

Warfare in World Religions: Has the Time Come to Junk All Religions and Found a New One?

Ronald Brown
October 9, 2017



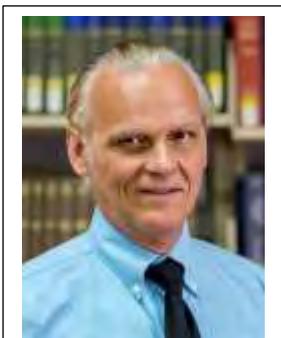
I adopted my traditional “stick of dynamite” approach to get my students out of their Sunday school, Hebrew school and Madrasa ruts.

“All the world religions are so mired in religious warfare they should be destroyed,” I said. “What humanity needs is a new god, a new holy book, and a new religion. Warfare and violence are so deeply rooted in the religions of the world they are beyond saving. They cannot be salvaged.”

So began my UTS course on “World Religions and Global Conflict” (LTR 5513) in the spring semester 2017.

Such a time to take over the course! “Christian” United States was bogged down in wars in Muslim Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria; Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia were threatening to go to war; Orthodox Russia was reasserting its superpower

aspirations; Israel was expanding Jewish West Bank settlements and carrying out ethnic cleansing against Palestinian Christians and Muslims in East Jerusalem; China was fashioning Confucianism as the nation’s national religion; India and Muslim Pakistan, both nuclear-armed, were fighting over Kashmir, and the BJP Hindu nationalist party was busily transforming India into a Hindu nation.



Ronald Brown

My 20-some students reflected the diversity of UTS – American Christians of various denominations, students from the Philippines and Africa, Unificationists, and of course their residually Catholic professor. Many of the students were active in interreligious dialogue and eagerly spouted the tried and true seminary and church slogans, “God is love,” “All religions strive for peace,” “Only a few radicals believe in holy war,” and “A nice dialogue over coffee and cookies will bring world peace.” Other students were dedicated to peace studies and taking UTS courses in the topic.

My goal for the semester was to blow up the “God is love” myth and zero in on the centrality of holy war, jihad, crusades, terrorism, and genocide to world religions.

Singing kumbaya, sipping tea, and exchanging love and peace platitudes with members of diverse religions will not make religious violence simply go away. Hence my goals in the course were to explore five questions: 1) What is the role and function of warfare in the human condition? 2) Can religion and warfare be separated? 3) Why did the attempts of Jesus and Buddha to sever this ancient bond fail? 4) Do world religions threaten the survival of the human race in the 21st century? and, 5) Has the time come to found a new religion?

What is the role and function of warfare in the human condition?

Konrad Lorenz, Raymond Dart, Desmond Morris, Niko Tinbergen, Robert Ardrey, among many others, argue that humans descended from killer apes and still retained deep in their genes and instincts a propensity for war and violence. Some insist that rather than genetic origins, human belligerence is the result of traditions and customs evolved over millennia as a result of the need to compete for territory, mates, food and power. Whether genetic, instinctual or historical, humans are a warlike species. Book titles such as *On Aggression*, *The Naked Ape*, *African Genesis*, *The Territorial Imperative*, *The Social Contract* (Ardrey, 1970), and *The Hunting Hypothesis* illustrate their argument.

As a result, humans evolved social structures, governments, economies, literature, and religions that recognized the inborn drive to violence. In biological terms we can say that violence is hardwired into the human genome. Richard Dawkins described this predisposition to violence as the selfish gene. In the Jewish Bible, God had no qualms about killing the Egyptian firstborn, destroying the pharaoh’s army, instructing Joshua to slaughter the population of Jericho, or ordering King David to massacre the Jebusite population of Jerusalem. The Koran united religious leadership in one person, Mohammed, making him

prophet and king. Warfare was as deeply rooted in Islam as it was in Judaism. The sacred books of Hinduism, Confucianism and Shintoism also incorporate warfare, violence and genocide into the teachings and practice of religion. Many religions even included a god of warfare in their pantheons.

Can religion and warfare be separated?

All the major world religions emerged as appendages of a particular people. From ancient Babylon, Egypt, India, China, Greece, and Rome until today this bond has remained intact. According to Aztec legend, the peoples who are the Mexicans today were a homeless tribe wandering the deserts of the North American southwest until their god Huitzilopochtli appeared to their leaders. “You shall be a homeless nation,” Huitzilopochtli uttered, “until you come across an eagle perched on a cactus with a rattlesnake in its beak. This land shall be yours for eternity.” Like the covenant between Jehovah and Abraham in the Jewish Bible, the god of the Aztecs promised them a far-off land that was already inhabited. From their inception both the religion of the Aztecs and the Jews incorporated genocide into their divine mission here on earth. The eagle, cactus, and snake grace the Mexican flag until today. Religion and warfare are part of the founding experience of both peoples.

The Old Testament’s account of Abraham’s covenant with Jehovah was clear: the Jews would become a mighty nation and inhabit their promised land in exchange for worshipping Jehovah as their one and only god. If they failed to keep their side of the bargain, Jehovah would revoke their right to the land of Israel. Some strict Orthodox Jews argue that the Jews failed to worship their god and were duly punished first by the Babylonians and later by the Romans with the destruction of the First and Second Jewish Kingdoms.

Every other world religion emerged as the religion of a particular people. Hinduism elaborated a complex caste system that rigidly structured society from the Brahmins to the untouchables and venerate India as a deity. The Prophet Mohammed established the leadership of the caliphs, defined Muslims as a people (*umma*), and elaborated complex rules (*sharia*) regulating food, business, marriage and divorce, pilgrimage, and daily worship. Today ISIS, the Islamic Brotherhood and many other groups are waging holy wars to expel America, European, Russian, and Chinese occupiers of their sacred lands.

In China, Confucianism is again becoming a national religion that places China at the center of the world and relegates all other peoples and nations to various states of barbarism. Shinto likewise is the national religion of the Japanese people.

Why did the attempts of Jesus and Buddha to sever this ancient bond fail?

Christianity as taught by Jesus was strictly other-worldly and apocalyptic. “My kingdom is not of this world” — Jesus stressed and demanded that his followers render to Caesar what belonged to him and to God what is His. The core teaching of Jesus was his imminent return. In Matthew 24:34, Jesus consoled his followers with the promise to return quickly. “Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” As a result, he instructed his followers to leave their wives and children, give what they had to the poor, and come follow him. The things of this world, such as government, economics, laws, and warfare had no place in his otherworldly teachings.

But this otherworldly Christianity was unable to sustain itself when it became evident to the followers of Jesus that his “imminent” return had been indefinitely postponed. Like a head without a body, the Christian community struggled to keep the faith. In the person of Emperor Constantine, this bodiless head encountered a headless body, the declining Roman Empire. Christianity proved its mettle at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 when, under the sign of Christianity, Constantine defeated his rival for the throne. The Christian head infused a divine mission into the decaying body and the Roman Empire enjoyed a new life. Constantine and later a host of European emperors, kings, dictators, and presidents, harnessed the Christian faith to their (this-worldly) national and imperial goals.

Buddha also taught an otherworldly religion that had held enlightenment as the ultimate goal of human existence. Like Jesus, Buddha rejected Hinduism’s this-worldly concern, with its rigid caste system and myriad laws regulating every aspect of daily human life, as illusions and obstacles to achieving enlightenment. But just as the teachings of Jesus were coopted by European kings, emperors, presidents, and dictators, so the teachings of Buddha were adopted by the kings of the nations and empires of South Asia, Tibet, and Sri Lanka (Theravada Buddhism). Today we see Buddhist monks taking the lead in violent crusades against Christian missionaries and Muslim minorities in support of Buddhist Thailand and Myanmar. Only in northeast Asia (China, Korea and Japan) did Buddhism manage to retain its otherworldly character by leaving the affairs of this world to the prevailing Confucian and Shinto governments.

Do world religions threaten the survival of the human race in the 21st century?

In his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington prophesied that the 21st century would be one of clashes between at least six religious-rooted

civilizations: Western Civilization (Western Europe and the USA), Orthodox Christian (Russia and others), Hindu, Sinic (Confucian China, Korea, and Vietnam), Buddhist (South Asia, Tibet, and Mongolia), and Muslim. The age of the nation-state is over; fasten your seatbelts for a wild clash of civilizations. Without natural borders like the other civilizations, the Muslim world is in conflict with all its neighbors. From the Muslim regions of Thailand, Myanmar, China, and the Philippines in Asia to colonial created half-Muslim and half-Christian states of Africa, and between the Muslim migrants to Europe and the USA, Islam is at war with its neighbors.



Detail from "The Battle of the Milvian Bridge"
(painted 1520–24) by Giulio Romano

Nuclear-armed Muslim Pakistan and increasingly Hindu India under the BJP (Hindu Nationalist Party) have been at war for almost a century over the province of Kashmir. Nuclear Jewish Israel threatens to destroy any Muslim neighbor that threatens its survival. Increasingly Orthodox Russia is pushing back at Western expansion into its civilizational territory, and Christian America and Western Europe are currently at war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Nigeria, and elsewhere to resist the Muslim drive to restore the lost unity of the Islamic world and the leadership of a single caliph.

Each civilization and religious-based people that seeks to restore its once great but now lost greatness cites its holy books and history as justification. Muslim fighters cite the great victories won by the prophet Mohammad and the early caliphs over pagans, Jews, and Christians as justification for their wars to expel "Crusaders and Jews" from their sacred lands and so-called "terrorists" take this struggle to Europe and the world. Osama bin Laden wrote that he organized 9/11 to show his opposition to the stationing of American (Christian) troops in Saudi Arabia, the protector of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. The supporters of Israeli Dr. Baruch Goldstein compared his 1994 massacre of 29 worshippers in a Hebron mosque in the occupied West Bank to God's instructions in Judges 2:2-3, "And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars ... (for they are) thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you."

As long as religions were armed with swords, chariots, and bows and arrows, religious warfare was limited. But today nuclear bombs, chemical and biological warfare, and man-made epidemics put the entire human race at risk. All world empires have been inspired by some form of national destiny but when this destiny becomes infused with a divine purpose there is no compromise with the enemy.

Has the time come to found a new religion?

The objective of my course, "World Religions and Global Conflict," is to force my students to take a long, serious and hard look at Christianity and the other world religions. Students of theology and all thinking followers of world religions must confront both the genetic propensity of humanity toward violence and warfare and seriously ask if Christianity and the other world religions are so compromised by violence that they are no longer salvageable.

Has the time come to junk Christianity and found a new religion? Can Christianity still be salvaged and made serviceable for the myriad of issues that confront humanity in the first decades of the 21st century? New times demand new religions.

For thousands of years, hundreds of millions of ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Aztecs, Mayas, Germanic and Celtic peoples, and Indians worshipped gods, erected temples, composed sacred writings, elaborated legends, and performed rituals. Today these are all dead religions. New movements such as Pentecostal Christians, Mormons, and the Unification movement labor to salvage Christianity and adapt it to the 21st century by tinkering around the edges.

But is Christianity so deeply and fundamentally corrupted by violence that even these heroic attempts to adapt the faith are doomed to failure? Futurists like Huntington predicted and newspaper headlines confirm that warfare in the name of religion is the wave of the present and future. Is humanity fated to extinction in the name of God?

Dr. Ronald J. Brown is a professor of history, political science and ethnic studies at Touro College and teaches courses in world religion at Unification Theological Seminary. A docent at the New York Historical Society with degrees from Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the University of Geneva, Switzerland, Brown is the author of A Religious History of Flushing, Queens; Into the Soul of African-American Harlem; and How New York Became the Empire City.