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Kippenberg begins this book by taking a critical approach to Western reactions to acts of violence associated with religious groups or movements, which are commonly assumed to be perpetrated by fundamentalists. At present, the terms fundamentalism and fundamentalists are mainly associated with Islamic Jihadists, but Kippenberg refers to other instances, such as those of the American premillennialist movement of 1978 and the Adventists of 1993. His main aim, however, is to challenge the validity of looking at these cases solely as acts of hatred towards the “other.” Devoting each chapter to a number of contemporary occurrences of violence, Kippenberg instead argues that such violence almost always arises from a historical and social context and therefore it is more useful for social scientists to try and understand not only the immediate reasons for but also the roots of such aggressive human behaviour which many a time brings about devastating consequences.

Through the case studies, Kippenberg argues that in trying to understand instances of cultism, fundamentalism and terrorism, putting the blame on specific religious communities is an oversimplification and may only serve to justify military retaliation against these communities and to reinforce and deepen hatred against them from opposing groups. The economic, political and social contexts in which extremists’ violence takes place are often discounted or denied, thus allowing for widespread and unqualified popular support for the condemnation of the perpetrators, solidarity with the victims, and, as very often happens, the justification of military attacks on communities which are identified and targeted not only by location but also by their religious faith. Such attacks tend to give rise to further misconceptions vis-à-vis ethnicity, especially where the violence originates from groups that are not associated with the West.

As Kippenberg points out in his concluding remarks, “contemporary forms of religious communality” are no longer dependent on traditional
forms of communication, such as congregations and rituals. Individuals are nowadays able to join different social networks and connect through transnational forms of religious communality. These means of communication are also available to and made use of by those who choose to come together to condemn and protest against acts of violence and to direct their protest against specific religious groups with whom they associate the violence. This does not always result in positive and constructive criticism, but many a time may serve to foster hatred towards particular ethnicities. At the same time, Kippenberg cautions the reader against taking an apologetic approach, while arguing that condemnation of violence and retaliation is not enough to prevent more violence from taking place.

The first chapter reviews a number of existing theories on violence and its perpetrators which propose that parts of the monotheistic texts may have been transformed into a rhetoric of aggression towards the non-believing “other.” However, the author demonstrates that while the link between monotheism and violence needs to be acknowledged, such theories do not provide a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon. He cites the case of Judaism, which is regarded as the first monotheistic religion with a holy text that inculcates religious intolerance. Yet he points out that in medieval times, under economic and social conditions where Jews were a minority either under European Christian domination or Islamic rule, Judaism was tolerant of peaceful co-existence and intolerance was mostly directed internally towards apostates rather than towards those of different faiths. Kippenberg thus prefers to understand religious conflicts against a background of economic and political instability with religion serving as a supporting social system. This is where he ties the aspect of emotion to violence, conceding that religious emotion may play a big role, but not without other underlying instigators at play. Religion, as seen by the classical philosophers, often acts as a coercive force in societies in order to maintain a social order based on morality. When this cohesion is threatened, religion may serve to encourage collective action of a violent and life-threatening nature because the emotions that this may arouse help individuals to overcome the fear of death resulting from such violence.

In the second chapter Kippenberg contends that the three Abrahamic religions foster community belonging and form solidarity structures. They also preserve moral autonomy by territorial segregation. Chapters 3 to 10 are each devoted to a particular religion and its associated acts of violence. Kippenberg gives detailed descriptions of each phenomenon and is careful to offer balanced overviews of different religious groups and different
forms of violence. His first reference is to the phenomenon of alternative religions considered as cults. Citing the collective suicides which occurred in Guyana in 1978 and in Waco, Texas in 1993, he provides a thorough critical analysis of the way that alternative religions were perceived, concluding that such acts cannot be sociologically understood through predefined concepts and stereotypes, especially since, in the case of Waco, it is still doubtful whether the seventy-four dead community members actually committed collective suicide or whether they “died of gunshot wounds” when they were attacked by the “liberation commandos.”

In Chapter 4 Kippenberg describes how the Iranian revolution uprisings going on between 1977 to 1979, “made use of” and “modernized” the religious rituals of mourning and martyrdom which commemorate the death of Husayn, the son of Ali in the battle of Karbala on the day of the Shi‘ite ‘Ashura. In Chapter 5 he describes how the mobilization of the Shi‘ites in Lebanon can be traced to the calls of Shi‘ite clergy for their followers to transform their grief at experiencing injustice into action or political activism. The next three chapters focus on the Israel and Palestine conflict. In the largely historical Chapter 6 he compares the link which the secular Zionists of the nineteenth century made between the “messianic promise” and the establishment of the national Jewish state of Israel. He contrasts this Zionist view with the perception of the Orthodox Jews who were more interested in returning to the Holy Land in order to “pray and study the Torah,” rather than in the nationalist and territorial issue. Kippenberg goes on to discuss how these divergent views eventually converged and served to justify the creation of Israeli martial rule. He cites Zvi Yehda Kook’s sermon on the Israeli National Day of 1967, “three weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War,” which seems to have legitimized the Israeli attacks to occupy territories that had been until then under the control of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Chapter 7 describes how the establishment of the PLO embraced both Christian and Muslim Arabs to resist the Zionist invasion.

Kippenberg also dedicates a part of this chapter to the relevance of Jerusalem in this conflict, mainly because of this city’s strong historical links to the three monotheist religions. He continues by describing the origins of the Hamas resistance movement in connection with the First Intifada, and links it to the influence that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had on the “new generation of Palestinians who were no longer willing to accept the either/or of secular political activism or religious quietism.” In Chapter 8 the author retains his focus on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and

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discusses the influence that American Evangelism has on the US Republican Party, and the role that the latter has played in supporting Israel while condemning Hamas as a terrorist group. This is therefore a good example of how nation states may, at face value, seem to support other nations on a political and military basis, where more careful scrutiny may indeed show that underlying currents of religious affiliations and alliances are much stronger than may be openly revealed. Chapters 9 and 10 are dedicated to the last case study, that of the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. war on terror. Kippenberg begins by describing the rise of Al Qaeda and places this in the historical context of the succession of wars in Afghanistan. This is then linked to the religious aspect by looking at how Al Qaeda embraced martial Jihad in its carefully planned violent attacks. The author concludes with a semantic analysis of the U.S. classification that distinguished “freedom fighters” from “terrorists,” and also shows how the US decision to proclaim a “war on terror” directed towards Al Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks was taken under the premillenialist influence coming from the Evangelical camp.

Kippenberg’s is therefore a very interesting contribution towards beginning to understand that much more needs to be done in what he calls, the “diagnosis” of acts of violence because, as he concludes in his final chapter, rather than blaming “a faith community or the circumstances of social conflict,” it is more likely that conflicts and war “are generated by the interplay between the two sides.” Contrary to what tends to be revealed by mainstream media, religious influence often plays a very important role, not only among the violent perpetrators who are very quickly labelled as fundamentalists, but also among those who may at face value project the image of the moderate religious. This book may thus be very useful for those who wish to get a deeper insight into what lies behind political decisions that are often projected as aiming towards security measures.

Gender difference is one perspective which is left out in this book but which could have been profitably included, such as in the case of the US “war on terror,” where women wearing the burqah often served as one of the justifications for military interventions based on a Western rhetoric of women’s liberation.

Kippenberg could also have developed further the aesthetic aspect of violence in those cases where the acts of violence take the shape of a performance or ritual. For example, just like the dramatic live footage of the 9/11 attacks, the more recent coverage of the kidnappings and executions carried out by ISIS contribute to a further rise of a sensational and com-
mon view of Islam as an increasingly intolerant and violent religion in the contemporary world. This may indeed serve to encourage more fundamentalist beliefs in reaction, but at the same time, it may equally serve to foster a stronger sense of identity in Muslims who wish to attest that Islam does not preach such violence.