

# Taking the bad with the good: Violence and the sacred

by [Winnifred Fallers Sullivan](#) in the [June 7, 2000](#) issue

*The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, by R. Scott Appleby

*Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, by Mark Juergensmeyer

The news media regularly report on events in which religion and violence come together. In a recent *Washington Post* article, for example, Congressman Tom DeLay (R., Tex.) argued that a lack of religion was the explanation for the recent shooting of one six-year-old by another. Another article in the same issue of the *Post* suggested that the hundreds of deaths among a Christian group in Uganda resulted from an excess of religion. Is religion part of the problem or part of the solution? Is one kind of religion bad and another good? Do we know how to tell the difference? Can we have the one without the other?

Religion looks more complicated today than it did some 50 years ago, when a tolerant liberal Protestantism shorn of the irrational and the pagan seemed to fit well with a liberal political regime. Now we are not so sure if that was really religion. It looks to some as if liberal Protestantism self-destructed as it accommodated itself to secular liberal society. Recovering “religion” has become a national project across the political spectrum. The endorsement by President Clinton and by both presidential candidates of government assistance to “faith-based” charities is one example. A puzzle that arises in this context is how to understand and whether to tolerate, or even support, “illiberal” religion of various kinds.

Scott Appleby, professor of history and director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame, and Mark Juergensmeyer, professor of sociology and director of Global and International Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, argue in their very different books that violence is in some sense fundamental to the religious imagination. Addressing the

general reader, each book displays an impressive and detailed knowledge of contemporary religious violence and an extraordinary sensitivity to the difficulties of describing and understanding it.

Two explanations have been offered for the recent deaths among the Ugandan Christian group: either both the members and their leader believed in an imminent apocalypse, according to their understanding of biblical and Marian prophecy, or the leader murdered his deluded disciples in order to steal their property. Either we must accept the idea that Christianity, to some degree, seems to align itself with such violence or we must assume that hundreds of apparently faithful Christians were deceived by a dangerous con man. Both explanations challenge our understanding of religion.

Appleby's book grew out of a series of initiatives by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. It is unabashedly programmatic. An initial chapter presents a phenomenological description of religion, drawing on classic (but not uncontested) theories of religion to show what Appleby takes to be a fundamental "ambivalence" in the human response to "the sacred"—an ambivalence that is the inevitable result of the limits of human understanding. We can see this ambivalence, Appleby explains, in the two kinds of religious activists, or "militants," on the scene today: extremists, on the one hand, and peacemakers, on the other. In subsequent chapters, Appleby presents case studies both of militants who use violence and those who work for peace.

*The Ambivalence of the Sacred* is a treasure trove of information on religious activists around the world, many little known even to an informed public. Appleby describes, for example, the work of Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, the 68-year-old Buddhist primate of Cambodia. In 1993 Maha Ghosananda led hundreds of Buddhist monks, nuns and laity on a dramatic month-long march from Siam Reap in the country's northwestern part, through its central regions, to the capital, Phnom Penh.

Held on the eve of the UN-sponsored elections of a new national assembly and government, the peace march, known as Dhammayietra II ("Pilgrimage of Truth"), traversed dangerous territory marked by landmines and firefights. The marchers hoped to build popular confidence in the elections and overcome the fear that had been aroused by Khmer Rouge threats of violence and disruption. By the time Maha Ghosananda and his supporters reached Phnom Penh, hundreds of thousands of

Cambodians had encouraged the marchers and more than 10,000 people had joined their ranks. Ninety percent of the electorate in this devastated country voted in the subsequent election.

This book, however, has another agenda, one that Appleby takes from what he calls “the growing end of an argument” among religious people. Since the “axial” age (approximately 500 BC), a time some scholars point to as the fount of the salvation faiths—when Confucius, the Buddha, Zoroaster, Deutero-Isaiah and Pythagoras were all alive—the argument for peace as the goal of religion has been gaining strength. Appleby believes that in the “great” traditions, the resources for peace warrant a cautious optimism if—and this is a big if—government and religious institutions give religious peacemaking the acknowledgment and support it needs.

Rejecting what he calls the “minimalist” approach to religion’s participation in public life, an approach in which religion is privatized and kept separate, Appleby wants us to consider the possibility that the right kind of religious zeal, not religious restraint, is the answer to global violence. While immensely appealing to religiously motivated reformers, this evangelical argument sits uneasily with Appleby’s academic, religious-studies description of a deep and ultimately unknowable ambivalence about or within the sacred.

Juergensmeyer’s book results from his personal interviews with religious terrorists. Like Appleby, he finds both peaceful and violent aspects in the religions he examines, but he explores these aspects at the individual, not the group, level. The book begins by describing religious terrorism in five traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism. Juergensmeyer focuses on particular incidents and people. It is typical of his careful and generous evenhandedness that he discusses Christianity first. He reminds us that Michael Bray, a convicted abortion-clinic bomber, justifies his actions by using a just-war theology that cites the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as those of Dominion Theology. “When I talked with Rev. Bray in his suburban home in Bowie in 1996 and again in 1998,” Juergensmeyer writes, “I found nothing sinister or intensely fanatical about him. He was a cheerful, charming, handsome man in his early 40s who liked to be called Mike. Hardly the image of an ignorant, narrow-minded fundamentalist, Mike Bray enjoyed a glass of wine before dinner and talked knowledgeably about theology and political ideas.” Is Bray a devil in angel’s clothing? Or do all religions contain such contradictions?

In the second part, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” Juergensmeyer depicts religious violence as a kind of theater that expresses its deadly symbolic power on a cosmic stage. He repeatedly tells us that religious terrorists are interesting, thoughtful, often likable people who think of themselves as living in a world at war—a cosmic war legitimated in scripture and justifying extreme measures. But, like Appleby, Juergensmeyer concludes on a hopeful note: “My conviction is that the same religion that motivates such potent acts of destruction also carries an enormous capacity for healing, restoration and hope.”

Both authors are reluctant to draw conclusions from their studies, and the titles of their books suggest an uneasy and ultimately unanswered ambiguity. Appleby’s title seems to insist on an unresolvable inscrutability about the religious imagination, and Juergensmeyer’s seems to promise a god’s-eye view of terrorism. Appleby’s title leaves us wondering whether it is people who choose between the violent and the peaceful response to “the sacred,” or it is “the sacred” itself which is somehow ambivalent about violence. Juergensmeyer’s asks whether humans imagine the terror in the mind of God, or whether the terror is actually there.

In each case, however, the tension in the title is at variance with a text that reaches for the unambiguous answer that religion is ultimately about peace, and that peace is what God wants. In the course of his book, each author places the agency firmly with the human. And yet there is a lingering sense that each avoids the critical questions. Is violence an inescapable part of the human condition? If so, what role does/can religion play in fomenting or reducing violence? Is violence an inescapable part of religion? If so, can humans change that fact?

Both authors suggest that the remedy is education. Appleby argues for a deliberate intervention by international actors to promote the peacemaking resources within the major religious traditions. In a more traditionally humanistic way, Juergensmeyer argues for understanding. Ultimately, Appleby is more optimistic and programmatic. One might almost call his book very “Catholic.” He sees human nature as essentially good and well-meaning, as something that can be improved through the efforts of institutions like the post-Vatican II church, which have the resources to educate and form their members. Juergensmeyer sees people as fundamentally flawed, and his solution—a more Protestant one, perhaps—seems to come at the level of the individual. For Appleby we are saved as a community; for Juergensmeyer we are saved one by one.

The apparent failure of modern secularism and of secularization theory—created as a response to the religious violence of the 16th century— has left a vacuum in both society and the academy. The resulting global religious revival and the renewed respectability of religious studies have provided new opportunities for scholars of religion. Appleby’s and Juergensmeyer’s books are two of the best of the recent popularizations which inaugurate a public language about religion that is at once tolerant and informed. They have done us a tremendous service by presenting the evidence that makes it impossible to deny the violence of religion and thus avoid taking responsibility for it.

It is instructive to listen to another debate about religion and violence, one that occurred on the threshold of modernity. In the mid-16th century, a remarkable argument about the humanity of the Indians of the New World occurred in Valladolid, Spain. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican missionary who was serving in Chiapas, New Spain, and Ginés de Sepúlveda, the royal historian, argued for five days before Philip II. Las Casas later published his argument. It has been translated into English and edited by Stafford Poole under the title *In Defense of the Indians*. In this long and wonderfully passionate work, Las Casas cites authorities ranging from ancient Greeks to medieval scholastics.

At one point, Las Casas addresses and rejects Sepúlveda’s argument that the Indians should not be regarded as human because they practice human sacrifice. He writes, “Every man, no matter how innocent he may be, owes God more than his life; and so, although these persons do not will it by any explicit act, yet they perform an act that is owed, since all men are obliged to give their blood and their life whenever God’s honor demands it.”

Las Casas knew from personal experience that the Indians were human and that they had a religion. He explicitly rejected forced conversion. But Las Casas, citing the binding of Isaac and the killing of the firstborn, did not flinch from defending human sacrifice as a justified religious act. If we are not simply to clean Las Casas up and make him a modern, we must come to terms with his argument.

The books by Appleby and Juergensmeyer reveal a larger contemporary debate in religious studies (indeed in the academy generally). What role should normative questions play in the academic study of religion, or any area of human endeavor? There has, for example, been an intense discussion about the ethical questions raised in the study of Aztec sacrifice. In both Appleby’s and Juergensmeyer’s

volumes, there is a conflict between the use of religious-studies vocabulary and the urgent desire to make that language serve particular ethical ends. Both Appleby and Juergensmeyer use the neutrality of religious-studies language to describe the complex structures of religious world views, but both also use value-laden language to distinguish bad religion from good.

Juergensmeyer says that “religion does not ordinarily lead to violence” and that “the object of faith has always been peace.” Appleby repeatedly distinguishes “strong” religion from “weak,” praising “authentic” religion and decrying religious illiteracy. Both want to insist that religion can lead to peace and understanding. That conclusion seems premature to me. We want academic religious studies both to explain religion and to show us how religion can save us. I am not sure that it is up to the second job.

Juergensmeyer says that the “reasons why we need religion and why we have violence are the same,” implying that both are the result of a failure of modernity. Yes, but to say that we know what religion we need to end this violence is a false resolution. It repeats the Enlightenment temptation to design a religion that will serve human ends. Though it tries to refine the project by rejecting the Enlightenment fear of religion, religion is still tamed. Making religion serve human ideas of peace can deny religion’s orientation to something larger than this world. Religion takes the long view. Its ways are not always our ways.