



A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence

Ulrich Beck

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Religion posits one characteristic as an absolute: faith. Compared to faith, all other social distinctions and sources of conflict are insignificant. The New Testament says: 'We are all equal in the sight of God'. To be sure, this equality applies only to those who acknowledge God's existence. What this means is that alongside the abolition of class and nation within the community of believers, religion introduces a new fundamental distinction into the world the distinction between the right kind of believers and the wrong kind. Thus overtly or tacitly, religion brings with it the demonization of believers in other faiths.

The central question that will decide the continued existence of humanity is this: How can we conceive of a type of inter-religious tolerance in which loving one's neighbor does not imply war to the death, a type of tolerance whose goal is not truth but peace?

Is what we are experiencing at present a regression of monotheistic religion to a polytheism of the religious spirit under the heading of 'a God of one's own'? In Western societies, where the autonomy of the individual has been internalized, individual human beings tend to feel increasingly at liberty to tell themselves little faith stories that fit their own lives to appoint 'Gods of their own'. However, this God of their own is no longer the one and only God who presides over salvation by seizing control of history and empowering his followers to be intolerant and use naked force.

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