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Professor Bivins has also published articles, book chapters, review essays, and pieces on religion, politics, and culture in the United States. He has increasingly published on theory and method in the study of religion. Professor Bivins’s next book on religion and politics is a study of the centrality of claims of victimization in American conversations about public religion. He is also writing a volume on Jack Kirby, the legendary comic-book artist.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- Professor Biography .................................................. i
- Course Scope .............................................................. 1

LECTURE GUIDES

- **Lecture 1**
  - Religion and Violence: A Strange Nexus ................................. 3

- **Lecture 2**
  - Defining Religion and Violence ........................................ 10

- **Lecture 3**
  - Violence in Sacred Texts .............................................. 17

- **Lecture 4**
  - Martyrdom, Sacrifice, and Self-Harm ................................. 26

- **Lecture 5**
  - Scapegoating and Demonology ........................................ 36

- **Lecture 6**
  - Understanding Witch Trials ............................................ 46

- **Lecture 7**
  - The Apocalyptic Outlook ............................................. 55
Lecture 8  
Racial Violence and Religion ........................................ 64

Lecture 9  
Religion and Violence against Women ............................. 74

Lecture 10  
Sexuality, Morality, and Punishment ............................... 85

Lecture 11  
Heresies and Their Suppression ..................................... 93

Lecture 12  
Religion and Just War Theory ....................................... 101

Lecture 13  
Peace as a Religious Ideal ........................................... 111

Lecture 14  
War Gods and Holy War ............................................. 118

Lecture 15  
Religious Violence in Israel ......................................... 126

Lecture 16  
Religious Violence in India ........................................... 136

Lecture 17  
Religion’s Relationship with Slavery .............................. 147
Lecture 18
Native Americans and Religious Violence ........................................ 156

Lecture 19
Violence and “Cults” ..................................................................... 165

Lecture 20
Anti-Catholicism in Europe and America .......................................... 173

Lecture 21
The Persistence of Anti-Semitism .................................................... 182

Lecture 22
Islam, Violence, and Islamophobia ................................................ 191

Lecture 23
Religion and Terrorism .................................................................. 201

Lecture 24
What We Can Do about Religious Violence .................................... 211

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography .................................................................................. 220

Image Credits .............................................................................. 232
THINKING ABOUT
RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

The persistence of religious violence in the modern world is one of the greatest conceptual and practical challenges our societies face. As recently as 50 years ago, increases in social opportunity, education, and tolerance led many to predict that violent religious actions would soon be relegated to the past. Not only did such predictions fail to become realities, religious violence has actually increased rather dramatically since the 1970s. Terrorist actions dominate our thinking, but religious violence also extends to legal or social coercions, defamation or misrepresentation, and practices of self-harm.

This course explores some of the factors involved in these developments by looking to the history of religious violence, its multiple manifestations, its scriptural justifications, and how its perpetrators perceive the world. Only by understanding the roots, causes, and circumstances of religious violence can we grapple with it intellectually and practically. These lectures treat the topic not as something resistant to analysis, but as a recurrent religious impulse that can be decoded, interpreted, and understood through comparison.

We’ll begin by looking at the power of religion and violence individually and separately. If religion is about absolute truth and authority, then violence is sometimes understood by actors as necessary to realize or defend said truth. This conceptual tension is at the heart of violent religion’s antagonism toward particular institutions, laws, practices, and persons.

From there, we’ll spend several lectures exploring some of the most common housings for religious violence. First, we’ll look at the sacred texts of multiple traditions to see which images and languages are cited to justify violent actions. From there, we’ll look to martyrdom and self-harm, and then turn to several historically recurring themes: demonology, scapegoating, witch trials, and apocalypticism.
Next, we’ll see how religious violence is used to construct and police other kinds of identity, specifically race, gender, and sexuality. From there, we’ll examine the legal and institutional reality of heresy courts. A trio of lectures compares how religions think about and enact wars.

The course then shifts to a series of case studies, including slavery and the persecutions of religious traditions like Native American religions, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and so-called cults, as well as violence within these traditions. The course also looks at the complex challenges of interreligious violence in modern nation-states like India and Israel. The course concludes by engaging perhaps two of the greatest challenges this subject presents: religious terrorism and how we can respond to religious violence in our time.

We’ll use multiple sources to assemble a wide range of themes and cases that collectively can help us understand religious violence from multiple perspectives. Such understanding is good in itself, but also a valuable resource for reimagining the world.
The religious violence of today has roots that extend back to ancient times—but it’s inseparable from modern realities. In spite of its longevity, it’s a 21st-century challenge and can’t be dismissed as simply the result of archaic thinking and traditions. This course’s goal is to place modern-day religious violence in proper context so that we can make sense of it. We’re going to spend some time considering important historical examples of the religion-and-violence nexus; however, our goal is not simply to review the past, but to mine it for insights on the present.
A COMPLICATED PROBLEM

♦ To take seriously the motivations of those who commit violence in the name of religion is to enter a world where mistaken identity, widespread generalizations, and sharp inter-group boundaries are common. The behavior of violent actors might seem wholly alien to us, but those who commit religious violence participate in a conceptual universe that has its own logic and often its own institutions, moral codes, and behavioral norms.
Given how complicated the issue is, an important question is this: Is religious violence really a problem to be solved or simply an inherent condition of humankind? Can we ever make any lasting progress in stamping out the human propensity to do violence to those who disagree with us?

There is evidence that we can. For example, homicide rates have declined significantly worldwide since the year 1300. Tolerance has increased in certain places around the globe, at least in fits and starts. In his influential book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, the psychologist Steven Pinker argues that we’ve gotten better at solving social problems and more comfortable living with cultural and religious pluralism, and are thus less likely to wage war on those who are different.

This course shares Pinker’s hope that our species can mend its ways, but he and his sympathizers overlook some important categories of violence—for example, institutional violence that bolsters racism, or perceptual violence that undermines the legitimacy of certain religious identities.

There have been increases in noteworthy measures of religious violence in the 21st century, such as the rise in Islamophobic and anti-Semitic incidents in the United States and Europe. Another concerning measure is the rise in religious terrorism.

As David Rapoport shows, until the period immediately after the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s, only 2 out of over 60 known terrorist organizations were religious. This changed rapidly, and by the mid-1990s, nearly half of all global terror groups were religious. According to the Terrorism Knowledge Base and the Global Terrorism Database, this percentage has dropped somewhat, but that is partly because of a general increase of the number of overall terror groups.

**SACRED/SECULAR BLURRING**

Since the 1960s, the boundary between the sacred and the secular has blurred consistently. We see this most obviously in the
resurgence of explicitly religious states. This includes states like the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Russia, which has seen a significant rise in religious nationalism. These are just two of many instances where religious identity fills the void left by regime change, whether with the overthrow of a secular authoritarian figure, the collapse of an entire state apparatus, or the end of colonialism.

♦ Sacred/secular blurring is even more acute in the rise of non-state religious actors. In Afghanistan, Egypt, Yemen, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and the Tamil Tigers have pursued often-violent actions outside shared conceptions of law, social order, and custom. The identities and communities that these groups cultivate reject shared norms as watering down the purity of their religious demands.

♦ A third area of sacred/secular blurring can be found in the rise of religious social movements focused on particular issues, like abortion, gay rights, or race. When such movements become antagonistic, they sometimes resort to intimidation, destruction of property, or even occasionally assault. They do so because they
believe the issues they pursue supersede the value of political stability or public order.

PROBLEMATIC FRAMING

♦ Two common ways of framing and describing the dilemma of religious violence are problematic. First, it’s become fashionable since the attacks of September 11, 2001, to revive a kind of Enlightenment-era anti-clericalism and to pronounce that all religions are inherently violent (except perhaps Buddhism). Many of the so-called New Atheists—thinkers such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins—claim that, whether we’re looking at fundamentalist Christians in the US, suicide bombers on the West Bank, or Hindu nationalists in India, religions keep us mired in backwardness.

♦ There is ample evidence of religions behaving in this way, but to generalize so broadly and flagrantly also overlooks the massive amount of good religions have accomplished, past and present. This dualistic mindset not only ignores complexity; it embraces caricatures of religion and secularism that are actually used by extremist religious actors to justify their actions.

♦ A second approach frames religious violence as the exception to the rule. This narrative understandably focuses on all that religions share between them and on the overwhelming majority of religious persons who reject the violence in their own and other traditions. This is the narrative of steadily increasing pluralism and tolerance, despite the persistence of violence.

♦ This course has far more sympathy for this narrative as a citizen and a scholar because it’s closer to reality and is a worthy aspirational model. But intellectual honesty and analytical consistency demand that we consider whether this narrative may be too confident in the progress of pluralism. It’s far from obvious that religious violence is just a deviation from the norm and not the product of a more fundamental problem.
THE GOAL

♦ This course’s goal is to get the viewer or listener to move beyond the two approaches discussed above. Its goal is to train ears to hear the complex music of religious violence and to widen eyes to view its many textures and all the things that shape it. Its goal is to make people more sensitive to religious violence because fear, sensationalism, and dismissal are dull, ahistorical, and not very helpful.

♦ This notion of sensitivity comes from a perhaps unexpected source: the British novelist Martin Amis. Amis once wrote, "Desensitization is precisely the quality that empowers the violent. … In the moments leading up to violence, the nonviolent enter a world drenched with unfamiliar revulsions. The violent know this.”

♦ Religious violence is often unexpected; it seems to exist in a decentered fashion, often with no obvious institutional face to which we can assign blame. It takes myriad forms, from the seemingly minor to the cataclysmic, in locations ranging from neighborhood houses of worship to arenas to mass transit. A vast number of factors have to exist in order for individuals to contemplate, plan, and commit these actions.

♦ Not everyone who is deprived of basic social goods is liable to join a terror group. Nor is every person who ranks their religious convictions over their political opinions a terrorist in waiting. It is unavoidable, though, that these actions—whether coordinated by a large organization like the Islamic State or by so-called lone-wolf actors—have a disproportionate influence beyond the small number of humans who approve of them.

♦ The political theorist Hannah Arendt once wrote that violence is the antithesis of true politics. It’s not certain that writing and teaching and talking about violence is a way of achieving some political reality where it’s less likely to actually occur. But that’s the hope of this course: not only giving relevant information and conceptual tools, but calling into question some of religious violence’s central tropes and images with the aim of reducing their power and of dissipating the atmosphere that Amis wrote about.
Those of us who want peaceful coexistence and cooperation should join in the learning, the understanding, and the development of alternate languages and concepts for coming to terms with religious violence. While it’s violent actors themselves who are responsible for what they do and the harm it creates, the responsibility for understanding violence lies with all those who would seek to put an end to it.

ONLINE SOURCES


“Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High,” http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/

SUGGESTED READING

Armstrong, Fields of Blood.

Pennington, ed. Teaching Religion and Violence.


Rapoport, ed. Inside Terrorist Organizations.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why is it important to understand religious violence, rather than simply to denounce it?

2. Why has religious violence increased in our time, despite advances in education and technology?
This lecture looks at different ways of recognizing and studying religion as a way of starting to make sense of religious violence. It introduces a range of key concepts. This will hopefully help shed light on the complexity and nuance of a wide variety of influences on religious violence—everything from religious scriptures to popular films.
IMAGINATION AND EMPATHY

♦ The study of religion is focused not on deciding which kind of religion is best and which is worst, but on understanding. That’s why empathy is a useful tool to start with. In colloquial terms, we’re all familiar with this virtue through certain pieces of folk wisdom, the most famous of which is the notion that to understand another person, one must walk a mile in her shoes.

♦ To experience empathy involves imagination. We imagine ourselves in another place, another time, and another body; we pretend for a while that our narrative is not our own but someone else’s. When we reenter our familiar time, place, and body, we do so transformed. When we use imagination and empathy to try to establish connections between different levels of awareness, we prepare ourselves for thinking about charged, complex subjects like religion and violence.

♦ This can be challenging, though. We can’t just dismiss unfamiliar worldviews and practices, even brutal ones, as crazy or fanatical. Whatever our reactions to them, they are as deeply felt as human feelings can be. They are the product of complex, historically entrenched, culturally inflected traditions of human meaning making. Before we can hope to change them, we need to understand them.

DEFINING RELIGION

♦ At the outset, it’s important to understand that people at different points in history have understood the term religion very differently. For example, the Roman author Cicero wrote in On the Nature of the Gods that divinities represent our attempts to personify nature, to put a human face to causes we don’t understand. Most classical or pre-modern conceptions of religion were quite local. Religion was what “we” did. It was an identity as much as a system of belief and practice.

♦ In the West, though, with the long process known as the Protestant Reformation, people started to wonder, “What kind of religion should I have?” Pretty soon it was a short step to asking, “Should I have any religion?” The people who wanted to ask this question were mostly
writers and philosophers, and they were among the first folks to take a look at religion from the outside. Thinkers like David Hume started talking about religion in a way that didn’t profess the faith but tried to figure out how religion arose, what made religious people tick, what religion did for them, and whether religion could stand up to tough critical questions.

♦ After this move was made, a range of new analytical approaches followed. The rationalists wanted to assess the value of truth claims. The empiricists wanted to know whether there’s any evidence for the things religions tell us. Later came anthropologists and mythologists, who want to understand religion by comparing its earliest expressions to the present. There are also functionalists, who want to concentrate on what religion does for people—the function it serves psychologically or sociologically.

♦ Many interpreters regard religion as a form of world building. According to this interpretation, a religion is really a mode of organizing social life around particular symbols, narratives, and behaviors. The sociologist Peter Berger once wrote that this world building allows us to hold together all of our most important ideas in a housing that religion constructs.

♦ He claimed that a religion teaches us what’s valuable, what’s important, and what to do in life. We project these ideas out there into society. This means that what we call “truth” is the product of human culture and conversation.

♦ Religion is clearly about much more than this. It can involve particular emotional states, artistic practices, bodily disciplines, special modes
of writing, and even specific kinds of meal preparation. However, this course focuses particularly on how religions shape perception and how they are understood by some humans as requiring the most horrific actions.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

♦ We still need to understand just what violence is, though, and that’s not as easy as it sounds. Conventional definitions of the term often focus on the physical use of force, one person or group violating the will of another, improper treatment, or the infliction of damage.

♦ This course’s understanding of violence focuses on the centrality of boundaries, both the physical ones of bodies and territories as well as the more abstract ones of identities and truths. Through the exertion of strength or the use of coercion, usually in an uneven engagement between hostile parties, boundaries grow shaky. Communities or individuals are provoked, threatened, or injured against their will. Denunciations or symbolic dehumanizations are used to undermine identity.

♦ Beyond boundaries, another key factor in religious violence is scale. Religious violence is expressed in individual and group conflict, all the way to the wider scale of nation-state and political order. Religious violence looks different at each of these different levels.

PERPETRATORS

♦ In almost all of the cases in this course, religious violence is motivated by the firm conviction that the perpetrators’ world is being threatened somehow. To have their world attacked is to have truth and purity attacked. The consequences they fear are that salvation and the divine will are going to be thwarted in the name of wickedness, apostasy, or cultic madness.

♦ The sociologist Émile Durkheim once wrote, in essence, that these convictions about purity and corruption are all thoroughly embedded in our social structures and habits. He meant that in religions small and large, the social and the sacred are basically identical to one
Defining Religion and Violence

Local customs, habits of thought, and worldviews all mutually reinforce each other. An example illustrates this.

♦ Puritan New England in the 17th century was more diverse than one might think. However, there was a shared sensibility that behind the visible world of the everyday was what Puritan theologian Cotton Mather called “the wonders of the invisible world.” The belief that demons and witches actually existed wasn’t separate from concerns about social class, rival neighbors, or sexuality.

♦ The supernatural beliefs fed into the social ones, and vice versa. When animosity, physical harm, or destruction of property lacked a tangible explanation, people invoked this other basic element of the socio-religious outlook: It had to be witches. Religious violence depends on such chains of conclusions.

♦ That sense of causal attribution, of naming one’s malefactor, is absolutely common to much of what we’ll be studying. It’s called *othering*. However, this is not the only factor. Religious violence can also be the product of institutional conflict, or of fears that the innocent are in danger, as with violent protests against reproductive rights. It can attack the failure of a marginal group to assimilate to the dominant context, which we see with violence against Jews in 19th-century Europe.

**THEMES**

♦ Underlying these different actions and goals, though, are several important themes that will recur throughout the course. First of all, one way of understanding how and why religious violence occurs is to focus on the before and after. Explosives usually need a spark to set them off; they don’t blow up on their own.

♦ Where we see sacred violence, we often find rapid social change, or a new mixing of cultures with competing worldviews, or secular institutions coming into conflict with religions that require strict fidelity to scripture, community, and behavioral norms. The Puritan example can be understood in this way, since the rise of mercantilism, social
mobility, and challenges to the authority of the Puritan magistrates were all changes underway in late-17th-century New England.

In short, when fervent believers feel that their identity is at risk, they may conclude that some kind of defensive action is justifiable, or even religiously necessary. Because salvation or purity are understood to be in question, religions that engage in violence often see their actions as justified. This kind of perception is especially prone to lock into place when violent religious actors are able to claim that worldly forces are blocking one of their crucial religious goals.
ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Hall, Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Are there important differences between religious and non-religious violence?
2. What is the relationship between physical harm and symbolic violence?
huge numbers of human beings have consulted sacred texts such as the Bible, the Qur’an, the Bhagavad-Gita, and others for inspiration, wisdom, consolation, and instruction. But these same texts also contain descriptions of violence and justifications for it, even if the majority of them spend most of their time on other themes. In this lecture, we’ll explore the special power and authority that sacred texts have for religious practitioners and how some people invoke their stories and images to legitimate violence.
 TYPES OF TEXTS

♦ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in particular, are built around the book and the law. Practitioners in these traditions consider their scriptures not only to be divinely inspired but to contain something of a historical record. In each of these texts, we see a great emphasis placed on certain primary, foundational religious experiences where the sacred is depicted as breaking into the everyday world.

♦ Other traditions have very different kinds of sacred texts. From about 1500–500 BCE, Hinduism produced the four compendia known as the Vedas. These have been interpreted as a collection of reflections on the nature of reality, the role of the gods, and proper ritual, combined with a series of incantations or hymns. They contain a great many instructions and religious formulae including descriptions of what the gods expect from us.

♦ The Vedic period gave way to an era that saw the creation of a second series of texts called the Upanishads, which means “secret wisdom.” Their focus on knowledge and awakening is understood
Thinking about Religion and Violence

to be extrapolated from the Vedas. There’s a lot of fascinating philosophical and mystical language in the Upanishads exploring the union between Brahman, which is conceived as a kind of totalizing divine energy that constitutes the substance of the universe, and Atman, the spark of the infinite dwelling in each of us.

♦ Buddhist texts present us with far fewer images and narratives involving violence and contain little in terms of wrathful sacred beings or holy wars. Indeed, they are far less narrative in their construction generally. Many Buddhist texts, like the Dhammapada, contain sayings of the Buddha.

♦ For many believers, sacred texts possess an ethical, behavioral authority that often cuts against shared political or cultural norms. Not all practitioners agree, of course, and this fact reveals how different groups of co-religionists quite simply read differently, whether they take the texts literally or allegorically.

♦ Some feel that mere literalism is an affront to God, since the sacred can’t be encompassed by a single dimension of meaning using the limited vehicle of language. Others, though, insist that sacred text has a singular force and is a vehicle for command morality. In this way of thinking, the text is a set of injunctions, a rulebook to be followed, and it is the measure of our fidelity. Falling short of what the text stipulates places us at risk. It’s this latter mindset that gives us a window into how the power and authority of sacred texts can condone or lead to violence.

BIBLE PASSAGES

♦ The lecture now turns to some passages of the Bible that may be familiar to you. In Numbers 11:10 of the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites complain about the manna that God has provided to sustain them in the desert. The text reads: “Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families … and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly.”

♦ We learn early in the Hebrew Bible that the God of the Israelites has very particular expectations for right conduct. In 2 Samuel 6:7, God
kills a man named Uzzah right where he stands just for touching the Ark of the Covenant to prevent it from falling to the ground.

We find similar notions throughout the New Testament. There’s still a range of human shortcomings and infidelities that might provoke divine anger, though there is considerably less imagery representing God as tyrannical or militaristic. Romans 1:18 further solidifies the link between the ethical and God’s anger: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”

The wrath of God in the New Testament focuses largely on unbelievers and doubters. Note Ephesians 5:6, which warns of “the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience.” And many passages foretell God’s separation of the wheat from the chaff, the good from sinners.

THE QUR’AN

In the Qur’an, Allah is represented consistently as loving and merciful. But one also finds passages where he is called an “avenger.” Most that do focus on wrath are concerned with defiance of Allah, as in Sura 90: “Thus they earned wrath upon wrath, and there is a humiliating punishment for the faithless.”

Allah destroys the cities of Ad, Thamud, and Lut because their people ignored repeated miracles and revelations of truth. But this wrath is also reserved for those who do not display mercy, compassion, and charity on earth. The Qur’an’s Sura 66, also known as Surah al-Tahrim, reads: “O prophet, strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh upon them. And their refuge is Hell, and wretched is the destination.”

The takeaway from this exploration of the so-called Abrahamic traditions is that religious violence—when it’s attributed to God—is a response to the violation of command morality. Right conduct brings rewards. Wrong conduct brings punishment. That much is common across religious traditions, but these monotheistic religions are also distinct in their emphasis on divine sovereignty and destruction. This
sense of cosmological high stakes is still very much alive for many contemporary violent actors.

HINDUISM

♦ Hindu gods are in some sense like those of other traditions in that they can be placated if believers avoid wrongdoing and bestow devotions on them. But in other ways they are quite singular, and Hindu divinity is exceedingly complex. Some gods are actually avatars of others, and some possess both demonic and benevolent attributes. Many of them are capable of violence.

♦ The three most important Hindu gods form a kind of trinity, and are known as Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. But these monikers are a bit misleading in their simplicity. Brahma, for all his significance as creator, is not worshipped as a major deity. Vishnu and Shiva, in contrast, have many devotees.

♦ Vishnu, who is also worshipped in the form of his avatar, Krishna, is depicted variously as an amorous consort, a defender of social order, or as a destroyer. In spite of the seeming overlap with the roles played by Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva is associated with the creation and destruction of the universe itself.

♦ Still another deity who embodies the cycle of creation and destruction is Kali. This deity appears in Hindu sacred texts, sometimes as an appendage of another god and sometimes as a wrathful emissary of divine justice, wielding her scimitar in surreal, almost psychedelic battles to slaughter all the demons who would threaten society.

♦ Other Hindu deities, like Hanuman and Durga, are associated with similar episodes of wrath and judgment. The takeaway here is that, unlike the command morality we saw in monotheistic violence, violent deities in Hindu traditions are more likely to be associated with larger cosmological processes like creation and destruction. Humans are still obliged to right action. However, that action looks less like obedience and more like situating the self in a larger order that’s social, behavioral, and cosmological at once.
THE BOUNDARIES

- To reiterate, there are plenty of passages in all these sacred texts that describe God or the gods more benignly, but our task is to understand why the violent passages are often given greater emphasis and what they do for people. Among other things, they create in the reader a feeling of instability and uncertainty.

- It’s difficult to come away from their portraits of deities without a clear sense that they have hardened the boundaries between good and evil and between right and wrong. Faced with the inevitability of judgment, readers find themselves in a strenuous ethical universe. They must choose which side they are on, and in many cases, be willing to fight those on the other. That leads us from vengeful gods to holy wars.

HOLY WARS IN WRITING

- Arguably, any warfare that is divinely sanctioned meets the definition of holy war. We’ll explore the idea of holy war in greater detail in another lecture, but this lecture will look at how it’s depicted in sacred texts.

- There are multiple sections of the Hebrew Bible so densely packed with descriptions of war, including specific military campaigns as well as general accounts, that some have described it as war literature. God is a kind of field general, and describes the conditions under which the Israelites might justly wage war.

- Christian scripture contains overwhelmingly pacifist injunctions, nowhere more so than in the ministry of Jesus himself. These statements far outnumber those like Matthew 10:34, where Jesus speaks of coming not to bring peace but to bring a sword. But these verses, though fewer in number, have exerted a powerful influence.

- The Qur’an has plenty of passages on the religious purposes of war. It decrees that taking life is a sin, but one passage reads, “Fight against those who fight against you in the way of Allah.” Another commands, “Keep on fighting against them until mischief ends and the way prescribed by Allah prevails.”
Hinduism contains numerous sacred writings that treat the subject of warfare in detail. It is usually described on an epic scale, and there are clear indications that war’s horrors are best avoided. But even as human societies sometimes inevitably tilt in the direction of conflict, the tradition teaches, so too does the cosmic balance sometimes require struggle to preserve it.

Buddhism’s sacred texts are largely devoid on exhortations to war. However, Buddhist history contains many episodes in which monks support armies or even lead revolts, and where the wise rule of kings—which sometimes includes military action—is depicted as supporting dharma, that is, the principle of cosmic order.

HOLY SUFFERING

Another theme we find in sacred texts is holy suffering. This suffering is self-denial or willingness to endure persecution, in which bodily harms are viewed as pathways to exaltation or salvation.

In Judaism, suffering and persecution are understood in terms of the overall direction of sacred history. We learn from the Hebrew
Bible that trial, suffering, exile, and persecution are expressions of Judaism’s identity in a general sense. But they’re also tests meant to assess fidelity to the covenant, adherence to the right ritual or the Levitical codes, or relations with surrounding communities.

♦ Christianity raises the stakes considerably, since in this tradition it is Christ himself who suffers. Christ is broken, bloodied, and executed on an imperial torture instrument—the cross, which becomes the very symbol of the Christian faith. Theologically, Christ’s suffering is the very condition for salvation, for the conquering of evil and death.

♦ The religious dynamic is different in Islam, which regards itself as the fulfilment and completion of Jewish and Christian prophecy. But themes of the righteous enduring suffering both bodily and spiritual abound in the Qur’an. Bodily disciplines are central to Islam, nowhere more than in the month of Ramadan, where fasting between sunup and sundown is mandatory.

♦ This family of traditions, then, approaches the sacredness of suffering through a particular series of expectations about the holy life. Even if one is not a martyr oneself, it is understood that life involves tests and trials, some of which might entail considerable suffering. One’s fidelity in the face of such suffering determines causally one’s righteousness and one’s fate in the afterlife. That emphasis on linear history, and its confidence of God’s purposes amidst suffering, is one we don’t see in Asian religions.

♦ Hinduism, too, addresses the matter of suffering and holiness, but its emphasis is on rising above the concerns of the self. In Hinduism, there is great merit in becoming attuned to the suffering of others.

♦ Meditation on scriptures is an important element of Hindu devotionalism, meant first to focus the mind on the presence of the divine in all things. Such realizations are intended to eradicate anger, envy, complaint, and lust. Renunciation is a key religious value in Hinduism that disciplines and denies the body quite strenuously. The most devout adherents leave their homes to become forest-dwelling hermits. Enduring physical hardship and suffering is one of the religion’s highest goals.
♦ Renunciation is doctrinally even more central in Buddhism, whose Four Noble Truths posit the relationship between dukkha, or suffering, and attachment or desire. While lay Buddhists may not conduct themselves as stringently as those in monastic orders, there is nonetheless an overarching desire to end what is believed to be a cycle of death and reincarnation by eradicating the ego.

♦ These notions inform the rigid disciplines of monastic orders, like the at-times militaristic Rinzai Zen of Japan. They shape the regular participation in fasting and like aesthetic practices. They even shape more extreme practices like Buddhist self-immolation. Thus, unlike in monotheistic religions, the emphasis in Hinduism and Buddhism is, despite their differences, on renunciation and mental recalibration.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Brown, The Body and Society.

Hashmi, ed., Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. If sacred texts lacked the powerful imagery described in this lecture, would there be less religious violence?

2. Why do you think that violent religious actors aren’t given pause by all the nonviolent passages in sacred texts?
This lecture explores how and why people commit self-harm for religious purposes. One of the most fundamental building blocks of anything we call religion is sacrifice. We think of it as giving something up; however, the word *sacrifice* actually means “to make sacred” or “to perform the sacred.” It has several associations with violence that hang suggestively together: a rite that requires a sacrificial offering to a deity or spirit, voluntary behavioral change, or the vicarious sacrifice or atonement of a divine figure. This lecture looks at how such practices have taken shape in religions.
ROOTS OF SACRIFICE

♦ In ancient societies, sacrificial practice was extraordinarily common. Some of the earliest comparative studies of religion focused on the roots of religion in sacrificial acts. Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* explored what he called “divine kingship,” a combination of political and religious rule in which rites of renewal and sacrifice were central to the authority of the rulers. This link was certainly prominent in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as other societies.

♦ Authority aside, Sigmund Freud saw totemic sacrifice not just as the primal root of organized religion, but something at the heart of shared social identity. Freud was fascinated by how common it was for revered animal figures, or totems, to be killed and ritually consumed in ancient societies, rather than protected and cared for.

♦ For Freud, reverence for totem animals means that the group’s identity is dependent on the shared symbol. But he believed that people resent this dependence on the symbol and feel the need to act against it. When this acting out is done in the formalized context of ritual sacrifice, people can give vent to their desires without undermining identity or collective bonds. An extreme form of animal sacrifice that resembles Freud’s totemism occurred during the Vedic period in India. Vedic animal sacrifice was highly detailed and formalized, and could be quite grisly.

♦ A familiar story is the Hebrew Bible’s depiction of Abraham being commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. Isaac is spared, of course, but only after it’s clear that
Abraham is willing to follow the command. Things worked out differently in the Tamil Hindu tale of Ciruttontar, whose devotion to Shiva is so great that he not only sacrifices his son but cooks him as a meal for Shiva.

♦ For quite a few ancient cultures, human sacrifice was not just mythological. It appears to have been practiced in various ways by the Egyptians, Mesopotamian civilization, the ancient Chinese and Koreans, Hawaiians, Mesoamericans, and more. Other cultures took human life in ritualistic ways that may be considered sacrificial; for example, head hunting was practiced by the ancient Scythians, the early Celts, and tribes on Borneo and the Philippines. Cannibalism was practiced on several South Pacific islands and by peoples of New Zealand, Tibet, and both North and South America.

♦ We should be careful, however, to not associate sacrificial violence only with the so-called primitive phase of religious history. Consider the ritual sacrifice of the paschal lamb still practiced by Jews on Passover—although many simply place a store-bought lamb shank on the Passover plate. The act is meant to commemorate the sacrifice commanded by God the night before the Jewish exodus from Egypt.
Muslims, too, practice sacrifice: the central religious holiday of Eid al-Adha involves the sacrifice of an animal in honor of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at God’s command. Christians appropriated the language and imagery of the Passover sacrifice in the practice of Communion—which not only honors the sacrifice of Jesus but requires worshippers to symbolically eat his body and drink his blood.

SELF-AFFLICTION

Given the long history of sacrifice, questions arise: What happens when the impulse shifts direction and religious people afflict themselves voluntarily? Which of these practices might count as violence?

Most religious cultures contain a fairly broad repertoire of self-denial or asceticism. These absolutely exist on the continuum of violence, since they share many of the practical, embodied qualities of sacrifice. They simply do things to the self rather than to another.

Meriting a close look are more extreme practices of self-denial that try to aggressively discipline the body and the soul for religious reasons. Ascetic discipline was part of Christianity from the beginning. Early devotees often practiced independent poverty and celibacy, for example, leaving their earthly families for a new monastic one. The ascetic wanted to possess only a body freed of impurities and desires.

MARYTRDOM

No practice makes clearer the destruction of the body for religious reasons than martyrdom. The term comes from the Greek, and it means to “witness”—as in to bear witness to one’s beliefs. In the early days of Christianity, martyrdom wasn’t just common; it was positively heroic.

Early Christians were resisters. Jews had engaged in resistance in their own way—for example, in the Maccabean Revolt of the 2nd century BCE, or in the revolt against Roman domination that
culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the mass suicide of Jewish resisters at Masada.

- However, early Christians defined themselves in quasi-apocalyptic terms. Over Christianity's first century or so, they held meetings in private homes, communicated via hospitality networks, and often conducted rituals in secret. But during Nero's heavy persecution from 64–68, which additionally saw exiles and the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, a growing sense of embattlement moved to the forefront of the Christian imagination. As Christian self-definition grew—against Rome, against Greece, and against Judaism—so too did persecution.

- Christianity's institutional growth and systematization in the 2nd century were accompanied by broadened persecutions. The martyrs considered themselves a sacred portion apart from society, and they identified their suffering with Christ's. The martyrs' overriding belief was that they had a special place reserved in death, a notion that had roots in the Jews' Maccabean Revolt.

- The trial of Justin Martyr, an early theologian, reveals some dynamics of martyrdom. He argued that Christianity was, in some ways, the most ancient truth, spanning from the prophets to the philosophers to Christ. He engaged in dialogue with other philosophers and was seized by Roman authorities for professing dangerous heresies. In trial, he was admonished for his beliefs but would not recant. He was martyred circa 165. This sense of access to the fullness of truth, a pure knowledge that supersedes the body, is often something martyrs claim to possess.

- Roman efforts to persecute Christians peaked under Decius. In 250, he required all citizens to obtain a *libellus*, an official document that confirmed one's reverence unto the Roman gods. This ended up in widespread coercion of Christians (who by now were quite a large community).

- Christian prohibitions against idolatry clashed with the requirement to make sacrifices to the Roman gods, and some Christians were killed for their refusal to do so. Decius was killed, but persecution was later
renewed in the 250s. One target was Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage. Cyprian was told by a fellow aristocrat to recant his criticism of Roman religion. He did not, and was subsequently beheaded.

♦ After a decades-long period known as the long peace, the emperor Diocletian then initiated the last great persecution. Caesar Galerius, who then governed the western part of the empire, convinced Diocletian to sack Christian churches and burn the scriptures. Diocletian regularly overreached his authority. After his rule ended prematurely, it turned out that his furious attempts to eradicate Christianity had the opposite effect from what he intended.

♦ Martyrs and their remains became a focus of Christian piety because they had borne witness in their blood and participated in the sufferings of Christ. People sought to be buried near martyrs, and wealthy families vied to possess martyrs’ remains.

♦ Roman authority continued to regard Christianity as a threat. And though it moderated its procedures and treatments in certain subsequent periods, it did little to undercut the overall symbolic power of Christian martyrdom.

**ISLAMIC MARTYRDOM**

♦ Islamic martyrdom is a useful comparison point to Christian martyrdom. Like the word *martyr*, the Arabic term *shahid* means “witness,” but there is an additional resonance. A *shahid* is also an individual “who dies or suffers because of his beliefs.”

♦ Early in Muslim history, the belief took root that those who die in battles defending Islam will enter Paradise directly. The first Muslim martyrs appeared at an equally early juncture in the tradition, including those who forsook apostasy and instead were tortured or killed. There are several passages from the Qur’an that underscore these beliefs.

♦ The assassination of the Caliph Ali in 661 and the subsequent martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Husayn are very
significant events in Muslim sacred history. This is particularly true for Shia Muslims, whose identity and history flow from the fates suffered by these figures, whom they regard as the first and third imams.

♦ Incidences of martyrdom intensified during the period of the Crusades and then dwindled very considerably until the modern era, when a new brand of martyrdom emerged in Lebanon and then elsewhere. Sunni Islam placed less emphasis on martyrdom historically, but Sunni groups such as Al-Qaeda and Hamas have embraced it in modern times.

♦ Nevertheless, despite the radical, usually terroristic nature of contemporary suicide bombings, Islam has always scrupulously cautioned against martyrdoms that transgress other norms. Islam, like Christianity, forbids suicide. The tradition makes a clear ethical distinction between voluntary death for the sake of obedience and actions that, like suicide bombings, place the innocent at risk. It's also imperative that individuals engage in self-interrogation to determine that they are engaged in action with only pure motives.

♦ In a sense, then, acts of witness like these have to be understood as the absolute test case of fidelity to authority: Just how far are people willing to go to enact their religious faith?

RELIGIOUS SUICIDES

♦ Not all forms of voluntary deaths in religion are martyrdoms. Take, for example, the complicated case of religious suicides, self-immolation in particular. The practice of self-immolation has particular roots in Buddhism.

♦ While the practice is quite old, it came to prominence during the Vietnam War, when Vietnamese Buddhist monks occasionally engaged in the practice to protest their treatment at the hands of the US-backed South Vietnamese government. The monk Thich Quang Duc in particular commanded international attention, sitting with perfect posture in the Lotus position while hungry flames claimed his body.
Buddhism seeks to eradicate the ego, which is regarded as the largest conceptual attachment preventing our enlightenment. The *Lotus Sutra* is a key source for this thinking. It returns repeatedly to the image of a bodhisattva giving his body up as an act of compassion for others. Duc understood this imperative in the political context of war, and called the practice “a donation to the struggle.”

Chinese and Japanese Buddhists particularly developed a range of such death practices. The Japanese Shingon school developed a practice called *Sokushinbutsu*. It’s a lengthy process of self-mummification, achieved by patient, steady withdrawal of food and water from the self. Ultimately, one’s body shrinks to the point that it is mummified. These mummies are widely admired by lay Buddhists for their commitment to austerities.

Religious suicide does not always involve a moral or political cause, however. A prime example is that of the extraordinary group Heaven’s Gate. In July 1995, astronomers around the world were thrilled to discover the 25-mile-wide Hale-Bopp comet. On March 22, 1997, the comet would come within 122 million miles of Earth.
♦ In coordination with this event, Marshall Applewhite, who led Heaven’s Gate, and 38 of his followers took their own lives in an effort to leave the planet in conjunction with the comet’s arrival. They believed that they were being “recycled” and departing their earthly bodies for what they called TELAH: The Evolutionary Level Above Human. Their basic belief was in a Christian version of the ancient-aliens theory. Specifically, they contended that Jesus Christ had effectively had his body taken over by one of many extraterrestrials visiting earth during his lifetime.

♦ The story of Heaven’s Gate is a fascinating riff on the familiar religious preoccupation with the limits of the flesh, the temporariness of bodily life. The group’s members dressed in Nike sneakers and in jumpsuits meant to resemble Star Trek uniforms. They killed themselves using a combination of sleeping pills, alcohol, and suffocation. One member stayed behind to make sure that the group’s teachings about recycled vehicles and the coming kingdom remained.

THE TAKEAWAY

♦ Differences matter between different martyrs, as do commonalities. The experience of Muslim soldier-martyrs in the first generation of Islam was different from that of Christians under Rome. And the outer-space sensibility of the members of Heaven’s Gate qualitatively shaped their collective suicide, just as Buddhist doctrine did Quang Duc’s immolation.

♦ It’s the interplay of certain religious people’s adherence to sacred texts, their aspirations for purity, and their willingness to put religious authority over temporal authority that makes them willing to undergo the destruction of their bodies to avoid wavering in their commitment to their beliefs.

ONLINE SOURCE

SUGGESTED READING

Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*.
Doniger, *The Hindus*.
Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.
Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think some of these older, arguably vestigial religious practices still hold their appeal for many people today?

2. Are there any religious traditions that don’t reckon, in some way, with the destruction of the human body? Are these practices really just about controlling the circumstances of one’s own death?
So far, this course has looked at the role sacred texts play in justifying violence, and it has examined practices of self-harm, voluntary suffering, and martyrdom as examples of how risk, bodily destruction, and denial are expressions of violence sought out to achieve religious ends. This lecture builds out to the level of community and the perception of others. It shows that religious violence is almost always justified by portraying its targets as something other than human or as malevolent.
OTHERING

- *Othering* refers to the cultural construction of a malevolent enemy figure. Specific words, images, and associations have to be articulated, usually by people of influence, for the mundane other to be identified as infernal. Religious warnings, reminders of obligations, or fervent denials of sin all go to work in responding to dangerous outsiders.

- But how does it actually work? A familiar Biblical narrative gives us some insight. In chapter 16 of Leviticus, in the context of the repetition of various sins and defilements, there are several passages regarding goats taken for a sin offering. Two goats are presented before the Lord in the hopes of atonement for Israel’s sins.

- Aaron, the brother of Moses, “cast lots upon the two goats,” leaving one goat to be sacrificed to the Lord and the other to become a “scapegoat.” Scholarly consensus holds that the Hebrew term for scapegoat translates into a “goat for Azazel,” referring to one of the more commonly known desert demons of the ancient Near East. The goat became the embodiment of the people’s sins, which were in some sense sent away to be consumed by the demon.
In verses 21 and thereafter, Moses is commanded to have Aaron lay his hands on the scapegoat’s head and confess Israel's sins, and then send the goat away. “[T]he goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited.” The goat is led into the wilderness and let go there. This paradigmatic story is a useful comparative tool for understanding how groups are identified as contagions to be purged, aliens to be outcast, or assailants to be defeated.

Competition over shared goods and ideas is a root cause of violence. The way it gets expressed is through othering, which in its religious form looks like scapegoating or demonology. A demon or a monster or a heathen can never be worthy of the things that belong to those who consider themselves righteous. Additionally, if we believe that we are about to become victims of an assault by a malevolent other, then pretty much any action we take can be justifiable.

AWE, FEAR, AND RELIGION

Many religious experiences are described using the language of awe, of fear and trembling. David Hume once said that religions are basically constructs of order that drive out fears and anxieties. Freud posited that religion was basically a neurotic response to feelings of instability in the self. Rudolf Otto described the “bewildering strength” of “the holy,” and piety’s link to “the ‘natural’ emotion of fear.”

This is particularly evident in monotheistic religions, as is illustrated in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Adam’s discovery that he is naked makes him fearful and makes him hide from God. More frequently, the Hebrew Bible describes a pious fear, a moral directive to remain steadfast in one’s faith lest awful consequences follow.

In the New Testament, the richest source is the Book of Revelation, whose landscape is overrun with monsters and demons pitted against the divine in a final cosmic battle. Violent imagery thus isn’t alien to Christian tradition and self-understanding; Christianity has inspired all manner of representations of the demonic. However often Jesus advocated for peace, other emissaries of Christianity inveigh against outsiders regularly and forcefully.
The other is demonic in the sense that the other advances a malefic anti-religion. However, the other is also a monster, in a very technical sense. The English word *monster* comes from the Latin “*monstrum*.” According to the scholars Timothy Beal and Edward Ingebretsen, the *monstrum* was originally understood as a divine messenger of sorts. This makes sense, given its derivation from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning to “show” or “reveal.”

Monsters embody and constitute the racial, sexual, political, or religious other. Once established as threats, they justify often-extreme social and political measures in the name of safety or purity. To invoke a monster is always to teach a cultural and religious lesson through the warning. The religious monster is understood as a material threat, an incarnation of evil; it is also a powerful part of a symbolic order. Representations of the monstrous can serve justificatory purposes, as in deliberations about launching war.

**FALSE GODS AND DEMONIZATION**

One of the most powerful and enduring designations of the monstrous is achieved through rhetorical and symbolic constructions of false gods. There are few more effective ways of conveying to audiences that souls are at risk of damnation than to describe the worship of false gods as illegitimate, monstrous, or demonic. One key medium of constructing such threats has been to insist that the other’s deepest commitments are shaped by something impure or malevolent.

One long-standing impulse within Western and Near Eastern cultures merits focus in today’s lecture: the demonization of Jews. A particularly heated interval of demonology and persecution occurred in 12th-century Europe.

It was then that accusations of blood libel began. Blood libel is a particular type of public accusation evolved from rumor and suspicion into a demand for justice or vengeance. The idea emerged that Jews were sacrificing or crucifying Christian children in order to use their blood in Jewish religious ritual.
This claim expressed the social and religious anxiety of anti-Semites. However, it also did something curious with the old claim that Jews killed Christ, now associating that act with repeated wickedness against everyday Christians. If a group can paint Jews as thieves, killers of the holy, and masters of infanticide, it can set a domino effect into motion, with accusation after accusation linked together.

In this mindset, Jews had to be subhuman beasts who might commit atrocities. Note how the demonological mindset works: Once one accepts the basic premise—that evil beings might commit unimaginable acts—then anything one can imagine is something one believes their target demon is probably planning right now. The fact that it hasn’t happened yet is actually part of what convinces a person: There’s still time to stop them.

Clearly, not every European believed such claims, and church authorities often condemned the most extreme versions of blood libel. But if we put these blood libels in the context of the regular and often brutally violent actions against Jews, we can see that demonology inspires this violent treatment of others.

**ANTICHRIST**

Many religious representations of monstrous others are aimed at policing or redrawing behavioral boundaries. The social boundary between “us” and “them” is commuted into the religious boundary between good and evil. No demon does this boundary work more effectively than with the figure of Antichrist.

The historian Bernard McGinn writes, Antichrist is a “mirror for conceptions and fears about ultimate human evil.” In other words, representations of Antichrist tell audiences a great deal about those crafting the representations. Antichrist reminds observers that social and moral behaviors yield eternal consequences. That’s why this particular case is such a vivid study in conceptual or representational violence: Antichrist is a threat.
Part of any representation of Antichrist is a portrait of Hell. Contemporary representations are indebted to the culture of medieval Europe, whose woodblock prints, paintings, and illustrated manuscripts are adorned with vivid, often-sexualized depictions of the infernal pit.

Like the other demonologies we’ve seen so far, these possessed a pedagogical function. They were intended to demonstrate the horrific fates that awaited sinners and heretics. As Robert Fuller aptly reasons, “[w]hen a community … names the Antichrist, it reminds its members who they are not and whom they must never allow themselves to become.”

The timetable of Antichrist’s alleged arrival is also significant. For example, one template is found in the conservative Protestant mode of thought known as premillennial dispensationalism. American authors like Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye did much to advance this framework in their popular texts and films. They envision that, after the Rapture, a seven-year period known as Tribulation will focus mostly on Israel and the Jews.

A political giant (the Antichrist) will assist the fallen church in making a covenant with the Jews to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Then, three and a half years later, the Antichrist will break the covenant (Daniel 9:27) and set up an idol in the Temple. After this, he will declare war on the righteous.

This will be followed by a period of war and cataclysm, culminating in the destruction of the Antichrist by Christ. After the millennium, a foreordained 1,000 years of peace, the Antichrist will return to urge rebellion, but at this point, God will intervene to destroy the Antichrist and begin the Last Judgment.

Even when Antichrist doesn’t represent a single malefic identity, his portrait frames a broader understanding of social, historical, and religious decline. Those people associated with the qualities ascribed to Antichrist can easily become victims of violent rhetoric, social ostracism, or even physical harm.
In early-16th-century Germany, the rise of trading leagues, the growing reach of secular law, and the breakdown of religious authority combined to shift the ground of German social life. Certainly one of the most famous examples of this shift is the Protestant Reformation famously associated with Martin Luther. In posting his famed 95 Theses in 1517, Luther called into question papal infallibility and other key Catholic convictions, and seemingly shifted the locus of Christianity to the people themselves.
There were other, more radical religious voices with a more revolutionary understanding of how to liberate the people, like Thomas Müntzer. Müntzer was initially one of Luther’s followers. He became a preacher in his own right in the small town of Allstedt, located near some productive mines. In a short period of time, Müntzer hooked into economic changes and began to advocate for the rights of miners, on the basis of Christian understandings of justice.

With huge outpourings of support, Müntzer successfully established his authority by 1525 and wanted to create a classless Christian utopia. There are many examples of that kind of experiment in religious history, but noteworthy are Müntzer’s own use of revolutionary violence to do so and Luther’s furious demonological response.

In May 1525, Müntzer led a military campaign at Frankenhausen. He and his 8,000 soldiers entered the fray with enthusiasm. Müntzer exhorted his troops, “Let your swords be ever warm with blood!” God’s kingdom would come when the world was purged of sin. The aristocracy and their religious defenders were, to Müntzer and his followers, advancing the cause of wickedness in the world. They were demons who needed to be felled. The battle was an absolute bloodbath. At least half of Müntzer’s followers, armed mostly with only farm tools, were slaughtered by the aristocracy’s organized militias.

The peasants’ chief document, the Twelve Articles, advocated ending the feudal order and transferring power to the people. Luther wrote lengthy treatises that carved out a space of the secular law, indicating that Christians owed a set of allegiances to the secular prince who would in turn not undermine their freedoms. While Luther wasn’t entirely unsympathetic to some of the peasants’ demands, their antinomianism alarmed him.

Luther had written warnings about violent insurrection years before Müntzer’s revolt. He admonished “mad priests and monks” as well as local “lords” that they bore fault in the agitation around them. In a piece called “Against the Murdering, Thieving Hordes of Peasants,” he used rhetoric to advance his conception of the good order.
Scapegoating and Demonology

Such rebellion could advance no just cause. It had to be put down, Luther wrote, “just as … one must kill a mad dog.” A rebellion is extralegal, and it brings only “fire” to a land. Thus, he wrote, the rebels deserve “death in body and soul.” While Luther later expressed regret for his role in Münzer’s eventual death, he wrote, “Whoever has seen Münzer, may say he has seen the bodily Devil … he wanted to kill my Christ.”

CONCLUSION

Horrific and fearful figures legitimate and justify human projects using the rhetoric of salvation and sin. Cultural context is always producing particular monsters. These range from the potent demonologies of the Middle Ages to the doomy mood of the Puritan commonwealths to the nuclear tinge of mid-20th-century American apocalypticism.

Religious violence is distinguished by the specific motivations and justifications for violence invoked, often pitched in absolutist or cosmological terms. Those articulating violence are convinced that the ontological stakes are high.

Religious violence is also distinct in the ways it identifies and interprets its targets. These are generally religious competitors or heretical policies and practices whose presence convinces those articulating violence that there is a dire threat needing to be eliminated. This method of justification and targeting often turns on a specific conception of identity.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Bivins, *Religion of Fear*.
Girard, *The Scapegoat*.
McGinn, *Antichrist*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. If creating an other is a basic feature of human psychology, how can religions rewire this tendency and promote conceptions of sameness and identity?

2. Since it’s obvious that demonology depends on false allegations and hysteria, why do facts, evidence, and reason not undercut demonology more than they do?
One of the most effective ways of demonstrating religious power is through trial and punishment. The violent implications of this power are most vividly seen in the perennial impulse to sentence or purge those whom society deems witches. Impulses to identify and purge witches peak during periods of anxiety, unrest, and demographic change. This lecture takes a look at the religious yearning for purity that underlies some social orders and the violence it can produce.
WITCHCRAFT

♦ Many ancient societies were hospitable to practices that we group together under the heading of magic. Magic here refers to folk practices at the intersection of nature reverence, medicine, and spirituality. Those who were skilled in healing, divination, or broad attempts to influence the course of events were sometimes called sorcerers or cunning folk. Later, they were called witches or warlocks, or perhaps herbalists or shamans.

♦ From ancient Greece to Celtic cultures and from Native American to West African to Siberian cultures, these figures possessed techniques and insights that set them apart from their peers. They weren’t widely regarded as evil in the way that the stereotypical witch is represented.

♦ However, early anthropologists have found negative interpretations of witchcraft. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Azande people of Central Africa is an example. Evans-Pritchard found that the Azande consistently attributed bad luck or calamity to witchcraft. Witches
were real, they believed, and they performed evil acts out of spite or envy. Witchery is also invoked in stories meant to discipline children. Think of the Grimms’ tales or the Russian legend of the Baba Yaga, with her fearful house that walks.

VIOLENCE

♦ As the great historian of witch trials John Demos notes, the actual practice of magic in pagan traditions has consistently been the object of religious violence. The strategies employed are twofold. Whether the witch threatens us from without or plots in secret among us, we continually see frightening narratives or visual depictions of: wild sexuality, dark magic, seditious or cultic beliefs, and often children at risk.

♦ A fascinating aspect of witch trials is that they are, in fact, trials. Cultural fears are focused using the full legal and political power available in a society. They adjudicate between permitted and illicit behavior, but they also demonstrate the consequence of wrongdoing with the ruined or lifeless body of the accused.

♦ The early modern church in Europe denounced magic in both its loose popular forms and, more strenuously, in its organized forms, which it now castigated as witchcraft. Anxiety often arises when popular religion starts looking and smelling a bit too magical. European anxiety about the cult of the saints, or colonial American anxiety about folk religion, played no small role in ginning up furor over witches.

♦ In the patristic writings of Christianity, there is considerable attention given not just to heresy in all its forms but to the subversive, anti-religious power of magic itself. The close proximity between religious and royal power in Europe also produced some memorable condemnations of magic. Charlemagne called for the enslavement of fortune-tellers, for example, and the execution of anyone making a sacrifice to Satan.
An important question is: What changed to lead religious and political authorities to train their eyes so sternly on the long-standing culture of folk and agricultural magic? Between the 10th century and 16th century, there was huge political and economic change that diluted the church’s legal reach.

Thanks to the Reformation, there were also profound demographic changes in the form of multiple new religious options, where there had previously been few. In the alarm about witchcraft, we can detect a powerful concern about losing church membership or allegiance. With it, we see the familiar outlines of a narrative emerging.

By the 14th century, the key narrative elements had cohered through repetition. One might reasonably get the sense that, just out of sight, in secret chambers or forest clearings, there was a nonstop sequence of orgiastic rites, child sacrifice, dark incantations, and other plots against decency and God’s good order. The larger sense of cultural and religious instability was in no small part influenced by the Black Death and the Hundred Years’ War. There were spasms of populist rage, anti-Semitism, and suspicions of palace intrigue in many of Europe's monarchies that fed a sense of conspiracy everywhere.

In 1317, a French bishop was accused of plotting to kill the pope. He was burned for witchcraft. Another prominent trial focused on the bishop of Coventry, who was eventually exculpated. These incidents show that institutional self-policing was heating up, and it was using the category of witchcraft to do the dirty work. Kings and royals picked up the practice from church leaders, and similarly used witchery as their medium of recognizing their enemies.

The actual trials bore some striking similarities. Each focused very exactingly on the collective enthusiasm of witches’ alleged Sabbath ritual, where all the most sordid abominations are thought to have occurred. In this, Demos rightly notes, we see a classic projection of church and state’s fears about popular challenges to their authority.
However, it’s also suggestive that the Sabbath rites described in the trials were indebted to Catholic imagery and to the structure of Mass.

Aside from the lurid descriptions of the rite, we also see a more pronounced association of witchery with Satan. The trials focused at length not just on the pact that alleged witches made with the Devil, but on how this pact was an internal betrayal of religious order.

The latter half of the 14th century saw a tenfold increase in witch trials. Earlier trials were somewhat procedurally haphazard, even if the themes and the imagery were consistent. With the increase in number and the geographical spread, there needed to be a set of standardized rules.

These rules came to focus on how to conduct the trial itself, considering factors like who was a reliable witness, how to parse testimony, and methods of examination. They also included very detailed instructions, which were ultimately recorded in user-friendly manuals, for how to spot a witch in the first place.

THE MALLEUS MALEFICARUM

The Malleus Maleficarum is a book that was used to identify certain human beings named by religious and cultural authorities as responsible for society’s ills, and therefore deserving of extreme punishment. Two witch hunters, Heinrich Kraemer and Jakob Sprenger, petitioned Pope Innocent VIII to produce a papal bull that would officially sanction the practice of witch hunting. Pope Innocent agreed that there was an epidemic the Church needed to stamp out.

The authority thus having been issued, around 1487, Kraemer and Sprenger produced this most infamous and widely used instruction manual. It grew out of practices that been underway for decades and the large number of cases that Kraemer and Sprenger had witnessed and tried themselves.

The text warns the reader that even a failure to believe in the power of witches is itself a dangerous heresy. It also goes into elaborate detail about the varieties of witchcraft and the methods witches
use to cloak themselves or deceive the intrepid witch hunter. The concluding part catalogues legal options, including the leveling of charges and the use of torture.

PANIC AND TORTURE

♦ Witch trials could occur in small towns, where an individual might become the scapegoat for instigating a quarrel or having a better crop yield. However, the most prominent witch tribunals, known as the Inquisitions, tended not to bother with such local, isolated trials.

♦ Their focus was on full-blown panics. Their task was to work toward a public confession, which would be a warning and a deterrent against future witchery. It’s here that we encounter the most grisly and liberal use of torture, which served a similar educational purpose.

♦ The most common means were the rack, which stretched out limbs until joints popped. There was the use of compression, to force blood through your orifices. Another tool was the strappado, which suspended the accused by the limbs, tied by ropes in all manner of improbable angles. The more that the practice got formalized, the more official its legal comportment, the more broken bodies it produced.

MALEFICIAM

♦ Demos notes that it was with the introduction of a new term around this time, *maleficium*, that magic’s negative connotations increased dramatically. *Maleficium* refers to supernatural harm, not merely influence.

♦ This kind of renaming and re-narrating helped change the perceptual frame. If magic was not just influence but was harm, and if harm was deceit rather than righteousness, then behind much of it had to be the Antichrist himself. Church authorities now described witches as not cunning folk but devil worshipers.

♦ Suspicions, inquiries, formal accusations, evidence, and sentences ranging from social ostracism to brutal torture were already justified
because witchcraft was so thoroughly understood to be malefic. The witch, then, was the occasion of the porous boundary, the instability of all that people believed was most solid.

AMERICA

♦ The lecture now turns to America as a young republic of the 19th century. For all its vaunted traditions institutionalizing rationality and free thinking, the country is obsessed with conspiracy. Take for example, the Freemasons. Subcultural enthusiasts have long noted that the architectural design and city plan of Washington DC seems to enshrine Masonic imagery and principles.

♦ The great obelisk that is the Washington Monument is thought to exemplify the stonemasons' obsession with Egyptology, though it also produces darker imaginings. The layout of downtown DC has also been described as resembling a pentagram, though the planned city grid resembles other shapes far more evidently. And even today, some believe that the imagery on the ordinary dollar bill winks at a Masonic conspiracy.

♦ The actual institutional history of Freemasonry isn’t easily tracked. But we know that by the late Middle Ages, and certainly by the early modern era, there were fraternal societies of stonemasons and bricklayers. They gathered together to perform rituals of membership, shared invocations, and developed a distinctive symbolic framework.

♦ The secrecy of these fraternal orders was the cause of some panic in England and other locations where Masons developed separate institutions called Lodges. Between the 17th and the 18th century, the Masons developed a sizable presence in Britain, involving elite chapters that sometimes developed their own variations on Masonic rites.
Common to them was a belief in progression through various professional degrees, oath swearing, and initiatory rites. Despite how commonplace lodges were, and the fact that many of the United States' Founding Fathers were members of them, freemasonry emerged as a subject of considerable panic.

In America, there were numerous attempts by local newspapers to publish the allegedly scandalous secrets of the Masons, who numbered approximately 100,000 in the early-19th-century United States. In the 1820s and 1830s, a spate of US court cases used the exposés of salacious journalists as templates for indictments on sometimes highly trumped-up charges.

European Masons had been accused of fomenting revolution and generally indulging in perverse ritual. Similar concerns arose in America, focused on the Masons' loose religious stipulations. Only atheists were forbidden to join, and that was far too broad for some citizens.

The animus reached such a pitch that there was actually the formation of anti-Masonic political parties, including the one that
designated as much by its name and others that sympathized with anti-Masonry. That was their primary legislative identity. They had success in several state legislatures from Pennsylvania to Vermont.

Many prominent officials endorsed or joined the party, including John Quincy Adams. Masons were portrayed as the antithesis of American democracy. Membership peaked when the party got a candidate on the national ticket in 1832. By the mid-19th century, Masonry was drastically reduced. It’s an interesting case study in how emotional fervor, conspiracy panic, and concern for the boundaries of identity go to work even on groups that don’t code as explicitly religious.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**

*Malleus Maleficarum*, http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/


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**SUGGESTED READING**

Demos, *The Enemy Within*.

Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*.

Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree*.

Schiff, *The Witches*.

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**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Are human societies basically uncomfortable with genuine difference, and thus, will inevitably name and persecute witches?

2. Is the rule of law more or less powerful than cultural suspicion?
It’s a common reaction to hear the word apocalypse and think of various depictions of the end of the world. There’s a good reason for this, given how often the term is used in popular entertainments. However, the word’s larger meaning actually derives from the Greek word *apokalyptein*, which means “uncovering.” The central idea is that previously hidden or imperfectly understood events or facts are revealed to the religious at moments of peak importance and danger.

An apocalypse is also a type of writing. As historians like Paul Boyer and John Collins show, tone and structure are important in framing content about, for example, the end of the world or the coming of a kingdom. If we want to understand how intensely combative religious worldviews come into being and are sustained, we have to examine symbolism, belief, imagery, and emotional urgency as well as predictions. It’s in these elements that we often find the motivation and the justification for violence.
The notion that the end is nigh often leads to a focus on preparedness. That’s one reason why we so often encounter a sense, among violent apocalyptic groups, that there is an urgent need to intervene in worldly affairs—to disrupt or even destroy them. Apocalyptic believers usually look for signs and symbols that they take as evidence that the end times have begun.

In ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, and elsewhere, many texts posited that history was driven by a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, one that would end in a great cataclysm. Ancient, medieval, and even contemporary apocalyptic groups often take their cues from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, especially the dire social warnings found in the prophetic writings. These books warned that straying from the covenant with God was the explanation for the suffering of God’s chosen people.
Apocalyptic literature took this warning further in vivid depictions of the end and the supernatural consequences of worldly action. The scholarly consensus is that this tone is a response to the social context in which many of these texts were written. Their audiences often faced persecution, exile, or death. For example, the Book of Daniel was written in response to persecution by Antiochus IV. The New Testament’s Book of Revelation, with its wild imagery, was written during John’s exile from the Roman Empire.

AMERICAN APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

We need to try to understand why some groups not only think about themselves as symbolically or metaphorically alienated from the world, but are ready to act violently against it. A modern context is helpful, specifically, 19th-century America, a period of unusual religious ferment.

Beginning in the 1830s, there started an emergence of groups publicly predicting a time and a place for the conflagration. They used advances in print media and exuberant preaching to electrify their audiences.

William Miller, a veteran of the War of 1812, became convinced that the world would end in 1843 or 1844, and he set about rallying souls to save. He established the Adventist movement, which concluded in what is amusingly called The Great Disappointment when the world didn’t end as predicted. In its wake another organization known as the Seventh-day Adventists, which was led by Ellen Gould White, set about living as if already under the judgment of Heaven, purifying body and community.

These two movements helped to build a wave that would crest with the arrival of a third group, Jehovah’s Witnesses, at the end of the 19th century. Under the leadership of Charles Taze Russell and subsequently Joseph Rutherford, the Jehovah’s Witnesses balanced demands for constitutional protection of religious liberty with a fervent denunciation of political, religious, and cultural idolatry, which they saw as linked to the dominion of evil in the world.
The long tradition of American apocalyptic thought gave birth to a community that would capture worldwide attention in the late 20th century: the Branch Davidians. The group's roots trace back to Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian immigrant who arrived in the USA in 1907 and joined the Seventh Day Adventists in 1919. By 1929, Houteff had grown critical of the church.

He wrote a manifesto called “The Shepherd's Rod,” which criticized the church's materialism and its laxity with scripture and core doctrines. Houteff believed he was a new divine messenger who would deliver the church’s 144,000 faithful into the Kingdom at the Second Coming.

Houteff was formally excommunicated in 1934. He gathered his followers together under the name Shepherd's Rod, and purchased a piece of land near Waco, Texas; they eventually created a permanent, separatist community at Waco. In 1942, they adopted the name Davidian Seventh-day Adventists.

Houteff died in 1955, and in the subsequent decades, the community underwent several changes in leadership and theological emphasis.
over the next decades. Eventually, community elder Benjamin Roden assumed leadership by insisting the group “Get off the dead Rod, and move into a living Branch.” This was a clear rebuke of Houteff’s vision in favor of Roden’s own version of the Davidian lineage.

♦ Under the new name Branch Davidians, and with legal control of the property, Roden predicted a fiery Second Coming. He believed that only he could help his followers develop a properly Christ-like character. He pronounced himself the successor to the Bible’s King David and began visiting Israel regularly. Roden wanted to ensure the group’s stability prior to the End Times, so he named his son George as his eventual successor.

♦ However, his wife Lois started having revelations about the female character of the divine, establishing alternate theological visions within the group. When Ben Roden died in 1978, the group descended into sectarian conflict. Lois improbably secured leadership and banned her son from the property. George rallied his own supporters and antagonized his mother and local authorities alike. Each faction began to stockpile and modify weapons. Into this ferment came Vernon Howell, the man later known infamously as David Koresh.

♦ Koresh initially visited the group as a handyman but eventually married into the community. He became fairly influential. After Lois Roden died in 1986, Koresh and George Roden entered into a protracted contest. Each was at one point exiled from the community. Roden filed judicial actions filled with profanity with the local authorities. Each group kept stockpiling weapons.

♦ Roden at one point challenged Koresh to see which of them could raise the spirit of a dead community member from the grave. After this last incident ended in a gunfight, Roden was jailed and Koresh assumed control of the community in late 1987. He told community members that Armageddon was nigh, and that it would commence right there in Texas.
VIOLENCE BEGINS

♦ By early 1993, the group had amassed a huge number of weapons, often legally purchased but illegally modified. This was preparation for the government-led siege they thought would inaugurate the End Times. Law enforcement officials claimed that the group intended to use the weapons for terrorist violence. On the basis of this potential and of known legal violations, on February 28, 1993, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) made a raid to seize the arms. Six Davidians and four ATF agents died in this raid.

♦ Following this, the Davidians entered into an armed standoff with the ATF for 51 days. Koresh was for a time in nearly constant communication with the ATF agents. They paid little heed to Koresh’s worldview, or to his occasional efforts to strike compromise. On April 19, ATF agents launched a massive attack on the complex, using their full military capability to smash in walls and pump noxious gas into the buildings. A fire broke out—nobody has verified the cause—and the entire compound burned.

♦ The bodies of Koresh and 74 followers (including 25 children) were found in the wake of the fire. Competing explanations ensued, and blame was assigned in multiple places. But we see here a first example of how apocalyptic beliefs can lead not only to communal separatism and an anti-worldly pattern of existence but to active preparation for hostilities, not just symbolic but material. We learn that a sense of temporal urgency, messianic expectation, and institutional antagonism often mark the transition from symbolism to actual harm.

AUM SHINRIKYO

♦ Japanese society in this period was known for its vibrant consumerism and technology. Japanese religion, meanwhile, was a complex but largely harmonious interplay of traditional Shinto culture with various forms of Buddhism and Christianity.

♦ However, in March of 1995, such impressions got rocked. A little-known Japanese group called Aum Shinrikyo released large
amounts of sarin nerve serum into the Tokyo subway lines, resulting in 12 deaths and over 6,000 injuries. Even more distressing was the fact that the group’s goal had been to kill many, many more.

♦ Founded in 1987 by former yoga instructor Shoko Asahara, the group’s name derives from the Sanskrit om and a Japanese term for “supreme truth.” However, little about the group’s apparent focus on loving wisdom would seem to connect with the spate of violent actions it undertook.

♦ The group grew quickly in the late 1980s and soon faced charges of kidnapping and physical assault. Following a brief but failed attempt at conventional politics, the group began to explore an unexpected religious theme: visions of Armageddon.

♦ Asahara was fascinated with the historical predictions of Nostradamus and the possibility that, unlike in classical Buddhist or Hindu conceptions of time, history was linear rather than circular. Asahara grew convinced that a new phase of human trials and possibilities was near. Under Asahara’s leadership, Aum Shinrikyo had begun to fixate on Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction.

♦ Hinduism traditionally focuses on Shiva’s role in cycles of demise and rebirth, but Asahara began explicitly to link Shiva with the end of modern civilization. He taught that only those who followed his teachings about meditation, salvation, and rebirth would be spared. In his 1989 treatise The Destruction of the World, Asahara predicted that in 1997 there would be a nuclear war between Japan and the United States.

♦ Asahara believed it was his group’s purpose to prepare for the revitalization of Japanese culture, religion, and society following this inevitable cataclysm. And as we have seen with our previous two cases, the group believed that it was uniquely positioned to facilitate this broader religious passage into and out of violence.

♦ In the months before its subway attacks, the group made several startling public pronouncements in its monthly newsletter. First, it alleged that it had been attacked with poison gas by hostile
governments. Second, it denounced both the US and the Japanese governments as illegitimate.

♦ Third, it started bestowing apocalyptic titles on Japanese heads of state. Fourth, two months before the gas attacks, it criticized global Judaism. The article described the “enemy’s plot” to tear Japan apart, invoking longstanding depictions of Jews running the “world’s shadow government.” Aum blamed Jews for the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the Rwandan genocide, and more.

♦ Stunningly, this morphed into a larger critique of Japanese entrepreneurialism and workforce culture. In the final days of preparation for the attacks, Aum started viewing commuters, businesspeople, and officials as “Jewish Japanese” who needed to be purged.

♦ The group had equipped itself for purging. In connection with its Armageddon prophecy, it engaged in aggressive production and stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons. It also made plans to take over the Japanese government, to recruit members of the Japanese military, and to make war on the West. Unlike the Branch Davidians, here, a combination of extremist beliefs—rather than a singular worldview—appears to have led to apocalyptic conclusions and violence.

ONLINE SOURCES

“Charts,” https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/larkin/dt/charts.cfm
“The ‘Death Tape,’” http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29084

SUGGESTED READING

Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More.
Chidester, Salvation and Suicide.
Hall, Apocalypse Observed.

Tabor and Gallagher, Why Waco?

Weber, Apocalypses.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Are apocalypses ever the product of prosperous times and stable communities?

2. Do humans spend more time obsessing about the end of the world than actually trying to prevent it?
In this lecture, we’re making something of a transition in the overall course. We’ve already looked at scapegoating, demonology, and witch trials. These are basic strategies of creating a religious other, and they underpin a lot of violence. This lecture turns to race, looking at a very specific, focused concentration on racial others as the objects of religious violence. This lecture looks at two very different expressions of racial religion: white supremacist Christianity and the Nation of Islam.
Throughout the 19th century, multiple American organizations coalesced around the notion that the only authentic citizens were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This presumption was a response to the rapidly changing demographics of young America, with many thousands of Jews and Catholics and others arriving each year.

The nativists and the Know-Nothing party famously demonized Catholics in particular, even to the extent of applying racial epithets to Irish and Italian immigrants. However, the most sustained campaign of religio-racial violence came from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

After the American Civil War, civil and political equality for African-Americans led briefly to black representation in some Southern state legislatures and occasional so-called black rule. In most of these institutions, the situation did not hold for barely veiled racial reasons.
Behind much of the larger resistance to equality was the KKK, an organization formed in Tennessee in 1865 by Civil War veterans, including Nathan Bedford Forrest. The Klan operated in local cells. They believed that their vestigial military honor, combined with a sense of God’s destiny for America, required that they contest the new law of the land.

They insisted it was Yankee rule that had trampled over God’s holy experiment, which demanded racial separation. True Christians, they reasoned, had to fight back and reclaim their lost country. A wave of racial violence swept the South. Black people were beaten, robbed, and raped, and thousands were lynched. Churches and schools were repeatedly attacked.

THE SECOND KLAN

The first Klan was based in the South and was primarily devoted to asserting white supremacy over blacks. It declined in the 1870s, in part thanks to anti-Klan laws passed by Congress. A second Klan, however, emerged in the early 20th century as a phenomenon outside just the South. It expanded the pool of people to whom the Klan objected to include Catholics, Jews, other minorities, and immigrants. This new Klan boasted some 4 million members and considered its ideas to be mainstream American. As the scholar Kelly Baker shows, its members understood their actions as actually modeled after Jesus’s life and ministry.

They marched on Washington. They rioted at Notre Dame. They developed their own literature, clothing, institutions, and more. In D. W. Griffith’s film The Birth of a Nation, the Klan was depicted as the true exemplar of a fighting Christ, a white Jesus who would rescue America from racial decline. In the film, this was illustrated by white actors in blackface pretending to rape white women.

The second Klan, too, fell apart as a result of outside pressure. But a third Klan reared up after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education lit a match beneath the cauldron of racial anxiety. It has survived into our day.
Most famously, Louisiana’s David Duke has used conventional politics to advocate for the Klan’s defense of white American Protestantism. In the 1970s, Duke promised that the Klan would restore America’s glory days. He wanted to roll back illegal immigration and for a time worked to organize a Klan border watch on the US border with Mexico.

Aside from the Klan’s own significance as a religio-political organization that sponsors violence, it’s also a model for other white supremacist organizations like the Aryan Nations and the World Church of the Creator. This subculture of nativist fringe groups aims at white supremacy and Christian triumphalism.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Common to all these groups is an apocalyptic understanding of Christianity, which demands purification before the last days. For these groups, two signs of this coming apocalypse are the encroaching power of the federal government and the increase of gun control laws (which many claim are aimed at destroying their communities, and hence their religion as well). These people are linked to a theology known as Christian Identity (CI), which believes that the purification must be racial as well as spiritual.

Thanks to the scholarship of Michael Barkun and James Aho, we know that Christian Identity feeds into a number of far-right hate groups. Like many subcultures, it is fairly well organized even though it slips below most people’s cultural radar; it produces its own literature, thrives on social media, and has its own network of communications that includes dozens of small churches.

CI members have been responsible for public acts of violence against the state. It had notable influences on the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. It has also committed numerous acts of violence on non-white people.

Some CI believers work within the American political system and try to run candidates for office. Others organize so-called survival communities to reduce contact with corrupt society and survive
the race war they believe is coming. Still others actively plan and organize to overthrow the federal government through guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The long reach of the Klan stretches into our times.

THE NATION OF ISLAM

♦ A different kind of heavily organized, racialized religion is the Nation of Islam, the religious organization to which boxing champion Muhammad Ali belonged. The origins of the Nation of Islam are in the Reconstruction period of US history, when many African Americans looked back to their roots in Africa. They dreamed of establishing a separate nation as an antidote to white violence and discrimination. Prominent public figures like Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey gave voice to these ideas in different ways.

♦ The forefather of the organization was Timothy Drew, later known as Noble Drew Ali, although the organization was not known as the Nation of Islam in his lifetime. Ali believed that he was the final prophet in orthodox Islam, and he even went so far as to create his own series of scriptures and attach these to the Qur’an along with various writings from the American metaphysical tradition known as New Thought.

♦ This all reflected Drew’s conviction that Islam needed to be made new for African Americans. He rejected white culture and Western religion, seeking to craft an entirely black religious discourse from his sources. He envisioned a separate society of advanced black spiritual leaders.

♦ In 1913, Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple of America in Newark, New Jersey. Ali promised that he was restoring to African Americans their real religious character, that he would return them to North Africa, and that black people would be liberated. The message spread quickly, and soon temples developed in many American cities.

♦ As group membership reached about 20,000 by the late 1920s, government surveillance was begun. Members wore suits and
fezzes, and changed their names to reflect an Islamic identity. However, in 1929, while awaiting trial for the murder of a rival, Ali died in his home under suspicious circumstances. Violent factional conflicts followed, along with sensationalistic media coverage.

♦ Below the surface, the temples themselves continued to serve ordinary worshipers. They nurtured a community of non-Christian religious communities, especially in the industrial Midwest. In Detroit in 1930, another mysterious figure emerged, espousing a new variant of Islam: Wallace D. Fard. He declared that he was an envoy from the city of Mecca, Islam’s holiest site.

♦ He told people that Islam was the religion that would free black people from white oppression. He taught that “black men in North America are not Negroes but members of the lost tribe of Shebazz, stolen by traders from the Holy City of Mecca 379 years ago.” Like others before him, Fard promised black people that they would gather in Mecca, redeemed and restored to their true faith.

♦ During the Great Depression, Fard was able to attract many disenfranchised African Americans. Converts got new names to reflect their African heritage, an attractive notion to African Americans who wanted an identity that didn’t reflect the history of racism in America. In 1934, Fard mysteriously disappeared.

♦ The remnants of the group were taken over by a young convert by the name of Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad led the group into its new identity as the Nation of Islam, which he led until his death in 1975.

♦ Elijah Muhammad taught that God had long ago instructed the ancient black race, the original humans, in the ways of “science and astronomy, the civilizations on other planets, and knowledge of self.” According to Muhammed, a mad black scientist rebelled against God. In an experiment gone wrong, Yakub created white people, the monstrous race that would oppress God’s children for 6,000 years until God became incarnate in Fard, which signaled the end of white supremacy.
Armageddon would occur when the Mother Plane, a giant UFO, descended on America to destroy white power. In preparation for these cataclysmic events, the Nation of Islam focuses on communal solidarity and on building up a separate culture and infrastructure.

MALCOLM X

In the 1950s, the Nation of Islam’s public presence became more widely known and more antagonistic. Much of this is attributed to the powerful presence of Malcolm X. Born Malcolm Little, X spent his formative years engaged in a life of crime and hustling. He ended up in prison and there became a convert to the Nation of Islam. Upon his release, he swiftly rose through the organization’s ranks to become a national spokesperson.
♦ X demanded liberation “by any means necessary.” The Nation of Islam had its own paramilitary unit, the Fruit of Islam. Their emphasis on self-reliance entailed readiness to resist aggression in kind. X was photographed brandishing weaponry.

♦ X regularly mocked the civil rights movement for seeking inclusion in a system that he believed could not accept black humanity. Fascinatingly, in 1961, Elijah Muhammad actually instructed X and an Atlanta member to meet with members of the Ku Klux Klan. X considered the Klan to be more honest than white liberals, and the two organizations shared the goal of racial separatism. They met in January 1961 to discuss the possibility of a land transfer to establish more black separatist communities. The Klan agreed not to attack the Nation of Islam’s mosques while the Nation of Islam agreed not to support the Civil Rights Movement.

♦ X later enraged mainstream America both black and white when he was asked to comment on President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963. He said he thought it was a case of the chickens coming home to roost. Elijah Muhammad sought to rein him in afterward. X was expelled and soon began to pursue his more radical political ideas, focusing on black internationalism and a critique of capitalism.

♦ He took the Hajj, the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca, and when he lived and prayed with Muslims of other racial backgrounds, he came to revise his racial views and embrace orthodox Islam. He remained just as radical politically, however, challenging black Christians to detach from the economic and cultural mainstream and embrace an African identity. Though he did not any longer profess that white people were actually devils, he continued to believe that they acted devilishly. In early 1965, X was shot to death in Manhattan’s Audubon Ballroom.

♦ The Nation of Islam stayed its course until Elijah Muhammad’s death. What survives today is the result of a late-1970s break from the organization led by Muhammad’s son. Another member, Minister Louis Farrakhan, grew uncomfortable with the direction that the organization was taking. Farrakhan broke away from the organization and reconstituted it as it had been led by Elijah Muhammad.
TAKEAWAYS

♦ What can we learn about racial violence and religion from the groups that we’ve considered? One lesson is that in order for race to be defended as a natural category, with social and institutional implications, religious teachings seek to explain racial difference through scripture or tradition.

♦ At times, the formation of great political powers incorporated theories of racial superiority rooted in European Christianity. These theories survive into the present, with their most pointed examples occurring in the ongoing existence of white supremacist religions in the United States, and to a lesser extent in the Nation of Islam, with its aggressive defense of racial identity. In groups like these, we see the degree to which some traditions will go to defend exclusivism of doctrine, practice, and community.

♦ If religious traditions are to seek to contest racism, perhaps one of the most effective ways of doing so is to put forth an alternative vision, one that contests racial representations with anti-racist ones. That means to promote texts and practices that authorize equality and human dignity, and to eliminate the very idea of others in favor of common humanity. If it’s true that sacred texts and images have the power to wire human perception, they can rewire it too.

ONLINE SOURCES

“Speeches,” http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches.htm

SUGGESTED READING

Aho, *This Thing of Darkness.*
Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right.*
Fredrickson, *Racism.*
Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad.*
Johnson, *African American Religions.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Thinking about the longstanding patterns of institutional racism, do economic motives to use and dehumanize other people precede religious racism, or does the latter preexist to justify the former?

2. Why is it so controversial to pay attention to racial representations of God?
Throughout human history, women have been framed in narrative, symbolism, and religious allegory in ways that determine their social roles and possibilities. This lecture looks at how religions demand violent practices from women, how they authorize violent treatment of women, and how gender is a central theme in the interpretation of certain religions.
Gender encompasses the full range of a culture’s values regarding the anatomical differences between males and females. There is the raw fact of the body, and then there is how culture reads it.

A fundamental Western presumption is that maleness is a standard for measuring human experience. Women are frequently put in a position of having to conform to male standards in order to be accepted. But where do these norms and expectations come from? One key source is our language. For example, when someone wants to talk about the beginning of human history, they often use the phrase “the dawn of man” or something similar. Another example is the taunt that someone “throws like a girl.”

In the religious realm, we also find that masculinist terms fashion conceptual links. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, we have the image of God as a stern but loving father, as a judge, and as a vengeful tyrant. In the New Testament, we see more loving but still predominantly masculine images. Islam is also entirely masculinist. Hinduism, in contrast, reveres several female deities, and images of the feminine divine are found in many polytheistic or pantheistic traditions.

Some religions, even Christianity, have always relied on mother imagery and feminine imagery. Additionally, mystics from various traditions have always insisted that divine reality was way beyond our human languages and descriptions. This would make categories like gender far too limited. Despite the presence of these counterexamples, the descriptive language of most traditions has been focused on male gods.

If divinity is identified with maleness, this certainly reinforces extant cultural norms that also privilege masculinity. It’s pretty hard not to think that different understandings of who can preach, who can lead, who can own, or who can vote weren’t shaped both consciously and unconsciously by the idea that maleness is closer to the sacred.
GENDERED REPRESENTATIONS

- An important question is: How are women’s bodies treated differently in cultures with gendered religious representations? In many Native American traditions, there was considerable gender complementarity. Not all cultures were organized matrilineally; however, there was a far less likely occurrence of male violence against women. There were often female leaders and even warrior chiefs. Curiously, this more open movement and conduct of women’s bodies was cited as the justification for violence against women by outsiders.
Many reports by European colonists remarked on these features of gender among Native Americans. They noted, with both confusion and admiration, the rarity of male sexual violence against women, even in war. Nonetheless, European Christians often depicted Native Americans as devils and savages. Consequently, their sexual and gender practices were understood as primitive, infantile, and not adjusted to God’s good order.

Misreadings of Native American cultural and religious life shaped a broader dehumanization that crops up repeatedly. In Gold Rush California, men frequently raped Native women or even took them for sexual enslavement. It wasn’t even possible to convict a white man of these acts based on Native American testimony.

At the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, the US military committed multiple atrocities against Cheyenne women. The official report to Congress suggests that women were singled out for particularly grisly acts of violation: “Women and children were killed and scalped, children shot at their mother’s breast, and all the bodies mutilated in the most horrible manner.”

Other cultural settings reveal shocking treatment. A possibility is that behind this treatment is a deep sexual anxiety. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *The Origin of Table Manners*, wrote a fascinating comparison of indigenous cultures’ interpretation of female reproductive cycles. Lévi-Strauss found that these cultures, from across the Americas, were committed to the careful regulation of menstruation as a means of maintaining the social order. Because of these cultures’ rootedness in nature’s cycles, the synchronization of menstrual cycles contributed to the overall balance between culture and nature. The actual practices varied widely, but often included seclusion in menstrual huts.

In other cultures—some traditional African religions, for example—we see the regular use of fetishes to deal with excess menstrual blood. Anthropologically speaking, this is an attempt to tamp down broader social anxieties about blood overflow and its apparently fearful symbolism. Many religions share this anxiety, often forbidding sexual activity during menstruation.
While some religions, like Sikhism, go out of their way to avoid condemning menstruating women, others—like very strict forms of Hindu traditionalism—sometimes even banish women from the home during menstruation. When we look to the isolation and stigmatization of the female body, we encounter all of a culture’s fears of contact with pollutants, contagion, or impurity. These ideas are central to representational and physical harm.

**WITCH TRIALS**

To get at the socio-religious implications of gendered violence, this lecture now turns to witch trials. An earlier lecture showed how common it is in demonology and in witch-hunting to encounter sexual language, which this course’s professor refers to as “the erotics of fear.” If the monster is a perversion of the good order, and if sex is at the heart of our conceptions of morality, we shouldn’t be surprised if the monster advances via carnality. It’s almost always women who are blamed for male misbehaviors, a lamentable impulse that lives even in our day.

This played out in colonial America, where Christianity wasn’t as distinct from so-called occult or magical practices as people have generally assumed. Indigenous religions, folk practices, and magical beliefs blended in an admixture of right-living piety with fear and darkness.

The Puritan commonwealths were rooted in a stark moral universe, whose certainties were framed by an unshakeable conviction that demonic others lurked outside and within the regenerate community. This burgeoning fearscape took shape in Cotton Mather’s zeal for understanding what he called the “invisible world,” which was overrun by demonic forces that could also act in the visible world.

It’s also evident in the diaries and doomy poetry of Puritan minister Michael Wigglesworth, where self-loathing and sexual desire mingled in grippingly described terrors before the divine. These Christians believed that the shadow world of spirits and demons was as real as the waking world. The Devil’s work was no trifling matter. Because it bred such seductions and captured the imagination, the devout
had to do battle. In the zeal of their scrutiny, Puritans produced what historian Perry Miller called a “staggering compendium of iniquity.”

♦ In 1692, a series of strange fits and visions came over some young women in Salem, Massachusetts. Many reported convulsions and visions of bodily violence that were deeply disturbing. The Puritan sensibility went quickly to work. Some of the girls actually lived with Samuel Parris, Salem’s minister, who consulted a local physician as to the cause of the girls’ torments. Doctor William Griggs concluded that the cause wasn’t biological but that “an evil hand” had afflicted these women, turning them into dangerous vessels for darkness.

♦ Next, a relative of one of the girls joined with Parris’s slaves, whose names were Tituba and John, to pursue an English folk method of identifying a witch. Parris was scandalized that his slaves, especially the alleged sorceress Tituba, were using allegedly occult remedies to undo occultism. He sought instead a more conventional form of identification, and he asked the afflicted girls to name the sources of their problems. They did so, identifying three women, one of whom was Tituba. The accused were then arrested.

♦ The trials that followed were sensational, and one of their chief features was the scapegoating of women by sometimes-imaginative means. What counted as evidence in the various trials challenges our modern sensibility: spectral evidence, which was based on a person’s dreams or visions; possession; bite or suck marks; or the touch test, where, if a person panicked at the touch of the accused, it was affirmed that the accused was a witch.

WIDESPREAD HUNTS

♦ Witch trials and hunts were rampant throughout the early colonies, as were attempts to protect oneself from dark magic through remedies such as throwing salt after spilled milk, carving crosses into broomsticks, or keeping some hair from any cow one sold. Behind this, many of the same general sociological factors that underpinned European witch trials were present in New England: a general crisis of authority, an anxiety about what we would call pluralism, and a powerful religious enthusiasm that here often trained its sights on women.
Puritan New England ran through male leadership, and the belief that God was male authorized all kinds of prohibitions on female leadership, even over domestic tasks. Women were believed to lack the moral character to contest the Devil. These convictions, situated in Cotton Mather’s “invisible world,” made it very difficult for believers to conclude anything other than that women are at fault.

Women’s testimony against women was taken as legally binding evidence. The initial fits that kindled Salem’s witch mania were observed only by the afflicted girls themselves, but nonetheless they were cited as ironclad facts. The testimony of the ones Mather called “visionary girls” was put into the service of the larger gendered violence of witch trials: naming, othering, or destroying women who were differently religious.

Women were accused of undermining their men or sealing a deal with the Devil for the queenship of Hell. However, this same narrative template also depended on portrayals of women as the chief victims of witchcraft. Women stood for virtue and innocence violated, even as they were named the responsible connivers.

The local superstition and gossip led frequently to legal actions against mostly women, who were singled out and made examples. So-called witches were stoned, hanged, drowned.
A case with more contemporary resonance is the purported violence against women in Islam. In response to large geopolitical events, recent decades have prompted considerable focus on the status of women in Islam, much of it grounded in the false assumption that Islam means one thing everywhere and always. Muhammad himself displayed relative liberality in Islam’s early history, bestowing on women a social status they manifestly lacked elsewhere.

The role and treatment of women varies significantly in different parts of the Muslim world. For example, women in Egypt experience life quite differently depending on whether they are urban or rural, despite the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which places emphatic limitations on women’s social mobility.

There is a wide range of social restrictions imposed on Muslim women in majority Muslim countries. But while they’re serious, they aren’t universal and they aren’t unchanging. Many Egyptian women, for example, enjoy high levels of education, social mobility, and employment status, though they cannot serve as judges in Egypt’s State Council.

Iranian women require permission to travel. Saudi Arabian women have long been forbidden by law to drive cars, although the Saudi government promised to lift the ban in 2018. Until 2005, women couldn’t vote in Kuwait. And despite relative openness in countries like Iran, there are still strict guidelines in terms of public behavior and comportment.

Despite the dominant impression that these patriarchal expressions are the whole of Islam, a couple of complicating factors emerge. First of all, we tend to see this kind of rigorous gendered conservatism embraced mainly—although not exclusively—by populations that are deprived of general socioeconomic liberty. Some fantastically wealthy Middle Eastern states endorse these practices; however, the gender norms spread among the dispossessed, who participate
in them partly out of the sense that they’re part of a broader Islamic fidelity that’s an antidote to blunt Western secularism.

♦ For example, when the Iranian shah or Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal Ataturk banned traditional gender practices like veiling, the result was negative. To practitioners, veiling and the general importance of family life and domestic relations represent a kind of authenticity, authority, and even liberation.

♦ If that sounds odd, keep in mind that the historical and sociological record shows unequivocally that over time, patriarchy and misogyny are breaking down in the Muslim world, largely through the efforts of women’s protest and reassessments of the liberatory elements of tradition. Muslim women don’t reflexively agree with male power, even if they can’t regularly contest the public either. Not everything is fundamentalist and patriarchal, in other words, and this lesson reveals to us that the same traditions producing social violence contain resources for reversing it.

♦ To reiterate: Muslim violence against women is real, widespread, and often resistant to amelioration via new social norms and practices.
The revival of so-called *zina* laws in recent decades in countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan—criminalizing sexual conduct outside marriage—is one piece of evidence for this claim.

- However, wearing a hijab is not violence against women. In fact, some Muslim women find that wearing hijab actually removes them from the predatory sexual gaze of men, detaching them from the broader sexual violence in many cultures.

- Economic dependence, defining sexuality as wicked, and physical harm to women are clearly different. Careful focus on this case reveals Islamic gendered violence not as a case wholly distinct from other religious examples, but as clearly on a shared continuum with other examples. It’s not always clear that traditional Muslim communities can be defined by occasional practices like honor killings or stoning, nor that their traditionalism is that different from that of conservative religions elsewhere.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**

“Cultural Imperialism or Rescue? The British and Suttee,” http://www.victorianweb.org/history/empire/india/suttee.html


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**SUGGESTED READING**

Andolsen, et. al. *Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience*.


Demos, *Entertaining Satan*.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you agree that gendered religious language has a tangible effect on how women are treated in our societies?

2. Do the religious traditions most commonly associated with violence against women contain resources for promoting women's agency?
Modern societies have regularly focused on concerns about purity and deviance. These concerns are often expressed in censorship campaigns, but sometimes they take shape in religious or political persecution that targets specific sexual practices. The two most consistent targets have been abortion and homosexuality. Although controversy surrounding abortion hasn’t been a perennial focus of religions, this heated issue involves not only regular depictions of the procedure as a form of murder—it also sometimes resorts to violence against it. Recent religious antagonism against homosexuality reveals not only the durability of older behavioral norms but also how religious violence often is fueled by concerns about domesticity and the natural.
VIEWS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

♦ There is a spectrum of religious beliefs regarding homosexuality. Some of them are quite open and liberal in their understanding, while others orient themselves around older prohibitions and customs. Additionally, there exists a theological emphasis on what the theologian Thomas Aquinas enshrined as natural law theory. This opened a space for the derogation of so-called sodomites as practicing not simply immoral acts, according to a social taxonomy, but “unnatural” ones.

♦ Today, some Judeo-Christian opposition turns on the Levitical text, privileging same sex relations as the chief sin of Sodom. Christians look also to 1 Corinthians 6:9–10: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men / nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Some interpreters point out that it’s unclear if “men who have sex with men” are morally distinct from, for example, the drunkards or the greedy.
Others, though, point to this as singling out sexually immoral persons as future heavenly rejects. Romans 1:26 is also often cited: “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.” Many denominations fashion different interpretations of these texts, or simply look to more egalitarian scriptures as having greater relevance for our time. Yet we don’t have to look too far to find evidence of hardliners. The Southern Baptist Convention once expelled member congregations that had concluded its anti-gay theology should be reassessed.

Strong conservative tendencies occur among certain Buddhists or Baha’i practitioners, although Buddhism tends towards more liberality in spite of its central monastic vow of celibacy. The Qur’an features several passages regarding homosexuality. For example, Sura 7:80–81 reads, “We also sent Lut: He said to his people: ‘Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds.”

COERCION AND VIOLENCE

A suggestive window into how this plays out is to focus on legal coercion that’s framed religiously, as well as representational or defamatory violence. Beginning in the 1970s, conservative Christians in America, like Anita Bryant, sometimes led efforts to repeal gay rights ordinances, though opponents argued that this is unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment.

In 1978, California state senator John Briggs authored a proposal to ban homosexuals from being public school teachers. These and similar efforts are rooted in claims that “natural” sexual relationships and “traditional” families are themselves under threat of violence from corrosive social forces like sexual promiscuity, pornography, and gay rights.

It’s important to understand how powerfully basic theological convictions about what is “natural” can resonate and are used to justify the harshest rebukes, legal sanctions, or physical
assaults. Many violent actors feel anger at what they regard as a deliberate assault on God’s will. They refuse to acknowledge that homosexuality is anything but a choice. The most extreme opponents of homosexuality teach not only that God hates gay people, but that it may not be inappropriate for societies to execute gay people.

♦ Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, believed that the expansion of gay rights was a material, legal violation of Christian rights. Regularly dipping into campus politics, picketing funerals, or harassing gay rights marches, Phelps was known for his inflammatory, epithet-strewn rhetoric.

♦ Although he was a veteran of the civil rights movement, Phelps infamously celebrated the murder of college student Matthew Shepard, who was killed because he was gay. Phelps also routinely gave thanks for the attacks of September 11, 2001, which he viewed as divine punishment for America’s sins, and called for the just suffering of all those who would pursue a “Satanic lifestyle.”

♦ Religious leaders in other nations have regularly resorted to violent homophobic rhetoric and action as well. Ayatollah Khomeini demonized Tehran’s fairly thriving gay community after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Many hundreds of gay Iranians lost their lives to official and unofficial violence. Far-right Jews in Israel demonize homosexuality regularly, and they have spread rumors about the sexuality of Palestinian leaders like Yasser Arafat. Reverend Ian Paisley protested the decriminalization of homosexuality in Ireland by launching the Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign in 1977.

♦ These events point to a global tension taking shape in the era of gay rights: Many religious traditions have little problem accepting different identities; however, those who go beyond criticism to endorse violent rhetoric and action rely on the language of nature and tradition to advance their claims.
Another provocative issue relating to sexuality and reproduction is abortion. Abortions have been around more or less as long as sex has, and for a long time, abortions weren’t considered remarkable (largely because they were seen as limited to only lower-class women). Between the mid-19th and mid-20th century, though, legal debates about criminalization, rights to privacy and due process, and the status of medical authorities prompted debates in the United States and elsewhere.

After the heavily contested 1973 Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade, abortion became a hot-button issue for American religious conservatives specifically. Many of them believed that the legalization of abortion was itself a state-sponsored form of violence, a legal killing of a fetus who was entitled to 14th Amendment rights.
Since *Roe v. Wade*, many limitations have been placed around the procedure. Aside from legal and theological critics of the practice, a narrow but heavily active subset of opponents has taken to violent action in order to undermine or eradicate legalized abortion. They compared Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote *Roe v. Wade*’s majority opinion, with Nazis and with Pontius Pilate.

**ATTACKS**

Blackmun received dozens of death threats, and a sniper shot into his apartment in 1985. Several organizations emerged during this period, including Joseph Scheidler’s Pro-Life Action League, Randall Terry’s Operation Rescue, and Mike Bray’s Army of God. They share an internal logic that believes secular law has run amok and the innocent are being slaughtered. Thus, according to this logic, extreme conditions demand extreme responses.

Between 1977 and 1982, there were 115 acts of violence against abortion clinics, doctors, and patients. They were robbed, vandalized, assaulted, and kidnapped. There were death threats, bomb threats, and arsons, in addition to blockades, public confrontations, and symbolic attempts to rescue the unborn. Such extralegal acts were also justified as manifestations of biblical authoritativeness, backed up by military imagery from the Hebrew Bible particularly.

After Operation Rescue began receiving national attention in 1988, the group engaged in clinic assaults in New York, a violent blockade in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and the so-called Siege of Atlanta, where several hundred gathered to try to break police blockades around downtown abortion clinics. Another group, Lambs of Christ, publicized the residential information of doctors who performed abortions, which led to multiple instances of violence. Michael Griffin assassinated the doctor David Gunn, and John Salvi opened fire on an abortion clinic in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Bray’s Army of God, which has been officially labeled a terrorist organization, believes that America has become “comparable to Nazi Germany.” In an interview by religion scholar Mark Juergensmeyer, Bray opined that the government was demonically influenced and
had seduced Americans with comfort and entertainment so as to distract them from the outrage of what he called “abortion mills” and the “child-killing industry.”

♦ In the manifesto Army of God and in Bray’s A Time to Kill, there are calls for “holy war” against what is claimed to be a government that endorses murder of the innocent. Two activists in Bray’s circle were convicted of murder or attempted murder. Reverend Paul Hill shot and killed a clinic doctor and his escort, while Shelley Shannon participated in numerous clinic bombings and in wounding a doctor with her firearm. Bray was convicted for his role in these and related actions, but has not backed off from his conviction that a particular conception of divine law should guide all American social and political institutions, without which they would deserve violent revolt.

NEWER REACTIONS

♦ Keep in mind that religions haven’t only related to sexuality via repressions and censures. However, we still find taxonomies of wrong sex in many societies and sacred texts. New religions are regularly stigmatized for their sexual innovations. A liberal mosque in Germany received death threats for announcing its openness to gay Muslims. Marginalized populations, like Iraq’s Yazidis, whose faith contains elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam, are often targeted with sexual violence.

♦ In 2008, the United Nations recognized the problem as being widespread, and 66 member nations voted to end the criminalization of homosexuality. Such criminalization, however, remains a prominent feature of nations like Egypt, Cameroon, and Russia.

♦ Oft-cited punishments for adultery, such as the anachronistic practice of stoning, have mostly died out. However, aside from the general demonization of certain sexualities, a range of practices—from Roman Catholic clerical abuse to censorship campaigns—aim to identify, classify, and purge what authority dubs unclean.

♦ The disciplining of desire partakes often of the same self-harm common to monastic and ascetic impulses. However, when these
broadly cosmological understandings of sex and its consequences are directed at others, we’ve seen multiple instances of the link between rhetorical violence, intimidation, prohibiting access to social goods, and physical harm visited on others.

♦ The idea of what is “natural,” as well scriptural interpretations, work to classify the enemy as the appearance of dirt in the purity of the religious world. The enemy is an invading pathogen to be isolated and removed. That spells danger for those judged to be outside of what counts as natural.

SUGGESTED READING

Bull and Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies.*
Elliott, *Fallen Bodies.*
Erzen, *Straight to Jesus.*
Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* vol. 1
Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God.*
Risen and Thomas, *Wrath of Angels.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Is it possible to imagine most religions’ moral code without the regulation of sexuality?

2. Does sexual “wrongdoing” receive sterner religious punishment than other kinds of alleged infraction? If so, why?
HERESIES AND THEIR SUPPRESSION

This lecture looks at law and violence as they focus on heresies. We'll see that in addition to sacred texts, religions are often defined by particular ways of inhabiting place, conceptions of time and destiny, and demands for ideal communities. Each of these plays an important role in our subject because most religions make ethical demands on practitioners. These often lead to intense bodily disciplines and social customs that foster an exclusive, even oppositional mentality. Beyond the functions of religion, we'll see that violence can consist not only of physical harm against people or groups but legal constraint, denial of basic liberties, or misrepresentation.
HERESIES

♦ On the most general level, heresies exist in every religious tradition. The term heresy refers in the most basic sense to a deviation from orthodoxy and orthopraxy. More specifically, though, the category of heresy is one that’s deployed inside religious traditions to refer to sectarian impulses that need to be named and eradicated in order to preserve said orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

♦ A heretic thus isn’t a figure that emerges from a religious tradition diametrically opposed to your own, but one who dangerously occupies a shared religious tradition. An early example comes from a scholar of South Asian religions, Wendy Doniger, who points out that in Vedic Hinduism, religious elites used negative language to undermine challengers to religious authority and authenticity: those who wore improper clothing, took non-Vedic vows, or generally destabilized the dharma. Those classifications begin to give some insight into the relation between power and obedience that’s at stake in heresiology.

GNOSTICISM

♦ Perhaps the most well-known heresy was Gnosticism, whose fundamental belief was that gnosis (knowledge) could save you. Christian Gnosticism claimed to have a secret teaching from Jesus which would free a person from slavery to the material world and death by disclosing the structure of the universe. Gnostics aimed for an individual, immediate experience of a spiritual Christ as opposed to one that was mediated through Church hierarchy and tradition. This is one key reason, aside from doctrine, that Gnostics were considered so dangerous by Christian authorities.

♦ Gnostics like Basilides and Valentinus claimed to have apostolic authority, which superseded institutions. The first major response to the Gnostics came from the early Christian father Irenaeus of Lyons. Between 175–185 CE, Irenaeus produced five volumes entitled Against Heresies.
In the third book, he writes, “The world is ruled by the providence of one God, who is both endowed with infinite justice to punish the wicked, and with infinite goodness to bless the pious.” Irenaeus writes not of any temporal law or torture implement, but darker, more cosmological punishment. He takes aim at the Gnostics for flirting with the feminine divine: “Well may their Mother bewail them, as capable of conceiving and inventing such things for they have worthily uttered this falsehood against themselves.”

He later connects such notions with ancient history and prophetic warning, writing, “We must not, therefore, infer that there was another God than He Whom Christ preached; we should rather fear, lest the one and the same God Who inflicted punishment on the ancients, should bring down heavier upon us.” He then provides a fairly exhaustive list of passages from the Hebrew Bible detailing examples of such punishment on wrongdoers and idolaters.

Interestingly enough, one the next most significant figures in this tale was Tertullian, a Roman lawyer who lived during the time of Irenaeus and who later became a Montanist because he was attracted to that movement’s clarity and rigor. Tertullian is significant because of the images and metaphors he introduced to Christian thinking, which would shape later thinking about heresies and punishments.

He represents a rigorist stance in early Christianity, a stance that sought to stem the tide of compromise to pagan culture and practice. He stressed the incompatibility of worldliness and faith. Tertullian would make no concessions to idol trafficking or to a social pagan religion he found vicious, sensual, and commercial. Those dangers bled into all the levels of society, making social life for the Christian one of constant danger of compromise. He judged that idolatry was evil not just because it undermines God but because it’s a slippery slope to other moral wrongs.

**RELIGION AND EMPIRE**

The story becomes more focused the closer we get to Christianity’s transformation into the religion of empire, which altered the status of pagans. In 390, the pagan poet Libanius wrote to Emperor
Theodosius: “You did not order the temples to be closed, but the men in black … attack the temples with stones, poles and iron crowbars, or even their bare hands and feet. Then the roofs are knocked in and the walls levelled to the ground, the statues are overturned and the altars demolished. The temple priests must suffer in silence or die.”

- Between the late 2nd and the early 5th century, such riots and public conflicts were regular occurrences. There was a mania to destroy all traces of heresy or pagan worship. Pagans retaliated, too, as with the murder of an Alexandrian bishop in 356 and the lynching of another in Syria. Post-Constantinian Christians systematically destroyed pagan temples and idols everywhere, first unofficially and then by official edict in 407.

- Once Christians possessed clerical and juridical power, it was common to use both law and physical force in the power of naming, categorizing, and marking people as others. Saint Jerome, for example, widely known for producing the Latin translation of the Bible, insisted that all Germanic peoples were cannibals. Behind this was likely the resistance of Germans to conversion, but note what’s going on here perceptually and culturally: If a person is not a human but a cannibal, and if a cannibal presents a specific range of dangers to humans, then logic dictates that almost any action undertaken to either convert the cannibal or to eradicate cannibalism is justified.

- Note: There is not something exclusively Christian about such engagement with others, despite the regularity with which Christians portrayed non-Christians as barbarians. One non-Christian example is the regular interreligious violence in the Hebrew Bible. Another is Muslim missions and the expulsion of Iberian Jews by the Almohads in the 12th century.

HERESY COURTS

- In 1231, Pope Gregory IX officially established heresy courts. Even though sentencing and punishment would be carried out by secular authorities, religious courts determined the nature and grievousness
of the religious harm. Within two years, these had morphed into what were officially Inquisition tribunals.

♦ These relied on clerical inquisitors—usually Dominicans or Franciscans—endowed with papal authority to accuse, try, and punish heretics. Evidence in these episodes was often extremely fuzzy. Even substantial rumor mongering was enough to merit punishments ranging from burning at the stake, drowning, or cutting out one’s tongue.

♦ Several different Inquisitions actually occurred, the most renowned being the Spanish (which lasted nearly four centuries, from 1478–1834). The Spanish Inquisition was nominally run by the crown. It had a broad scope that often entailed strictly political judgments as well as religious ones. Spanish orthodoxy became central to what’s known as the Counter-Reformation.

♦ Because of its prosecutorial vigor, Spain was even called by some the “sword of Rome” or the “hammer of heretics.” The hard repression of Protestants produced not only deaths in large numbers but imprisonments, excommunications, and exiles. Most infamous of the inquisitors was Tomás de Torquemada, who burned an estimated 2,000 accused. Late in his long life, he was instrumental in the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

♦ The shift to the legal focus on Protestantism, following a prior obsession with Judaism and minor sects, was led by Pope Paul IV. Picking up from Paul III’s 1542 papal bull, Licet ab Initio, Paul IV ensured that the wide scope given to the Inquisition was itself regularly policed.

♦ This wasn’t for the benefit of accused laity, though. It was more like the internal affairs arm of a police department. Even established members of the hierarchy sometimes weren’t spared: Bartolomé Carranxa expressed sympathy for the theology of Erasmus and for the idea of limiting the pope’s authority a bit. For this, he was imprisoned for many years and then essentially quarantined in a monastery.
♦ Civil authorities cooperated with the Inquisition in Sicily, France, and elsewhere. There were coordinated efforts to eradicate the Huguenots, including raiding homes, imprisonments, and deaths.

GALILEO

♦ The case of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) gives another fascinating window into the heresiological imagination. As a young man, Galileo worked on the problem of motion at Pisa and Padua. He was opposed to Aristotle’s theories, which were endorsed by the church. His late-16th-century piece *On Motion* was based on impetus physics of the late Middle Ages.

♦ Galileo later became a follower of Copernicus, who was also concerned with the problem of motion on Earth. In 1604, Galileo worked out a new law: Bodies fall with uniform accelerated motion, regardless of weight. This was not published until 1638 in *Two New Sciences*. After confirming some of Copernicus’s insights regarding the path of the Moon—thereby contradicting Aristotle’s notion of heavenly perfection—and publishing an influential work in 1610, he won the patronage of Cosimo de Medici in Florence.

♦ The reaction by the church was harsh. In 1616, Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* was placed on the church’s literary blacklist. Galileo was forbidden to “hold or defend” Copernican theories by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine.
Galileo, however, continued exploring. His 1623 writing *The Assayer* articulated a new corpuscular theory: Matter consisted of atoms of various sizes and shapes in motion. He described taste, odor, color, and sensations of touch as secondary or subjective qualities. In 1632, Galileo published *Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems of the World*. The characters were Simplicio (whose views supported Ptolemy and Aristotle, which was the church’s view), Sagredo (a neutral observer), and Salviati (who supported Copernican arguments).

Galileo was condemned in 1633 for his support of heliocentric theory. The church reaffirmed its official position, forbidding anyone to “teach or defend the Copernican doctrine in any way whatsoever.” The *Dialogue*, however, was enjoying a huge success that infuriated the pope. Galileo was summoned to Rome for a complicated and, at times, confusing trial.

He was found guilty and made to renounce Copernicanism, and thereafter sentenced to house arrest. Galileo’s condemnation had a negative effect on science in Italy. Even elsewhere, new research by Descartes or by mechanists was often published with withholding anything smacking of Copernicanism removed.

This gives us insight into how heresy doesn’t just turn on rigid social morality but on which institutions get to decide what constitutes proper knowledge. Trial, confession, ostracism, and even the destruction of the body result from such charges. Even recantation and repentance mean that a life has been disrupted and altered. However, to those who bestow the name heretic and cast out violently those who have been identified as such, chaos has been overcome and order restored.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**

“Inquisito,” https://inquisition.library.nd.edu/collections/RBSC-INQ:COLLECTION

SUGGESTED READING

Berzon, *Classifying Christians*.
Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Is “heresy” just another name for theological innovation?

2. Can a religion have an identity without defining (and punishing) heretics?
This lecture shows that Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have all regarded war as at best a partial evil and at worse something far below that. They worry that committing violence against other humans violates fundamental ethical norms or tempts us with a kind of idolatry, placing nation above the divine. But they also wrestle with other questions, most of them concerning how to balance religious ideals with what the real world requires. In short, this lecture is about how religions define violence in the context of war as a necessary, limited evil.
This lecture begins with Hinduism. Toward the end of the Vedic period, beginning around the 6th century BCE, a series of texts called the Upanishads wrestled with new ethical categories and cultural developments. This same period saw a reckoning with social station and the newer obligations of kingship, one of which is war. The hugely influential South Asian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, contain reflections on right action that shape Hindu thinking about violence. One important section of the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad-Gita.

The Bhagavad-Gita was probably composed with the social castes of old India in mind, especially members of the warrior caste. It features a crucial encounter between a warrior and a god during an actual war. Arjuna is the warrior. He’s faced with a genuine dilemma: If Arjuna is to adhere to the demands of his station in life, his caste, and the actions required of a soldier, he might have to kill his own relations, some of whom are on the other side of the battlefield from him.
Arjuna is visited by the god Krishna, who tries a few different (and unsuccessful) arguments to compel Arjuna’s participation. Krishna is finally able to persuade Arjuna that avoiding the excesses of total renunciation or total worldliness leaves open a middle path that allows participation without attachment to worldly results.

The takeaway from this key text is that while total nonviolence may be impossible to achieve, the kind of participation described in the Bhagavad-Gita makes it possible to conduct ethical warfare without vainglory, cruelty, and other states that undermine justice and righteousness. The social order, including the social castes, is important to achieving larger religious ends, and so it is necessary to defend that order from harm or compromise.

WAR AND BUDDHISM

While many casual observers in the West associate Buddhism with complete nonviolence, the historical record isn’t quite so unidirectional. Buddhist ethics are grounded in the Five Precepts and the Three Baskets. The Five Precepts for all practicing Buddhists forbid them from harming living beings, stealing, sexual impropriety, consuming intoxicants, or indulging in wrong speech, like lying or rumor mongering. Monks have an additional set of precepts, generally focused on the avoidance of excess and materialism.

The first of the Five Precepts would seem to have a clear pacifist direction. The Three Baskets are Buddhist scriptures that spell out in more detail what right conduct and discipline require. In them, we find some exemptions to that first precept.

History shows that Buddhist monasteries have often been the site of military outposts. Monks have often led military campaigns. Many kingdoms or nations have defined themselves as Buddhist with leaders proclaiming that defenses of the political order are in fact Buddhist in nature.

As the tradition evolved historically and spread from South Asia to Southeast Asia, isolated monastic communities came into more regular contact with not just political power but soldiers. In reckoning
with the challenges of these new encounters and relations, Buddhism started to think through some new ethical distinctions.

♦ According to these scriptures, there’s no way to undertake any kind of violence or aggression without impeding one’s progress toward enlightenment. However, as we see often in religious justifications of war, there’s a sense that some outcomes justify the religious harm. Contending with a greater sin merits committing a lesser one. Early Buddhist monastic codes stipulate that accidental deaths or the actions of madmen, though wrong and regrettable, fall outside the scope of the Five Precepts.

WAR AND JUDAISM

♦ Jewish theories of just war are shaped by a sacred text with an awful lot of war in it. The God of the Hebrew Bible is not only a judge and a king but frequently a divine general. The peace of Eden and the peace of Zion are important aspirations for Jews; however, we live after the Fall in a world of sin.
Therefore, conflict is inevitable between individuals, between nations, between ideals, and even between humans and God. In turn, it’s necessary in this moral universe to make tradeoffs. There is, as Ecclesiastes 3:8 holds, “a time for war and a time for peace.”

Much of the material of the Hebrew Bible focuses on the hard road of ancient Judaism. There are a great many periods of exile, persecution, and terrible battles. In all of these trials, Jews have considered it vital to maintain their fidelity to tradition and to the covenant. That’s a large part of justifying why and when warfare might be legitimate, especially defensive war.

Over time, there came an emerging consensus as to the proper procedures, rules, and institutions that determine whether war is justifiable. Thinkers like Maimonides or contemporary Jewish ethicists like Elliot Dorff have created one line of reasoning in Judaism seeking to place the burden of proof on those who would go to war rather than on those who want to avoid it. This way of thinking says that basic values like justice and mercy are far more important than victory.
WAR AND CHRISTIANITY

♦ Christian just war theory attempts to place some regulations on aggressive action. There are principles which must be followed prior to entering war (jus ad bellum) and also regulations which must be followed in war itself (jus in bello). St. Augustine and later theologians like Aquinas, Vitoria, Suárez, and Grotius articulated a series of specific conditions that must be addressed prior to war, without which the decision to go to war would be unjust. They also stipulated conditions to be honored during the waging of war, so that combat be waged justly, too.

♦ If entering into a scene of violence and warfare is ever to be justified, it must satisfy the following conditions:

◊ First, there must be a just cause. Generally speaking, just causes tend to be responses to killing innocents or to flagrant violations of national sovereignty.

◊ This must be backed by right intention. It’s not only the cause, in other words, but the goals or purposes of participating in war that must pass a moral test. Generally, if one enters a war for just reasons but entertains a goal of plundering natural resources, that is not just.

◊ War must always and everywhere be a last resort, coming only when peaceable means have been tried and have proven unsuccessful.

◊ The decision to go to war is only legitimate if it is made by competent
authority, meaning not only appropriate persons and offices but using appropriate methods.

◊ War must have a reasonable chance for success. This will depend on a lot of analysis and interpretation, but the key here is that recklessness is never acceptable.

◊ The criterion of proportionality asks us to consider whether the goods being defended are worth the risks of war.

◊ And finally, comparative justice cautions against unlimited war by demanding that participants assess the values that may be at stake in any given conflict. This warns authorities against justifying aggression by presuming that their side is morally pure and that opponents are sinners.

◊ Even if these conditions are met, *jus in bello* stipulates that in warfare itself there are acceptable and unacceptable means.

◊ Discrimination prohibits intentional killing of civilians, honoring the distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Failure to protect noncombatants is regarded as murder, though much here depends on the intentions of the combatants. If killing of civilians occurs but isn’t actually intended, it can be justified according to something known as the rule of double effect.

◊ Proportionality applies in war as well as prior to it. Keeping in mind the possible tension between civilian risk and military goals, as well as broader values, the theory demands that one ask once again if the risks of specific military actions outweigh the justification.

**WAR AND ISLAM**

◊ Many people are familiar with Islamic theories of politics and justice only through the dim filter of media coverage of events such as large-scale terrorist attacks, revolts, and hostage crises. Around such events, stereotypes of Muslims have been accepted uncritically into
contemporary discourse. This part of the lecture attempts to look more closely at Islamic social and political thinking.

♦ When Muhammad went from Mecca to Medina, his teachings were characterized by an intense concern for social justice. Yet it is in this phase that many Muslims and non-Muslims alike see the roots of justification for military action: It was here that Muhammad spoke of the injunction to spread Islam by political means and even military means if necessary.

♦ However, the political topography of the Middle East was constituted by rival families and factions for the most part. Muhammad was part of this rivalry, but he and his followers saw Islam as a liberalizing and liberating force; their desire to spread Islam was, by many accounts, a relatively benevolent one.

♦ Many contemporary Islamic theologians and ethicists believe that Muhammad’s injunction warrants concerted military activity to force Islam on non-believers and to police the proper expression of belief. Others, however, believe that Muhammad was only sanctioning the use of military force for those occasions when Muslims were themselves being threatened by military force.

♦ The Qur’an and the commentary known as the Hadith contain numerous conditions that map quite closely onto those we’ve seen in other religious traditions. Most broadly, there is a right and a wrong way to fight. Sura 4:76 of the Qur’an states: “Those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of the Shaitan”—that is, in the way of the devil.

♦ This involves a stern prohibition against taking innocent life and the lives of women or children. The only just victims of violence are those who themselves murder or violate the law of the land. (Despite all the bad interpretations out there, Sharia law emphasizes clearly that Muslims are always to respect the law of the land they live in.)

♦ Islam also warns against fighting as “transgressors” do, meaning that within war there are limits on actions and intentions. Sura 47:4 indicates that one should seek always to “smite the necks”
of opponents and then imprison them, rather than seeking their deaths on the battlefield. The first Muslim military campaigns, during Muhammad’s lifetime, were broadly understood to be defensive, since, according to the Qur’an, “oppression is worse than killing.” Treaties are encouraged, along with care for orphans and those whose homes have been destroyed. This signals an ethic of warfare that extends beyond the battlefield.

♦ Responses to outside aggression or persecution are fairly easy to justify. However, even the widely cited Muslim use of war for the expansion of land and faith is also more complex than is often noted. As Islamic Studies scholar John Esposito notes, its express purpose isn’t to force conversion on people but to establish Muslim customs and institutions that will ideally persuade people by their example.

♦ Sura 8:61 says of different populations, and even opponents, “if they are inclined to peace, make peace with them, and have trust in God.” This may seem like a distinction without a difference, but the point of this lecture is to show how each of these traditions understands itself to be required to make good arguments and provide good justifications across a range of elements of warfare and violence.
ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Esposito, *Unholy War*.

Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In your opinion, does just war theory excuse warfare too much or limit it too much?

2. Most traditions acknowledge that self-defense is the most uniformly agreed on justification for violence, but can’t self-defense be used to apply to just about anything we can imagine?
It's impossible understand religion and violence without looking closely at religions that say no to violence in all its forms. That brings up the question: What is pacifism? Both the Greek and the Latin definitions suggest that it means “making peace.” That's an interesting tell, because it doesn't assume that peace a natural state for humans. Religions certainly have a lot to say about taming various impulses, as this lecture shows.
Many religious pacifists consult the very sacred texts that contain passages on warfare and violence. However, many of these same texts also contain maxims, stories, and images exhorting us to peace.

For example, the Hebrew Bible is justly known for its extraordinary compendium of war stories and imagery; however, it is also laden with injunctions to live peacefully, in both the prophetic books and the books of Psalms and Proverbs. None of this is to deny the constraints of the covenant, the fierce prohibitions against idolatry, or the demands of command morality. With that in mind, read the poetry of Psalms for some examples of this pacifist repertoire. Psalm 34:14 reads, “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”

Christianity’s teachings on pacifism are many, though the foundational passages come from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Three verses from Matthew stand out as examples:

◊ “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”
◊ “Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.
◊ “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

In Islam, the Qur’an and the Hadith contain abundant injunctions to make peace, too. While Islam does not advocate pacifism in the event of clear injustice or oppression, otherwise it is a clear preference. Hindu texts contain depictions of warfare, but they also describe practices meant to lead one toward a more blissful, peaceful state.

The World of Gandhi

Each of the traditions discussed above blends personal ethics with those of societies or nations more broadly. They mix specific
prescriptions with abstract celebrations of peace. However, the question remains: Since major religious traditions all contain abundant resources for thinking and living pacifically, why doesn’t it happen more often? For one, pacifism is hard, as shown in the story of Mahatma Gandhi.

♦ Gandhi was a jurist, a critic of colonialism, an advocate for an independent India, and a theorist of non-violence. It's impossible to understand Gandhian principles or tactics without fully appreciating the context of colonial India. The British Empire of the early 20th century extended around the globe, and it had been actively involved in India from the 17th to the mid-19th century.

♦ After the 1857 Indian rebellion, so-called British India was transformed from an outpost under the governance of the British East India Company to a more comprehensive administrative entity known as the Raj. Economic and cultural benefits weren’t extended to Indians outside of a select elite who did not often challenge the Raj’s institutions.

♦ As is often the case in colonial contexts, the imposition of laws and institutions by an outside power revitalized the native population’s traditional sense of identity. Several explicitly Hindu movements led the backlash. The reform movements Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj as well as the Indian National Congress called for independence by the late 19th century. This is where Gandhi enters the picture.

**ACTIVITIES OF GANDHI**

♦ Gandhi’s willingness to engage multiple communities, not to mention his law training in England, wasn’t always well received in India. However, Gandhi credited this period with his spiritual and political transformation. Especially important was his experience with blunt discrimination, first by other lawyers in England and later in South Africa, where he stayed for over two decades. There, he developed an understanding of the sufferings of the underclass, and his commitment to this cause grew along with his deepening religiosity.
He was preoccupied by the Bhagavad-Gita, especially with the notion that service to the divine was best realized without self-interest. During this period, Gandhi explored communal living, and he created the ambulance corps in the Zulu Rebellion and the Boer War. He was committed to the Hindu ideal of moksha (freedom), but became convinced that it was being undercut by conflict and discrimination.

Gandhi identified and brought into balance a set of Hindu principles he thought could assist this transformation. First was his personal commitment to an ascetic lifestyle. Although he had married at an early age, Gandhi sought in later life to make celibacy a primary element of his own behavioral change. He maintained that all the self’s desires had to be forgotten if higher principles were to be realized. This was called brahmacharya.

Next was the manifestation of “soul force,” or satyagraha, the collective energies of people who are dedicated to the truth in the practice of direct action. Finally, there was ahimsa, which refers to nonviolence.
Gandhi believed fervently that Indian independence was necessary. However, he believed that calls for violent overthrow of the Raj were wrong both in principle and tactically, since they would be defeated and lead inevitably to even tighter rule. In South Africa, he began to practice his approach to achieving independence though other means. He participated in acts of civil disobedience that shaped his understanding of nonviolence. He protested and joined thousands of citizens in burning draft certificates. This reflected his willingness to go to prison and even face execution in fealty to higher laws.

When he returned to India in 1915, Gandhi committed more fully to traditional identity in his clothing, in his fasting, and in ascetic acts like pilgrimage. He continued direct action of the sort he’d done in South Africa. He urged noncompliance with unjust laws and was willing to suffer punishment and jail time in the defense of just ones. This was an important distinction that would prove influential in India and in the American civil rights movement.

After he was released from jail, Gandhi helped organize national civil disobedience actions, manifestations of satyagraha that, because they were nonviolent, proved effective over the long haul. In the short term, there were multiple arrests. Occasionally, frustration and tension resulted in episodes of violence.

However, it’s widely understood that one additional display of brahmacharya was instrumental in making the push for self-rule. Gandhi led a 21-day day hunger strike in early 1943, and upon his release, the independence movement entered an even more successful period. Gandhi organized and helped humanize the Indian underclass, as he’d envisioned in South Africa. At the peak of his influence, he argued that legal and administrative independence for India were insufficient. The three principles were aimed at nothing less than the nation’s spiritual regeneration. Gandhi’s example reveals pacifism and direct action can be responsible for catalyzing social change, and social and cultural instability don’t only lead to religious violence.
West Africa in the 15th century provides another example of pacifism. Islam in Africa was well established and highly influential by this time, brought there initially along trade routes from the Middle East. That same vital trade remained a feature of African culture, and it brought with it the kind of practical challenge that can result in either religious adaptation or the hardening of boundaries. The challenge was: Given the imperative to spread Islam, how were people to deal with the many non-Muslims actively participating in trade?

Among the Soninke people of the region was the prominent scholar Sheikh Al-Hajj Salim Suwari. Suwari was well traveled and understood acutely the daunting challenge of adapting to non-Muslim environments. His overriding conviction was that the only reasonable solution lay in peaceful coexistence and cooperation, a theological premise that would lead to an even broader pacifist orientation in time.

According to the historian Ivor Wilks, Suwari articulated these ideas first with the overall claim that religion and politics might reasonably be separated. This was a fairly radical move at the time, and it required some theological elaboration. Suwari did so by extrapolating several key observations from the Qur’an and the Hadith. He described non-Muslims not as evil but as unenlightened and suggested further that this could not by definition be a deviation from the will of Allah.

The best strategy for compelling others to Islam is not, he contended, to use force or coercion but to exemplify good Muslim piety with the confidence that it will eventually win them over. Hence, aggressive proselytizing should be avoided. In another move anticipating contemporary societies, Suwari argued that peace could be maintained—and non-Muslim legal authority accepted—so long as there were no prohibitions or restrictions on Islamic practice. Further, he insisted that military jihad was only justifiable in the face of concrete threats to Muslims.
Though the Suwari school remains a relatively minor influence, it did spread throughout Africa and elsewhere in the period following Suwari’s death. Regardless of the numbers, Suwari exists on a substantial continuum of Muslim pacifists that also includes the medieval theologian al-Ghazzali, the Pashtun critic of the Raj Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and contemporary progressive Muslim networks around the globe.

ONLINE SOURCES
The Catholic Worker Movement, http://www.catholicworker.org/

SUGGESTED READING
Sanneh, Beyond Jihad.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
1. What do religious pacifists have to say about the necessity of protecting the innocent from violence?
2. How can religious traditions reshape their institutions to promote pacifism?
This lecture looks at the role of holy war and war gods in human cultures and sacred texts. From there, the lecture turns to an extended look at the Crusades of medieval Christianity and Cold War religious imagery. The lecture shows that despite the seeming otherness of holy war religiosity, the sacralization of violence can also assume familiar forms.
SACRED TEXTS AND WARFARE

♦ One way of conceptualizing religion is as a form of collective explanation. When gaps exist in human understanding as to why events transpire, humans have often assumed it is the will of the gods. This basic conceptual move has often been weaponized. Ancient mythological pantheons often depict warrior gods directing their followers to conquer in their name.

♦ In ancient mythic cultures like Sumeria, Persia, or Greece, conquest and warfare were made cosmologically necessary when associated with the Babylonian war god Ashtart, the Roman war god Mars, or the Norse war god Tyr. These gods not only stood for a culture group or simply gave their divine blessing to military campaigns. The gods also fought for people. The battle they wage in the skies or the underworld—against a primal dragon or rival deity—was mirrored by the wars waged on earth.

♦ The God of the Hebrew Bible is many things, but among them is a great warrior. This is a function we see replicated in the Hindu deity Indra and elsewhere in contemporary religions recognizable to Western eyes.

♦ The explanatory power and instructional authority of the gods help people understand the sanctification of violence. The sheer audacity, bodily violence, and extremism that sacred conflict requires challenge our moral sensibilities. Humans have found it easier to live with these actions, or with harm to others, if we link them to the will of the gods.

♦ Moreover, it’s not just that the gods will certain actions. The actions also participate in religious goods. Violence is seen as good because it rolls back evil, because it sustains karmic balance, or because it brings a necessary chapter of human history into being. A shared sense that cosmic war is already underway positively demands that holy warriors do their part on earth. That’s the mindset that was absolutely central to the Crusades.
The Crusades were a series of military campaigns largely undertaken or sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church for the purposes of expelling the Turks (i.e., Muslims) from the Holy Land. The Church believed that it possessed the sole legitimate claim to occupancy of the Holy Land and that the Turks were merely enemies.

Most histories acknowledge that the Crusades took shape in part around the issue of pilgrimage routes. Access to holy sites was a key consideration for Christian pilgrims, who sought to make contact with sacred space unimpeded by those they regarded as foreigners, defilers, or heathens. They believed not only that Muslim occupancy was unjustified but that sacred harm was being done by this occupancy.

The larger Christian salvation narrative was, in their eyes, compromised by the movement of Muslims in the eastern Byzantine Empire. The Muslim victory at Manzikert marked the beginnings of serious incursions into Byzantium, not only destabilizing pilgrimage routes but looming as a threat to Western hegemony. Christian pilgrims also wanted to use the Crusades to find holy relics.

Not everyone in the West was primed for war. Many monastic orders called for peace, even if they also hoped that the peace of Christ meant total conversion. The Byzantine emperors themselves often had goals that differed from those of the Catholic Church. However, the late 11th century brought things to a head. There was more than enough enthusiasm from European publics to combine with church authority to channel energy into this sanctified militarism.

At the Council of Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade, hoping to stop up what he, along with many clergy and pilgrims, thought was a crack in the dam of church power. Urban set the tone for all the Crusades to follow, drawing on the deep traditions of othering and demonology to gin up enthusiasm for war. He called the Turks “an accursed race, utterly alienated from God.”
Between 1096 and 1099, Urban’s Christian knights convened at Constantinople. They fought to claim Nicaea, Dorylaeum, and eventually Antioch. These were sites central to sacred narrative and institutional power alike. This is a reminder of how important controlling history and place is to sacred violence. With holy war, this reclamation is seen as spreading the will of the divine sovereign in an earthly campaign that contributes to the cosmic one.

There was also a shift in battlefield ethics that’s illustrative. As
religion scholar Charles Kimball notes, Christian soldiers were once expected to atone for killing. But with the Crusades, they displayed Muslim heads like trophies, and believed that on some level they were expiating their sins by fighting.

♦ Subsequent Crusades hardened this mindset, but were extremely inconsistent in terms of the Church’s military success. In the Second Crusade, from 1147–1149, Bernard of Clairvaux was instrumental in inspiring a response after Muslim forces took Edessa. French and German forces marched to join in a failed raid on Damascus, which left western forces weakened regionally.

♦ Several decades later, the Third Crusade of 1189–1192 was launched after the renowned Muslim leader Saladin took Jerusalem. The new campaign began rapidly but sputtered out, though not before securing a truce with Saladin (after Richard the Lionheart captured Cyprus).

LATER CRUSADES

♦ Pope Innocent III committed to reorganizing military efforts, hoping to reverse fortune both symbolically and materially. During the Fourth Crusade of 1202–1204, major looting of Byzantium occurred.

♦ Innocent later called the fourth Lateran Council to generate support for a Fifth Crusade, between 1217–1221. From earlier campaigns, Christians had something like an outpost in the Levant (in the city of Acre). Innocent wanted to use that as a base to make incursions into Egypt, which would secure strategic advantage and also expand Church dominion. There were humiliating defeats at Egypt’s hands.

♦ Feeling the burden of his failed leadership, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II desperately wanted a victory; however, it wasn’t necessarily the one the church envisioned. The Sixth Crusade occurred in 1228–1229, and it was far more diplomatic than any of the others. Frederick negotiated a deal and agreed to cede certain territories back to the Muslims if he could be named king of Jerusalem. This arrangement lasted many years, but Frederick was eventually excommunicated for failing to fulfill earlier military obligations.
After the Sixth Crusade, Jerusalem changed hands two more times before the Muslims retook it in 1244. Leadership of the Seventh Crusade, between 1248–1254, shifted to Louis IX of France. He led a campaign against Damietta in Egypt, but lost quite badly. He retreated to Acre and tried for an alliance with the Mongols. After a failed second campaign, he was captured and eventually ransomed.

Louis tried again in the Eighth Crusade of 1270. Louis joined two fleets and set sail for North Africa. After their arrival in Tunisia, they were awaiting further troops in preparation for a raid on Tunis. Throughout the brutal summer of 1270, vast numbers of French troops, including Louis himself, died, largely from dysentery.

What initially began as a comprehensive effort to extend Christendom into a huge range of non-Christian territories ended up just trying to hold onto the Christian ones. However, this reversal of fortune in no way altered the crusaders’ mindset. The lesson that they teach us is that in certain circumstances there simply is no separation between church, state, and force.

THE HOLY COLD WAR

Sometimes, holy war can emerge as a way of interpreting an ongoing conflict, not just an actual military campaign. That is shown by the hottest decades of the Cold War and the religious frameworks regularly given to the continued expectation of violence.

In the late 19th century in England, John Nelson Darby, cofounder of the Plymouth Brethren, brought the notion of the Rapture to the center of Christian prophetic thought. Darby helped popularize the theology known as dispensational premillennialism, an eschatological interpretation of religious history that looks for signs that humans are on the brink of the end times. This mode of scriptural interpretation caught on in the United States in the early 20th century and spread its influence from there.

In the nuclear era, with the larger ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, many who support this theology began using it to interpret geopolitical developments around them.
There was a resurgence of apocalyptic literature from the 1950s through the 1970s, and a growing number of conservative American Christians began to see the Cold War as part of a divine plan.

♦ Consulting the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, and new publications, they saw foreign policy and military matters as signs of God’s purposes unfolding. They would lead inevitably to a series of cataclysms that would usher in the end times and culminate in the battle of Armageddon, which they believed would be a worldwide conflict centered in the Middle East.

♦ This last idea was popularized by author Hal Lindsey’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. International and military affairs would set the stage for the Second Coming, where Christ will return to reign over earth’s new peace. Lindsey and his sympathizers (most famously President Ronald Reagan) believed that the fall of the Soviet Union would be part of this divine drama, which explains why they were so adamant about supporting US anti-communism. They believed that the Soviets might be the fearful Gog and Magog, the biblical beasts from the east who might one day invade Israel.

**INTERPRETATIONS**

♦ Ultimately, Lindsey believed that a battle for the Holy Land was being set up and that it would involve armies from across the globe. He and his sympathizers thus interpreted the broader Cold War purposes of the United States as both holding off enemy nations and also protecting Israel in advance of this battle.

♦ They interpreted all the warfare and hostility in the Middle East—like the Six Day War of 1967, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the civil war in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, and the Gulf War—as signs that the end times were upon us. While no single military skirmish here was itself the holy war, the influence of Lindsey’s dispensationalist worldview shows how holy war mentality shapes perception—and can even influence the foreign policy decisions of the most militarily powerful nation on Earth.
The ancient roots of war gods and sacred violence aren’t quite as distant as we’d like to think. What we learn by looking to those gods, and seeing their authorization of violence as a religious vehicle, is that holy wars of various stripes reveal our abiding fascination with conflict. Moreover, campaigns of holy war, or interpretations of historical events, are more likely to be embraced by actors who believe their first principles are at risk from hostile, even demonic opponents who would seize land, sacred sites, or tradition.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More.
Riley-Smith, ed., The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How great a role do various forms of popular entertainments, religious and otherwise, have in creating a tolerance or even a hunger for war?

2. The journalist Chris Hedges once wrote a book called War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning. Does this examination of religious venerations of violence prove him right?
One of the biggest challenges in understanding how interreligious conflict arises in a particular place is figuring out what role national identity has in the conflict. A nation is not the same thing as a place, which is not the same thing as an identity, which is not the same thing as a religion. In certain locations, though, the distinctions between these terms become blurry.

The case of modern-day Israel is just such a location. Its conflicts are familiar but seldom understood. The long history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Holy Land demonstrates the contentiousness of competing claims to shared land and sacred sites, the fractious experience of overlapping traditions and histories, and the limits of secular power in a religiously complex world.
IDENTITIES

♦ Judaism is a self-conscious religion, based as it is on the belief that the people of Moses entered into a special covenant with God in exchange for status as a nation. Jews have always believed that according to the terms of this covenant, God promised to be the protector and the sustainer of the people of Israel if the community of Israel would agree to have no other God and to obey God’s law as revealed to Moses.

♦ Consequently, the community believed in religious blessings coming from membership in a particular historical community, which has its history identified in a particular place. Jewish identity has turned on the shared remembrance of the Jewish story itself, which runs from Abraham and Sarah to the leadership of Moses, the gift of the law at Sinai, and the Israelites’ entry into Canaan. Another key piece of Jewish identity is the community’s recurrent experience of exile and suffering through secular history: first in the time of Pharaoh, then under Rome, and in centuries of Christian anti-Semitism through to the modern experience of the Holocaust.

♦ The land currently occupied by Israel and Palestine is the stage for the sacred narratives of Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism. Each tradition recognizes holy areas in the region generally and specifically within the small area of East Jerusalem known as the Old City. Covering less than one square mile, the Old City is home to what Jews call the Temple Mount and what Muslims call the Noble Sanctuary. These Abrahamic religions share not only some aspects of their religious history, but overlapping cities and buildings, too.

JERUSALEM AND CONFLICT

♦ Beginning with the Crusades in 1099, Jerusalem became something of a political and military prize for rival empires. It was sacked by Christian crusaders. It was later captured by the Khwarezmian Turks in 1244, and in 1517 by the Ottoman Turks. For most of the next four centuries, Jerusalem and larger Palestine remained somewhat steadily under Muslim control. Under the leadership of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Old City was rebuilt; during a long period of
peace, Muslims, Jews, and Christians worshipped peaceably and openly there.

♦ Things began to shift during the declining years of the Ottoman Empire, beginning roughly in the mid-19th century. At this point, the seeds of the intense interreligious conflict we see in modern times began to grow. Jews were scattered across the globe. They experienced intense persecutions, particularly in Northern and Eastern Europe.

♦ During this period, Leo Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, and others established the Zionist movement with the goal of reestablishing the land of Israel as a Jewish nation. Broadly secular and socialist in its politics, Zionism was a reaction to the pogroms of Russia. Zionism rejected the demands for cultural assimilation that Jews faced in other nations.
Many of the supporters of early Zionism were unaware that Palestine had been populated and ruled more or less consistently by a Muslim majority since the middle of the 7th century. As more and more Jews began to emigrate to Palestine in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the changing demographics and land acquisition resulted in the dispossession of Muslims already living there.

Events that transpired after World War I, however, were even more significant. This is when Great Britain captured Palestine from the Ottomans and assumed control of its governance. Prior to this, the Zionist vision had been supported by Great Britain and was made official in 1917’s Balfour Declaration. Because of British occupying authority, the statement, in effect, enacted this new nation by fiat, though the declaration wasn’t backed up by international law. The statement also tellingly conflated nationhood with ethnic identity and with religion.

**TERRITORIES**

The territories would be called Mandatory Palestine, referring to the British mandate. According to this new arrangement, Arab communities, which were by and large Muslim communities, were assured of religious rights and civil rights. Interestingly, though, there was no guarantee that their political rights would be protected. The next 30 years were dominated by multiple conflicts between Arabs, Jews, and the occupying British military.

After the atrocity of the Holocaust, there was a renewed effort to create separate Jewish and Arab states that would be acceptable to both Muslim and Jewish populations. In 1947, the United Nations adopted the resolution that would create these separate states. However, the Arab-Israeli War (which Israel called the War of Independence) broke out in 1948, as Arab forces from Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon seized control of East Jerusalem and blocked centuries-old Jewish access to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

Despite varying interpretations of the scale of particular battles, the balance of forces, and the legitimacy of earlier agreements, even
those parties who interpret this war quite differently acknowledge the facts and the raw numbers of the establishment of separate territories for Jews and Arabs. Fifty-six percent of the land west of the Jordan River was accorded to Jewish occupants and settlers, and approximately 700,000 Palestinians were dispossessed.

♦ Since the armistice agreements of 1949, conflict of one sort or another has dominated. In the wake of the Holocaust, many Jews—both religious and secular—saw the existence of a state for Jews in the land of Israel as a matter of survival. Some Israeli state defenders further claimed that they were restoring true civilization to a deprived land (which didn’t go over particularly well). Palestinians argued that the land was central to their religious observance as well, that it had been their homeland since the 7th century, and that they made up the majority population.

♦ Though the population at the time was in fact approximately two-thirds Arab, the United States, which bestowed huge support to the new nation of Israel from its founding, initially supported an even split of territory. This position changed over time, however, as did Israel’s populace, which swelled with Jewish immigrants in the two decades following its creation.

TIME AND NARRATIVES

♦ Conceptions of time are central to the struggle between these communities. Claims to temporal precedence are important to asserting the priority of one tradition over others. These competing conceptions of an authentic past are vital to power in the present.

♦ Aside from temporality, we also see the role of narration coming back into our focus again. This occurs in at least a double sense in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, each side is going to narrate the events of the conflict itself differently. On the other hand, there are also those larger religious narratives shaping the interpretation of current events, military strategy, and more. The sacred stories of Judaism and Islam each make definitive claims about the spaces themselves and about the destiny of particular people in those spaces.
These narratives and concepts became even more central and further hardened with the Six-Day War of 1967. Tensions and animosities from 1948–1949 had never really abated. Different groups interpret the causes and motives in varied ways.

According to Palestinians, the Israeli military aggressively launched several strikes against neighboring nations in order to seize control of the majority of the area’s sacred spaces. Israelis contended that their actions were justified preemptive responses to alarming military buildups on the border with Egypt. Whatever one’s perspective, though, this war marked a shift in the relationship between nation and religion.

Many citizens wanted Israel’s primary identity to be that of a secular state, despite the role of historical Judaism. Many other citizens saw the state’s modern inception of 1948 as a long-overdue fulfillment of religious destiny. After the Six-Day War, the latter group of citizens felt emboldened and celebrated what they felt was the reclamation of their lands. There were plenty of other Israelis, including even the country’s founder David Ben-Gurion, who urged the return of these captured territories, seeing the previous settlement boundaries as imperfect but the only sustainable peaceful solution.

The territories were not returned, and this hotly angered many of Israel’s neighbors and many of its Palestinian citizens. Egypt and Syria jointly attempted to invade Israel on Yom Kippur 1973. Their focus on the Jewish Day of Atonement reminds us again of how competing notions of time are at work in these contests over place; for that year, Ramadan overlapped with this holiest day on the Jewish calendar.

Militarily, things were less conclusive than in the Six-Day War. Israel was able to block Egyptian forces from advancing much past the Sinai Peninsula, though this was far beyond the previously established ceasefire lines. Syria had simultaneously made a push far into the Golan Heights. Over the course of the brief war, the Israeli military successfully repelled both forces.
The implications weren't just territorial but psychological as well. The sense of dispossession and blindsiding many Arabs already felt was coupled with a clear sense of humiliation and defeat. The conflict festered until US president Jimmy Carter invited Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin to Camp David in 1978.

Much to the surprise of many, they reached a peace settlement there, which included a return of the Sinai in exchange for, among other things, Jewish access to the sacred sites there. The settlement eased tensions with Egypt and Jordan, but they remained high with Syria and Lebanon.

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, military actions, terrorism, and peace efforts made a strange public counterpoint in Israel. The narratives began to turn on conceptions of colonizers and occupiers. Each side regarded the other as complicit in and guilty of violence, while they themselves were involved in, for example, legitimate defense or undoing wrong.

FURTHER EVENTS

As further immigration to Israel continued, the Arab-Muslim Palestinian population shrank in terms of its overall percentage of the Israeli populace. In a certain sense, this led to a hardening of older sensibilities. However strange it was for Muslims to find themselves sharing land with another people—a land they, too, saw as sacred—it was altogether shocking for this population to find themselves a fairly powerless underclass in a new political and economic system that saw them as outsiders.

The old dynamic of “us” and “them” was thus blooming in a very small, very specific, very cramped place. After the Israeli military, following the wars of 1967 and 1973, had begun its occupation to protect Jewish settlements in the West Bank, disapproval and disbelief began in some quarters to breed outrage.

A young militant named Yasser Arafat helped form the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), initially a movement seeking to
undermine the Israeli government and military. The actions which, during the 1970s, brought them to international attention included airplane hijackings and the PLO-related attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

♦ The PLO evolved over time from simply a guerrilla military outfit to an administrative and political presence in its own right. The PLO's original intent was to combat what it perceived to be illegitimate Israeli police actions and to develop its own independent political voice. In the early 1980s, the PLO worked to reframe perceptions of what was happening in Israel, in other words, to change the narrative. Though the specter of violence still loomed, they hoped in the early 1980s to make gestures towards negotiation over disputed areas.

THE INTIFADA AND HAMAS

♦ The intifada (which means “uprising”) was a response to a traffic incident in the Gaza Strip in which an Israeli vehicle killed a number of Palestinians. This marked a turning point, and from here on out there were numbers of ordinary Palestinian citizens who were willing to rise up against the Israeli police and settlers.

♦ Film footage of the Intifada showed demonstrations, strikes, children throwing rocks at police, and often-brutal military responses to these varied actions. Intentionally or not, the footage often captured the Palestinian sense of being a vulnerable population oppressed by a military state. In other ways, it seemed a suggestive reversal of the Arab sense of disbelief and humiliation after the wars, stunned that tiny Israel could prevail.

♦ During this period came the formation of Hamas, which is an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement. This was a more explicitly religious expression of the broader resistance, and it had links to two highly militant groups: the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

♦ Hamas proclaimed that it was enacting a jihad against the oppressor Israeli state, marking an important development. It was not just
individual heretics or opposing religious traditions that could be
demonized; now, a modern nation-state was demonized as well. Israel
and supporter states like America were part of the demonization.

- This enactment of jihad by Hamas was immediately denounced by
  the Israeli government as extremism and fundamentalism. It did
  nothing to halt a period of several years’ fractiousness and violence.
  By the early 1990s, particularly following the fraught interval of the
  Gulf War, the situation seemed to acquire new urgency.

- In 1993, President Bill Clinton helped broker the Oslo Accords. 
  Israel was partitioned so that Palestinians would be able to control
  their own portions of Gaza and the West Bank. The response was
  for the PLO to evolve into the Palestine National Authority, a signal
  that the organization was ready to act as a bona fide governmental
  institution in the new arrangement.

- However, the Palestinian regions had by this point been
  underdeveloped for decades and now lacked an economic or
  political infrastructure. Many Arab Muslims continued to blame
  their circumstances on Israel and the Israeli government, while
  many Israelis continued to harbor suspicions and prejudices about
  the Palestinians.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**


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**SUGGESTED READING**

Demerath, *Crossing the Gods*.

Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms and the State*. 
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Is the only way to resolve religious conflict in Israel to return to pre-1967 borders?

2. How great a role is the exclusivism of monotheist religions to these contests over sacred sites and land?
On December 6, 1992, in the Indian city of Ayodhya, a house of worship was destroyed. There had been ongoing demonstrations around this 450-year-old Muslim mosque, called the Babri Masjid. It was situated where many devout Hindus believe is that the god Rama was born, and seemed, therefore, to compromise the site’s significance for Hindus. Over the course of just one day, demonstrations turned to destruction. An angry mob formed, made up primarily of members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist political party. The destruction of the Babri Masjid instigated a wave of Muslim-Hindu religious violence in Northern India. There were also incidents in several of India’s major cities like Mumbai. In total, over 1,700 lives were lost.

This episode is significant, and not just because it was an extreme version of the kind of national religious violence that occurs quite often in India and other places such as Northern Ireland and Israel. We also see here implications for thinking about religious violence in relation to factors such as secularism, pluralism, and post-colonialism.
BACKGROUND ON INDIA

♦ To understand the significance of this particular event in Ayodhya, it's important to look at the historical relationship of religious ethics to public life in India. For many millennia, there were few systematic efforts to unite South Asia nationally. The region was known for its considerable diversity of geography, culture, politics, and religion. Hindu social and religious ethics guided public life in the territory we now call India, rather than anything we might describe as nationalism.

♦ Historically, Indian social and religious ethics have been oriented towards three overarching goals: dharma (translated loosely as justice, duty, or virtue), artha (success or prosperity), and karma (pleasure). The final goal of moksha, or liberation from the perceived cycle of death and rebirth, supersedes these more proximate goals.

♦ Much of social life was framed primarily by sacred texts known as sutras. This would eventually change when law codes were articulated more systematically in the Laws of Manu (in the 2nd century BCE). Prior to that, the Shrauta-sutras dealt with Vedic sacrifices, the Grihya-sutras described domestic ceremonies, and the Dharma-sutras elaborated right personal or social conduct.

♦ The Dharma-sutras cover a vast spectrum of cultural customs and prescribe specific rules for many areas of social life. Many of these were also enshrined in the traditional social caste system. There are four castes: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and merchants), and Shudras (workers and artisans). A person expects that by respecting people in higher castes and performing the duties of one's own caste, he or she will eventually be born into higher castes through the cycles of death and reincarnation.

♦ Public life was also historically shaped by a host of civil and ceremonial laws that contributed to a harmonious cosmic order. In this system, the absolute worst thing one can do is commit violence. That makes it tricky to square the basic predisposition to nonviolence with interreligious violence.
SHIFTS IN HISTORY

♦ The modern story of India has roots as early as the 7th century. This was the start of an extended period of Islamic incursion into the subcontinent. Between the 7th and the 16th centuries, various Muslim powers conquered and ruled over parts of India. In most of these cases, one of the most significant impacts was the creation of forced political unity, or what we might call a forced nationalism.

♦ There were periods when Hindus were effectively excluded from public life altogether, and other periods in which they were permitted. Note that this represents a significant change; again, public, social life had previously been shaped by the Hindu Dharma-sutras.

♦ Another major shift occurred with the establishment of the Mughal Empire in 1526. The Mughals systematized Indian public and political culture in many ways, but they were also, significantly, active traders. Throughout much of the 16th century, their involvement in trade motivated them to more religious tolerance and cooperation, more out of expediency than principle.

♦ In 1608, the East India Company arrived as a nonofficial representative of the British Empire. It would remain in India, and become increasingly influential, over the next 250 years. During this time, many Mughal leaders made alliances with smaller Hindu kingdoms or principalities as these were absorbed into the empire. In some cases, Hindus achieved positions of prominence, occasionally serving as advisors to Mughal leaders. Mughal leaders permitted Hindu religious practice and even sporadic permission to erect new temples.

♦ The tension and complexity of modern India is most directly a product of the British control of India that began in 1858. Building on prior economic and political independence and the long decline of the Mughals, the British established a permanent occupational authority, which they called the Raj. It didn’t end until 1947, with the successful independence campaign organized and led by Mohandas Gandhi.
The very relationship and social patterns that the colonizers disrupted came to be embraced as the defense against a hostile bureaucracy and a modern world that disrupted norms and diluted true religious faith. The very much older religious identities were themselves national identities. There was no independent sphere for religion. This identification of national identity with a renewed and purified religious identity is a fascinating by-product of the very nation-state reality that proves a vexation in the first place.

AFTER THE RAJ

After Indian independence, the initial question concerned just what kind of state would follow the Raj. The toughest and biggest issue was whether or not a separate Muslim state was going to be partitioned off in Northern India in addition to India’s intention to be integrationist and multi-religious.

After contentious debates, in 1947 came the creation of East Pakistan and West Pakistan, each granted national sovereignty during the same year the British left India. West Pakistan was Muslim, and in 1954 East Pakistan embraced state secularism. In 1971, East Pakistan would become Bangladesh, leaving West Pakistan as simply Pakistan.

Following the initial partition was an absolutely massive conflict between different armies and various civilian populations who refused to uproot themselves to relocate in order to conform to the new national boundaries. Nearly half a million people died in these conflicts. Gandhi, who advocated nonviolence, was himself assassinated in 1948 by a fellow Hindu who believed Gandhi’s universalism was a compromise of religious authenticity.

Disparities in economic power between East and West Pakistan became clear during this period. Strikes and debates and various uprisings continued into the 1950s. Tensions remained between the two states until the crisis of 1968–1971 led to martial law and troops firing on Bengali demonstrators. Eventually, separation of the two states occurred after a period of intense conflict in 1971 and the establishment of an independent Bangladesh.
FOCUSING ON INDIA

♦ A new constitution was adopted in India in 1950. There were some initial attempts to have Hindu privilege reflected in the document, but these were rebuffed in favor of inclusiveness of law and governance within the newly independent nation. The 1950 constitution stipulated that Muslims in India would be allowed to observe Sharia law and custom in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. This rankled some Hindus who interpreted it as Muslims receiving special privileges despite their minority status.

♦ Recall that one of the foundations of the dream of independence from colonial power had been the assertion that traditional religion was the opposite of colonial power. With that colonial power’s absence, some believed that that traditional religious identity should form the explicit basis of public life. Complaints and disgruntlements lingered until the 1980s, when the situation began to get dramatically worse.

♦ India remains a majority Hindu nation, but there are a large number of Sikhs, Buddhist, Jains, and especially Muslims. In a context of political and economic fluidity, the religion of the majority can often become a stable factor through which individuals establish or defend identity and find reassurance. Important features of Indian public life are integrative, but the country remains in many ways deeply divided, from the proliferation of ethnic and regional identities with distinctive languages to broader beliefs about who gets to worship where.

SIKHISM

♦ Since the 1980s, the most trenchant issue has been the debate surrounding the contested North Indian region of Kashmir, which is jointly controlled by India, Pakistan, and China. A majority of India’s religious conflict has occurred in Kashmir. In both 1999 and 2002, full-scale war nearly broke out. This is in addition to five major conflicts that have occurred in the region since independence in 1947. The India/Pakistan border is routinely policed by troops from both nations.
Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that broke from the Hindu religion in part because of its rejection of the caste system. Much of the violence involving Sikhism occurs in Punjab, a majority-Sikh region where the religion was founded. Sikhism has in many ways defined itself around notions of suffering, persecution, and willingness to defend the faithful. The tradition has a history of victimization, even torture under some of the Mughal emperors.

An effect of the land partition debates in 1947 was the isolation and alienation of upon the Punjabi Sikhs. Anxious that almost all attention in the partitioning was focused upon Hindu-Muslim relations, there arose among the Punjabi Sikhs what is known as the Khalistan movement. This was the effort to secure part of Punjab for the creation of a Sikh theocracy to be called Khalistan.

There were two motivations for this effort. One was a desire for Punjabi independence and the other was for Sikh authority. The Indian government effectively resisted and contained both impulses, sometimes using military force. It didn’t settle the issue by any means. Punjabi leaders didn’t want to cede part of Punjab to a Sikh government.
Independent Khalistan forces asserted that their political sovereignty already existed, despite what Indian political authority had to say. In the 1970s, militant separatist movements became more commonplace, and a growing opposition to the Indian government festered internally. Opposition increased even further in the 1980s with one of the most startling developments in this narrative.

The occupation was the product of growing civil unrest and protest. Influential Khalistan member Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale undertook an action of huge strategic and symbolic importance. In the Punjabi city of Amritsar is the Sri Harmandir Sahib, otherwise known as the Golden Temple or the Abode of God. This is the most revered of all Sikh gurdwaras, or houses of worship. Bhindranwale and
some followers staged a military occupation of the temple in 1982, arming it to the gills against what they saw as an intransigent, even hostile Indian government.

♦ Bhindranwale and Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi had been relatively amicable in their relations prior to this. However, this standoff, which soon involved Punjabi police and India’s national armed forces, led to a violent denouement.

♦ Gandhi feared that this episode would set off a far larger regional upsurge of violence. She approved Operation Bluestar to eliminate Bhindranwale, quell the protest, and end the occupation. The operation, which was launched in early June 1984, succeeded in assassinating Bhindranwale but caused massive loss of life—and instead of putting down the protest, it only antagonized Sikh Khalistan supporters further.

♦ Sikhs were infuriated not just at the assassination, but also at what they regarded as government defilement of their holy space. In October 1984, two of Indira Gandhi’s Sikh bodyguards killed her in retaliation. There were massive anti-Sikh riots following the assassination, and a pronounced Hindu nationalism seemed to be on the upswing.

♦ A second Golden Temple occupation in 1986 and a spate of insurgent militia actions were undertaken by Sikhs into the early 1990s. While that moment of militant furor has subsided, deep questions abide about the rule of law, land, religious freedom, and pluralism.

HINDUTVA

♦ The lecture now turns to Hindu hyper-nationalism known as Hindutva. This defensive religious nationalism has roots in the
British Raj. In response to the tensions of Indian public pluralism in the last few decades, it has experienced a resurgence.

♦ Hindutva was first articulated in the 1920s by a man named Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. He was an anti-colonial activist who developed the idea of Hindutva during a prison stint. It’s rooted in explicit nationalism and meant to distinguish real Hindus from inauthentic ones. This strict emphasis on belonging and identity is so pronounced that according to this theory, a person is only a real Hindu if they’re born to Hindu parents and if they believe that the Indian nation itself is sacred.

♦ Unlike alternate conceptions of nationhood, which place value on establishing bonds with Muslims and other religious minorities, Hindutva identity fuses notions of racial identity, culture, and nationality. The ideology coalesced in K. B. Hedgewar’s establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. It was militant, and meant to defend Hindu culture against accommodationists like Mahatma Gandhi.

♦ A separate political party was established in the 1950s called the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, and it would later become the central figure in the story of Hindutva. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh is a violent group defined by its resistance to compromise. Bharatiya Jana Sangh merged in the 1970s with multiple other organizations to form the nationally influential BJP.

♦ This far-right political party explicitly pursues Hindu exceptionalism. In the 1980s, it drew energy from the response to the Punjab insurgency and to broader social concerns about immigration. In 1989, it drafted an official resolution embracing the full extent of Hindutva as a category meant to shape political institutions and the law. This commitment to Hindutva was directly embraced by those who destroyed the Babri Masjid in 1992.

THE SAFFRON TERROR

♦ Saffron terror is a term generally used to refer to a spate of terrorist actions between 1999 and 2008; these were loose and extremely
violent expressions of the most violent Hindu exclusivism. It’s called saffron because of one color of India’s flag, and because it seeks to associate itself with self-sacrificing disciplines practiced by Hindu monks who wear saffron robes.

♦ Many dismiss saffron terror as a journalistic moniker or dispute its associations with known religious traditions. However, some violent actions are commonly linked to it. A Christian missionary and his sons were killed by a member of the extremist group Bajrang Dal. In 2002, there were riots in Gujarat that primarily targeted Muslims and saw heavy involvement from citizens enthusiastically endorsing Hindutva and the BJP. Rapes, murders, and property destruction took place on both sides, with most victims being Muslim.

♦ An attack on a crowded train followed, with an assault on a Sufi shrine, the bombing of a mosque in Hyderabad, and more. It can seem awfully difficult to understand why these violent actions continue to occur in a growing cultural and economic superpower like India.

♦ In India, we see two different scalar articulations of violence. One of these articulations of violence is broadly nationalistic. The second articulation of violence is local, spatial, and symbolic, infusing the larger articulation into spaces of pluralism in a way that seems to set the stage for competition for goods and status. Behind it all is the way a religious exclusivism with regard to land—nation, region, town, or site—can lead people to create and maintain boundaries as sharp as the edge of a knife.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Demerath, *Crossing the Gods*.
Doniger, *The Hindus*.
Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Does the emergence of Hindutva and the BJP reveal the dangers of mixing religion and nationalism, or are most other religious nationalisms peaceful?

2. Why are so many secular constitutions unable to secure interreligious harmony?
Religions have wrestled with but also condoned the brutal institution of slavery. It would appear on the surface that most religions, even those that have a complicated relationship with violence, would surely have to forbid such a transparent violation of basic human dignity and equality. However, while some of slavery’s most powerful critics have been full-throated religious practitioners, the same can be said of slavery’s defenders.
SLAVERY IN RELIGIOUS CULTURE

♦ All three Abrahamic traditions emerged from a cultural context in which slavery was regular and familiar. Starting with Judaism, the Hebrew Bible has many references to slavery, though with a few relevant distinctions. There are episodes wherein Jews are held as slaves by foreign powers, most notably in Exodus under Pharaoh; however, there are many other passages describing how Jews should treat Jewish slaves.

♦ Shifting to Christianity, the New Testament speaks regularly about respect for the law of the prophets, but also of the new law in Christ. There are passages like Galatians 3:28 which say that in Christ there is neither slave nor free person. Yet there are many others that say otherwise. Ephesians 6:5 notes, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ.”

♦ Regarding Islam: Muhammad owned slaves, though not Muslim ones. Like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Qur’an addresses the subject more than incidentally. Sura 5:89 reads, “Allah will not call you to account for what is futile in your oaths, but He will call you to account for your deliberate oaths: for expiation, feed ten indigent persons … or give a slave his freedom.” Thus, ownership is linked at least on some level to the fitness of the owner.

AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVERY

♦ To give a sense of how this religious power and authority work in a specific context, the lecture now turns to a look into African American slavery. In August of 1619, a Dutch ship arrived at Virginia's harbor Jamestown carrying some 20 Africans who were ultimately sold as servants to the Virginia Colony’s tobacco farmers. This was the first act in what would become a long pattern: These 20 Africans were plucked from their homes, mostly in West Africa; stripped and shackled by ruthless mercantile soldiers; and shipped to the New World.
Through the middle of the 17th century, these ships appeared in the harbor more and more frequently, and slowly filled the tobacco plantations with laborers. By 1649, there were about 300 slaves in the colony, and by the early 18th century the slave trade was in full swing and spreading to other colonies. This included northern colonies. For example, in 1638, William Pierce brought African slaves to Massachusetts Bay, and the Puritans often engaged in the slave trade, reaping the benefits of free labor and profits.

The initial wave of the slave trade is tough to track, but it's estimated that at least 427,000 slaves were brought from Africa by 1808, when the importation of African slaves (but not slavery itself) was outlawed. Most brought with them various forms of West African traditional religions, though approximately 25 percent were Muslim. All of their beliefs were gravely challenged when they found themselves ripped from their home and people, then forced into boats to suffer the long passage across the Atlantic.

Slaveholders were very wary about possible rebellion. In order to avoid rebellion and revolt, they deliberately separated Africans from anyone else who came from their community or spoke their language. At first, slavery was inefficient and costly, and records indicate that at times slaveholders and slaves worked together in the fields.

The intense labor required to produce tobacco resulted in the formation of the plantation system. Slaves worked inhuman hours performing backbreaking labor; they were abused sexually and socially, living in barely inhabitable quarters with no education, threadbare clothing, and minimal health and hygiene.
The Africans who were enslaved managed to carve out a new existence, a new culture, and a new religious idiom that reflected their horrific experiences as well as their hopes and their solidarity. There were many new African American religions that were born from this mixture of shared experiences along with bits and pieces held over from the African past and the Christian tradition that was forced upon them. They kept many traditional customs and practices from Africa, particularly their way of looking at the world as a mixture of earthly and divine.

Most slaves were forced, on penalty of torture or death, to embrace Christianity in some form. Occasionally this was Catholicism, as it was around Louisiana, but mostly it was Protestantism. The first slave was baptized in 1624. While the sacraments and rituals of Catholicism offered practical settings that were attractive to many African Americans, it was mostly Protestantism—with its opportunities for highly personal, often ecstatic worship—that many found most appealing.

Slaves combined Protestantism with older stories and rituals held over from the African past. They took Christian stories and practices and used them to make sense of their current suffering and to bond together in the hope for eventual deliverance.

Wary of revolts, white slaveholders were vigilant about banning religious services that took place without supervision. Slaves had to come together in their own worship, away in the shadows of the woods at night or in somebody’s cabin, constantly wary of the danger of discovery and interruption.

In these so-called hush harbors, black slaves recreated their own sense of sacred time and space, fusing older forms of ecstatic worship with Christian themes about suffering and redemption. Prayers were whispered and songs were sung at a barely audible level. Lookouts were close by to give warning of approaching strangers; those who got too excited were quickly silenced.
The black body was seen as such a cheap commodity that the very possibility of its freedom was met with legal and physical violence. Consider the existence of the Fugitive Slave Act. The 1850 act instituted what was effectively a special class of magistrates to hear claims in this area and enabled authorities to form local posses to round up those suspected of being runaways. This was basically a federal writ protecting mob violence, and that’s exactly how it worked out in many cases. What’s more, accused parties couldn’t even invoke their legal rights in court, nor could they defend themselves.

The act was resisted on the popular and the legislative level. Raids in the north to seize runaways not only employed violence themselves, but also bred it. It wasn’t uncommon for struggles to break out during these attempts, occasionally even armed resistance. There were also instances of resisters breaking into jails in order to free captured slaves, spiriting them away to safe houses or across the border to Canada.

THE COMPLICATED PICTURE OF ABOLITION

Abolitionism wasn’t always a wholly benevolent or even consistent movement. It was more accurately a family of impulses. On the one hand, the familiar abolitionist position included efforts like Quaker relief stations to accommodate escaped or freed slaves, or boycotts of Southern products.

Other abolitionists had different motivations. The American Colonization Society wanted to abolish slavery and send slaves back to Africa because they believed that races were not meant to live together. Their position was uncomfortably close to those of Christians who supported slavery, justifying this monstrous violence on scriptural grounds as they understood them.

There were mixed feelings about converting slaves in some quarters, and there were fears that the obviously liberationist impulses in the Gospels might either lead slaveholders to treat slaves differently or could possibly engender rebellion amongst slaves. In time, Southern ministers had to craft a public defense of the system.
The first response was the so-called Plantation Mission, which proclaimed the need to bring the light of the Gospels to slaves, who were looked upon as ignorant children in need of lifting up. Charles Colcock Jones preached a theological system of obedience. Jones claimed that there was scriptural support for slavery.

The intransigence of this outlook, combined with legislative inertia and the undeniable, deep-seated racism that characterized almost all elements of American life during this period, provoked different forms of resistance. Precedent for violent resistance to slavery had been established earlier in the Haitian Revolution. This was an uprising under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture and others that abolished slavery and led to independence in 1804.

RESISTANCE

Three major slave revolts were planned in America, with very different results. The earliest was the brainchild of Gabriel Prosser, who in 1800 sought to lead slaves to an assault on Richmond. A series of betrayals and false starts led to the Virginia militia being called out, and Prosser was eventually hanged along with many other slaves.

Former slave Denmark Vesey plotted a revolt in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina, where there was a very active public trading block on which slaves were auctioned. Vesey and others planned to attack slave owners and traders, but their efforts, too, were put down and Vesey was also put to death.

Perhaps most apocalyptically, Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia in 1831 was the most successful of these attempts. His uprising led groups from one plantation to the next, plundering and killing in unprecedented ways, claiming the lives of dozens of white people. In response, white militias and armed forces led an uncontained assault on African Americans in Southampton County, indiscriminately slaughtering them regardless of whether they could be tangibly connected to the rebellion or not.
These revolutions’ ideas about revolutions were all biblically inspired. The slaves had read the Book of Exodus and had seen a foretelling of their own eventual liberation. They believed that God would see justice done against the slaveholders. These prophetic, occasionally apocalyptic beliefs led many African Americans to believe that they were vehicles for divine justice and that through their suffering radical change would eventually occur.

Other instances of symbolic and material violence were marshaled against the institution of slavery. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, a Baptist reformist in Boston, began to publish an abolitionist newspaper called The Liberator. On July 4, 1854, at a public speech in Framingham, Massachusetts, Garrison burned the American Constitution, asserting that if it did not protect all Americans then it was useless.

Black intellectual Frederick Douglass gave an address on Independence Day, 1852, and wondered: “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license … a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.” Here the languages of violence and savagery are used for social critical purposes, to cry out for their eradication.

A white man, John Brown, led a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. He hoped to use the arms there to set off a revolt among slaves through the South. The raid was a spectacular failure. Robert E. Lee, along with 87 marines and a
local militia, killed most of Brown’s men and forced Brown into a small barricaded building.

- Brown remained on the floor of that building, shot several times and with the corpses of his two sons lying in front of him, without food or sleep for over two solid days. His last written statement before being hanged was, “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.” He was right.

**CONCLUSION**

- The realities of slavery add up to the reduction of the person’s humanity. Beyond this, the discourse of slavery has been yoked to other programs of violence. Accusations of slavery have been crucial to denouncing popery and Islam. Marxists fulminate over the condition of wage slaves. The Temperance movement believed that alcohol made the drinker a slave. Freethinkers like Robert Ingersoll thought religion itself was a form of slavery.

- Slavery exists as more than just a metaphor in our world today. While it’s less commonly justified on religious grounds than it once was, sex trafficking, forced labor, child labor, and other forms of modern slavery remind us of the lengths to which some humans will go to achieve their ends. Where religion can be employed to justify those ends, the historical record suggests that humans won’t hesitate to use it again.

**ONLINE SOURCES**


SUGGESTED READING

Heuman and Burnard, *The Routledge History of Slavery.*

Raboteau, *Slave Religion.*


QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do African Americans still have to navigate the long-term consequences of American slavery?

2. Is it possible for us to interpret religious slave revolts in light of other categories from this course, like apocalypticism?
This lecture explores episodes of cultural loss and traditions under threat, and traces the role of violence in and around Native American traditions. Important questions include: Just how common is land displacement, or outright theft? What about competing gods, or vengeful ghosts? And is the story of indigenous peoples inseparable from colonialism and imperialism, often motivated to eradicate indigenous religions? The lecture digs into these questions by exploring the history of Native Americans and religious violence.
VARIATIONS

♦ About 550 unique Indian societies and languages have been identified in North American history alone. The labels Indian and even Native American are not names these communities ever gave themselves but labels attached by outsiders. These North American communities vary by language, geography, and cultural characteristics.

♦ It’s not surprising, then, that Native American religion is equally varied. In Native American cultures, there simply was no dividing line between a group’s history, its culture, and its religion; all these things were, to a degree, coterminous.

♦ There are some characteristics common to Native religion that most scholars have identified. A strong sense of identification with the natural world is common to indigenous people. This is more than simply to claim that Native Americans live close to the land, although they do. Rather, think of the relationship between humans, nonhuman animals, natural forces, and topography as a network.

♦ A second common characteristic is a genre of creation stories known as an earth-diver myth. In Native American cultures, these cosmologies explain the relationship between the forces of creation, the natural world, and our day-to-day activities. They also contain moral inferences, such as how to live in balance with the land.

♦ Native Americans also practice distinctive rituals. Some of them involve bestowing thanks to each of the natural elements, the four directions, or to particular divinities. Native Americans also believe that visions and dreams contain insights that are more significant than those of waking life.

NEWCOMERS

♦ The many nations and traditions of Native Americans existed for centuries, sometimes in relative isolation and sometimes in cooperation with one another. However, beginning in the early 16th century, Spanish Catholic colonialists and missionaries were establishing outposts in what would one day be the United States.
By the mid-16th century, nearly 40 missions had been established in Florida alone.

♦ Most of these missions were nominally established by priests for the work of conversion, and it was estimated that these missions had converted as many as 26,000 Native Americans in the 16th century. It’s important to note that these missions were always accompanied by a significant military presence, with each force working in tandem.

♦ Spain took over regions that became the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and California, establishing farming, weaving, and mining to build its economic base. They forced Native Americans to do much of this work. Religious conversions were also coerced.

♦ French missions were established in a similar fashion. The French first arrived in North America with shipping vessels that landed on the Newfoundland coast in the early 16th century. Early in the 17th century, the French Protestant Huguenots planned to set up an outpost in Nova Scotia.

♦ The French government wanted Catholics to accompany the Huguenots, believing that Catholic disciplines would be more effective in fully converting the Native Americans. French Franciscans and Jesuits traveled to Quebec and established mission stations in Upstate New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, and eventually all the way down the Mississippi to Mobile and New Orleans.

THE UNITED STATES

♦ Removal, displacement, and suppression of religious activity became tragic leitmotifs for Native Americans, long after the landscape of colonial America had been federated into the United States. The failure to honor treaties between the US government and native people, the seizure of native lands beginning with President Jefferson, the near-genocide of the Trail of Tears, and the US government’s Indian Removal Act are all examples of the official, state-organized violence committed against Native Americans in order to acquire land and expand political and economic power.
Before he was president, Andrew Jackson was well known for defeating and killing Native Americans by the thousand. He and his men would regularly massacre or desecrate their corpses. He used their skin for hide. He cut off their noses and scalps. He wanted to wipe out the Cherokee entirely, and he called all Indians “savage dogs.”

Native Americans fought back in defense of their traditions and what they considered their home and land. However, the institutional and military force, the use of law, and the reservation system do present a remarkably one-sided picture. There is little surprise, then, that revolts were commonplace beginning with European contact.

**REVOLTS**

- It was common in episodes of colonial contact for Native Americans to resist the incursion of outsiders onto their sacred lands. One of the clearest and earliest examples was in response to the Spanish Catholic settlement of New Mexico territory, which Spain had pursued beginning in the 1540s.

- The Spanish encomienda system was extremely coercive. A new economic system was superimposed on the native societies, the Catholic clergy was in charge of daily life, and there were often attempts to very deliberately eradicate Native American rituals from public life.

- Sometimes the native response was to pursue their traditional forms of religiosity in a modified form within the broader framework of Catholicism. The Hopi and the Pueblo practiced a kind of modified traditionalism. They used Catholic saints’ days as opportunities to venerate their traditional ancestors or other spirits.

- However, circumstances were often more fraught. In New Mexico, Father Alonso de Posada outlawed traditional dances, including the absolutely central Kachina dance. He forbade the ingestion of...
traditional hallucinogenic plants, which are used to facilitate vision quests. He presided over the destruction of sacred objects used in these activities.

♦ The Pueblo began to strategize their resistance. A nasty period of drought and continued legal pressure from the Spanish crown exacerbated tension. The Spanish sensed something brewing, and began to imprison Pueblo leaders, including shamans.

♦ One prominent leader, Popé, established alliances with other Native groups and prepped for battle. He assured the Pueblo that violent struggle would return their lands and traditions to them. In 1680, there was armed revolt against local Spanish authorities. The Pueblo didn’t have the advanced weaponry of the Spanish, but they prevailed. They had superior tactics and the powerful motive to restore their traditional religious practices. They also outnumbered the Spanish by about 10 to 1.

THE 19TH CENTURY

♦ In the late 19th century, many Native Americans struggled to preserve their religions, particularly in the Great Plains states. The long-term effect of first missionary work and later US government efforts had essentially expunged Native religion and culture from American life.

♦ After the American Civil War, though, we see a series of very surprising visions among Native peoples, revelations that serve to connect different groups and establish a kind of resistance solidarity among them. Many of these visions involved the eventual reclamation of the land by ancestor spirits and noble warriors, which is imagery from the Chief Seattle tale from the audio/video version of this lecture.

♦ A leader emerged from this region; he was a shaman of the Wanapum people named Smohalla. He experienced visions of Native people being born in the earliest eras of time and of their rightful stewardship of the earth. Smohalla’s vision was appropriated by other communities outside of his own people. His vision became an inspiration for Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, who
mounted armed resistance against white attempts to force them onto reservations.

♦ In 1870, among the Paviotsos of Nevada and California, the prophet Wodziwob had an even more powerful vision. In it, departed Native ancestors one day returned to earthly life, carried on a train. This is a resonant image of revenge against the technology that had displaced so many of them.

♦ It was then prophesied that a hole in the earth would open up, swallowing most humans, but that the followers of the old ways would survive and reclaim the property stolen from them by whites. Toward this end, Wodziwob performed a traditional dance known as the Ghost Dance. After Wodziwob’s death, the Ghost Dance became hugely influential among many Native Americans of all nations and deeply vexed the US government.

THE SIOUX AND LAW

♦ The Sioux people were among the most militant resisters to the US government. They’d defeated General Custer’s troops at Little Bighorn in 1876, and they exuberantly championed the Ghost Dance. The US government outlawed the ritual, sensing its effectiveness in generating mass resistance. The Department of the Interior made
regulation of Native American ritual part of its regular concern in the late 19th century.

♦ This move led, perhaps inevitably, to even stauncher defiance from the native peoples, and this defiance came to a head at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in December 1890. There, federal troops slaughtered some 200 Sioux, including many women and children.

♦ The use of law to outlaw, quarantine, or transform religious practice is a marked theme in Native American history. Here disruption, physical harm, and cultural prohibitions work together to create a fundamental and systematic undermining of Native culture and religion.

CONVERSION AND RESERVATIONS

♦ In certain cases, the effort to convert Native Americans to Christianity was made the work of policy, legal writ, and institutional force. The New England Puritans believed that if the native peoples would successfully climb up from their lower station to the welcoming light of Protestantism, they might be regarded as partially human; they would be “praying Indians.” But these converts would need to be segregated in what were called “praying towns,” so as not to be corrupted once again by their unconverted native peers.

♦ This is a clear antecedent to the reservation system that developed in the 19th century. The economic, social, and agricultural isolation of the reservations were devastating for the native peoples displaced onto them. Christian churches were an integral part of each reservation, along with their boarding school systems. These schools were federally instituted and regulated.

♦ This was justified by a religio-racial logic that assumed that anything native required Christianization. It also regarded all so-called savages as in need of instruction in the mores of secular European culture. In certain cases, native children were removed from their homes for Christian conversion and European education.
Throughout the 20th century, in a period where American political rights were expanding, Native Americans turned to law to undo the effects of centuries of forced removal, legal and economic discrimination, and violent oppression. The strategy was to mount an appeal that would invoke laws protecting US citizens’ freedom of religious practice.

The historian Tisa Wenger shows how legal repression was contested by Native Americans in part by creating an opposing legal force. Beginning in the early 20th century, Native Americans used the category of “religion” that had once been used to paint them as savages because they were not Christian.

The establishment of the federally recognized and protected Native American Church, whose practice includes elements of Christian ritual, helped Native Americans claim their constitutional rights. Wenger shows that in the 1920s, the Pueblo were able to resist legal sanctions and prohibitions on traditional practice because they had a religion.

In 1978, some 2,000 Native Americans walked across the continent to Washington DC, in what was called the Longest Walk, to demand rights. That year, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed. Congress stated that Native Americans possessed an “inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions.”

In 1987, the case of *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association* came before the US judicial system. The US Forest Service wanted to pave a road in California that was going to cross through land considered sacred by the Yurok, Karok, and Tolowa peoples. In district court, native people won the right to have the road rerouted. However, the Supreme Court reversed this decision in 1988, claiming that there was a “compelling government interest” to have the plan go forward.

In the 1990 case of *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith*, two Native Americans working as
substance abuse counselors were fired because they occasionally used peyote in religious rituals as part of the aforementioned and federally protected Native American Church. They were subsequently denied unemployment compensation in addition to losing their jobs.

The Oregon Supreme Court later awarded them a victory based on the free exercise clause. The court noted that many other states had decriminalized this ritual use, and that exemptions had routinely been granted for religious traditions (as with church wine during Prohibition). However, the US Supreme Court negated this in 1990, in what many saw was a significant blow to religious liberty generally and as yet another blow to Native Americans specifically.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Niezen, Spirit Wars.

Pointer, Encounters of the Spirit.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Would Native Americans have suffered such violence if European empires and the US federal government hadn’t been so interested in land and resource acquisition?

2. How central to the anti-native actions in this lecture is the policing of the category of religion?
In the big world of religion, there is very little more inflammatory than the notion that there are so-called cults in our midst. Most people think of cults as groups practicing brainwashing, violence, sexual abuse, and financial impropriety. However, many of these groups emerge from, or end up in, the religious mainstream. In fact, the creation of new religious practices and beliefs is about as constant a feature of human religiosity as we could find. That brings up questions: Why is it that newer, smaller, more marginal traditions often attract such violent responses? Why does a fraction of these groups commit violence?
In the popular imagination, cults are dangerous groups that cause mental and emotional damage to their adherents. Academics, politicians, and the general public often presume that a cult is out to make a lot of money or to secure blind obedience for a slick, selfish leader.

Looked at objectively, the groups called cults tend to be defined by a few key characteristics, none of which inevitably entail violence. First is a desire for authenticity, the need to get back to an earlier phase of human purity or to be free from the seductions of culture. Second is a new kind of authority, whether this is a person, a book, a vision, or a combination of these things. Third is a new pattern of life, which is often where we see the break with mainstream culture. What often appears to outsiders as coercive is described by insiders as liberating.

The Mormons

We need a deep dive into some specific cases if we’re going to figure out why some new religions provoke violence and why others practice it. The story of the religion often called Mormonism begins with Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

Smith derived from his religious experience an incredibly creative brew of conventional Christian belief, apocalyptic sensibility, an entirely new creation story, and a range of new doctrines and practices. During his adolescence, Smith claimed to have had a number of powerful religious visions. In them, he was promised a new revelation. It was further made clear
to him, by a manifestation of God and Jesus in a pillar of light, that all extant religious movements were illegitimate.

- A subsequent vision from an angel named Moroni told Smith of a forgotten history written on gold plates, chronicling the lives of earlier inhabitants of North America. This history was alleged to contain the teachings that Jesus himself had revealed to these people. Smith went to the hill in upstate New York where Moroni told him the plates were kept.

- The history was written in multiple languages, and Smith claimed that he translated them using seer stones lodged into the plates. Ultimately, and with considerable controversy, the *Book of Mormon* appeared in 1830, claiming to contain another testament of Jesus Christ and the key for the authentic church that Smith promised to revive.

- Though Smith initially attracted very few followers, in its early years of slow growth the movement generated significant and heated backlash. First was a wave of discrediting literature. After the group began to grow, they moved west to Kirtland, Ohio, and later to Missouri and to Nauvoo, Illinois. The more distinctive their beliefs and practices became, the more vituperation they attracted.

- Anti-LDS publications censored and defamed LDS voices. One pamphlet, for example, called Smith a “juggling, money-digging, fortune-telling imposter.” This kind of prose is central to discrediting other religious viewpoints, or even dehumanizing them. It’s easier to justify violence against something that’s not human.

- Mormons were bloc voters, and in towns this habit awoke longstanding American anxieties about factions. On more than one occasion, it was the unified Mormon vote that led to some electoral upsets and stunned locals. During their stay in Missouri, such an episode led to a period of unexpected combat, one of several violent skirmishes between the young LDS and governmental authority.

- In 1838, there was the Missouri Mormon war. It began when Missouri’s governor, Lilburn Boggs, responded to a skirmish by
issuing an order to evict all Mormons from the state. Mormons did not comply, and in short order a posse raided the Haun’s Mill settlement, where 18 Mormons were murdered.

♦ Concern about Mormons actually led to the creation of an anti-Mormon political party in Illinois, and in Nauvoo, martial law was declared. An angry mob destroyed the LDS printing press, denouncing Mormon publications as seditious and heretical. Raids, attacks, and assaults were not uncommon. Smith was jailed and subsequently killed by a mob on June 27, 1844.

♦ In time, and after continued persecution, the LDS migrated west. After settling in Utah, which was not yet a state, the group established its own community. It included a standing militia under the leadership of Brigham Young. Regional anti-Mormons, alarmed at the otherness of the group’s practices, campaigned against it and in time convinced President James Buchanan that the LDS planned open revolt against the United States.

♦ The federal government sent a large body of troops west. A year-long period of tension and violence between the US government and the Mormon brigades ensued. It was only with time and persistence that Mormonism survived to become the widely accepted religion that it is today.

JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

♦ Later in the 19th century, a somewhat different countercultural new religion was established: the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The key texts for Jehovah’s Witnesses are the books of Daniel and Revelation, apocalyptic books that millions of other Christians also consult. They contend that only Christ and 144,000 other elect have immortal souls. All other people have mortal souls, but will be given a second opportunity after Christ’s millennium is established, when the present world will be replaced by a new, righteous one.

♦ The Witnesses, under the leadership of Joseph Rutherford, began in the 1930s to denounce Catholicism more fervently and to cease altogether saluting the American flag. In response, anti-Witness
violence became routine. Proselytizing Witnesses were attacked by angry mobs, leading to injury (including, in one case, castration).

Witness houses of worship, which are known as Kingdom Halls, were burned. Members of the American Legion and less-organized mobs staged frequent raids and assaults. In public schools, Witness children were bullied and sometimes beaten for their display of what was alleged to be un-Americanism.

During this period, the Supreme Court was hearing multiple Witness cases and beginning to expand this nation’s capacity of religious liberty. Attacks were frequent and fierce: according to the ACLU, there were attacks on nearly 1,500 Witnesses in 1940 alone. At stake for many of the attackers was not the group’s reading of the Book of Daniel or its beliefs regarding blood transfusions. What mattered to them was the Witnesses’ rejection of the American flag and their refusal to buy war bonds.

The Supreme Court was initially inconsistent in its rulings for the Witnesses, but in time passed down several decisions underscoring their right to the free exercise of their religion. Additionally, important political figures denounced the violence perpetrated against them.

Though there followed a period in which Witnesses were targets of the anti-communist witch hunts of the 1950s, in general their persecution in the US has abated. Globally, the situation is often still quite dire. They have been banned from worship in or expelled from some nations altogether, including most recently Russia, and had their political and civil rights stripped in others. For many of their antagonists, in other words, they still do not qualify as a legitimate religion.

**FALUN GONG**

In the case of Mormonism, religious violence was a response to the close resemblance of religious traditions. There was also a highly charged political dimension to anti-Mormonism. Keep both of those factors in mind as we explore the treatment of a contemporary Chinese new religion: Falun Gong.
♦ In Chinese traditional religion, the term *qi* means “vital breath.” Cultivating it, directing it, and giving in to its rhythms all play an important part of healing and meditation alike. This is true most prominently in a family of traditional practices known as qigong. It’s used in Buddhist and Taoist practices as well as in folk medicine.

♦ In 1992, a 40-year-old man named Li Hongzhi emerged as a public teacher. He claimed to have studied in secret with various esoteric masters and to have gained new insight into qigong’s possibilities. He called for a meditative reform across China, linking specific meditational techniques with moral purity on the path to enlightenment. Throughout the 1990s, the movement became immensely popular in China and in the West, where it resonated with a post-1960s interest in alternative medicines. One of the movement’s key features were the claims by followers that they were healed of incurable maladies using Li’s techniques.

♦ In short, what came to be called Falun Gong was no mere meditation technique, but a new religion. As is often the case with new religions, criticism arose. Chinese media denounced the healing claims as hoaxes. In 1999, things escalated. Falun Gong organized a massive protest in Beijing, denouncing the criticism as orchestrated by a corrupt government. Mass arrests followed, and it turned out that there were quite a few communist party members among Falun Gong’s ranks. This was no longer just about healing; it was about a contest of loyalties.

♦ The government cracked down hard on the movement, and Falun Gong in turn responded by drawing on some of Li’s lesser-known materials, which included apocalyptic and militant themes. The movement was channeled into resistance. They were denounced as people who represented as grave a danger to political authority and social stability as the student protests of the late 1980s. The movement was banned.

♦ Li, by then living in the United States, organized several attempts at dialogue with the Chinese government. Falun Gong protests reached a new pitch. In response to state violence and legal sanctions, in January 2001, multiple alleged practitioners immolated
themselves in Beijing. The movement still exists, though it has never recovered its initial popularity.

◆ Severe persecution continues, with sometimes thousands dying annually in Chinese jails. Once again, we see that political repression and organized state violence sometimes are directed at groups believed to threaten loyalties.

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ONLINE SOURCES


“What We Owe Jehovah’s Witnesses,” http://www.historynet.com/what-we-owe-jehovahs-witnesses.htm

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SUGGESTED READING

Corrigan and Neal, eds., Religious Intolerance in America.
Peters, Judging Jehovah’s Witnesses.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Was the journalist Tom Wolfe right when he said a cult is “a religion with no political power?”

2. Are cults more likely to commit violence when left to their own devices, or is some violence the result of external pressure or defamation?
This lecture and the next two examine the power of stereotype and misrepresentation to justify social exclusion and physical harm alike. We’ll begin today by looking at how church reformers and philosophical critics produced a series of enduring negative images of Catholicism. The lecture starts in Europe and then shifts to the United States, where anti-Catholicism has taken some unique forms.
EUROPEAN CRITICISM

♦ Some of the earliest negative images of Catholicism were produced by religious critics who sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church. John Wycliffe was a philosopher at Oxford in the 14th century who became an early major spokesperson against religious corruption. He attacked the pope and claimed that the Bible was the only real religious authority, demanding that it be translated into the language of the people. He attacked monastic institutions and certain religious art.

♦ The Bohemian priest Jan Hus was compelled by such ideas. Hus criticized the failings and the immorality of corrupt clergy particularly. The subculture of Bohemian critics to which Hus belonged railed against the church’s sale of indulgences; they hurled insults at the hierarchy, calling them adulterers and hypocrites; and they even burnt papal decrees.

♦ As this Bohemian critique heated up in the early 15th century, Hus emerged as a religious authority. This was a time of great controversy for the Catholic Church known as the Great Western Schism.

♦ In 1414, the church convened the Council of Constance to deal with this schism. The council ignored the growing cries for reform. They invited Hus to the council. He watched the hierarchy condemn Wycliffe posthumously, dig up his remains, burn them, and throw them into a river. Then the council put Hus on trial for heresy and, when he refused to recant his beliefs, burned him at the stake.

MARTIN LUTHER AND REFORM

♦ Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk whose intention was to reform the Catholic Church, not break from it. Luther became angry when he encountered another monk named Johann Tetzel, a Dominican who was selling indulgences—that is, obtaining payments in exchange for promises that loved ones would not have to spend time after death atoning for their sins in Purgatory.

♦ Luther charged that salvation came not through good works—by which he meant obligatory actions imposed by the church, with
relative disregard for one’s inner disposition—but through faith alone (which was a gift from God). In 1517, Luther posted his 95 Theses relating to reform of the church, and so began what is now known as the Reformation.

♦ These reformers, as well as leaders of other popular movements, fed the idea that religion needed to be divorced from corruption, interiorized, and made reflective rather than embodied. Steadily, Catholicism came to be associated by reformers and their followers with freedom’s opposite. The emergent identity of what came to be called Protestantism was linked to disdain for indulgences, the cult of saints, and what they called the church’s other “vulgarities.”

♦ When they judged that the church was impossible to reform, they urged a complete rejection of the institution. For these reasons, the long conflict between European Protestants and Catholics turned on issues of purity, authenticity, and early customs. These conflicts led to the Wars of Religion in France from 1562–1598, and was pursued further throughout much of Europe in the Thirty Years' War between 1618 and 1648.

ANTI-CATHOLIC VOICES

♦ It was with the advent of first humanism and later the Enlightenment that Catholicism came under its most withering satire and critique. Its “priestcraft” was pilloried as the enemy of human progress and the antithesis of enjoyment of life.

♦ The thinker Erasmus wasn’t so fiercely anti-clerical as some of the later philosophes were, but he inaugurated some influential anti-Catholic critiques. Roughly a contemporary of Luther’s, Erasmus drove a wedge between Catholic excess and what he considered pure Christianity.

♦ The English Protestant writer John Foxe shaped this discourse indelibly. In his 1563 Actes and Monuments, popularly known as the Book of Martyrs, Foxe predicted that the Word would ascend beyond church’s customs and institutions when “coloured hypocrisy, false doctrine, and painted holiness, began to be espied more and more by the reading of God’s word.” He contrasted the Word, reason, and liberation with image, superstition, and cultic coercion.
Denis Diderot was a Deist, a believer in what’s sometimes known as the “philosopher’s god,” but he excoriated popular religion. Regarding the need to criticize the Catholic Church, Diderot wrote: “It seems to me that if one had kept silence up to now regarding religion, people would still be submerged in the most grotesque and dangerous superstition.

Even among leading intellectuals, few did as much as Voltaire to champion the defense of reason against the dogma, superstition, and empty authority he linked to the Catholic Church. The church, he asserted, kept people uneducated, poor, bigoted, and the prisoner of emotion. He wrote acidly, “Religion began when the first scoundrel met the first fool.”

COLONIAL AMERICA

In colonial America, anti-Catholicism had cultural and legal teeth. Consider the English colonies, like Maryland. It was established as a haven for Catholics in the 1630s, and which later extended religious liberty to all inhabitants with the Act of Religious Toleration. When English Puritans gained control of the government in 1654 and repealed the act, Catholicism was suddenly and officially outlawed.

In New England, tolerance also failed to extend to Catholics, who were only granted freedom of worship after the American Revolution. New York had religious tests to exclude Catholics from public office, and Rhode Island excluded Catholics beginning in 1664.

Theologically and liturgically, Catholics were portrayed as retrograde, vulgar materialists, even polytheists, for their alleged worship of Mary, the saints, and even the pope. Socially, they were said to venerate clergy above democracy or republicanism, and hence pronounced unfit for citizenship.
These are the kinds of characterizations invoked to undermine Catholics’ legal and civic standing in many colonies. More than just having their vote denied, Catholics were also tried for practicing their religion. They were sentenced with corporal punishment, exile, or deportation. In a few instances, there were even military raids on Franciscan missions in the South.

A HOTHOUSE

The young American republic became something of a hothouse for the growth of anti-Catholicism. In 1830, an anti-Catholic newspaper called The Protestant was founded. It circulated widely among local civic associations and communities, where it surely stoked further criticism. This moment saw the beginnings of a movement called nativism, which believed that unless one was born on American soil, one should not have any of the rights of American citizenship. Nativists reserved special enmity for the many Catholics coming to the United States from Ireland and later from elsewhere.

One infamous episode occurred in 1834, when a Protestant mob burned down an Ursuline convent outside of Boston. They’d become convinced that religious sex slavery was taking place there, with young girls imprisoned on the orders of a tyrannical pope.

Well-known evangelical preacher Lyman Beecher made anti-Catholic ad hominem attacks a regular part of his rhetorical diet. His ideas are known to have been instrumental in motivating this arson.

In the summer of 1844, Protestant mobs in Philadelphia burned down St. Michael’s and St. Augustine’s churches, and they even torched fire departments so they couldn’t respond. Mobs then led attacks into Catholic neighborhoods, all of it animated by the fear that Catholics were plotting to remove the Bible from public schools. Rioting had to be put down by a massive militia deployment.

ENSUING DECADES

In the ensuing decades, several explicitly xenophobic American political parties were formed: the Know-Nothings, the American
Republican Party (not the forebear of today’s Republican Party), and the curiously named Native American Party.

♦ The Know-Nothings earned their name because when they were regularly questioned about their alleged involvement in anti-Catholic and other nativist violence, their go-to response was “I know nothing.” Yet there was sufficient support for them to win some elections in 1855. They helped pass the Putnam Bill in the New York legislature. The bill, which was repealed in 1863, made it illegal for Catholic bishops to own property.

♦ In San Francisco in the 1850s, Irish Catholic immigrants were also targeted with neighborhood raids ostensibly focusing on crime and corruption but really looking to intimidate. In 1856, a group called the Committee of Vigilance gained control of the city. They promptly set about trying to banish nearly 100 Catholics from San Francisco, and actually executed four.

THE HEAT RISES

♦ Anti-Catholics in the United States kept making steady inroads into high politics. President Ulysses Grant made an 1875 speech contrasting, in his words, “patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other.” The use of “superstition” was a recognizable anti-Catholic dog whistle.

♦ For Rutherford B. Hayes, it was scandalous that priests were allowed to visit prisons and asylums. In his diary, he noted approvingly all those modern nations who’d opposed Catholicism, and he mused “the interesting point is to rebuke the Democracy by a defeat for subserviency to Roman Catholic demands.”
♦ The heat rose in 1885, when Josiah Strong published *Our Country*, a major book that reacted to the changing demographics of US religion by asserting the superiority of white Protestantism. This notion was mirrored at the local level by the continued existence of nativism and by the 1887 formation of the American Protective Association, or APA. They organized around the goal of protecting America by halting all immigration.

♦ The APA quickly registered over a million members, many of them immigrants from Canada and England. The group had connections to the anti-Catholic Orange Order, to the Moody Bible Institute, and to a growing wave of European anti-Catholicism. APA meetings regularly chewed over bogus captivity narratives, including heated allegations that the church had armed itself for open revolt. Justin Fulton noted with great alarm the ease with which Catholic immigrants were filling up American mills and factories.

♦ The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century only deepened anti-Catholic animus. The Klan sponsored fake talks by nuns who claim to have narrowly escaped convent prisons. In the 1910s and 1920s, there were as many as 60 weekly anti-Catholic papers broadcasting such claims, which now included accusations that Catholics started the Great War and tried to poison Warren G. Harding. The Klan even burned Catholic Presidential candidate Al Smith in effigy. During the Red Scare, allegations of Catholic plots were yoked into service once more, with claims that Rome colluded darkly with communism.

BACK IN EUROPE

♦ Parallel impulses flared in Europe in the 19th century, working through both legal and physical violence. Popular anti-Catholic
literature in the 1840s and 1850s shaped efforts to expel Catholics in the wake of the 1848 revolutions.

♦ Much was made in Europe of the church’s 1864 Syllabus of Errors, which held that there was no reason for the pope to reconcile the church to modern notions of progress and liberalism. In the minds of critics, if the church would actually admit this, then who knows what other truths could be confirmed? A similar response attended the First Vatican Council in 1870, which generated fears that the church’s redoubled commitment to papal authority boded ill for intellectual freedom, political liberty, and science.

♦ European leaders passed even more legislation than their American counterparts. Bismarck’s 1870s Kulturkampf actually locked up members of the clergy and banned monks and nuns from Germany. Italian nationalists sought to constrain or purge Catholic power from new conceptions of public life.

♦ French liberals in the late 1870s passed a number of laws aimed against Catholic clergy. William Gladstone and others in Britain were in some sense even more exuberant. Gladstone’s pamphlet The Vatican Decrees in Their Bearing on Civil Allegiance explicitly stated that one could not be a loyal Briton and Catholic simultaneously.

CLOSER TO THE PRESENT

♦ It’s tempting to think that anti-Catholic violence was effectively ended with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. Certainly, the furor of the 19th century seems to be in our collective rearview mirror, not least because of important interfaith efforts, the effects of the Second Vatican Council, and other 20th- and 21st-century developments. However, anti-Catholicism still exists.

♦ The eccentric evangelical cartoonist Jack Chick, whose “Chick tracts” were distributed globally in the tens of millions, produced regular and resonant anti-Catholic broadsides. Influential evangelical pastor Robert Jeffress frequently denounces Catholicism as Satanic. The resiliency of anti-Catholicism reveals links between religious violence and conspiracy theory, nationalism, and sensationalism.
While Catholics may no longer be the religious other that incites the greatest anxiety in European and North American democracies, anti-Catholicism to a certain extent birthed an entire genre of thinking about religious others, one that blended perceptual, legal, and physical violence. The limits imposed on Catholic “outsiders” established limits beyond which violence was thought to be justified. These limits, and their zealous defense of so-called purity, are still with us.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Corrigan and Neal, Religious Intolerance in America.
Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France.
McGreevey, Catholicism and American Freedom.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Will there always be anxiety about religious traditions with robust internal authorities like the Catholic hierarchy and canon law?

2. When considering the violence of the Counter-Reformation, are we more likely to see violence erupt between religious groups whose identities are quite similar than between groups that share little resemblance?
Judaism has long been defined by its particular historical consciousness, premised as it is on the notion that the people of Moses entered into a special covenant with God in exchange for status as a nation. This sense ofchosenness has been reflected in the distinctiveness of Jewish ritual, Jewish sense of history, and the prolonged, repeated marginalization and persecution that is a large part of that history. In some instances, anti-Semitism has targeted Jewish practices, particularly customs, community, and religious ritual. Yet elsewhere, it seems oddly resentful of Jewish assimilation.
OTHER RELIGIONS VERSUS JUDAISM

♦ Jews were temporarily banned several times by the Roman Empire. Most remarkable were the persecutions led by Antiochus IV and the widespread campaigns in Antioch and Alexandria, in which synagogues were deliberately desecrated, property destroyed or stolen, and Jews murdered.

♦ Nevertheless, and even in the wake of Rome’s destruction of the Second Temple, there was little apparent interest on the part of the Roman authorities in destroying Judaism altogether. It was with Christian attempts to differentiate themselves from their Jewish heritage that extant stereotypes of Jews effectively became weaponized.

♦ Central here is a series of powerful passages from the New Testament. For example, take 1 Thessalonians 2:15, which condemns the Jews “who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men.” The Book of Revelation is more aggressive, and in 3:9 demonizes “Satan’s synagogue,” warning that Jews who
don’t accept Christ will stumble and fall. Prominent early Christian authors amplified such antipathies.

♦ Like Christianity, Islam also crafted its identity in relation to Judaism, whose lineages it shared. Several passage in the Qur’an exhibit hostility toward Jews. For example, Sura 3:112 and 5:70 excoriate Jews for hearing new prophecy, learning of true religion, and disregarding it.

♦ Beginning in the 10th century, Jews began to be accused of disdain for political authority as well. Jews were routinely linked to the line of Judas Iscariot, who sold out Christ for 30 pieces of silver. Pope Innocent III’s 1205 papal bull *Etsi Judaeos* made it possible for rights to be suspended if Jews were found guilty of violating (or even contradicting) church or civil law.

♦ While both Christianity and Islam practiced periodic toleration of Judaism, neither regarded Judaism’s essential religious claims as legitimate, since both later traditions claimed to extend and fulfill the basic prophetic lineage. Jews were repressed in both Christian and Muslim lands throughout the medieval period.

♦ With the increase of these legal prohibitions and the waves of mob violence they would precipitate, we see some common threads emerging. The realities of economic hardship, combined with an increase in anxiety over heresies, led to a ready-made, double-barrel scapegoating: Jews were made an object lesson in heresy and were blamed for economic privation.

**PERSECUTION CONTINUES**

♦ In 1066, in Granada, Spain, mass Muslim violence erupted in an attack on that city’s Jewish population, resulting in their almost complete eradication. Regular periods of Spanish persecution followed in subsequent centuries. Oppression was also present in some Muslim caliphates, like the Almohad of North Africa.

♦ In 1096, in the thick of the religious enthusiasms whipped up by the First Crusade, the mass violence picked up in Europe’s largely
Catholic societies. Approximately 1,000 Jews were killed in Cologne and Mainz. Eight hundred were killed in Worms, and smaller numbers died throughout the rest of Germany.

♦ There were huge casualties in Spain in the 14th century: 8,000 were massacred in Toledo in 1368, and the widespread Spanish slaughter of Jews in 1391 is widely seen as a precursor to the Spanish Inquisition. Elsewhere, as the Black Death peaked, thousands more Jews were slaughtered in Erfurt, Mainz, Strasbourg, and Brussels in 1349. Such harrowing violence even continued into the so-called Age of Reason, as when 2,000 Jews were killed in Frankfurt in 1614.

♦ Concerns over land and status, threats and blame, purity and danger melded with old theological rationales and scriptural injunctions. Still powerful was the conviction that Christians had to avenge Christ’s wrongful crucifixion and betrayal by Jews. Soldiers marched into and seized Jewish territories, threatening occupants, stealing their belongings, and raping women under these and similar beliefs.

♦ Martin Luther played a significant role in perpetuating European anti-Semitism into the Reformation era. In 1543, he published *On the Jews and Their Lies*, which upbraided Jewish learned classes for not admitting the plain truth that Luther insisted was evident in scripture. Beyond writing alone, Luther encouraged that synagogues be burned and that both Jewish teaching and practice be suppressed.

**JEWS ELSEWHERE**

♦ In 1492, all Jews were expelled from Spain, and in 1497 from Portugal as well. Seeking refuge, Spanish Jews flocked to more liberal European countries like Holland. When the Dutch colonized eastern Brazil in 1630, a Jewish settlement was established there. However, the Portuguese reconquered Brazil in 1654, and some members of the Jewish settlement fled to New Amsterdam (New York). Some people there, notably Governor Peter Stuyvesant, were decidedly unhappy about this.
Elsewhere, Jews challenged the Puritan’s sense of the New World’s providentialism. The Puritan minister Increase Mather wrote scathing, loaded criticism of them. In Virginia and other early colonies, church attendance was obligatory on pain of fines or imprisonment.

Ultimately, Jews were allowed to stay in New Amsterdam, and within a decade were established members of the colony. They were active in the economy, serving in the militia, buying property. By the time New Amsterdam fell to the British in 1664, the Jews of the colony were just one among the many religious groups there.

Many Jews continued to immigrate into America, most of them being extremely poor and accustomed to extreme marginalization and persecution in Europe. Hardest hit were the immigrants from Eastern Europe, who had suffered vast economic misery and fierce persecution. They had often been forced to live in the small towns known as shtetls.

Worst of all were the pogroms of tsarist Russia. The term pogrom translates roughly as “total destruction or devastation.” For the most part, they expressed themselves as mass upsurges in popular mania. The Russian Empire’s expansion in the 19th century resulted in acquisition of lands where there were far more Jewish residents than there historically had been in Russia itself.

In what are now Ukraine and Poland, episodic revolts had often resulted in the slaughter of Jews, as happened in the mid-17th century, for example. While there had been similar riots in early 19th-century Russia, this land acquisition from Poland resulted in legal prohibitions against Jews relocating in the Russian Empire unless they converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity.

After Tsar Alexander II was killed in Saint Petersburg, in March 1881, anti-Semitic violence erupted in many Russian cities. Dozens of Jews were killed through 1881, and there are even reports of Jewish infants being slaughtered. Violence recurred for several years.

An even more violent wave took place in the first years of the 20th century, often more directly organized or sanctioned by political
authors. Concerns about religious purity and identity were certainly still in play here, but economic resentment and a mania for policing national sentiment were equally powerful. Anti-Semitism often motivated pogroms targeting political revolutionaries as well.

GERMANY

♦ Pogroms outside Russia—in Poland, Ireland, and Israel itself once it was occupied by Great Britain—fomented an atmosphere of distrust and scapegoating. The recurring hostility and violence was certainly instrumental in Jewish emigration to America and elsewhere, but the lasting mood got calamitously worse in Germany in particular.

♦ It was there, in the mid-19th century especially, that occurred an especially virulent rise in socioeconomic resentment of Jewish market success. For the most part, this was a resentment that expressed itself via racial animus.

♦ During the Weimar period of Germany, several key texts began to revive the idea of a primal, powerful German past and historicized it. One prominent work, written in 1923 by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, was entitled The Third Reich. It held that Germany’s glorious destiny ran through the First Reich during the Holy Roman Empire and the Second Reich from 1871 to 1918. It held that a Third Reich was inevitable.

♦ In it, the pure German folk, defined by blood and soil, would celebrate the removal of impurities from history and from social life. After the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s, they positioned themselves as the military, cultural, and ideological vanguard of this history. The Nazis began rounding up dissidents, homosexuals, and especially Jews.

THE UNITED STATES

♦ Ideas unsettlingly similar to those in Germany thrived in the United States in the early 20th century, and they still they do today. According to Syracuse professor Michael Barkun, one central influence on American thought during this period was the Scotsman John Wilson’s mid-19th-century work, Our Israelitish Origin: Lectures
on Ancient Israel, and the Israelitish Origin of the Modern Nations of Europe. In this, we see the roots of British Israelism, a strain of ideas that has been picked up in the United States as Christian Identity.

♦ The central belief is that Jesus was an Aryan, and so too were Israel’s lost tribes, who Wilson insisted had actually settled in England. Wilson suggested that Jews were the devil’s children, possibly sired with Eve, and that they were working in secret on plans for world domination (with an assist from the Freemasons).

♦ In the US, there were many supporters for these and related ideas, including Gerald L. K. Smith, Gerald Winrod, William Cameron, and Henry Ford. Smith formed the America First Party in the 1940s, and he was equally unreserved in his enthusiasm for white supremacist ideas and Nazi ideology.

♦ Winrod, also a supporter of Nazism, ardently decried the alleged conspiracies of international Jewish bankers running the world and directing President Franklin Roosevelt like a puppet. The latter claim was echoed by the Catholic figure Charles Coughlin. Cameron believed in forcibly establishing biblical government in order to prevent dilution of legal, ethnic purity.

♦ As in Europe, American anti-Semitism depended on its print culture. Perhaps the most influential text was the 1903 Russian publication Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion. This fake document purported to be actual text of the Jewish plan for world domination, and it was published in the West in the 1910s. Ford, a vehement anti-Semite, personally financed the publication of half a million copies and published excerpts in the anti-Semitic newspaper the Dearborn Independent, which he also owned and wrote for.

♦ It took only a few years for the text to be revealed as a forgery and a fake, but that didn’t stop American anti-Semites from continuing to endorse it. Ford was eventually forced to recant his support for the Protocols, but his opinions of Jews didn’t change. For his paper, he wrote a piece called “The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem.”
He claimed, “there is more downright bitterness of religious prejudice on the part of the Jews against Christianity than could ever be possible in the Christian churches of America … The Jew glories in religious prejudice.” He also published a list of the “Demands of NY Jewry,” including “suppression of all references to Christ” in public policy, work on the Christian Sabbath, and the “Elimination of Christmas celebrations in public.” Unfortunately, this kind of mania isn’t behind us.

MODERN ANTI-SEMITISM

Far-right anti-Semitism is on the rise in pluralistic Europe and North America. It’s built steadily on influences that never went away. In the US, for example, the subculture of conspiracy theory has produced manifold forms of anti-Semitism in its underground press, like Gary Allen’s None Dare Call It Conspiracy, Jack Mohr’s Know Your Enemies!, or Elizabeth Dilling’s The Plot Against Christianity. The last of those claims that World War II was actually a cunning communist plot to promote Satanic Jewish world power. Holocaust deniers, the John Birch Society, and multiple white supremacist militias have kept these old themes and stereotypes alive.

Nearly as influential as the Protocols is a novel called The Turner Diaries. Its author was William Pierce, a failed academic who was seduced by Nazism. The 1978 novel seems like standard conspiracy fare, depicting freedom fighters heroically resisting an overreaching leviathan state. However, its overarching theme also scapegoated Zionists.

Some took this survivalist fantasy literally, and in 1984, Bruce Carroll Pierce, directly inspired by the book, assassinated a Jewish radio host in Denver whose ideas they believed would lead to the grim future that the book envisioned. And as the white supremacist and militia underground grew in the 1980s and 1990s, many were taken by William Pierce’s depiction of paramilitary resisters.

Among the groups that took the book as a call to action were the Aryan Nations and The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, which established what it called the Endtime Overcomer
Survival Training School. These groups cited such diverse factors as gun control, the shift to a credit-based economy, bar codes, and the 1993 government raid on the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas as all part of Satan’s plan orchestrated by Jews.

♦ The pump had been primed by several decades of sermons, pamphlets, and manifestos denouncing the Zionist-occupied government and preparing for what’s known as RaHoWa, or racial holy war (a term that comes from a book by Ben Klassen called *White Man’s Bible*). One of the most enthusiastic champions of *The Turner Diaries* and Christian Identity beliefs was Timothy McVeigh, who masterminded the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**


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**SUGGESTED READING**

Jaher, *Scapegoat in the Wilderness*.


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**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. How can we make sense of anti-Semitism’s persistence, given Judaism’s relatively small numbers and marginal status?

2. How common is it for anti-religious violence to conflate racial and religious identity, as we often see in anti-Semitism?
In previous lectures, this course looked at Islam in India and Israel, Muslim conceptions of just war, and Islamic gender norms. This lecture turns to look at Islam and violence from different perspectives. First, we'll explore how Islamophobia depends on generalization and exaggeration. We'll turn from there to explore Muslim theological sources of violence in the modern world and significant examples of Islamic revolution. Islam is unique in that violence committed against it is often justified by claims about the purported role of violence in Islam. The tradition’s history complicates such assertions.
As this course has shown with so-called cults, Catholics, and Jews, violence against Muslims often takes shape through misunderstanding. In the gap between Islam as an actual tradition and the fears surrounding it, dark imaginings unfold. The vibrant print culture of early America expressed itself in part through a fascination with exotic others, and many of them contained just such portraits of Islam.

Such associations were common in Puritan New England, which feared Muslim decadence as much as imposture. In the hot climates of Muslim lands, one might read, a person’s morals might degenerate to the point where all they wanted was an oasis and some virgins.

Merely associating a person or an idea or a political platform with Islam was sufficient to undermine them. Roger Williams even attacked the Quakers by linking them with Islam, and announced his hope that the pope and Muhammad would burn eternally. These and other Protestant critics believed Islam was self-glorifying, and that the Ottoman Empire had to fall before the Second Coming could occur.

A popular 17th-century text was William Okeley’s *Eben-Ezer, or, a Small Monument of Great Mercy*. The author described his capture by Turkish pirates. In his recounting, he produced influential and withering caricatures of Islam. For example, he described Ramadan as a drunken orgy.

During and after the American Revolution, there was a second wave of naval activity and anxiety. These pirates were from the Barbary states of North Africa that were Europe and America’s chief maritime rivals. This presents a suggestive case where economic competition was racialized and Islamicized.

There were allegations that Muslims were to determined to rape, enslave, and murder, but the discourse also had a political edge. Ben Franklin associated Islam with unreason and superstition.
Thomas Paine compared decadent monarchs to Muslims. When President John Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts to enable the government to detain suspicious persons at a time when war with France loomed, he, too, was likened to Muslims for this authoritarianism. Islam is a perennial other in the American imagination, regularly portrayed not just for its wrong religious beliefs but for its alleged disdain for law.

**THE 19TH CENTURY**

- The tone of these attacks reveals some measure of early American anxieties about safety and security. After Tripoli pirates captured the vessel *Philadelphia* in 1803, the American popular press was awash with captivity narratives. And 19th-century millennialists like William Miller regularly framed Muslims as the chief malefactor in their divine narratives.

- Missionary societies produced voluminous literature documenting their fearful encounter with swarthy, bearded, turbaned, sword-swinging Muslims. From a long list of American military engagements, efforts to supposedly spread liberty in Malaysia, Algeria, and elsewhere were reported as being opposed by Muslim spies, connivers, despots, and pirates. The specter of Islamic tyranny was even invoked in abolitionism and anti-Mormonism.

- A massive global religious tradition, spanning many centuries and vast differences in culture and geography, was thus regularly boiled down to threatening caricature. History does show that during many of these periods, there were regular episodes of violence initiated primarily by Muslims. These occurred in Greece, North Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.

- However, from that cloth was spun a portrait of a religio-cultural monolith. This would be analogous to reading about the Oklahoma City bombings and a Klan march, and concluding that Christianity itself is a global engine for terrorist acts.
There exists a tendency—sometimes fearful, sometimes snarky—to insist that Islam’s basic claim to be a religion of peace is an inversion of its violent reality. At the heart of many such confusions is the false homologizing of more extreme Muslim theologies such as that of Wahhabism and the broader Islamic world.

This isn’t to deny that for Muslims themselves, the idea of unity exerts a powerful influence. However, if we can understand and analyze these theological and ideological elements as distinct in their role in violence, we’ll be better equipped to respond to them without falsely demonizing the peaceful majority of Muslims.

Some traditional Muslim conceptions of warfare and basic categories like jihad can, but often don’t, manifest themselves in strongly dualistic ways. Allegiance, identity, and clarity of truth contrast markedly with otherness, wickedness, and ambiguity.

There is also a long legacy of tension and frequently conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, who believe that the legitimate
lineage of authority vested in Muhammad’s family was unjustly broken with the martyrdom of Muhammad’s grandson Husayn. Clearly, the Sunni/Shia split yields different understandings of the motives, justifications, and desired outcomes of spreading Islam, which entailed military violence in its early decades and sometimes still does.

♦ The veneration of martyrs (and delineation of rewards in paradise) is part of these broader efforts to realize rectitude and proper education. This is conceived as the attempt to transform *dar-al-harb* (or the “land of war”) to *dar-al-Islam* (or the “land of faith”). These territories have often been understood as allegorical or internal to believers themselves. Even when understood literally, Qur’anic injunctions about slaying idolaters are usually balanced by passages directing peaceful coexistence under appropriate conditions.

♦ Throughout Islamic history, radicals and hardliners have generally rejected some of these interpretations as diluting, compromising the strictness that is demanded. Examples include older groups like the Kharijites, contemporary groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, and those ascribing to Wahhabism or Salafism. These groups tend to emphasize expansionist rather than defensive conflict, a hard line rather than a porous boundary between Islam and the West.

**WAHHABISM**

♦ Wahhabism’s origins are in 18th-century Saudi Arabia. Forged between the theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the emir Muhammad ibn Saud, its goal was to unite the tribes and recreate Islam’s originary sequence of events. In this, Wahhabism is generally understood to be a militant amplification of what’s called Salafism, a longstanding impulse to venerate the *salaf*, or “pious predecessors.” After its inception, the Ottomans quashed the initial movement, but remnants survived, as did the powerful aspirations of the Wahhabis.

♦ Wahhabism is literalist in its interpretation of the Qur’an. It regards the Sunnah, the normative practices of the earliest Muslims, as strict and inflexible in their morality. Wahhabis believe that not just non-
Muslims but Muslims who believe differently than they are idolaters to be punished. They seek to wage war on unbelief so as to establish a properly Islamic state (which would be the Saudi state).

♦ Wahhabism is grounded in nostalgia for the pre-colonial world, and its perception of contemporary geopolitics is filtered through this lens, naming powers like the United States as existentially threatening. In this, Wahhabism also finds its justification, noting that defense of this strictly drawn piety is obligatory.

♦ This sensibility thus seems to mandate specific actions: Not only are targets implied by this worldview and rewards promised, but it is because of Wahhabism’s militant dualism that some of its most prominent representatives, like Abdullah Azzam of al-Qaeda, resist also the very idea of compromise or negotiation. The narrative template and ideological prescriptions of Wahhabism have proven disproportionately influential, so that many Westerners interpret violent acts committed in the name of Wahhabism to be representative of Islam generally.

♦ Filtered through the last few decades of Middle East history, Wahhabism’s worldview has hardened and its calls for violence increased. The big pivot to radicalism followed the Six-Day War. It crystallized in 1973 in what Israelis call the Yom Kippur War, which some Muslims refer to as Badr, the crucial early Islamic battle that Wahhabis see as being reenacted in our time.

REBELLION

♦ Contemporary Muslim violence has also taken the form of rebellion, rather than calls for global jihad. Many observers of the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s were surprised by the rise of the country’s conservative religious leadership. Few understood, in focusing on the period of tension between the US–backed Shah Reza Pahlavi and the ayatollahs, that Iran’s history has long cycled between periods of upheaval and stability.

♦ Throughout much of the 19th century, the hegemony of Persia’s Qajar dynasty was being challenged by economic and military
outsiders, first Russia and later England. The shah at the time made numerous economic concessions to Britain, leading to discontent within the Shia population, especially among people involved in the growth of valuable crops like tobacco.

♦ The March 1890 tobacco concession prompted a significant revolt. Farmers and merchants allied with religious leaders, like Sayyid Ali Akbar, who opposed the concession. In December 1891, the country’s most powerful Shia leader issued a fatwa, a religious legal statement, denouncing the agreement’s empowerment of foreign nations and its harm to Islamic beliefs and customs.

♦ This accusation initially led to a strengthening of Persian tobacco interests, but there was no denying that the Qajar dynasty had been weakened. The path was cleared for the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and after a period of turbulence, Reza Khan helped to instigate a coup and later became shah of Iran. He led the nation into a period of forced industrialization and secularization. The crucial factor here is the emergence of secular authority and the displacement of Shia authority in the context of economic modernization. Those religious energies, forcibly sidelined, weren’t going anywhere.

♦ After Stalin and Churchill’s invasion of Iran in 1941, there followed a period of great economic and political calamity. Iran reclaimed its oil rights from Britain and nationalized that industry in 1951. Shocked by the move’s implication for global oil supplies, the US helped overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh and establish the Shah as having absolute power. The Shah established a kind of dictatorial, military power through the so-called White Revolution, which sought to isolate urban clerics and elites.

EXHORTATIONS

♦ In 1960, the shah and others established the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, which only deepened tensions brought about by decades of political and economic isolation of traditional Muslims. The rising prices were felt in rural Iran especially. Many rural communities were wholly undermined, forcing large-scale relocation to cities like Shiraz and Tehran.
These transitions, and the cultural crisis they entailed, were hugely significant in the revolution of 1978–1979.

♦ The prophetic language, command morality, and singular identity that the ayatollahs offered in response to these developments was more than just consolation to the disaffected, who were experiencing a loss of meaning and coherence. It was also exhortatory. Not only was change possible, but it was necessary.

♦ Many observers since these galvanic events, made worse by the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the Iran-Iraq War, note that the attraction of millions of Iranians to the revolutionary cause wasn’t necessarily because of any explicit affinity for Ayatollah Khomeini’s teachings. Rather, many were more attracted to the purer cause of the revolutionary mujahedeen, holy warriors who might reverse the cultural and economic dislocation they had experienced.

♦ Alarmed Western journalists proclaiming this to be an Islamic revolution were insensitive to the multiple, complicating factors at work in Iran, from colonialism to economic transition to US-backed leadership. It’s not, and it almost never is, the case that some religious switch is flipped and people are all of a sudden engaged in street violence for religious reasons.

CONCLUSION

♦ Many observers of religion assume that Buddhism is somehow essentially peaceable, and contrast it with the supposedly inherent divisiveness of monotheistic faiths. Yet Muslims in Sri Lanka and Burma, now Myanmar, have been targets of violence rather than instigators. Muslims in Burma, for example, have been attacked at the behest of hardline Buddhist monks like Ashin Wirathu, who was once convicted of inciting religious hatred.

♦ There’s a fluidity to Islam and its reception that eludes formulaic interpretation. It’s true that we see many instances of violence in which Muslims are involved: Many African nations are riven with conflicts between Muslims and Christians, and Sunni/Shia violence persists.
However, as many prominent news sources have documented, there has been very little journalistic attention paid to stories about Muslims actually suffering violence outside of North America and Europe. Even Eastern Orthodox Christian attacks on Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s were regularly described as “ethnic violence.” As for violence by Muslims, consider that all available evidence shows that the likeliest victims of attack by the so-called Islamic State or ISIS are other Muslims.

The violence present in the Islamic world isn’t monolithic or uniformly anti-Western, and it’s often most vigorously directed against and resisted by other Muslims. Our real focus in thinking about Islam and violence should be not on whether it occurs, but on why—and why people feel compelled to generalize about certain groups, and conduct law and policy on the basis of sloppy thinking.

ONLINE SOURCES


SUGGESTED READING

Ernst, *Following Muhammad*.

Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Are religions other than Islam forced to bear the blame for the most extreme actions committed in their name?

2. Islam’s history prompts the question: Is violence committed in the name of religion usually bound up with statist ambition and expansion, or is it free-standing?
At its root, terrorism is the attempt to terrorize a particular population or political unit through acts such as the killing of innocent people, the taking of hostages, the destruction of property, and so forth. The goal is almost always to intimidate the population in question, to force the hands of politicians, and, more abstractly, to dramatize the differences between the perpetrators and the victims. These differences can be religious, cultural, behavioral, national, or some combination thereof. Terrorists and terrorist groups reject culture, law, and authority as being insufficient, outmoded, or stacked against them. Usually, the driving goal for them is to somehow bring into being what is authentic and authoritative.
This lecture looks first at a pair of movements in modern Israel. The first is called Gush Emunim (GE), the name meaning Bloc of the Faithful. Founded in 1974, GE draws on holy-war framing of cosmic struggle and historical inevitability. Its beliefs are rooted in the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and initially centered around the influential Yeshiva school Mercaz HaRav.

GE promotes a hardcore messianism and militant nationalism. For many years, GE’s focus was on distinguishing what it regarded as authentic Israeli identity from false identity. This involved strengthening the right kinds of law, community, and action in Israel. They opposed the Israeli administration’s attempts to achieve compromise with neighboring Arab states and saw land concessions as particularly injurious to Israel’s true destiny. They were especially dismayed by Palestinian settlements continuing to be granted.

GE assaulted and raided Arab settlements that were suspected of complicity with Arab acts of violence. Civilians were even killed in so-called retaliation, even if there was no apparent cause or evidence. At the height of GE violence, in response to the murder of six yeshiva students in Hebron, they attacked several mayors of Arab settlements, bombing the cars of those they named as complicit in the murders. They described this particular effort as “a pure act of self defense.”

Israel should have taken care of the problem legally and punitively, they reasoned. However, in the absence of its exercise of legitimate authority, GE felt compelled and justified to act.

Unlike other terrorist groups, there’s not a rejection of cultural norms and legal authority altogether. Even as they shifted to this brand of violence, the group maintained that law and authority were valuable; they had simply been coopted by thugs, or improperly applied. This was all knit together by a deep, emotionally charged nationalism.

Their most outrageous plan for violence—and it was only a plan—was inspired by what GE regarded as the abomination of the 1978
Thinking about Religion and Violence

Camp David accords. They believed that perhaps the only thing that might truly save Israel was the coming of the Messiah, and they hoped that a major cataclysm could help bring this into being. They wanted to blow up the Muslim Dome of the Rock. They believed that it was polluting Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and had to be removed from sacred space in order to fulfill national destiny.

THE KACH PARTY

- Another Israeli presence calling for militant extralegal action was the Kach party. Its roots were in the Jewish Defense League, which Rabbi Meir Kahane founded in 1968 in New York. In the period of the Palestinian intifadas, Kach became infamous for their move from symbolic to material violence.

- Kahane believed that Israel’s misfortunes and instability could be attributed partly to its embrace of the secular state model. He wanted to punish both Gentiles and Arabs by reorienting the state along properly religious lines. As with GE, this would require often quite violent actions to accomplish.

- Kahane won a seat in the Israeli Knesset in 1984, but his term ended when Israel banned his Kach party for its antidemocratic and racist beliefs. Kahane’s call for all Arabs to be forcibly expelled from Israel was too extreme for most Israelis. However, after the eruption of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 and Hezbollah attacks on Israel in the early 1980s, increased anxiety led to more success for his brand of xenophobic, extremist religion.

- Kahane called for the creation of a robust new military force, which he called “a Jewish fist in the face of an astonished gentile world.” The reasoning was that because Israel had so many enemies, armed force was necessary. In his text *The Jewish Idea*, Kahane spelled this out by calling for the creation of a “world-wide Jewish anti-terror group.” Yet he described this group using the same kind of logic as was present with GE’s vigilantism, and he also advocated extralegal action.
All of this eventuated in Kahane’s direct involvement in stoking conflict in the West Bank town of Hebron and elsewhere. Most infamously, Kahane’s ideas directly inspired another radical group, the Eyal Movement. One famous sympathizer and associate of Eyal was Yigal Amir, who in 1995 assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel. Rabin was believed to be dangerously compromising the Jewish religious primacy that would guide Israel to its properly Messianic destiny.

One year earlier, Dr. Baruch Goldstein attacked a shrine at Hebron’s Tomb of the Patriarchs. That site is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, but since the 7th century, it had been the site of the Mosque of Ibrahim. Goldstein believed that this was a violent supplanting of an earlier, authentically Jewish history. Goldstein used an automatic weapon to kill 29 Muslim men and boys, while wounding scores more.

That’s a curious look at extralegal, terroristic actions that flirt with the edge of recognizable political parties. The lecture next turns to how terrorism moves between state and non-state actors in the case of Lebanon’s Party of God, or Hezbollah.

**HEZBOLLAH**

Hezbollah came to public attention after its formation in 1982, when it was quickly associated with a spate of violent actions. Most notorious of these was its use of a weaponized truck to kill 241 Americans and 58 French at a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon.

The group’s emergence is rooted in the Shia population in a country where rule is shared with Sunnis and Maronite Christians. In the years before Hezbollah’s emergence, the Amal militia worked to organize Shi’a Lebanese and, when necessary, to engage in armed conflict. The Amal understood their actions to be defensive, responsive.

Things changed irrevocably after dispossessed Lebanese youths saw the transformative example of the Iranian Revolution. This was a dramatic expression of Shia religious authority in a country previously linked to the secular West. In its aftermath, many
Lebanese Shia clerics began to speak out, exhorting their followers to pursue the creation of an Islamic republic. They noted the urgency of the historic moment: Israeli troops occupied part of southern Lebanon, which these clerics decried as an unacceptable presence from allies of the US and slaughterers of Palestinians.

♦ It proved a successful call to action. Soon, in the Bekaa Valley, young Shiite revolutionaries welcomed 1,000 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard who’d come to train and assist them. As the scholar of religion Martin Kramer notes, Lebanon was a hothouse for this association to occur. There was social despair, economic misery, and Amal’s relative inattention to community.

♦ When the Israelis invaded in 1982, the huge numbers of young Lebanese agreed that it was time for revolution. They also crafted the new organization Hezbollah around the central tenet of loyalty to Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini. Their primary goal was to struggle for the sake of, and in the name of, God. They would not only seek to defend Islam according to their understanding, but to correct historical wrongs.

♦ Hezbollah in time grew into a political party, which echoes in some ways the path of Hamas in Palestine. They remain most widely known (and feared) for their guerilla and terrorist actions, which observers like Kramer group into four categories: the attempt to remove foreigners from Lebanon, support for Shia military campaigns elsewhere in the world (something which began with their support for Iran in the Iran/Iraq War), efforts to free Hezbollah political prisoners, and contests with rival groups for local dominance.

♦ Their use of suicide bombings and hostages have been hotly criticized even by some other militants, who argue that both practices are non-Qur’anic. However, those who commit the actions believe they are close to divine purpose itself and that suicide bombings are a way of explosively reversing their earthly misfortunes.

♦ Hezbollah gives some interesting insight into how terrorism isn’t always just about tactics and targets. Terrorism also provides an
explanation for suffering, a surrogate community, and a new map of history. Without these, the call to action wouldn’t be so effective.

AL-QAEDA AND THE TALIBAN

♦ For a final case study, the lecture turns to a familiar group that also emerges at the intersection of colonialism, foreign wars, and collapsing social institutions: al-Qaeda, or The Base.

♦ The movement is widely known as a militant force that emerged in Afghanistan, infamously led for many years by Osama bin Laden—a Sunni Muslim who was born in Saudi Arabia. During the 1970s, radical Muslim movements proliferated. Each shared a resentment of Israel and usually also of the United States.

♦ Afghanistan flared for a time as an important Cold War site. There was US support for local resistance fighters known as the Mujahideen, who were actively involved in the Soviet-Afghan war. They wanted to transform Afghanistan from a pro-Soviet state into a Muslim one. Local Afghanis as well as militant Muslims from other nations joined in this jihad, which successfully toppled the government in 1992.

♦ With the formation of a Muslim Afghanistan that year, bin Laden shifted his goals. He had been a prominent member of the Mujahideen and had invested many of his own resources from his wealthy Saudi upbringing. Now, he and others had their eyes on Saudi Arabia itself. They were outraged that the land of Islam’s birth had housed US troops during the Gulf War of 1990–1991. The growing US regional presence, along with what bin Laden and others believed was weakened purity in Muslim states, was seen as unacceptable.

♦ He sought and received a fatwa from radical clerics who pronounced that training fighters to resist these developments was a sacred duty. He used a safe house in Peshawar, Pakistan, as a network hub for jihadi fighters on the move. In time, these organizational efforts led
to the formation of al-Qaeda, which became involved in training, education, and generally facilitating militant goals.

♦ Bin Laden trained in Sudan and Yemen and gave his approval to terror acts in the US and Somalia. In 1996, the Taliban arose. It provided free education to Afghan males and was made up of many Afghan war veterans. Influenced by militant factions in Pakistan, its members were stridently anti-American.

♦ Their social life was rooted in traditional Afghan social norms. Women were allowed no social mobility. Most media were forbidden. The Taliban slaughtered a huge proportion of the Shia minority in Afghanistan. The Taliban’s rise as a political force created a social climate that was hospitable to sheltering al-Qaeda.

♦ From the Islamic Jihad group, bin Laden absorbed the model of organizing in small cells (usually for practical reasons at first, to avoid detection). Islamic Jihad was viciously repressed by the Egyptian government in the 1990s, and Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda merged in 2001. This bolder, stronger group began to gain broader recognition. Even prior to that, Bin Laden declared jihad against the United States. His proclamation announced him as not just a militant, but a media-savvy provocateur.

♦ Bin Laden’s speech became filled with charged rhetoric describing the plans of the Zionists and crusaders, the US imperium supplying Israel with weapons, Jewish Americans pulling the strings of global finance, and more. The hydra-headed beast is common to all conspiracy thinking. Here, though, it shaped the perception that violent restoration of Muslim purity is precisely what the prophet Muhammad would have sought in a similar political context.

♦ Bin Laden began to pursue both familiar forms of terror like suicide bombing and larger, more dramatic demonstrations of the will of Muslim jihadis and of the symbolic weakness of the West. They culminated in the hugely jarring attacks of September 11, 2001. This event changed Americans’ sense of public space, safety, and the way they interact with others.
CONCLUSION

♦ Many of the groups that commit acts of religious terrorism perceive themselves as disenfranchised from the religious mainstream and often as the unjustly displaced, authentic few. They usually begin with the contention that they are being frozen out of public life or directly oppressed by unjust powers both foreign and domestic. The first move in authorizing violence, then, is to deny the very legitimacy of political systems and legal authorities that see the world differently.

♦ Some of the most important interpretive work on religious terrorism has been contributed by Mark Juergensmeyer. His writings distill several important themes. For example, most people believe the world is fundamentally peaceful, and so we regard violence as unjustified; terrorists believe the world is already in the thick of war, and so they regard violence as necessary. This war is a cosmic one in which terrorists gain a powerful identity as agents of sacred history. Terrorism is also highly symbolic, even theatrical. And
terrorism clarifies the world: Terrorists are the martyrs, and their victims are the wicked, who suffer justly.

♦ In its selection of targets and times, terrorists are pointing to a moment in their tradition's history before these things existed. This is the pure time of restoration and authenticity. In defending threatened beliefs, contesting authority, and rearranging our experience of the world, terrorists are also manifesting the vitality and conviction of the community to which they belong. This community is new in the sense of its urgency of occasion, but they claim that it is also quite old, predating all that is fallen about our world.

♦ Further still, terrorism forces victims (both real and potential) to share a condition of vulnerability. The very conditions that produce terror groups are those they force into being for the rest of the world. Once this erosion of safety and security has occurred, terrorism enacts another inversion: The terrorists achieve victory not just through the death of victims but sometimes even through their own, understood as a glorious sacrifice.

♦ Finally, terrorism makes real what its perpetrators believe already to be the case. Terrorists aim to show the terrorized what the perpetrators think is the real state of our institutions, safety, and pluralism: rubble.

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**ONLINE SOURCES**


The Global Terrorism Database, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/

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**SUGGESTED READING**

Carr, *The Infernal Machine*.

Esposito, *Unholy War*. 
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you agree that religious fundamentalism should be understood as distinct from an extremist worldview that accepts terrorism?

2. Is it possible for democratic nations to intervene in the affairs of other nations without risking the sort of backlash we see across the world of religious terrorism?
This lecture looks at strategies for contesting religious violence, starting with tools for individuals and proceeding from there through communities, nations, and international institutions. Even if some disagree with some of the proposals, they can be motivation to think concretely about the problem of religious violence, rather than be seduced into fear or numbed into inaction.
STEP 1: A LOOK AT THE SELF

♦ One of the first and most powerful steps we can all make as individuals is to question ourselves. There are good ethical, religious, and political reasons for asking, “What have I done to sustain a world of religious and political others? What practices have I let slip? What am I reading or consuming that might contribute to the conditions that shape religious violence?”

♦ Another aspect of this first step is for people to identify and break down their own tendencies to indulge in stereotypes and demonizations. Simply recalibrating one’s thinking isn’t going to produce any structural change right away, but it’s the kind of thing that can interlock meaningfully with the other strategies.

♦ More than that, though, it does matter on its face: Even people who are comfortable with generalizing about, for example, Muslims or homosexuals will for the most part relate to those people quite differently when encountering them face to face. That means that asking “What’s wrong with us? What are we not doing as well as we could?” might make a difference in terms of how we treat others.

♦ Individually, we can start by admitting that our own identities aren’t always as different from those of extreme actors as we’d like. Some of this course’s professor’s own research explores how the dread of recognition sometimes motivates violent refusals of the other. Our willingness to understand ourselves and to educate ourselves about our fellow humans is one way to convert such recognitions from negatives to positives.

STEP 2: COMMUNITY WORK

♦ None of this matters if we don’t also focus on achieving positive change through legislation, institutions, and communities. Religious violence takes root and thrives in those places where communities have broken down, when the norms and institutions of civil society aren’t stronger than the bonds of other, sometimes violent communities. If we can increase justice and equality in our world, religious violence will diminish.
One thing that communities could do is to promote education about religions. Communities can also do better at conveying and modeling some core civic skills, like debate, dialogue, rationality, and respect. The point is to resist the atomism of our lives and get people talking.

If we can do this, and promote conversations that are open to all, we could go a long way toward reducing the tension some groups feel with their societies. Sometimes, when groups feel frozen out of public life, they’ll seek out communities where they don’t feel denied or excluded. In some of these communities, they find meaning in radical violence.

What we can do in our communities won’t necessarily prevent wars from being waged or populations ravaged. But we can prevent discrimination and marginalization from occurring in some practical as well as some conceptual ways.

One opportunity is to work within religious communities themselves. There are several strategies to pursue, all of which require some
initiative and commitment. We’ve seen throughout this course that one appeal to participating in violent religious groups is the idea that a person is participating in a sacred history or imitating a holy exemplar. These are crucial ideas for recruitment and motivation.

♦ One way to leverage against the pull of violence is to establish alternate scriptural genealogies and point to peacemaking exemplars. This is a move common to religious activists, and it could pay dividends if local communities pursued it.

♦ Another move is to start reading groups devoted not only to serious engagement with sacred texts but with other literature by religious actors who reject violence. Make sure the conversation allows for the expression of all viewpoints, even those that might initially seem repellent, because many people who join violent communities describe themselves as being rejected or oppressed by other communities and institutions. Work by demonstrating the appeal of community rather than meeting inflexibility in kind.

♦ One way to get these notions resonating is to petition the state to assist in these endeavors. That means using grants, fellowships, community initiatives, media, and similar avenues to help promote the voices of religious moderates.

♦ Religions already contain the resources for reversing violence. They already have paradigmatic texts and figures they can look to, and ethical norms focused on sharing, welcoming, healing, and more. Communities can be better about defending them loudly and publicizing this.

♦ Another thing we can do in our communities is keep our doors open. Isolation helps strengthen and maintain conditions that can enable violence. It’ll be through interreligious dialogue that progress is made. If we’re serious about religious pluralism, then we have to be serious about the role of religions in producing shared languages and norms that we can all agree on in public life.
STEP 3: GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

♦ These community actions have to be buttressed by institutions and policies at the national level if we want to undermine or eliminate some of the conditions enabling violence. Nations ranging from India to Israel and from Iran to the US can too easily allow for gaps in law and social safety. In these gaps, religious violence can grow.

♦ One way to prevent this is to reassess our nations’ values. We need to ask ourselves: Are we promoting national identities that might alienate certain religious groups? Bellicosity and exclusivism don’t sit easily with what actual democracies look like, and they also make for a stereotype that can be used by violent religious actors for the purposes of mobilization.

♦ Beyond self-image alone, a rule of law that fails to protect very different ways of humans living their lives risks sending the message that some of those ways of living are unwanted. That begs the question: Can we accept the hard reality that there is going to be a cost we’ll have to pay if we want the world to change? That requires not just behavioral modifications, like new laws or new forms of participation in politics, but actual money.

♦ In order to create a climate that guards against religious violence, a robust social safety net has to be guaranteed by our nations. One reason we hesitate to do this is because of how thoroughly our cultures have been commodified, to the extent that political theorist Benjamin Barber refers to Western capitalism as McWorld. In this course’s view, this imperils a necessary balance between public goods, shared meanings, and personal gain.

♦ If we want communities that substantively, structurally resist violence, more than markets and voluntarism are needed. Compassion requires the rule of law and sound policy. The role of community governance is the same as the role of national governance: to pursue corrective justice out of concern for the least advantaged. These are not only obviously religious values, but ones that are fundamental to basic conceptions of the good society.
Governments should strengthen institutional ties between NGOs, schools, civic groups, and state-sponsored programs like the United States’ Countering Violent Extremism. This program focuses on understanding how fraying civil societies enable violent action. In 2017, however, its mission was modified to focus exclusively on Islam. Hopefully, the change will be temporary, for that is an inappropriate narrowing of a much broader human problem. Such programs should devote themselves to understanding religious violence in all its forms, rather than simply responding to polling or voter anxiety about the perceived threat of the moment.

Nations and governments also have to think seriously about the social media that governs our very consciousness today. Monitoring social media can be helpful, for violent religious groups use it regularly. Care should be taken, though, for state actors and agencies not to abuse their power by harassing communities or singling out particular religions or political orientations, because this undermines some of the goals being sought.

It may also be fruitful to consider initiatives, through the US Department of Homeland Security or elsewhere, to create counter-messaging through social media. These projects are underway at American universities and elsewhere, enlisting tech-savvy people to resist the extremist messages so often linked to membership in violent communities.

**STEP 4: GLOBAL ACTIONS**

The recommendations proposed so far are targeted primarily at the personal, local, and national levels. However, if we’re focused on challenging violence by changing the traditions that create it, we also need to think and act globally—starting with a non-negotiable defense of human rights.

The tradition of human rights in the West presumes that people possess natural rights and dignities that are inviolable. Positive rights enshrine freedom of speech, association, and due process of the law. Negative rights protect people from coercion by states or fellow citizens. Social order must be grounded in political
communities possessing a public sphere where debate can occur, where individuals can act as citizens, and where order isn’t imposed from outside.

♦ That last part is important, since the introduction of ostensibly liberalizing cultures to a society that is not accustomed to them can produce backlash. What happens, for example, when a Western, individualist society attempts to liberalize a culture that places less weight on individual identity and more on collective identity? What happens when autonomous communities produce habits or even laws that don’t neatly resemble a Western conception of human rights?

♦ Despite such ambiguities, throughout the 20th century, people used the language of human rights to assert their freedoms and, in some cases, their national autonomy. One turning point was the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR, and later the 1975 Helsinki Accords. These documents have inspired legal activism, social movements, and political reform around the world.

♦ The UDHR includes economic survival as a basic human right. States must provide their citizens with the conditions by which opportunities can be achieved and dignities secured. Precarity is a major shaping factor in religious violence.

♦ If national leadership, from the US and other countries, is to make global progress on contesting religious violence, more than militarism is required. Active commitment to and work on behalf of economic and social justice must be coordinated between global institutions. The only way for these efforts to work is by honoring local culture, actively seeking its participation, rather than naively (and in many ways destructively) imposing a unilateral model from the outside.

CURRENT EFFORTS

♦ This kind of work is already happening energetically. It’s just not always as robustly supported by individual nations as it needs to be. International groups like the World Council of Churches or the Muslim Peace Fellowship are actively involved in religious peace
What We Can Do about Religious Violence

Multiple NGOs are promoting education, cultural exchange, and dialogue, bringing actors together to negotiate solutions. They are working hand in hand to strengthen international institutions, strengthen the rule of law, and to build economically, dialogically, and culturally solid communities. They know that the global community must be constructed likewise so we don’t lose cities, countries, and regions to extremist ideologies.

The interaction between nations also matters. The only way to avoid the earlier pitfalls of colonialism or clumsy nation-building is to work collaboratively, coordinating the efforts of the local, the national, and the international.

Among the norms that nations must accept is that elections in one nation are not subject to ratification by other nations, even if they don’t like the results. The effects of interference can be disastrous, most obviously in Iran in the 1950s. At bottom, this serious reckoning with democracy is grounded in the understanding that respect for democracy precludes dictating specific policy choices to a voting society. It’s about procedures, frameworks, and spaces for deliberation, backed up by laws capacious enough to protect all citizens and a social floor that addresses the background conditions of socioeconomic life.

The problem of religious violence must absolutely be understood by attending to perceptual and theological particulars. However, it must be addressed by working structurally as well as through deliberation and internal reflection. These strategies won’t eradicate religious violence with any satisfying finality, but while perpetual peace might be impossible, we can make strides by establishing cultures and institutions that weaken the lure and power of the violent.
ONLINE SOURCES

“Countering Violent Extremism,” https://www.state.gov/j/cve/
Muslim Peace Fellowship, https://mpf21.wordpress.com/

SUGGESTED READING

Appleby, The Ambivalence of the Sacred.
Habermas, The Divided West.
Hurd, Beyond Religious Freedom.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you agree that religious peacemaking depends on acknowledging multiple legitimate forms of political activity?

2. Do you share this course’s hope that increasing socioeconomic security will reduce the lure of religious violence?

3. In democratic countries, will religions be more likely to buy in if they can voice their religious opinions in public, or should politics be completely secular?


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Riley-Smith, Jonathan, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. One of the more valuable resources for studying the Crusades, in that it shows how much more than merely military campaigning was involved therein.


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