

Classification Matters: Hiding Violence in Christianity in the United States

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In the last twenty years, scholarship on the relationship between religion and violence has flourished. The bulk of that work, however, has been global and comparative or, if rooted in the U.S. context, has been primarily concerned with marginalized New Religious Movements or traditions perceived of as “foreign,” most significantly Islam. Yet from slavery, colonialism, and manifest destiny, to abortion clinic bombers and antigovernment gun rights activists, many examples of organized violence in the United States are explicitly Christian or derive from cultural influences broadly shared by American Christians.

Since Christianity is the dominant religious tradition in the U. S., it is the beneficiary of rhetorical structures and classification systems that function to obscure its relationship to violence. An impediment to the analysis of the place of violent religion in the United States has been the hegemonic character of Christianity and the authenticating discourses of Christians themselves, as they work to legitimate their own versions of their tradition while denying “authenticity” to the various other expressions of it, most especially violent expressions. Authenticity discourses are invoked to argue that violent Christians are not “really” Christians, an argument that relies on unspoken and unexamined theological commitments. Descriptive scholarly discourse is often muddled by Christian theological discourse.

And yet there can be no argument that American Christianity is characterized by a version of atonement which asserts that an all knowing, all powerful god creates a world in which sin results, and demands a violent crucifixion to repair the damage. This is not a religious tradition that exists apart from violence (if indeed, any do).

This special issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, focusing on Christian right-wing religious violence in the United States, both explores

specific sites of Christian violence in the U.S. (apocalypticism, militancy, gender/sexuality, and racism) and the way in which processes of classification function to legitimize said violence and often hide its very character. As guest editor I specifically solicited submissions that would present a balanced set of examples with theoretical engagement on this issue.

Classification matters. The articles that follow problematize the category of religion itself, recognizing that the way in which that term is employed plays into when and if an incident or group is seen as legitimate and when and if violence is recognized as such or seen as something else.

Sean Durbin builds on recent scholarship rethinking the theological category of theodicy in his “Violence as Revelation: American Christian Zionist Theodicy, and the Construction of Religion through Violence.” Durbin replaces the traditional effort to grapple with “why evil exists” with an examination of the social functions served by grappling with “problem of evil,” in the context of conservative Christians’ Premillennial Dispensationalist Apocalyptic Zionism. He traces the rise of this form of conservative Christian eschatology in the United States, and shows how the violence inherent in it is not an unfortunate by-product but actually constitutive of the system itself. As Durbin writes, violence related to Israel (and the Middle East broadly) “consistently acts as a visible affirmation of Christian Zionists’ truth claims and thus their religious identities.”

Importantly, the way religion functions to naturalize the violence in, and related to, Israel (that is, make it appear to be in the very nature of the world as God made it) effectively naturalizes historical violence such that even the holocaust is, appallingly, understood as “God’s plan.” As Durbin shows, this process of naturalization can serve to hide violence from view, making it barely register as relevant to the category “violence” at all, such that the struggle of the Palestinians, for example, is erased. Moreover framing a series of binaries in terms of economies of signification, Durbin focuses on the way Zionism anchors notions of good and evil such that all aligned with Israel are “good” and all opposed to it are “evil,” the result being a powerful uniting feature for the Christian Right on every issue imaginable. Even seemingly unrelated issues become part of God’s blessings or curses depending on a nation’s obedience to God in supporting Israel.

Zionist Christians are not the only ones promoting a specific kind of violence in the U.S. In 2018 Sean Moon’s controversial church garnered much attention for conducting a mass wedding in which participants wore crowns and carried AR-15s. In “God’s Favorite Gun: the Sanctuary Church and the Militarization of American Christianity,” Brad Stoddard mines the details of that story, and the responses to it, to analyze militant Christianity in the

United States, as well as the backlash, arguing that the church was neither “authentically Christian,” or even “religious.” Finally, he examines the ways in which our current political climate and the laws of the United States “do not simply protect religion; they influence and nurture it.”

At each stage of his argument Stoddard engages the processes by which people tell histories and construct classificatory systems that suit their ideological purposes. The Sanctuary Church has a narrative about the utopian world it envisions and its relationship to the United States Constitution, modified in keeping with concerns shared by other threads of right wing American religion. The church’s critics see Christianity and religion as “inherently peaceful and private,” leading them to label the Sanctuary Church not a church at all but, instead, a “cult.”

In other examples, classification schemes work to hide the violence altogether, to allow Christians to deny the violence inherent in the violence in the policies they promote. Sophie Bjork-James tackles the classification strategies that allow white Christian Nationalists in the United States to frame their efforts to deny basic rights to LGBTQ Americans as merely defensive efforts to protect themselves and Christian culture from attack. In an essay based in extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Christian Right mecca, Colorado Springs, Bjork-James shows how classification matters by exploring the internal logic of Christian Nationalists who perceive themselves to be persecuted by those pursuing a “gay agenda.” She finds a widespread “disavowal of hate discourse,” as anti-gay activists claim their “emotional state free of animus as proof that they were innocent of harm.”

Bjork-James’s point is not that we need to better empathize with their claims of innocence, when they say they “don’t hate gay people”; her point is more sophisticated than that. She argues that framing the motivation as one of “sentiment” is itself a rhetorical move. Painting the conflict as based in “hate” or “not hate” allows the Christian Nationalists a defense. But, as she argues, this leads us to misperceive the impact of their efforts. Specifically she shows how this particular classification strategy serves to make invisible the discursive violence to which the practices subject sexual minorities. Bjork-James seeks to shift the focus from the “feelings” of the Christian Nationalists, to the actual impact of the policies they advocate, and the resulting various forms of violence; she seeks a shift in focus in terms of the rhetoric about who is to be protected and who is not.

Finally, in “Scared Sheetless: Negrophobia, the Fear of God, and Justified Violence in the U.S. White-Christian Imaginary,” Richard Newton examines what he calls biblicist Negrophobia as an important strategy for legitimating white racial violence against black people, by classifying black people as an

existential—even demonic—threat and classifying white violence against them not as aggression but as a Christian duty. Biblicist Negrophobia replaces Klan sheets in the U.S. Christian-White imaginary to hide the racism of anti-black violence. Or, as Newton says, “those who wear a mask of whiteness can don a Christian mask in scenarios where oblique racial discourse seems too gauche.” The examples upon which Newton draws range in time from Bartolome las Casas and Denmark Vesey to President Donald Trump.

But perhaps the most direct examples of Newton’s point are the examples of the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, in which neither of the white killers were held accountable because they claimed their acts were justified, based on an assertion of overwhelming fear of their black targets, despite in both cases the implausibility of the legitimacy of the fear. In Trayvon Martin’s case, his killer even invoked the will of God in the aftermath of his acquittal. Newton argues that, to understand how white supremacy works we need to stop expecting racists to be clothed in Klan robes and instead, look to the ordinariness of the complex relationship between Christianity, whiteness, and racism.

Each of the essays illustrates the ways in which religious violence can be hidden, legitimated, and even defined away by the tools and strategies available to a dominant religious tradition, in this case Christianity in the United States. Our purpose here is not to suggest that Christianity is more readily employed for violent ends but rather to call attention to the classificatory systems structures and rhetoric that make this possible. Of course, the examples put forth in this issue are in no way exhaustive. Many more are available. Our suggestion is that this can be a profitable avenue for further research both in the American context and in other contexts with other dominant traditions.

References

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