

The Just War and Jihad: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

R. Joseph Hoffman, ed.

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The fifteen chapters of this book bring together scholars from a variety of fields to examine and analyze what they perceive to be a relationship between religion and violence. Generating a feeling of *déjà vu*, they rehash previously developed assumptions, arguments, and biases that tend to ignore underlying causes related to the “existence of the sacred,” for reasons apparently beyond the domain of secular comprehension. The articles reiterate conventional secular arguments about the dangers of religious convictions on “peace” and tend to vary in quality and consistency, which reflects on the book’s overall merit.

Although it is not feasible to go into each chapter’s details, it is important to underscore their basic thrust and common theme: the issue of legitimacy and what confers legitimacy on action, be it violent in nature, such as in war or conflict, or simply legal and organizational. Hector Avalos (chapter 6) puts it candidly. In the “relative” framework of “empirico-rationalism,” he argues that *religious* violence is always “immoral,” positing that “life,” as a manifestation of that which “exists,” is worth more than that which does not exist (p. 113). However, this does not preclude war in the absolute. One arrives at this conclusion after reading J. Harold Ellens’ “The Obscenity of War” (chapter 2) as well as the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion’s (CSER) “Protocol on Religion, Warfare, and Violence” (chapter 15).

Ellens, who wrote the first article, has been a soldier for fifty years and is a self-proclaimed hater of war who nevertheless supports American aggression against Iraq (p. 34). His argument boils down to the illegitimacy of war if carried out in the name of religion, but its legitimacy if launched in the name of what he terms the “imperative evil expedience.” In other words, war, as it were, is obscene if conducted in God’s name but justifiable if pursued in the name of American interests. For this, he provides rather tenuous and factually erroneous claims for the invasion of Iraq: Saddam Hussain supported al-Qaeda, which is simply not true even by the American leadership’s own admission, and that this war was imposed on the United States by 9/11, an attack with which the Iraqi regime had nothing to do. Of course he does not forget to mention Saddam Hussain’s support of PLO “suicide” bombings against Israel, never questioning whether this could be justified by the same principle of “imperative evil expedience” (p. 45, footnote no. 3). If war and violence can be justified by what he chooses to construct based on faulty assumptions and manufactured “facts,” why can it not be justified by reasons other than those of his own choice?

One gets the same impression from the CSER’s textual statement. According to this proclamation, modern warfare calls for a new calculus to be decided at the international level, having the status of international law “without exemption” (p. 279). In other words, it is not the question of war but of the laws governing it. Since existing international law is a largely Eurocentric text, the CSER is, in effect, stating that wars can only be conducted in accordance with “Eurocentric” values, justifications, and, for that matter, permission. Thus, Palestinians must not violently (if at all) resist Israeli occupation and Muslims are “advised” to subject Islam to the same deconstructivist endeavors that revealed Judeo-Christian texts to be artifacts of late Antiquity (pp. 279-80). In essence, Muslims are being told that *you have to be like us*, a grandiloquent expression of Orientalist textual as well as physical imperialism. Rejecting such offers can only be undertaken at their peril. As the case of Iraq indicates, this is justified by what Judith Lichtenberg (chapter 1), quoting Michael Walzer, calls the “sliding scale,” according to which the more superior one believes one’s “values” to be, the more rules one can violate for the sake of their imposition (p. 23).

Factual errors, tenuous allegations, and imperial justifications do not end there. In a brief chronology about the history of “religious” violence, Hoffmann indicates that in 1032, 6,000 Jews were killed by Muslim troops in Fez, Morocco, in a bid to reconquer Spain, and that in 1148 Spain’s Christians and Jews were forced to accept Islam or die (p. 8). Given the generally

well documented history that Jews actually prospered in Muslim lands at the time, Hoffmann does not explain the reasons behind the alleged killings of Jews. Was it a matter of systematic religious persecution, or could the reason perhaps be found in something that they may have done? After all, why would Muslims feel obliged to kill *Jews* to reconquer *Christian* Spain? It is also well acknowledged that as a matter of *jus ad bellum* (legitimate reasons for making war), Muslims used to offer three, rather than just one, conditions to their enemies: convert, pay *jizyah* (tax), or face war. Even if war broke out after the refusal to pay *jizyah*, this is different from saying that Jews and Christians were told to convert or be killed. A diffusion of meanings seems to be at play here.

On another level, Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez's article (chapter 13) appears to be one of the few exceptions in this book. It offers interesting insights and a measure of analytical sophistication. His main proposition is that recent religious violence is largely motivated by ideological competition between secular and religious claims to bases of legitimacy (p. 233). In this sense, religion is not necessarily a *cause* of violence, even if in some cases it may play a "constructive role" by providing an interpretive framework of narrations and symbols justifying violent behavior (p. 243). For all intents and purposes, the real causes of violence may lie elsewhere.

This collection of articles leads one to wonder whether claims about religion being an "inevitable" source of extreme violence can, in fact, stand their ground. After all, one can argue that the most violent human experiences in history were, more or less, secular in nature. One is tempted to speculate as to what the fate of tens of millions of indigenous peoples living in the "New World" would have been if Muslim armies had "discovered" it rather than the forces of rationality and the Enlightenment.

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