

# Saintly violence

by [Dan McKanan](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

*Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown.*

By Louis A. DeCaro Jr. New York University Press, 348 pp., \$32.95.

John Brown is almost the only radical abolitionist I have ever known who was not more or less radical in religious matters also," reported his supporter Thomas Wentworth Higginson. "His theology was Puritan, like his practice; and accustomed as we now are to see Puritan doctrines and Puritan virtues separately exhibited, it seems quite strange to behold them combined in one person again." In this biography, Louis A. DeCaro reveals the religious integrity of a man whom others have seen as a criminal, a lunatic or a study in contradictions. For DeCaro, Brown's deep Christian faith accounts for his abiding hatred of slavery, his sense of himself as a special instrument of Providence, and his conviction that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." These beliefs led Brown to his fatal attack on slavery at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

DeCaro is fiercely critical of previous biographers, both proslavery apologists who portrayed Brown as a "fanatic" and modern scholars who sought a "neutral approach." He proposes instead that we see Brown as a "Protestant saint"--that is, as "a sincere believer, however imperfect, also believing himself carried along by God's grace and mercy." This approach sets the tone for the book, but it does not lead DeCaro to conclusions radically different from those of Brown's most influential scholarly biographer, Stephen B. Oates. Oates (who calls his approach "empathetic" rather than "neutral") also recognizes that "Brown's intense Calvinist faith . . . is the key to understanding him."

DeCaro rightly faults Oates for overemphasizing "the wrathful Jehovah of the Old Testament" as a component of Calvinist faith. He also departs from Oates in devoting more attention to the years before Brown gained fame as an antislavery guerrilla in Kansas and as the martyr of Harpers Ferry. In loving detail, DeCaro fleshes out Brown's lifelong practices of prayer, moral discernment and action. DeCaro's book will appeal to readers interested in antebellum evangelicalism;

Oates's will remain standard for those who are fascinated with Brown's role as a precursor of the Civil War.

DeCaro acknowledges but does not sufficiently reflect on Brown's increasing religious isolation. Because he refused to compromise either Calvinist or abolitionist principles, Brown had no church home during the last 20 years of his life. Most of his African-American allies were Methodists; he attended their churches but did not join. Other evangelical abolitionists gravitated toward Unitarianism, skepticism or spiritualism, while Brown remained steadfast to the faith of his fathers. (A Unitarian, however, presided at his funeral.) The "Secret Six" who funded the raid on Harpers Ferry were postevangelicals and radical Unitarians. Brown's sons drank deeply of his abolitionism, but uniformly rejected his brand of Christianity. DeCaro might have explained why even admirers found it hard to emulate Brown's combination of "Puritan doctrines and Puritan virtues."

De Caro is relentlessly honest about the centrality of violence to Brown's faith. Brown was convinced that he could not raise God-fearing children without physical punishment, just as he knew that slavery would not end without bloodshed. Such beliefs were not relics of the Old Testament, as some implicitly anti-Semitic interpretations would have it. Instead, they were rooted in a Christian theology of the atonement. Like the radical pacifists of his day, Brown believed that Jesus' suffering gave violence a special significance beyond ordinary calculations of cost and benefit. The nonresistants believed it was impermissible; Brown though it was indispensable. Most other abolitionists held to something more like just war theory, which may explain why Frederick Douglass and many others refused to join Brown at Harpers Ferry.

Because Brown saw violence as a form of atonement, he believed it could be redemptive whether he was the perpetrator or the victim. Thus, he kept a tally of the whippings his children earned, but took many of these whippings on himself. A similar logic led him to take the outrageous risk of seizing a federal armory in hopes of sparking a slave revolt. Whether he succeeded or failed, he was confident that Providence would transform the resulting bloodshed into new life for the nation.

DeCaro emphatically denies that Brown was a "terrorist," and he cites many instances in which Brown took pains to avoid harming bystanders. Yet there are striking parallels between Brown and the suicide bombers of contemporary Palestine and Kashmir. Like Brown, these young people are willing both to inflict and to receive violence because they fervently believe that their actions are governed by a

divine plan. DeCaro's *Fire from the Midst of You* makes it hard to dismiss such beliefs as mere "misinterpretations" of Islam. As a Christian pacifist, I cannot honor either Brown or the suicide bombers as "saints," but neither can I deny them their religious integrity.