

The Martyr and The Warrior: Religion and Violence

BLHV 255 01

Monday 6:30-8:45

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Introductory Statement :

This course will examine the complex ways in which religion is implicated in human violence and self-destruction. We shall look at aggressive acts such as holy wars and crusades along with religiously sanctioned terror. But the course will also look at self-directed violence, such as severe fasting, austerities, self-flagellation, martyrdom etc. The purpose of the course will be to examine whether religion justifies violence or actually causes it, whether religious ideas and beliefs or deeper emotions are at work in cases of religious warfare and acts of self-destruction. The underlying assumption is that the explicit reasons cited by different religious actors, the folk-theories, are seldom sufficient for understanding the true causes of such violence. There are universal factors at work that transcend explicit religious discourse, and these must be fully understood if religious conflicts are to be resolved. Students will look at the scriptural and theological justifications for warfare and for self-destructive behavior. These will be applied to specific historical and contemporary cases. A number of scientific theories will then be studied and examined in relation to the cases. Finally, using both the theological and the scientific data, the students will attempt to design methods for reducing the level of religious conflict in hypothetical situations (e.g. an Iran-Israel nuclear showdown). A number of existing conflict resolution programs, including that of Gandhi, will be addressed.

Empirical Component :

1. Current cases of conflict involving distinctly religious components. (Israel-Palestine, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan-India, Ireland, Iran-Israel).
2. Historical cases: European counter-reformation, Karbala, Massada, biblical wars, crusades, Islamic expansion, Ashoka in India.
3. Cases of self-directed violence: martyrs, rites of passage, pilgrimage, mystical discipline.

Discourse (folk theory):

4. Religious discourse associated with acts of violence and self-destruction. (Scriptural sources and authoritative statements from theologians from the main religious traditions; anthropological descriptions from tribal religions).

Explanatory theories (sociology, psychology, biology):

5. Rene Girard and Walter Burkert (sacrifice, mimesis, contagion, scapegoat)
6. Sigmund Freud, Ariel Glucklich (taboo, sublimation, sacred pain)
7. Richard Dawkins, Robert Axelrod, David Wilson, Jared Diamond (evolution, ecology, groups formation)

Additional Sources:

In addition to scriptures, theologies (including Gandhi), anthropological accounts and the theoretical scholars listed above, the class will also utilize a number of recent works of scholarship on the subject of religion and violence. These will include the works of Mark Jurgensmeyer, Charles Kimball, Ami Pedhazur, Jessica Stern and others.

Readings, Assignments, Grading:

For the 2008 fall semester, the first time the course is offered, there will be no books to purchase. Required readings are available on Blackboard. To begin the discussion that opens the class I recommend that students buy either Hitchens or Harris's books, which are listed for September 8. Students will also be instructed on using library resources, especially Lexis Nexis for gathering data throughout the semester.

Grading will be based on three elements: two 6-page papers (due Oct. 6, Nov. 10) and participation in presenting a case study of conflict resolution (Nov. 24, Dec. 1).

Schedule:

September

Describing the Problem:

8—Overview of course; discussion of the issues via current media coverage and best-selling critiques of religion (Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*.)

15—Religion and violence in South Asia: Pakistan, India and Sri-Lanka

22—Religion and violence in the Middle East: Israel, Palestinians, Iran

29—The history of religious violence in the West: Greco-Roman, biblical, Christian history.

October

Justifications:

6—The scriptural, theological and ideological justifications for violence: the cases of Hinduism and Islam.

20—The scriptural, theological and ideological justifications in Judaism and Christianity.

27—Martyrs, mystics and masochists: self-directed violence in the name of God.

November

Explaining religious Violence:

3—Do political and economic theories explain religious violence? What is a religious theory of human behavior?

10—Psychological, sociological and biological theories of religion and religious violence.

Applied conflict resolution

17—Applying scientific theories for reducing religious conflict: case-study workshop: South Asia.

24—Case-study workshop continued: the Middle-East.

December

1—Case-study: averting a religious nuclear war (Pakistan-India; Israel-Iran, or?)