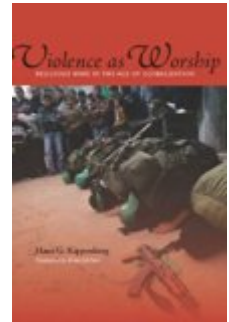


Hans G. Kippenberg. *Violence as Worship: Religious Wars in the Age of Globalization.* Translated by Brian McNeil. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. viii + 286 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-6873-3.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Hans G. Kippenberg's *Violence as Worship*, ably translated from German by Brian McNeil, develops a framework for understanding religious violence that emphasizes religious meanings that communities attach to conflicts and violent actions. Kippenberg views violence as the outcome of encounters between religious communities and outside forces, rather than simply as a consequence of groups' ideologies. He applies this framework through case studies of violent episodes and movements within the Abrahamic faiths from the 1970s to the present. The questions raised and many of the cases selected will be quite familiar to readers versed in the subfield of studies in religious violence; Kippenberg's most important contribution is in rereading these familiar episodes to highlight relational and contextual forces that lead groups to commit violence in the name of religion. He develops his thesis through eight case studies: Jonestown and Waco (chapter 3), the Iranian Revolution (chapter 4), Lebanon's Hizb Allah (chapter 5), religious viewpoints on Israeli conquests and the Israeli settle-

ments in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (chapter 6), Muslim resistance movements in Palestine (chapter 7), American Evangelicals' views concerning Israel's role in the fulfillment of biblical prophecies (chapter 8), Al Qaeda (chapter 9), and the U.S. "War on Terror" (chapter 10).

Given the highly charged nature of his subject, Kippenberg carefully situates his study within the Weberian concept of "understanding" and views it as having two dimensions, one that focuses on individuals' motives and another on "the significance of an action" (p. 3). Kippenberg concentrates on the latter version of "understanding," which for his purposes entails exploring how religious communities view acts of violence and what processes lead believers to impose religious readings on struggles that are, Kippenberg argues, originally social and political in nature. Although Kippenberg briefly mentions violent movements within non-Abrahamic traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, he is primarily interested in the problem of how discourses of "exclusive monotheism" found in some Jewish, Christian,

and Muslim communities relate to violent episodes.

One point of departure for Kippenberg is the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the second century BCE. Kippenberg writes that “monotheism supplied a script for violence against unbelievers,” but that this script was only “applied when the obligatory nature of the community’s values had to be defended against external foes” (p. 11). Violence flows not from the nature of monotheistic belief, he argues, but from specific situations in which communities feel threatened or aggrieved; in other situations, monotheistic believers compromise with outsiders. Conflicts, for Kippenberg, are not reducible to religion, but neither are religious readings of conflicts reducible to factors like politics and economics. Given that perception can affect reality, Kippenberg says, “actors who advocate religious interpretations of a conflict alter the course of this conflict” (p. 200).

With this framework in mind, Kippenberg turns to the contemporary era, the “age of globalization,” in which “the growth and differentiation of civil society have made it possible for faith communities to develop new forms of institutionalization” (p. 38). The diversification of forms of religious communality has allowed for the growth of religious networks, including transnational ones. These networks provide an “ethic of brotherliness” that can “offer the individual a safety net in situations of distress” (p. 203). Kippenberg resists labels, especially “cult,” “fundamentalism,” and “terrorism,” that suggest that groups that turn to violence have abandoned “genuine religion.” Instead, Kippenberg approaches the study of religious violence “on the basis of tensions between faith communities, on the one hand, and governmental, legal, and economic structures, on the other” (p. 38).

Kippenberg’s chapter on Jonestown and Waco is one of his strongest case studies. He argues persuasively that confrontations between those two

communities and American federal authorities escalated in part due to authorities’ misunderstanding and unwitting fulfillment of the communities’ religiously inspired readings of conflict. When authorities defined these communities as “cults,” Kippenberg writes, they deployed analytically misguided concepts that became part of the conflict itself. Authorities privileged perspectives from apostate members of the communities and concerned relatives of remaining members while ignoring how narratives informed actions, and how actions informed narratives. In the case of Jonestown, “events took a particularly fateful turn when the concerned relatives succeeded in winning over powerful allies within the established order—the press, investigating officers, a congressman. The greater the threat to the existence of the community, the more it saw itself in an all-or-nothing situation” (p. 45). Collective suicide, for Jim Jones, was “a more dignified solution than submission to the destructive powers of this world” (p. 44).

During the siege of Waco, the community also read the standoff with federal authorities through a religious lens, that of the book of Revelations. In a letter, David Koresh asked authorities for time to finish writing his interpretation of the book’s symbolism; federal agents, rejecting the help of biblical scholars who wanted to meet with Koresh and discuss his interpretation, “regarded the letter as a delaying tactic” (p. 51). The forced eviction of the Waco community proceeded. Although Kippenberg’s main purpose is not to provide policy solutions for preventing religious violence, he cites a later encounter between a separatist community (the Montana Freeman) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in which violence was averted when agents heeded experts who “advised the FBI to avoid doing anything that the community might regard as a confirmation of its own [religious] interpretation of the situation” (p. 53). Breaking cycles of religious violence, Kippenberg writes in the conclusion, requires that authorities cease attempting to eliminate violent re-

religious communities, and instead seek to negotiate with them.

Also notable is Kippenberg's treatment of the Iranian Revolution, where he traces how the meanings of Shi'ite rituals and histories shifted over time in Iran, ultimately informing the uprising against the shah and the subsequent war with Iraq. His discussion of Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks makes the important observation that governments' initial recognition of the nebulous nature of Osama bin Laden's network gelled into a hardened view regarding a definable entity called Al Qaeda in the late 1990s, with consequences for the course of the conflict between the United States and bin Laden.

One of Kippenberg's main contributions is to describe specific aspects of religious perspectives on conflicts that differentiate religion from other forces and make reality appear different to certain believers. One example is the distinctive way in which certain religious communities view time. "Salvation-historical interpretive frameworks," Kippenberg writes, differ from "secular-progressive" ones (p. 205). Communities link events in the present to prophecies of the future, as in the case of American Evangelicals and Israel, or read present events as a reenactment of foundational religious moments, as when Al Qaeda models its attacks on early Islamic raids. Such understandings of what is distinct about religious worldviews have relevance beyond the study of violence. By taking communities' religious readings of conflicts seriously, Kippenberg contributes not only to the study of religious violence, but also to the study of how religions function in public life in contemporary societies.

While *Violence as Worship* constitutes an original and compelling treatment of its subject, the book contains weaknesses. One is that Kippenberg deals insufficiently with other literature on the subject of religion and violence. He refers to studies from the 1970s, such as the works of René Girard, and he cites more recent authors, like

Mark Juergensmeyer and R. Scott Appleby, but he does not critically engage these latter works. This is particularly unfortunate with regard to Juergensmeyer, who also takes a case-based approach to the study of religious violence in *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2001). A discussion of Juergensmeyer's approach to terrorism, particularly his ideas about terrorism as performance, would have enriched *Violence as Worship* and situated it more solidly within the existing literature. Mention of Juergensmeyer, who treats cases beyond the monotheistic faiths, raises another issue with Kippenberg's work. Kippenberg is keen to address the specific relationship between monotheism and violence, but his decision to limit the field of inquiry to three traditions is inadequately justified in a book that sometimes seeks to explain religious violence in general. A third problem concerns the book's heavy reliance on secondary sources, which contrasts unfavorably with Juergensmeyer's extensive fieldwork and interviews with participants in episodes of terrorism. Finally, while Kippenberg analyzes his cases effectively, the criticism could be made that the case studies were all rather obvious choices; the book could have benefited from the inclusion of some examples less well known than those of 9/11, the Iranian Revolution, and the Palestinian Intifadas.

Violence as Worship is a compelling contribution to the study of religious violence, remarkable for the care its author takes to understand how some of the most reviled groups in the West in recent memory have viewed the significance of their actions. Kippenberg focuses on violence as the result of not only religious ideologies but also their deployment within conflicts that escalate due to perceived threats and grievances from the outside, as well as the behaviors of outsiders themselves. He rightfully places some attention on the complex and relational nature of conflict. These ideas may be controversial or even uncom-

fortable for some American readers, but they merit serious consideration.

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