

Render and Surrender: Fundamentalist Monotheism Confronts the Separation of Church and State

**Paula Bolduc and
James Hersh**

This paper examines two conflicts that emerge in the engagement between monotheism, especially as it is expressed in its fundamentalist form in both Christianity and Islam, and the separation of church and state. The first conflict involves intellectual compartmentalizing. We take issue with the argument of Bernard Lewis that the exhortation of Jesus to his followers to "render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's" afforded Christianity an easy accommodation to the separation of church and state. Islam names itself for a "surrender"

that is acknowledged by most Muslims as total and that, therefore, as Lewis himself claims, does not allow for intellectual compartmentalizing. A Muslim could not accommodate, for example, a social contract that included the adoption of a Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" over her religious beliefs. Nevertheless, we argue that it is possible to see compartmentalizing itself as an act of surrender if it involves a contract that protects one's religious practice. The second conflict concerns the possibility that the contract may require that all "absolute truths" be assigned metaphorical status. Although there appear to be only three possible intellectual positions produced by the engagement between a monotheism that lays claim to an absolute truth and the separation of church and state, we show that there exists a fourth position. This fourth position relieves a monotheist of the necessity of renouncing all claims of absolute truth in order to participate in a contract separating church and state.

When Jesus exhorts his followers to "render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's" (Matthew 22:21), he implies an intellectual compartmentalization that makes possible the separation of church and state. Bernard Lewis claims that this compartmentalizing afforded European Christianity an easier accommodation to the historical separation of church and state in the 18th century, especially as that separation was expressed in Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and in the Constitution of the United States.¹ Moreover, Lewis argues that secularism was itself an invention of Christianity necessitated by the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Lewis' argument is that because the Muslim world never experienced the kind of religious wars that Europe experienced, the need for a separation of church and state never arose in the Muslim world as it did in Christian Europe.² Also, Islam, insofar as it requires a "surrender" that is total ("Islam" means "surrender"), does not appear to allow for the sort of intellectual compartmentalization called for in Jesus' maxim; that is, it appears that for a Muslim there can be no "non-Muslim compartment" in one's mind or in one's life. Lewis explains:

For Muslims, Islam is not merely a system of belief and worship, a compartment of life, so to speak, distinct from other compartments which are the concern of non-religious authorities administering non-religious laws. It is rather the whole of life, and its rules include civil, criminal, and even what we would call constitutional law.³

To participate in a separation of church and state seems to render Muslims “non-Muslim” since their “surrender” becomes conditional. To borrow an image from John Rawls’ description of a fair and just society, the compartmentalizing called for in a social contract which separates church and state requires that a “veil of ignorance”⁴ be thrown over one’s religious beliefs in order to allow for the simultaneous practice of all beliefs. An intellectual compartment is thus created that has no bias regarding religions or their truth claims.

Our position is that neither compartmentalizing nor believing in absolute truths is problematical for participation in a separation of church and state contract, as long as that monotheistic “absolute” truth does not lead to literal harm to other citizens of the state.

The Conflict in Dialogue Between Compartments

Imagine a dialogue between two compartments in the mind. One compartment is that of a fundamentalist monotheism with its beliefs and practices; the other is the compartment within which a political contract is drawn up for the separation of church and state. There are four possible outcomes to this dialogue:

1. A disagreement leading to *the rejection of fundamentalist monotheism*. One might, in this case, choose to adopt a more moderate non-fundamentalist form of monotheism that would allow for compartmentalization. This move, however, we maintain, is not necessary.
2. A discord between the compartments leading to *the rejection of the state*. One might think that one’s religion denies one the option of compartmentalizing since religious surrender is seen as unavoidably “total”, or that the contract separating church and state demands that “absolute” truth is not absolute. This move, we also claim, is not necessary for a fundamentalist.
3. One might *passively accept participation* in the state’s contract and in one’s fundamentalist religion only because the possible implications of that contract have not been thought through. In this case there is not a meaningful dialogue between compartments.
4. A *mutual acknowledgement between the compartments with no discord*. Our contention is that a meaningful reconciliation between

the state compartment and a fundamentalist monotheism compartment is possible.

In the first position a person adopts a more tolerant monotheism and may even claim that she no longer accepts the “absolute” character of her religious truths. “My religion is no longer the *true* religion,” she might say. She might also claim that her religious surrender is not total since she maintains a state compartment in her mind that is seen as nonreligious. When John F. Kennedy, during his 1960 campaign, defended his desire to be President by saying that he would not allow his Catholicism to influence his political decisions, he was claiming the ability to compartmentalize: “Whatever one’s religion in his private life may be, for the officeholder, nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts—including the First Amendment and the separation of church and state.”⁵ This issue of precedence of state over religious fundamentalist monotheism is what leads some people to the second position.

The second position rejects the state’s contract because one believes that the demand for compartmentalizing is inconsistent with the religious demand for total surrender. This person feels that there can be no state compartment in the mind and that the notion of giving precedence, as Kennedy did, to such a compartment is not only intolerable, but also an immoral compromise. In this case, the state is rejected. This is the position of fundamentalists who have no intellectual space for “Caesar”.

The third possible position does not represent a meaningful conversation between compartments since the person has not thought through the implications of compartmentalizing. Had a conversation occurred, the person might have been led to either of the first two positions.

Finally, regarding the fourth position, our argument is simple. There is no reason why one could not view the creation of a state compartment in the mind as itself an act of religious surrender if that creation were necessary to produce a state that protected and made possible one’s religious practice. Compartmentalizing, here, is a necessary ingredient in a religious surrender and a part of that surrender’s totality. That which protects religious practice is *included in* and *is necessary to* religious surrender, and there can be no religion to surrender to without this protecting state.

The Conflict in Belief in “Absolute Truths”

It could also be argued that anyone participating in a contract separating church and state must forsake *all* notions of absolute

truth. Yet, we contend that some absolute truths can be held without causing harm to other people. If an absolute truth can be held without causing harm, then the state has no reason to be concerned. For example, someone might believe that "Allah is One" and that the Christian Trinity is a form of polytheism, without feeling that that belief is a call to harm Christians. Such absolute truths can be maintained even while the believer agrees to the separation of church and state.

Some "absolute" truths, however, may lead to harm, as for example, beliefs regarding land. Conflicting beliefs about the area of Al Aqsa Mosque/ Temple Mount in Jerusalem or Ayodhya in India may lead to bloodshed. In such instances, the state contract implies one or both of the following: either one's belief must be seen as a metaphor, or one must admit that one is caught in an intellectual paradox. In the first case, if the believer is able to say that Jerusalem is not a literal Jerusalem, but a "Jerusalem in the mind", then the fact that "infidels" are walking in literal Jerusalem is not a cause for alarm. These "infidels", therefore, need not be harmed since they cannot violate the "Jerusalem in the mind".

The question here is, What do one's religious beliefs demand? If one's beliefs demand an ethnic cleansing of certain geographical areas because those areas are sacred in some literal sense, then one cannot meaningfully participate in a contract separating church and state. The religious truth will not tolerate a secular state, and there can be no compromise. Metaphorical belief allows for compromising, while fundamentalism is "all or nothing".

Thus, metaphorical thinking might provide a solution to fundamentalist absolutism. If religious truths are viewed metaphorically, a balance between church and state becomes feasible. One example of this balance might be expressed through constitutional law. The Bill of Rights is a way of looking at competing notions of truth. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution demands that the state compartment not take sides. That means that from the perspective of this compartment the belief in the divinity of Christ, for example, stands on equal political footing with, and has equal value to, the belief in the non-divinity of Christ. The state compartment simply sees religious compartments making claims, and its only desire is to protect the right to make those claims. However, if the state compartment were required to judge among the veracity of these various claims, it would be forced to view each "truth" as a metaphor. Hence, the only way for competing and contradictory absolute truths to be viewed meaningfully as truths is for each to be interpreted as a metaphorical "truth".

One might argue that this determination ought to be added to the contract separating church and state. This judgment, so the argument

goes, ought not to take the form of a bias regarding which “truth” is actually true (for example, the state ought not choose Islamic “truth” over Christian “truth”, or vice versa); to the contrary, this compartment ought to make a judgment that all such “truths” are metaphors. The conclusion to this argument is that this judgment ought to be made because it is the *only* understanding that can produce political order, that only metaphorical thinking will provide a peaceful, tolerant, and fair society. As the Islamist scholar Henri Corbin once oversimplified the situation in a manner that could be seen as offensive, “What is wrong with the Islamic world is that it has destroyed its images, and without these images that are so rich and so full in its tradition, they [Muslims] are going crazy because they have no containers for their extraordinary imaginative power.”⁶ The assumption here is that only by recognizing *images* as images are Muslims prevented from “going crazy”. Thus, one might argue that the contract separating church and state ought to require that religious truths be regarded as metaphors.

Our position, however, is that even though we ourselves prefer the metaphorical approach, metaphorical thinking need not be required by this contract. The state requires metaphorical status only for those absolute truths when they lead to harm, as in cases of ethnic cleansing. There is nothing in the contract separating church and state that demands metaphorical thinking regarding other religious beliefs. The fourth position is just as viable as the first position. A monotheist, even a fundamentalist whose beliefs in absolute truths do not lead to harm, can participate meaningfully in a contract separating church and state.

Paula Bolduc, M.A., M.S., Department of English, Salve Regina University, 100 Ochre Point Avenue, Newport, Rhode Island 02840-4192, U.S.A.; e-mail: bolducp@salve.edu; James Hersh, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, Salve Regina University, same postal address; e-mail: hershj@salve.edu

NOTES

- 1 Lewis, Bernard, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 179.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 4 Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, revised ed., 1999), paragraph 24.
- 5 Cited in Menendez, Albert J., *John F. Kennedy: Catholic and Humanist* (New York: Prometheus Books, no date). See also Barrett, Patricia, *Religious Liberty and the American Presidency* (Herder & Herder, 1963), p. 9.
- 6 In a conversation with James Hillman. See Hillman, J., ed., *Inter Views* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 142.