

*Introduction***WHY IS RELIGION VIOLENT AND VIOLENCE RELIGIOUS?**

VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION, plentiful enough in our time, is an enduring feature of religious life. Rituals of sacrifice and martyrdom and legendary tales of great battles abound within every religious tradition. In most cases the violent images are symbolic, but the reality of religion is clouded with actual events of violence—inquisitions and internal attacks, sacrifices and martyrdoms, wars and conquests. Virtually every religious tradition has left a trail of blood.

Some would argue that the violent images in religion are greatly misunderstood. Religion itself is not violent, these defenders of religion claim, but a voice of peace. Rather, the misuse of religion leads to violence—stealthy activists legitimizing their deeds with religious justifications—and that sullies the purity of religion's reputation.

We agree, in part, for indeed most religious teachings are about peace. They not only preach tolerance and understanding of those who are different but advocate forgiveness and mercy in the face of opposition. The idea of killing is abhorrent to all religious traditions, and even the attempts to coerce and bully are regarded as anathema. We wish that this volume were large enough to include the peaceful sides of religion and to counteract all of the violent passages.

Yet we feel that there is value in having a volume that focuses on the destructive side. After all, these brutal passages exist, and despite the overwhelming peacefulness of religious traditions, the fact remains that they are also filled with the symbols and language of violence. Why is this the case? It may well be, as some will claim, that these images help to alleviate real violence by symbolically displacing violent urges. It also may be true that religious violence is the rare exception rather than the rule. Yet these are precisely what need to be explained—how religious language can embrace violent images and acts, and why, and on what occasions, and how it is possible that symbolic violence can turn to real acts of bloodshed.

The link between religion and violence extends back into the early history of religious traditions. The sword of Islam and the cross of Christianity—an execution device—are only the most obvious indications of ancient associations with bloody images in religious culture. Tales of violence are frequent in the most ancient Western texts, from the Bible through the Assyrian and Hittite royal annals to the earliest Sumerian and Akkadian poetic celebrations of such deities as Ishtar, Ninurta, and Nergal. The vio-

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lent images in Asian religious traditions are equally ancient. The auspicious acts of destruction undertaken by Vedic gods such as Indra and Rudra are conspicuous in early Indian poetry and epic, and the martial arts traditions associated with Taoism and Buddhism reflect principles based in 2,500-year-old texts—and some would say in the cosmos itself.

Virtually all cultural traditions have contained sacrificial acts and martial metaphors. Some would argue that the rise of religion is intimately related to the origins of sacrifice. But images of warfare are equally ubiquitous and similarly ancient. The Muslim notion of jihad is the most notable example, but even in Buddhist legends great wars are to be found. In Sri Lankan culture, for instance, virtually canonical status is accorded to the legendary history recorded in the Pali Chronicles, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, that relate the triumphs of battles waged by Buddhist kings. In India, warfare has contributed to the grandeur of the great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which are tales of seemingly unending conflict and military intrigue. Arguably, more than the Vedic rituals, these martial epics defined subsequent Hindu culture. In Sikhism, the *Dal Khalsa* (“army of the faithful”) is the term for the Sikh community, denoting a disciplined religious organization. Great passages of the Hebrew Bible are devoted to the military exploits of great kings, their contests reported in gory detail. Though the New Testament did not take up the battle cry, the later history of the church did, supplying Christianity with a bloody record of crusades and religious wars. Protestant Christianity is an example. Although the reformed tradition is strongly pacifist, martial images abound in the rhetoric and symbolism of the faith. Protestant preachers everywhere have encouraged their flocks to wage war against the forces of evil, and their homilies are followed with hymns about “Christian soldiers,” fighting “the good fight,” and struggling “manfully onward.” Given both the antiquity and the persistence of such images, it seems reasonable to conclude that violence is in some way intrinsic to religion.

This is a book of readings that helps us understand this dark attraction between religion and violence. The first section of the book focuses on war and religious language, and contains a collection of writings, including scriptures and ancient texts, that justify military action for religious reasons at special moments in history. This section also includes writings from contemporary religious activists—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist—who justify acts that most observers would regard as terrorism. Included are the last instructions for the hijackers involved in the September 11, 2001, attacks, as well as the theories of those who have

formulated the jihadi ideology of global struggle and Christian and Jewish militancy in the contemporary world.

In the second section, sacrifice and theoretical ideas are at the center. This section contains excerpts from such formative thinkers as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud up to contemporary theorists like René Girard and Elaine Scarry. Each of them has attempted to make sense of the role of religion in human culture by focusing on what might appear to be religion's most peculiar obsession, violence. They offer thoughts on the essential question: What is it about religious traditions that seems to welcome images of violence? What is it about religion that can lead to violence? Speculation about the link between religion and violence has been launched from a number of different disciplines—history of religions, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science, among others. Early theorists pondered religious violence in forms they identified mostly with arcane cults—totemism and blood sacrifice. More recently scholars have questioned the roles that ritualized killing seems to play within broader cultural constructions, such as punitive codes, scapegoating, gang-related activities, terrorism, and war. This section offers ideas from thinkers whose voices continue to resonate in the scholarly world's attempt to make sense of the phenomenon of religious violence.

Is there a relationship between the writings in the first section and those in the second? At first glance, it might appear that they are about different things. The religious apologists in the first section justify and defend the *actual* use of violence in religious contexts. The scholarly essays in the second section are largely ruminating about the *symbolic* images and rituals within the religious imagination. Those who read the selections in this volume may very well conclude that the two kinds of writings have nothing to do with one another, or that—as some theorists argue—real acts of violence are the result of the imperfect application of religious rites and symbols that in their best moments diffuse violent urges rather than promote them.

At the same time there may be a closer connection between real and symbolic acts of violence than one might think. For one thing, symbolic violence is often thought to be the ritual reenactment of ancient but quite real acts of violence. Freud, for example, thought that there was an original conflict that involved fratricide among brothers and patricide of the father. The oldest forms of sacrifice, some scholars argue, were human sacrifices. Even later sacrifices that involved animals were, from the perspective of unwilling sheep, violent events. Similarly the legendary stories

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of warfare were in many cases actual wars. The Crusades, the Sikh battles against Moghul rule, the warfare between Buddhist and Tamil kings described in Sri Lanka's Pali Chronicles—all these were real battles that later became remembered as legendary ones.

Moreover, contemporary acts of religious violence are often conducted in a ritual way, with intentions that are as symbolic as they are strategic. The martyrs chosen for suicide attacks often carry the hallmarks of a sacrificial victim. The attackers on September 11, 2001, acted as though they were undergoing a sacred rite. One might argue that their act of terrorism was an attempt to redefine public space in religious terms. In many contemporary acts of religious terrorism, the activists appear to be conducting public rites of purification as much as they are making a political statement. To some extent then, acts of religious violence can be seen as religious acts indeed, events that need to be understood and challenged from a religious as well as a political perspective.

For these reasons, we think that it is helpful to include in one volume readings that embrace both the activist writings that justify violence in a religious milieu and the scholarly attempts to understand religious violence in its symbolic forms. Given the incendiary mix of religion and violence that characterizes much of contemporary global conflict, it is helpful to understand this volatile combination from a variety of perspectives—historical and contemporary, scholarly and activist, symbolic and political. The ultimate goal of all understanding, however, is not just to appreciate reality but to change it. In a modest way, we hope that this effort at making sense of religious violence will lead to a new appreciation of the transformative capacity of religion and its ability to lead to tranquillity as well as destruction, and to healing as well as to harm.