State of Israel."

17 The editor ended without this: "Inwardly, it is 'the soul's sincere desire,...the motion of a hidden fire': outwardly, it is rituals of worship, praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, hope; and it is commensurate action in the world, 'walking the walk'."

18 Before the end of the first sentence & before the last sentence, I had this: "religion-open--neither secular nor religion-neutral. The First Amendment binds the federal government against being church-partial (i.e., favoring one church over the others) and against 'prohibiting the free exercise' of religion."

The LARGE-TYPE BOX? It tames & distorts my text by suggesting that religion is itself nonviolent but sometimes is victimized by the violent--a half-truth for which my text's only basis is in the first paragraph, which balances with the fact that propagandists poison the public mind with "sentimental falsehoods" (one of which I nail in 15, whose bold-face is a quotation from the present President). Indeed, #15 is an instance of "poisoning the public" with "sentimental falsehood," Islam being inherently pro-violent (on which see also #13). Further, the second clause in the large-type box is a half-truth: as #14 shows, it's a "plain fact" that "in themselves" (each claiming the whole truth & therefore inherently claiming "everybody" for its whole truth) "religious differences" do "make for bad neighbors"--but this built-in opposition need not burst out as active hostility if the neighbors are (1) cool about their religions (i.e., not passionate) or (2) involved with one another in common interests &/or leisure friendship. 1, after the 1st sentence: "Itself irrational in the light of human history and the human heart, this illusion has a bloody record from the French Revolution's 'goddess of reason' to communism's 'scientific dialectical materialism'. Religion is as characteristic of humanity as is language."2, after the 1st sentence: "For millions, true of what is called religion. But....How worthy of your humanity is what is now holding your attention? What effect did 9/11 have on your actual religion?".... 11, end of 1st sentence: ": we are incurably sense-makers, and overall sense is precisely the intellectual dimension of religion."

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7 — Illusions about religion—sad, tragic, increasingly dangerous—thrive in the soil of ignorance about religion. For their own purposes, propagandists manipulate these illusions, poisoning the public with prejudices, fanning the flames of hostility to the white head of terrorism, lulling people's minds with sentimental falsehoods.

In Toronto recently, 8,000 religion scholars gathered for their annual meeting. We are enemies of illusions about religion, knowing that these illusions are enemies of truth and therefore of humanity. And our lists have more items in common than the general public might think.

Here is one religion scholar's list of illusions now beclouding the public mind, hindering civil discourse, and endangering peace. Each deserves an essay but here can have only a brief comment.

Illusion 1: Religion is itself illusory, an airy nothing, to be replaced by reason. (Itself irrational in the light of human history and the human heart, this illusion has a bloody record from the French Revolution's "goddess of reason" to communism's "scientific dialectical materialism." Religion is as characteristic of humanity as is language.) The illusion that humanity can rid itself of religion arises from the fact that some abandon their birth-religion seemingly in favor of no religion at all. But on examination, their "no religion" functions as a surrogate way of seeing and living in the world (which is a definition of religion).

Illusion 2: Unlike politics, business, sports, and entertainment, religion is peripheral to life. (For millions, true of what is called religion. But) do you know no one whose religion is sports? What gets your attention gets you, and what holds your attention is your religion. (How worthy of your humanity is what is now holding your attention?) (What effect did 9/11 have on your actual religion?) What effects will society suffer from secularism's sidelining of "institutional religion" and the religious heritage of America?

Illusion 3: If the religions can't settle their differences, world peace is impossible. This illusion is fed by the fact that sometimes religion gets coopted and corrupted by armed power, but religious differences do not in themselves make for bad neighbors. Besides, the religions could "settle their differences" only at the loss of their integrity, the comprehensive vision and claim of each. (While I cannot surrender my vision of Jesus as the ultimate "Lord of all," that exclusive claim—far from making me a bad neighbor—obligates me to obey Jesus' call to me to "love your neighbor" and even "love your enemy.")

Illusion 4: Religion is unfriendly to freedom. Libertines think so, but do not end up free. From the Mayflower compact on, religion has been the foundation of American freedom.

Illusion 5: Freedom can exist without religion. Some philosophers have thought so, no government has demonstrated it.

Illusion 6: Belief in a Creator is insupportable by reason. (Scientist-author Michael Crichton asks whether it's reasonable to think nobody put into the Big Bang everything than has come from it.) The (rationally inferior) notion that the universe came into being and order randomly, just by itself, is gradually losing intellectual respectability.

Illusion 7: Religion teaches faith, science is based on knowledge. The faith/reason, faith/knowledge splits are fading away as science is (ever) better understood as based on faith and religion is ever more accepted as a way of knowing.

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Illusion 8: One religion's sacred scripture is as good as another's. You cannot believe that if you believe that human beings, as equally created in God's image, are entitled to equal rights, including freedom of worship/speech/press/assembly—a conviction only one sacred scripture, the Bible, stands behind and supports. (While "bible" is used metaphorically of other sacred scriptures, "the Bible" means the Old Testament plus the New Testament.)

Illusion 9: Everything real is material. This Western nonsense, and the Eastern nonsense that everything is spiritual, cancel each another.

Illusion 10: Religion is a private matter and should be kept out of public affairs, including public education. Impossible. (In persuading to particular ways of seeing/valuing/deciding,) public figures ((teachers, politicians, the media)) ground their rhetoric in world-views (cultural paradigms) which are foundationally religious. Our "civil religion" ("In God We Trust," etc.) is foundational to the American way of life, as all our founding fathers agreed (even Jefferson, despite his infatuation with the French Philosophes).

Illusion 11: America's religious liberty means (that) religion is optional. While our Constitution's First Amendment guarantees freedom from a federal-government-imposed religious "establishment" (that is, an official national church), nothing can free human beings from trying to make overall sense of their lives and of the world and the universe (we are incurably sense-makers, and overall sense is precisely the intellectual dimension of religion.) Those who do not take responsibility for this religious obligation suffer the consequence: some religion they did not choose is imposed on them.

Illusion 12: In public life or on public property, nothing religious that anyone finds offensive should be permitted. Since there is nothing religious that nobody finds offensive, this stricture reduces to "Nothing religious should be permitted in public life or on public property." The ultimate absurdity of this is the tyranny of a minority of one: one California atheist was enough (in the Ninth Circuit Court,) to eliminate "under God" from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Nowhere anytime has religionlessness long succeeded—even with the help of ruthless violence, as in communist states.

Illusion 13: The Crusades were unprovoked attacks of Christians against Muslims. Muslim armies overran and conquered most of Christendom, and the Crusades were attempts to recoup part of the loss.

Illusion 14: All religions are basically the same, (all paths lead to the mountaintop) Not from hostility but by the very nature of each religion as intended for everybody, every religion excludes rivals. Only those with little or no commitment to a religion fail to understand this plain fact. (For example, Islam divides the world into lands under Muslim control ("dar al-islam") and lands that by "jihad" will come under Muslim control ("dar al-harb" [war]). The Qur'an obligates Muslims to try to destroy any non-Muslim government on land that was once under Muslim control: Arafat's religion forbids his accepting the existence of the State of Israel.)

Illusion 15: Islam is a religion of peace. "Islam" means submission, so a resultant meaning of "islam" is peace: those who submit are peaceful. Mecca did not submit to Muhammad, so he took it by the sword, and it has been peaceful ever since.

Illusion 16: The root of religion is nothing but fear. And awe, wonder, love, yearning for transcendence. Watch that "nothing but"! Religion's root is too multiplex to be limited to anybody's pet peeve or particular passion.

→ Illusion 17: Religion is ethics rendered impressive by ritual. Or its only really psychology with a blessing. Or an anodyne for pain and suffering (Marx's "opiate of the people"). Again, watch that
+ "nothing but"! Religion is no reducible to something else. (Inwardly, it is "the soul's sincere desire, ... the motion of a hidden fire": outwardly, it is rituals of worship, praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, hope; and it is commensurate action in the world, "walking the walk.")

Illusion 18: The United States is not a Christian nation. We are the most Christian nation in percentage of population and in church attendance, but the founding fathers had the wisdom to form a government that is religion-open—not secular and not religion-neutral. (The First Amendment binds the federal government against being church-partial (i.e., favoring one church over the others) and against "prohibiting the free exercise" of religion.) If the founders had intended the government to be religion-neutral, they would not have used Biblical expressions; and if secular, they would not have appointed chaplains in government and the military.

In the University of Hawaii, Willis Elliott taught the world's religions; and elsewhere, the languages of the Bible.

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P.S. continue with interest (it)
S. "where did we come from?"

ILLUSION #4: That religion has no place in American public education. In his A COMMON FAITH (1934), John Dewey, father of "progressive education," proposed that belief in democracy replace religious teachings and exercises in our public schools. That year, my senior year in highschool, Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS (our first English-language classic after Chaucer and the King James Version of the Bible) was dropped: "religious." (The previous year, it was required reading for my older sister.) Gradually, religious literacy declined to its nadir, today: abysmal religious ignorance--relieved, at most, by a superficial thumbnailing of the world's religions. (6)

ILLUSION #5: That the American public schools are religion-free & therefore religion-neutral spaces. Suppose that as the utopian ideal: it would require that teachers avoid the three religio-philosophical questions forever facing humanity, namely, Where did we come from? why are we here? where are we going? As we all should know, none of these questions is avoidable: children ask them, & teachers aren't permitted to say "I don't know." Even if they were so permitted, their integrity would not permit it.

So how do our public teachers answer these questions? Or rather, how are they taught to (allowing for some rebels)? They say we come from a big bang by a random process of cosmic-energy distribution through the "spontaneous" generation of life & "natural" selection of species. Why are we here? NO particular reason, but we should be kind to one another. Where are we going? To dust, planetary extinction, and perhaps cosmic collapse into a far-end big bang. That is the world story taught in our public schools, higher ed, & the media. As a story that leaves nothing out, it meets the requirement of being religious. And it is a religion exclusive of deity: God is superfluous. Ergo, the God-religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) are superfluous to thought & life.

ILLUSION #6: That the Am. gov't. is secular. This would be news to the Founding Fathers, who assumed biblical religion as the cultural foundation of the republic. Secularists are eager to rewrite our history & erase all traces of God from our public life, including prayers at the beginning of all sessions of Congress & of the Supreme Court, all chaplaincies, all visual symbols of religion on monuments & in public buildings. The Communists did it where they were in control; thank God neither they nor our home-grown secularists are in control in the USA.

That while pol, bus, & entertainment are powerful forces in the world, religion is weak & weakening. Reply: Religion, except when too narrowly defined, is & always has been powerful and (as we saw 9/11 and since) dangerous.

BEGIN

No enough solid can be said about religion to make discussing it worth while.
 REPOLY: Every one of the 8,000 religion scholars who recently gathered in Toronto for their annual meeting is a dispeller of this illusion. While much can & should be said about religion itself; & the fact that there are many religions should no more discourage the study & understanding than should the fact that there are many languages discourage scholars from the study & understanding of language itself.

BEGIN

Ign is dangerous, producing illusions that impede the search for truth & foster unnecessary prejudice, hostilities, conflicts. You might try your hand at the list of these illusions. I've tried mine, and here is my short list. Here is one religion scholar's short list, necessarily abrupt: it would take an essay to nuance each illusion. I have space only for a brief comment on each.

Religion causes conflict; & if we got rid of it, there would be peace. The French & Russ Revolutions, both aggressively atheist, were ruthlessly bloody, in contrast to the Am Rev.

That one rel is as good as another. If you believe that human beings, as equally created in God's image, are entitled to eq rights, you believe a civil rel whose primary source is the Jew & Xn B. No other relig is that "good" (in this pol sense).

That Islam is a rel of peace. "Islam" means submission, & those who submit are (of course) peaceful. But Islam divides the world into areas now in submission ("dar al-islam") and areas in which Muslims are to push for submission ("dar-al'harb struggle for dominance (d) stuggle ("jihad," incl war)

Bec Jud, Xny, & Islam claim Ab as their forefather, they are basically the same rel., & so their devotees should be able to live tog in peace. These rels have irreconcilable visions, but their peoples can learn to coop toward common ends.

Arafat's rel. permits him to accept the existence of the State of Is. Islam enjoins all believers to reject any non-Muslim govt on territory that once was Muslim.

ILLUSION #7: That if they really cared enough, the world's religions could get together on a common core, eliminating conflicting religious ends. The linguistic parallel to this simple-minded proposal is Esperanto, designed to be the world's common language--long ago proposed, & forgotten.

This proposal betrays ignorance of the nature of religion as an inclusive vision and practice: each religion has a complete worldview: nothing is left out, so nothing is left over for any other religion. For ex, Islam divides the globe into "Islamic" lands (now under Muslim control) & "jihad" lands (not yet under M control): no real estate left for any other religion. Once a territory comes under Muslim control, Muslims are to give their lives if nec to prevent its coming under any other control: Palestinian Muslims are religion-bound to try to destroy the non-M State of Israel.

Not from hostility but from the very nature of a religion, each religion excludes rivals. Only those with a superficial knowledge of religion & commitment to a religion fail to understand this fact.

ILLUSION #8: If religions can't settle their differences, world peace is impossible. This illusion is fed by the fact that often a religion gets coopted into economic & political armies (as in the Balkans), but religious differences do not in themselves make for bad neighbors. Besides, if the religions did "settle their differences," they could do so only at the loss of their integrity, the comprehensive vision of each. As a Christian, I cannot surround my vision of Jesus as ultimately "Lord of all"; but far from making me a bad neighbor, I must obey Jesus when he calls me to "love your neighbor" and even "love your enemy."

ILLUSION #9: That all religions are basically the same, all paths leading to the top of the mountain. As a teacher of the world's religions in the U. of Hawaii, I had to be acutely aware of religious differences as well as of possible convergences. To take one esp. pertinent now on the world scene, the founders of Xny & Islam had opposite messages on violence. Jesus said "put up your sword" & suffered v: Muhammad founded Islam as a military general.

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INTRO.....

Rel is a stumbling block to freedom. Libertines think so, but do not end up in freedom. From the Mayflower Compact on, rel has been the foundation of Am freedom.

Freedom can exist without rel. Some philosophers have thought so, no statements have demonstrated it.

That Am's founders intended a secular gov't, rel-neutral. Most of the states had official chs., & the First Am says the nation is to have no "established" of rel. (i.e., official church). The people (not the gov't) were Xn; The gov't was nonpartisan about the churches, but not neutral of rel. (else we'd not have our motto as "In God we trust," the Pres had at inaug would not be in a B, the sessions of Congress would not be opened with prayer, the mil would not have chaplains, etc.).

Christianity & Islam are eq inclined to v. J was killed, Muh killed. Christianity had 3 cs of development before it took the sword: Islam's founder by the sword est his rel in Mecca. War is nat in Islam; Xns have to argue for it themselves into it.

That rel is ^{what it is} manmade, & one may choose not to make it: one may choose to be nonreligi. A rel is a part way of seeing the world & living in it; it is what gets & holds one's att; it is one's ult concern, deepest passion. The option of not being nonrelig does not exist.

Belief in a Creator is insupportable by reason. Science author Michael Crichton asks whether it's reasonable to think nobody put into the big bang everything that has come from it. The notion that everything happened randomly itself is losing intellectual respectability.

Rel is nothing but.... Rel is irreducible, "a-tomic" (Psy? Ethics?)

The root of reli is nothing but... KFear? Awe, wonder, love, yearning for transcendence. Too much for anybody's pet peeve or particular passion.

Rel teaches faith, sc is based on kn. Sc is based on faith, & rel is a way of knowing. The faith/knowledge, faith/reason splits are false.

That rel will fade away. Marx & Feud thought so, but that was only one of their illusions.

That reality is matter, not spirit. West materialism is only as half right as is Eastern mysticism (with its belief in spiritism, that matter is unreal).

10

That the Crusades were unprovoked attacks of Xns against Muslims. Muslim armies had swept over most of Xndom, and the Crusades were attempts to recoup part of the loss. Osama against "C & Jews."

That notg relg offensive to anyone should be permitted in pub life. The tyranny of the minority. Pseudo-pluranism obscures difernces.

That rel is optional to soc-pol order.

I remember L & R

Revels of alt. world to some G.