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Believing that religious and academic leaders have tried for too long to minimize, justify, or explain away religion's violent tendencies, Hector Avalos counters this trend in his book *Fighting Words*. His theory of religious violence attacks the way religions profess special divine favor for themselves, over and against other groups. Avalos believes this tendency leads to violence because conflicting claims to superiority, based on unverifiable appeals to God, cannot be adjudicated objectively. While Avalos provides a sobering analysis of widespread violence in scriptures and exposes mechanisms by which religions have provoked fighting in the past, his argument depends on an erroneously narrow understanding of religion. By approaching religions through a rational-empiricist critique of their foundational sacred texts and supernatural beliefs, Avalos neglects the complex and changing nature of actual religious traditions, as practiced by living communities.

One of the key contributions of *Fighting Words* is the application of scarce resource theory to religious violence. Observing that violence often occurs because of competition over a limited supply of things like food or land, Avalos suggests that the same mechanism functions when religions *create* scarce resources through *inscripturation* (the designation of some texts, but not others, as holy or revealed by God), *sacred space*, *group privileging*, and *salvation*. In each case, one individual, group, or idea is given special, transcendent value by the religion, prompting a struggle for that entity, or between groups who privilege different things. Avalos believes this struggle is lamentable, and less ethical than other kinds of violence, because *religious* scarce resources are not ultimately real, but rather are manufactured by religious traditions.

Avalos also makes the case that religion is a more significant factor in violence than others admit. He challenges claims that religions are fundamentally peaceful and rejects notions that religious violence is due primarily to reactions against modernity. Instead, he identifies

a tendency toward violence at the core of religious traditions. While other scholars stress economic, political, and social reasons for violence, he maintains that religion can stand on its own as a necessary and even sufficient cause.

In the four parts of *Fighting Words*, Avalos recounts past explanations of religious violence, presents his scarce resource theory in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, outlines religious dimensions of violent episodes attributed to secular causes, and finally sketches proposals to end religious violence.

The first section of *Fighting Words* details the history of explanations for violence from antiquity to the present. Avalos methodically discusses a range of philosophical, biological, psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives, highlighting antecedents of his scarce resource theory. Among contemporary approaches to religion and violence, Rodney Stark's connection between conflict and religious particularism and Timothy Gorringe's work on the violent consequences of Anselm's theory of atonement are treated sympathetically for directly linking religious beliefs to violent acts. Avalos finds himself most in agreement with Regina Schwartz, who concludes in *The Curse of Cain* that exclusive identities generated by monotheism are to blame for religious violence, since they create insider/outsider relationships and scarcity of access to the deity.

Throughout his survey of theorists, Avalos frequently critiques efforts by the academy and religious communities to protect religion from responsibility for violence by declaring true religion fundamentally peaceful and labeling its violent manifestations as distorted variants. Avalos rejects both points. First, he argues that peace is not a benign concept but rather a "code word for hegemony" by the dominant party (84). Similarly, he finds that arguments for peace are no more essential to religion than arguments for violence, since both are widespread in foundational texts.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the focus of the second section, in which Avalos applies his "scarce resource theory" to these three traditions. In the case of Judaism, Avalos identifies claims to special revelation, its identity as a chosen people, a provision for violence against any who desecrate the Torah, and the disproportionate value placed on Jerusalem as the center of the universe as contributing to violence. Recounting the history of modern Israel, Avalos believes that the present conflict in the Holy Land "would not exist if it were not for the belief that God had given the land to Israel" (136). While highlighting the

exclusive aspects of Judaism, Avalos does not account for alternative traditions, such as prophetic texts, that suggest greater parity between Israel and other nations. In fact, he particularly attacks the search for counter-traditions, along with mythical or contextual readings, as yet another attempt to preserve religion despite its violent tendencies.

Indeed, Avalos rarely accounts for internal change and development within religions. For instance, he argues that the word shalom does not mean peace as much as "domination," "reward," or "repayment" (169). Whatever the original meaning in scripture, however, shalom has come to mean "peace" as a present value that does not create scarcity but stands as a symbol of abundance. The preference for a peaceful or violent interpretation of tradition ought to be viewed not simply as an arbitrary decision, as Avalos sees it, but rather as a particular commitment in light of hopes for the ongoing life of the religious community.

Critiques against Christianity and Islam are similar as Avalos reaches beyond conventional examples like the crusades, jihad or anti-Jewish violence. He provocatively challenges supposed foundations of peace, including the Golden Rule. Avalos goes on to suggest that "Jesus commands hate" (216) and that Christians have ignored the "slavish nature of agape" (223). Similarly, Avalos sees Islam as "premised, from the start, on the use of violence to achieve its ends" (242) and finds scriptural warrant to speak of "God as terrorist" (252).

As the book proceeds, careful argument turns into a haphazard catalog of religion's evils and a polemic challenge to any who find value in religion. For example, while Avalos is right to note the religious dimensions of the Holocaust, in his third section, he seems to intentionally provoke outrage by calling the Hebrew Bible the "first popularizer of racist descriptions of the other in the ancient Near East" (310). What Avalos does not do in this section on secular violence is to talk about secular violence itself. Rather, he argues that "religious violence is more immoral than secular violence" because of its appeal to supernatural reasoning (349).

The solutions Avalos prefers, in his concluding portion, are the elimination of religion altogether or its radical reform to counteract tendencies that create scarce resources. While Avalos succeeds in his effort to raise awareness of mechanisms that cause violence, his "zero-tolerance argument" that would reject wholesale any text that contains violence is a naïve and imprecise solution to a complex problem (360). While the more rigorous work of choosing what parts of a text ought to be deemed authoritative may cause fighting, as he

suggests, his rejection of any techniques of re-appropriation or recovery of counter-traditions is unwarranted by his theory.

On the contrary, these internal debates are precisely how religious traditions nonviolenly struggle over the proper meaning of sacred texts. The critical eye that Avalos brings to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures is an invaluable contribution to this work, as he unapologetically exposes the extent of violence in religious history and paradigmatic stories, revealing precise mechanisms by which religions create unnecessary fighting. His is an impassioned argument, driven by a desire to "close the book on a long chapter of human misery" (382). The solutions he proposes, however, risk causing even more violence by making religion itself a scarce resource, as secular forces like Avalos seek its elimination while religionists struggle to preserve that which they value. A more nuanced appreciation of the dynamics of religious traditions is necessary for the provocative insights in *Fighting Words* to have the practical influence Avalos desires.

Book Reviewed by:
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