Religious Violence: Causes, Case Studies, and Conflict Transformation

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Introduction

Religious violence is often portrayed as either an inevitable clash of absolute beliefs or a convenient mask for secular interests. This book rejects that false choice. Instead, it treats religion as a dynamic field where theology, identity, and politics intersect—sometimes to inflame harm, often to constrain it, and frequently to offer resources for repair. By combining historical case studies with contemporary conflict analysis, we seek to clarify how structures, stories, and strategies interact to produce both violence and peace.

Three commitments guide the work. First, analytical precision: we disentangle doctrinal claims from social identities, and symbolic grievances from material drivers such as inequality, state fragility, and exclusion. Second, comparative breadth: we read across traditions, regions, and time periods without collapsing their differences. Third, practical relevance: the goal is not merely to explain violence but to equip mediators, policymakers, and researchers with evidence-based tools to prevent and transform it.

The book opens by defining key terms and surveying major debates, then develops an integrative framework that links sacred narratives to institutional incentives and political opportunities. We track radicalization pathways from grievance formation to mobilization, highlighting the roles of authority figures, peer networks, and digital ecosystems. Throughout, we attend to “sacred values” that resist compromise and can trigger escalatory dynamics if mishandled, while also noting how the same values can anchor restraint, apology, and reconciliation.

Our case studies—ranging from Northern Ireland and Israel–Palestine to India, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the United States, and the Islamic State—serve two functions. Empirically, they demonstrate variation: religiously framed violence is not monolithic, and similar theological motifs can justify opposite political projects depending on context. Methodologically, they allow us to test hypotheses about structural drivers, leadership strategies, and intervention timing using process tracing, mixed methods, and cross-case comparison.

The latter chapters pivot from diagnosis to design. We examine interfaith dialogue and joint service initiatives, religious peacebuilding rooted in lived theologies of nonviolence, and transitional justice practices that incorporate ritual, memory, and moral repair. We distill lessons for preventing violent extremism through education, civic inclusion, and community resilience, and we provide practical guidance for mediators on engaging sacred values, building guarantees, and sequencing implementation. Each intervention is assessed for feasibility, risks, and measurable

outcomes.

Finally, the book argues for a posture of humility and partnership. Analysts and practitioners must avoid pathologizing any tradition or conferring collective blame on entire communities. Upholding human rights—including freedom of religion or belief—goes hand in hand with addressing material deprivation, political exclusion, and identity-based humiliation. When theology, identity, and politics are understood together, the same forces that have justified harm can be mobilized to protect life, sustain pluralism, and cultivate durable peace.

CHAPTER ONE: Defining Religious Violence: Concepts, Terms, and Debates

The concept of "religious violence" often conjures vivid and unsettling images: ancient crusades, modern acts of terrorism, or sectarian clashes in far-flung lands. However, beneath the surface of these immediate perceptions lies a complex and fiercely debated landscape of definitions, motivations, and interpretations. What exactly constitutes religious violence? Is it merely violence committed by religious individuals or groups, or must it stem from specific religious doctrines? And how do we differentiate it from other forms of conflict where religion might be a contributing, but not the sole, factor? These are not mere academic quibbles; the way we define and understand religious violence profoundly impacts how we analyze its causes, how we attempt to mitigate it, and how we ultimately strive for peace.

The very term "religion" itself is a complex and often contested concept, particularly in Western thought, and a universally agreed-upon scholarly definition remains elusive. This ambiguity naturally extends to the realm of religious violence. Some scholars argue that religion, by its very nature, can be a potent driver of violence, especially when its truth claims are seen as absolute, leading to divisiveness and irrationality. Others contend that such a view oversimplifies the issue, suggesting that religion is often merely one of many social and political factors that contribute to conflict, rather than the primary cause.

Indeed, many cases labeled as "religious violence" reveal deeper roots in ethnic animosities, political struggles for power, or economic grievances. Attributing violence solely to religion in such instances can lead to a misguided understanding of the conflict's origins and can hinder effective resolution strategies. The danger lies in oversimplification, which can obscure the multifaceted nature of human conflict and the various ideological reasons that fuel violence.

One prevailing perspective defines religious violence as that which is motivated by, or in reaction to, religious precepts, texts, or the doctrines of either the perpetrator or the target. This includes violence against religious institutions, people, objects, or events. However, this definition immediately raises questions about the degree of religious motivation required. Is a conflict "religious" if a combatant invokes sacred texts, even if their underlying motivations are predominantly political or economic? Or must the violence be explicitly commanded or justified by a specific theological framework?

Some scholars emphasize the interpretive aspect, suggesting that religious violence

often occurs when individuals or groups interpret religious teachings in a way that justifies aggression. This highlights the role of agency and individual (or group) interpretation rather than an inherent violent nature within the religion itself. After all, religions contain narratives, symbols, and metaphors of both violence and nonviolence.

A significant debate revolves around the distinction between "religiously motivated" and "religiously framed" violence. The former implies a direct causal link, where religious beliefs are the primary impetus for the violence. The latter suggests that while religious language and symbols are used, the underlying drivers are secular, such as political power or territorial control. Political scientists, for instance, often view religiously charged intrastate conflicts as matters of political choice, where religious identity becomes a tool for political entrepreneurs to exploit grievances and escalate conflict for their own advantage. These entrepreneurs can leverage the codified behavioral guidelines, multi-layered divisions, and transnational networks that religious identity can provide.

The concept of "holy war" or "divinely sanctioned violence" is another key element in understanding religious violence. This involves the belief in a divine mandate to commit violent acts, often articulated as a concept of cosmic war where the stakes are elevated to an ultimate, existential struggle. Such claims can imbue violence with a ritual intensity and an absolutist quality that makes compromise incredibly difficult. However, even within traditions that historically embrace notions of holy war, there are often powerful counter-narratives of peace, reconciliation, and non-violence.

The "myth of religious violence" is a term introduced by scholar William Cavanaugh, who argues that the idea of "religion" as a universal, transhistorical phenomenon inherently prone to violence, distinct from "secular" aspects of life, is a Western construct. This myth, he contends, serves to reinforce the perceived superiority of Western secular social orders and can be used to legitimize violence against "nonsecular" or "religious" Others. Essentially, it creates a dichotomy where "their" violence is seen as irrational and religious, while "our" violence, being secular, is rational and peace-making. This perspective challenges us to critically examine our own biases when labeling conflicts and to recognize that secular ideologies and institutions can also be prone to absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality.

Indeed, the historical record offers ample evidence of violence perpetrated in the name of secular ideologies, sometimes on a scale that dwarfs religiously framed conflicts. Twentieth-century secularist regimes, for example, have been responsible for immense suffering and death, often specifically targeting religious communities. This suggests that the problem may not be "religion" itself, but rather the human capacity for ideological fervor and the mobilization of groups against perceived enemies, regardless of the ideological veneer.

Moreover, the separation of "religious" and "secular" as distinct categories is itself a relatively modern Western invention. In many cultures and historical periods, religion was intricately interwoven with political, economic, and social life, making any clear distinction between religious and secular motivations for violence incredibly difficult, if not impossible. To insist on such a separation can obscure the complex interplay of forces at work in many conflicts.

Another dimension of the debate concerns the role of religious leaders and institutions. While some religious authorities may explicitly endorse violence, many others actively promote peace, justice, and reconciliation, drawing on the same sacred texts and traditions. This highlights that religious traditions are not monolithic; they are dynamic, internally diverse, and offer resources for both conflict and peace. Ultimately, the link between religious belief and behavior is not linear, and the vast majority of religious adherents do not engage in violence.

The concept of "sectarian violence" is a specific form of religious violence that arises from discrimination, hatred, or prejudice between different sects or denominations within a particular religion. Religious segregation can often exacerbate such conflicts. This type of violence can be particularly brutal as it often involves communities with shared heritage but diverging interpretations, leading to intense internal divisions.

Methodologically, studying religious violence presents unique challenges. Scholars must navigate the complexities of interpreting actors' own claims about their motivations, which may be deeply intertwined with self-justification or strategic signaling. Isolating "religious" motives from other social, political, and economic factors is often a daunting task. Furthermore, research on religious violence needs to be sensitive to the cultural context in which such violence occurs, employing diverse theoretical and empirical approaches.

Ultimately, defining religious violence is less about finding a single, universally accepted phrase and more about acknowledging the intricate web of factors at play. It requires a nuanced approach that avoids simplistic essentialisms or attributing inherent violence to any particular faith tradition. Instead, it calls for a careful examination of how religious beliefs, identities, and institutions intersect with political agendas, economic conditions, and social dynamics to produce both conflict and, crucially, pathways to peace. This book, therefore, seeks to move beyond the superficial and delve into these complex intersections, recognizing that while religion can be a powerful force in conflict, it is rarely the sole cause, and often, it holds the keys to its resolution.

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