



Violence, Politics, and Religion: Cosmic War in *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract: Religious violence and religious politics are highly intertwined concepts whose coexistence presents a danger to the current American political and religious systems. The Song of Ice and Fire series by George R.R. Martin and the accompanying television show, Game of Thrones, provide a case study with which to view this relationship between religion, politics, and violence, and then apply the findings to America's political landscape. The storylines of Stannis Baratheon, Daenerys Targaryen, and the Faith Militant illustrate the notion of cosmic war and serve as an exploration of potential impending violence from the mixture of religion and politics in modern America.

Keywords: Game of Thrones, religion, violence, politics.

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Religious violence dominates the modern news cycle and appears to have permeated everyday life. From cases of religiously motivated terrorism to religiously inspired acts of smaller scale violence, the appropriation of religion to justify violence runs rampant in American culture. The supposed reemergence or worsening of religious violence has prompted many scholars to dedicate their efforts toward alleviating this violence. Religious violence in and of itself is difficult to define due to the overlapping nature and goals of religion, politics, and culture. The spectrum of scholastic work on the definition of religion ranges from narrow definitions of religion that must include some divine figure to broad interpretations which include liberalism, nationalism, sports, capitalism, and other ideologies under the umbrella of religion (Cavanaugh 3). Some scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith even question whether religion exists outside of an academic concept. Thus, in order to discuss religious violence on any clear terms, a definition of religion must be provided. For the purposes of this paper, Martin Marty's definition of religion from his book *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*, will be employed. Per this definition, there are five distinct features of a religion: it focuses our ultimate concern, builds community, appeals to myths and symbols, uses rites and ceremonies, and requires followers to behave in certain ways (Cavanaugh 4-5). Therefore, religious violence may be defined as violence that is a result of the pursuit of these five qualities.

However, violence is only one reason why religion receives media attention- religion's involvement with politics is the other major reason that religion consistently appears on the news. Political issues such as abortion, Planned Parenthood, public schools, same-sex marriage, and transgender rights have become imbued with religious language and often are seen from a religious

perspective. The religious right, a large voting bloc of evangelical Christians, is often fundamentally opposed to those on the left who seek to secularize America. Further complicating the situation, as scholar William T. Cavanaugh describes, “it is impossible to separate out religious from economic and political motives in such a way that religious motives are innocent of violence” (Cavanaugh 1). Religion has become so integrated into politics and vice versa that it is difficult to distinguish between political motivations and religious motivations. Critics of religiously informed politics warn that this integration is a violation of the First Amendment and a threat to the religious freedom of America. Thus, though the ideal of separation of church and state exists, religion and politics are interwoven and co-existing parts of American culture, practically negating distinctions between church and state.

In order to better understand the relationship between religion, politics, and violence, a fictional series presents the opportunity to explore this concept and learn how to mirror it with the American religious landscape. Fantasy and science fiction series allow the audience to understand, digest, and respond to difficult issues by establishing consequences of complicated storylines (Dyson 8). The *Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin and the accompanying television show, *Game of Thrones*, provide a unique lens through which to view this relationship between religion, politics, and violence, and then work through the findings to better understand the real world. The findings are both definitive and enlightening for real world problems. Sentiments of cosmic war lead to the mixture of religion and politics in the *Game of Thrones* series, which results in dangerous violence. The storylines of Stannis Baratheon, Daenerys Targaryen, and the Faith Militant illustrate this notion of cosmic war and serve as an exploration of potential impending violence from the mixture of religion and politics in modern America.

***Game of Thrones* as a Case Study**

Game of Thrones provides a unique case study that would be impossible to carry out in the real world: the series begins with an entirely secular government. Not only does religion play no role in politics, religion is used only as a ceremonial tool and regularly holds no meaning to the practitioners. Under Robert’s rule, the religion of the Seven serves as a prop to legitimize marriages and other sacred events that are highly politicized, but otherwise is non-existent in the political life of the kingdom and is utilized by politicians only for show (*Game of Thrones*). Not only are traditional forms of religion missing, but concepts that are not normally labeled as religion that perhaps could fall under the umbrella of religion, such as nationalism, are absent as well. Even if one agreed with the notion of nationalism being a religion, nationalism does not exist in the Seven Kingdoms, further creating a secular dynamic in the series. There is some nationality on the local level such as the reverence for House Stark or desire for independence in the Iron Islands, however these fragmented regions’ distinct cultures and identities exemplify the Targaryen failure to unify the Seven Kingdoms into a single, cohesive nation state. Though technically unified under a single ruler, each former nation exhibits loyalty to their own people rather than the unified kingdom as a whole, removing nationalism from the state level. Thus, *Game of Thrones* presents a secular government at the beginning of the story and allows for the reader to see the transformation of the political structure as religion is introduced into the equation. It offers an examination of the dangers of such an intertwined system and the failure to address the violence that arises from the system.

Cosmic War Theory

One of the theories that *Game of Thrones* explores for readers and viewers is cosmic war theory, a religious theory most written about by scholar Mark Juergensmeyer. Juergensmeyer defines cosmic

war as “an imagined battle between metaphysical forces- good and evil, right and wrong, order and chaos- that lies behind many cases of religion-related violence in the contemporary world” (Juergensmeyer, “Cosmic War” 1). This struggle of cosmic war creates an all or nothing conflict that offers a holistic worldview for those that accept the struggle and demonizes the enemy, which justifies violence against the worthless or evil foe (Juergensmeyer, “Cosmic War” 9-11). In distinguishing between cosmic war and regular war, there are three major circumstances in which war may be perceived as a cosmic war: when it is a battle to protect basic identity and dignity, when losing is unthinkable, and when the struggle cannot be won in real time (Juergensmeyer, “Cosmic War” 15-16). Only one of these factors is required to elevate the conflict to cosmic war- all three do not have to be present. In his book *Terror in the Mind of God*, Juergensmeyer identifies several real life examples of cosmic war, including Christian abortion clinic bombers, Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, militant Sikhs in India, the Christian Identity movement, and the Kach party in Israel (*Terror in the Mind of God* 153). *Game of Thrones* is perhaps a better example of cosmic war than any of these real life examples as the constraints in a fantasy series are less binding than those of the real world. Within *Game of Thrones*, the storylines of Stannis Baratheon, Daenerys Targaryen, and Cersei’s conflict with the Faith Militant all exemplify different aspects of cosmic war theory. More importantly, these examples of cosmic war illustrate how cosmic war both leads to the entanglement of religion and politics and how the entanglement of religion and politics leads to cosmic war, creating an unending cycle of excessive violence. Through this example, cosmic war becomes a conduit for understanding how religion, politics, and violence mingle in the American political system.

Stannis Baratheon’s Cosmic War

Stannis Baratheon’s cosmic war exemplifies how the mixture of religion and politics feeds cosmic war and how cosmic war feeds the mixture of religion and politics, both of which result in violence. Stannis’ plotline is the most overt example of cosmic war as his cosmic war is directly related to what most audience members would identify as an established religion. In order to understand Stannis’ plotline and the implications, one must first understand the religion that prompted him to turn a question of lineage into a cosmic question of good and evil.

Stannis’ closest advisor is a “sorceress, shadowbinder, and priestess to R’hllor, the Lord of Light,” named Melisandre, or the Red Woman (*A Clash of Kings* 20). The religion of R’hllor began in the east in Essos and is spreading in the western kingdom of Westeros via priestesses and a traveling band of followers headed by Beric Dondarrion. The faith worships the Lord of Light in a dualistic portrayal that pits light against darkness and good against evil and blends elements of human sacrifice, necromancy, and fanaticism (Hardy 417). The Red Woman believes that Stannis is the second coming of the hero Azor Ahai and as such “Stannis embodies the power to save the land by driving its supernatural enemies back into the far north and uniting its peoples in a way as much prophetic as it is heroic” (O’Leary 9).

Though Stannis was relatively close to accepting a cosmic war state of mind at the time of his introduction of the second book (or second season of the show), he did not immediately buy into worshipping the Lord of Light. He questioned “how many swords will the Lord of Light put into my hand” and openly scorned the religion of the Red Woman (*A Clash of Kings* 19). He only employed the religion of R’hllor as a power measure in the beginning, using “religion to increase his army (hard power) and to justify his claim according to god’s will (soft power)” (Ruiz 44). Stannis capitalizes on the devout converts that make up his army by motivating them with religious speeches, even when he himself does not believe in the religion. In this way, religion augments Stannis’ blood claim to the throne in the eyes of his men, legitimizing his fight for power. This

elevates his fight for the throne to a cosmic level in the eyes of his men and the believers who fight for his cause. Juergensmeyer's definition of cosmic war frames struggle as a battle between forces of good and evil that justify violence, which is exactly how Stannis and Melisandre frame the religion of R'hllor. Followers quite literally worship the light, a fire god who is destined to fight the evil force of darkness. The prayer of the religion, "the night is dark and full of terrors," justifies the violence that Stannis' army carries out because they are fighting evil and darkness, which must be defeated at all costs ("The North Remembers"). Through this type of language, Stannis convinces his men that they are not just fighting for him to sit on the throne, but to defeat the forces of evil that Renly and the other contenders for the throne present since they are not followers of the one true god. Since, to R'hllor's followers, "the universe is a battleground between R'hllor and his evil opposite: a god whose name must not be spoken, and is only ever described at the Great Other," and only the return of Azor Ahai can end the fighting, Stannis convinces these followers that he can end the mystical fight and bring peace as the second coming of Azor Ahai (Wittingslow 119).

Stannis takes this cosmic war to a new level when he begins to actually believe in the religion of R'hllor. When Stannis is defeated at the Battle of Blackwater Bay, Melisandre convinces him that he lost the battle because she was not present and therefore he was not supporting the Lord of Light (*A Storm of Swords*). As a result, Stannis begins to rely more heavily on dark magic and the Lord of Light to win the throne. He allows the Red Woman to make a blood sacrifice from the illegitimate son of Robert Baratheon to kill all of the remaining "kings" competing for the throne (*A Storm of Swords*). By the end of the fifth season of the show, the Red Woman has successfully convinced Stannis that he is Azor Ahai incarnated and needs the favor of the Lord of Light to win the throne. Stannis has bought so far into the religious element that he sacrifices his own daughter by burning her alive as a way to win the Lord of Light's favor before a major battle ("The Dance of Dragons"). He would not have allowed his own daughter to be killed unless he truly believed that the magic would win him the favor in the Lord of Light, meaning that he obviously must believe in the Lord of Light.

These actions elevate the cosmic war to an even higher level in which he meets two of Juergensmeyer's standards for cosmic war- that losing would be unthinkable and that the battle is to protect basic identity. In burning his own daughter alive, Stannis expresses exactly how unthinkable losing would be- he would rather kill his own daughter than lose the war. Because he has elevated the conflict to a cosmic war level in which he must win the throne to protect the realm from the incoming threat of the White Walkers, winning the throne takes precedence over all else, including his loved ones. Embedded within this line of thinking is the elevation of a good versus evil dichotomy. Stannis and his army are the good who will protect the kingdom, while the White Walkers are the evil, mystical creatures who seek to overrun the kingdom and create an army of the undead (*Game of Thrones: The Complete Fifth Season*). In this sense, Stannis is also fighting to protect the lives and basic identity of realm, which is another indicator that the conflict has been elevated to cosmic war status. Stannis believes that he is the only way to stop the White Walkers, who he believes would seek to kill every living person within the kingdom. The White Walkers threaten the way of the life in the kingdom and pose a danger to every person in the realm, and as such Stannis views himself as protecting lives and their way of life.

The importance of Stannis' cosmic war lies in its ability to illustrate how it both caused religion and politics to become intertwined and how it resulted from the entanglement of religion and politics. Stannis' cosmic war was a catalyst for the entanglement of religion and politics because it allowed him to make a religious argument as to why he deserved a political decision. Even though Stannis possessed the best claim to the throne as the next eldest brother of Robert, he did not rely on his bloodline- he relied on the religious justification that he was favored by the Lord of Light. By relying on a religious claim for a political position, Stannis effectively violated the secular nature of Westerosi politics and made religion a legitimate reason for political power. This

merging of religion and politics, in turn, fed his cosmic war by convincing him that only a messianic figure capable of stopping the White Walkers should earn the throne. Such thinking served to justify Stannis' willingness to sacrifice humans and fight bloody battles during his quest for the throne and reinforced his binary worldview. This cyclical nature of cosmic war both promoting and feeding off of religion's mixture with politics is evident in the American political system as well, as will be discussed below.

Daenerys Targaryen's Cosmic War

Daenerys Targaryen fights a less overtly religious type of cosmic war than Stannis, which serves to send a different message than Stannis' cosmic war. Daenerys does not depend on an established religion like Stannis did; she creates her own type of religious following and a quasi-religion of her own which she then uses to justify a good versus evil cosmic war. Daenerys inadvertently forms a pseudo-religion based on morality as a result of her encounter with slavery. Revolted by the cruelty inflicted on the Unsullied soldiers-being taken from their mothers at age five, taught to kill and brutalize on command, forcibly castrated, and initiated into the ranks of the Unsullied when they kill a baby- Daenerys buys the entire Unsullied army and frees them, resolving to end slavery (*A Storm of Swords* 318). Daenerys moves from city to city in Slaver's Bay liberating slaves and punishing the former masters who owned slaves. But, every time Daenerys moves on from a city, "the old order reasserts itself and new kinds of sectarian killing and guerilla warfare emerge in resistance to the changes she tries to bring about (Larrington 201).

This locks Daenerys and her Unsullied troops in a battle with the immoral slavers, which she prioritizes over her quest for the throne. The mother of dragons becomes mother of the slaves, the poor, and the oppressed as Daenerys begins to devote more of her time to her morality campaign. This moral fight becomes Daenerys' cosmic war- her fight of good versus evil is not based on established religion, like Stannis, but based on a morality that she expects all of her subjects to adhere to. She turns slavery and oppression into a cosmic battle that it is her duty to win, even at the cost of her quest for the Iron Throne. Daenerys' cosmic war is enabled by the large following of freed slaves that she accrues, many of whom see her as a messianic figure. Because of this following and Daenerys' preaching about morality, she fits the formerly stated definition of religion. Her leadership meets all five factors of a religion- she focuses the ultimate concern on morality, builds a community of former slaves, appeals to the myths and symbols of her dragons and Targaryen lineage, employs ceremonies such as the crucifixion of the masters and the fighting pits, and requires her followers to behave in a certain moral way.

Further heightening Daenerys' power of her pseudo-religion is her portrayal as a messianic or god-like figure. Numerous supporters believe that Daenerys is the second coming of Azor Ahai. In the television show, when Tyrion Lannister arrives in Slaver's Bay, he takes a moment to listen to a red preacher, a woman with the same fiery style as Melisandre, who preaches to a crowd of onlookers that Daenerys, not Stannis, is the savior ("High Sparrow"). In the novels, Tyrion comes across a red priest, Benerro, who preaches that Daenerys is "Azor Ahai returned... and her triumph over darkness will bring a summer that will never end... death itself will bend its knee, and all those who die fighting in her cause shall be reborn" (*A Dance with Dragons* 313). On his deathbed, Maester Aemon declares "Lady Melisandre has misread the signs... *Daenerys* is our hope," issuing a prophetic charge to Samwell Tarly to ensure the safety of Daenerys (*A Feast for Crows* 744). Even though Daenerys may or may not be aware of how others view her as a messianic figure, the reader or viewer is made aware of the possibility of her divine status, elevating her message that she proclaims. Whether or not Daenerys truly is a divine figure is irrelevant; the mere worship of her as

such validates her message and builds upon the pseudo-religious persona she has already cultivated for herself.

Once it is established that Daenerys' rule may be classified as a religion, her cosmic war becomes readily apparent. Much like Stannis, she espouses a cosmic good versus cosmic evil sort of rhetoric that leads to two polarized sides. Daenerys clearly draws battle lines when she states that "slavery is real. I can end it. I will end it. And I will end those behind it... They can live in my new world, or they can die in their old one" ("Mockingbird"). The weak, oppressed, and former slaves form the good contingent of society while the slavers and masters form the bad contingent of society whom must be defeated. She meets two of the three factors that can transform a regular war into a cosmic war- the battle is a basic battle for dignity and losing would be unthinkable. Whether because of her own oppression under her brother or because of her extraordinary empathy, Daenerys takes this assault on the dignity of slaves as an assault on all of society and thus fashions a cosmic war out of this fight for humanity. Her war also meets the requirement that losing is unthinkable. The cosmic war over slavery and human rights is so important to Daenerys that she delays her quest for the throne in order to eradicate slavery. After purchasing the Unsullied she possessed an army large enough to make a bid for the throne, yet she chose to stay and liberate Slaver's Bay instead (*A Storm of Swords*, Martin).

The cosmic war that Daenerys and the followers of her self-made religion pursue provides yet another example of how cosmic war promotes the entanglement of religion and politics, which leads to violence. Prior to her decision to liberate slaves and to develop an image of herself as the breaker of chains, Daenerys faced solely political choices and pursued her goals with a solely political mindset. With the creation of pseudo-religion, however, she injects religion into every political decision she makes, and the result is an explosion of violence. Prior to her religious convictions, Daenerys had sought entirely political solutions to her problems that involved relatively little violence, such as bartering, manipulating, and impressing her enemies. But, once she develops a religious mindset, she infuses her politics with her moral religion and she commits massive amounts of violence in the name of politics and religion. She sacks the cities of Yunkai, Astapor, and Meereen, all of which involve killing soldiers, politicians, and slavers. After she witnesses 163 crucified child slaves on the way to Meereen, she crucifies 163 slave masters when she gains control of the city as retribution ("Oathkeeper"). Most violent of all, in the television series, when the masters and Sons of the Harpy try to regain Meereen from Daenerys's control, she releases her dragons on their forces and watches as her dragons eat soldiers, burn the masters alive, and sink ships carrying thousands of men ("Battle of the Bastards"). Her decision to allow religion to interfere with politics, her choice to let her moral religion influence every political decision she makes, results in unparalleled violence and justifies her use of the same ruthless violence she tries to prevent.

Cersei Lannister and the Faith Militant's Cosmic War

As ruthless as Daenerys' actions may be, she is considerably less cruel and inhumane than Cersei Lannister. Cersei's battle with the Faith Militant is the final example of cosmic war in the series and exemplifies how cosmic war can result from the volatile mix of religion and politics. Cersei, who serves as the Queen Mother for the majority of the series, seeks power in any and all forms, even when it places characters she loves in danger. When Cersei's son, Tommen, is crowned king and wedded to Margaery Tyrell, Cersei feels her hold over her son slipping and names the High Sparrow the new High Septon and reinstates the Faith Militant, a military group who defend the primary religion in the city, the Faith of the Seven. After Tommen merges the church and the state, Cersei's war against the Faith Militant escalates quickly, culminating in the explosion of the Sept, which

kills all of the sparrows, Margaery, and, ultimately, Tommen (*Game of Thrones: The Complete Sixth Season*).

Cersei's war against the Faith Militant constitutes a cosmic war from both Cersei's point of view and the High Sparrow's point of view. From the Faith Militant's point of view, their battle with the political elite attempts to restore faith to the kingdom and save the citizens from their sins. Their mission is a fundamental battle of good versus evil- the politicians have corrupted the city by removing faith from the lives of the people. Thus, they are good and noble in their quest to return King's Landing to a faithful city and the Lannister politicians are evil in that they let the populace fall into a sinful life. The Faith Militant raise the issue to cosmic proportions by insisting that it is a matter of morality and spiritual salvation, heightening the stakes of the issue to a battle that cannot be won in real time and is unthinkable to lose.

Cersei, likewise, also elevates the conflict to a cosmic war level through her determination to gain more power. Cersei comes to frame good and evil in her life in terms of power. She tells her son Joffrey that everyone who is not a part of their family is an enemy in order to maintain a small circle of power within those she feels like she can control ("Lord Snow"). Through such a worldview, Cersei creates two sides- the good side, which is composed of the few family members she trusts, and the bad side, which is anyone she does not feel like she can manipulate to her own benefit. She takes this dichotomy to a cosmic level when she plots a war against the Faith Militant because she views the conflict as a protection of her basic identity as a power-player and a conflict that is unthinkable to lose. Cersei's does not take issue with the Faith Militant's religious beliefs per se, but their infringement upon the power of the crown and their competition for her son's ear. In this way, Cersei expands the meaning of the conflict and elevates it above regular conflict to a cosmic conflict that she must win. She distinctly illustrates how unthinkable losing would be when she barely mourns her dead son since it brought her to the precipice of being Queen- she would sacrifice her own children in order to win her war for power ("The Winds of Winter").

Cersei's cosmic war is the product of the entanglement of religion and politics, and results in extreme violence that could have otherwise been avoided. Though Cersei frequently kills or silences her rivals prior to the Faith Militant incident, she never commits such large acts of violence in the name of a war of any kind. However, as soon as she allows the mingling of religion and politics by reinstating the Faith Militant, violence ensues. The mixing of religion and politics stimulates the cosmic war by introducing two sides with fundamentally incompatible aims: the side that wants to promote religion and the side that wants to preserve the power of the crown. Once the cosmic war was triggered by the Faith Militant's imprisonment of Cersei, violence quickly follows- the Mountain smashes a man's head against the wall when he mocks Cersei, Jaime rallies the Lannister army, and Cersei blows up the sept full of the Faith Militant (*Game of Thrones: The Complete Sixth Season*). Cersei's slaughter of the Faith Militant is the final and most dramatic example of how the mixture of religion and politics promotes cosmic war, which leads to violence.

Connecting Fantasy to Reality

This paper has argued the existence of a relationship between the mixing of religion, politics, and violence in *Game of Thrones*, but the application does not end with the series itself. The proliferation of television and mass market book series has allowed media to become a cultural currency with which consumers may reflect upon issues in their own society. As Newcomb and Hirsch noted in the 1980s, "contemporary cultures examine themselves through their arts... ritual and the arts offer a metalanguage, a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and attitudes are adjusted, how meaning shifts," prompting television to focus on "our most prevalent

concerns, our deepest dilemmas” (Newcomb and Hirsch 562). Thus, popular series such as *Game of Thrones* allow for reflection on real issues such as religious and political violence.

Further, as a fantasy series, *Game of Thrones* makes statements not just about the world of Westeros, but also about the real world. Science fiction and fantasy serve as a mirror for the real world that illuminate real problems. Put simply, “in sci-fi and fantasy, we can see far into the future as events play themselves out over vast expanses of time. As a narrative art form, fiction has endings. Stories are complicated. We can see the consequences” that are not readily apparent in real life circumstances (Dyson 8). Fantasy books and shows like *Game of Thrones* allow the audience to make connections and build understanding that is too complicated to see in the real world. In this sense, fantasy becomes a way to discuss complex issues in a way that the brain can process- “we can use these other worlds as inspiration for thinking about what kinds of evidence bearing upon our theories might become available if we could see far into the future, relive the past as it happened, and alter fundamental parameters of technology and biology- all of which is beyond us when looking at the real world” (Dyson 8). The issues of cosmic war, the entanglement of religion and politics, and ensuing violence presented in *Game of Thrones* serve as a reflection for those same issues in real life.

Therefore, the connections between religion, politics, and violence in this paper do not merely apply to *Game of Thrones*, but to the American political scene as well. Just as the mixture of religion and politics both created and resulted from cosmic war in *Game of Thrones*, the same can be said for the American political and religious institutions. Although many Americans believe that the government is secular, the simple truth is that America is far from a secular nation. There may not be an official national religion, but Christianity serves as a de facto national religion. From small examples like the references to God on paper money and in the Pledge of Allegiance to larger examples like the fact that the American calendar follows Christian holidays, the American culture is ripe with religious messages. A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that two-thirds of American adults consider the United States a Christian nation (Straughn and Feld 280). After the events of September 11, 2001, the claim that America is secular was further weakened by another Pew survey that found that “in light of the perceived moral threat to the nation, 70 percent of Americans in 2001 said they wanted to see religion’s influence on American society grow” (Hecl 83). President George W. Bush perpetuated this religious infusion by evoking God’s favoritism of America as a defender of freedom to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and other foreign intervention (Carlson and Ebel 41). Yet, simultaneously, the concept of separation of church and state also exists as a foundation for the country and a principle of American freedom.

The coexistence of these two dichotomous ways of thinking has more or less divided Americans into two camps- the religious people who wanted religion to play a larger part in government and the generally liberal thinkers who wanted to embrace true secularism. What began in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s with the rise of the religious right and involvement of right-wing group in politics has expanded into a large scale cosmic war of epic proportions between the religious right and the secular left (note these are general political affiliations- not all religious or secular advocates fall in line with the expected party). The danger of such a cosmic war is clearly illustrated in *Game of Thrones*: exponential violence in order to win the all-important war. Some of this violence has already come to fruition through right wing radical attacks, however, before expanding upon that, the development of the cosmic war must first be examined. It should be noted that the examples of violence predominantly focus on the right due to the religious nature of the attacks- the left perpetrates violence as well, but it tends to be secular violence, which is not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

The entanglement of religion and politics greatly expanded in the 1980’s as the religious right became a powerful voting bloc for the Republican party. The Moral Majority, created in 1979 by Reverend Jerry Falwell, was a political action committee whose platform was “pro-life, pro-

traditional family, pro-moral, and pro-American” based off of Falwell’s Christian teachings (Falwell 387-388). Falwell believed that if he could get Christians to the polls then he could change the negative direction that he perceived the country to be heading in. Whether or not he changed the moral compass of the nation is debatable, but he did successfully help Reagan get elected in 1980 and form a large evangelical constituency within the Republican party (Sutton 21-22). This was the birth of the modern day religious right, a bloc of evangelical voters who persist today and focus on political issues like Planned Parenthood, abortion, gay marriage, pornography, and education. And, many that are a part of this religious right view secularists as the literal devil. Modern Christian nationalists and Republicans “speak of any attempts to defend church/state separation as part of a ‘war’ on believers,” creating a legitimate war between the religious defenders and the secular defenders (Goldberg 17). This war that the religious right wages on the secular population mirrors Stannis’ cosmic war. The religious right views themselves as the saviors of the country in that they are the only people with the power to save the country from the current path of destruction. This is exactly how Stannis comes to view his quest for the throne- he needs to win the throne because, as the second coming of Azor Ahai, he is the only person with the capacity to save the kingdom from the destruction of the eternal fight between good and evil and the impending invasion of the White Walkers. All other contenders for the throne become obstacles in his noble quest, just as many secularists are viewed as literal agents of the devil impeding the noble Christian vision in the eyes of the religious right.

To be entirely fair to the religious right, the secularists view the religious in no less demonizing terms. Many secularists believe that the religious right and social conservatism are “the combination of repression, populism, and paranoia,” and treat all evangelicals involved in politics as such (Goldberg 54). Both sides disagree, and the extremes of both sides bitterly oppose one another, setting up the perfect conditions for each side to proclaim that the other side is fighting a war on their ideals. This type of demonization mirrors how Stannis describes the non-religious contenders for the throne, how Daenerys describes the slavers, and how Cersei and the Faith Militant describe each other. The two American political sides are attacking each other in the same way these *Game of Thrones* characters attacked one another- this should stimulate thought about the type of dehumanization that each side could potentially employ, and the characters did employ, which ultimately justifies violence.

The conflict between the secularists and the religious right is not just a regular war, but constitutes a cosmic war. Both sides view the battle as something much larger than simply affecting political policies; the religious view it is a battle of morality while the secularists view it as a battle for freedom and human rights. Both of these viewpoints elevate the conflict to a higher plane and prescribe higher meaning to the outcome of the “war.” On the religious or fundamentalist side, the morality and spirituality of the country is jeopardized by the secularists; they “see their stand against the tidal wave of change as honorable, right, life preserving, and a life calling” (Emerson and Hartman 131). This is the same view that Daenerys holds throughout the series- her war protects her vision of morality for Slaver’s Bay by fighting to end slavery. Just as Daenerys made all of her choices revolve around her moral war, the two fundamentally opposed sides in American politics make sure that “every political issue- indeed, every disputed aspect of our national life- is a struggle between good and evil,” and elevate the struggle to a good versus evil dichotomy, transforming the conflict into a cosmic war in which violence is bound to ensue (Goldberg 4). This leads to the mentality of cosmic war in which losing is unthinkable because it is a matter of salvation and the battle is about basic morals. The secularists view the conflict as having equally high stakes because they believe that secularism stands for freedom, human rights, and democracy, all of which transcend the political plane to a higher meaning as well. These two groups antagonize one another, creating a vicious cycle of cosmic war.

And, conflict already has ensued. Timothy McVeigh, an extreme Christian, detonated a bomb at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 (Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion* 151). His act was motivated by a Christian Identity novel, *The Turner Diaries*, in which the “hero” bombs a federal building to combat the evil government who seeks to deprive Christians of their freedom by creating a more secular society (*Global Rebellion* 188). This action parallels the Faith Militant’s belief that the Lannister family actively sought to deprive the Seven Kingdoms of religion through their secularization. And, like the Faith Militant, McVeigh turned to violent means to deliver his message. Reverend Michael Bray set several abortion clinics on fire in 1985 to protect God’s creations that the secular government was destroying, and his friend, Paul Hill, murdered abortion doctors several years later (Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* 20-22). More recently, Christians have lashed out against Muslims, refugees, and homosexuals in an attempt to govern who may participate in American politics. These smaller episodes of violence mirror Cersei’s build up in her war against the Faith Militant when she attempts to assert that only her family members may hold power. Just as American Christians want to dominate the sphere of political power and exclude outsiders in order to enforce laws favorable to Christianity, Cersei sought to exclude from politics anyone that she could not manipulate in order to maintain her power. While this began with relatively minor violence such as individually killing her opposition, it escalated into murdering the entirety of the Faith Militant. These *Game of Thrones* parallels offer a space for viewers to work through potential real world violence- these incidents of violence by the radical Christians could continue to escalate so long as the cosmic war continues, and the cosmic war would continue until Americans recognize the reality of the political climate.

Some may argue, as scholar William T. Cavanaugh has, that religion cannot be separated from politics and therefore this argument is invalid because it recognizes religion and politics as two separate entities. This criticism would be a misunderstanding of the argument being made. This paper is not necessarily asserting that religion and politics are separate; after all, as Cavanaugh points out, politics could also be classified as a religion under Marty’s definition of a religion that this paper has utilized (Cavanaugh 4-5). Instead, this paper argues that a contingent of Americans views the nation as a secular nation while simultaneously advocating for increased religion in politics, and fails to understand that the entanglement of religion and politics- be that because politics is a form of religion or not- undermines this “secular” claim. Americans need to understand and face the reality of living under a non-secular government, or else the blindness to the mingling of religion and politics could cause more violence. This is not to say that the mixing of religion and politics is inherently bad or evil, but to say that the blindness to the situation is akin to denying the situation and will perpetuate the violence. This leaves Americans with two choices- recognize the current system that exists and learn to peacefully coexist within a non-secular atmosphere, or eliminate the interactions between religion and politics on a national scale and work to create a truly secular government. So long as Americans continue to deny the reality of the political climate and fail to pursue one of these two options, violence likely will dominate both political and religious rhetoric, feeding discontent and continuing the cycle of violence.

Conclusion

Recognizing problems such as this one may be difficult, but fantasy media like *Game of Thrones* serve to help enrich our understanding of elusive concepts and function as a building block for bettering society. This paper has examined *Game of Thrones* as a lens for understanding the mixture of religion and politics in the American context. In *Game of Thrones*, sentiments of cosmic war lead to the mixture of religion and politics, which results in dangerous violence. The examples of Stannis Baratheon, Daenerys Targaryen, and the Faith Militant illuminate this notion of cosmic war and

allow exploration of potential impending violence from the mixture of religion and politics in modern America. The cosmic wars in American politics are real and dangerously misunderstood, and until Americans stop denying the non-secular nature of the government, these cosmic wars will continue to generate violence, just as they did in the *Game of Thrones* series.

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