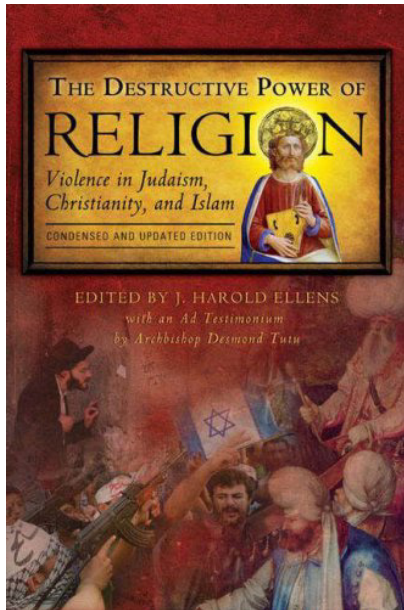


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Ellens, J. Harold, ed.

***The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam***

Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007. Pp. xxiv + 257.  
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Jan Willem van Henten  
University of Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This collection of essays is a condensed and updated version of an earlier work in four volumes, published in 2004 under the same title. Ellens, the editor of both works, wrote about half of the essays in the current volume. The book concentrates mainly on how violence is expressed in the sacred literature of Jews, Christians, and Muslims through metaphors and statements about “the other” inside as well as outside the community of believers. In line with recent discussions about the representation of violence in the Bible, the main assumption of the book is that violence is a prominent theme in both Testaments. The main point made in most, if not all, of the essays is that religion, including the religion of the Bible, is ambivalent in its attitude toward violence. Religion is shown to have the potential to trigger constructive as well as destructive powers. Although an explicit discussion of the definition of violence is missing, most authors take the view, in line with discussions by Robert McAfee Brown and Michael Desjardins, that violence can be physical as well as nonphysical (e.g., xxiii, 129).

The aftermath of 9/11 and the serious possibility that Islamic terrorism will hit the U.S. again is one of the major concerns of this book. A second fundamental issue is that the mindset in the West is fueled by the metaphor of cosmic conflict (e.g., 36, 101, 114–15). The book tries to offer some explanations for these two important issues (xxiii).

Ellens sets the tone in the first essay, in which he elaborates on the destructive powers of religion in the Bible. These powers are linked, in his opinion, to the metaphor of God as a divine warrior, the image of God who kills his son, the apocalyptic worldview that leads to radical dualism and the notion of a cosmic battle. These notions, in turn, result in a psychological archetype that calls for the quest for “final solutions,” with violence as the ultimate outcome. In “The Bible Made Me Do It...,” D. Andrew Kille focuses on the interaction between the biblical text and the readers, who are determined by psychological and social factors. He discusses several psychological explanations for readings based on violence (childhood processes, object relations, group identity formation, cognitive theory, and personality theory). Charles T. Davis III deals with the divine warrior-hero plots seen in Islam and Christianity, focusing upon jihad and the Crusades. He argues that Muslim-Christian enmity has its roots in an unconscious archetype based on the divine warrior image. This leads to a situation in which evil is projected onto the infidel “other” (42).

Ellens pursues his argument that religious metaphors can be deadly in his second contribution, in which he discusses Exod 21 (“an eye for an eye”), Gen 4, the reward for jihad, and the crucifixion, which he considers a metaphor of violence of the worst kind. The metaphors in these texts lead to a psychological archetype that legitimates violence. However, although psychology can help explain the occurrence of violence, it cannot rid us of it. This can only be done by the readers themselves, who must eradicate the violent metaphors that lie at the core of their master narratives and replace these with constructive metaphors (56–57).

Jack Miles’s “The Disarmament of God” links up with his work on the biography of God. He argues that God decided to become a pacifist after he failed to help Israel, which led to the first Holocaust after Titus’s capture of the temple. In another contribution (“The Interface of Religion, Psychology, and Violence”), Ellens further elaborates his argument that metaphors of cosmic conflict create an archetype that legitimates violence. Both religious and psychological factors contribute to violence, which means that an interdisciplinary approach is needed that applies insights from both theology and psychology. Another contribution by Ellens elaborates on the interconnections between violence and prejudice. Jack T. Hanford’s contribution focuses on shame. He says that negative shame combined with anger and rage leads to blaming the “other” and, eventually, to violence. He calls for more education about other religions and for nonviolent cultural norms. Shame must become positive before psychotherapy can be effective, and pastors and practitioners need to educate people about shame so that they can turn it into healthy shame.

Leroy H. Aden deals with the role of self-justification in violence. Self-justification is bad because it is morally corrupt and prideful. It presents the “other” in a negative perspective, obstructs serious dialogue, and is resistant to help and healing. In “Toxic Texts,” Ellens focuses upon the darker side of the story about the blind man in John 9, the attitude of Jesus’ opponents, which is characterized by narcissism and the exploitation of others. Ellens subsequently offers a survey of jihad in the Qur’an and contemporary culture. He emphasizes that the main point of jihad is constructive, because it aims at doing God’s will. Unfortunately, some modern Muslims have focused upon the minority of passages that can be interpreted as supporting violence, and Ellens regrets that moderate Muslims make so little effort to neutralize this.

Two contributions by Walter Wink take up most of the last part of the book. In “The Myth of Redemptive Violence,” Wink argues that what he calls the “dominion system,” the myth that only violence can bring salvation and that the gods favor those who win, is prominent not only in antiquity but also in contemporary popular culture. He connects this with the U.S. need for national security and the “American empire.” He calls for a counterparadigm that focuses upon seeing God in the enemy, in love as well as in forgiveness. In “Beyond Just War and Pacifism,” Wink elaborates this paradigm with a discussion of Jesus’ “third way,” which goes beyond a strategy relying upon violence as well as a pacifist approach. Jesus’ third way is resistant but nonviolent, coercive but nonlethal. Jesus’ statements in the Sermon of the Mount about turning the other cheek, giving the undergarment, and going a second mile illustrate this way, which is also represented by a chart with guidelines (190–91; see also 225). In another essay, Wayne G. Rollins offers a synthesis of Wink’s work.

In “Fundamentalism, Orthodoxy and Violence,” Ellens argues that fundamentalism may have genetic and biochemical roots but that it is basically psychopathology with a specific pattern: (1) canonical literature is verbally inspired by God; (2) an apocalyptic worldview; (3) humankind is divided in two camps; (4) believers are saved from eternal judgment by confession of sins and correction of behavior; and (5) God will win the cosmic conflict (200). He also points to the dangers of fundamentalism. Ellens engages with Miles’s work in “Violence and Christ: God’s Crisis and Ours.” He concludes that what remains after Miles’s biography is a story and that “the story doesn’t work.” Ellens takes side with Harold Kushner’s point that God is not in control and that we humans are responsible for the world. This leads up to the final essay, also by Ellens, which is a touching story about Laura Blumensfeld’s journey (see her *Revenge: A Story of Hope*, 2002). The story shows that the question is not that God be forgiven but that forgiveness depends on us humans.

Many articles in the book rely on research by and insights from others, offering a synthesis with practical guidelines for the readers. Criticisms are possible from several

perspectives. Specialists may easily find something to pick on in their own field. Several, if not most, of the essays suggest that violence is the result of a psychological distortion because it is the outcome of a violent archetype. Social scientists may disagree by pointing out that violence can be the outcome of a rational decision that prefers violence to other means in certain contexts. Wink argues that the violence that is so prominent on television and in video films and computer games contributes substantially to the violence in which adolescent boys engage (171), but this is debatable, as other scholars have pointed out. Personally I, as a European, was shocked to read Ellens's claim that indigenous Europeans do not stand up against fundamentalist Muslims (he even writes: "It seems clear that both Germany and France would welcome another major terrorist assault on the United States directly if that would further trouble the American economy and morale" [158]). I wonder whether this is not a remnant of the cosmic conflict metaphor that Ellens wants to counter. The assumption that seems to underlie some of the essays, that fundamentalists are always violent, is simply incorrect. The Jewish-orthodox *haredim* discussed by Ellens (207–8) use violence only if other people interfere with their way of life. Many Salafists, orthodox Muslims, will opt for a nonviolent approach to nonbelievers. This raises an important question: Why do some fundamentalists decide to use excessive violence while others do not?

Although there may be several things to criticize this book for, I consider this a likeable and important project for two reasons. First, the main point that the Bible—the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as well as the New Testament—is principally ambivalent with respect to violence is right. Second, the essays raise the radical question how we, in the twenty-first century, should deal with the violence in the Bible. Should we erase the violent passages from our canon, as Ellens suggests, or should we go for "a canon within the canon" and link up with those passages that point to an alternative way, as Wink argues in his discussion of Jesus' third way? Or should we accept that violence is part of our religious and cultural tradition and try to cope with it, without erasing or ignoring it? The role of the reader is crucial here, as Kille and Aden point out. Both Wink and Ellens offer guidelines for contemporary readers who want to go beyond violence. Wink argues for Jesus' nonviolent third way, and Ellens builds on Kushner (102–3, 234): humans are God's agents and should aim for growth, fulfillment, and goodness, as well as acts of grace, as an analogy of God's grace for us. In short, this book is an important contribution to the debate about violence in the sacred literature of the "Religions of the Book." It raises crucial questions that require scholars and other readers to sit up and take notice.