



# BEYOND VIOLENCE

Religious Sources for Social Transformation  
in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

EDITED BY JAMES L. HEFT, S.M.

# Beyond Violence

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# DEDICATION

This volume contains the major papers given at an international conference titled “Beyond Violence: Religious Sources for Social Transformation.” Held at the University of Southern California on May 5–7, 2003, the conference drew more than two hundred participants. Jews, Christians, and Muslims honestly and thoughtfully considered how their religious traditions could become greater forces for justice and peace. I dedicate this volume to those individuals who collaborated with me in every phase of planning: Mr. Dafer Dakhil of the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Foundation, Dr. Reuven Firestone of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Dr. Donald E. Miller of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, and Ms. Brie Loskota, the conference director who generously assisted in editing this volume. I dedicate this volume also to those who provided important support for the entire effort: Dr. Steven B. Sample, President of the University of Southern California; Dr. Joseph Aoun, Dean of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, USC; Dr. Lewis M. Barth, Dean of HUC-JIR, Los Angeles; and Mr. Edward P. Roski Jr., friend and supporter of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies.

Fr. James L. Heft, S.M.  
November 16, 2003

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# PREFACE: BEYOND VIOLENCE THROUGH DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

*Leonard Swidler*

Religion today is at the heart of violence around the world: in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, the Middle East, Bosnia, Kosovo, Azerbaijan/Armenia, Cyprus, Iraq, Sudan, and elsewhere. Religion should instead be at the heart of the solution.

How is it that religion, one of the most sublime activities of humanity, has so often through the centuries—even until today—been a motivation for the most heinous of human activities? It is because of the very nature of religion that it can be both: *Corruptio optimae pessima*, “the corruption of the best becomes the worst.”

Religion is “an explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on some notion of the Transcendent, with the four C’s: Creed, Code of Ethics, Cult of Worship, Community-Structure.” Religion does not attempt to explain just part of life, as do, for example, such disciplines as physics (the physical dimension), chemistry (the chemical dimension), biology (the living dimension), psychology (the inner human dimension), and sociology (the interhuman dimension). Rather, religion attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of the entirety of life. Consequently, religion tends to be *absolute*.

“Absolute” stems from the Latin *ab* (from) *solvere* (to solve, finish, limit), meaning literally *un-limited*. Hence, religions tend to make unlimited truth claims (my way or the highway). However, during the last two hundred years, we humans have become increasingly

aware that all truth claims—that is, all statements about reality—are necessarily limited. This is true even on the most basic level, such as when I truthfully state, “The door is closed” (and it really is). Even though the statement accurately describes the door in relation to its frame, it is still a true statement only within certain limits, for I can also say many other true things about the door. I can speak about its color, weight, and size.

“So what?” one might ask. If it is true that every statement about reality is necessarily limited, not un-limited (ab-solute) even when describing simple physical things, how much more likely is it that our statements about reality are not absolute when speaking of the most complex of realities, “the *ultimate* meaning of life,” religion.

Consequently, we come to realize that our religion—all religions!—even when we are convinced that it tells us the truth, cannot be un-limited, ab-solute, in its description of the ultimate meaning of life. There are aspects of the meaning of life that others with different experiences, asking different questions, and using different concepts, cultures, and languages will be able to tell us that we would not otherwise know because we do not have or use their experiences, questions, concepts, cultures, and languages. Hence, if we wish to grasp ever more truth (for, as Jesus said, “The truth will make you free”), we need to be in dialogue with those of different religions to learn from them, and they from us. Then our understanding of the “ultimate meaning of life” will expand and deepen, and hence also will our ability to “live accordingly.”

Thus, in the third millennium, religion needs to become less and less part of the problem and increasingly more of the solution through dialogue and cooperation. To this end the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California has here joined with Jewish, Muslim, and secular institutions to foster that dialogue and cooperation, first among the Abrahamic religions and modernity, as well as all the religions and ideologies of the world.

# Beyond Violence

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# INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS SOURCES FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

*James L. Heft*

Especially since the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many people in Europe have linked religion with violence. Bloody conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, and then between Protestants and other Protestants, lasted for decades. Once the leaders of the Enlightenment added to the horrors of these religious wars the memories of the Crusades, and especially the Inquisition, they concluded that if religion were excluded as a force from public life, violence could be minimized. They believed that once “privatized,” religion would no longer be a source of violence. The public sphere would then be governed, they assumed, by people who followed the light of their own reason. After all, they thought, everyone has the ability to reason, even people who have no faith. In fact, some Enlightenment thinkers claimed that people without any religious faith would be more reasonable than those whose passions were fueled and judgments shaped by religion.

But by the end of the twentieth century, most observers of the international scene came to realize that religion resists privatization. Moreover, it became obvious, to at least some, that religion profoundly affects world events. When in 1979 the public demanded to know how the CIA had failed to anticipate the revolution in Iran, Admiral Stansfield Turner explained that although the agency

had carefully tracked Iranian markets, cinema, demographics and publishing, “the only thing we paid no attention to was religion, because it has no power in the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> Some observers, particularly neoconservatives in the United States, believe that since the Persian Gulf war in 1991, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we cannot avoid a “clash of civilizations,”<sup>2</sup> and more specifically, a clash between the West and Islam.

More clear-sighted than Turner and the CIA, and more hopeful than those who foresee an inevitable violent confrontation between civilizations, is theologian Hans Küng, whose commitment to and long-standing involvement with interreligious dialogue led him to the now oft-repeated conviction: No peace among nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without global ethical criteria. No survival of our globe without a global ethic.

Admittedly, the construction of “global ethical criteria” boggles the mind. A dialogue between religions, however, is imaginable; in fact, it is already taking place. A recent fruitful example of a dialogue among three religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, took place at the University of Southern California in May 2003. The chapters of this book contain the major addresses presented at that international conference, titled “Beyond Violence: Religious Sources for Social Transformation.” From all over the world, this conference brought together devout Muslims, Jews, and Christians, who, precisely because they are devout, feel compelled to work for reconciliation, peace, and justice. In other words, this conference made more visible an important role that religion can, does, and ought to play in public affairs: being a vehicle for peaceful social transformation. Dozens of international conferences have of late explored the relationship of religion to violence; few, however, have explored how religion contributes to the work of peace and reconciliation. None, to our knowledge, has brought together Jews, Christians, and Muslims, both academics and community activists, to explore how their religious commitments have helped them be ministers of peace and reconciliation.

Serious interreligious dialogue is, historically speaking, only in its infancy. The purpose of interreligious dialogue is not always clear. Is it conversion? Better mutual understanding? Collaboration without any effort at conversion? Is the point for a Christian, for example, to help a Muslim become a better Muslim or a Jew a better Jew? Is it presumptuous to even think that the profound and intimate things of God can be the object of a dialogue, however respectfully conducted? Answers to these questions vary and at times contradict each other. Two things are certain: people of different religions mix with each other more than ever before, and respect for people of other religions is better than violence.

Not everyone thinks dialogue is a good thing. Some oppose it because they see no gain; in other words, they believe they already possess all the truth needed. Some oppose dialogue with a particular religion. Even before the September 11 terrorist attacks, prominent members of the religious right in the United States attacked Islam and the Qur'an. Since then, many of the same prominent conservative religious individuals in the United States have opposed dialogue with Islam. According to Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham and now director of his father's vast evangelical enterprise, Islam is "a very evil and wicked religion." Evangelist-broadcaster Pat Robertson described Muhammad as "an absolute wild-eyed fanatic." Taking the caricature even further, Reverend Jerry Vines, past president of the Southern Baptist convention, described Muhammad as a "demon-possessed pedophile."<sup>3</sup> In fairness to most evangelical Protestants in the United States, it should be noted that at the very same time that the "Beyond Violence" conference was taking place at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Institute on Religion and Democracy cosponsored a forum in Washington, D.C., at which prominent evangelicals strongly criticized the negative generalizations of other more conservative evangelicals about Islam, but still supported their right to proselytize to Muslims.

Islam is not the only religion people distort and misunderstand. An equally distorted picture of modern Judaism results when anyone identifies Judaism with the policies of the Israeli government. Within Israel itself, deeply diverse understandings of Judaism challenge each other as to how the state should conduct itself with regard



to the Palestinians. Even wider divisions of opinion concerning the policies of Israel can be found among American Jews. In the United States, since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Jewish-Christian dialogue has borne much fruit. Rabbis Irving Greenberg and Reuven Firestone enriched the conference as orthodox and reform Jews, respectively.

The great diversity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims created an opportunity for the organizers of the “Beyond Violence” conference. How can the rich diversity of these religions be best represented? After some discussion, we identified two criteria for inviting speakers. First, we wanted individuals who would be able to address in ways we thought insightful the theme of the conference: the contributions religious traditions can and do make to positive social transformation. Second, we wanted to invite well-qualified scholars, so that even if they did not personally represent all the branches of their own religious tradition, they would be informed and fair in what they had to say. We were fortunate in that nearly all of our first choices for main speakers accepted our invitations. Only one, the late Alija Ali Izetbegovic, the former president of Bosnia, had to decline because of ill health. But in his place, we were fortunate to have His Eminence the Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dr. Mustafa Cerić. The Muslim planners of the conference did an extraordinary job of including a wide range of speakers from their tradition.

The primary purpose of the conference was neither to proselytize nor to collaborate, though many of the participants came to a deeper knowledge of and respect for religious traditions other than their own. Rather, the conference was designed to explore how these three great religious traditions provide the resources needed for the work of justice and reconciliation. Besides scholars, we also invited individuals who, sometimes at the risk of their own lives, make use of those religious resources in their work. We avoided any denial or cover-up of religion’s well-known complicity in violence. For centuries believers have in many instances mistakenly thought that their religion called them to commit acts of violence. Governments and extremist groups often co-opt religion for their own violent purposes. Rather, effort was made to look honestly at the historical and textual records, admit that at times all three religious traditions have fueled acts of violence, and then focus

directly on the potential of each tradition to be religious sources of peaceful social transformation.

### SCHOLARS AND ACTIVISTS

The conference brought together both scholars and religious activists. All the religious activists, nine in number, were asked to describe in several concurrent breakout sessions their work and how their religious tradition motivated them in that work. These people included a Palestinian Muslim psychiatrist, Samah Jabr, who spoke of the effects of the ongoing conflict in Israel; an American rabbi, Arik Ascherman, who lives in Israel and works for human rights among Jews, Christians, and Muslims; an Anglican priest, Michael Lapsley, who had both hands blown off and an eye destroyed by a 1990 letter bomb sent him by the South African government, but who has continued to devote his life to healing victims of violence; a Catholic sister, Filo Shizue Hirota, who works with Japanese “comfort women,” victims of government-sponsored sexual abuse during World War II; a Catholic priest, Michael Kennedy, who works to end violence among gangs of youth in East Los Angeles; a Muslim man, Yasser Aman, who operates a free clinic in south central Los Angeles for indigents of all faiths and no faith; a Jewish social worker, Melodye Feldman, who directs a nonprofit grassroots organization that specializes in helping youth from different religions become peacemakers; another Jewish woman, Stephanie Fingerroth, who organizes Jewish groups to work at issues of women’s health, sustainable agriculture, and income generation in developing nations; and finally a Muslim accountant, Naim Shah, who directs the faith-based nonprofit ILM Foundation that provides food for the hungry and helps the unemployed develop marketable skills.

Each of these nine dedicated believers and activists explained their work and how their religious tradition moved them to do that work. Their explanations and testimonies added an intensity and realism to the conference that academic exchanges typically lack. Moreover, the frequent exchanges between activists and the scholars helped keep the academics more grounded in reality and the activists more reflective about their work. Their lively and sometimes tense exchanges