

Fia Gani

What We Don't Call It

Critical Essay

There are words for nearly every form of prejudice modern society claims to reject such as racism, ableism, and classism. These terms give injustice a distinct look and make it easier to confront. However, one of the most powerful forces driving global conflict still moves without a name. Across history and into the present, belief has created invisible barriers between people, determining who may live safely and who may not. Over time, those divisions have fractured nations, justified wars, and taken countless lives. And centuries later, the world is still bleeding. The difficulty in breaking this pattern is not just in the violence it causes, but also in the lack of language surrounding it. Sociologists have noted that, unlike racism or sexism, there is no single, generalized term used to describe prejudice based on religion (Clarke and Davie, Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion). The terms that do exist all fall short. *Religious discrimination* functions primarily as a legal category, useful in courtrooms. *Religious intolerance* is unclear and passive, softening harm into mere disagreement. *Sectarianism* applies narrowly to conflicts within a single religion. Group-specific terms like *antisemitism* and *Islamophobia* recognize real, serious histories of hatred, but they can't describe the larger system that uses belief to categorize, exclude, and justify harm.

This lack of language matters because belief in itself is not dangerous. Belief does not come carrying weapons. It started as stories people tell themselves about how the world works and why they are in it. For most of human history, belief existed on an individual level. It guided morals, rituals, and meaning. It did not require borders, enemies, armies, or mass graves. The violence only begins when belief is forced to carry weight it was never meant to hold. Belief does not demand attention, and it certainly does not come with guidelines on who deserves to suffer.

Once belief is tied to power, it stops answering questions and becomes a symbol of loyalty and threat. It becomes a shortcut for deciding who is trustworthy and who is dangerous. Instead of asking who someone is, belief is used to decide what they are. At that point, belief no longer explains the world. It organizes it. It defines whether they are allowed to exist safely within it. People are not judged by their actions, but by the stories attached to them – without bothering to know them. It becomes efficient, and efficiency is dangerous. Political scientists and historians have shown that religion is rarely the root cause of war, but it serves as one of its most effective tools. Karen Armstrong, a scholar of religious history, argues in *Fields of Blood* that conflicts labeled “religious wars” are usually driven by power, land, or survival, with belief providing moral cover instead of actual motivation. From the medieval Crusades to the modern conflicts in the Middle East, belief is repeatedly transformed into armor, and used to give *war* a sense of moral justification. Belief makes conflict feel justified, and religion offers something powerful: righteousness. It frames aggression as defense and suffering as necessary sacrifice. Wars that aren't actually about faith learn to speak its language anyway, as

belief sounds ancient and unquestionable. Wrapped in belief, violence appears as an obligation rather than a choice. This is not because belief demands blood, it is because belief is persuasive when power needs an excuse. In other words, belief does not start the fire, but it makes the flames look holy.

Modern conflicts still follow this pattern. Even in the twenty-first century, religion is often used to justify displacement, violence, and exclusion. Political agendas are disguised in sacred languages. Borders take on a divine quality, and claims become eternal. Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer describes this as “cosmic war,” where ordinary political disputes are elevated into battles between good and evil. Once a conflict reaches this level, peace becomes nearly impossible because the enemy is no longer just wrong but immoral.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt warned that when ideology goes unnamed, it becomes easier to accept. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she explains that ideas gain strength when repeated without clear identification or questioning. This means that when discrimination becomes familiar, it stops standing out. This helps explain why belief-based prejudice persists across generations and conflicts. Without language to identify it, the logic behind religious conflict begins to feel reasonable, even inevitable. And what feels inevitable is easy to excuse and even easier to repeat.

The most troubling aspect of this pattern is how unnecessary it all is. Belief does not need to act as a border. It does not have to determine who belongs or who is safe. In many human interactions, belief is irrelevant. People can coexist without shared beliefs. Violence only begins when belief is absorbed into systems of control, and divides life itself between those guaranteed safety and those pushed to blockade and erasure.

Unless belief-based prejudice is clearly named, it will continue to escape examination. It will continue to be dressed up as moral disagreement, and belief will keep being used as the weapon it was never meant to be. The world does not bleed because people believe different things. It bleeds because belief is allowed to decide whose lives matter. Until that mechanism is unveiled, history will keep repeating itself, and belief will remain one of the most powerful and least questioned tools of division we have.

Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951.
- Armstrong, Karen. *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.
- Clarke, Peter B., and Grace Davie, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. 4th ed., University of California Press, 2017.