

The American Way of Religion and Violence?

John D. Carlson
Arizona State University

Within the academy and many sectors of public life, preoccupation with religion and violence mushroomed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In response, many scholars now claim that religion has been unduly singled out for its violent propensities, thereby obscuring just how violent secular actors and institutions have been. Drawing upon recently published scholarship, this paper takes up three positions that show how this debate both illuminates and ignores the unique history, formation, and identity of the United States. One approach to this topic considers whether there is a distinctively American rendering of this problem—an American way that religion and violence intertwine, converge, or take form. Another approach examines how religion and violence have been indispensable instruments of what sometimes is loosely called the “American way”—the character, ethos, and place in the world that many ascribe to the United States. Still another approach reaches very different conclusions than either of these positions. In reconciling these positions, it turns out that what we mean by *religion* and *violence* makes all the difference in the world.