

**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
INVOKING RELIGION IN VIOLENT ACTS AND  
RHETORIC**

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**ABSTRACT**

Contemporary discussions of the link between religion and violence are plagued by the contested nature of the terms. This essay summarizes some problems of definition and scope for those terms, and then introduces the four studies and postscript that follow. The four studies theorize and contextualize violent acts and religious rhetoric in today's India and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the 1920s United States, and in fifteenth century Morocco. The postscript identifies a theme common to the four essays, which is the capacity of violent rhetoric and acts to empower religious pundits in the public sphere.

**KEYWORDS**

Assault Sorcery, Buddhism, Christianity, Crusades, Eugenics, Hinduism, The Mai-Mai, Rape, Sexualized Violence, Sufi Islam

Religiously inflamed acts of violence and the theories that attempt to explain them are increasingly abundant. This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* brings together four studies which theorize and contextualize violent acts and religious rhetoric in different historical-cultural spheres, namely, in today's India and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the 1920s United States, and in fifteenth century Morocco. Despite diversity in historical and cultural settings, these essays treat problems at the heart of the relationship between religion and violence. They all address, for instance, how traditional understandings underpin and legitimate particular

expressions of violence, although they diverge in their focus on different violent formations. Two address rape, one addresses the rhetoric of racial purity, and another addresses what might be called a poetics of violence. The essays are diverse in their methods as well. Two are based on core texts, one is a mix-method of interviews and textual analysis, and another treats religious disenfranchisement and ritual secrecy in-the-bush.

Before presenting the essays, it is necessary to summarize a few issues of identification which plague any contemporary discussion of religion and violence. This is necessary because, not only is the collocation of religion and violence still contested, but so are its individual terms. For the collocation, it is clear that the singular lenses of yesteryear, whether political, anthropological, psychological, sociological, gendered, or theological, have yielded to lenses which are more prismatic. Today we intricate discourses on, say, the imagistic and bonding effects of violent rituals,<sup>1</sup> with charismatic religious carrier groups,<sup>2</sup> and with the narrative imaginations and dramaturgical scripts of violent actors.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of various stripes are probing philosophy and literature for language to describe our ontological responses to terror: we hear of an emerging sense of the uncanny, of virtual contingency, of social unpredictability, and of the “potential rupture within our customary worlds.”<sup>4</sup> The studies are increasingly multifaceted.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Altamira Press, 2004); Candace Alcorta and Richard Sosis, “Ritual, Religion, and Violence: An Evolutionary Perspective,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 571-596 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Mark Juergensmeyer, “Religious Terrorism as Performance Violence,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 280-292 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jeffrey C. Alexander, “From the Depths of Despair: Performance, Counterperformance and ‘September 11,’” *Sociological Theory* 22/1 (Mar. 2004) *Theories of Terrorism: A Symposium*, 88-104.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, “Introduction: Terror, the Imagination, Cosmology,” *Terror and Violence: Imagination and the Unimaginable*, eds. Strathern, Stewart, and Whitehead, 1-39 (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), 7. See also Vincent

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Violence itself is not a straightforward phenomenon. It has been compared to a crab scuttling sideways – evasive to capture.<sup>5</sup> Some see it as an inevitable consequence of the mimetic desire that pervades societies,<sup>6</sup> or, in slightly broader terms, as a sociodynamic process endemic to the human condition.<sup>7</sup> Others measure violence by the effects of force on bodies, societies, and imaginations.<sup>8</sup> Even when restricted to bodies, though, the effects of force are elusive, given that pain, bodily integrity, and death are culturally circumscribed. Pain, for instance, may flatten realities for the tortured,<sup>9</sup> but it may also create new, incontestable realities for participants in initiation rituals.<sup>10</sup> Pain may even transport self-wounding members of the religious to ecstatic states.<sup>11</sup> Bodily damage is similarly elastic: one person's bodily mutilation or scarification is another person's badge of identity or of beauty and probably has been so since our first self-decorating

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Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and, Goran Aijmer and Jon Abbink, eds, *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 1-54 (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>6</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Bruce and Aisha Karim eds., *On Violence: A Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo Schröder, eds, *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> See Candace Alcorta and Richard Sosis, "Ritual, Religion, and Violence: An Evolutionary Perspective," in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 571-596 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Thomas O. Beidelman, *The Cool Knife: imagery of gender, sexuality, and moral education in Kaguru initiation ritual* (Ann Arbor: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 179; and, Alan Morinis, "The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation," *Ethos* 13/2 (Summer 1985): 150-174, 166-168.

<sup>11</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Cary, NC: Oxford University, 2003) and "Pain and Ecstatic Religious Experience," *Oxford Handbooks Online*, forthcoming.

ancestors.<sup>12</sup> Violent death may make bodies into inert things,<sup>13</sup> but also may create martyrs and heroes.<sup>14</sup> Even within everyday discourse, an act of violence may be understood quite differently by its perpetrators, victims, and witnesses.<sup>15</sup> There are multiple problems of perspective and context.

As for religion, a consensus has emerged among social scientists and humanitarians that, while religion cannot be treated as an isolated analytic category in violence studies, narratives grounded in religious tradition certainly lend symbolic significance to violent behaviors, particularly in the context of war. This awareness has resonated beyond religiously inflamed destruction on the global stage into the study of religious roots. For the scholar of traditional origins, sacred warriors and sacred victims may be found at the heart of textually established traditions world round, including traditions typically presumed to be nonviolent.<sup>16</sup> This is not to mention sacred warriors in secret traditions which elude textual tools.<sup>17</sup> A number of new trends have emerged which address this seeming sacralization of violence.

One trend, alluded to above, is the study of ritualized violence and its disturbing effects among targeted audiences. For instance, despite differences of scale, the combination of ideational intent and heightened performance register that we saw with the 9/11

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<sup>12</sup> Enid Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 319-344, and Paul G Bahn, *Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 70-81.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Weil, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," *Chicago Review* 18/2 (1965).

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 13.

<sup>15</sup> David Riches, ed., *The Anthropology of Violence* (New York: Blackwell), 1986.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, eds., *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Buddhist Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and, William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Nathalie Wlodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and Reality in Contemporary African Conflict and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); Nathalie Wlodarczyk, "African Traditional Religion and Violence," in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 153-182 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Neil L. Whitehead, *Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2002).

perpetrators, may be found also among practitioners of assault sorcery in Amazonia, New Guinea, and Africa.<sup>18</sup> In the Amazonian case, innovative assault sorcerers, situated at the interstices of traditional and modern justice systems, are said to combine ritual performance with explicit ideational intent in order to inflict real or mystical injury on personal rivals and also on perceived representatives of hegemonic powers.<sup>19</sup> Much like terrorist performance art, these mystical assaults, when known, precipitate a heightened sense of foreboding and personal vulnerability for victims and witnesses. Comparable foreboding may be intimated in the ancient Near Eastern context too, in, for instance, the ritualized killing of oath-victims (e.g., murdered sheep posing as prospective perjurers),<sup>20</sup> the violent smashing of inscribed texts and their implicated realities,<sup>21</sup> or the performed poetry of threat by some biblical prophets (Amos 7). In short, menacing performances and their unsettling effects are not new and not confined to the global stage.

Another trend is the study of religio-nationalist rhetoric and the power of carrier groups to mount campaigns that encourage violence in the political sphere. One recent example is the rhetoric of the Burmese Buddhist monk U Wirathu, who declared in February 2013: "Our existence as a Buddhist Burmese Nation has been seriously threatened! So whatever work we do we must do it from a nationalist

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<sup>18</sup> On ritual strategies among the 9/11 activists, see Margo Kitts, "The Last Night: Ritualized Violence and the Last Instructions of 9/11." *Journal of Religion* 90/3 (2010): 283-312; Hans Kippenberg, "'Consider That It Is a Raid on the Path of God': The Spiritual Manual of the Attackers of 9/11," *Numen* 52/1 (2005): 29-58. On similar practices elsewhere, see Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds., *Violence: Theory and Ethnography* (New York: Continuum, 2002); and Nathalie Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and Reality in Contemporary African Conflict and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Neil L. Whitehead, *Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2002).

<sup>20</sup> See Margo Kitts, *Sanctified Violence in Homeric Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 237-38.

<sup>21</sup> See Scott B. Noegel, "The Ritual Use of Linguistic and Textual Violence in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East," in *State, Power, and Violence*, Vol. 3 of *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual*, eds. Margo Kitts, et. al, 33-46 (Weisbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2010).

point of view. When we eat we should eat like nationalists. When we travel we must travel like nationalists do....Why do I have to say all this? Because our people are very weak in the affairs of our nation and thus we're losing our country and society to the invading Bengali-Muslims."<sup>22</sup> In aligning being Buddhist with being Burmese, U Wirathu also identifies Muslims as not Burmese, an identification which recently impelled a number of Buddhist riots against Rohingya Muslims.<sup>23</sup> Leaders like U Wirathu fit what Max Weber calls "charismatic carriers of culture," in which key figures with discursive talents rework traditional associations and meanings in the public sphere.<sup>24</sup> Such marriages of religiously charged rhetoric and actions make visible how religion penetrates and controls other aspects of culture.

This special issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* addresses the ways in which rhetoric and action make visible the power of religion in culture. The first essay targets traditional Hindu legend and contemporary rhetoric in justifying acts of rape. In "The Rape that Woke Up India: Hindu Imagination and the Rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey," Mackenzie Brown and Nupur Agrawal explore the extent to which a variety of traditional narratives continue to shape the imaginations of college age Indians on the subject of gender relations and sexual crimes. Their research, conducted in the aftermath of the shocking gang rape and sexual mutilation of Jyoti Singh Pandey on December 16, 2012, points to the way that religion affects a society in flux. Religious authorities and hallowed texts still help to construct conservative conceptions of gender roles and behavior, but outrage over the rape of Jyoti has triggered defiance of norms and an incipient revolution in popular sensibility.

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<sup>22</sup> Hla Oo trans., "Boycott Muslim Businesses: Nationalist-Monk Shin Wirathu," 8 March 2013. Accessed at <http://hlaoo1980.blogspot.ca/2013/03/boycott-muslim-businesses-nationalist.html> on 24 April 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Jerryson, "The Buddhist State of Exception," in *Buddhism and the Political Process*, ed. Ian Harris (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946, 1978), 468-517.

The next essay focuses on the change in Mai-Mai ritual practices regarding sex and purification in the context of Congolese conflicts of the twenty first century. “The Mai-Mai Rape: Female Bodies and Collective Identities at War in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,” by Torang Asadi, describes the surprising turn of the rebel militia from sexual abstinence, as recently as the 1990s, to ritualized rape as a means of enhancing warrior power. These extraordinary sexual violations – the majority are gang rapes, and many penetrations are performed with foreign objects – are shrouded with traditional notions of warrior magic. Asadi contextualizes the revival and perversion of traditional notions by tracing the increasing isolation and alienation of the Mai-Mai from the rest of Congolese society and, indeed, from a multitude of forces situated in the region.

The next essay addresses the rhetoric of religion, violence and race. In “‘This Mighty Struggle for Life’: Modernist Protestant Ministers, Biopolitical Violence, and Negative Eugenics in the 1920s United States,” Leif Tornquist argues that a Protestant ministerial platform of negative eugenics against unfit whites was linked with a theology of evolutionary immanence, wherein the destiny of the “white race” in the approaching kingdom of God on earth was to be realized by the sterilization of the feebleminded. By tracing this theme in Protestant sermons of the time, Tornquist historically contextualizes Protestant evolutionism as a religiously inspired discourse of civilizational advance that justified a sovereign right to impose “evolutionary death” on those whose survival would mar racial purity.

Then Manuela Ceballos challenges contemporary propaganda which envisions Sufi pacifism as a corrective to Islamic militancy. In “Sufi Lovers as Sufi Fighters: Militant Piety in Muhammad ibn Yaggabsh al-Tāzī’s *Book of Jibād*,” Ceballos highlights Sufi endorsements of ethical violence in response to expulsions of Muslims from Spain and in the face of Christian-Islamic struggles in fifteenth century North Africa. Al-Tāzī’s *Book of Jibād* is rich with poetic figurations – e.g., Jesus as an advocate against Satan and Andalus as a besieged virgin – and reorients traditional categories of Sufi asceticism toward support of worldly fairness for the oppressed. The essay argues

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against popular conceptions of Sufism as a private form of Islamic spirituality. Rather, Al-Tāzī's Sufism promotes defensive violence in the mission of reconstituting a morally just world.

In the postscript, Mark Juergensmeyer locates the public nature of violence throughout these four essays. He shows how rhetorical as well as physical acts of violence may empower religious professionals who in turn influence the public sphere. In these scenarios, religious leaders exploit public suspicions of disorder and chaos by harnessing symbolic forms of violence to provide a sense of ultimate order for the public. Such leaders are not necessarily being charitable. As several of these contributions show, some use their status as arbiters of public values to affirm their own power and importance.

Within the religious sphere, physical acts of violence are easy to discern and obviously more visceral than symbolic forms of violence. However, it is religion's hold on the imagination, its discursive power, that can justify the gang rape of 23-year old Jyoti Singh Pandey, that can motivate the Mai Mai rebels to rape for warrior prowess, that once legitimated White Protestant culling of the feebleminded, and that inspired Sufi defensive action against crusading Christians in North Africa. This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* highlights the potency of discursive power invoked when linking religion with violence.



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