EXPRESSIVE VIOLENCE:
AN INTRODUCTION TO PAIN, POLITICS,
AND THE MONSTROUS OTHER

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When the topic of violence arises in the classroom, my students often think of wars, terrorist attacks, or the brutal repression of an oppressed social group. Like my students, most people I talk to about religious violence limit their understanding of "violence" to negative actions that cause harm to innocent victims. It is irrational. It is directed to some "other." And it either highlights the horrific nature of religion or undermines the very heart of religion. What is often overlooked, however, is that violence—especially religious violence—is infused with symbolic value and indeed establishes and reinforces the values of those doing violence. To draw upon Pierre Bourdieu, we could see expressions of violence as means of generating or utilizing social capital in order to reinforce social habitus. Rather than being disruptive, religious violence can be (re-)integrative and empowering for those engaged in or engaging such acts. Rather than being just external events, acts of violence speak to internal or in-group angst.

Theorists are increasingly appreciating the communicative side of violence. Rather than simply identifying violence as physical acts or unjust social systems, scholars such as Mark Juergensmeyer, Bruce Lincoln, and William Cavanaugh, among others, have prompted us to appreciate such systems and acts as expressions of symbolic values. People don't simply kill, oppress, or destroy for the sake of doing harm. They do so to make a point. In other words, violence expresses something. It is a means of communication, to get a message across. What that message is will vary depending on the social actors and circumstances involved, as well as the audience. Moments of expressive violence, such as those presented in the following articles, often target those doing violence as the primary recipients of the symbolic message. Expressive violence, therefore, constitutes attempts at shaping or

re-shaping an identity, often of oneself. The reinforcement of an identity is an internal process, even when engaging external concerns (be those political, economic, or ideological). Violent behavior—directed either at oneself or at others—is a creative process. To express is to create what Michel Foucault called a discourse or *episteme*; i.e., bodies of knowledge within which certain meanings, values, and alignments of power relations are made possible. It is through such creative expression that social actors are able to use violence constructively, such as to justify actions, offer healing and reintegration of shattered lives, or to render "obvious" and "natural" those worldviews that are socially constructed or contested. As Juergensmeyer has long emphasized, such expressions – as performative or theatrical violence – make possible a sense of empowerment in conditions of disempowerment.

This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* brings together four distinct studies, yet each in its own way highlights the importance of *expression* as an analytical focus. We begin with two fascinating looks at self-violence. Marie Pagliarini explores the embodied experiences of tattooing practices, sharing her findings from fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay area. Tattooing is a form of self-mutilation, yet one that literally inscribes into the body spiritual identities. What is expressed is often a reintegration of traumatic experiences into a productive healing process. Materiality, memory, and identity are linked through voluntary pain, giving abstraction a physical and enduring presence. Similarly, Jack Downey's study of the highly controversial self-immolation of Tibetan monks directs our attention away from discourses of suicide (a negative view of self-killing in much of Western culture) towards what Michael Biggs calls "communicative suffering," where the social actors "insert themselves into a discourse . . . [thereby] circumventing the narrative of control by the state." Downey refers to such expressive acts of violence as necroresistance. Such resistance not only challenges China's occupation of Tibet, but also declares (and thus legitimizes) Tibetan cultural identity along with the religious dedication of the monks. Necroresistance reminds me of the ancient noble death traditions, where voluntary death is honorable and beneficial. Like other types of self-mutilation, such as tattooing, self-immolation—at least for these Tibetan monks—is not pathological but rather viewed as empowering and operative toward particular goals. Unlike tattooing, however, the audiences of self-immolation often are external. Expressive violence in this case is directed toward evoking both an emotional and rational reaction from others (thus, fitting into arguments of *logos* and *pathos*).

Our last two articles shift our focus away from self-inflicted violence toward ideological reframing of violence. The symbolic impact explored by both Nathan French and Brian Doak shapes and directs social actors (their

identities and actions) through a re-direction of social perceptions of the world or its interactive narratives. In other words, the scripts are revised and the stage is adjusted to express the director's final cut (to evoke a theatrical analogy). As French puts it in his very title, a re-scripting of the social narrative allows social actors to justify their actions as "permissible violence." French offers an insightful comparison of such rhetorical justification in both the American government's use of drones to kill Anwar al-ʿAwlaqī in 2011 and al-ʿAwlaqī's suspected involvement with al-Qāʿida in opposition to the United States. The targeted killing of an American citizen by his own government without the usual court process was justified by a shift in narrative from a judicial script (dealing with "crime") to a military script ("an immediate threat to American citizens"). Violence was justified due to a script of humanitarian concern and the protection of the community. Similarly, al-ʿAwlaqī justified violence along these same lines, though directed toward safeguarding the communal well-being of Muslims. Drawing upon the Qurʾanic material, especially in conjunction with the application of *takfīr* (the identification of another Muslim as a disbeliever), violence becomes ethically permissible due to "a perceived threat to the shared social order." In both cases, violence is not simply an external act or a strategic instrument. Rather, it expresses group solidarity through a reimagined narrative or, to return to Foucault, a body of knowledge or *episteme* within which horrific acts are not only justifiable, but clearly necessary and perhaps desirable for the common welfare of an imagined humanity.

Moving in a different direction, Doak challenges us to reconsider the symbolic and ideological potency of mythical creatures in the Hebrew Bible, specifically the book of Job. Doak looks at the various "monsters" in this biblical text (especially the Leviathan, Yamm, the Twisting Serpent, and Behemoth), situating such creatures within the Joban narrative as rhetorical devices. Drawing upon the field of cognitive science, specifically the work of Justin Barrett and especially Harvey Whitehouse, Doak effectively demonstrates that "monster violence" in Job serves to "teach its audience through trauma." The imagistic mode of religious expression disrupts stable or codified religiosity by evoking pain, terror, and, especially relevant for the Joban narrative, broken bodies. Given their "false resemblance" to other creatures, monsters serve as metaphoric images for the characters (and thus readers) by evoking cognitive shocks. As Doak nicely observes, "the monster *demonstrates*." And what the monster demonstrates is the otherness, disorientation, and redemption of the community. Like with self-violence, here monster violence can serve a healing function—it addresses trauma, healing, and communal empowerment in the midst of empire.

As I read through these articles, the term *expression* continually came to mind. In one sense, these are very different articles. We are dealing with tattoos, self-immolation, terrorism, and ancient near eastern narrative monsters. But in another sense, they wonderfully illustrate a range of overlapping themes and processes related to religious violence: group affirmation, narrative reorientation, responses to trauma (individually or collectively), cognitive processes, and a positive function of violence. Each author demonstrates the significant role that expressive violence plays not just for explaining external or physical acts of violence, but rather, and more importantly, the internalization and self-expression of identity by means of such acts of violence. Violence has less to do with communicating to outsiders than it does with inscribing symbolic value creatively and constructively for insiders. In this sense, expressive violence is an act of worldview building. Closing off this set of articles, Margo Kitts in her response continues and opens up the discussion that our authors have started. Readers are invited to join the discussion, to engage these various themes and fascinating examples of pain, politics, and the monstrous other.