In the introduction to his book *Is Religion Dangerous?*, Keith Ward makes the following eminently sensible remark: “If you do not know what ‘religion’ is, you can hardly decide whether it is dangerous or not” (Ward 9). Ward discusses the notorious difficulty of defining religion, and notes that the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of religion would apply not only to Christianity but also to belief in Superman and the Constitution of the Labour Party. Ward then drops the subject, however, returning to it in chapter 1 only to say, “At last, having discussed and then side-stepped the almost insuperable difficulties in saying what a religion is, I can get around to the question of whether religion is dangerous” (Ward 27).

My contribution to this volume is to say “No, you can’t.” If Ward’s first, sensible remark is true—and it is—then his second remark is nonsense. You simply cannot side-step the question of what religion is and then go on talking about religion as if we all know what you’re talking about.

“Oh, no,” some readers are now thinking, “not a tedious, hairsplitting argument about the definition of religion. Every concept has some fuzzy edges, but if we stop to try to get a precise definition of every concept, we’ll never get anywhere.” The problem with arguments about the violence of religion, however, is not that their implicit definitions of religion are too fuzzy; the problem is that they are unjustifiably clear about what counts as religion and what does not.

A glance at the table of contents of this volume illustrates this point. The following are treated in the second section, which is apparently a catalog of the major religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, and Chinese Popular Religion. The list itself, which reflects a substantivist conception of religion, is fraught with difficulties. Why include
Confucianism, when it is often considered a philosophy, not a religion, and the Chinese government explicitly excludes it from Document 19, the official list of religions in China? (Beyer 175-77). Why include Shinto, when the developers of Shinto from the late nineteenth century to World War II emphatically denied that Shinto is a religion? (Thal 100-11). Even more problematic than what is treated as religion in this volume is what is not. There are no chapters on the violence of, for example, Marxism, nationalism, or capitalism, despite the enormous body of scholarship (functionalist conceptions of religion) that regards these and many other ideologies and institutions as religions.

The planners of this volume have clearly opted for a substantivist conception of religion over a functionalist one. In the first section of this chapter, I will suggest why substantivist conceptions of religion fail, and why functionalist definitions are also ultimately inadequate. In the second section, I will give a history of the concept and show that what counts as religion in any given context depends on how power is configured in that context. In the third section, I will argue that substantivist views of religion—and the idea that they have a peculiar tendency to violence that is absent or diminished in “secular” phenomena—are produced by and help reinforce a certain configuration of power, that of the modern, secular nation-state. The idea that religion causes violence in fact normalizes certain kinds of secular violence.

This chapter is only a very brief summary of arguments I make at much greater length in my book The Myth of Religious Violence (Cavanaugh). For that volume, my editor at Oxford University Press advised me to drop the “scare quotes” around the word “religion,” to keep from cluttering the text. I will mostly follow that practice here too, though the following section should make clear why scare quotes are warranted.
I. Why no one seems to know what religion is

Substantivists regard religion as a basic, transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, and what counts as a religion can be determined by examining the substance or content of beliefs and practices. Substantivists generally restrict religion to beliefs and practices that make central something like “God” or “gods.” Despite the absence of God or gods from many forms of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, these make substantivist lists of religions by broadening the category of religion by substituting for “God” or “gods” some more inclusive term like “transcendence” or “the supraempirical.” The problem is that the more inclusive the term, the harder it becomes to exclude things that substantivists want to exclude. “Transcendence,” for example, though originally a term specific to Judeo-Christian ideas of a Creator God, can be made vague enough to include not only Judaism, which has such a God, but also Buddhism, which has no such God. The vaguer one makes “transcendence,” however, the less is it possible to exclude things like nationalism from the category. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a better candidate for transcendence than the “imagined community” of the nation. Why does Shinto make the cut, but other types of nationalism do not? Similarly, “soteriology” is sometimes offered as a term inclusive enough to encompass the list of religions in this volume, but if made broad enough to include both Christianity and Confucianism, it is hard to imagine on what grounds Marxism could be excluded. How about “supraempirical”? As Timothy Fitzgerald points out, all values are supraempirical, including supposedly secular ones like freedom (Fitzgerald 12). Even if one were to come up with a convincing and accepted definition of religion that would include Islam and Confucianism and Shinto and exclude nationalism and capitalism and Marxism—a feat of ingenuity no scholar has yet accomplished—it would not necessarily tell us anything interesting about the world, or about violence in particular. As William Arnal has said, we might be able to come up with a way to separate things that are blue from things that are not blue (a
much easier task than defining religion, it seems), but that would not in itself justify having departments of Blue Studies in universities (Arnal 27-28).

For these reasons, many scholars prefer a functionalist definition of religion, which is more inclusive. Functionalists base definitions of religion not on the substance or content of a belief system, but on the way it functions, the social, political, or psychological tasks it performs in a given context. Functionalist definitions of religion can be traced to sociologist Émile Durkheim, who observed that many different things could be treated as sacred by a society. Religion refers to the sacred, and the sacred is whatever serves as the symbolization of communal solidarity. It does not matter that the flag is not explicitly worshiped as a god; as long as it functions as a sacred object of veneration in a given society, it is considered a religious object (Durkheim 46, 154-74).

Functionalist accounts have the advantage of being based on empirical observations of people’s actual behavior, not on claims of what people believe in some unobservable mental state. If a person claims to believe in the Christian God, but never darkens the door of a church and spends most waking hours obsessively following and playing the stock market, then Mammon may be what actually functions as the focus of that person’s religion. As the mention of Mammon makes clear (see Mt. 6:24), observation of this phenomenon is not new to Durkheim; in the Bible it is called “idolatry.” In the wake of rolling blackouts in California in 2001, one of the architects of the deregulation plan that caused them was quoted in the New York Times expressing his faith that “free” markets always work better than state control: “I believe in that premise as a matter of religious faith” (Berenson 6). Why not take him at his word? Functionalists contend that nothing is gained by insisting he is only speaking metaphorically. Indeed, what is lost is a key insight into why people behave the way they do. There are all sorts of ideologies and institutions—free market capitalism, for example; see Robert H. Nelson’s Economics as Religion (Nelson)—that people treat as absolutes and to which they sometimes sacrifice resources, toil,
common sense, and even lives. To restrict such ideologies and institutions to the substantivist list of
religions given in the second part of this volume is arbitrary and incoherent, and does as much to
occlude as to illuminate the sources of violence in our world. Those who insist on studying violence
under the rubric of religion will be on much firmer ground if they accept a more inclusive view of what
counts as religion.

Emilio Gentile’s book *Politics as Religion* is one example of this approach. The Italian political
scientist writes that a “religion of politics” is religious insofar as it is “a system of beliefs, myths, rituals,
and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the
destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity” (Gentile xiv). For Gentile, a religion of
politics is different from a theocracy, in which an explicit god is worshipped. In a religion of politics, a
nation-state or party serves as the “supreme entity” to which all else is subordinated. Communism and
fascism are examples; the literature on Marxism as religion is extensive. But Gentile also examines the
“civil religion” of democratic nation-states, such as the United States. Here too the scholarly literature is
extensive, especially in the wake of Robert Bellah’s famous 1967 article “Civil Religion in America,” in
which Bellah identifies “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America” that “has its
own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does”
(Bellah 21). Carlton Hayes’ 1960 book *Nationalism: A Religion* had already examined how public
Christianity in the West has been largely replaced by the sacralization of the nation as the central object
of worship (Hayes). More recently, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle have written “nationalism is the
most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries” (Marvin and Ingle
767). For Marvin and Ingle, the transfer of the sacred from Christianity to the nation-state is seen most
clearly in the fact that legitimate violence has passed from Christendom to the nation-state. Christian
denominations still thrive in the U.S., but as semi-private affairs. They are not publicly true, “[f]or what
is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for” (Marvin and Ingle 769). This ability to mobilize violence is what makes civil religion the most powerful religion in the United States.

If one insists on studying violence under the rubric of religion, therefore, it is simply unjustifiable and unhelpful to exclude things like civil religion or nationalism from this volume. Most American Christians would recoil from the idea of killing on behalf of Jesus Christ under any circumstances, and yet most Americans consider organized slaughter on behalf of the nation—or perhaps on behalf of some ideal like freedom—as sometimes necessary and laudable. The United States currently spends over $600 billion a year on its military, more than all the other nations of the world combined. To ignore the ideologies that make this possible only distorts any examination of the violence of “religion.”

II. Histories of religion

Functionalism helps us to see the fatal problems with substantivist accounts of religion, but functionalism has problems of its own. In the first place, it casts the meaning of religion so broadly that the term does little real analytical work. “Religion” becomes the name of any ideology or institution that people take seriously enough to kill for. In the second place, insofar as functionalists assume that religion is a transtistorical and transcultural phenomenon, functionalism suffers from the same essentialism from which substantivism suffers. One includes more things in the category than the other, but both assume that religion is out there, a basic feature of human life.

A more fruitful approach is one being taken increasingly by those who have examined the history of the category. Religion exists, but only as a constructed category. It is a category constructed in different ways in different places and times, and according to different modalities of power. Rather
than trying to decide once and for all, as an essentialist would, whether Confucianism is a religion, it is much more potentially fruitful to examine history and analyze why Western scholars in the nineteenth century categorized Confucianism as a religion, and why Chinese nationalists at the same time emphatically denied that it was (Beyer 174-75). Why do some deny that Marxism is a religion, and others affirm that Marxism is a religion but U.S. nationalism is not? What configurations of power are authorized by naming some things religious and other things secular?

It is necessary to examine the history of the concept of religion, and note that the religious/secular dichotomy as we know it is a modern, Western creation. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's landmark study *The Meaning and End of Religion* demonstrated that in the premodern West and in non-Western cultures previous to contact with the West, there was nothing equivalent to what we think of as religion, as a discrete human activity separable from culture, politics, and other areas of life (Smith 18-19). The ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Aztecs, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese all lacked an equivalent term for religion, because it was not something separable from other areas of life. It would be nonsense, for example, to ask whether the Aztecs' bloody human sacrifices were “religious” or “political”; there simply was no such distinction. The ancient Romans employed the term *religio*, but it covered all kinds of civic duties and relations of respect that we would consider “secular.” As Augustine says in *The City of God*, “Religion (*religio*) is something which is displayed in human relationships, in the family (in the narrower and the wider sense) and between friends; and so the use of the word does not avoid ambiguity when the worship of God is in question. We have no right to affirm with confidence that religion (*religio*) is confined to the worship of God, since it seems that this word has been detached from its normal meaning, in which it refers to an attitude of respect in relations between a man and his neighbor” (Augustine 373).
Although Augustine did use the term *religio* to refer to worship of God, it was a relatively minor concept for Christians, in part because it did not correspond to any significant biblical term. The Vulgate New Testament used the word only six times, for several different Greek terms. In the medieval period no one ever wrote a treatise on *religio* (Smith 32). The primary use of the term was to distinguish religious from secular clergy, that is, clergy that belonged to orders from diocesan clergy. This is the meaning religion had when it entered the English language. In 1400, the religions of England were the various orders—Benedictines, Dominicans, etc. A secondary use of *religio* in the medieval period was to refer—as in Aquinas’ scheme—to one of the nine subvirtues attached to the cardinal virtue of justice. In this sense, *religio* approximated “piety,” but only as a bodily habit embedded in a complex set of practices within a Christian social order. *Religio* was not a universal genus of which Christianity was a species, it was not a system of beliefs, it was not merely interior to the human person, and it was not something separable from politics, economics, and other pursuits deemed “secular” in modernity (Cavanaugh 64-69).

The concept of religion as a universalized and interiorized human impulse, expressing itself in beliefs held on a non-rational basis, and essentially different from secular pursuits like politics, is a creation of Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, Herbert of Cherbury, John Locke and many others contributed to the creation of a religious/secular distinction into which all human activities should be divided. The creation of religion was a product of the great early modern struggle between civil and ecclesiastical authorities for power in Europe. Whereas medieval Christendom had seen the civil authorities as something like the police department of the Church, in the early modern period civil authorities were largely successful in curbing ecclesiastical power and establishing the modern reality of state sovereignty. Key to this process was the confinement of the Church’s proper area of concern to an interiorized human impulse called “religion” that is essentially
distinct from politics, the proper concern of the state. For Locke, for example, religion was a matter of “opinion” not adjudicable by public reason. Locke wanted a sharp separation between the “outward force” of the state and the inward persuasion of religion, which is the province of the church. “The end of a religious society... is the public worship of God and, by means thereof, the acquisition of eternal life. All discipline ought therefore to tend to that end, and all ecclesiastical laws to be thereunto confined. Nothing ought nor can be transacted in this society relating to the possession of civil and worldly goods” (Locke 22-23). Locke does not appear to think that his attempt to “distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion” (Locke 17) is involved in the creation of something new. He sees himself as trying to separate two essentially distinct types of human endeavor that have somehow gotten mixed up together. The church, whose business is only religion, has overstepped its boundaries:

The church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies, which are in their original, end, business, and in everything perfectly distinct and infinitely different from each other (Locke 27).

In fact, Locke was witnessing a very new configuration of power, the birth of the modern state, which was proving that the boundaries were anything but fixed and immovable. Locke’s claims that they are essentially fixed gives legitimacy to the new order by making it appear natural. It is crucial to note that substantivist definitions of religion and the idea that the religious/secular boundary is fixed and immutable are themselves part of the new configuration of power that comes about with the birth of the modern state. Religion appears not as what the church is left with once it has been stripped of earthly power, but as the timeless endeavor to which the church’s pursuits should always have been confined. We might want to say that the modern separation of church and state is a good thing. But we should not ignore the way that the term “religion” carries not merely descriptive but normative power. The invention of religion is part of a new configuration of power, the modern Western state.
This is true also in the application of the term “religion” to non-Western cultures in the process of colonization. In their initial encounters with the non-Western world, European explorers reported, with remarkable consistency, that the natives had no religion at all (Chidester 427-28). Once colonized, however, the category “religion” became a powerful tool for the classification of native cultures as essentially distinct from the business of government. “Hinduism,” for example, a term first used in 1829, became a religion in the course of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that it encompassed the entire Indian way of life, everything we would include under culture, politics, religion, and economy. Frits Staal has concluded, “Hinduism does not merely fail to be a religion; it is not even a meaningful unit of discourse” (Staal 397). The classification nevertheless proved extremely useful. If, under British rule, Hinduism was a religion, then to be Indian was to be private, and to be British was to be public. This is why many contemporary advocates of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva)—especially the powerful Bharatiya Janata Party—reject the classification of Hinduism as a religion. As Richard Cohen writes, “The proponents of Hindutva refuse to call Hinduism a religion precisely because they want to emphasize that Hinduism is more than mere internalized beliefs. It is social, political, economic, and familial in nature” (Cohen 27). It was for similar reasons that Chinese nationalists denied that Confucianism and Taoism were religions.

In her book *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa concludes “This concept of religion as a general, transcultural phenomenon, yet also as a distinct sphere in its own right... is patently groundless; it came from nowhere, and there is no credible way of demonstrating its factual and empirical substantiality” (Masuzawa 319). It is not quite right to say that it came from nowhere, however. It came from the West, and it came as part of an entire system of colonization. Daniel Dubuisson calls religion “the West’s most characteristic concept, around which it has established and developed its identity” (Dubuisson 6). It is not merely that the religious/secular divide characterizes the
Western way of organizing the world, but this divide has been characterized not as parochially Western but as universal. As Dubuisson argues, “We should...avoid describing as universal values that the West alone has invented. Since their domain is always fundamentally one of conflict, these values would effectively become universal only when all the others had been destroyed and eliminated—by us” (Dubuisson 21). The characterization of Western values as universal makes them normative and declares other social arrangements to be abnormal or primitive. Again, as we found in Locke, the invention of a transhistorical, universally valid religious/secular distinction is itself part of a new creation of—sometimes violent—power.

III. Power and the religious/secular distinction

Substantivist conceptions of religion are not simply neutral descriptions of reality, but part of the creation and expansion of the power of modern Western nation-states. This does not necessarily mean that all uses of the religious/secular distinction are malignant. There are many benign uses; I think, for example, that having religious studies departments in state universities is a good thing, because it sometimes allows a space for theology to happen there (to the horror of some observers). But how the religious/secular distinction is used and what types of power it authorizes should be carefully scrutinized. This is especially the case when the substantivist view of religion is employed in arguments that religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence. Such arguments play a key role in Western society in the marginalization of certain discourses and practices, and the authorization of others. Sometimes such arguments are even used to authorize violence against those deemed “religious.”
In domestic life in the United States, the substantivist idea that religion causes violence has played a key role in shifting the dominant mode of jurisprudence from what Frederick Gedicks calls “religious communitarianism” to “secular individualism.” Well into the twentieth century, religion was cited in Supreme Court cases as having a unifying social effect. Beginning in the 1940s, however, religion came to be seen as a potentially dangerous and divisive social force. The first U.S. Supreme Court decision to invoke the myth of religious violence was *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940), which upheld compulsory pledging of allegiance to the American flag. Writing for the majority, Justice Felix Frankfurter invoked the specter of religious wars in denying the Jehovah’s Witnesses the right to dissent from patriotic rituals. “Centuries of strife over the erection of particular dogmas as exclusive or all-comprehending faiths led to the inclusion of a guarantee for religious freedom in the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, and the Fourteenth through its absorption of the First, sought to guard against repetition of those bitter religious struggles by prohibiting the establishment of a state religion and by securing to every sect the free exercise of its faith” (*Minersville* 593). Such free exercise does not apply to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in this case, however, because their dissent threatened the “promotion of national cohesion. We are dealing with an interest inferior to none in the hierarchy of legal values. National unity is the basis of national security” (*Minersville* 595). “What the school authorities are really asserting is the right to awaken in the child’s mind considerations as to the significance of the flag contrary to those implanted by the parent” (*Minersville* 599). The Court would reverse itself three years later, but Frankfurter had succeeded in introducing the idea that First Amendment decisions could be made against a backdrop of some unspecified history of “bitter religious struggles,” the antidote to which is the enforcement of national unity. In the succeeding decades, the myth of religious violence would be invoked by the Supreme Court in case after case, in decisions banning school prayer, forbidding voluntary religious instruction on public school property, forbidding state aid to parochial school teachers, and so on.
In dissent from the 1963 *Abington* decision forbidding school prayer, Justice Potter Stewart famously warned that the decision would be seen “not as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of a religion of secularism” (*Abington* 313). Stewart had already noted the long history of government religious practice in the U.S., including the fact that the Supreme Court opened its sessions with “God save this Honorable Court.” In their concurring opinion in *Abington*, however, Justices Goldberg and Harlan addressed this objection by drawing a sharp line between patriotic invocations of God and “religious” ones.

There is of course nothing in the decision reached here that is inconsistent with the fact that school children and others are officially encouraged to express love for our country by reciting historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence which contain references to the Deity or by singing officially espoused anthems which include the composer’s professions of faith in a Supreme Being, or with the fact that there are many manifestations in our public life of belief in God. Such patriotic or ceremonial occasions bear no true resemblance to the unquestioned religious exercise that the State has sponsored in this instance (*Abington* 307-8).

Goldberg and Harlan offer no reason why patriotic invocations of God bear no true resemblance to religious invocations. But it is clear that what separates religion from what is not religion is *not* the invocation of God. God may be invoked in public ceremonies without such ceremonies thereby becoming religious exercises, provided such ceremonies express “love for our country.” Separating religion from non-religion in this case depends not on the presence or absence of expressions of faith in God, but on the presence or absence of expressions of faith in the United States of America. My point here is not to take exception to the decision in this case, but to show how the myth of religious violence is invoked to marginalize certain “religious” practices while simultaneously promoting American civil religion.

The myth of religious violence has also been found useful in foreign policy, to justify secular violence against religious Others, Muslims especially. Bernard Lewis, for example, who has been called “perhaps the most significant intellectual influence behind the invasion of Iraq” (Weisberg) invokes the myth of religious violence in his 1990 article “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” which has been praised by
Dick Cheney. It was that article that originated the term “clash of civilizations” that Samuel Huntington would popularize. According to Lewis, the West has learned to tame the violence of religion, but the Muslim world has never learned to assimilate the blessings of secularism. The current result is the clash of civilizations between the secular West and a Muslim world that cannot abide the separation of religion from politics. The classification of Islam as a religion, and the application of the Western assumption that religion is something essentially distinct from politics, immediately marks Islam as inherently problematic, an “abnormal” religion.

In the article, Lewis considers many possible explanations for Muslim resentment of the West – colonialism, support for Israel, support for oppressive regimes like the Shah’s, etc. – but dismisses them all in favor of “something deeper that turns every disagreement into a problem and makes every problem insoluble” (Lewis 7). That something deeper is religion.

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both (Lewis 13).

The myth of religious violence thus allows us in the West to shrug off any specific grievances that the Muslim world might have about U.S. relations with the rest of the world. We may overlook, for example, the American- and British-engineered coup that installed the Shah’s brutal, and secularist, regime in 1953. In explaining the oppressive nature of the Islamist regime that has ruled Iran since ousting the Shah in 1979, we prefer to attribute it to the volatility of the “mixture” of religion and politics. Malignant forms of Islamic theology are no doubt implicated in the theocracy that now rules Iran, but the popularity of those theologies cannot be understood without a hard look at the secularizing violence of the Shah and his Western sponsors. Universalizing the religious/secular distinction, however, can cast a convenient fog of amnesia over the history of Western involvement in the Muslim
world. The myth of religious violence can thus become a justification for the further use of violence. We will have peace once we have bombed the Muslims into being reasonable.

IV. Conclusion

Although I could cite many such examples, the point is not that substantivist arguments about religion and violence are part of a conscious conspiracy to legitimate violence. The point is rather that such arguments, willy-nilly, direct attention toward the violence of actors and ideas labeled “religious” and away from the violence of actors and ideas labeled “secular,” without any good reason for doing so. There is good reason to direct our attention to the violence of Islamist militants, and to explore the roots of such violence in interpretations of sacred texts. But there is also good reason to direct our attention toward the other roots of such violence in reactions against secularist violence. We should indeed examine the historical circumstances under which jihad or the concept of Christian martyrdom can produce violence. But we should also examine the circumstances under which belief in the invisible hand of the market or belief in the United States as liberator or belief in the worldwide necessity of secular social order can produce violence. The groundless religious/secular distinction is in reality a form of Orientalism that causes us to regard Western social arrangements as normative and inherently unproblematic. We in the West love the myth of religious violence because it provides us with an irrational Other to contrast with our noble rationality. Doing away with this blind spot would level the playing field so that so-called “secular” violence would come under equal scrutiny.

Of what use, then, is the Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence? Although I have only seen the table of contents and have not read the other essays in the volume, I am sure that there is much interesting and valuable empirical work in them regarding when and how certain kinds of ideologies and
institutions promote violence. Insofar as they employ a substantivist definition of religion, however, I fear that the analysis will be hobbled by the term “religion.” It is not helpful to try to find the genetic code for violence in a category that was constructed as non-rational and violent from the start. The structure of the volume as a whole furthermore promotes the impression that there is a peculiar set of beliefs and practices—Christianity, Buddhism, etc.—that have a dangerous tendency to fanaticism and violence that is absent or tamed in “secular” social structures. Killing for the flag gets a pass, and the volume is easily recruited into secularist self-congratulation.

One solution would be to open the volume up to a functionalist conception of religion, and include essays on Marxism, capitalism, nationalism, liberalism, and the like. If that were done, however, it would probably be best just to jettison the problematic term “religion” and publish it with the title *Blackwell Companion to Ideologically-Inspired Violence*, or some such. The marketing people at Blackwell would not be pleased. So, if the volume as it is presently titled is not to be a bad idea, I would suggest a resolutely historical approach to the question of religion and violence, examining the history of the term “religion” itself and the kinds of work it has been made to do in different contexts. One chapter would examine, for example, when and how Shinto became a religion, and what kinds of power have been authorized by both the denial and the affirmation of Shinto as a religion. Another would examine what kinds of violence are done by the classification of Islam as a religion, and therefore as an abnormal religion. Another would examine the debate over American civil religion and explore the types of violence that are either authorized or questioned by labeling Americanism as a religion.

And now you know why I was not asked to edit this volume.

References


