Review Essay

‘Fire and Cloud’
Religion, Violence, and the Apocalyptic Imagination

Dustin Faulstick
Missouri Southern State University


In one of many brutally violent scenes from Cormac McCarthy’s novel Blood Meridian, a group of mercenaries—who, in the 1850s, make money collecting indigenous scalps and selling them to US governments—enters an unsuspecting camp with the goal of utter destruction. Less than a page into the general slaughter, a mercenary “emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones” (156). The scene echoes—and, in fact, the specific form of the violence depends on—the impre-
cation of Psalm 137: “a blessing on him who seizes your babies / and dashes them against the rocks” (v. 9). *Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts*, edited by John Renard, takes up the question raised by McCarthy and countless others: what is the nature of the relationship between violence and religious texts?

While the essays in *Fighting Words* offer more nuance, for McCarthy’s antagonistic Judge Holden, the answer is simple: “War is god” (249). An unspecified judge shrouded in mystery—characters in *Blood Meridian* several times ask, “What’s he a judge of?” (135)—Holden evokes a terrifying, apocalyptic judgment. The three remaining books listed above contribute to how readers have imagined and continue to imagine the idea of apocalypse generally and the book of Revelation specifically. McCarthy stresses the contemporary urgency of all of these topics with his conclusion to *Blood Meridian*, in which the judge “is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die” (335). As McCarthy insists through the judge’s unrelenting influence—and indeed as we see consistently in local and global events—ideas about religion, violence, and apocalypse are likely to be vitally important to the future of our world.

*Fighting Words* establishes contextualization and reception history as two important tools for approaching religious violence. In his essay on Christianity and the Hebrew Bible, Bernhard A. Asen outlines the fundamental approach applied consistently throughout the collection: each essay broadly adapts Jonathan Klawans’s advice to focus on ways that religion and scriptures “accentuate, exaggerate and otherwise bring about acts of human violence in specific documented historical contexts” (56, italics in original). Rather than theorizing about the abstract origins of religious violence, these essays are grounded in the specifics of history. A major part of that history can be seen in what Pashaura Singh, in his essay on Sikhism, calls “a genealogical mode of reading” (201); that is, the collection’s authors explore historically influential interpretations of specific texts in light of their contextual realities. This historicist focus advanced in *Fighting Words* complements sociological studies of religious violence like Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God*. In his introduction, Renard warns against thinking of religious violence as something perpetuated only by people of another religious tradition, and accordingly, the collection surveys seven religious traditions from around the world: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bahá’í Faith, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Renard then introduces the sacred texts of each religion, which provides a basic overview of the religions themselves and prepares readers to appreciate the history of each text and tradition.

A major advantage of contextualizing a violent scripture is that it draws attention to the mentalities associated with the time and place of the text’s