Acumen Handbook of Philosophy of Religion

Edited by Graham Oppy
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Religious Violence

Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion,

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1. Introduction

Throughout history religions have inspired both violence and peaceful opposition to violence. A diversity of stances on violence, including deep and principled repudiations of violence, are reflected in the core values and teachings of many religious traditions. However, violent acts have been committed in the name of most of the world’s religions. Religious violence has a history which is partially recorded in sacred texts from the ancient world, remains a pervasive feature of contemporary life, and will occur again. While reflection on questions about the relations between violence and religion is not new, interest has been amplified in recent years, not least in response to the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. A wide range of concerns in this area are looming large in the public awareness, including causal and evaluative questions such as: Why do people commit acts such as these and how can we understand the role that some sorts of religious commitments play in such destructive behavior? Under what social conditions do religious groups tend to become involved in violence and why does it erupt as frequently as it does even among those groups that ostensibly cherish peaceful ideals? Under what circumstances, if any, is violence justified and how might religious considerations enter into attempts to rationalize violent actions? What sorts of good and harm are done by ‘religion’ and would the world be better off without it? Religious
violence now frequently arises as a topic in global discussions about secularization, religious 
revival, fundamentalism, conflict resolution, and the place of religion in an ever changing world. 
It has also led some to question the limits of the liberal ideal of tolerant pluralism. One can 
expect the body of sustained philosophical reflection on topics related to religious violence – 
alongside the contributions of religious scholars, historians, psychologists, sociologists, political 
scientists, and economists – to continue to expand sharply in the years ahead. Philosophers 
continue to contribute to such ongoing conversations in a number of ways, not least by clarifying 
key concepts, ensuring that important questions are well-posed, making relevant distinctions, and, 
perhaps most characteristically, by identifying and evaluating the quality of arguments offered for 
various positions. This chapter offers an overview of some of the main issues at stake in current 
topics of discussion and some suggestions concerning issues that warrant further analysis.

2. Conceptual Preliminaries

The focus of recent discussion of religious violence has centered not on those who suffer 
persecution owing to their religious identity but on its perpetrators. Religious violence in the 
latter sense refers to violence such that the religious commitments of the actor(s) play a 
significant role in explaining their motivations or reasons for acting violently. However, giving 
even this sort of boundary to the topic is not unproblematic, since opposing sides to a conflict 
often draw the lines between terrorist and freedom fighter, suicide bomber and martyr, or 
aggressor and victim in different ways. Even more fundamentally, what is violence and how 
shall we understand religion? The task of clarifying such key concepts falls among the 
foundational issues for any discussion of the complex and varied relations between violence and 
religion and the quality of the definitions selected by researchers can affect the results and
interpretation of empirical studies. Even if we focus on human acts of violence, there are a lot of ways to act violently and a great diversity of phenomena that fall under the heading of religion. The examples and initial glosses of violence and religion in this section are put forward not as attempts at final analysis, since these concepts themselves continue to be subjects of contention, but for the purpose of identifying issues involved in offering further characterizations and as entry points into discussion of the larger issues that generate interest in the topic. Equipped with an understanding of violence, for example, scholars can proceed with the tasks of distinguishing between different types of violence (such as political violence or self-defense) and clarifying conceptual relations between other concepts of interest such as terrorism.

Violence

We can understand violence, at least as a rough first pass, as action with the intent of inflicting harm. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines violence as “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to persons or property”. The clearest cases involve physical injury to humans in situations where the use of force is in some way excessive or destructive. Striking a cheek, gouging an eye, murdering a brother, raping a woman, stoning for blasphemy, burning the accused at the stake, ritualistically sacrificing a child, murderous rioting, detonating a suicide bomb in a crowd of bystanders, hijacking a plane, mutilating by torture, beheading a captive, and launching a cruise missile at enemy forces are paradigmatic violent acts. These might be premeditated far in advance or impulsive reactions to provocation.

A number of further issues might be debated about the definition of violence or how to refine the criteria to be used in identifying it. We could press on the above suggestion by asking: Does violence really require the intention to harm or can accidental human actions, or even events
like earthquakes, be violent? Wouldn’t the above proposal classify pricking voodoo dolls with pins as an act of violence, even if no harm was done? Should we understand violence to include not just bodily damage but psychological forms of harm like verbal abuse or damage to property as when works of art are boisterously destroyed or a copy of Qur’an is publically burned? Ought the definition be broad enough to include institutionalized social arrangements that foster racism, worker exploitation, and class disparity which Johan Galtung labeled “structural violence” or does this risk turning the concept of violence into a mere catch-all for items about which we express politically correct disapproval? A range of positions can be defended, some clearer and closer to the mark than others. Employing an extended notion of violence, Galtung (1969) takes it that “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations,” whereas Audi (1971) offers a three part analysis which takes a different stand on some of these issues:

Violence is the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous physical struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp, caustic psychological attack upon a person or animal; or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property.

Clear discussions of the philosophical literature on the nature of violence can also be found in Coady 1986 and Burgess-Jackson 2003.

The positions we take on the nature of violence can have consequences for discussion of related issues. However, for most purposes, the dictionary definition of violence is serviceable enough. So long as we are clear enough to avoid confusion and resolve remaining issues in a way that countenances the paradigmatic examples of violence given above, as any adequate definition surely must, a certain amount of vagueness need not impede further discussion. We might, for example, go on to define terrorism as the unlawful tactical use of violence or the threat
of violence to create continuing public fear in order to achieve a social or political end or to characterize torture as a deliberate use of violence to inflict severe physical and/or psychological suffering usually as a means of punishment, coercion, or out of sadistic pleasure. (Further questions could also be raised about these definitions. Does terrorism have to be unlawful? What about cases that otherwise qualify but against which there are yet no existing laws in place explicitly prohibiting them? Is the above gloss on torture too broad to distinguish it sufficiently from the definition of terrorism?) We could even, without confusion, speak of violent meteor impacts on the moon several billion years ago which damaged neither persons nor property and involved no intentions (or at least none obviously discernible to us, granting the possibility that these were acts of God) while recognizing this extended sense of “violence” as a departure from the examples most central to ordinary use. Indeed, there are reasons to resist the demand for rigorous definitions of either “religion” or “violence” at the outset, which can itself lead to unnecessary muddles. Flawed or shortsighted characterizations might lead to an artificial or distorted picture of, or invite misguided questions about, the phenomena we seek to understand. To describe an act as violent is often, though by no means always, also to evaluate it negatively. Many of the examples that generate concerned discussion about religious violence have a particularly nasty or brutish character. Yet, while the potential evils of violence are apparent, some would argue that acts of violence can manifest virtues such as courage, heroism, selflessness, and loyalty and, moreover, that there are circumstances under which violence is not simply morally permissible but required. As Coady (1986) points out, it is therefore desirable to avoid building moral judgments into the definition. Some sort of normative judgment – at least as an initial presumption open to challenge – is likely unavoidable, as even the notions of harm, injury, or damage, involve evaluation (Burgess-Jackson 2003). Even those who defend the moral permissibility of violence in a limited range of circumstances often regard it as regrettable or as
recourse of last resort. But if violence were simply defined as the illegitimate or wrongful use of force, this would preclude substantive discussion about whether violence can sometimes be justified and under what circumstances. We would be forced either to say that the notion of a just war is incoherent or to deny, implausibly, that any legitimate use of force is violent even if it results in tremendous loss of life. Killing in self-defense, for the protection of others, in military service to one’s nation-state, or as part of a revolt aimed at securing freedom – whether justified or not – can clearly involve violence. Pacifists and war hawks, protesters and riot police, should insist on a largely descriptive approach to defining violence and then go on to argue for their positions on the morality of war or its limits and whether violence can be justified. Similarly, those who would defend the moral permissibility of torture ought to do so on grounds such as its alleged effectiveness in procuring important information or as a deterrent to or just retribution for certain types of behavior rather than by denying that it involves violence (Coady and O’Keefe 2002).

Religion vs. Religions

Identifying some forms of violence as “religious” inevitably draws on some sort of characterization of religion. Religion clearly has something to do with sacred beliefs, values, and practices, with ways of life oriented around reverence for the transcendent or supernatural, often a God or gods. In ordinary use, ‘religion’ includes everything from the indigenous myths of tribal people from every continent, polytheism, pantheism, western monotheism, deism, nontheistic forms of eastern meditation, private religions, new age movements, to doomsday groups like the Heaven’s Gate cult in California. A determined attempt to define ‘religion’ might consider more than fifty proposals, some more adequate than others (Leuba 1912). But attempts to specify some
clear and informative set of necessary and sufficient conditions that identify the genus of which all and only religions are species have not found widespread consensus.

Indeed, a number of religious scholars resist attempts at the abstract characterization of ‘religion’. Scholars do sometimes disagree about whether Buddhism and Confucianism are best classified as religions and many reject the presupposition that there can be a crisp definition which captures a unified or homogenous essence common to all the above forms of religion while excluding groups bound together by secular ideologies and institutions such as Marxism, capitalism, and environmentalism, therapeutic groups, football fans, workers unions, militias, bowling leagues, and charities or patriotic social clubs. Perhaps, as Cavanaugh (2009) argues, such efforts to define religion are a misguided relic of seventeenth and eighteenth categories imposed on the domain of investigation by modern western European scholars seeking to partition it from the secular political sphere, often in the interest of justifying violence in the name of the state. On this more post-modern or deconstructivist view, it makes little sense to categorize human sacrifice as a religious rather than political act in an ancient Egyptian culture where Pharaoh is considered a god. One need not deny the possibility of an integrated and comparative perspective on world religions to appreciate the point that a deep understanding of religion requires learning about particular religions, each studied on its own terms.

Rather than arguing about necessary and sufficient conditions, then, we might instead start with examples of major religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We could then proceed to characterize each tradition, identifying key founders, cultures of origin and subsequent history, texts, teachings, practices and the like. But neither are these traditions monolithic; within each one finds a great deal of diversity, in some cases such a spectrum of differences as to raise interesting questions about what it can mean to see subgroups as part of a shared religious tradition. In Christianity, for example, there are profound
differences at the level of doctrine, values, and practice between the early Desert Fathers in ancient Egypt, the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, Southern Baptists, Pentecostal movements in Africa, and Catholic liberation theologians in Latin America as well as disagreements within any of these local communities. It is important to recognize the diversity and autonomy of individual actors even where we go on to draw reasonable generalizations about what binds these groups together (Appleby 2000).

In light of these considerations, perhaps it is preferable to treat religion as a family resemblance or cluster concept and to draw up a list of characteristics typically, though not always, associated with religion. Alston (2005) offers a helpful list of “religion-making characteristics,” including items such as belief in supernatural beings (gods), a distinction between sacred and profane objects, ritual acts focused on sacred objects, prayer, a moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods, arousal of characteristically religious feelings (such as awe, a sense of mystery, guilt, and adoration) during the performance of ritualistic practices or in connection with the ideas about a divine agent or agents, organization of an individual’s life around a worldview or general picture of the world, and social groups whose identities are bound together by these sorts of characteristics.

While these definitional complications do not imply that we lack clear examples or a reasonably adequate understanding of ‘religion’ suited for general use, they do arguably have implications for the kinds of questions that we can helpfully pose about religious violence and for the range of phenomena which get grouped under such a category. Consider the now often debated question: Is religion inherently violent? Framed in this way, such questions can invite superficial or simplistic answers and even obscure the issues by failing to notice the diversity among the phenomena that fall under any nuanced and descriptively adequate explication of the concept. It should not be assumed at the outset that any connections there might be between
violence and twentieth century Satanism in California will also hold for Jainism in ancient Kalinga. Surely such judgments are better made in light of the evidence relevant to particular cases. Serious attempts to understand the particular traditions, values, beliefs, and practices of people in different times, places, and social contexts and any connections they might have to violence cannot ignore variations in the stances and attitudes we encounter. Moreover, enough is known about religious phenomena to give us reason to be suspicious of global claims about a single relation between religion and violence supposed to apply at all times and places. If the goal is to understand the complex relations between violence and religions in their various manifestations and as they change over time, there is no avoiding detailed local investigation.

3. Recent and Historical Examples of Religious Violence Connected with Major World Religions

Some of the most visible treatments of religious violence in recent years play to popular outrage at religiously motivated atrocities in the service of apologetics and anti-religious propaganda. Much of the latter work has especially targeted Islam while expressing concern that religion in general, whether in fundamentalist or more moderate guises, provides a social backdrop for extremism. Bestselling author Christopher Hitchens (2007) argues that religion “poisons everything” while Richard Dawkins (2006a; 2006b) maintains that it is the “root of all evil” and that humanity would be better off without religion since “Only the willfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today” (Dawkins 2003, 161).

There is no shortage of examples of religious violence from the past or in the daily news. Frequently discussed episodes of violence with some sort of religious connection include: human sacrifice in Ancient Near Eastern cultures and in the indigenous populations of South and
Central America, the Israelite conquest of Canaan, Islamic expansions starting under Muhammad, the medieval Christian Crusades, torture and execution at the hands of the Inquisition or other religious authorities, the brutality of Spanish conquistadors who colonized the Americas, the French Wars of Religion, the Thirty Years War, the Taiping Rebellion, anti-Sikh militancy in the Punjab region after the partitioning of India and Pakistan, group suicides in Jonestown, abortion clinic slayings, nerve gas attacks on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shrinik cult, and the destruction of the World Trade Center. As Sam Harris (2004) recounts:

Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews versus Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians versus Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians versus Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants versus Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims versus Hindus), Sudan (Muslims versus Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims versus Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims versus Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists versus Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims versus Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite versus Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians versus Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis versus Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. In these places religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in the last 10 years (Harris 2004, 26).

Harris artfully supplements such lists of polarizing conflicts with graphic descriptions of specific atrocities that must alarm and concern any conscientious person, such as this New York Times report of violence between Hindus and Muslims in India from 2002:

Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then ... set on fire. A pregnant woman’s belly was slit open, her fetus raised skyward on the tip of sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city (cited in Harris 2004, 27).

It is indisputable that religion has served as a powerful motivation for violence. Violent acts have been and continue to be committed in the name of religion across the globe and there are innumerable horrors, violations, and failings which rightly concern citizens of the world for which various religious groups should acknowledge responsibility and repent. Lists of atrocities
sometimes appear on scorecards in polemical arguments between critics of religion and apologists attempting to weigh these social ills against those acts similarly attributable to atheists or secular regimes or whatever involvement religions have had in supporting hospitals, universities, welfare programs, famine and disaster relief efforts, charities, and other positive forms of social action. A balanced and empirically informed discussion of the place of religion in social life should also come to grips with the recent wave of sociological and psychological studies that suggest robust statistical correlations between different measures of religious commitment and social goods such as crime prevention, education, health benefits, charity, and other measures of subjective well-being (for an entry into this vast literature and discussion of its philosophical implications see Miller 2012). While there is, of course, a danger that highlighting only the most shocking and extreme acts of religious violence will contribute to distorted or stereotyped characterizations of religion, the above examples illustrate the divisive role that religious identity can play in conflicts at the group level, including both inter-religious conflict (e.g., between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia or Sinhala Buddhists and Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka) and intra-religious conflict (e.g., between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland or Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East).

There is no question that coming to grips with the religious dimensions of such conflicts will often be crucial to understanding them. Religious passions frequently evoke deep fervor, emotional attachment, and out-group enmity, and religious convictions are often among the short list of things for which people are willing to die. However, these examples also display some of the complications that arise in identifying “religious violence” as a distinctive form of violence designated for analysis alongside groupings such as political violence, ethnic violence, sexual violence, and domestic violence. First, philosophers should think more about what sorts of basic categories are most probative for systematic treatments of violence. Why not instead, for example,
classify violence according to forms of personal violence (such as murder) and social violence (such as war) while treating personal animosity, greed, racial prejudice, politics, or religious factors as they enter into these? At any rate, because classifications of violence often allow for considerable overlap and religious factors can play a role in suicide bombing, torture, or almost any of the other categories, attempts at systematic treatment or empirical study of religious violence must cover a wide terrain. Second, when analyzing a particular episode of violence it is often difficult to disentangle the role and relative importance played by religious factors from, say, political or economic factors or other influential aspects of the situation and treating it as an instance of “religious violence” may cloud rather than clarify what is going on. Such challenges are compounded when one is attempting to characterize a prolonged conflict with multiple instances of violence. Third, in cases were violence does have a religious dimension, we can go on to ask: what exactly is the connection between religion and violence here? To what extent are the perpetrator’s intentions and actions connected to the goals of the religious group of which he or she is a member? Are they rooted directly in the core values and teachings of that religion? Is what we are seeing simply indicative of the general moral failings or evolved tendencies of human beings, to be expected in any community of appreciable size and only contingently associated with religious ideas, or what? A lone wolf with a psychopathic profile might have been disposed to violence regardless of cultural context. In other cases, marginalized groups feel driven to desperate measures and, though religious language or symbols are invoked, their cause may be in service of other ends.

4. Reasons and Causes for Religious Violence?
Recent decades have brought a wealth of sociological and psychological research on religious violence taking the form of quantitative studies, in depth case studies, and participant interviews. These studies make available a great deal of information about both individual motivations of violent actors and their wider social circumstances. Some of this information has challenged widely held assumptions: suicide attackers do not come simply from the ranks of the uneducated, poor, or socially alienated, and, from a clinical perspective, very few are mentally ill (Atran 2003; Introvigne 2009). Among the 9/11 hijackers were scientifically literate middle class professionals. It also makes clear that no single psychological profile can cover all forms of religious violence (Jones 2008).

Two distinctions can help us to characterize several of the broad efforts to understand why people commit such acts of violence. Theoretical approaches to explaining and predicting violent behavior differ, first, in the extent to which they look to individual psychology versus wider social circumstances and, second, with respect to the weight they give in their explanations to the cognitive rationales articulated by violent perpetrators themselves. For example, psychoanalytic approaches influenced by Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1918) have tended to downplay the importance of stated beliefs in explaining and predicting religious violence, looking instead to the unconscious workings of the inner psyche, such as the repression of basic instincts or deeply rooted desires for gratification or revenge. René Girard (1972) develops the Freudian idea that symbolic and ritualistic expressions of violence, such as the sacrifice of a scapegoat, serve to redirect and dissipate aggressive instincts that might, if frustrated or suppressed, otherwise lead to more socially destructive acts of violence. This is a different, though not necessarily incompatible, explanatory starting point from approaches like that of political scientist Robert Pape which focus primarily on contextualizing religious violence within its political setting. After analyzing all of the documented acts of suicide terrorism worldwide
between 1980 and 2009 (350 incidents between 1980 and 2003, followed by a sharp increase to 1,833 over the next six years), Pape concludes that, despite the widespread assumption that the root cause of these threats is Islamic fundamentalism (which was around well before the turn of the new millennium), the main factor driving such attacks was the desire to strategically resist foreign military occupation (Pape 2005; Pape and Feldman 2010). Similarly, seeking to place these discussions in a broader evolutionary framework, anthropologist Scott Atran takes research in social psychology to support the claim that “Although both personal and contextual factors affect action, studies of individual behavior in group contexts show situation to be a much better predictor than personality” (Atran 2004, 47).

Other sociologists and cultural critics insist that the most straightforward explanations of such acts must make reference to the specifically religious goals and self-understanding of the actors and that taking such considerations seriously is crucial to understanding religious violence (Juergensmeyer 2003; Harris 2004; Selengut 2003). The types of rationales offered as reasons for action are of particular philosophical interest. The fact that masked representatives of Al Qaeda brandishing AK-47s are saying things like “We are now forming suicide cells to make jihad in the name of God” in videos (Nordland 2012) and actively engaged in long term planning for such operations raises an unavoidable set of questions about the connections between religious ideas, explicitly articulated reasons for action, and behavior.

The following combination of beliefs is just one sort of recipe for violence:

(1) God exists;

(2) We are morally obligated to submit to God’s will;

(3) God wills me/us to kill a particular person or group of people.
The first two beliefs are common in many religious traditions. (Their scope could be further extended by substituting some other transcendent power for ‘God’). In fact, many theists would hold something stronger than (2), granting that God is to be obeyed above all considerations of reason or moral intuition as exemplified in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. At least on one interpretation of the Genesis narrative, Abraham’s obedience to God supersedes ordinary moral judgments and his action displays what Kierkegaard terms a “teleological suspension” of ethical considerations. Adding beliefs like (3) to such a mix can literally be explosive.

Motivations for premises like (3), or sets of beliefs and attitudes giving rise to less stark forms of violent aggression, might stem from moral revulsion at the larger culture one feels compelled to confront, a sense that one’s religious identity or core values and beliefs are under attack, that one is playing a role in a cosmic struggle of good against evil or facing some emergency situation that overrides ordinary moral standards, appeals to conscience or revelation, intolerance or fear of outsiders or a sense that some differences in metaphysics or matters of doctrine are worth dying for, a conviction that torturing the body of a heretic is justifiable if it can save her soul or that apostasy is punishable by death, or that God has given one’s people sacred land. Some of these motivations might be reasons that perpetrators of violence would cite if asked to justify their actions or they could appear as explanatory considerations in a sociologist’s attempt to identify causes for instances of religious violence, alongside the observation that some religious teachers instruct young, weak, or easily influenced people that it is their duty to kill. Consider, for example, the reasoning of Michael Bray, a Lutheran minister and member of the terrorist organization Army of God. Bray offers the following sort of argument in his attempt to morally justify the killing of medical personnel at abortion clinics: Good people ought to have resisted the Nazis with violence, if necessary. Abortion is the slaughter of innocent children—a moral atrocity comparable with the situation in Nazi Germany. So, good people ought to resist abortion with
violence, if necessary. In this way, Bray sees himself as an advocate of change who stands in
opposition to the existing social order and sees violence as a justifiable tactic by which to bring
about rapid revolutionary change (Bray 1994). Obviously there are a lot of cases of religious
violence in which the connection between belief and action is far less direct and straightforward.
But even where the reasoning is made explicit we might be concerned about the extent to which
those appealing to such a line of thought are open to critical dialogue. One concern is that the
belief that an act of violence is commanded by God might lead people to suspend or ignore
ordinary moral sentiments. A second, related, worry is that someone who holds such premises
dogmatically or as an unchallengeable absolute might simply opt out of reasoned discourse or
ignore criticism or calls for reform which could otherwise serve as a check on the proposed course
of action.

Neither Bray nor Al Qaeda, of course, represent majority positions on violence in either
Christianity or Islam and literally millions if not billions of people would characterize them as
fringe extremists who are hijacking the very traditions to which they claim to belong. The vast
majority of religious persons around the world do not advocate such violence. While the
reasoning of such extremists can and should be evaluated independently, mistaking a
preoccupation with such cases in the context of discussions about religious violence for evidence
that the highly publicized actions of extremists are typical can give rise to serious
misconceptions and unwarranted generalizations about the connection between religious
movements and violence (Melton and Bromley 2002). It is common for religious groups to take
official stands condemning hateful crimes as immoral and to work for peaceful forms of
reconciliation. Religious historian Scott Appleby (2000) argues that such unsung religious
peacemaking movements, which often collaborate with secular nongovernmental humanitarian
organizations, can have a crucial role to play in resolving some of the deadly conflicts that
religion has exacerbated. Another important project, therefore, is to examine what the founders of major religions, influential texts, and mainstream contemporary leaders say about violence committed in its name.

5. Texts of Terror?

One can find strong affirmations of peaceful ideals and ways of life as well as rationales for the sanctity of human life in each of the major world religions. The notion of *ahimsa*, the avoidance of violence or harm to living things, has a central place in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. A scrupulous effort to avoid inflicting unnecessary suffering leads some monks not only to principled renunciations of violence and vegetarianism, but to handle plants, insects, and even rocks with delicacy. The Hebrew concept of peace, *shalom*, is an important aspect of Jewish teaching, “Islam” is a cognate of *salām*, the Arabic word for peace, and Christians celebrate Jesus as the “Prince of Peace” prophesied in Isaiah 9:6 and greet each other with the passing of the peace. But there are also places where violence finds expression in religious symbols and rituals as well as sacred texts and teachings that seem to license or even exhort violence.

For example, in the Torah – a text revered as divine revelation by each of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) – we encounter not just frank portrayals of the realities of violence in human relations, including murder and rape but also prescriptions for punishment (e.g., stoning adulterers), violent acts portrayed as commandments of God, and images of God as a mighty warrior. Consider the terms in which these texts present the military conquest of Canaan:

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall
annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God (Deuteronmy 20:16-18).

God is here understood to have commanded genocide; an annihilation that includes women and children and makes no distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Joshua is seen as carrying out the destruction in obedience to Yahweh’s expressed will.

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded (Joshua 10:40).

Moreover, God is portrayed as a violent actor who directly intervenes in human affairs:

For it was the Lord’s doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses (Joshua 11:20).

Narrative portrayals of God as a jealous and vengeful judge whose wrathful deeds take the form of floods, plagues, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have offended the moral sensibilities of ancients like Marcion and many moderns alike. Exodus 22:18, most memorably translated in the King James Version as “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” was cited as biblical justification for the execution of tens of thousands of marginalized women in early modern Europe.

Given their holy status, texts such as these clearly invite a range of exegetical and moral questions and criticism. Some critics take these as examples of the moral bankruptcy of religion and even go on to argue that the problematic or objectionable teachings are not confined to fundamentalist or literal readings but inherent in mainstream orthodoxy. Responses of adherents to these religious traditions range from simply accepting the texts at face value perhaps on the
pain of revising some contemporary moral intuitions or by positing that there must be some reason that we do not understand, seeking benign interpretations or to reconcile disturbing or morally troublesome passages with other core values and teachings about God as a compassionate, loving, and merciful redeemer, advocating ongoing reforms that change the practices of one’s own tradition for the better over time, to largely ignoring or dismissing the texts as the all too human relics of a more barbarous age. For example, with reference to the Joshua 11 passage, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has argued that “Yahweh gave permission for Joshua and Israel to act for their justice and liberation against an oppressive adversary” (Brueggemann 2009, 23) and the Israelites’ actions went well beyond the circumscribed use of violence that Yahweh had authorized. Interpreted in this way, Brueggemann argues, the narrative is not as disturbing as it might otherwise have seemed. In recent years scriptural scholars and theologians have written a great deal in attempt to respond to public interest in religious violence (e.g., Bekkenkamp and Sherwood 2003; Bernat and Klawans 2007; Boustan, Jassen, and Roetzel 2009; Collins 2003; Craigie 1978; Desjardin 1997; Freitheim 2004; Gibson and Matthews 2005; Kang 1989; Lüdemann 1997; Miller 1973; Niditch 1993; Schwartz 1997; von Rad 1926/1991; and Williams 1991). The finest treatment of these issues by philosophers is Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2009.

Even where religious teachings do not condone violence so explicitly, there can be concerns that they might foster latent attitudes with a more indirect potential to lead to violence. Consider Adolf Hitler’s invocation of religious rhetoric in a speech delivered in Munich on April 12, 1922:

My Christian feelings point me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter [tumultuous, prolonged applause]. They point me toward the man who, once lonely and surrounded by only a few followers, recognized these Jews and called for battle
against them, and who, as the true God, was not only the greatest as sufferer but also the greatest as a warrior (quoted in Steigmann-Gall 2003, 37).

Even granted that Hitler’s attempt to stir anti-Semitic sentiments and mobilize political support for the Nazi cause is clearly incompatible with Jesus’ central teachings and lived example, the effectiveness of the rhetorical tactic clearly relies on Hitler’s expectation that his remarks will be met with some degree of social approval that can be manipulated in the service of his own ends. While it may be that the atrocities tend to be committed by extremists, some nevertheless worry that without external or internal criticism even moderate and liberal religious communities might serve as a backdrop from which extremists or perpetrators of hate crimes can emerge. In hindsight, many Christian communities are now much more sensitized and responsive to the potential danger that certain New Testament passages (particularly in the Gospel of John or in reference to Jesus’ crucifixion) and Luther’s On the Jews and Their Lies, demonize “the Jews” in ways that can incite hatred and violence. Others have worked vigilantly to transform the internal dynamic of their tradition by critiquing attitudes that might lead to hostilities directed at women or homosexuals.

Early Islam also saw a period of military conquests and similar concerns can be raised about verses from the Qur’an and various holy teachings (hadith) in Islam, including concerns about the severity of punishments found in the shar’ia or divine law (such as cutting off the hand of a thief in accordance with Qur’an 5:38), violence against women (stemming from passages such as Qur’an 4:34, which seem to offer instructions about conditions under which it is appropriate for husbands to beat their wives), and passages which call for seemingly continuous war on infidels which can end only with their submission or annihilation (e.g., Qur’an 9:5; 9:29; 9:73; 9:123; Sahih Muslim C9B1N31; and Sahih al-Bukhari B2N24). The Qur’an instructs Muslims to “Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not begin aggression, for God loves not aggressors” (Qur’an 2:190). Without further contextual cues or constraints on
issues such as how far back in the past one can look to assign responsibility to other parties for starting the fight or whether preemptive strikes are justifiable, such a verse seems at least *prima facie* to legitimize retaliatory violence and to leave wide latitude for interpretation about the permissible scope of fighting. Due to the frequency of appeals to the notions of *jihad* (variously translated as “struggle,” “striving in the way of God,” or “holy war”) and martyrdom by contemporary militant Islamic groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and al Qaeda, these notions have recently come under particular scrutiny. One topic of intense recent debate has been whether the ideals and teachings of Islam are more violent than other religions, as Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2007) claim, or whether this is a reactionary and politically charged cultural misrepresentation of mainstream Islam (Lumbard 2009; Milton-Edwards 2011; Esposito 2011).

These texts and teachings are open to varying interpretations and differing views about their status. But they are examples of the kind of material that serves as the basis for a recently a burgeoning literature on religious violence which explores the implications of such ideas in each of the major world religions and a host of new religious movements, begins to pose the pointed questions that need to be asked about them, and attempts to offer a fair and scholarly exposition and critique of the range of positions that have been adopted.

6. Traditional Religious Justifications for Violence and Peaceful Opposition

Reflection on the sorts of moral and religious considerations that might permit or constrain the use of violence connects with wider philosophical arguments about the justification, phenomenology, and significance of violence (see Arendt 1970; Stanage 1974; Sherman 1974; Vries 2001; Honderich 2002; Corlett 2003; Coady 2008; Bufacchi 2009; Eckstrand and Yates 2011). What sorts of principles, intentions, consequences, virtues and
vices, or features of situational context are relevant to the moral evaluation of acts of violence? Might deontological and utilitarian approaches reach dramatically different conclusions about the moral permissibility of certain types of religious violence? What place, if any, do major normative ethical theories give to religious considerations in arguments for or against the use of violence? Are there not moral obligations of nations to citizens, parents to children, and passerby to innocent victims to protect and defend human life that are strong enough to require intervention with violent force if necessary? On what grounds might one categorically reject recourse to violence? Questions like these – as well as the examination of violence in connection with issues surrounding differences in power or vulnerability, of personal and collective identity, and of experiences associated with things like the alienation of others as strangers which are prominent topics in continental philosophy – bring philosophy into close engagement with topics of public interest.

Two broad and prominent traditions with religious roots, just war theories and principled commitments to nonviolence such as pacifism, have influenced contemporary international policies that place certain humanitarian constraints on the waging of war like the Geneva and Hague conventions as well as the Charter of the United Nations, statements on human rights, approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation, as well as interdisciplinary academic work in “peace studies”. Due to space limitations I shall focus primarily on the Christian tradition, and this all too briefly, but parallels may be found in other religions as well (Johnson 1981; Brock 1998; Kelsay 2009).

Within the Christian tradition there is a long tradition of theological reflection, influenced by Augustine and Aquinas, on the conditions under which war is justifiable and how to conduct a just one. Though just war theory is by no means limited to Christianity, the classic work for theorists in the just war tradition is Thomas Aquinas’ treatment in *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.40
where, in response to the question of whether it is always sinful to wage war, Aquinas argues that three conditions must be met in order for a war to be just: the war must be undertaken by a legitimate public authority, for a just cause (such as defense against aggression, reclamation of unjustly seized property, or responding to a serious threat to the public good), and with good intentions (such as the aim of establishing peace, resisting wrongdoing, or punishing evildoers rather than out of a wicked desire for revenge, advancement of power, or cruelty). From a moral perspective, balancing the goods of, say, liberating an oppressed people against the loss of life, especially to parties innocent of the injustice in question, can require some tough judgment calls. Developments and refinements of the just war tradition typically also insist that those who take up the sword should do so only as a last resort, after exhausting attempts at peaceful resolution of the conflict, and where there is a reasonable chance at success. Military engagements should not directly target non-combatants and take care to limit their indirect harm, not use excessive force in achieving objectives, and the destructive consequences of the war itself should not outweigh realistically achievable outcomes (Walzer 2006).

Others have felt the duty to seek peace is incompatible with violence in any form or at least that recourse to violence should only be exercised in severely restricted circumstances. Pacifists, for example, oppose war almost without qualification and maintain that more peaceful approaches to conflict resolution are nearly always available. Conscientious objectors refuse to participate in the violence of war as incompatible with their values. In the twentieth century, the leaders of two of the most significant political movements emphasizing active non-violent resistance to injustice and aggression – Mahatma Gandhi’s struggle to free India from British rule and Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership in the civil rights movement – were inspired by religious ideals. Each of these led to the development of a number of creative expressions of civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and strategies that seek to awaken and appeal to the moral sensibilities of the
aggressors by confronting the brutality of their actions while refusing to retaliate (Sharp and Paulson 2005). Even otherwise sympathetic critics such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer have worried that this will not work, or would come at too great a cost, against certain types of aggressors – such as psychopaths or tyrants who dismiss the demands of morality – who might otherwise either be deterred by the threat of retaliation or stopped by it. Both Gandhi and King recognized that the price of such an approach would often involve real and significant suffering, but they hoped to elicit a moral and spiritual transformation in the aggressor that could open the way to reconciliation.

Within the Christian tradition, one of the primary sources of inspiration for a steadfast commitment to nonviolence comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ teachings elevate the value of peace (“blessed are the peacemakers,” Matthew 5:9), revise or reinterpret authoritative teachings (“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” Matthew 5:38-39), and place high moral demands on followers (“love your enemies,” Matthew 5:44). Jesus also sharply rebukes disciples who wish to take up swords on his behalf (Matthew 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). To be sure these teachings are part of a longer narrative in which Jesus also says things like “‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34), but obedience to the substantial nonviolent dimension to Jesus’ teachings has been a particular point of emphasis among Anabaptist, Amish, Mennonite, and Quaker communities. Moral visions along these lines have been developed in the works of writers such as Hauerwas (1983), Yoder (1992), and Wink (2003).

7. Conclusion
The project of examining the role that religious commitments have played and continue to play both in contributing to violence and to its decline is clearly an important and timely task. Despite deep and significant differences on many matters, there is widespread recognition of at least some moral constraints on violence, that peace is a good to be desired, and that some forms of violence committed in the name of religion are morally appalling and these have occurred with a truly regrettable frequency. Those seeking to develop and defend an informed perspective on religious violence today have available a wide range of interdisciplinary resources and the clear trend in this area, as in areas like philosophy of science and philosophy of mind, is for philosophical work that emphasizes a close level of engagement with the facts on the ground.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker presents a massive body of empirical data from prehistory to present to make a case that, despite the tremendous loss of life due to violence in the twentieth century and a ballooning world population, rates of death due to violence have persistently, if unevenly, declined and that we are living in the most peaceful era in our species’ existence. Most of us are less likely to be murdered, executed, ritually sacrificed, beaten, raped, casualties of war or to meet some similarly gruesome fate than humans in earlier, less civilized, populations. Pinker’s thesis is controversial, but he argues that if things seem otherwise this is due to our increased global awareness and sensitivity to violence. Confronted with the ongoing reality of violence, the availability of terrifically efficient weapons large and small, and the open possibility of nuclear war, perhaps most readers – whether secular or religious – can share in the longings of the prophet Isaiah, who yearns for a more peaceful time when people “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4).
Works Cited


