

# Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics (Encountering Traditions)

*Ted A. Smith*

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## WEIRD JOHN BROWN



**Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics**

**TED A. SMITH**

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#672245 in Books Smith Ted a 2014-11-26 2014-11-26Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.00 x .70 x 6.00l, .0 #File Name: 0804793301221 pagesWeird John Brown Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics | File size: 70.Mb

**Ted A. Smith : Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics (Encountering Traditions)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics (Encountering Traditions):

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Wierd?By j a haverstickThe title comes from a contemporary Walt

Whitman poem referencing Brown. If you check a 19th cent dictionary or two, as I did, Webster's and Worcester's, you'll discover that the basic definition of the word at that time was "supernatural" (that was surprising to me given how the word has changed in the last 80 or so years). And that is exactly Smith's point. Brown's justification was divine, a stepping beyond the earthly. This loosens up the conversation which for a century has focused on the either/or. Either Brown was a terrorist or patriot. Both these judgements assume the legitimacy of state-only violence. Hence Brown was either advancing the interests of the state or he was attacking its foundation. We need to step outside this box, in Smith's opinion, and ask about the legitimacy of his raid from a suprapolitical point of view. To really respond would take me fifty pages and I'm not going to do it here. Basically, however, I agree. As Smith puts it an unforgettable phrase, any contemporary state - or at least the USA - is in fact "the congealed violence of the past". I have great admiration for the limitations of the state as expressed in the social contract theory to which we in this land appeal as our foundational theory (Locke, Jefferson). Obligation of the citizen ceases at some point when the state itself has broken the contract. Most people, most of the time, don't face a moral choice about this, but sometimes we do. Smith also shrewdly points out that on the street our society has itself gone a long, long way in legitimizing extrastate violence in recent decades: open carry laws, Blackwater, stand your ground, secret renditions and much more. The state itself has made the state-only model passe. If you're ready for a long and detailed read on a profound subject that may challenge your moral reasoning (or confirm it as in my case) you might read this book. Once you get going, you can start to speedread, but much of the thought is closely argued and I couldn't do this as much as is my custom. The thinkers with whom Smith engages are familiar to me at second hand only, though I taught ethics (in the philosophy dept) most of my life... (Frankfurt School and all that if you're in the loop). But Smith makes it clear what issues are involved and so you don't have to be an expert on, say, Benjamin, to get Smith's point. You'll like it if you're an academic and you'll profit from it if you're not but are willing to work.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars  
By Customer  
An important book

Conventional wisdom holds that attempts to combine religion and politics will produce unlimited violence. Concepts such as jihad, crusade, and sacrifice need to be rooted out, the story goes, for the sake of more bounded and secular understandings of violence. Ted Smith upends this dominant view, drawing on Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, and others to trace the ways that seemingly secular politics produce their own forms of violence without limit. He brings this argument to life and digs deep into the American political imagination through a string of surprising reflections on John Brown, the nineteenth-century abolitionist who took up arms against the state in the name of a higher law. Smith argues that the key to limiting violence is not its separation from religion, but its connection to richer and more critical modes of religious reflection. *Weird John Brown* develops a negative political theology that challenges both the ways we remember American history and the ways we think about the nature, meaning, and exercise of violence.

"It is simply the best thing I have read this year, and it is the one book that I am now insisting that my colleagues read." William T. Cavanaugh, in *Marginalia*  
"Smith offers a major contribution, a courageous and fruitful theological move in discussing racial wounds and the possibility of a new community no longer marked by the bitter legacies of slavery." Keri Day, in *Political Theology Today*  
From the Back Cover "John Brown is perhaps the most polarizing figure in America's past, 'the stone in the historian's shoe,' as scholars have acknowledged. Ted Smith's *Weird John Brown* removes the stone, as it were, and reframes the debate. It examines Brown on Brown's own terms, from the perspective of political theology. A brilliantly original and compelling book, it offers a new way to understand Brown, and its fresh insights on almost every page resonate deeply in a post 9/11 world."--John Stauffer, Harvard University  
"Ted Smith has given us something that heretofore has not existed, a very sophisticated philosophical and theological reflection on John Brown and the question of divine violence. Smith not only analyzes the shortcomings of ethical reasoning and moral vision locked within an immanent frame against the backdrop of the complexity of John Brown, but he also explores the racial unconscious embedded in the American political unconscious in ways both refreshing and convincing. This book teaches John Brown. It gives us a John Brown restored to his preeminent place as a mirror of the dilemmas of an American world, a white world that has forgotten we exist in God's world."--Willie James Jennings, Duke University  
About the Author Ted A. Smith is Associate Professor of Preaching and Ethics at Emory University. He is the author of *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice*.