The phrase religious violence often brings to mind dramatic events: the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, riots in India between Muslims and Hindus, etc. In fact, he concludes, the Crusades and the Thirty Years War did as much or more in undermining the long-term prospects for peaceful coexistence as some of the most notorious events of the modern world. Any examination of the relationship between war and religion should begin with a study of the immediate origins of the religious wars of recent times, but it is also true that the modern world and the contemporary experience of religious conflict both owe in important ways to the Christian past. Medieval Europe was one of the most violent eras in human history, and religious war was a part of that. The Crusades, which the modern world often romanticizes as a noble and virtuous undertaking, were in fact one of the most destructive and demoralizing events in European history. The Thirty Years War, which is often portrayed as a purely religious conflict, was in fact a war of religious war, involving the most advanced military technology of the time and leading to the deaths of millions.

Accurate historical understanding is the first step toward a more effective understanding of the modern world. The modern world is not the work of some inevitable historical forces, but the product of human actions in the past. The study of the past is not simply an academic endeavor, but an essential part of the task of building a more peaceful future. The history of religious war and conflict is not just a matter of recounting the events of the past, but a means of understanding the present and planning for the future. It is only by understanding the past that we can hope to build a world that is free of religious war and conflict.