PART II

Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace: Study Guide
INTRODUCTION

“How many millions have been murdered in the name of religion!”
“We know that when humans lose their moral compass, their faith in God, the unthinkable becomes possible.”

These two quotations by Samuel Pisar, a humanitarian, international attorney, and Holocaust survivor, illustrate a tension that disturbs the minds and hearts of all people in whose lives religion has a place. Religion can divide, oppress and incite human beings to violence, or it can unite, liberate, and call humanity to live in peace. Jews, Christians and Muslims have in recent years come together to proclaim that in rejecting the former, they can truly pursue this peace in a spirit of faithfulness to their respective traditions.

This Study Guide explores the questions about violence and peace faced by people of faith and those whom they encounter. It is not a curriculum unto itself, but aims to inspire further study, reflection, and most importantly, prayer and action in the pursuit of peace. The sections are intentionally short to allow for individuals or students study groups to examine the important issues surrounding religion, violence and peace, in one-hour increments.

The main source materials for this Study Guide are gleaned from two conferences ("Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace" in 1998; and "Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths" in 2003) sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut. The papers presented at the 1998 conference have been published by Sacred Heart University Press, in the 2000 volume, Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace. The previous section of this volume contains the papers presented at the “Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths” conference.

For continued study and reflection, additional bibliographies and resources are provided in the Appendices of this Study Guide.
Religion and Violence

The twentieth century is often referred to as the most violent century in history. In the wake of two unspeakably bloody world wars, the Shoah, the conflicts of the second half of the century in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East, as well as the abominable genocides in the Balkans, Africa, Cambodia, and elsewhere, our memory of the century past indeed bears this out. Violence is the tragic milieu of historical world affairs, and remains the scourge of millions of families and individuals the world over.

Violence is a word bearing many different connotations. It can refer to physical combat, emotional subjugation, economic suppression, or other disorders and conflicts; the forms of violence are manifold. But can the origins and root causes of violence ever be adequately understood and acted upon in such a way as to cease it? Such a line of inquiry and study will be pursued in the search for understanding that can lead to peace.

VIOLENCE AS CHOICE

In the essay, "The Problem of Religion, Violence and Peace: Uneasy Trilogy," in Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace, the author writes, "Violence is the worst expression of humanity’s freedom of choice." This assertion has three important implications.

1. Violence is an action that is done by human beings.
2. Violence is freely chosen and despite nonviolent alternatives, it is enacted anyway.
3. Violence is a transgression, contrary to life and the common good.

First, despite its prevalence in human history, violence can be rejected by humans. The contingency of violence upon human action is the first and foremost point to keep in mind – a point that is central to religious exhortations to peace. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all emphasize the preeminent responsibility of human persons to discern
and cooperate with the divine plan in bringing violence to an end, for violence is of our own creation. Such a world view is rooted in the hope of God's promise of peace and the belief in the ability of people as God's creation to co-create a world of justice and law. Accordingly, the Abrahamic faiths have the ability to speak out in word and deed against notions of selfishness, greed, fatalism, nihilism and futility in human endeavors.

Second, religious teachings and beliefs call forth an ethical commitment on the part of individuals and communities to work towards the reduction and eventual eradication of violence. But religion and violence have too often gone hand in hand. Why should we have to fear the emergence of violence from the religious traditions that consistently preach and teach its opposite? In the Christian Scriptures, Paul of Tarsus laments in Romans 7, "I find myself doing the very things I hate." He recounts his sins, and in this self-examination, he finds penitence and the hope for redemption. His instance could serve as an example for people of faith to examine their own traditions, and their own personal behaviors, in order that the seeds of violence be identified and rejected.

Third, despite the obvious tear to the fabric of life and the common good, people choose to violently transgress against God, others and themselves. The Code of Hammurabi and the Lex Talionis were both attempts to limit violence from escalating into unchecked tribal blood feuds. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) also functioned to maintain social order and helped to reduce the possibility for violence to erupt. The irrationality and selfishness of violence will always threaten the sacredness of life and the security of life in common. The establishment of the central place of law in a society is one of the highest achievements of humans in the pursuit of justice and peace, a development that religions have contributed greatly.

For Continued Discussion

Think about a personal experience involving violence. What can be learned from direct, first-hand knowledge of violence's causes and effects?

Is it possible for violence to be completely overcome? Does your answer to this question, especially in light of religious beliefs, make a difference in your life and your actions?
If peace is the goal, why is it that religion is used as a weapon? What are the ways that we as individuals or as a nation can work to reduce violence?

Many religious believers hold that the evil in the world exists due to the influence of Satan or evil. Azizah al-Hibri discusses the Islamic interpretation of "satanic logic" in this volume and describes the ways that pride can lead to violence. If violence is influenced by forces other than human choice, then lasting peace will only be achieved through the assistance of God and frequent prayer. Compare these ideas to your own traditions regarding Satan or the devil. Do you see violence as a necessary part of the human condition, "satanic," or both?

**Reflections**

When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had ever made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved. (Genesis 6:5-6)

Our rabbis taught: When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, "My creatures are perishing and you sing praises?" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, verse 39b)

We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies...We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:22-24, 28)

Islam teaches that God has ordained that there be different religious communities on earth (49:13, 30:22), and that they must all respect one another (49:11). Discrimination is forbidden on any basis including religion, because it is God's will that there be different religions on earth until the Last Day. The Qur'an reads, "Unto every one of you we have appointed a different law (shari'a) and way of life. And if God had so willed it, He would have made you all one single community, but He
willed otherwise, in order to test you by means of what He has given you. So vie with one another in doing good deeds, unto Him you shall all return, and then He will make you understand all that on which you have differed.” (5:48)

Those who inflict violence or death on others assume the power over life and death. As such, violence is a display of idolatry. When people choose to act violently, they fail to acknowledge the value of life and fail to reverence the creation of God.

VIOLENCE IN HISTORY AND RITUAL

The anthropological theories of mimetic desire and scapegoating, developed by the French scholar Renè Girard, have exerted a dramatic influence on the sociology of religion in recent decades. Girard's research explores the foundational myths and sacred practices of societies, with an eye toward the ways in which violence plays a role. His system of thought is complex, but can be roughly summed up in the following points.

Violence is nearly always present in the foundational myths of societies and civilizations; well-known examples are the fratricides of Abel (Genesis) or Remus (Roman mythology). An intensive survey of such stories suggests that for societies to develop, something or someone was destroyed or killed. Many, if not all societies sustain internal concord by re-enacting the foundational violence, either in sacrificial ritual, or by the periodical “scapegoating” of a vulnerable member onto whom the society's anxieties and faults are projected. This violence against one or a few relieves social tension and provides at least a temporary unification of the remaining members.

Scapegoating is driven by a psychological principle that Girard calls “mimetic desire,” a behavior that begins in infancy with the imitation of one's parents' desires. It is a necessary part of development in the early years, because a child in order to survive must learn to desire things without cognitively knowing why they are desirable—for example, the ability to speak the parents' language. Mimetic desire, the fabrication of desires by imitation of others, becomes potentially violent in later stages, for the simple reason that it is a sub-rational behavior. If one desires something not because one has decided it would be good, but only because another
person desires it, a conflict is likely to arise between the two. The conflicts arising out of mimetic desire naturally continue to escalate. At this point, the crux of the theory comes into view: the easiest way out of the cycle of violence between the two parties is to identify another member of the community, someone as vulnerable and undesirable as possible, and they exercise their violent passions on him or her. This “scapegoat” is beaten, killed, or driven out of the community, and the conflict between the two parties subsides, until the next time.5

The impact of Girardian theory on the study of history, as well as our experience of religion, raises important questions. The most horrific crimes of genocide resemble very closely the Girardian behavior of scapegoating. The Nazis envisioned bringing about a new world order with the Third Reich, and the Holocaust was to be its foundational myth. Although the society they envisioned would never come to be, six million European Jews were methodically exterminated in the most terrible ways. Nazi propaganda resounded with language that identified the Jews as collectively guilty of widespread societal ills; the Jews became the scapegoat. They were as vulnerable as any other group would have been, and the Nazis succeeded in convincing the greater part of German society of their undesirability, by painting them as sub-human and devoid of dignity. As Gil Bailie puts it, “The Nazi ideologists were trying to put the principle [that violence creates togetherness] to work in history. And they were not the last to do so.”6

Mimetic theory on the surface seems to conclude that violence is an inevitable fixture of human life. But recall that violence is voluntary; it requires a choice, and there are alternatives to it. Religion seeks to provide the alternatives. James G. Williams’ paper included in this volume from the 2003 “Pathways to Peace in the Abrahamic Faiths” conference, surveys the Hebrew Scriptures with an eye for the ways in which sacrifice and mimetic violence resemble one another, and in turn, how the stories emphasize the human responsibility in rejecting the violence in favor of fidelity to God. For example:

The...episode that stands out is Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. It is very important in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is an account full of richness and ambiguity. I would simply stress that though it is not an explicit condemnation of child sacrifice, it certainly must reflect a struggle with the problem. The story of Abraham is moved forward by
yearning to fulfill the divine promise, yet it turns out that it can be accomplished without violating the life of Abraham’s son.7

The interpretation of this Biblical story is indeed central to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Abrahamic faiths. If violence, mimetic or otherwise, is a sub-rational behavior that often grips human beings, then Abraham’s story illustrates that a relationship with God can raise us above it. We are made more human (and humane) by our cooperation with the divine will and can break the cycle of mimetic violence; rather than turning our anxieties loose on a vulnerable scapegoat.

Of note here is that sacrifice in Christianity carries a particular meaning. Christians believe that God, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, became an atoning sacrifice—a scapegoat, in a metaphysical and spiritual sense—for the sins of all humanity when he was crucified. The central event that Christianity reveres, then, is a violent sacrifice. Nonetheless, Christianity is a religion that teaches peace, but this paradox is essential to the understanding of the Christian faith. Christians believe that the self-sacrifice of Christ makes liberation from violence possible. One’s sins are forgiven, so nothing is to be gained by the blaming or scapegoating of another.

For Continued Discussion

What are the alternatives to violence when founding a new country or community? Are there any historical models to look to other than those that promote violence and conquest when starting a new community?

Scapegoating was practiced in the past to temporarily free societies from escalating expressions of violence. The Abrahamic faiths teach that scapegoating is unacceptable and wrong and that violence towards human beings can no longer be seen as sacred. Why do some adherents still promote violence as an acceptable way to follow God, and what can be done to correct such misrepresentations?

At various times in history, violence has sprung forth from the Abrahamic faiths. For Christianity, the crucifixion narrative has been grossly misrepresented as an injustice committed by the Jews of Jesus’ time for which all Jewish descendants were guilty. This misrepresentation was particularly prevalent in medieval Europe, where Jews were
abused, ostracized and even killed by Christians who regarded them contemptuously as Christ-killers. *Nostra Aetate*, the 1965 declaration of the Second Vatican Council, repudiated this contempt and asserted the commitment of the Church to a relationship with Jews based on dialogue, trust and mutual respect. What are other historical wounds caused by religions need to be honestly discussed and healed?

The scapegoat ritual described in Leviticus 16 required the high priest to annually send out a goat into the desert to die as an atonement for sin. Such a notion is illustrated in the Gospel of John (11:15) where the high priest Caiaphas is attributed with saying, “It is better that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed.” How do Christians properly understand this atonement theology today?

What aspects of our faiths or religious practices or supposedly religiously-founded societies that tolerate dishonesty, slander, violence, war? Are there scapegoating mechanisms in place in the legal system of the United States and other countries where the overwhelming number of those in prison are poor, minorities and psychologically impaired? Is there any resemblance in societies that advocate capital punishment as a legal form of vengeance to ancient bloodletting sacrifices? Are these areas where Jews, Christians and Muslims should focus their efforts for civil and religious reform?

*Reflections*

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the Lord's messenger called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger. “Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.” Genesis 22:9-12

There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven:

- A time for giving birth, a time for dying;
- A time for planting, a time for uprooting what was planted.
A time for killing, a time for healing;  
A time for tearing down, a time for building up. . . .  
A time for war, a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3)

All who take the sword shall perish by the sword. (Matthew 26:52)

God is a God of Peace and He is Peace Himself. As-Salam, peace, in Arabic is both the common greeting and one of the 99 Beautiful Names of God. (Sheikh Abdul Palazzi)

War has made too many victims. It must be outlawed. There is no such thing as a holy war in Christianity, nor in Islam, nor in Judaism. Only peace is holy, for peace is the Name of G-d. Only the beautiful word of shalom, peace, salam constitutes the greeting through which, when brothers meet, they call out the divine blessings. Shalom is the name of G-d. Salam is one of the 99 names of Allah. (Rabbi René-Samuel Sirat)

Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrong­fully waged—and verily God has indeed the power to give them victory. Those who have been driven out from their homelands against all right, for no other reason than their saying, “Our Lord is God.” If God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, then all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in all of which God’s name is abundantly extolled—all of them would have been destroyed. And God will support those who support Him. (Qur’an, 22:39-40)

Once a man has begun to use violence he will never stop using it, for it is so much easier and more practical than any other method. It simplifies relations with the other completely by denying that the other exists. And once you have repudiated the other, you cannot adopt a new attitude—cannot, for example, start rational dialogue with him. Violence has brought so many clear and visible results; how then go back to a way of acting that certainly looks ineffectual and seems to promise only very doubtful results? So you go on using violence, even if at first you had thought that violence would be only a temporary expedient, even if you have achieved thorough change in your own or the general political situation. (Jacques Ellul, Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective)
What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the home­less, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of total­itarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy? (Mahatma Gandhi)

FUNDAMENTALISM AND VIOLENCE

Fundamentalism is another pernicious attitude from which vio­lence can break out. Not all manifestations of fundamentalism are prone to violence; there are communities of fundamentalists, such as the Amish, who embrace strict pacifism. However, a majority of funda­mentalist movements are characterized by an ideological commitment to rigid religious tenets that promote a suspicion and antipathy toward those who do not hold the same things to be true. Martin Marty has studied fundamentalism and cautions how it can be a precursor to vio­lence. He details the cultural paranoia that generates a felt “need for reaction against threats to one’s personal and social identity, [the funda­mentalist] having ordered a movement that creates boundaries and dis­tances from ‘the other.’” Marty goes on:

Having chosen fundamentalistic approaches as defenses against modernity, what is next? Most movements see them­selves as chosen, as elect instruments to carry out divine pur­poses as they have been instructed to do in [selectively retrieved] sacred writings, or as recapturing ideal moments in the past. They use this chosenness or election against “the other.” They know where history is going.¹⁰

Marty acknowledges the subjective sincerity of many fundamen­talists; their concerns are truly felt and their zeal is genuine. Whether actual violence breaks out or not, fundamentalism sees itself as at odds with the world, “doing battle for the Lord.” Violence is easily justified in this context, where all things foreign are seen to be essentially hos­tile—not only to the fundamentalist, but to God as well. Notably, Marty insists that relativism is not the antidote for fundamentalism:

I like Gabriel Marcel’s concept of counter-intolerance, which a fundamentalist will at least understand since he or she might not have any empathy for light tolerance. Instead of saying tol-
erantly, "I don't believe much of anything and I expect you not to, and then we can live and let live," the counter-intolerant says and shows, "I believe something so deeply that I understand what your belief means to you, and I use the attachment to and comprehension of my belief structure as a warrant, a guarantee, of your own."

Such a commitment to one's own tradition facilitates approaching other traditions with a credible attitude of respect and allows for coherent moral objections to the violent excesses of the more malignant strains of fundamentalism. Consider Pope John Paul II's remarks on the subject of religiously motivated terrorism, given in Assisi on the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2002:

Terrorism springs from hatred, and it generates isolation, mistrust and closure. Violence is added to violence in a tragic sequence that exasperates successive generations, each one inheriting the hatred which divided those that went before. Terrorism is built on contempt for human life. For this reason, not only does it commit intolerable crimes, but because it resorts to terror as a political and military means it is itself a true crime against humanity...To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offence against human dignity, and ultimately an offence against God whose image that person bears. For this reason, what is usually referred to as fundamentalism is an attitude radically opposed to belief in God. Terrorism exploits not just people, it exploits God: it ends by making him an idol to be used for one's own purposes.

For Continued Discussion

What are the social structures, political-historical circumstances and/or economic realities that tend to spawn radical violent religious fundamentalism? Are there realistic ways to intervene in such situations to reduce the possibility of violence? If so, how? What roles do religions, governments, and international organizations have in such work?

In what ways are religious fundamentalism and violence linked? Who is able to authoritatively repudiate unlawful and immoral violent actions?
How can people of faith engage fundamentalists peacefully? When dialogue is impossible, what constitutes a proper response to the challenges of religious and cultural fundamentalism? What does one do when violence breaks out?

Read the first reflection passage below by Martin Marty. Fundamentalism presents tempting answers to the questions of all believers. Identify the strains of fundamentalism that exist in one's own tradition, and think about ways you might be susceptible to the claims it presents.

**Reflections**

Protestant fundamentalism has tended to be doctrinal above all, while Catholic fundamentalism has concentrated on magisterial churchly teaching, as in nineteenth century papal documents. Jewish fundamentalist movements concentrate on story (for example, its constituents like to tell stories of how God promised a specific land to Abraham and Moses and assured conquest through Joshua). And in Islam, the accent is on law and the literal application of laws in *shari'ah*, the body of law that appears as a kind of commentary on the Qur'an. (Martin Marty)

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:26)

Selective literalism is a favorite practice of extremists on the one hand and those with secular tendencies in all religions, on the other. For example, extremist Muslims might read, “Fight the unbelievers,” and stop. They omit the rest of the sentence, which says, “as they fight you.” Unfortunately, they frequently apply this method to all of the fighting verses in order to legitimate their violence. (Amira Shamma Abdin)

All ethnic and nationalist claims, whether made in the name of Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or self-determination, or ethnic pride, or patriotism, or whatever other ideology is made to serve as a veil for violence. (Robert Hamerton-Kelly)

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. (Qur’an, 2:256).