

The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

J. Harold Ellens, editor

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007

Even a cursory exploration of history, or of the evening news, makes the reality of religious violence glaringly apparent. An Islamic radical group is out to destroy the West; A Christian fundamentalist seeks to marginalize homosexuals and kill abortionists; A group of Jewish settlers pursue land through apartheid-like policies and military action. Although religion has provided the inspiration to move individuals to rapturous artistic and humanistic heights, it has also provided divine mandate and the justification necessary for disastrous acts of violence. It is this reality of religious violence, and the motivations behind it, that *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* seeks to address.

In the introduction to the book, editor Ellens points out that religious brutality is something of which each of us is guilty, and something that each of us has suffered. Because it is a religious problem, and because it “wreaks havoc on all our souls and psyches” (xxiii), it is necessary to address violence both spiritually and psychologically. It is in seeking to understand these roots of violence that this book offers something unique. The book refuses to accept an oversimplified understanding of violence whereby it is a conscious choice of sick-minded and hate-filled radicals. The book recognizes that the roots of violence are hidden in all of us, in our histories, our myths, our psyches, and our sacred texts, in the very things that make us who we are. If religious violence simply existed as a conscious action of enervated theology, a simplistic approach would be suitable. The essays in this book seek to lay bare such obvious accusations and uncover the unconscious influences present within each of our traditions, and within each individual, to resolve our differences with violence.

Many of the essays in the book address the psychological and developmental influences of religious violence. Nothing is left unaddressed. Everything is examined as a possible source, from relationships in early childhood to the idealization of sacred texts to cognitive theory

and personality theory to social psychology. However, the most intriguing articles are those that address the metanarratives that provide justification for violence. The first of these articles is written by Ellens and begins the book. It is an insightful look into the core metaphor of a cosmic, transcendent battle between good and evil, which has been handed down to modern societies through the religious roots of the three Abrahamic religions, namely the Hebrew Scriptures. Popular movies, music, video games, literature, and religion utilize this metaphor to tap into dichotomous archetypes that pit “us” (those on the side of good) against “them” (those on the side of evil.) Ellens locates the justification for religious violence in this transcendent and all-encompassing metaphor.

Cosmic evil is only one of the subconscious myths that shape our perception of violence. Walter Wink’s essay, “The Myth of Redemptive Violence,” addresses another, albeit connected, metanarrative. In this essay Wink makes a connection between warfare and religion, arguing that from the dawn of civilization violence has been endowed with redemptive power. Wink locates this endowment in ancient creation myths, in particular the Enuma Elish. In these myths the gods establish peace and tranquility in creation through war, death and violence; even humanity is created from these brutal actions. Violence is necessary to overcome evil and realize good. The adoption of this myth of redemptive violence leads us as a society to represent all those who oppose our societal norms as evil, and to seek their destruction as a means of purifying a stain from society’s inherent goodness. From there it is a short step to state-sanctioned violence in defense of the nation; the myth of redemptive violence becomes the spirituality of the militaristic state.

Wink’s essay is important for another reason. It is one of the few essays in the book that locates the solution for religious violence within religion itself. Religious metaphors and narratives have the ability to move people in a way that little else in our world does. As such, the only real solution available for the problem of religiously sanctioned brutality is nonviolent religion. According to Wink, the Hebrew creation myth reveals a God who brings order out of chaos through the spoken word; violence is not necessary. There is no question that religion has been misused, but the fact that it can be misused so powerfully implies that it can also be used to the benefit of peace, coexistence and conviviality. While this collection of essays does a fantastic job of addressing the sources of violence, it does little to recognize the possible solutions available within religion itself. In the essay mentioned above, and in his essay, “Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus’ Non-violent

Way” Wink begins the conversation, but more is needed.

Nearly half the essays in the book are written by Ellens, himself. It is clear that he has spent a lot of time and energy considering the problem of religious violence. Interestingly, Ellens does not simply see violence as something that humanity inflicts upon itself. Nature, as a part of the created order of God, “violates us and terrorizes our central selves” (xviii). In this regard, the problem is one for which God is responsible. At times, Ellens’ approach verges on heresy. The problem of violence has vexed God throughout history. God hasn’t upheld his end of the bargain; even when we are faithful we suffer. Christ fell victim to violence because he chose violent solutions. Some will read this book and take offense at these perceived theological shortcomings. But whatever your Christology, whatever your theological convictions about God’s sovereignty, this book is an honest and vulnerable attempt to confront violence at all levels, regardless of who or what is committing it. The pervasiveness of violence and its connection to subconscious foundations enforces the realization that the task that lies before us is daunting. It can be overwhelming, but as Ellens avers, the greatest consolation (not solution, mind you) we have available to us is that God is a God of grace. This consolation is available in each of the three Abrahamic faiths, and is the only thing that actually works to overcome the daunting realization of the problem of religious violence.

Chris Spotts, PhD candidate

Marquette University