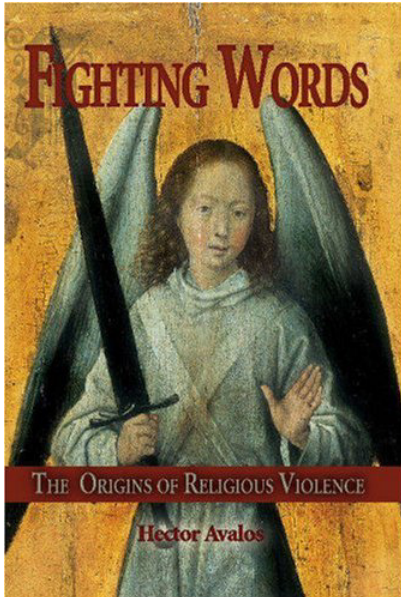


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Avalos, Hector

Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence

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Hector Avalos is an angry man, and well he should be. So should be a lot more of us in biblical and religious studies around the world. Hector Avalos has seen the monster, named the monster, and observed how the monster has ravaged our world psychologically and spiritually for the last three millennia. The monster is that old Israelite story that lies at the root of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That monster has shaped the history of our Western world, and particularly of biblical and religious studies, in an enormously destructive way; indeed, it has wreaked havoc and provoked violence everywhere it has made its pervasive presence felt.

Hector Avalos should be enraged. It is understandable that he has undertaken, almost single-handedly, to bring this monster down. Last year he published *The End of Biblical Studies* (Prometheus, 2007; see Peter D. Miscall's review in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4.2). There he argued aggressively that biblical studies as we have known that discipline must end because it perpetuates the false notion that the old Israelite story from the Hebrew Bible has lasting constructive effect for our day and everyday, while the truth is that it has always been and is today a specifically destructive lie.

Much of the firepower Avalos brings to bear on this issue is appropriately motivated. The difficulty with Avalos's approach, however, lies in the fact that he has chosen to use a 8-gauge elephant gun filled with fine bird shot to blast scatter loads of pellets at the broad side of this monster. He needs to get himself a Winchester or Remington 270 with a scope, and hollow point cartridges, so he can narrow his aim precisely upon the vital points of vulnerability in this huge historic hulk he wants to hit and hurt mortally.

The monster Avalos is out to get is the myth of God as warrior engaged in a cosmic conflict, the battlefield of which is human history and the human heart. He is after all forms of religion that derive from this old story and from all other sources of religion. Now it is clear that human beings have not needed the metaphors of this myth to trigger and excuse quick resort to war, copying the proclivity of the god of the Hebrew Bible to solve all ultimate impasses by ultimate violence. History is strewn, East and West, with the refuse of dead soldiers, civilians, and civilizations, brought down by the human lunge for ultimate solutions, which always take the form of massive indiscriminate violence and often genocide. Take, for example, the broad sweeping mayhem of Tammerlane and Genghis Khan in their days, and Hitler and the Imperial Japanese of the last century, to say nothing of the religious wars in Hinduism and the less known deadly local scraps all round the world throughout all time.

However that may be, the god of the Hebrew Bible's culture of violence is a paranoid psychopath who really believes there are cosmic evil forces that are out to get him and undo his work in creation and history. To perpetuate the notion that there is in the fabric of history this kind of destructive divine enterprise prompts people to emulate that god and model his violent solutions to all the significant problems of life. Sick gods make sick people, and that makes Avalos mad (see my *Understanding Religious Experience* [Praeger, 2007] and *Radical Grace* [Praeger, 2007]). It should make us all mad. Avalos wants to signal the claim that religion promotes and perpetuates such a sick society, and thence come wars and rumors of war. Avalos wants to get rid of the Bible and biblical traditions. He thinks they are sick and sickening. In large part he is right (see my *The Destructive Power of Religion, Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [Praeger, 2004, updated 2007], also my *Understanding Religious Experience*, [Praeger, 2007]).

Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence has four parts and seventeen chapters. It is replete with a fine introduction and conclusion, has a thousand-entry bibliography, and includes all the required indexes. The author and publisher have both taken this volume seriously. They prepared it wisely and packaged it well.

Avalos's chapter titles tell the story of his book: theories of violence in the premodern and modern world; special theories of religious violence; scarce resource theory in research,

religion, the Bible, and early Christianity; academic defense of religious violence in the three Abrahamic religions; violence in twentieth-century dictatorships; and ethics, policy, and solutions to human violence. This is not just another book about religious violence, but rather a book presenting a bold new theory to account for it.

Avalos has a right to speak on these issues. He is associate professor of religious studies at Iowa State University, executive director of the *Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion*, former editor of the *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion*, and author of four books on biblical studies and religion. Violence seems to be everywhere these days, much of it associated with the energies and drivers religions incite. It would be easy to say that only the radical religionists, fundamentalists of all sorts everywhere, are the cause of that violence, but that closes the eye to the realities of history: a narrative of religion-induced violence everywhere in the world. Add to that the secular reasons for violence and war, and we are faced with a universal historical narrative since time immemorial in which the dominant theme is killing, mayhem, and abuse. Tragically, the Hebrew Bible sets a model for this.

Avalos's new theory argues that the roots of violence run deep from the very nature of religion itself. Most violence is the result of real or perceived scarcity of desired resources. He asserts that religions create new scarcities on the basis of unverifiable and illusory criteria. By analyzing the texts of the three Abrahamic religions, Avalos explains that four scarce resources have always caused religiously incited violence: sacred space; sacred scriptures and their interpretation; sacred certifications (group privilege); and salvation. The Christian Crusades were about possession of the sacred space of the Holy Land. The violence between orthodoxy and heterodoxy arises from claims as to whose scriptures or interpretations are the more sacred. When outsiders cannot attain the special privileges of "ordained" insiders, tension and violence are likely to arise between the privileged and the left out (for example, the plight of homosexual persons at the Lambeth Conference currently in progress in Canterbury). Dissension, alienation, and even violence have often arisen over the question of who is going to be saved and by whose rubrics.

Avalos argues that if we condemn nonreligious violence over scarce resources (Darfur) to be immoral, how much more horrid is the induction of violence by religions' "alleged scarcities which cannot be proven to exist!" What makes him enraged is the fact that so many modern scholars of religion maintain the value of sacred texts despite the violent and destructive impact of the metaphors and myths of those texts upon persons and society. His criticism is important.

One might argue, as I have, (*The Destructive Power of Religion*, 2004, 2007; and forthcoming *The Healing Power of Religion*, 2009) that Avalos misses an important point

when he asserts that the violent side of the old Israelite story and of religions in general is the only or at least dominant side of the emphasis and role in human experience afforded by religions. I have argued that, from a psychospiritual perspective, the watershed determinate of the quality and authenticity of any religion lies in the answer to the question: Will it bury your child. That is, does the kind of spirituality your religion affords you assure that when you must lower your own dead child into the cold bleak darkness of the empty tomb, you have some quality of life left? Can you go forward without abject depression, desperation, and despair? The old Israelite story has a prominent other side to it than the side of the warrior God. That is the narrative of the God of radical, unconditional, and universal grace.

Avalos's argument misses the grace theme, by which poetry, metaphor, and myth people have been able to live and die well, even when Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning could not carry the ball through pain and grief. Avalos acknowledges my perspective on this matter (86) and agrees that there is no reason to claim that such a thing as ontological evil exists in the world and that there is no evidence for a transcendental cosmic conflict. However, he argues that my claim for the authenticity of the biblical message about a God of grace is unverifiable, and hence simply "aids and abets the enemy," so to speak, feeding the monster and keeping it alive:

Scholars such as Ellens represent the continuation of an apologetic approach to religious violence. Religious violence is acknowledged but seen as unrepresentative, while "the real God" is described as being distorted by the human portrayal of violence. As we shall show, all religious view points about the role of religion in violence perpetuate or endorse the very fundamental elements that create the violence; otherwise they do not recognize the elements that are responsible for the violence. In this case, speaking of "the real God" is simply trading one hegemonic view of God for another, with neither being verifiable. (86)

Avalos is correct in his assessment here, except for the negative implication of the term "hegemonic," which might better have been "dynamic." The entire substance of the rest of Avalos's learned and highly readable volume is an attempt to verify the claim that all religion produces violence because of its inherent scarcity-inducing nature and to demonstrate the ways in which religions create scarcity, scarcity creates enmity, and enmity creates violence.

He is right about a number of things. First, he is correct in his implied notion that religious claims of all sorts are largely unverifiable by the positivist rubrics of empirical rationalism and the scientific methods of the Enlightenment. Second, he is correct in his implied notion that religious models of God's nature and function are psychospiritual

projections of human insights upon an imagined transcendental entity, about whom we do not know how to converse very precisely. In the final analysis, nobody knows what the word *God* means or for what it stands, (personhood, agency, energy, mindfulness, causality?). Thus, we are always forced to resort to metaphor, image, myth, analogue, and allusion if we undertake to say anything at all about the divine (in concept or as reified ontological entity).

However, there are a number of flaws in Avalos's argument as he unfolds it. First, he seems to assume that, because the two points I have just made are true, God does not exist and religion is a sham, devised by power people to exercise power destructively. He has overlooked the crucial fact that, given the intimations available to us for a creative source inducing the existence and nature of the material world, and given the intimations available to us of a spiritual reality existing behind parapsychological experience, he must adduce an infinitely greater body of data to rule out God's existence than I must adduce to rule it into my hypothesis, for the sake of argument. Atheism is the least verifiable posture in all of philosophy. Avalos has not verified it. He simply claims it as his foundational assumption. He seems to be an incurable positivist and foundationalist, a position that has been successfully challenged by almost all major philosophers for the last half century (see N. Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* [Eerdmans, 1976]; and A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* [Oxford, 1974]).

Second, Avalos seems to assume that because *the Bible* is used as a religious text it is, therefore, a monolith of teaching, perspective, or literary content. That is, of course, far from the truth. Anyone who has read the Bible with careful attention and honest perception has observed that there are within it (1) a great variety of different kinds of literature; (2) a great variety of perspectives upon history, God, spirituality, and religion; (3) some awful stuff that one would hope a child would never encounter; (4) serene passages of creative imagination, consolation, and poetic perception without peer in world literature; (5) poisonous passages that can only wreak mayhem in the human spirit and our social fabric; (6) commandments that are erroneous; (7) enticements that are destructive; (8) philosophical notions that are patently false; (9) ancient *dicta* that are no longer relevant; (10) and insights of grace that can make a person or a culture civilized and a thing of beauty.

Sometime around 1900 the Methodist bishop Oxnam observed that the God of the Old Testament is a big bully and in no sense the God of grace and mercy that we see in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. Avalos seems to affirm that much and a lot more. The problem is that such a perspective is not a significant commentary on the Bible, but it is an important commentary on Bishop Oxnam and others who would hold his view. It is a

clear indication that Oxnam never read the Old Testament, or at least did not know how to read it, and had missed all the passages of grace, healing, and beauty.

Third, Avalos will likely feel that such “romantic” observations on my part are not precisely addressed to his point. He wishes to argue that, regardless of the poetic beauty and creative consolations of religion, the very existence of and adherence to religion sets up a psychosocial order in which his four forms of scarcity are inevitably created. Without conceding his claim I should like to point out that if his claim is true and if this is a reason to dump all religion, then he must be logically consistent and dump his role as professor at Iowa State University, his role as Executive Director of the CSER, and his identity as former editor of *JCSR*. These changes in his life are necessary because each of these roles represents his location in a hierarchical system. Hierarchical systems inevitably create scarcity of sacred space (his office of which others do not have equal use), of sacred message and/or interpretation (his authoritative word on the organization and the articles he chooses to publish in his journal, leaving others out), of sacred certification (while he is in the power positions described others cannot be), and of salvation (if he is right, then I am wrong: he is saved and I am unsaved). Scarcity is not uniquely the product of religion. It is the result of any organizational structure.

Fourth, scarcity is not the only thing religion creates. Some forms of religion create the opposite: fullness and enrichment for adherents, without destructive and prejudicial consequences regarding others. This seems to be the thrust particularly of Rom 8, 1 John 1–3, and a host of other descriptions of biblical spirituality.

Fifth, Avalos fails to distinguish between religion and spirituality, a crucial distinction for our discussion and a universally acclaimed distinction in the world of religious discussion in this postmodern era. Religion is the formal structure that spirituality takes in expressing itself: ritual, dogma, confessional documents, theological arguments, organizational structures, institutions, and programs of action. Spirituality is the inner dynamic of every human that moves along the trajectory of our irrepressible quest for meaning, of any kind and every kind. It seems that Avalos is addressing the former but not taking much account of the latter, the driving force behind religious formulations, institutions, and programs.

Sixth, Avalos’s intense pursuit of the monster religion, as he sees it, is in fact an urgent spiritual quest on his part. His religion is, consequently, taking the form of atheistic formulations, dogma, institutions, programs, confessional documents (of which this book is a fine one), theological arguments, and rituals. Thus religions are not the only structures that create programs of violence. If there were ever a destructive monster afloat

in our society today, it is the politics-ridden world of the Academy. Let Avalos chase the God-damned monsters of scarcity and violations of human beings there for a while.

Seventh, in his intense religious pursuit of monster religion, Avalos is missing the key issues. (1) It is not necessary to prove the existence of God to have truth that works. (2) William James was quite right in taking the pragmatic, phenomenological, and heuristic approach to this matter of both spiritual and religious truth and reality. (3) The truth of any religion is in the evidence of how it works: constructively or destructively. If it is destructive, as in the case of most fundamentalisms, it is erroneous, and about that Avalos is quite right and has done us a great service in pursuing that monster. He is not as alone in this as he seems to believe. (4) If a religion or form of spirituality is not psychosocially or psychospiritually destructive, but instead affords the inspiration, motivation, energy, and vision to create civilized and wholesome institutions, programs, rituals, thought content, confessional statements, and relationships, it is not a monster but quite the constructive alternative. Avalos seems to have overlooked this.

Eighth, if formulating a notion of God produces this latter kind of constructive force in society, it is its own warrant as operational truth. Whether it is precisely the ultimate statement, definition, or description of transcendent ontological reality is beside the point. Humans have no criteria for what can possibly be ultimate, transcendent truth about ontological reality. All we can do is work with analogues and analogies. When they work, they are their own truth-warrant. One hundred and twenty centuries of human beings have been able to sort out “the garbage from the gospel” in the Bible, with sufficient success that some in each generation matured into people of grace who saw the divine beauty in life, cherished one another as they perceived God cherishing them, and buried their dead with civilized dignity and enduring consolation. That works. So there is more to be said about religion than Avalos dreams of.