

Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence across Time and Tradition. James K. Wellman Jr., ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.

The modern age was rife with examples of religiously motivated violence well before September 11, 2001, from the large-scale conflict in Northern Ireland to the murder of abortion providers in the U.S.; likewise, there was plenty of scholarship on the intertwining of religion and violence, such as Regina M. Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* and Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2000). So, contrary to the assertions of the United States' political corps, 9/11 did not change much except people's perspectives. Perhaps because modern historiography tended to explain away the religious motivations of past events (e.g., the Crusades were more about domestic policy than about killing infidels), the attacks upon New York City and Washington DC codified in the popular mind a very recent linkage of religion and violence, even as they resulted in an urgent quest to understand that linkage.

Of the many volumes published on religious violence in the last few years, few rise to the level of *Belief and Bloodshed*, which draws upon the work of scholars from a range of fields—history, law, comparative literature, sociology, religious studies, anthropology, and so on—all working together to present a multi-pronged approach covering numerous religious traditions and historical periods. Editor James K. Wellman sets the tone for the book in an introduction offering a new definition of religion composed specifically to neutralize the view that conflict is tangential to its essence: “Religion is a system of symbols, composed of beliefs and practices, developed in a common setting, often institutionally legitimated, which negotiates and interacts with a power or force that is experienced as within and beyond the self and group. ... The symbolic and social boundaries of religion mobilize individual and group identity, and create conflict and, more rarely, violence within and between groups” (4). The essays that follow consider these “symbolic and social boundaries” and the resultant conflict in a great variety of religious traditions and across the span of institutional religious history, from some of humanity's oldest records of such down to the present day.

The book is organized somewhat chronologically, opening with analyses of divine violence imagery in the ancient Near East and the ritual of the Roman Triumph by Scott B. Noegel and Sarah Culpepper Stroup, respectively. Moving on through the Middle Ages, most notably with Paul Stephenson's discussion of Orthodox leaders according spiritual rewards to those who died fighting for Byzantium, *Belief and Bloodshed* jumps full into the modern era with essays on the seventeenth-century Quaker martyrs of Boston, anti-Muslim violence in the Chinese province of Yunnan, and the clergy-approved murder of women participating in government-sponsored unveiling campaigns in Soviet-dominated Uzbekistan. The three essays that end the book address the post-9/11 period. Joel Black finds parallels in the destruction of the twin Buddhist statues in Afghanistan with the Twin Towers, describing both as instances of religiously motivated iconoclasm, and notes that "in predominantly religious societies iconoclasm and terrorism would seem to be inextricably related" (190). Editor Wellman asks, given overwhelming evangelical support for the Iraq war, whether war is normative for evangelical religion. Here he perhaps faults by not considering any differences between white and black evangelicals, especially given the suspicion with which most African-American religious groups have historically eyed U.S. military policies. Bruce Lincoln wraps up the volume by discussing the similarities in the imperialistic rhetoric of the Cyrus Cylinder of the sixth century BCE and President George Bush's 2003 State of the Union address, finding conjunctions in their shared dualism, theme of election, and "a soteriological sensibility, which assumes responsibility for perfecting the world through the exercise of one's power" (222).

Given that one of the first steps toward religiously motivated violence is the association of another group with the forces of evil, *Belief and Bloodshed* would be well paired with another recent volume, Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Lourens Minnema's *Coping with Evil in Religion and Culture: Case Studies*, which analyzes how various religious and cultural traditions define evil and attempt to cope with it. However, *Belief and Bloodshed* has a definite advantage over similar ones in that it offers a fairly global and historical perspective on its subject, rather than focusing on the monotheistic traditions and the modern age, as is popular. Too, some of the essays included serve as potent reminders that groups today often associated with more peaceful tendencies have their own checkered pasts. Charles A. McDaniel Jr. focuses upon the 1534 Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster, Westphalia, and the movement of the city's new religious leaders to utter bloodlust, concluding:

“Institutional development creates the vision of an alternative society that may amplify eschatological or other potentially contentious values that are already present in a group’s theological core” (76). Charles F. Keyes likewise connects Theravāda Buddhism and political violence in colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand.

This volume rounds out the subject at hand with the inclusion of two essays analyzing specific instances in which religion led to a diminishment of violent impulses. Marion S. Goldman examines the ways in which mass violence was successfully avoided at the Rajneeshpuram commune in Oregon, while Michael S. Berger studies how the various rabbis of the second century CE, in the wake of disastrous Jewish revolts against Rome, rhetorically moved messianism beyond human reach, concluding that “what is critical in determining the role of religion in escalating or suppressing violence is a tradition’s view of human agency that accompanies one’s portrayal of a conflict in cosmic terms” (54–55). *Belief and Bloodshed* thus offers not only analyses of brutality but is also a guide toward building religious communities less likely to be so infected. All those interested in the nexus of religion and violence—either from a purely academic standpoint or with practical intentions toward the reclamation of faith from its historical and lamentable darker tendencies—would be well served by this important book.

Book Reviewed by:

Guy Lancaster, Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture