

*Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, by Leo D. Lefebure

Reviewed by [Paul F. Knitter](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

Why are so many people simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by religion? Why are religions as adept at setting us at each other's throats as they are at linking us with the divine? Leo Lefebure wants to help Christians answer these questions, and he is eminently qualified to do so. For 12 years professor of theology at Mundelein Seminary in Chicago and now at Fordham University, he's a comparative theologian who knows other religions (especially Buddhism) almost as well as he knows his Bible and church history.

To explore why Christianity has produced so much battlefield carnage, Lefebure takes his readers on a quick but enlightening journey through scripture and tradition, asking what beliefs have inspired Christians both in their attitudes and behavior toward other religions and in their use of violence. Throughout the Bible and the early and medieval church, the image of God is distressingly dual. God is both warrior *and* nonviolent friend of all. According to the Christian tradition, the divine both embraces all peoples and yet destines some to "supersede" and bring final truth to all the others. Lefebure places clearly on the table what many Christians might prefer to sweep under the rug: the roots of violence and interreligious animosity can be found in the Bible and the Christian tradition themselves.

So what can be done? Lefebure offers what for some will be a refreshing frankness: Choose God over the Bible. That choice is grounded in the conviction that the God of Abraham and Jesus is fundamentally a God who calls us to achieve justice through love, not through hatred and violence.

That's the criterion that enables us to agree with Martin Buber when he concluded that if Samuel thought that God was punishing him for not killing his enemies, "Samuel has misunderstood God"! Lefebure presents his readers with a challenge both delicate and urgent: "It is necessary to reflect critically on passages within the Bible itself [especially those promoting violence], even to the point of deeming them not revelatory of God's will."

Lefebure's advice on how Christians can improve their relations with other religions is equally challenging. He doesn't find much help in most current theological "models": exclusivism (only my religion is true), inclusivism (your religion may be true, but mine is truer) and pluralism (we're all equally true). Lefebure is wary of diluting diversity by either declaring it valueless or by giving everything the same value. At the same time, he trusts that what is divergent can also be convergent. Out of real differences can arise real dialogue.

Two important resources can help Christians participate in such dialogue. The first, mined from the veins of Christian belief, is the Wisdom tradition, which affirms that although the divine has been embodied in Jesus, it cannot be confined or finalized in any one religious form. Indeed, Wisdom needs diversity to express herself and can do so even through what appear to be contradictory beliefs.

This leads to the second resource, scientific chaos theory, which provides a fitting and hope-giving model for embracing the confusing diversity of religions. Out of chaotic and sometime clashing differences come new forms of unity, new discoveries. This process requires that each member both preserves its own borders and makes them porous to feedback from others. The patience to sit back and let things happen is essential.

Lefebure's analysis and proposals are the kind of medicine Christians need. But perhaps he should push his case even further. He identifies "supersessionism" (my religion is destined by God to replace yours) as the root of Christian violence toward Jews. But the Vatican's recent declaration *Dominus Iesus* makes clear that supersessionism still marks Christian attitudes toward all religions.

Admonitions to supersede and replace other religions are as much present in the Bible as are endorsements of violence. Perhaps Lefebure needs to be as critical of biblical calls to convert others as he is of scriptural calls to violence. But one cannot assemble such a critique of Christian supersessionist/replacement attitudes without a new critique of a Christology that insists that Jesus is the only savior for all humankind. Perhaps this is the subject to which Lefebure should turn next.