

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

SUICIDE: WHY DO PEOPLE KILL THEMSELVES IN THE NAME OF RELIGION?

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Suicide is in most cultures considered taboo. Nevertheless, there are people willing to voluntarily kill themselves, as well as people willing to honor them for do so. From at least the time of Durkheim's study of suicide and his discussion of the connection between religion and suicide the issue has interested scholars of religion. The issue of religion and violence – especially religion and suicide – became a prominent topic after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. Prior to this event, certain scholars with an interest in religion and violence had focused on the new religious movements that committed collective murder-suicides, beginning with the tragedy in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. As the field of study of religion and violence has grown, new perspectives on the topic have emerged. In this issue, the focus is on suicide and religion.

Self-immolation is the theme in Helen Farley's "Death By Whose Hand? Falun Gong and Suicide." Even though Falun Gong condemns suicide, several practitioners have set themselves on fire to protest the oppression practitioners experience in China. Additionally, Falun Gong practitioners are encouraged not to receive medical treatment. Farley links the possibility of Falun Gong practitioners committing suicide to the apocalyptic message of the movement, as well as with their belief that correct adherence to their tenets will help them overcome serious illnesses. In effect, this has led to a number of deaths. The accusation that this is suicide is refuted by the Falun Gong leadership, claiming that the practitioners who have died are not following the tenets with the correct attitude. Farley's chapter touches on the recurrent theme in the study of suicide and religion that suicide is one of the mechanisms minority religions can apply against a dominant majority.

In "Why Muslims Kill Themselves on Film," Hartney examines the function suicide has in film. Hartney bases part of his analysis on Girard's victimage mechanism together with theories of narrative construction and radical constructivism. Hartney considers suicide as a sacrificial plot device that gives the audience an experience of

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the feeling of horror in a safe zone. He finds that the suicides of Westerners are described in a more nuanced fashion than Muslims committing suicide. In fictional Hollywood representations about Muslim suicides, the focus is not on motivations or on considerations of the person's inner thoughts. They depict Muslims killing themselves as a different Other – they kill themselves simply because they are Muslims.

Rebecca Moore had two sisters who were involved in the murder-suicides in Jonestown in 1978. In her article, "Rhetoric, Revolution, and Resistance in Jonestown, Guyana," she argues that the members of Peoples Temple saw themselves as martyrs in the fight for African American liberation. The article thus explores the differences between "selfish suicide" and "revolutionary suicide", and how their deaths can be seen as an act of resistance of the powerless against the powerful.

Both Lynn S. Neal and Christopher Hartney examine how suicide and religion is depicted in popular culture (especially American). While Hartney focuses on Muslim suicide bombers, Neal focuses on new religious movements. In "Suicide and *Cultural Memory in Fictional Television*," Neal explores how six American fictional television programs have reflected the murder-suicides in Jonestown, the siege in Waco and the Heaven's Gate's collective suicide. Neal's interest is in how these tragic events are being remembered, and finds that the fictional description of cults and violence "smooths over" viewers' concerns about government abuse of minority religions. Such TV programs assure viewers that the government can be trusted. Thus, the issue of the violation of religious freedom is softly written out of the *cultural memory*.

In "Burning Buddhists – Self-Immolation as Political Protest," Katarina Plank examines the Tibetan self-immolations that occurred in 2009, which escalated in 2011 and 2012. Her interest lies in the religious aspects of these acts, and she refers to Buddhist and pre-Buddhist ideas about sacrificing the body as an unselfish deed to help those who are suffering. The article aims to explain how the tantric practice of self-immolation has come to be an expression of political protest.

In "The Devil Made Her Do it: Understanding Suicide, Demonic Discourse, and the Social Construction of 'Health' in Yucatan, Mexico," Beatriz Reyes-Cortes examines how suicide is understood among Yucatec Maya people. She shows how biomedicine, psychiatry and religion are utilized to fight the devil in different aspects of life. There is thus no conflict between medicine and tradition, as they are used to fight evil in different arenas. This commingling of spiritual, mental and bodily health also shows how illness is understood as an evil transcending the personal and into the communal.