Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence

Hector Avalos
Iowa State University, havalos@iastate.edu

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<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DtrH</td>
<td>The Deuteronomistic History</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAAR</td>
<td>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAOS</td>
<td>Journal of the American Oriental Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>JRAS</td>
<td>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</td>
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<td>JSOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td>Loeb Classical Library</td>
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As usual, I must thank Rusty, our all-knowing pet squirrel, who furnished entertainment for the sometimes word-weary author.

I, hereby, absolve them all for any transgressions.
A NOTE TO READERS


All quotations of the Qur’an, unless otherwise noted, are from A. Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation, and Commentary (Brentwood, MD: Amana, 1983).

Foreign languages are notoriously difficult to transliterate. We have used approximations, except where noted or where an argument hinges on precise diacritics. We have used brackets to enclose words, especially in titles of articles and books, whose transliteration deviates from what is actually printed in the original publication.
INTRODUCTION

This is not simply another book about religion and violence.

It is a book presenting a new theory for religious violence. The idea for the book was born long before the now well-known events of September 11, 2001. Religious violence has preoccupied me ever since I began to ask myself how I could hold sacred the Bible, a book filled with so much violence. I then expanded the question to how anyone today can deem sacred those books that endorse any level of violence. By early 2001 I had already published an article comparing violence in the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita.¹

Some of my thinking was influenced by a book by Regina Schwartz, The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism (1997).² The author argued therein that monotheism was inherently violent. Since monotheism advocates only one legitimate deity, then the worship of anything else is a violation of boundaries. The addition of a group of outsiders then becomes the prime ingredient for violence. The life of outsiders may be devalued, so killing them can be justified. But more intriguing was the author's allusion to the scarce resources created by monotheism. For example, belief in one god as the exclusive possession of one people may mean that outsiders are denied access to the benefits or rights provided by that one god. Such benefits could be land or national identity.

I wondered if similar mechanisms were at work not just in monotheism, but in religion as a whole. I asked myself whether religion is inherently violent. If not, what are the mechanisms by which religion sometimes becomes violent? Are those factors the same as the ones that cause other types of violence? Is there something special about religion that makes it prone to violence? Or are we misperceiving religion by focusing too much on its violent side?

¹

²
The questions seemed particularly important because there is a definite stream of popular opinion and scholarship that denies that religion is the cause of some specific conflicts or of violence in general. Shortly after the attack of September 11, Andrew Sullivan noted in a *New York Times Magazine* article that “there has been a general reluctance to call it a religious war.” Similarly, there have been efforts to deny that the Nazi Holocaust had any religious roots, some preferring to place responsibility on evolutionary theory or atheism. Alan Jacobs has even argued that “the whole notion of religion as a cause of violence is . . . a function of the desire to believe that religion is eliminable.”

Along the way, I concluded that while it does not always cause violence, religion is inherently prone to violence. In fact, even so-called pacifistic religions often approve of violence in subtle ways. I saw that “peace” itself was simply the name for the set of conditions favorable to a proponent group rather than some absolute rejection of violence. Other times, “peace” was simply an intermediary state in which pacifism was maintained for political and self-interest rather than for any systematic opposition to all violence.

But more important, I came to wonder how and why religions can be prone to violence. After much thought and comparison of many religions, I formulated what will be the main elements of my thesis, which I can summarize succinctly as follows:

1) Most violence is due to scarce resources, real or perceived. Whenever people perceive that there is not enough of something they value, conflict may ensue to maintain or acquire that resource. This can range from love in a family to oil on a global scale.

2) When religion causes violence, it often does so because it has created new scarce resources.

As I compared religious violence with secular violence, I also realized that there was a fundamental distinction between the two. Unlike many non-religious sources of conflict, religious conflict relies solely on resources whose scarcity is wholly manufactured by, or reliant on, unverifiable premises. When the truth or falsity of opposing propositions cannot be verified, then violence becomes a common resort in adjudicating disputes. That is the differentia that makes religious violence even more tragic than nonreligious violence.
DEFINITIONS

Any claim that religion is inherently prone to violence must begin with definitions. The first pertains to religion, which is defined here as a mode of life and thought that presupposes the existence of, and relationship with, unverifiable forces and/or beings. As such, our definition is squarely and unapologetically within the empirico-rationalist tradition.

All definitions of violence are value laden as we choose the type of suffering and violence we value. Our definition is somatocentric insofar as it values the physical human body and regards any sort of “soul” or “spirit” as nonexistent. As we will see, religions often espouse a pneumatocentric justification for violence, in which the values of the entities called the “soul” or “spirit” are paramount to those of the body. Accordingly, we define violence as the act of modifying and/or inflicting pain upon the human body in order to express or impose power differentials.

By this definition, pain or bodily modification can be inflicted upon a person by others or it can be self-inflicted, as in the case of self-flagellation and martyrdom. There are degrees of violence, so that a haircut or a tattoo, both bodily modifications, are not always regarded as very violent. At the same time, our definition allows for the fact that depilation and tattooing can be painful forms of torture. Likewise, circumcision could be subsumed under violence in that it modifies a body for the purpose of expressing power differentials. Circumcision also imposes a power differential upon a child, as it is not the result of a mutual decision between parent and child. Killing, of course, is regarded as the ultimate imposition of a power differential on the body.

Since we regard mental processes as part of the body, then psychological and mental violence is included in our somatocentric approach. Psychological torture, for example, involves physiological changes in the body, and pain is ultimately how we experience certain neurochemical events. As long as an action relating to the expression of power modifies or inflicts pain upon a physical body, it is defined as violent, whether such injury is justified or not.

It is important to note that war is one of many forms of violence. The focus on “war,” if defined as an armed conflict between collective entities, results in the thesis that religion and specific religions are not violent because they do not often engage in war. This has been a particularly recurrent problem in evaluating early Christianity, as often being against military service is equated with being nonviolent. And there is evidence that even in self-described “pacifist” groups the incidence of domestic and sexual violence reported can be just as high as among the general population. Ours is a more holistic approach because we realize that much religious violence does not come in the form of the large and organized effort we may associate with
war. Examples of religious violence range from circumcision to killing gays and lesbians.

We recognize, but do not treat, "verbal" violence here except when it is a clear precursor to actual physical violence. Violence does include the destruction of property when that is an instrument to cause harm to the livelihood or sociopsychological welfare of any individual or community. One such example is Kristallnacht (1938), when German Jews were terrorized by the destruction of their property even, if outright killing of Jews was not yet at its height in Nazi Germany.

Under our concept of violence, we can also distinguish between justified and unjustified violence. Violence in self-defense or the defense of the physical well-being of others is acceptable. The surgical modification of the body for the purposes of saving a life or empowering an individual, especially if the individual chose to be so modified, is justified violence. We hold any violence that is not based on verifiable causes and phenomena to be senseless and unethical. We will outline this argument at greater length in chapter 15. Beating a child or stoning a woman to death is not acceptable violence, regardless of the reason. We certainly do not advocate that physical injury or killing someone's body is ever justified to serve some greater spiritual good.

CAUSALITY AND HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

Since at least the time of David Hume (1711–1776), the notion of causality has undergone severe scrutiny. David Hume proposed that spatial and temporal contiguity did not constitute logical proof of causation. What we call a "cause" is actually better described as a correlation that occurs in time and space between two or more events. At most, we could speak of correlations, wherein we observe that one event regularly followed temporally upon another.

Within history, the notion of cause has produced a crisis that is still underway. What would it mean to claim, for example, that Ronald Reagan's policies "caused" the fall of communism? Unlike many correlations found in nature, historical events are not usually repeatable under exactly the same circumstances. Even if there were correlations, these cannot always be seen as a "cause" any more than the correlation of a rooster crowing before sunrise means that the rooster's crow caused the sun to rise.

Within the study of war, the crisis of determining causality can be seen in the mammoth project known as the Correlates of War (COW), which seeks to find what factors can be correlated with wars. Frank Whelon Wayman and J. David Singer, one of the founders of the COW Project, are
reticent to speak of causes. They see the COW Project as “searching for variables that are positively correlated with the onset of war, and ascertaining whether the association seems causal.” Nonetheless, Wayman and Singer propose at least three requirements for establishing causality, which can be summarized as follows:

1. A postulated cause has to precede the effect in time (or at least occur simultaneously with it rather than come after it).
2. The cause and effect have to covary as demonstrated by a statistical correlation.
3. Other explanations of the cause and effect relationship have to be eliminated.

So what does it mean to say that religion “causes” violence or “can cause” violence? Here we opt for a definition of “cause” that can demonstrate a logical sequence as well as a spatiotemporal one. We may say that religion causes violence if and when the perpetration of violence is a logical consequence of beliefs in unverifiable forces and/or beings. The expression “logical consequence” can be represented in a more formal manner: Religious Belief X, therefore Act of Violence Y. Accordingly, attribution of religious causation requires demonstration that an act of violence had a necessary precedent in a religious belief. Without that causational belief, the specific act of violence would not have taken place.

For example, suppose person A truly believes that God has commanded him to kill homosexuals, and this person then kills a homosexual. In this case, we can say that belief X (God has commanded person A to kill homosexuals) caused the killing of the homosexual. In such a case, we may say that the religious belief was necessary, if not sufficient, to perpetrate this act of violence. In the clearest cases, the perpetrators may themselves cite such beliefs.

Most acts of religious violence are not so transparent. This has led scholars to posit political and economic factors as the main causes of many common conflicts. And indeed political and economic factors can also lead to violence. However, the notion of causation would be no less severe for positing economic and political factors, and, in fact, they may be even more elusive as causes. Disentangling the religious from other causes forms a main challenge for our thesis.

It is, indeed, also useful to make the distinction between necessary and sufficient causes. Some violence would not occur if certain religious beliefs did not exist. For example, the idea that homosexuality is evil may be necessary, but not sufficient, to explain a particular act of antigay violence. Our study will include acts of violence for which religion forms a necessary and/or sufficient basis for the violence.
Accordingly, the reader must realize that our thesis does not claim that religion is the cause of all violence. We certainly recognize that poverty, politics, nationalism, and even neuropsychological factors may generate violence. Nor do we necessarily claim that most violence is religious, as statistical verification is very difficult, especially for ancient history. We also recognize that within religions there may be a plurality of positions on violence, though we shall show that some descriptions of religions as peaceful rely on faulty data or lack of acquaintance with primary sources.

Our thesis proposes that when religion causes violence, it usually does so because it has created a scarce resource. The creation of scarce resources may occur when the adherents of a religion claim that the benefits of that religion are not or cannot be equally distributed to all human beings. Accordingly, we must also extend our argument to include scarcity in the chain of causation. We acknowledge that religion can also cause violence through means other than the creation of scarce resources, and we will outline some of those as we examine specific cases of religious violence.

A resource is any entity that persons utilize in the enterprise of living. Not all resources are of equal value, of course. One can live without a Rolex watch. We focus on those resources that are of high value, or at least of a value high enough to fight for. A resource may be described as scarce when it meets one or more of the following requirements: (1) It is not immediately available, and (2) accessing it, maintaining it, or acquiring it requires the expense of a significant amount of social or physical capital and labor. A scarce resource X created by religion may cause violence when at least one of two or more persons or groups (1) desires to acquire or maintain X, and (2) believes violence is an allowable and proper method to acquire and/or maintain X.

Demonstration of our thesis consists of at least two main types of evidence. The first centers on the words of perpetrators of violence themselves. Too often in debates about religion and conflict, the attribution of motives is based on secondary sources or faulty deductions. The COW Project, for example, usually does not focus on statements made by perpetrators of violence. One example of a clear attribution of violence to religious reasons can be seen in the following Hadith reported by Al-Bukhari, perhaps the most authoritative collector of traditions about Muhammad. Al-Bukhari tells us:

The prophet said, “Allah . . . assigns for a person who participates in (holy battles) in Allah’s Cause and nothing causes him to do so except belief in Allah and in His Messenger, that he will be recompensed by Allah with a reward, or booty (if he survives) or will be admitted to Paradise (if he is killed in the battle as a martyr).”\textsuperscript{16}
Here is a clear attribution of the reason for violence from a Muslim himself. This sort of self-attribution by practitioners of a religion certainly would count as strong evidence that violence was the result of religious beliefs.

A second type of demonstration involves logical deductions, which allow us to make clear cases of a belief leading to an action much as described above. Again, we pursue examples in which we can reduce the act of violence to the following rationale: Religious Belief X, therefore Act of Violence Y. If we return to our example of violence against homosexuals, we can infer a religious reason when a person who commits an act of violence against a homosexual has only previously expressed religious reasons for hating homosexuals. In such a case, we need not necessarily hear him utter religious reasons at the time he commits an act of violence, nor do we need to hear him threaten an act of violence to make a reasonable inference that religion was probably the likely “cause.”

We are also fortunate to have at least a bit of empirical survey data that allows us to correlate religiosity with certain beliefs about the value of Jerusalem and other sacred spaces that are important in our argumentation. One such example is the survey conducted by Jerome M. Segal, Shlomit Levy, Nadar Izzat Sa'id, and Elihu Katz. We will also discuss studies on the correlation between religious belief and militarism undertaken by sociologists of religion.

Likewise, we concentrate on cases in which economics and politics can be shown to derive from religious factors rather than the reverse. In sum, we will count our thesis successful by providing examples of violence that would probably not have occurred if a religious belief were not involved or where we can show that religious motives are expressly used to incite or maintain violence.

VIOLENCE AND ACADEMIC RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Our main claim here is that academic biblical scholars and scholars of religion, more often than not, maintain the value of religious texts that promote or endorse violence. This maintenance is accomplished by hermeneutic strategies that sanitize the violence, claim to espouse multivocality in readings, or claim aesthetic value to texts even if historical aspects of the texts are minimized. In this regard, we are influenced by theories that see the academic study of literature itself as a locus and instrument of power.

Most of us are influenced by our training and life experience in formulating any theory. In the interest of openness and self-analysis, I provide a brief narrative about some of the recurrent issues that I see among academics
who attempt to address the problem of violence in religion. Briefly, these issues are: (1) the perceived public mission of religious studies; (2) the presence of cryptoessentialism in religious studies; and (3) the place of empirico-rationalism and naturalism in religious studies.

The first problem revolves around the perceived mission of religious studies, particularly in secular institutions of higher learning. Noam Chomsky argued cogently during the Vietnam War that "it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak truth and to expose lies." 20

However, since public universities are funded by taxpayers, the mission of religious studies is perceived to mean that scholars must be sympathetic or neutral toward religion. Religions must be understood but not criticized. Any research indicating that religion is injurious or that particular religions are injurious can bring a response that universities, as publicly funded institutions, cannot seek to undermine the faith of constituents.

Otherwise, the notion of academic responsibility has not been consistent from field to field. Professors in the sciences, for example, routinely are expected to help solve problems in society, whether these be finding a new medication for cancer or learning how to suppress odor produced by swine containment facilities. This is particularly the case in so-called land grant universities, which are expected to be involved directly in the betterment of the society around them. In the case of science, academics are encouraged to identify a "problem" and then help to solve it.

From time to time, there have been efforts to engage in what is called "activist" scholarship, or "praxis." This sometimes means that advocates of some sort of liberation theology see their obligation, as scholars, as putting their beliefs into practice. We have seen this with all sorts of liberation theology movements in Latin America and in the United States. In South Africa there were some vocal theoreticians of this approach when apartheid ruled. For example, Gregory Baum says, "religious studies, and the human sciences in general, should not only aim at understanding reality, but also at transforming it." 21

In truth, neutrality does not and cannot exist in the academic study of religion, even if it can be minimized in the teaching about religion in a pluralistic society. The nonneutrality of academic attitudes toward religion can be traced to at least Thomas Jefferson's vision of the first public university in the United States, the University of Virginia. Outlining a radical departure from earlier American colleges, Thomas Jefferson decided that theology would not be taught in his university. In a letter dated November 22, 1822, Jefferson told his friend Thomas Cooper, "In our university . . . there is no Professorship of Divinity. A handle has been made of this, to disseminate an idea that this is an institution, not merely of no religion, but against all religion." 22
Jefferson actually would permit sects to fund their own professorships and be housed near enough so that students could go listen to their lectures. However, Jefferson insisted that these professorships should "maintain their independence of us and of each other." His agenda in having these sectarian professorships interact with students at the University of Virginia was, in part, "to neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality."

And, indeed, despite the complaints of creationists, science departments have very little problem teaching evolution as a fact. Evolution certainly undermines Christian literalistic understandings of Genesis, but those understandings are either held not to be suitable understandings of Christianity, or they have so little power that they can be ignored. Nor do universities have a problem teaching a heliocentric vision of the universe even if a few constituents still think it undermines their religious belief. Truth here is held to be so obvious that a religious understanding may be excluded as legitimate. Here the results of empirico-rationalist science are held to take precedence over offending religious beliefs.

By the end of the nineteenth century, bitter battles were fought over the advent of higher criticism, which undermined belief in the historicity of many parts of the Bible. Among the first portions of the Bible to be submitted to close scrutiny was the Pentateuch. The main issues revolved around the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Eventually, most critical scholars rejected the idea that one person had written the whole Pentateuch. The other issue revolved around the historicity of the stories in Genesis, especially the creation stories. Eventually, geology and astronomy led scholars away from literal interpretations of Genesis, and those stories were reclassified as "myth."

The New Testament also came under fire. The publication of H. S. Reimarus's fragments in 1768 is usually taken as a benchmark date for research that systematically questioned the historicity of Jesus. Reimarus argued that Jesus was a failed revolutionary whose disciples refused to admit his death. Thus, a story developed that Jesus would resurrect and return triumphantly to set up his kingdom.

Likewise, battles with the so-called fundamentalists were waged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a clear secularizing trend that undermined the religious views of many in the United States. George M. Marsden, writing from a Protestant perspective, wrote *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (1994), which charted some of the secularizing trends. Likewise, James Tunstead Burtchaell, writing from a Catholic perspective, documented in detail how many religious colleges had been secularized. Both Marsden and Burtchaell wrote these works as lamentations rather than as celebrations.
Other scholars see more desectarianization (i.e., less emphasis being "Baptist" or "Lutheran") than secularization.29

Supreme Court decisions, particularly in the 1960s, made it clear that the academic study of religion in public institutions should be descriptive, and not prescriptive.30 The Supreme Court also indicated that academic study ought not be hostile to religion. Accordingly, new curricula were devised to teach religion as "literature."31 Questions that criticized religion in general or particular religions were shunned. These Supreme Court decisions also saw a new effort to shift biblical studies away from historical criticism, especially in high school curricula, to literary aesthetics, as another way to preserve the value of the text.

So, despite the claims to neutrality, there have always been efforts that undermined some religious beliefs. And what is the difference today? The difference resides simply in which religious beliefs are favored by academics at any given moment. Currently, literalistic beliefs about Genesis 1 are not favored by academics, and so they are systematically undermined. The Supreme Court has often cooperated in undermining the teaching of "scientific" creationism in schools, as in the case of Edwards v. Aguillard (1987), even though its principles may play a role in the religious belief of millions of Americans.

Donald Wiebe, in a penetrating analysis of the politics of religious studies, notes that modern departments of religious studies and the entire field of academic religious studies are still dominated by what we may denominate as "religionists."32 Many are self-described Christians who may no longer advocate a hierarchical and institutional Christianity. Instead they may favor a more eclectic form of "spirituality," or "religious praxis" tailored to elite individualistic lifestyles. However, this religious orientation still retains the idea, no less verifiable than those of the institutional theologies, that religion is essentially good or should not be discarded altogether.

At the same time, Wiebe has critiqued scholarly activism on behalf of religionist causes.33 However, here I must qualify Wiebe's criticism. All scholars are political if "political" is understood to mean that they are either supporting power structures or fighting against them. Even passivity is a political stance. In this regard, secular humanist scholars will strive to assert their "right" to advocate for what their conclusions lead them to believe. If any scholars come to believe, on the basis of their academic research, that religion or specific religious traditions are harmful to humanity, then it follows that it is their obligation to counteract those beliefs. Of course, this means a nonviolent and dialogic approach, given the current pluralistic politics.

This brings us to the problem of "crypto-essentialism," which refers to the use of essentialism while at the same time proclaiming not to do so. One
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A common example of this is found in works where undesirable elements in some religious traditions are characterized as “deviations.” Often, the word “fundamentalist” is used to devalue those traditions. We shall examine some very specific cases in which scholars attack Western essentialism in order to defend the view that Islam is “essentially” peaceful, and that those committing violence in the name of Islam are not legitimate practitioners of Islam.

The third problem in studying violence in academia is that the field of religious studies is still undergoing an epistemological identity crisis. We see this crisis discussed in books as well as in sometimes heated exchanges in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, among other periodicals. Among the main issues is whether the proper approach to the study of religion will entail empirico-rationalism, naturalism, or some species of epistemology that acknowledges the existence of the supernatural. John Milbank, among others, sees all the social sciences themselves as a form of secular counter-theology.

Combined with these issues is the fact that many empirico-rationalists no longer wish to be called empirico-rationalists or positivists, but claim that they are practicing something else. By empirico-rationalism, I refer to the epistemology that affirms that only what can be verified by the five senses and/or logic deserves the term “knowledge,” while all else is “belief.” “Belief” is reasonable only if based on verifiable evidence and inferences. Any belief not based on verifiable evidence or logic is deemed irrelevant or meaningless. By “naturalism,” I refer to the idea that natural phenomena are the only things known to exist and that religion is a natural phenomenon.

Usually, avowed empirico-rationalists would say that historical conclusions fall under the category of reasonable belief, which is any belief that, while not directly verified, is based on verifiable phenomena. Unreasonable beliefs are those that neither can be verified nor are based on verifiable phenomena, and this would include God or any other supernatural entity. Thus, all religion has a natural basis, and is not some sort of reflection of the transcendent.

The view of empirico-rationalism as some sort of Western hegemony or Eurocentric invention has led to challenging the very notion of whether there is such a thing as religion at all. And even if there is such a thing as religion, some would hold that outsiders can never really understand any particular religion. An alternate version of anti-empirico-rationalism argues that religion is a sui generis phenomenon that cannot be reduced to any other aspect of human behavior. Such a position has been seen as simply another apologetic attempt to retain the value of religion.

In reality, empirico-rationalism continues to be the premise for most of the work I see in the academy. What is different is to whom and upon whom empirico-rationalism is applied. Some self-described liberal Christian
scholars, for example, may be willing to admit that the world was not created in six days, as the fundamentalists believe. In this case, they have accepted the conclusion on nothing more than empirico-rationalist grounds, whether they admit it or not. On the other hand, they may hold to the existence of a "transcendent being" for no more verifiable reasons than the fundamentalist holds to creation in six days.

And if empirico-rationalism or naturalism is held to be the proper approach to truth, then it becomes feasible to argue that the best way to deal with religious violence is to undermine religion itself. Just as we undermined the religious belief that Genesis 1 is historically true, we can undermine the belief that any religion has received instructions from a deity. Although not as frank as my proposal, the proposal of John J. Collins, who served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2002, urges a more activist stance when he concludes: "Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world, is to show that certitude is an illusion."41

Those academicians who believe that religion is some sort of sui generis phenomenon or some manifestation of actual transcendent forces that may be harnessed for good may, of course, have cause to argue that academia should strive to understand religion so that we may harvest its essentially good fruits. Such academics likewise should be allowed to voice such opinions in a pluralistic society.

This argument between the naturalists and the supernaturalists will not be settled here. And given this political impasse, the best we can do for now is to be frank and up-front in summarizing my own presuppositions. I am a secular humanist. To the extent that I have a worldview, that consists of (1) an empirico-rationalist approach to the definition of religion;42 (2) a paradigm that is value laden and somatocentric when it evaluates human thought and action; (3) an activist orientation that not only allows, but obligates, a critique of religion and/or of specific religious traditions.

To the extent that I hold certain views on what is "good" or "bad," then my approach is value laden, just as is the approach of anyone else. My observations, therefore, will be accepted by those who share my values. However, my moral judgments are also grounded in facts and reason insofar as I can demonstrate logical and structural parallels between actions and ideologies. For example, whether I regard genocide as evil or not, I can demonstrate that event X constitutes a case of genocide once I have defined genocide adequately. Semantic logic is feasible regardless of value judgments.43

As an academic scholar of religion, it is my responsibility to analyze how religion may contribute to the detriment or well-being of humanity based on verifiable facts and reason.44 For the same reason, in order to make any progress in ameliorating the problem of violence, one has to confront vio-
lence in each religion in a frank manner. I believe I do it evenhandedly. As a secular humanist, I do not favor one religion over another, as I hold all of them to be equally based on unverifiable grounds. We argue for example, that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all heavily dependent on violent premises. They all regard their scriptures as sacred despite the violence endorsed therein.

And rather than pretend I am not hegemonic, I hold that (1) all worldviews, even those that claim pluralism, are hegemonic—for example, even pluralistic worldviews inevitably seek power over nonpluralistic worldviews; and (2) a pluralistic religious hegemony is a politically expedient means to persuade people to adopt a secular humanist hegemony, which I believe holds the best prospect for a nonviolent global society. Phrased more frankly, religious pluralism is good so long as it tolerates and serves the goals of secular humanism.

AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Although we focus on how scarce resources cause religious violence, an overarching theme of our thesis is that the lack of verifiability in religious belief differentiates ethically the violence attributed to religion from the violence attributed to nonreligious factors. This distinction will then lead to our main argument, which is that religious violence is always ethically reprehensible, while the same cannot be said of nonreligious violence, even if we grant that nonreligious factors can also create a great deal of violence by making certain resources scarce. We argue that the quality of the scarcity created by religion is fundamentally different.

Our argument will be framed in the form known as a fortiori argument, and kol wahoma in rabbinic argumentation:45 Briefly, such an argument attempts to show that if the truth for one claim is judged to be evident, then another claim ought to be held even more evidently true. As it pertains to our argument about religious violence as compared to secular violence, an a fortiori argument would be as follows: If any acts of violence caused by actual scarcities are judged as immoral, then acts of violence caused by resources that are not actually scarce should be judged as even more immoral. We further develop the argument that any act of violence predicated on the acquisition or loss of a nonexistent entity is always immoral and needless because bodily well-being or life is being traded for a nonexistent gain.
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SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

We need not study every religion in the world to establish our thesis. While most religions may be prone to violence, not all religions have an equal impact on the quality or quantity of violence that we see in the world. Religions shared by only a few tribespeople are prone to violence as well, but their scale makes them relatively insignificant on the world stage. We will concentrate on a few of the major, so-called world religions, because they have produced the largest scale of violence, and present the most pressing problems today. We also concentrate on religions that have scriptures, as that contributes to the quality and quantity of violence that can arise out of those religions.

On the most general level, our book is divided into four parts. Part 1 summarizes past explanations for violence. The aim is to place our thesis within the context of those explanations, as well as to explain why most previous explanations have not been successful in identifying the most basic mechanisms of religious violence. Part 2 introduces the theoretical underpinnings of scarce resource theory, on which our own theory is based. We discuss how religion creates scarce resources, and then focus on the following: (1) access to the divine will, particularly through inscripturation; (2) sacred space; (3) group privileging; and (4) salvation.

Part 2 also contains the main feature of our book insofar as it illustrates how our thesis applies in detail to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These traditions, combined, reportedly have more than 3 billion adherents. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may indeed be viewed as sectors of one older religious complex sometimes called the “Abrahamic” religion(s), because they all believe Abraham is an early and crucial worshipper of the god of those three religions. Abraham is believed to be a monotheist, even if the portrayal of his god among these three religions is not very consistent.

The initial chapter on each religious tradition is subdivided by the scarce resources that we think are the most important in explaining violent mechanisms. Again, these are (1) access to the divine will, particularly through inscripturation; (2) sacred space; (3) group privileging; and (4) salvation. Discussion of each scarce resource in each religion will be followed by illustrative conflicts that can be tied to that scarce resource within the religion itself. Illustrated conflicts will be relatively balanced between ancient and modern periods to show the continuity and pervasiveness of the religious mechanisms for violence. Each tradition is accompanied by a chapter that explains how academic scholars have defended violence in that tradition.

Part 3 examines alleged instances of secular violence. This is important because many scholars assume that secular violence is largely responsible for what appears to be religious violence. We show the religious origins of major
instances of violence (e.g., the Nazi Holocaust, Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre), which have been attributed to secular and political forces. The fourth and final part synthesizes the thesis by showing how secular violence differs from religious violence. In addition, part 4 offers practical solutions and applications (e.g., foreign policy) for our theory.

All scholarship is affected to some degree by training and experience. In the interest of methodological frankness, the most relevant formal training I have received is in anthropology and in biblical and ancient Near Eastern Studies. I am very centered on philology and text in order to make my arguments. I provide quoted portions of texts in the primary languages when editions in the primary languages are available to me or when the arguments hinge on more precise linguistics. I take the challenge of *ad fontes* seriously.

Relative to perhaps many other scholars, I tend to reproduce longer quotes and allow, as much as possible, the texts to speak for themselves in the same way that an ethnographer may allow informants to speak for themselves. I fall somewhere in between Lydia Cabrera’s superb ethnographic work on the Yoruba of Cuba and the ruminations on minutiae found in the Talmud. As we shall see, part of the recurrent problem one finds in all fields is that primary sources are frequently not consulted, especially when dealing with claims in fields outside of our own.

**SUMMARY**

Embarking on a new explanation for a common phenomenon is a humbling task that requires a high degree of self-confidence. It is humbling because one encounters a mass of data and literature that one will never master. On the other hand, the very notion that one can develop any new explanation reflects the confidence that one can successfully tackle a problem whose solution has eluded so many others before. But that is what the challenge of scholarship is partly about—challenging past explanations, and waiting for one’s peers to scrutinize, confirm, and/or dismantle a new one. I will count myself successful if I have prompted scholars to think in new ways about religious violence.

**NOTES**


9. For a recent entry into the “religion and war” theme, see Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, Encyclopedia of Religion and War (New York: Routledge, 2004). This reference is uneven in the quality and selection of entries, and its introduction does not outline clear categories of theories on war and violence.


11. Compare our definition to that of Albert Bandura, Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 5: “Aggression is defined as behavior that results in personal injury and in destruction of property.” Also the definition of Robert McAfee Brown (Religion and Violence: A Primer for White Americans [Stanford, CA: Stanford Alumni Association, 1973], p. 7): “The basic overall definition of violence would then become violations of personhood.” Violations, therefore, need not be physical and one of the most important violations consists of “injustice.”


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


30. There is a vast literature now on the Supreme Court and religion, but the following are ones I have found useful: Stephen H. Webb, “The Supreme Court and the Pedagogy of Religious Studies: Constitutional Parameters for the Teaching of Religion in the Public Schools,” JAAR 70, no. 1 (2002): 135-57; Robert Alley, ed., The Constitution and Religion: Leading Supreme Court Cases on Church and State (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); and James W. Fraser, Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999).


33. Ibid., 129-35.


38. See, for example, Tim Fitzgerald, “Religious Studies as Cultural Studies: A Philosophical and Anthropological Critique of the Concept of Religion,” Diskus 31 (1995): 35–47. Fitzgerald believes seeing religion as a “culture” is more definitionally sound, but he fails to see that “culture” itself may be a construct that presents no less problems than “religion.” The problem in defining “culture” was seen at least sixty years ago, on which see Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, 1952).


42. For a recent discussion of naturalism, see the special issue of *Philo* 3, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2000), edited by Keith Parsons.


