

Religion 264: Religion and Violence

Professor Michael Sells

The course is divided into three areas of inquiry, that are pursued simultaneously throughout the semester: case studies, modalities of religious violence, and the class project (violence and peace, apartheid and diversity in Herzegovina).

Case Studies Include:

- Religious nationalism and "Ethnic Cleansing" in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
 - The globalization of Wahhabism and the Taliban (including the interrelated religious extremism in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and the U.S.).
 - Hindu religious nationalism, ayodhya, and the gujarat massacres.
 - Jerusalem in radical ideologies.
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The Modalities area is centered upon role of sacred text and sacred models in the channeling, motivation, and justification of conflict, persecution, and aggression. A list of seven paradigms for violent ideology is given below. We will be discussing others as well.

1) The Jealous God. Monotheistic foundation texts (The Bible and the Qur'an) contain an embedded polemic against idolatry, syncretism, and religious plurality. Some have suggested that this conflictual view of religion makes monotheism, by nature, intolerant. What are the texts and examples of such thinking? What examples can we find of efforts within monotheistic traditions to deny or accept this syndrome as an issue, and to offer an alternative understanding of monotheism.

2) Blessing Rivalry. If only one son (Cain or Abel, Isaac or Ishmael, Esau or Jacob) can be blessed and given legitimacy, how can the descendants of both live together in full acceptance.

3) Purity. Religious violence frequently justifies itself through ideologies of purity. Purity laws (in Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism especially), concern with adulteration of religious identity, the horror of miscegenation in orthodox Hindu dharma texts; the comparison of idolatry to "whoredom" and the relation of such passages to "religious cleansing," "ethnic cleansing," and misogyny.

4) The Innocent Martyr and collapse of primordial or past time into the present: the most known example is the passion of Jesus Christ which, when ritually recalled or re-enacted can place the worship into the event in a "collapse of time," leading to extraordinary emotive power and mass psychology. Another example is the passion of Husayn. Both can be used for peaceful purposes or, as in case of persecution of Jews, to motivate and instigate violence against those alleged to be guilty.

5) Competition for Sacred Space: The phenomenon needs little initial explanation. Examples. Temple Mount/Harem ash-Sharif, Ram Temple/Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Bishop Peric's claim concern the Careva Mosque in Stolac.

6) Pilgrimage and Territoriality: Like all religious rituals, pilgrimages can generate intergroup solidarity or warfare, depending upon circumstances. We will focus on the role of pilgrimage in mobilizing, financing, organizing, motivating, and justifying the annihilation of the religious other.

7) Collapse of the Future (eschatological or apocalyptic time) into the present. This paradigm centers on the belief that one is at the end time and fighting the anti-Christ, Dajjal, or other cosmic evil, represented in religious nationalism or racism, as a particular nation, religion, or race. Those acting in such a scenario are willing to carry out the most extreme acts (which are almost always mild by comparison to what is described in some of the eschatological texts. One writer, Mark Juergensmeyer, has argued that this eschatology-in-a-state-of-realization is the guiding ideology behind all the post Cold War forms of

religious terrorism.

8) Eschatology: Heaven and Hell. The notion of eternal punishment can affect a dehumanization of those believed to thinking or acting in ways that will be damned, leading to torture to make them repent and to inquisitions to keep them from leading others to eternal punishment. The play upon a desire for finality, perfection, and bliss can be used to motivate human beings to commit acts they would not normally contemplate, acts that can be either life-affirming or life-destroying. Though some allowing a deity or supreme being to punish sinners is more compassionate or peaceful than taking the punishment on oneself, historical examples suggest that the issue is more complex.

The Class Project focuses upon the Herzegovina region of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has been roughly divided between areas controlled by Serb and Croat religious nationalists. We will discuss the efforts to annihilate the non-Orthodox or non-Catholic peoples and heritage in these two areas of control, and the efforts of Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and other non-nationalists to resist the religious apartheid, reconstruction the interreligious heritage, and create a pluriform society.

We will study the war-crimes, the individual war-criminals, and the religious leaders who supported them and continue to support them, as well as the specific individuals and religious leaders resisting the violence and the ways they have developed to support a pluriform society based upon civil democracy, tolerance, and a shared tradition of religious pluralism. Special attention will be paid to the areas of [Stolac](#), [Zitomoslici](#), [Pocitelj](#), [Mostar](#), Trebinje, and Medjugorje.

Requirements of the course include a final, 15 page page paper (which will count as 50% of the final grade); faithful participation and attendance; a group project on a case study with individual reports and oral presentations; and a report on participation in the class project. The reports on the group project and the class project may be integrated into html formats and, with the permission of the student, may form part of web sites posted and linked from Michael Sells' Balkan Human Right and War Crimes page and/or a future Religion 305 report on religion and violence, with special attention to the cases studies.

Readings. The tripartite division of the class makes it difficult to align readings exactly with both case studies and class project. For this reason, the student will need to be able to have at least two "tracks" of readings, sometimes three, proceeding at the same time. A tentative syllabus of readings will be posted at a later date. Note: this is an intensive class at the advanced level.

The reading assignment due on September 16 are:

Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 1-76

Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, 1-155

[Stolac Web Page](http://www.haverford.edu/relg/sells/stolac/stolac.html): <http://www.haverford.edu/relg/sells/stolac/stolac.html>

Required Books: We will be discussing and reading passages of the required books in class. Everyone will need to have access to a copy of a book. However, the readings at some point will become expensive, so in certain cases it will be feasible for two people to share a book, in which case they will make sure each has time to use it and will be read to share it during the class hour. This provision should only be used in specific cases (up to four of the required books). Because *The Bridge Betrayed* will be used constantly throughout the course as a source for the class project, each student should have a copy (all royalties, approximately \$1 per book, will be donated to programs for interreligious peacebuilding in Herzegovina). Other required books include:

- Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*
- Peter Partner, *God of Battles*
- Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth*
- Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*
- Gavin Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*

- Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*
 - Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*
 - Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth*
 - Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*
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