Guns and crosses: A religion of violence or peace?

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

Many intellectuals associate religion—and Christianity in particular—with violence. Hence they argue that the less religion we have the better off we will be. In an article in the *Atlantic*, for example, Jonathan Rauch argues that the greatest development in modern religion is "apatheism"—a sense of not caring one way or the other whether God exists. The best of all possible situations, says Rauch, is to be indifferent toward religion, whether you are religious or not.

On the pages of this journal and elsewhere, I have argued the opposite. If we strip Christian convictions of their original and historic cognitive and moral content, and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, we are likely to get religiously legitimized and inspired violence in situations of conflict. If, on the other hand, we nurture people in historic Christian convictions that are rooted in sacred texts, we will likely get militants for peace. This is a result of a careful examination of two things: the inner logic of Christian convictions *and* actual Christian practice. In his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, R. Scott Appleby argues that on the basis of case studies, and contrary to widespread misconception, religious people play a positive role in the world of human conflicts and contribute to peace—not when they "moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized and often highly particular beliefs," but rather "when they remain religious actors."

Even if this argument is sound (as I think it is), we still need to ask why misconceptions about the violent character of Christian faith abound. I have already given part of the answer: Christians have used and continue to use their faith to legitimize violence when they believe violence must be deployed. Misconceptions of the Christian faith mirror widespread misbehavior of Christians, and misbehavior of Christians goes hand in hand with misconstruing their own faith, and with "thinning" its original elements.

There is more. One can easily show that the majority of Christians—and the majority of religious folks in general—are nonviolent citizens, peace lovers, peacemakers and peace activists, not in spite of their religion but out of religious reasons. The purveyors of violence who seek religious legitimation are statistically a small minority among Christians.

So why is the contrary opinion widespread? What Avishai Margalit writes about ethnic belonging applies equally well to religion. "It takes one cockroach found in your food to turn the otherwise delicious meal into a bad experience. . . . It takes 30 to 40 ethnic groups who are fighting one another to make the 1,500 or more significant ethnic groups in the world who live more or less peacefully look bad." One may describe this as "self-inflation of the negative," or the tendency of the evil to loom larger than the comparatively much larger good.

This tendency is strengthened in the modern world, where information flow is dominated by mass media. Consider the following contrast. The Serbian paramilitary who rapes Muslim women with a cross around his neck has made it into the headlines and is immortalized in books on religious violence. But Katarina Kruhonja, a medical doctor from Osijek, Croatia, and a recipient of the alternative Nobel Prize for her peace initiatives, remains relatively unknown, as does the motivation for her work, which is thoroughly religious. While it's true that the success of such work depends on low visibility, our unawareness of it also has to do with the character of mass-media communication in a market-driven world. Violence sells, so viewers get to see violence.

The mass media create reality, but they do so by building on the proclivities of viewers. Why does the Serbian paramilitary rapist seem more "interesting" than Kruhonja? And why are we prone to conclude that his religious faith is implicated in the acts because he is wearing a cross, while it would never occur to us to blame the institution of marriage when we see a ring on his finger? Religion is more associated with violence than with peace in the public imagination partly because the public is fascinated with violence. We, the peace-loving citizens of nations whose tranquillity is secured by effective policing, are insatiable observers of violence. And as voyeurs, we become vicarious participants in the very violence we outwardly abhor. We are particularly drawn to religious violence because we have a strong interest in exposing hypocrisy, especially of a religious kind. Put the two factors together—the inner deployment of violence and the delight in exposure—and it looks as if we want to hear about religious people's engagement in violence because *we* are violent, but

expect them to act otherwise.

If we were more self-critical about our violent proclivities and more suspicious about violence in media, we might note, on the religious landscape, the steady flow of work that religious people do to make the world a more peaceful place. Our imagination would not be captured, for instance, with religion as motivating force for a dozen or so not particularly religious terrorists who destroyed the Twin Towers. Instead, we would be impressed with the degree to which religion serves as a source of solace and orientation for a majority of Americans in a time of crisis. We'd note the motivation it gave to many to help the victims, protect Muslims from stereotyping, and build bridges between religious cultures. We should promote religion—this kind of religion—and not be indifferent toward it.