



# Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence

By Jon Pahl

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**Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence** By Jon Pahl

It is widely recognized that American culture is both exceptionally religious and exceptionally violent. Americans participate in religious communities in high numbers, yet American citizens also own guns at rates far beyond those of citizens in other industrialized nations. Since September 11, 2001, U.S. scholars have understandably discussed religious violence in terms of terrorist acts, a focus that follows U.S. policy. Yet, according to Jon Pahl, to identify religious violence only with terrorism fails to address the long history of American violence rooted in religion throughout the country's history.

In *Empire of Sacrifice*, Pahl explains how both of these distinctive features of American culture work together by exploring how constructions along the lines of age, race, and gender have operated to centralize cultural power across American civil or cultural religions in ways that don't always appear to be "religious" at all. Pahl traces the development of these forms of systemic violence throughout American history and focuses an intense light on the complex and durable interactions between religion and violence in American history, from Puritan Boston to George W. Bush's Baghdad.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

In this scholarly but generally readable monograph, Lutheran Theological Seminary professor Pahl traces the confluence of violence and religion in the United States. He argues with scholars who situate religious violence largely outside of American borders, claiming instead that it is a recurrent feature in the formation and development of the United States. Pahl emphasizes the ways in which, throughout U.S. history, the notion of sacrifice has rendered killing justifiable and even holy. Building on the work of theorists like René Girard and Mark Juergensmeyer, Pahl lays out four historical case studies—about youth, race, gender, and capital punishment—to develop his theory: Americans have found ways to consider blessed some rather brutal attitudes and behaviors... in patterns that are identifiably religious. His examination, in the epilogue, of the fusion of Christian symbols with military domination in the war on terror, while no longer a unique idea, is more extended and nuanced than most. Particularly helpful is Pahl's term innocent domination, describing a cultural attitude that champions violent systems while remaining convinced of its own virtuous intent.

(Feb.)

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Review

"*Empire of Sacrifice* is the most broad-sweeping scholarly examination of religion and violence in the United States written to date."

-Jeffrey Williams, *American Historical Review*

"By uncovering the many ways Americans have misused religion to justify violence, Pahl holds up hope to end the histories of dead men walking. His work contributes to a more peaceful, forgiving, loving and just future for America."

-Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of *Dead Man Walking*

"*Empire of Sacrifice* is a provocative and engaging work of cultural criticism worth reading for the questions it poses about religion and violence as categories, and for the many intersections of the two it finds in places where either religion or violence or both are hidden in plain sight." -Jonathan H. Ebel, *The Journal of American History*

"Pahl intends his work as a call to take up the opportunity missed after 9/11, to 'shape a remarkable global consensus against religious violence.' This work's basic paradox is that religions 'produce violent power' but exist ultimately to 'eliminate violence.' That paradox captures the troubling message but hopeful conclusion to the work." -CHOICE

"An astute indictment of four centuries of American violence." -Dan McKanan, *The Journal of Religion*

"A true achievement of *Empire of Sacrifice* is its untangling of the 'blissful logic' that preserves American virtue at all costs. Illuminating the cultural and religious assumptions that justify subtle and not-so-subtle

forms of violence, this book invites a healthy self-critical stance on American civil religion and social practices. After reading *Empire of Sacrifice*, it is impossible to avert one's eyes to the disturbing, complicated confluence of religion and violence in American culture." -Jennifer Beste,Xavier University

"Pahl exquisitely illuminates the pathway by which religion has made possible American empire and poignantly sketches those who have had to sacrifice to create the superpower we know today. *Empire of Sacrifice* is an admirable experiment in pulling back the curtain on the religious and cultural mechanisms that are often lost in what Pahl calls our national obsession with 'innocent domination.' His case studies are finely tuned windows into the ways in which religion has both abused and freed Americans along lines of gender, race, and class. This book acts as a clarion call for us to think twice when we are called upon to 'sacrifice' in the name of God—a strategy that all too often hides our violence in the cloak of religion." -James K. Wellman, Jr.,author of *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest*

"[This book] is a wide-ranging, amply detailed, and ethically intelligent book with clear political stakes." -*Rain Taxi*

"*Empire of Sacrifice* is a thought-provoking work, sure to join other scholarly considerations of religious violence . . . the book will assist anyone interested in learning more about the religious roots of contemporary violence in American national policies." -Rebecca Moore,*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*

#### About the Author

**Jon Pahl** is professor of the history of Christianity at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of many books, including *Paradox Lost: Free Will and Political Liberty in American Culture, 1630-1760* and *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place*.

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**Haley Thacker:**

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