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## Religion and Violence

Lauren Bannister  
*St. John Fisher College*

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## Religion and Violence

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"For thousands of years, religions and belief systems throughout the world have been severely criticized, due primarily to the deadly violence their followers endorsed. History clearly demonstrates that individuals and groups used religion to justify what most people regard as unholy acts. For centuries, discussions have questioned if religion is essentially good, or flawed, and if religion is inherently violent."



*Lauren Bannister*

## **Religion and Violence**

### *Introduction*

For thousands of years, religions and belief systems throughout the world have been severely criticized, due primarily to the deadly violence their followers endorsed. History clearly demonstrates that individuals and groups used religion to justify what most people regard as unholy acts. For centuries, discussions have questioned if religion is essentially good, or flawed, and if religion is inherently violent.

### *1) Is Religion Inherently Violent? Why or Why not?*

On September 11, 2001, a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City changed the lives of millions of Americans. After this horrific event, many religious leaders had to answer the emerging question of whether religious beliefs were inherently violent. The topic of religion-related violence grew, as more information about the suicide bombers emerged.

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer discusses how religion rarely leads to the death of individuals, but it is used to justify slayings that take place. In his book, *Is Religion Killing Us?*, Nelson-Pallmeyer states, “Human violence is inevitable as long as those of us who are practitioners of competing faiths give legitimacy to violence-of-God traditions” (Xiv). This statement concludes

that human beings are violent individuals that will act in a violent manner as a defense mechanism, since it is a normal human characteristic. When humans act in a violent manner in order to fulfill a religious duty, they must be able to defend their violent actions through their beliefs and practices. In the case of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the Islamic religion was closely scrutinized. Many viewed the terrorists' actions as punishments from God, they were not seen as a heroic passage to get closer to Allah. Nelson-Pallmeyer does not view religion as inherently violent, because he believes individuals are violent, and can commit violent acts, but religion in itself is not violent. Many other authors agree with Nelson-Pallmeyer, in the way he explains that violence is something different for everyone. Once violence is defined, people are able to understand what constitutes violent and harmful actions. Although he addresses his stance on religion as non-violent, he notes that where religion is present, violence seems to follow.

Another author who also suggests that religion is not inherently violent is Scott Appleby who wrote, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. He discusses the importance of acceptance between religions and tolerance between individuals. His book was reviewed by Roger S. Gottlieb, who summarized Appleby's ideas by stating, "Differences in metaphysics (which God is "really" God, whose scriptures are authoritative) and in many of the ethics of daily life (observance of Sabbath regulations, watching trashy TV shows) are a private matter of social choice, deserving of a tolerant live and let live attitude" (138). He emphasizes that the idea of a tolerant lifestyle among humans is a common belief; everyone should be able to live the way he/she desires, and believes in things that are sacred from their religious and spiritual world view. His stance however does not give reasons of how violent acts transpire from religious beliefs. Appleby suggests that everyone should be respectful, conscious that

others have different ideas and beliefs that are sparked from a religious background, and humans should have the freedom to practice as they desire.

Wolfgang Huber is the author of *Religion and Violence in a Globalized World*. He created three different propositions that coincide with some of the ideas Nelson-Pallmeyer and Appleby developed. Huber explains in his three different points views that differ from one another but ultimately suggest that religion is not inherently violent. His first view is that religion is not inherently violent, but violence can be a characteristic of religion that can be acquired. This first point brings great insight to the nature of how religion is practiced. Since violence can be an acquired characteristic, it truly relies on how the religion is interpreted and practiced by individuals. His second point discusses how religion should lead to a non-violent world because religion teaches humans to act in non-violent ways, viewing violence as a disrespectful way to handle a situation. Huber's third proposition claims that there is a "contingent" link between religion and violence. Huber states: "Some situations do seem to make the use of violence inevitable; however, religions should refrain from justifying the use of violence and maintain a preferential option for nonviolence" (39). He has suggested that in difficult situations the only means people find necessary can be violent or harmful, but if they are truly religious individuals, they should be able to recognize that violence is not appropriate or acceptable.

David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, the co-authors of *Cults, Religion and Violence*, discuss how violence occurs within a religion. The authors' state: "It is clear, then, that studying the connection between religion and violence involves a variety of distinct issues and relationships that require invocation of very different types and levels of theoretical explanation" (1). Bromley and Melton discuss the differences in religion and different acts of violence that may be tied to religious beliefs. A regrettably common act of religious violence includes suicide

bombings, such as the shocking acts the world experienced on September 11, 2001. The authors discuss how new religions are emerging and there is a difference between a new religion and older religions. They also mention how violence is not as prominent in older religions and when a violent act occurs within a religion, it is viewed as a norm, or ritual. Therefore, they do not see religion to be inherently violent; they view violence that can be supported by a religious act to be accepted.

*Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, written by Hent de Vries, discusses the comparison between violence and religion. One must be able to define violence and distinguish it from other actions. He states, "Violence, by contrast, is said to take place whenever the other is not welcomed or addressed as such" (124). He uses this statement to demonstrate how violence may take place in religious matters due to human differences. Although violence is present in religion, he does not believe that it make religion inherently violent.

## 2) *Is Religion good or flawed?*

In the book, *Is Religion Killing Us?* Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer states: "I was taught that religion was good, necessary and at the heart of life because it dealt with issues of ultimate consequence and meaning. Much later I learned that what made religion good and necessary also made it prone to intolerance and violence" (Xi). With all of the good religion brings to groups and individuals all throughout the world, it still has the ability to diminish violence among different groups. Although violence may be a characteristic that occurs, it does not make religion flawed.

Roger S. Gottlieb's review of Scott Appleby's book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*, discusses Appleby's overall positive views toward

religion. Appleby believes that religion is a freedom that all individuals must respect. Gottlieb states: "Rather, religion is 'ambivalent', containing within itself a wide range of possible responses and necessarily giving rise to a kind of 'internal pluralism' which signals a continuing struggle over the essentially contested meaning of the religious tradition itself" (136). This demonstrates the vast religious views that span the world, although they may be conflicting with one another, they give a community a purpose.

Combining his three key points, Wolfgang Huber has concluded that religion is ultimately good. Religion should influence individuals to stay away from committing violent acts and strive to be the best person they can be, with guidance from their spiritual leader. In Huber's writing, he states, "All religions include an impulse to overcome violence" (43). This confirms his point that religion should influence people in a positive manner to divert away from violent impulses.

Bromley and Melton suggest that religion is ultimately good. Whether it is new religion or old religion, it brings together a community of individuals who believe in the same higher power. These beliefs can be understood only by the group, and may differ from other religions, but is a good system for individuals throughout the world to experience. Bromley and Melton state: "Given the challenge posed by the movements, on the one side, and the imperative to maintain the existing social order, on the other side, the likelihood of tension and conflict is considerable" (2). In this case they are talking about new religions and the challenges they are faced within the community. Although these problems arise between different religions, they view religion as a positive system for a community to follow the same beliefs and worship the same power(s).

Ross Douthat, the author of, *Bad Religion: How We Became A Nation of Heretics*, addresses a point that all of the other authors seem to have overthought. Douthat suggests that over time religion, which was once a good, healthy system of beliefs, has conformed to new norms of the country. He states, "Their America is a nation in which religious faith has been steadily marginalized, with increasingly disastrous results. Their scapegoats include progressive educators, activist judges, Hollywood elites, and the deophobic media" (2). He uses this to address how the priorities in America have shifted and unfortunately the shift has changed many aspects of American society. Douthat explains how religion was used to have faith in the political, judicial and social matters, but people have not been as accepting and have adopted many changes within the country for religion and religious acts to be a social norm. Douthat's point is very important because it highlights the fact that America has changed over the years and is not the country it used to be, when Christianity was the main religion.

### *Conclusion*

Our world is filled with many different religions and belief systems that embrace violence. I believe most religions are inherently violent, in part due to conflicting beliefs people have regarding which God to worship, and which rules they follow. I believe religions are ultimately good and may consist of violent acts, but I do not believe they are inherently violent; religion gives individuals a spiritual recipe for living a meaningful life.

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