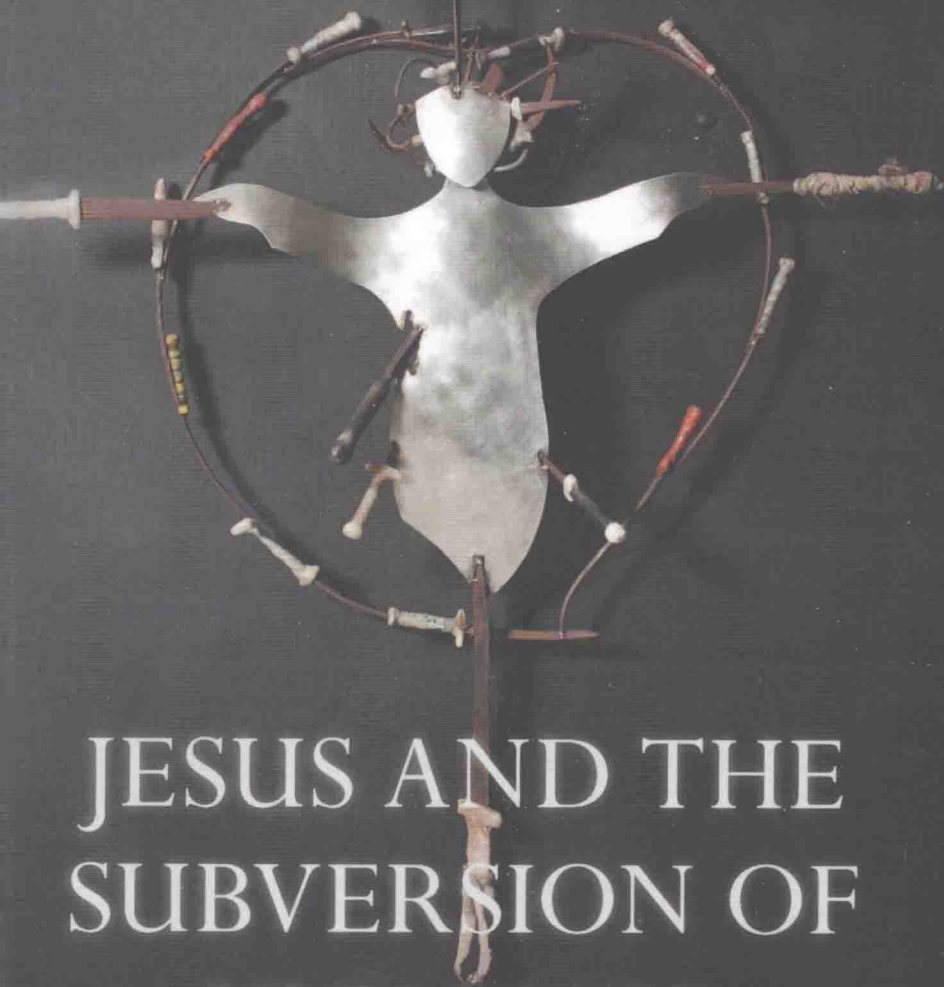


THOMAS R. YODER NEUFELD



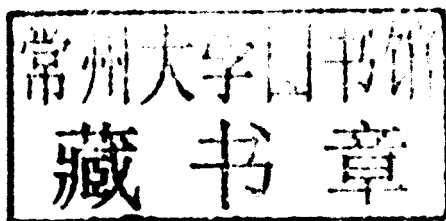
# JESUS AND THE SUBVERSION OF VIOLENCE

Wrestling with the  
New Testament evidence

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THOMAS R. YODER NEUFELD



Published by Baker Academic in the USA as *Killing Enmity:  
Violence and the New Testament*

First published in Great Britain in 2011

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
[www.spckpublishing.co.uk](http://www.spckpublishing.co.uk)

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-06068-9  
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-06701-5

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong  
First printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Group  
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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*For Hedy, Esther, Mary and Peter*  
*Faithful and courageous followers of the Lamb*

Ephesians 2.11–22

<sup>11</sup> Remember, then, that at one time you Gentiles in flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by ‘the circumcision’ made in the flesh by human hands, <sup>12</sup> were at that time without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he is our peace,  
who made both into one  
and has broken down the dividing  
wall – the enmity – in his flesh.

<sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law in its  
rules and regulations,  
so that he might create the two into  
one new human in himself, thereby  
making peace,

<sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both to God in  
one body through the cross, thereby  
killing the enmity.

<sup>17</sup> And he came proclaiming the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and outsiders, but you are citizens together with the saints and members of God’s household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are together built into a dwelling for God in Spirit.

Translation by Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

# Preface

At the very centre of the first half of the letter to the Ephesians is arguably the greatest peace text in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In chiasmic fashion Ephesians 2.11–22 celebrates the mending of the human family – enemies, strangers, Jews and non-Jews – as the most immediately experienced dimension of God’s grand healing of all rifts, partings and partitions in a cosmic ‘gathering up’ of all things in and through the Messiah (Eph. 1.10). The core of this text, verses 14–16, constitutes an act of worship, a hymn celebrating Jesus as ‘our peace’.

We should not be surprised to find in such peaceable poetry the image of the birth of a ‘new human’ made up of erstwhile enemies (v. 15). But we might be surprised to encounter violence at the very centre of the creation of peace. There is the shattering of walls that define and protect identities, but that also reinforce enmities between people and between them and God (v. 14). There is blood (v. 13), terse shorthand for Jesus’ own death on the cross (v. 16). We should remember that there was not yet a shred of romance around that instrument of lethal torture and imperial state terrorism. Perhaps most surprising is that Jesus’ violent death is the instrument by which he himself committed murder. In and through his own death Jesus ‘killed enmity’, he ‘murdered hostility’.

We are put before a question we will face again and again throughout this investigation: do we see in this remarkable poetry a way in which the vocabulary, images and metaphors of violence create a space for violence, validating, even enshrining, violence at the core of the message? Or does the presence of such language intend to subvert and finally ‘murder’ violence? This is the challenge we take up in this book.

It is not a straightforward matter to meet such a challenge. Where some see courageous suffering of violence, others see passivity and

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<sup>1</sup> See epigraph. For a full discussion of Eph. 2.11–22, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 106–37; Yoder Neufeld, “‘For he is our peace’: Ephesians 2:11–22”, in *Beautiful upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God* (ed. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen; Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies/Scottdale, PA/Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 215–33.

the willing acceptance of victimization; where some see the urgent rhetoric of a prophet, others see violent threats and ultimate sanctions; where some see a bracing call to resolute discipleship in a violent world, others see an exclusionary and for that very reason violent religious imagination; where some see a loving saviour, others see an abject victim of divine parental abuse. Some might thus be tempted to dismiss the stories and teachings in the New Testament precisely because they deem them violent. Others might be tempted to quarantine troublesome texts rather than wrestle with their implications, or simply to explain the violence away, trivialize its offence and silence those who object to its presence.

This book was from its inception to be an exploration of how the New Testament relates to the issue of violence, with attention to the variety of approaches interpreters bring to the subject. I have thus attempted to resist each of these temptations. I have undertaken, nevertheless, to wrestle with how such 'texts of trouble' might, ironically, have the potential to subvert the very violence that troubles us in them. I invite readers attuned to the urgent issue of violence to engage the New Testament with an ear to hear – afresh.



## Acknowledgements

I wish first of all to thank Philip Law of SPCK and James Ernest of Baker Academic and their respective staff for their remarkable patience and encouragement in the writing of this book, as well as Bruce Longenecker and Rebecca Mulhearn, who first invited me to undertake the task. I was able to begin the work on this book during a brief sabbatical leave, enjoying the kind hospitality of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, in particular, old friends in administration and faculty, Howard Loewen, Alvin Dueck, Glen Stassen and the now sadly departed David Scholer. I also wish to thank Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo, my academic home, for the encouragement and generous assistance in making it possible for me to complete the book. Words fail to convey my gratitude for the many expressions of encouragement from friends and family alike, most especially my wife, Rebecca, and our children, Miriam, David and Gina.

# Abbreviations

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ESCJ	Electronic Sixteenth Century Journal
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDBSup</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>MQR</i>	<i>Mennonite Quarterly Review</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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# 1

## ‘Violence’ and ‘New Testament’

We begin our investigation with an exploration of what we mean with ‘violence’ and ‘New Testament’. It may seem obvious what these terms mean, but in actual fact there is a wide range of meanings persons give to these two concepts, and to the approaches taken to them. Given the brevity of this study, the limited number of texts and the limited attention we will be able to give them, this chapter will serve not only as an introduction to the theme but point the way to resources that can help further investigation.

### ‘Violence’

Reflecting dictionaries generally, the first meaning of ‘violence’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as follows:

The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.

Violence is intentional physical harm and injury. We think of crimes of violence such as battery or murder, or of war, in which massive harm is done to others, whether by soldiers or civilians. To state the obvious, ‘violence’, ‘violent’ and ‘to violate’ have unambiguously negative implications. Even when such violence is deemed necessary in certain circumstances, it is viewed as highly regrettable. Synonyms of violence are force, coercion, abuse, aggression, fighting, hostility, brutality, cruelty, carnage, ferocity, vehemence and many more. The dictionaries point out that sometimes ‘violence’ can denote vehemence of feelings that come to expression in gestures or words, even if they are not accompanied by physical harm, and that ‘violence’ can be used to designate someone’s use of language in improper ways, or even wilful distortion of the words of others, including texts. But intended physical harm is the primary lexical meaning.

Were violence as ‘intent to injure’ the sole way it is understood in our culture, this book would probably not have been written. More than once I have had to respond to the question, ‘You mean “Old Testament”, right?’ The common assumption is that the New Testament is generally against violence. Jesus’ teaching on non-retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount comes most quickly to mind. However, what counts as ‘violence’ has widened dramatically, with significant implications for how the New Testament relates to violence.

To illustrate, Johan Galtung coined the by now deeply entrenched terms ‘structural’ and ‘cultural violence’, showing that there is violence other than ‘direct’ violence engaged in and suffered by individuals.<sup>1</sup> Political and economic ways in which society is ‘ordered’ can violate whole peoples and classes. Robert McAfee Brown likewise expands the notion of violence:

Whatever ‘violates’ another, in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is involved or not, can be understood as an act of violence. The basic overall definition of violence would then become violation of personhood.<sup>2</sup>

Such ‘an act that depersonalizes would be an act of violence’ and might not be obvious ‘except to the victim’.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, in such a case the determination of what constitutes violence has shifted from the intent of the perpetrator to the one who experiences it. Brown cites Brazil’s Dom Helder Camara’s notion of a ‘spiral of violence’, where ‘direct’ violence is often already a response to ‘structural’ (economic, racial, class) violence, a notion Richard Horsley has taken up on his *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the late

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research* 6/3 (1969), 167–91; Galtung, ‘Cultural Violence’, *Journal of Peace Research* 27/3 (1990), 291–305. Philip L. Tite would like to add ‘sociological violence’ to this insight, which he sees as less static, in *Conceiving Peace and Violence: A New Testament Legacy* (Dallas, TX/New York/Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), 37; see also Warren Carter, ‘Constructions of Violence and Identities in Matthew’s Gospel’, in *Violence in the New Testament* (ed. Shelley Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2005), 81–108 (90–2).

<sup>2</sup> Robert MacAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (2nd edn; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, [1973] 1987), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Religion and Violence*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 22–6.

French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul identifies the conflict between economic classes as ‘violent competition’.

The violence done by the superior may be physical (the most common kind, and it provokes hostile moral reaction), or it may be psychological or spiritual, as when the superior makes use of morality and even of Christianity to inculcate submission and a servile attitude; and this is the most heinous of all forms of violence.<sup>5</sup>

These perspectives reflect the issues surrounding violence particularly during the 60s and 70s of the last century, when the threat of nuclear annihilation, revolution and the war in Vietnam established the context for a consideration of the relationship of violence and the New Testament. Was the ‘historical’ Jesus a ‘Zealot’? Did he harbour sympathies for resistance and revolutionary movements? Or was he resolutely anti-violent in his teachings on non-retaliation and love of enemies?<sup>6</sup> Do Paul’s famous words in Romans 13.1–7 regarding being subordinate to the authorities imply he was anti-revolutionary, thus supportive of state violence (‘sword’)? Or does ‘Romans 13’ furnish the grounds for resistance to an unjust and thus ultimately illegitimate regime? Is John’s Apocalypse a blistering prophetic critique against a violent Roman Empire? Or is it a fevered apocalyptic vision of divinely initiated end-time violence, providing theological cover for those dreaming of nuclear Armageddon?

The Vietnam War ended; the Cold War came to an end of sorts; revolutionary rhetoric disappeared from common discourse in the global North. The focus of ‘violence’ has since shifted to terrorism, especially when religiously motivated. More, ‘violence’ has come to be identified not only as deliberate physical harm or injury but also harm done to the environment, through economic inequalities, persistent gender inequalities, racial, sexual and class discrimination, and marginalization and intolerance in general, whether buttressed by state power, culture or religion and, more specifically, sacred texts. Not just ‘fundamentalism’, but religion more generally, has come

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (trans. Cecelia Gaul Kings; New York: Seabury, 1969), 87.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967). In opposition, see George R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1972).

under intense scrutiny on whether it is a resource against violence or whether it might not be an incubator for it. There is heightened sensitivity to the potential of religion not only to countenance violence but also to nurture and to incite it. Needless to say, this has brought also the New Testament to the attention of critics.

To complicate matters yet more, there is growing awareness of the role of power, social location and vested interests at work in human discourse. This has undermined confidence in interpreting texts as having a particular meaning and, at the same time, increased alertness to the way texts are themselves involved in the exercise and maintenance of power, often masking the violence at work in them. In a postmodern context, the very notion of authority, of revelation and the claim to universal validity fall under the suspicion of purveying violence, broadly conceived.

If the meaning of texts does not reside simply in the author’s intentions, which may or may not be accessible to the reader or interpreter in any case, but rather in the interaction between readers and the text, then a text becomes violent if the interpreter or the reader experiences or employs it as such. This is one aspect of the way in which the shift in determining whether some action or word is violent moves from actor to victim. Clearly texts can themselves fall victim to the use interpreters put them to. We speak frequently of ‘doing violence to a text.’ We might then also ask whether a text ceases to be ‘violent’ if readers do not ‘take it’ that way, or use it that way. For example, scholars might determine a text to be violent in its implications, but not taken that way by a believing community. Should one blame the community for not being faithful to the text’s violence?

Not surprisingly, this way of construing violence as very broad has had a significant impact on the question of the relationship between violence and the New Testament. It has widened the texts that ‘count’ in such an investigation, but it has also opened the door to much greater and more radical critique. As Jonathan Klawans points out, ‘the broader the definition [of violence], the easier it is to indict biblical texts and those who, guilty by association, deem them to be sacred’.<sup>7</sup> In *Violence in the New Testament*, for example, various authors

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Klawans, ‘Introduction: Religion, Violence, and the Bible’, in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (ed. David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 1–15 (7).

explore ways in which the documents of the New Testament are implicated in the violence of ‘empire’, even as these writings attempt to varying degrees to escape or critique it.<sup>8</sup> The massive four-volume *The Destructive Power of Religion*,<sup>9</sup> which contains many articles focused on the New Testament, adds psychology to the mix of criticism, exploring, among other things, the personality (disorders) of Jesus and Paul, the destructive effects of the intolerance in pronouncements of judgement and the violence deemed to be inherent in claims of revelatory truth.

Feminists have drawn attention not only to what they see as the implicit violence in the suppression of memory of the role women played in the early decades of the Church<sup>10</sup> but also to what they consider to be dimensions of the religion reflected in the New Testament as ‘dangerous to [women’s] health’.<sup>11</sup> In particular they have focused on texts requiring subordination of women to men, on what is deemed to be the valorization of suffering and, closely related, on the role of the death of Jesus in atonement and salvation. Some see it as a kind of ‘divine child abuse’,<sup>12</sup> viewing the violence of the cross as anything but ‘redemptive’.

This is by no means a concern only of feminists. Walter Wink has made the critique of ‘redemptive violence’ central to his work on the New Testament,<sup>13</sup> as has the French anthropologist and literary

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<sup>8</sup> Matthews and Gibson, *Violence in the New Testament*; see also, e.g., the collection of articles in Ra’anan S. Boustán, Alex Jassen and Calvin J. Roetzel, eds, *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practices in Early Judaism and Christianity, Biblical Interpretation XVII/1–2* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> J. Harold Ellens, ed., *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Westport, CT/London: Praeger, 2004): Vol. 1, *Sacred Scriptures, Ideology, and Violence*; Vol. 2, *Religion, Psychology, and Violence*; Vol. 3, *Models and Cases of Violence in Religion*; Vol. 4, *Contemporary Views on Spirituality and Violence*.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. most famously Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), and the many studies that followed it.

<sup>11</sup> Letty M. Russell, ‘Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation’, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985), 137–46 (141).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, ‘For God so Loved the World?’, in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn; New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1–30.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Wink, particularly the last volume in his trilogy on the ‘powers’, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1992).



critic, René Girard, whose attention has focused on the sacrificial dimensions of religion, in particular of atonement theories in Christian theology, viewing sacrifice as participation in deep-seated violence endemic to human culture.<sup>14</sup>

If one enquires about the origin of violence, the explanations are again diverse. René Girard sees it as emerging from ‘mimetic rivalry’,<sup>15</sup> in effect from wanting what the other wants. This leads ultimately to murder and then to the various mechanisms to mask that murder and to contain the resulting cycle of violence, including scapegoating and sacrifice. In short, violence adheres to the very core of religion, particularly in the sacrificial and scapegoating mechanisms he sees as central to religion.

Hector Avalos has suggested, rather, that violence emerges from scarce resources and the deliberate restricting of access.<sup>16</sup> With respect to the New Testament, the restriction of salvation only to the elect, or only to believers, thus renders it violent at its very core.

Others propose that human beings are ‘hard-wired’ by nature for competition and rivalry for what it takes to live, and are thus pre-disposed to violence. Nature is ‘red in tooth and claw’, in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s words.<sup>17</sup>

Jacques Ellul sees violence as reflective of nature, yes, but of a fallen and corrupted nature, an inextricable aspect of the bleak ‘order of necessity’. Violence is not only sin but also rooted in primordial sin that pervades the way things are. With characteristic decisiveness, Ellul sees violence as therefore ‘absolutely’ prohibited for a Christian, as is any justification of violence, precisely because the Christian is ‘free’ from the necessity of the fallen order.

[Christians] must struggle against violence precisely *because*, apart from Christ, violence is the form that human relations *normally* and *necessarily* take . . . If we are free in Jesus Christ, we shall reject violence precisely because violence is necessary! . . . And mind, this means all

<sup>14</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘In Memoriam A.H.H.’, Canto 56.