Book Review


Thomas Hobbes notably remarked that life is “nasty, brutish, and short.” Innumerable instances of contemporary global political-religious violence speak both to life’s ugliness and to its brevity, from the Syrian civil war and riots in Burma to communitarian unrest in India and Iraq and bombings by aggressive militants in Somalia, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Quoting Hobbes in his introduction to Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts, editor John Renard suggests that it is through scripture that religious communities interpret violence and make meaning of life. Problematically, religious adherents often declare themselves without fault; it is all other religions that sanction or pardon violence. The problem is that “religionists are too seldom willing to entertain the possibility that their own faith tradition is as much a contributor to the problem as a counterforce.”1 Renard thus presents the collected volume of essays as an invitation to readers to question their tendencies to accuse particular religions of endorsing violence.

More broadly, Renard aims to add to growing knowledge about and work in “interreligious relations.” The book rests on “the premise that a balanced approach to religious pluralism in our world must build on a measured, well-informed response to the increasingly publicized and, sadly, sensationalized association of terrorism and other forms of large-scale violence with religion.”2 In other words, Fighting Words sets out to dispel the general public’s misconceptions about religion as complicit in terrorism and violence in the world today. To fulfill this goal, each chapter of the book deals in turn with a distinctive religious tradition and its diverse modes of approaching violence through scripture. Chapter-by-chapter, each author explains the ways that religious adherents read, expound, and use their sacred texts to sanction and justify or to condemn violence.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address Judeo-Christian readings of the Bible. Reuven Firestone offers Jewish perspectives on warfare by way of rabbinical and modern readings of biblical violence. Through his sketch of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history, and the exegetical evolution of the notion of “holy war,” Firestone concludes that interpretations of biblical violence shift in light of contemporaneous events. He claims that any reading of scripture results from “a religious and human response to a reality that was confusing and frightening, and also a response to social and political forces both locally and internationally,” an assertion confirmed by subsequent chapters.3 Likewise, Bernhard A. Asen provides a Christian perspective on the Old Testament by analyzing the

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2 Renard, “Exegesis and Violence,” 2.
3 Reuven Firestone, “A Brief History of War in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish Interpretive Tradition,” in Fighting Words, 47.
so-called “text of terror” – the book of Samuel as it addresses the Israelites’ enemy, the Amalekite people. Struggling with what he deems “senseless” violence against Amalek, Asen concludes that although violence against evil, as exemplified by Amalek, may be contextualized and even justified, it cannot be glorified. Lastly, Leo D. Lefebure examines passages of the New Testament that have featured centrally in justifying inter- and intra-religious violence in various historical periods. Together, Firestone, Asen, and Lefebure show the correlation between particular historical situations and methods of biblical interpretation.

In a similarly succinct and formulaic manner, Chapters 6 and 7 address the Baha'i and Zoroastrian relations to scripture and violence. Todd Lawson discusses Baha’i teachings on both violence and nonviolence, articulating Baha’i tradition as primarily and unambiguously peaceful, a religion in which violence is “to be avoided at all costs.” Conversely, Jamsheed Choksy situates Zoroastrian attitudes toward violence within the framework of cosmic warfare, the “raison d’etre of human life” that shaped the Iranian national epic, the statecraft of Sasanian rule, and the Parsi community under British colonialism in India. Zoroastrians “see themselves as holy warriors working for order in the corporeal world,” committing violence when necessary to fight for good. While both Lawson and Choksy echo the aforementioned link between interpretations of religious texts and specific incidents of violence, they seem to classify all Baha’i and all Zoroastrians as directed toward goodness, whether established by peaceful means alone (Baha’i) or by instigating violence as a necessary measure for creating peace (Zoroastrians).

_Fighting Words_ moves away from its broad, prescriptive approach to violence in sacred texts in three distinctive chapters: Michael Sells on Islam, Laurie Patton on Hinduism, and Pashaura Singh on Sikhism. In writing about Finhas of Medina, a Jewish elder discussed in the Qur’an and hadith, Sells chooses a single case study to illustrate Islam’s relation to its scripture in the everyday world. He treats Finhas not only as a historical individual but also as a complex character whose words, actions, and existence carry profound theological, political, and social implications. Focusing on the multiple modes of Muslim interactions with and interpretations of Finhas texts, Sells demonstrates that textual narratives are “filled with ambiguities and marked by contradictions.” And unfortunately, some of these narrative interpretations are woven together to create “pastiches of terror” that justify varieties of violence.

In her chapter on Hinduism and the Bhagavad Gita, Patton follows Sells in explicating the dangerous malleability of religious texts. With a critical eye toward the postcolonial, global setting of India, Patton examines the complex ways in which Hindu religious communities read, interpret, and use their texts, underscoring that each does so with a “particular aim in addressing a particular history moment.” She stresses that modes of reading sacred texts hinge on historical circumstances and political agendas, and multiple readings are possible because – as Sells pointed out – a single text is always multi-vocal. Subsequently, Patton suggests emulating Indian poetics by attempting to hold together different meanings that lie in tension with one another, rather than discarding one or another. Her insistence on both historical-political context and nuanced textual expositions emphasize the abundant complexities of scriptural exegesis.

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