

# COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF RELIGION AND VIOLENCE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE CURRENT STATE OF SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION

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**Abstract:** This essay provides a brief introduction to articles reflecting on the current state of conversation regarding religion and violence. I begin by noting the occasion for which the articles were developed, then note some of the points made by each of the authors.

**Key words:** Religion, religious traditions, ethics, violence

The essays collected here originated as presentations for a panel at the November 2014 meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I served as moderator, and it is my privilege to provide this brief introduction.

To begin, it seems important to note the occasion for the panel. In June 2014, Cambridge University Press released *Religion, War, and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions*, edited by Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Nicole Hartwell. Compiled and edited by scholars associated with the Peace Research Institute of Oslo, this anthology constitutes a major contribution to comparative studies of religion and violence. Particularly with respect to teaching, the assortment of texts presented—many translated into English for the first time—provides an important resource, complementing the editors' previous collection of texts related to the just war tradition with selections from Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditions.<sup>1</sup> Our panel was organized in part to call attention to this collection, in hopes of

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<sup>1</sup>*The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Endre Begby (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

encouraging a wide range of scholars to examine and perhaps to make use of the materials in their own teaching and research.

This leads to a second reason for our panel. While calling attention to a new and potentially very useful resource, we also wanted to encourage an exchange about the current state of conversation among scholars interested in comparative studies of religion and violence. While there is a sense in which this conversation is relatively old, and may be traced at least as far back as the mid to late nineteenth century, there can be no doubt that it has gained momentum over the last three decades, with important contributions by James Aho (1981), James Turner Johnson (1981), Susan Niditch (1993), and Mark Juergensmeyer (2000), among others.<sup>2</sup> The 2013 publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* illustrates the range of scholars interested in this topic, as well as the wide variety of approaches and questions illustrated in their work.<sup>3</sup>

For the AAR panel, I invited four presenters to reflect on the state of things with respect to their particular areas of expertise. Each was asked to comment, even if briefly, on the way in which the selection and ordering of texts in *Religion, War, and Ethics* reflects the trajectory of scholarly work as they understand it; as well, panelists were encouraged to gesture toward new directions or problems they believe need further attention. In an effort to bring more voices to the table, I then invited two people to serve as discussants, commenting on the possibilities emerging from the “area” or “tradition” papers for more broadly comparative work.

Since I think the papers by these discussants—Rosemary Kellison and Scott Davis—do an excellent job in summarizing and commenting on the essays developed by our “expert witnesses,” I will not attempt a detailed summary here. It will suffice to note a few critical voices.

For instance, Michael Jerryson believes that the work he and others are producing on Buddhism and violence indicates the need to supplement the texts collected in *Religion, Ethics, and War* with studies of religion “on the ground”; these in turn suggest the importance of distinguishing the various modes by which individuals and groups claim or assign authority for the legitimation of violence. Some do proceed by appealing to texts. But others stress ritual performance, and still others, in a category Jerryson believes needs considerable development, negotiate authority by means of the status enjoyed by the holders of particular offices—for example, Buddhist monks.

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to mention other works by these authors, much less by many other scholars contributing to the discussion.

<sup>3</sup>Edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson.

Torkel Brekke finds the collection of texts in the Cambridge anthology useful, though it leads him to ask why, in studies of South Asian religions, there is such a divide between the textualists he calls Indologists and scholars engaged in historical and social scientific studies of modern India. Brekke believes that some combination of these distinctive types of scholarly work can add depth to studies of religion and violence in the Indian context.

Nahed Artoul Zehr's discussion of Islam points to the need for additional translations of texts, the point being to increase the range of materials available for scholars engaged in comparative work. Not least important in this respect would be translations of work by scholars already known. We have translations of some of al-Shaybani's ninth-century responses to questions on armed struggle, for example. But it would be useful to have some of his other work, so as to encourage scholars to set those responses in the context of a wider theory of statecraft.

Then, too, Zehr is interested in questions about the purpose of comparative work. Clearly, one of the major concerns motivating scholars of Islam at present has to do with understanding militancy. One might with justice believe this leads to less work on other questions, however, and Zehr suggests we might spend some time on the relationship between Islam and international law, among other possibilities.

Reuven Firestone's recent book, *Holy War in Judaism* (2012), describes the strange career of the idea of sanctified war in Jewish tradition. His essay here provides a synopsis of that work, as well as setting the material in the context of what he calls a "systems" approach to the study of religions and the communities that serve as bearers of tradition. From this perspective, religious traditions and communities function more or less like organisms focused on survival. In certain environments, appropriations of traditions that encourage violence rise to the fore; in others, the end of survival is better served by discouraging resort to armed force. Firestone's survey ends with some comments on contemporary developments in Israel, which he sees as a yet unfinished moment of change, again reflecting the need of communities to address altered social and political conditions.

Firestone's discussion leads nicely into Rosemary Kellison's suggestions regarding the potential of a focus on tradition as a frame for comparative work. Drawing on the work of Robert Brandom, among others, Kellison points to the way religious communities are always involved in the reconstruction of tradition. Participants in an intra, or sometimes an inter-communal argument about the rights and wrongs of violence often appeal to textual and other precedents. The interest of scholars of religion and violence is, or at least might be, a matter of attending to which precedents are selected, how

they are appropriated, and the shape of response as people exchange reasons intended to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate behaviors.

Finally, Scott Davis points to the way scholars might worry about the category of violence itself. As a matter of comparative study, it could be that the concept is now used to cover so many things that conversation might be better served by sticking with more particular items, such as war or revolution. In any case, a focus on the ways people claim and assign authority for the legitimation of particular acts remains important, and requires a combination of conceptual analysis and historical or ethnographic attention to the details of the contexts in which human beings live.

As moderator of the aforementioned AAR panel, it was my pleasure to listen to the oral versions of these essays, as well as to the interesting questions raised by members of the audience. It is wonderful now to see them in print, where the authors' ideas may reach a wider audience and spur further discussion of this important subject.

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