CHAPTER 4

RELIGION AND THE STATE

A TYRANNOUS ALLIANCE

The continuation of religious intolerance, carried out internationally and expressed violently, was a major reason for the authorship of the New Atheist books. Some historians see the problem in a larger context as a “clash of civilizations.” This term was first used by Bernard Lewis (b. 1916), scholar of Islamic history, in an article in the September 1990 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* (47–58) titled “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” Historian Samuel P. Huntington (1927–2008) expanded on the idea with a 1993 article in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* and then with a book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). In this context, “civilization” is “culture” writ large, and the identification of religion as an important aspect of culture is consistent with this outlook.

The heinous activities of religious activists carried out against those who are nonadherents of their particular message may be divided into three types. The first type is historical: discrimination and violence carried out in earlier eras by empires in the course of conquest. The second type is the same type of activity carried out currently by a government against its own citizens who belong to a minority sect or religion. Both types are considered in this chapter. The third form of hostility is contemporary cross-border intolerance: that is, acts of violence, hatred, or denigration of other sects or religions, being carried out now by individuals or groups acting on their own or by governments acting across their borders. This latter type is discussed in Chapter 5.

R. G. Saltman, *Sacred Humanism without Miracles*
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By the end of the fourth century CE, the Roman empire had become officially Christian. With political and military power as well as a defined creed, Christianity was able to implement a totalitarian policy. That is, no variant sect or wholly different religion had equal standing within its territory, and all polytheistic religions were proscribed. Centuries later, new political conditions enabled independent branches of Christianity to arise in different parts of Europe and the Middle East. Even then, almost every Christian-ruled nation made some Christian denomination its official religion.

According to its tradition, Islam originated in what is now Saudi Arabia in the early seventh century. It gained strength with the defeat of opposing local forces. Then Islamic armies began a march of conquest. Within one hundred years, Islam had spread widely, carried by military force through the Middle East, then west to the Atlantic coast of northern Africa and to Spain and Sicily. It advanced east beyond Iran to the Indus River valley (now in Pakistan) and northeast past the Caspian Sea. Muslim supremacy was established in central Asia with centers at Bukhara and Samarkand (both now in Uzbekistan).

With the establishment of nations that were officially Islamic, that religion was able to implement religious totalitarianism, similar to the Christian model. This orientation was based on interpretations of the Koran. It has statements proscribing paganism but indicating tolerance of other monotheistic faiths. However, the text has been interpreted as only permitting the existence of other religions, not their full equality with Islam. The schism that created the Sunni and Shi’a branches of Islam did not affect this basic understanding.

Within Christendom, Judaism had an ambiguous status. Its continued existence was a disputatious issue among Christian theologians. The Jews had no military power, and their possible ill-treatment depended on the whims of Christian princes, prelates, and occasional mobs incited by rumors or by preaching. Within the territories of Islam, both Christianity and Judaism had secondary status. Christianity was powerful in nearby nations, but Judaism