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Lloyd Steffen. *Holy War, Just War: Exploring the Moral Meaning of Religious Violence.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. xxviii + 300 pp. $35.77 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-5848-9.

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Religious Ultimacy and Moral Vision: The Challenge of Violence

Violence committed in the name of religion is a particularly troubling feature of our world. Certainly the phenomenon is not new; think of the Crusades. The forms it takes today seem particularly acute and threatening, however. Lloyd Steffen recalls these examples in the preface to his book on religious violence: the People's Temple suicides; the Branch Davidian events in Waco, Texas; the Aum Shinrikyo gassings in Tokyo; and of course the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

Many responses to the connection of violence with religion are possible. On one hand, perhaps those doing the violence have misinterpreted religion–or their own religious tradition–so that the violence is not a product of "true" religion. Religion is reflective of a good God, and so its counsels rightly understood are necessarily good. At the other extreme, some argue that the destructive potential of religion is strong reason for eradicating it. I think here of Christopher Hitchens's writings, notably *God Is Not Great* (2007).

Lloyd Steffen maintains that religion is *powerful* and it is *dangerous*. It is powerful in that it motivates action: "in human culture religion is something people do" (p. 7). It is dangerous because of its potential for creating violence. It is a virtue of Steffen's book that he does not beg the question of religion's necessary goodness. "Goodness" is a moral category, and religion can be good or bad. It is also a virtue that the discovery of destructive potential within religion does not lead him to reject it wholesale. Instead, he stakes out the moderate middle ground.

Steffen's strategy is to examine the ways people choose to be religious from the moral point of view. He claims, with ample justification, that religious practice can be life-affirming, but it can also be life-destroying or, as he says, "demonic" (chapter 3 is entitled "Being Religious: the Demonic Option"). The key differentiating factor is whether what a religion takes to be "ultimate" is also considered "absolute." "Violence," he says, "emerges from religion only when Ultimacy is transformed and becomes equated with the idea of the Absolute" (p. 23). The notions of "ultimacy" and "absolutism" are so central to Steffen's discussion that I wish he had defined them more precisely than he does. An approximation for "ultimacy" is "that than which no greater can be conceived," following Anselm's famous ontological argument (p. 15). A clearer definition is "a source of meaning that has no superior and cannot be transcended" (p. 15). Ultimacy does not have to be conceived in absolutist terms; that is, as a concept that "suffers no restrictions, admits no limitations, and allows no exceptions" (p. 25). In the abstract, however, it is unclear to me how "ultimacy" escapes becoming absolutized.

Steffen's analysis of three ways religious people respond to violence, in the second part of the book, does help to clarify what he is criticizing and what he is endorsing. In many ways the discussion of pacifism, holy war, and just war is the richest and most valuable part of the book. Each of these can be found in life-affirming religious forms, and in demonic forms. Although it is initially surprising to find pacifism portrayed in its demonic form, as Steffen does here, he is surely correct that there are radical forms of pacifism that disengage from human society and allow evil to be perpetrated without opposition. His Tolstoy-Gandhi contrast, representing life-denying and life-affirming commitments to nonviolence, is well made. The form of radical pacifism Tolstoy eventually embraced is an absolute (exceptionless) rejection of force of any kind, and ultimately of engagement with human institutions in defense of the good of life. Thus he leaves the field to the forces of evil. Gandhi, on the other hand, advocated nonviolent resistance to evil. Steffens says, of Gandhi's key principle of *satyagraha*, "As a non-absolutist form of nonviolent but morally engaged pacifism, *satyagraha* serves to expand the goods of life, promote the goods of life, and enact a vision of goodness" (p. 81).

The examination of holy war focuses primarily on Islam, although the chapter begins with an examination of ancient Israel. "Holy war" is defined generically as "any use of force justified by appeal to divine authority" (p. 182). The moral presumption is against holy wars, precisely because appeal to God's will seems to transcend moral critique. With regard to Islam in particular, Steffen concludes: "Whether Islam could advance the possibility of a holy war that is non-demonic and life-affirming must be subjected to moral critique independent of any appeal for justification to heaven … but Islam itself does not sanction such a move" (p. 229).

For American readers who lack wide acquaintance with Islamic traditions, the detail and nuance of this section are especially valuable. Steffen shows that resources exist within Muslim traditions to critique claims that particular wars are willed by God. He also distinguishes "jihad" from "holy war," and shows how "jihad" can be interpreted in a life-affirming way. Careful reading will provide ammunition against current stereotypes of Islam.

Steffen's discussion of just war covers ground that is more familiar to Western philosophers. I am in essential agreement with his construal of the theory, including his insistence that a moral presumption against the use of force "underwrites" the theory (p. 242). In its structure, a strong basic assumption with the possibility of justified exceptions (when the use of force is warranted), just war theory exemplifies the sort of moral thinking Steffen has all along implicitly appealed to, against absolutist claims.

A reader's response to this book will depend on the extent to which s/he accepts some assumptions which Steffen relies on but does not really defend. There are many, but the most central is that moral evaluation can count on widely–or universally–shared moral presumptions. It depends, also, on one's response to the dilemma Socrates posed in the *Euthyphro*: Is piety good because it is loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods because it is good? If we are religious, should we determine what God would have us do based on our conception of the life-affirming and good, or should we depend on some revelation from God (whose ways are not our ways)?- Steffen makes clear just how much turns on the answer to this classic question.

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