

Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present

Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed. *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011. 3 vols.: 915 pp. Hardcover. \$349.00. ISBN: 9780765620484 (set). Online description from publisher: <http://bit.ly/iwwe3X>.

The first thing that came to mind in looking at these volumes is why they were not all bound as one volume, as it could have easily been done without becoming cumbersome. It may have been designed this way to appeal to undergrad students, or to make it seem more substantial than it really is. When the volumes are opened, the font size and layout seem to be aimed at a more popular than scholarly audience. The cover art seems needlessly sensationalistic, and perhaps betrays the editorial outlook of this work, casting negative connotations on religion before one even opens a volume.

The presuppositions behind even publishing this work need to be addressed at the outset. The introduction states that the work “is designed to answer both basic and relatively complex questions regarding the intersection of faith and violence” (xv), which sounds reasonable. But then a few pages later the editor states, “The connection between religion and violence is pervasive and undeniable. Under the premise that more knowledge is power, this encyclopedia should be an essential source for those seeking a better understanding of this subject” (xix). It seems reasonable to presume from the latter statement a general hostility toward religion on the part of the editor. Dr. Ross is “an Associate Professor in the School of Criminal Justice, College of Public Affairs, and a Research Fellow of the Center for International and Comparative Law at the University of Baltimore” (<http://www.jeffreyianross.com/>). His other writings have been on subjects such as corrections, political crime, terrorism, and extreme/abnormal criminal behavior. Whether this background is best for editing a book on this topic seems questionable, as he is stepping outside his area of expertise at the very least. The forward states that the work “will irritate those who believe that a particular faith embodies only goodness, and that violence is a deviation from its stated goals” (ix). This does not seem to leave open the possibility that violence may actually be a deviation from the tenets of many religions, nor does it seem to leave open much middle ground either.

The three volumes contain 130 entries. The entries vary in length from about three to ten pages in length, with an average length of five to six pages. Each entry ends with “see also” references within the work and a brief list of entries for “further reading,” most of which seem to cover recent sources. Some photos and charts are included, but they add very little of value to the work other than to break up the text. It is of concern that I did not recognize names of any major theological writers in the list of contributors (though I admit to not having a knowledge of writers from all traditions). A few of the contributors are listed as “independent scholars”; that is not exactly a ringing endorsement for the quality of this material. Perhaps the editor did not look far enough to find more qualified contributors with demonstrable credentials—it would not have been hard to find them. It is more likely that the general orientation of his career did not give him the familiarity with the sort of experts he could have included to give more balance to the entries.

The introduction contains a wholly unsatisfying “literature review” that is barely over one page in length. While the editor mentions four presumably seminal works in this area, they do not offer much help to the reader. The

only one that might be familiar to broader audiences would be Robert McAfee Brown's *Religion and Violence*, but that was last published in 1987. While complaining that there are "very few integrative analyses on the role of religion and violence" (xvi), Ross fails to mention recent contributions that would seem to fit that bill, such as *In the Name of Heaven: 3,000 Years of Religious Persecution* by M. J. Engh (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). This literature review either should have been more comprehensive or left out entirely, trusting the "further reading" entries to provide that sort of help.

The entries seek to cover five major themes: biographies of important figures (somewhat weighted to more recent figures); historical events; country and regional studies; religious groups; and practices, rituals, and the process of religious violence. It would seem that in all but perhaps the last category, there exists a wealth of other tools, both print and online, that already ably serve to provide this information. A quick search on WorldCat with the terms "religio* violence" turns up a wealth of monographs on the topic, and I did not attempt a search of journal literature. Another WorldCat search on the group "Aum Shinrikyo," which has an entry in volume 1, also turned up many monograph titles. If researchers simply want the violence slant on things, works such as the *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, edited by Cindy C. Combs and Martin W. Slann (New York: Facts on File, 2007) can cover that ground.

The decision on which entries to include and exclude is mystifying. Are entries on such things as Father Coughlin, Danish Cartoon Crisis, Joan of Arc, Rastafari, or Stigmata really important enough to merit inclusion? Is an entry on "Europe" really going to be able to sufficiently cover such a broad topic? Credit should be given that articles dealing with opposition to violence are also included, such as Conscientious Objection, Just War Theory, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Quakers. However, an entry titled "Internet" is puzzling—is the fact that violent people use the Internet really news, and how is that different from non-violent use of the Internet, or a book, or any other media? The author of this entry starts out by saying, "Among its various uses, some of the potentially dangerous ones include communicating the culture and teachings of religions..." (341). Really? Any appearance of objectivity is soon dispelled as one reads from entries in the work.

The editorial slant alluded to earlier can be illustrated further. In the introduction, the phrase "white American Christian true believers" is used in relation to abortion clinic bombings (xv). To imply that this is normal behavior for "true believers" seems an insult to Christians. In the entry on "atheism," the author says:

The relation between violence and religion must also be noted Advocates of atheism often argue that religion has historically prevented scientific, economic, and social progress. Were it not for religious persecution of science, humankind might have landed on the moon hundreds of years ago. For centuries the Christian Church did not allow the dissection of dead human bodies, calling it "a desecration of the temple of the Holy Ghost." . . . The power of religion creates scarcity, and scarcity causes violence; hence, the weaker the influence of religion and the stronger the impact of atheist ideas, the more affluent the society and the fewer reasons for violent social upheaval. (87)

Aside from being stunning in its assertions, this article is another example of poor scholarship. I realize that many encyclopedia articles are not footnoted, but to make sweeping generalizations without pointing to some externally supporting sources makes one wonder how much (or how little) research went into some of the entries.

It is one thing for a balanced work on religion to admit the faults of various followers of religion as lived in society. This is not a balanced work, though, and to paint religion with such broad strokes of sloppy and selective

scholarship is not helpful. This book certainly would not be that useful in a graduate theological program. For that reason alone I would not recommend the purchase of this set, but then consider the greatly overblown price, and you have even more reason to avoid it (charging \$125 would be more in line, if that). If libraries want works on this general topic, they would be better off spending their acquisitions money on monographs that touch on various aspects of violence and religion, choosing a selection of titles that taken overall would offer students the balanced perspective that this work does not deliver.

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