

Militants for peace

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

It was not what was predicted by mainstream sociologists who followed in the footsteps of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, but it has happened. Instead of slowly withering away or lodging itself quietly into the privacy of worshipers' hearts, religion has emerged as an important player on the national and international scenes.

It is too early to tell how permanent this resurgence will be. The process of secularization may continue, though not so much in the older sense of a decline in religious observance as in the newer sense of the diminishing influence of religion in contemporary societies. Yet on the international scene religion is well and alive. A collection of essays titled *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* is obligatory reading for many diplomats. The London School of Economics has organized a major conference on religion in international affairs.

In the public perception, the reassertion of religion as a political factor is not a positive development. As the title of Mark Jurgensmeyer's recent book—*Terror in the Mind of God* (reviewed in the June 7-14 issue)—on the global rise of religious violence suggests, the resurgence of religion seems to go hand in hand with the resurgence of religiously legitimized violence. Hence we continue to hear a call for weakening or eliminating religion as a factor in public life. The call rests, however, on a twofold misperception.

First, it is not true that the Christian faith is primarily a negative force in our world of conflicts. It would not be difficult to show that many religious people are peacemakers for religious reasons—many more, in fact, than are purveyors of religiously sanctioned violence. But we rarely hear stories of religiously motivated peacemakers. The work of Katrina Kruhonja, a medical doctor from Osijek, Croatia, remains virtually unknown. The motivation for her work is thoroughly religious. She became a peace activist when, under the Serbian shelling of Osijek, she recentered her life on the crucified Christ and “was able to resist the power of exclusion and the logic of total war.”

Part of the reason we know little about people like Kruhonja is that the success of their work is predicated on their low visibility. But part of it has to do with the logic of mass-media communication in a market-driven world, which invariably zeroes in on violence. Hence the Serbian paramilitary who rapes Muslim women with a cross around his neck makes the headlines and becomes a celebrated example of religious violence.

Media create reality, but they do so by building on viewers' proclivities. Why does the Serbian paramilitary seem more interesting than Kruhonja? Why are we prone to conclude from the cross he is wearing that his religious faith is implicated in his acting, whereas it never occurs to us to conclude from the ring on his finger that the institution of marriage is to blame? Religion is more associated with violence than with peace in the public imagination in part because we are fascinated with violence. We, the peace-loving citizens of suburbia, are insatiable observers of violence. And as is the case with all voyeurs, by being observers we become vicarious participants in what we claim to abhor.

Moreover, we are particularly drawn to religious violence because we have a strong interest in exposing hypocrisy, particularly religious hypocrisy. Put the two factors together—inner deployment of violence and delight in exposure—and it looks as if we want to hear about religious people's engagement in violence partly because we ourselves are violent—but expect others to act differently.

Second, it is not true that weak religiosity is less likely to be violence-inducing than strong religiosity. In *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (also reviewed in June 7-14), R. Scott Appleby argues that contrary to the misconception popular in some academic and political circles, religious people play a positive role in human conflicts and contribute to peace, not when they “moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized and often highly particular beliefs,” but “when they remain *religious* actors.”

The more we reduce the Christian faith to vague religiosity or conceive of it as exclusively a private affair of individuals, the worse off we will be. Inversely, the more we practice it as a religion that by its intrinsic content shapes behavior and by the domain of its regulative reach touches the public sphere, the better off we will be. It takes a “thick” practice of the Christian faith to help reduce violence and shape a culture of peace.

Strip religious commitments of all cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, and we are likely to get religiously inspired or legitimized violence. People truly nurtured in the tradition become militants for peace. The Christian faith is less likely to be misused for purposes extrinsic to its own proper content when people have deep commitments to the faith, commitments with robust cognitive and moral content. A faith rooted in historic Christian beliefs is unlikely to be recast arbitrarily by leaders of short-lived and oppressive communities.