CHAPTER 1

Religion and Violence: Coming to Terms with Terms

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One spring morning in 2007, as Virginia Tech University students were setting off to class, fellow student Seung-Hui Cho began a shooting spree that, before turning his gun on himself, claimed 32 lives. Efforts to interpret the massacre, the shooter’s motives, and the trauma’s aftermath were freighted with resonances and attributions that most would call religious. The story is lucidly analyzed by Grace Kao, then a religious studies professor at Virginia Tech, whose poignant account affirms that we cannot gain meaningful understanding of this violence by ignoring the facets that are tinged – if not saturated – with “religion” (Kao, forthcoming).

Numerous pundits presumed Cho’s outbreak was motivated by Islam, in spite of his Christian upbringing and the Christian allusions that littered his manifestos. Similar assumptions were made in 2002 when the public learned that the Washington DC Beltway sniper was a member of the Nation of Islam. Born John Allen Williams, he changed his last name to Muhammad one month after the attacks of September 11, 2001. For many, Cho and Muhammad were perpetrators of “religious violence.” It mattered little that they were both mentally ill. Kao shows, however, that the religious symbols that haunted Cho’s “testimonials” were fragmented within a highly disturbed psyche. Cho’s irrationality undermined – rather than validated – the claim that his violence was religiously motivated or framed. Neither he nor Muhammad bore the markings of American abolitionist John Brown, or Osama bin Laden, or others who make perspicuous religious arguments to justify their perverse violence. The study of religion and violence enables us to scrutinize such expectations about religion’s causal relation to violence.

But that is hardly the whole story, for various forms of religion were intimately bound up in the efforts to find meaning in the Virginia Tech killings. A few religious groups prophesied that Cho’s actions were divine retribution for America’s sins. More representatively, the community and nation collectively expressed sorrow through the consolation of various religious traditions and prominent modes of public religion. At the convocation ceremony a few weeks after the shooting, religion was on full display:
from Qur’anic and biblical invocations to religious musings by public officials to an
impromptu recitation of the Lord’s Prayer led by members of the audience. This episode
reveals how multifaceted and contested the role of religion can be, particularly as asso-
ciated with incidents of violence.

A spate of recent scholarly works seek to probe various intersections of religion and
violence (Appleby 2000; Juergensmeyer 2003; Lincoln 2006; Selengut 2003). This is
hardly a novelty of life in the twenty-first century, though. The meanings we pack into
the categories “religion” and “violence” are as important to understanding human
history and the human condition as they are to understanding American society in a
post-9/11 world. Interestingly, at the same time, other scholars are questioning whether
such categories offer useful insight at all. Thus, one conceptual prerequisite for a
Companion to Religion and Violence entails a defense of the terms on which it relies. As
an overture to the chapters that follow – by way of coming to terms with the key terms
of debate – I take up the conceptual, ethical, and practical stakes of thinking carefully
about religion and violence. Specifically, I argue that critically assessing the meaning
of violence – a much neglected concern in recent religion scholarship – is at least as
significant as defining religion.

The Category Formerly Known as Religion?

This volume emerges at a time when use of the “R-word” is more contested than ever.
Religion turns out to be a rather peculiar term, fraught with paradox. It is at once
pregnant with meaning yet, for some scholars, increasingly vague and meaningless.
Elements in the media suggest that religion is everywhere around us, while scholars of
religion deny that religion is anything but a social construction. For a phenomenon
with such an unsubstantiated basis, religion remains a powerful concept. As we shall
see, much ambiguity surrounding “religion” is tied to root concerns about power and
violence.

Debates over the definition of religion go back to early antiquity. Cicero linked reli-
gion to reading (legere). The term relegere entailed either rereading or reading carefully
or treating thoughtfully “all things pertaining to the gods.” Lactantius and other
Christians who disputed this etymology instead invoked religare, meaning to bind
together (i.e., as a ligament binds or connects). Augustine, too, adopted this account,
having flirted with the idea that religion involved “recovering” (religere). But in all these
cases, the common “re-” prefix underscores the divine reference point, whether recover-
ing God, binding oneself back to God, rebinding oneself to others through deities, or
reading again matters involving the divine. Christian theologians and scholars of reli-
gion both have perceived a deep split between Christian and non-Christian notions of
religion. Augustine, for example, contrasted the “true religion” of Christianity with the
“civil theology” of Rome. But in other cases, for example when Calvin invokes Cicero
to describe the sensus divinatus in human beings, one can appreciate that religion is
found in various forms among diverse peoples and cultures.

For traditionalist scholars of religion, some variation of the following account often
serves as an adequate working definition in the trade: Religion entails the practices,
rituals, beliefs, discourses, myths, symbols, creeds, experiences, traditions, and institutions by which individuals and communities conceive, revere, assign meaning to, and order their lives around some account of ultimate reality generally understood in relation to God, gods, or a transcendent dimension deemed sacred or holy. More succinctly, Scott Appleby defines religion as “the human response to a reality perceived as sacred” (2000: 8). Bruce Lincoln introduces “maximalist” and “minimalist” qualifiers that distinguish, respectively, between forms of religion that are more explicit and those that are implicit or veiled by secular premises. What maximalist religion and minimalist religion share in common — what makes both religious — are the divine reference points to which various communities’ discourses, practices, identities and institutions are oriented (Lincoln 2006: 5–8).

One preliminary concern with the category of religion involves what we might call the membership problem. Which traditions, discourses, and belief systems belong to this club called religion? Some scholars debate whether the terms of membership are sufficiently broad to include Confucianism and certain forms of Buddhism. Many worry that religion has been defined too exclusively so as to privilege Christianity, monotheistic traditions, or belief-based systems (King 1999). But we also can err by liberalizing the admittance requirements too much. For, as William Cavanaugh puzzles in chapter 2, what insight is gained when virtually anything — Marxism, nationalism, or one’s undying love and loyalty for the Chicago Cubs — can be a religion? Though one may bind oneself to others in each of these examples, the etymological discussion above suggests that religion is about more than binding to any old thing.

Some may conclude that there simply is no such thing as religion. Perhaps, then, we should no longer talk about religion as such, instead naming only specific traditions or groups — “things” belonging to the category formerly called religion. Of course, this approach has its own problems. How does one define Christianity in a way that is accurate and meaningful? Is it tenable to lump together practices, beliefs, discourses, experiences, and institutions as diverse as those of the early apostles, Egyptian Copts, medieval Crusaders, Calvinist Huguenots, contemporary Methodists and Mormons, old order Amish, modern-day fundamentalists, Korean Baptists, Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, African-American Pentecostals, and countless other denominations? Indeed, in terms of certain practices and discourses, some of these groups may have more in common with members of other faith traditions than they do with one another. We might not know that, though, unless there was a broader category that invited such a comparison. Categories serve vital purposes. We think through them and the meanings we assign to them. Creatively applied, categories help us to organize human thought and experience. Misapplied, they engender conceptual mis-organization and prejudice.

There is an egalitarian way out of the category conundrum: One who claims a category or title gets to use it. Similarly, those who seek refuge outside this umbrella should be heard (e.g., “We practitioners of ‘X’ do not consider ourselves adherents of religion”). The crucial stipulation is that one who claims, assigns, or denies a category (e.g., religious, Christian,) must offer reasons, which, in turn, will be assayed by scholars, citizens, and other coreligionists. Religious categories about the sacred or transcendent can be useful, but they are neither sacred nor profane themselves and should not be treated as such. A category becomes defunct when it is no longer useful, and one sure
way to hasten its demise is to insist upon fixed borders instead of more flexible contours that admit to contestation and negotiation.

So, if there is a spirited debate about whether Confucianism is a religion, then so be it. Does this mean that belief in anything can qualify as a religion? And if not a member of the religion club, then to what club do other beliefs belong? For what it is worth, no matter the suprarational hope sustaining the faith and allegiance of Cubs fans, I would not call it religious. Nor do I deem Marxism a religion. Given its founder’s view that religion is the “opiate of the masses,” that seems a stretch (though many Christians have been influenced by Marx). Political theorists usually classify Marxism as a political ideology. Here it is important to recall that comparisons across categories also can be useful, particularly when religious and political beliefs and affinities enjoy important similarities, including their understandings of power or support for or opposition to violence. Certainly, what is often called civil religion could straddle different religious and political categories. Wars waged for explicitly political (and putatively secular) reasons, often are filled with religious symbols and meanings, as recent scholars have shown (Ebel 2010; Stout 2006). Preserving a broad and fluid notion of religion will help the reader connect and reflect upon the diverse essays of this volume.

There is, though, another more potent objection that some critics of “religion” – religious studies scholars especially – have lodged. As Jonathan Z. Smith avers, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization” (1982: xi). For some scholars, the discovery or “invention” of religion is tied intimately to the history of European expansion and colonialism and to the religious studies discipline that emerged in tandem (Asad 1993; Cavanaugh 2009; Masuzawa 2005). Failure to recognize how religion is socially constructed allows essentialists to portray religion as universal across human communities in time and space and to impose such a framework upon “Others.” Such essentialism reinforces expectations of whatever it is people believe religion’s “true nature” to be: in secular societies, “good religion” is private, nonviolent, and subject to reason; “bad religion” is public, violent, and irrational.

In the post–September 11 world, constructions of religion can be easy to form, dangerous to hold, and difficult to break down. Consider the dramatic cover on the November 3, 2007 issue of The Economist, which included a special report devoted to “the new wars of religion.” A hand descends from grey clouds, index finger extended, suggesting a menacing – presumably monotheistic – deity delivering orders to his (not her) followers below. The image represents religion’s explosive potential, for clasped within the heavenly grip is a hand grenade, pin still in place. The image of the divine hand and grenade emblematically depicts religion as a tangible object or “thing” with a highly discernible violent essence. The viewer gets the sense that this essence has changed little over time, as portrayed by the modern grenade clutched by a hand seemingly lifted right from Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam (ca. 1511). This image illustrates the kind of essence against which the category critics of religion warn, while simultaneously reinforcing the views of new atheists and ardent secularists who contend that religion is inherently violent (Harris 2000; Hitchens 2007).

Even scholars who merely claim that religion’s ties to violence must be understood can reinforce constructions of religious violence found in popular culture no matter
how sophisticated their academic treatments. There are, to be sure, simultaneous countervailing claims. The idea that “true” religion is peaceful and nonviolent has been affirmed by many apologists, including George W. Bush in the days after September 11, 2001, and Barack Obama in his Nobel Peace Prize address. (One struggles to find comparable magazine covers that reinforce this essentialist view of religion.) More importantly, any single representation risks displacing the many other complex, multivalent pieces made up of innumerable actors, movements, texts, discourses, and institutions – and which, together, form no overarching montage or composite of “authentic religion.”

Scholars who are critics of the category of religion often worry that conceiving religion in essentialist terms ignores not only that religion is just a social construction but also risks overlooking the ill purposes to which such categories and constructions are put. Specifically, when religion’s complicity with violence becomes essentialized, “the secular” is assumed to be an agent of peace. Specifically, the nation-state’s grounding in secular reason is used to justify and legitimate its violence against the illegitimate violence of irrational religion. But even as the artifices of religion and secular are deconstructed, new categories emerge and, with them, new essentialisms. Taming our instincts to categorize and essentialize turns out to be no easy task – even for strong critics of categories. Ironically, it is the effort to deconstruct categories such as religion and religious violence that eventually manifests the limitations of such deconstructive methodologies.

Religious and Secular Violence

Bruce Lincoln’s comparative study of religion examines not simply different religious traditions and their relations to violence but the different forms those religions can take. Discussing commonalities in the videos of Osama bin Laden and national addresses of George W. Bush following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Lincoln distinguishes between maximalist accounts that make use of explicitly religious tropes and discourses (such as those bin Laden deploys) and minimalist accounts that appeal to secular assumptions about religion, the state, and violence. For Lincoln, what is distinctive about Bush’s minimalism is the way in which his words, spoken as a secular political official, belied his own hidden but religiously maximalist commitments. According to Lincoln, President Bush “double-coded” his rhetoric with religious references that would fall on the deaf ears of those with secular orientations but would ring through sonorously to certain Christian audiences. “The conversion of secular political speech into religious discourse invests otherwise merely human events with transcendent significance,” Lincoln affirms. “By the end, America’s adversaries have been redefined as enemies of God, and current events have been constituted as confirmation of Scripture” (2006: 32). The upshot of Lincoln’s analysis is made clear in his pluralized choice of title, Holy Terrors.

One can debate Lincoln’s exegesis of bin Laden’s and Bush’s words and whether they amount to comparable defenses of terror. But even if one departs from his conclusions (as I do), his methodology, nonetheless, proffers a form of critical inquiry about religion
that extends to the state’s use of coercive force and secular efforts to defend it. What is intriguing about Lincoln’s approach is the way religion serves as both a common analytic denominator as well as a comprehensive category. Lincoln’s minimalist-maximalist distinction preserves a focus on distinctive features of critical religious inquiry, reminding readers of the transcendent backdrops on which various actors – and the communities they seek to reach and bind together – rely.

Critics who are skeptical about “religious violence,” however, train their sights more directly onto the secular. They question the excessive attention applied to religious violence at the expense of secular violence, which leads to the false essentialization of religion as violence-prone and the secular as peaceful. Simple recollection of the horrors committed under Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot’s reigns would confirm this point. Overcorrecting, though, invites new forms of essentialism that undercut conceptual coherence about what we label “violence” and that overlook important empirical realities. Consider, for example, Janet Jakobsen’s claim, “The secular is not less violent than the religious; in fact, it is more so” (2004: 53). Jakobsen does not arrive at this conclusion hastily, noting that religious actors readily appeal to their traditions to justify violence. She also observes how religion and the secular bleed together: “religion and secularism are intertwined, and they are intertwined specifically at the point of legitimating violence. The violence of the modern state, including that of the U.S. government in particular, is religious as well as secular” (2004: 65). It is difficult to disentangle the blurred interpenetrations of religion and secularism, sufficiently at least to arrive at the conclusion that the secular is more violent than religion. Jakobsen, nonetheless, observes: “there is plenty of evidence to show that the [secular] modern state is the origin of, rather than the solution to, most of the contemporary world’s violence” (2004: 63). As evidence, she compares the tally of destruction and loss of life between religiously inspired terrorist acts and secular governments’ efforts to counter terrorists. She bypasses discussions of motive, intentionality, and moral limits, noting simply that because the violence purveyed by the secular state ostensibly is put to the cause of peace, “‘our’ [US] violence literally becomes less violent” (2004: 61). Jakobsen thus shifts the preponderant negative valence from religion to the secular. The categories retain currency; their responsibility for violence simply needs reconfiguring. By homing in on government’s unique capacity for destruction, she essentializes another category – the secular state – even as she criticizes secular governments that essentialize religion’s violent propensities.³

Debates about religion’s definition, propensity for violence, and relationship to the secular converge and come to a head in William Cavanaugh’s revealing work The Myth of Religious Violence (and his essay in this Companion). Cavanaugh goes to great length to deconstruct the reigning categories. “The point is not simply that secular violence should be given equal attention to religious violence. The point is that the very distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying” (2009: 8–9). Why? Because the distinction between religion and secular is artificial and was “established through violence, not by argument” (2009: 7).

Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority. ... [T]he attempt to say that
there is a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena is itself part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West ... The idea that religion has a tendency to cause violence – and is therefore to be removed from public power – is one type of this essentialist construction of religion. (2009: 59)

Cavanaugh chronicles the warped origins of these binary secular/religious configurations. By charting the history of the secular modern nation-state, colonialism, and the parallel development of the academic study of religion, one can observe the dangers when those with great power essentialize religion and create a secular alternative that serves their purposes and legitimates their interests. The state’s self-proclaimed monopoly on force has permitted extensive violence against religious actors and “Others” who reject binary distinctions between the secular and the religious, public and private, reason and faith. Cavanaugh cites as a contemporary example the US-led war on terror against the Muslim Other.

Once the myth of religious violence has been denuded, however, the categories no longer serve their purpose to cloak the secular state’s violence. The categories become defunct and can be dispatched. Cavanaugh seeks to level the playing field between religious and secular violence, “the secular” having long held a certain narrative advantage by which the state’s actions are defended. Yet deconstructing the myth of religious violence also leads to overcorrection. Placing the secular nation-state in the analytical crosshairs suggests that its violence, if not comparably worse as Jakobsen maintains, is at least more deceitfully disguised than religious violence. The problem, though, is that Cavanaugh intentionally avoids making the normative argument that might actually level the playing field for comparing and morally evaluating violence (2009: 14).

We see in all three of these accounts efforts to “interrogate,” nuance, or break down socially constructed categories and assumptions about religion’s relation to violence without any comparable effort to unpack “violence.” Lincoln’s analysis preserves religious and secular markers by accounting for maximalist and minimalist forms of religion, tracing most violence back to the unresolved tension of the nation-state: between the religiously maximalist commitments of a nation or people and the minimalist or secularizing character of the modern state. Jakobsen, while noting the fuzzy borders of religion and the secular, still admits the categories, pointing up the comparatively greater evils of secularism. Cavanaugh, finally, dispels the binary categories altogether. In their own way, all these scholars point to the nation-state as the locus of modern violence. But one wonders if, in these treatments, “the state” is any less essentialized or more useful a category than religion.

For all the worries over the confusion that intellectual categories rend, what is needed is a more nuanced, even-handed treatment of the state and its relationship to the still ill-defined category of violence. For we are too easily left with the impression that the secular state is the cause of violence by virtue of possessing instruments of force. This move too closely approximates some of these very critics’ original complaints about overstating the dangers of religious violence. We might level the ground of this debate by noting that violence is a feature of the human condition, found in all peoples.
All manners and forms of human communities have been parties to violence, and they have invoked economic, religious, tribal, ethnic, and political rationales (or some combination thereof) to justify their actions. Violence and war neither began nor ended with the secular nation-state. As such, violence is not essentially religious, secular, or even political: it is human.

This claim about “human nature,” I concede, risks introducing new categories and essentialisms. This suggests that the scholarly effort to tear down categories is a limited undertaking. For one cannot get very far dismantling categories such as religion without unwittingly building up others. Moreover, even when we seek to overcome the categories themselves, their essential meanings still slip through. Cavanaugh’s foremost concern, for example, is to raze any collective cause – religious or secular – that leads to violent loss of life: “In the West, revulsion toward killing and dying in the name of one’s religion is one of the principal means by which we become convinced that killing and dying in the name of the nation-state is laudable and proper” (2009: 4). But one wonders if this is an argument that no form of collective identity or belief should ever be the basis for which people should be willing to risk their lives or kill others. Does no such cause exist (particularly if linked in some way to the state)? Should we presume here Cavanaugh’s critique entails a commitment to pacifism?

Cavanaugh deliberately avoids these ethical questions, but frequent and indeterminate use of the often loaded term violence inevitably returns them to the fore. Cavanaugh persuades me that we probably can get along reasonably well without the category of “religious violence”; at the very least, the term often obscures as much as it reveals. But, problems of “religion” and “violence” still remain. In particular, what is at stake when we label something violence? Can violence ever be justified in any form, particularly through appeals to texts, beliefs, or institutions widely considered “religious”? Or, is all violence perforce immoral? In answering these questions, it seems prudent to work with the categories we have, even if we must vigilantly scrutinize and adapt them to fit the realities facing us. Having deconstructed religion, the secular, and the state, we are left it seems only with violence – a term that engenders as much confusion as it elicits opprobrium. More careful reflection and precise distinctions are clearly in order.

What Is Violence?

A few minutes flipping through television channels on most evenings provides a good sense of how society conceives violence. As viewers grow inured to increasingly mundane forms of violence, the use of up-close, slow motion, or intentionally gruesome scenes (though to some a nouveau form of art à la Quentin Tarantino) has sought to startle viewers out of their complacency. Whether watching traditional “low grade” violence or increasingly “high grade” gratuitousness, viewers might scarcely notice when the remote flips between fictitious accounts and real world events. Indeed, real world stories increasingly shape the storylines of television and film drama. No matter the level of revulsion that fictionalized or nonfictionalized accounts inspire, both involve the passive absorption and processing of violence. Such passivity provides a poor model
for critical thinking and dampens our deliberation about the concepts, meanings, and uses of violence, particularly as relating to matters deemed religious.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed sharp debates among moral and political philosophers over the meanings of violence (Arendt 1970; Cotta 1978; Shaffer 1971; Stanage 1974). Scholarly engagement seems to have ebbed somewhat in the 1980s before cresting again in the 1990s (Brady and Garver 1991; Curtin and Litke 1999; Keane 1996) and continuing into the first decade of the twentieth century (Castelli and Jakobsen 2004; Tilly 2003; Žižek 2008). Interestingly, the questions raised in the 1960s and 1970s still bear upon contemporary studies of violence. To be sure, the social and political context then was relevant, given wars in Vietnam and Algeria as well as other anticolonial struggles. (Such studies also coincided with the reemergence of just war thinking by prominent figures such as Paul Ramsey, Michael Walzer, James Turner Johnson, and others.) More recent scholarship often unfolds against the backdrop of major terrorist attacks and the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Political contexts inevitably shape scholarly reflection. No matter the conflict or the context, though, we do well to scrutinize how passive or uncritical understandings of violence carry over from wider culture into academic inquiry. For as Hannah Arendt perceptively lamented in her 1970 treatise On Violence:

> It is, I think, a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as “power,” “strength,” “force,” “authority,” and, finally, “violence” – all of which refer to distinct phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did ... To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain degree of deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it has also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to. (1970: 43)

Most worrisome of all, for Arendt, was the collapsing of power with violence, a move popularized in deconstructionist and postcolonial thought. For Arendt, though, the relationship between them could not be starker: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance ... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it” (1970: 56). What Arendt means by this is hardly intuitive but becomes clearer later. For now, it is enough to say that power is legitimate in a way that violence never is.

We might provisionally define violence as physical force, often vehement or excessive, used to inflict injury or damage. Scholars seeking to gain purchase on the term frequently turn to the Latin etymology of violentia. Three distinct but associated meanings stem from the Latin cognates. At a basic descriptive level, violence usually entails energy or force (vis) that causes destruction. In this way, we speak of violent storms or automobile crashes. For similar reasons, political acts involving physical force – whether labeled war, coercion, terrorism, revolt, revolution, or insurgency – have violent dimensions. For those caught up in wars or hurricanes, there is no disputing the damage suffered. Vis then captures the empirical or effectual meaning of violence, particularly the subject’s experience of it. This is not to say that the effects of violence are only physical,
since resulting emotional and psychological trauma can be debilitating. But on the empirical view, the victim or recipient of force is the primary reference point.

Political violence unfortunately applies to all too many spheres of human life. For those seeking to mitigate or respond to destruction, the empirical definition can seem sufficient. The World Health Organization (WHO), for example, defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or real, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (quoted in Braga et al. 2008). Such an account expands violence to any human-related actions or social structures and the harm they cause. One need not be a political philosopher to recognize the broad net cast by this empirical conception. As even some clinicians note,

The depth and breadth of the WHO definition are adequate to that organization’s purposes, which require an ecological model of violence centered on multiple levels. However, when the breadth of what is denoted in a term expands, its descriptive power is retracted. A comprehensive definition [such as WHO’s] expands the use of the term “violence” to situations that result from economic poverty, social alienation, or political repression. (Braga et al. 2008)

Or for that matter any situation involving political power. This is not to dispute the reality of structural or institutional inequalities, but to assume that they necessarily amount to structural violence seems a more contestable claim. Interestingly, in spite of WHO’s comprehensive definition, the philosophical literature often considers this a “minimalist” conception of violence. That is, violence is measured primarily by facts not values. Prioritizing physical and empirical effects marginalizes other morally relevant dimensions of violence (e.g., human agency and motivation).

Considerably less attention is paid to normative or evaluative connotations, denoted by the term violare, the basis of the word violation. Violence not only causes harm of various sorts; it causes injury. The distinction is vital. The Latin word injuria stems from the root jur or jus, which is the basis of ethical terms such as right and justice. Simply put, an injury is an injustice – a violation of that to which one has an ethically defensible claim. While many physical acts of force can cause harm, they do not all cause injury in this normative sense of the term. A doctor may cause great pain or even harm if severing a gangrenous limb, but she does not injure the patient in this effort to save his life. Similarly, a hostage-taker may be apprehended, shot, or even killed while performing his misdeeds, but he certainly has not been violated or denied what is due to him. The distinction between force and violence is sharpened when intentionality and agency are assigned – as when acts (nouns) are transformed into verbs. To force or use force can be justifiable, legitimate, even morally apposite, in a way that to violate or do violence against another can never be (Wade 1975). On this reading, violence is inherently immoral and cannot be justified in ways that physical force can be.

Some philosophers refer to this normative approach as a “comprehensive” (i.e., broad) account in the sense that any violation of any right could be called an act of
violence. However, just as for critics of the minimalist definition, the breadth and imprecision of the comprehensive account provides reason for many to discount this view (Bufacchi 2005). But if we couple together the empirical and normative meanings, we reach a more meaningful and definitionally precise account that is preferable to the two aforementioned alternatives. That is, when we speak of violence, fact and value converge, implicitly if not explicitly (as the phrase “doing violence” suggests). This maximally meaningful account opens up the possibility of violence against nonhumans (e.g., property) in ways that, some claim, minimalist accounts tend to deny (Wells 1970), a point that becomes critical when assessing conflicts surrounding sacred sites. More importantly, integrating the normative dimension allows one to consider cases in which violation is present but the empirical dimension is concealed, for example, when exploitation or repression that violates people’s rights does not involve actual physical force but simply the threat of it. Here, in the service of an immoral cause, the distinction between the use of force and threat of force becomes negligible, a matter of degree. Thus violence can exist without force, just as force, we will see, can exist without violence.

A final meaning of violence stems from the cognate *violentus*, meaning vehemence or impetuosity. Scholars of domestic violence understand particularly well the violent emotions that often underwrite abuse against family members (Maguire and Shaikh 2007). This dispositional dimension reinforces the importance of human agency in that it places violence outside the domain of reason. Violence cannot be rationally defended; those who offer arguments for their actions do not conceive them as violent. Force, however, is part of the logic of reason and human action, as the term *ultima ratio* (in its proper sense) suggests. Force can be a legitimate means by which to influence or enforce the choices people make (Wade 1975: 182). Those who use force in irascible or excessive ways, though, stray into the domain of violence.

For our purposes here, it is important to note that religious discourses are generally rational discourses in spite of certain secularist presumptions that traditionally divide reason and faith. Seung-Hui Cho’s religiously infused “manifesto” was not a rational argument that justified his actions but, rather, the product of a highly unstable mind. Here it differs from other religiously framed actions and defenses of so-called violence. As Bruce Lincoln makes clear in his analysis of Osama bin Laden’s and George Bush’s rhetoric, these are not the impetuous, incoherent ramblings of irrational men, even though they both make appeals to a transcendent reality known in part by faith. Whether these communications underwrite violence or force (such as the September 11 attacks or the war on terror) and whether such instances are comparable must be assessed by appealing to normative meanings of the term. Certainly, those who argue that bin Laden transgresses moral boundaries within Islamic discourse accuse him of violence (Kelsay 2007).

While the state has been defined as possessing the “monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force” (Weber 1946: 78), violence itself is not defined with respect to the state. This distinction preserves the possibility that the state or other actors, by virtue of their institutional status, cannot be excused for its violence. Certainly states and governments have committed violence and must be subject to the same (if not greater) moral standards as others. Simply put, the state’s immoral or unjust use of force is
violence. That said, we return to the danger of defining violence with respect to the state. For as Sergio Cotta clarifies, the view that “every institutional form of power constitutes violence and also implies some use of it” presupposes a narrow range of political perspectives such as anarchism or radical forms of libertarianism and individualism (1978: 54).

The intent in bringing clarity to the term violence is to unsettle assumptions that obstruct debate about what counts as violence – not to settle such debate itself. Readers of this volume will do well to consider what various authors mean when they use the term. What premises, normative or otherwise, are stated or left unsaid in any given account? How is religion defined or configured in its relationship to violence? It can be helpful here to consider different perspectival approaches to the problem. From the recipient’s perspective, the empirical and consequential effects of violence will always be primary. From the inflictor’s perspective, the first response usually is to provide justification – to say that his or her force was not violence. Scholars naming and analyzing violence do well to consider the various perspectives, rights, and duties of different sides when rendering judgment. This will not resolve all dilemmas, of course. One who uses force to come to the aid of another may, in spite of her best efforts, unintentionally harm innocents. Is this an example of violence? Probably not, though much depends on the circumstances of the case. But certainly the example points to the complex and often tragic nature of force. Force can be gruesome and dreadful without always being violent. We need not view all of life’s horrors, disasters, traumas, and catastrophes through the prism of violence in order to convey the misery, destruction, and mournful loss of life they bring.

Religion, Violence, and Power

Scholars of religious violence and de-mythologizers alike often understate the complex meanings and ethical stakes of defining violence, thus obscuring the multidimensional ways that religion and violence can be related. Moving forward from here requires some attention to a final under-analyzed category that often unites religious and political domains: power. For many scholars today, however, power offers little more than a lens for critique: those who have power are critiqued. Within this framing, power amounts to little more than potentia, sheer force of might. A more conceptually robust account of power also takes stock of potestas, the legitimacy that empowers an institution, group, or movement to act in concert on behalf of others. This is the normative meaning of power that Arendt conceives in inverse correlation to the political violence that strives to substitute for it (1970: 44). Power is not a bad word for Arendt as it often is today. For her, power presupposes legitimacy, violence illegitimacy. Rejecting Mao Zedong’s view that power grows out of the barrel of a gun, Arendt argues that when power is weak and contested – when potestas diminishes, leaving only sheer potentia – violence is the result. Terror, or more precisely, state terror is the term she applies to “the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control” (1970: 55).
Terror’s opposite, of course, is anarchy, which entails violent disorder. These two extremes of violence, epitomized by modern-day North Korea and Somalia, remind us that consolidating *potentia* and *potestas* remains the central task of politics.

A vivid example from Arendt’s day stands out for this discussion. “The head-on clash between Russian tanks and the entirely nonviolent resistance of Czechoslovak people is a textbook case of a confrontation between violence and power in their pure states” (Arendt 1970: 52–3). Given the antireligious character of the totalitarian movements she studied, the role of religion understandably is elusive; she, nonetheless, offers a useful framework for thinking about contemporary religious movements and political struggles. For, similarly, the government of Myanmar’s 2007 crackdown on Burmese monks and other demonstrators illustrates how violence compensates for a government’s lack of power. The case of Burma’s nonviolent resistance movement makes clear that the secondary relationship between religion and violence pivots around a more primordial struggle for *potestas*.

Various religious movements, actors, and institutions seek to articulate the legitimacy of power through their appeals to religious traditions, beliefs, and identities. This is as true for maximally religious governments such as the Islamic Republic of Iran as for minimally religious entities such as the United States government, both of which appeal to quite different religious ideals to underwrite their legitimacy. From the other direction, too, movements that call state power into question often draw from religio-ethico ideas to challenge what they perceive as the state’s illegitimacy and violence. Again, this is as true for al-Qaeda’s campaign against corrupt secular governments as for the US civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King – in spite of the many differences. Of course those who, under the banner of “religion,” march or fight or protest against the state should enjoy no prima facie legitimacy by dint of their religious allegiance. Nor should those who govern under a religious mantle. Whether religious, secular, or some combination thereof, most political institutions and movements – as purveyors of power and seekers of legitimacy – appeal to ethical principles that can be discerned both from within religious traditions and independently of them. Because such consensus can be difficult to achieve, though, religious discourses, practices, identities, and institutions often play a prominent role in this struggle between power and violence.

Let me close by pointing to some specific ways that the struggle between power and violence has been resolved successfully. Martin Luther King’s brilliance in leading the struggle for civil rights accrued not simply from his embrace of nonviolence and civil disobedience but from his keen understanding of political power, much as Arendt understood it. Foremost, he understood that the power of this movement stemmed from its moral values, which enjoyed a deep religious backing; similarly, he knew, resorting to violence would undercut this moral appeal (even if others believed violence was justifiable or necessary). King was as explicit about the willingness to suffer the adversary’s violence as he was about the refusal to respond in kind. In this way, he proposed a moral congruity between the ends sought and the means employed. Given the moral value of the end pursued, the strategy of resorting to civil disobedience drew from wellsprings of power and legitimacy that states strive to tap to legitimate their use of
force. Yet the force (*potentia*) of King’s movement was no less for its nonlethal or even its illegal nature. Indeed, the power (*potestas*) of the US civil rights movement was mobilized through the force of ethical argument. Through moral power, the movement galvanized physical power.

When in 1957 the governor of Arkansas called out the state’s National Guard to prevent black students from attending class in Little Rock, following the Supreme Court ruling barring segregated classes, the governor’s use of state coercion amounted to violence. In the effort to uphold an unjust law, the state of Arkansas threatened use of force (*vis*) as angry mobs, arrayed behind the National Guard, threatened to lynch black students and their supporters. The tense scene recalls how highly contested was the state’s power among citizens of Arkansas and the nation. In this case, Arkansas’s threat of violence ultimately signaled an erosion of power. When, however, President Eisenhower countered by deploying the army and federalizing the Arkansas National Guard, the federal government showed its willingness to use lethal force to restore power. Surely, some at the time considered it violence. However, like King’s use of nonviolence, the army’s threat of coercive force accrued its legitimacy from the force of reason and moral argument, this time backed by law. Both examples show how moral congruity between just means and just ends illumines the distinction between violence and force.

One cannot expect to resolve all complex global conflicts by exporting these examples from US history. Nonetheless, the lessons they yield about violence and power, religion and politics, and especially means and ends, pertain to other contexts. Ethicists and practitioners concerned about war and peace frequently point up the importance of congruity between war’s means and ends. In just war thought, such concerns revolve around parity between the *jus in bello* or laws of war and the *jus ad bellum*, including the just causes and ends pursued (Johnson 1981). Recent developments in counterinsurgency strategies focus new attention on the importance of protecting and providing for civilian populations. Within Islamic ethical thought, there has been invigorating inquiry into the moral conduct of war set out by the tradition of jihad (Kelsay 2007). In all of these circumstances, the links among religion and power and violence and force are undeniable. We cannot begin to gain purchase on the problems such linkages raise, or identify potential solutions, without gaining clarity about the meanings and stakes of the terms we use.

Notes

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1. It is not my task here to provide a comprehensive history of the meaning of religion or the field that has unfolded around this pursuit. Other scholars have spent their careers theorizing religion, from Émile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Robert Bellah to Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, and Tomoko Masuzawa.

2. That some scholars of religion are leading this charge is no small irony. At a time when the value of the humanities is being tested, religion scholars may be paving the way toward
the dissolution of their own discipline. For if there is no such thing as religion, of what need are the corresponding academic fields and departments?

3 Jakobsen’s claim is not without some backing. Max Weber, after all, famously defined the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory ... The state is considered the sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence” (Weber 1946: 78). This conflation of force with violence stands to be nuanced.

References


