

Religious Violence since 1920

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This essay abbreviates a very complicated stream of contexts and ideologies from the twentieth century. Instead of recounting all the religiously inspired wars and atrocities, the focus here is on the religious ideologies which undergirded a striking handful of those, namely the religious ideologies of World War I, then the Third Reich, religious Zionism, jihadi salafism, U.S. based Christian nationalism, Hindu nationalism, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, as well as the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

To start it is important to define what is meant by 'religious' and 'violence.' Here I take a very liberal view of what is considered religious. That is, I will not restrict religion to 'belief' in non-verifiable supernatural agencies and trust in the institutional authorities who espouse these,¹ but instead will consider the vast perceptual reservoir of religious imagination, including, for instance, the propensity to find significance in visions, prophecies, charismatic messengers, paranormal fears and the occult. As for violence, given the enormity of scholarly work on the subject,² it is no longer sufficient to treat only harm to bodies; instead I will try to treat also harm to imaginations. That is, this chapter will consider not only bodily brutalization but also the inducement of fear, dread,

¹ *Pace* to the cognitive scientists of religion, on which see critique in Kitts 2018:72-79.

² See, e.g., Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson, eds., 2013; Hall 2003.

suspicion of outsiders, distrust in an unstable world order, as well as trust in an invisible providence whose aims may not be universally charitable. This miscellany has been deemed the ‘violent imaginary’ by recent scholars.³ The violent imaginary will not be confined to individual fears and dreads, but will be extended to those collective anxieties which express themselves in fevered religious nationalism.

World War I

To appreciate religious violence in the mid to late twentieth century, we must open our discussion with the religious themes that saturated reports of violence in World War I, and set the stage for the movements that followed. Far from being solely an armed conflict between allied nations, World War I resounded with religious associations for fighters on the ground, which echoed into reports to families back home. It is argued that it was the horrors of European trench and gas warfare and the 16 million dead that precipitated widespread ponderings of theodicy⁴—would a just god permit such evil?—and anticipation of an approaching end-times, but end-times ponderings were also bolstered by numerous and astonishing reports of Marian visions, prophetic dreams, and miraculous signs among fighters of various sectarian persuasions, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox.⁵ Biblical tropes such as sacrifice, martyrdom, and judgement day were harnessed by poets⁶ as well as by journalists to transform bloody realities into Christlike triumphs, wherein battlefield sufferings were rendered ‘the red seed of battle, an eternal seed of victory and redemption.’⁷ Although such tropes can be traced back to the Bible, emerging technologies of

³ Summarized in Kitts 2013; see too Aijmer 2000:3-5; Charles Taylor 2002:107.

⁴ <https://www.history.com/news/world-war-i-causes>

⁵ Jenkins 2014:135-155; Davies 2018:1-15.

⁶ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i>

⁷ René Gaëll, cited in Jenkins 2014:103. See too Cabanes on the spread of fantastic propaganda from the front (2020:295-297).

global communication—radio, journalism, film production⁸—propagated such tropes to capture the magnitude of WWI losses. Religious innuendos were not restricted to the biblical; rather ‘conventional belief was accompanied by a vast penumbra of occult and mystical belief that had a wide influence across classes.’⁹ It was a time of delirious religious imagination.

The Third Reich

Delirious religious imagination did not quite wane after World War I, as other kinds of religious inspiration took hold in Germany between the wars. The allure of the Third Reich is typically pinned on political grievances stemming from Germany’s humiliation in the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War in 1919, but the picture is more complex than simply political. Mining Nazi biographies in the Theodore Abel Collection (at the Hoover Institute) and the four volumes commissioned by Rudolf Hess in 1936 (now at the Library of Congress), David Redles finds personal narrative after narrative characterizing the Weimar period (1919-1933) as a time of acute national despair and chiliastic hopes.¹⁰ As Alfred Rosenberg put it in 1924, Germans yearned for a rebirth into ‘a new synthesis of life, a spiritual transformation’¹¹ for which Germany would be the dynamic champion of a ‘world-historical epoch.’¹² Following his mentor Dietrich Eckart, Adolf Hitler offered this spiritual rebirth in the form of a coming Third Reich, a counter to ‘Jewish Bolshevism,’ and he amplified this hope with millenarian rhetoric.¹³ It would be a mistake to dismiss Hitler’s apocalyptic ravings about an *Endkampf* (final battle), *Endsieg* (final victory), and

⁸ Edwards, Penn, and Winter 2020:1-15

⁹ Jenkins 2014:111.

¹⁰ Redles 2005:14-45; 2011.

¹¹ Rosenberg 1924: 3, 21–34.

¹² Said too William Scherer; Redles 2005:46-47.

¹³ Redles 2009.

Endreich (final empire) as incapable in themselves of igniting millenarian hopes, but, despite Hitler's oratorical prowess,¹⁴ the roots of such hopes preexisted his rise to power in the early 1930s.

That is, Hitler came of age surrounded by what today we might call new religious movements, or the 'occult.' We can only skim a few of these movements here, but Redles, Landes, and Kurlander¹⁵ have taken these movements seriously as authentically religious and have described their seductive appeal before and during World War II. By 1909, Hitler was already enamored with the Ariosophy of Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, who prophesized the resurgence of a chosen race of Aryan 'God Men'—Nordic heroes whose racial blood purity it was essential to preserve in order to avoid a civilizational collapse. A number of Lanz's ideas made it into the Nazi party's platform a decade later, such as the 'dangers of racial miscegenation; the monstrous perfidy of the 'Jew'; the deleterious effects of socialism, liberalism, and feminism; and the mystical power of the Indo-European swastika.'¹⁶ Eliminating Jews and sterilizing 'inferior races,' as well as adhering to the arcane religious practices of Nordic warriors of old, were part of Lanz's recipe for revitalizing an Indo-European völkisch community, wherein blond, blue-eyed heroes were to vanquish 'an army of racial sub-humans.'¹⁷ This racially pure society could not be initiated until 'a final battle against the demonic horde of Jewish Bolshevism had been won, once and for all.'¹⁸ The idealization of this conflict between Germans and Jews as a 'hard zero-sum millennial competition between two chosen people'¹⁹ may seem ridiculous to us today, but it was supported by the conditions summarized in the paragraph above, as well as by the racist demagoguery of a number of civic leaders and secret

¹⁴ Redles 2005:108-134, 160.

¹⁵ Redles 2005, 2011; Landes 2011; Kurlander 2017.

¹⁶ Kurlander 2017:4.

¹⁷ Kurlander 2017:4.

¹⁸ Redles 2005:160.

¹⁹ Landes 2011:354.

Ariosophists, and the wide diffusion of the fallacious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which promoted the conspiratorial theory of a multifaceted Jewish power grab over the entire world.²⁰

Another seductive element in this fluid völkisch imaginary was the evolving marriage of pagan and Christian mysticism, which, although it would be hard to find consensus among its various proponents, represented an urge toward a more authentically German religiosity.²¹ Hence figures of legend, such as werewolves and witches, were understood as vestiges of old Indo-European warriors whom the Judeo-Christian status quo had misrepresented as monsters. Even Satan was resurrected by the Nazis as a victim of Jewish propaganda and seen as a righteous rebel against a tyrannical god.²² If there were any aspect of Christian mythology idealized by Hitler, it was the persona of Jesus as the warrior on horseback slaughtering the enemies of the lord in Revelation 19, or the furious messiah overturning the tables of Jewish money-lenders in the four major gospels. It was not the pacifist lamb urging blessings upon the poor and downtrodden.²³ The reconstitution of old celebrations, such as the pagan Christmas, was part of this resurrection of authentically German religiosity, and successful insofar as it generated interest in old legends now used to make remarkable claims of German ingenuity and of victimization by the status quo. A plenum of völkisch-esoteric groups, such as theosophs and anthroposophs, helped to promote a fabled history of the Aryan master race, at the expense, of course, of Jews and other victims to the death camps. In sum, while Nazi violence used to be deemed simply nihilist, explorations of these alternative völkisch dreams and their spell on violent perpetrators show that fantastical imaginings of racial destiny truly did sanction Nazi violence during the Second World War, at least for some military leaders.

²⁰ Landes 2011:368.

²¹ Kurlander 2017:7.

²² Kurlander 2017:170.

²³ Landes 2011:371-372.

Of course, religiously tinged ideologies which played into the Second World War did not stop in Germany. The Italian racial laws promulgated by Mussolini were religiously encoded,²⁴ although the abundance of internment camps elsewhere has not been in apparent need of religious rationalization.²⁵ The extent to which religious sentiment underlay the cultivation of Japanese kamikaze pilots in the Second World War is debated, as where one person sees personal effacement and loyalty to the state as deeply rooted in Shinto ideals, another sees the self-effacement and state loyalty as informed by Buddhism. There is in any case a long history of synthesis of the two.²⁶ Nor have pogroms against ethnic minorities across the world required religious sanction, although brutality can always be exalted by religious icons and ideologies.²⁷

Religious Zionism

Our next religiously inflamed ideology is that of the religious Zionists before, during, and after the partition of Palestine by the United Nations in 1947. Religious Zionism must be distinguished from secular Zionism, which was rooted in nineteenth century disappointments regarding Jewish hopes for European assimilation and in the ambition to establish a secure and protected homeland for Jews. As activists, secular Zionists long opposed the Orthodox Jewish point of view that Jews would return to their ancient homeland only if they followed the 613 biblical commandments and patiently awaited God's messiah to lead them there at the fulfillment of time (the 'messianic redemption'). Religious Zionists, comprising a small minority of Orthodox Jews, fell into two broad camps. One was pragmatic, holding that Orthodox Jews should join with secular Zionists to forge a Jewish state which would protect them from antisemitic hostility. The more

²⁴ <https://primolevicenter.org/events/the-italian-racial-laws/>

²⁵ Stone 2020

²⁶ Victoria 2023:187-214.

²⁷ Mojzes 2009.

religiously consequential one was that of R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), who believed that Jewish settlement of the land was itself the start of the messianic redemption, and that God was acting as a mystical force in history to secure such settlements, whether settlers knew it or not. Opinions on the legitimate use of violence in this process were various: some saw violence as sanctioned only as a defensive response to Arab aggressors, but others saw a mystical sanction in warlike violence insofar as it established victory of the chosen people in the land granted to Abraham in Genesis.

After the horrors of the Holocaust and after Israelis managed to defeat Arabs in the wars of 1948 and 1967, the son of Rabbi Kook, R. Tsevi Yehudah Kook, extended his father's ideas to the political realities of the Israeli state, proclaiming that territories captured in those wars vindicated the messianic program. His group resisted calls to exchange land for peace with Palestinians and in 1976 some of his followers, the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), successfully lobbied the Israeli state to protect scores of Jewish settlements in the captured farmlands. The issue remains contentious, as other religious Israelis support the idea of returning land to the Palestinians and mine biblical texts to support negotiations for peace. Nonetheless, conflict has broken out between these and the more militant factions, who harness biblical and rabbinical texts to their own ends.²⁸

On the other side of this quandary are of course the Palestinians. What began as pan-Arab outrage at the 1947 UN decision to partition Palestine, evolved after 1976 into a narrower Palestinian resistance movement, when Israeli settlements were established on Palestinian farmlands. Religious differences were not initially salient to the conflict and Palestinians to this day are not religiously unified, as roughly two per cent of Palestinians identify as Christian. However, once Palestinian president Yasser Arafat lost control of the various secular resistance movements in the 1990s, including his Fatah (Victory) Party, religious identity became ascendant and to this day marks

²⁸ See Eisen 2023:299-313.

the most conspicuous resistance groups, such as Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), Islamic Jihad, and, in Lebanon, Hezbollah. On the cultural front, the Palestinian Brotherhood, motivated by principles of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, established Muslim schools and other institutions to encourage Muslim virtues and ideological resistance to Israeli dominion.²⁹ The picture remains complicated. Historically the conflict has been marred by notorious terrorist incidents, such as the 1972 slaughter of Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich by a Fatah faction and the 1994 slaughter of Palestinian worshippers at a mosque in Hebron by a Kach party member. Nor did the two intifadas (uprisings of 1987-1993 and 2000-2005) successfully 'shake off' Israeli control, never mind Palestinian outrage about it, although they did seem to bring to the world's attention the plight of Palestinians, at considerable cost.³⁰

Jihadi Salafism

There have been efforts to subsume the Palestinian struggle into a larger, pan-Islamic struggle against the West, but the pan-Islamic movement has its own features. Although pan-Islamism is arguably seeded in the eighteenth century teaching of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and its globalization sponsored by Saudi programs in the later twentieth century,³¹ the most conspicuous spur for twentieth century Islamism was the 1979 Iranian revolution, identified as the first successful challenge of oppressed Muslims to an entrenched authoritarian regime.³² This was followed by the transnational movement of Muslim fighters to aid Afghans in their struggle against Russian communists (1979-1989), a movement which, albeit circuitously, generated the jihadi salafi trend we still see today. The jihadi salafi movement may be characterized as the most puritanical

²⁹ Landau 2012.

³⁰ For a short summary, see Nasrallah (2012).

³¹ Sells 2021.

³² Hafez 2023: 332-348.

proponent of pan-Islamic religious nationalism, distinguishing itself from quietist and other activist movements by its ambition for a transnational Islamic society and its refusal to compromise with secular or even soft Islamic governments.

Let us break down our understanding of the movement to its two primary terms. By salafism is meant the idealization of the first three generations of Muslims who lived through the prophetic mission of Mohammed and his rightly guided companions. Salafists yearn to return contemporary Islamic societies to those golden age mores as captured in the Qur'an and Hadith.³³ As for jihadism, jihadists are inspired by the Qur'an's use of the term jihad, meaning to strive, to take extraordinary pains, the implications of which range textually from peaceful persuasion to military combat. Jihadists tend to privilege jihad as combat, although amongst them they disagree about the political conditions which might legitimate combat. Puritanical sects of jihadi salafism, such as Boko Haram, Daesh, and al Qaeda, advocate forcefully removing political regimes from power unless they embrace several salafi principles, which overlap. These include tawhid, the oneness of a sovereign God and obedience to his laws as captured by the Qur'an and explicated in Hadith; takfir, the permissibility of jihadi salafists to declare some Muslims apostates and thereby to excommunicate or even kill them; al-wala' wal-bara, which is to show absolute loyalty to fellow Muslims and to disassociate from unbelievers; jihad in the way of God against any state that does not apply the jihadi conception of Islamic law; istishhad or martyrdom, which they carefully contrast to the self-immolation clearly proscribed by the Qur'an, by highlighting those Quranic verses which venerate dying in battle without intention to die; al-ta'ifa al-mansoura, which refers to a privileged victorious sect prophesized by the prophet Mohammad as being the only one out of seventy three

³³ Hafez 2021:261.

sects to end up in paradise.³⁴ All of these notions are highly controversial and vigorously disputed by respectable Islamic scholars.

Christian Nationalism in the U.S.

Aside from the Protestant-Catholic “troubles” in Northern Ireland,³⁵ and the Armenian Christian genocide in Anatolia,³⁶ one movement of notorious religious aggression associated with Christianity over the last century is U.S. Christian nationalism. The germ for this ideology is deeply rooted. As Philip Gorski, Julie Ingersoll, and others have argued, the idealization of a divinely chosen nation abiding by biblical principles harks back to the Puritan internalization of the story of Israelites in route to the promised land. The Puritans saw themselves as having figuratively survived slavery, delivery across waters, wandering in the wilderness, the conquest of ‘Canaan,’ and most importantly, as having entered a covenantal relationship with God in the new land.³⁷ The ‘city upon a hill’ (Winthrop’s coinage) was the beginning of God’s kingdom to come on earth.³⁸

Although there is no simple trajectory from the Puritan way of thinking to the reconstructionist voices that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, there are unmistakable echoes. In striving to reconstruct ‘social neo-puritanism’ and espousing Old Testament biblical law as the literal basis for U.S. society—a notion called theonomy³⁹—reconstructionists such as R. J. Rushdoony have sought to eliminate cultural and ideological contamination in the forms of religious pluralism, multiculturalism, and sexual freedom, while embracing, albeit in sometimes coded forms, antisemitism, racism, antiabortion-related violence, and

³⁴ Hafez 2023:332-348

³⁵ On which see Juergensmeyer 2017:40-47; Rapoport 2022:116-118.

³⁶ See Kieser 2020; Levene 2013.

³⁷ Gorski 2017:38-40.

³⁸ Gorski 2017:47-58; Ingersoll 2015:8.

³⁹ Ingersoll 2015:28.

also corporal punishment, although this last reputedly is to be imposed only after society has been transformed by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Reconstructionists seek postmillennial Christian dominion over the country and eventually the world. The doctrine of dominionism is based on the dominion reputedly granted to humankind in Genesis 1:28-29 (and again in 9:1-3), which is construed as an urgent aspiration by postmillennialists who believe that Christians must establish dominion over the earth before Christ is to return, a belief based on Matthew 28:18-20. This relatively positive view of human destiny—that we can help to shape the conditions for Christ to return—is contrasted to the older view of premillennial dispensationalism, which holds that we are now living in the second to final dispensation, or age, which in time will descend into a Revelation-like turmoil and tribulation whereupon Jesus will have to return to establish the kingdom of God.⁴¹ There are different understandings of whether and how many Christians will escape this tribulation, that is, of the extent to which they will be raptured to be with Christ in heaven or will suffer Armageddon first.

Biblically informed accelerationist groups—those who seek to accelerate the refashioning of society to conform with biblical law—come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but overall seem to entertain certain degrees of intolerance for non-Christians in the U.S. Refuting the Christian social gospel of giving, healing and saving all humankind, the most extreme of these groups use biblical verses to disparage accommodation for refugees, immigrants, and people of different origins in favor of Anglo-Saxons, the people ostensibly chosen by God to live in the U.S. promised land. Nativist understandings of New Testament parables include, for instance, the story of the Faith of the Canaanite Woman, where a mother begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Christian nativist Vox Day stresses that Jesus was ‘only sent to the lost sheep of Israel’ (Matthew 15:24), while downplaying that Jesus did grant the Canaanite woman’s request and did heal her daughter (Matthew 15:28). For

⁴⁰ Ingersoll 2015: 213-235; Berry 2020:78.

⁴¹ Ingersoll 2015:27; Lahr 2023:314-331.

Christian nationalists, the story supports ethnonationalism, as does, curiously, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which is construed to show that the Samaritan helped the injured man from the Samaritan's own resources, not from a government handout, and housed him separately from his own kind.⁴² All this is to support kinism, a term used by Andrew Fraser who, with like-minded Ehud Wold, argues that God established prophetic boundaries of the nations that would come from Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah's sons in Genesis, to support the idea that the nations are to be kept apart, and that homogenous kin should reside together.⁴³ In contrast to post- and also pre-millennialists, Fraser argues the amillennialist view that since 70 CE and the fall of the Jewish temple, the promised kingdom of God is already existing in this world without end, and that the charter of covenant creation is in process, although it is with Anglo-Saxons, not Jews. Ethnoreligious realism precludes anything like a Judeo-Christian ecumenical harmony; instead 'Christian faith, kinship, and covenant, taken together, represent the archaic core of Anglo-Saxon bioculture.'⁴⁴

Within this milieu of Anglo-Saxon Christian nationalism, the most infamous nativists are affiliated with Christian Identity, which one might dismiss as ridiculous had it not motivated, at least in part, mass-murderers Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik. Self-identifying as one of the lost tribes of Israel that, once established in Britain, came over with the Mayflower, Identity proponents too promote a pan-Saxonic vision of authentic Christianity shorn of its Jewish tribal roots.⁴⁵ Christian Identity is infamous for its militant anti-Semitic doctrines. For instance, as opposed to the dispensationalist anticipation of the tribulation and rapture of the faithful at the end of time, Christian Identity anticipates an earthly conflagration, an apocalyptic battle between Aryans and Jews

⁴² Berry 2021:44.

⁴³ Berry 2021:52-54.

⁴⁴ Berry 2021:55.

⁴⁵ Michael 2013/2014.

in the U.S., for which Identity followers are urged to be prepared (hence the Identity militia, the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord). If there is to be any Rapture, God will protect Identity followers through it right here on earth.⁴⁶ The most curious of Identity doctrines concerns the two seeds. Only whites are of the seed of Adam (supposedly deduced from Genesis 2:5–7); infused with the divine spirit of God, they must be kept apart from Babylonian contaminants and above all from biracial marriage, itself a capital crime. The seeds for colored races are both pre- and post-Adamic. Based on the sequence of creation in Genesis, the animals created for Adam to name constitute non-white two-legged as well as the variety of four-legged races over which Adam and his descendants were to have dominion. The post-Adamic seed, called the serpent race, is the Jews, deemed the offspring of Satan and Eve who together produced Cain. Miscegenation, as seen in this pairing, as well as in Cain's pairing with a pre-Adamic wife, constitutes original sin. This fear of miscegenation is just one eccentric feature of Christian Identity, and related to the fear of ZOG, the Zionist Occupational Government, an evil cabal of enemies which must be overthrown to preserve the white race. There are other conspiracies as well, such as those concerning the blood of fallen angels among Jews, and the Turko-Mongol origins of Ashkenazic Jews.⁴⁷

Hindu Nationalism

The rise of Hindu nationalism, as with other religious nationalisms, is often pinned on disappointments with secular nationalism, which promoted the idea that a nation was based on a

⁴⁶ Gardell 2003.

⁴⁷ Barkun 1997:104-109; Juergensmeyer 2017:19-23. Further perspectives on the ever-expanding world of alt-right religion in the U.S. can be gleaned from, for instance, Julie Ingersoll's 'America's Holy Trinity: How Conspiracism, Apocalypticism, and Persecution Narratives Set Us Up for Crisis.' *Journal of Religion and Violence* <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv202281698>, and Margo Kitts, 'Contextualizing the Proud Boys: Violence, Misogyny, and Religious Nationalism.' *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.ORE_REL-01066.

social compact of equals rather than on ethnic ties or sacred mandates.⁴⁸ This was the idea embraced by the first Indian national congress (from 1885 to 1964), which initially regarded the Indian nation as encompassing all who happened to live within the borders of British India.⁴⁹ In contrast, Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) recognized the deep pull of religious allegiances in India, and envisioned the Indian nation as ‘a harmonious collection of religious communities all placed on equal footing,’ hoping for a syncretic end-product wherein all Indian creeds—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, animism—were to converge harmoniously.⁵⁰ Neither viewpoint currently prevails. All the historical intricacies are too complex for this short essay,⁵¹ but a few important moments will be sketched.

While there may always be disputes about economic protectionism versus religious identity as motivators for conflict in India, religious differences were very much under discussion as early at the Brahmo Samaj, whose founder Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) defended Vedic Hinduism against the West as more theologically sophisticated than Christianity. His ideas stimulated disputes to come. By emphasizing an unmediated access of the individual atma (essence) to Brahma (the divine essence of existence), Hindu theology was superior to Christianity, which posited intermediaries between the individual and God. Further, based on the age of Vedic texts, Hinduism was almost two millennia older than Christian tradition. The Arya nobles of the Vedic golden age spoke Sanskrit, the mother tongue for all Indo-European languages; by implication, contemporary Indo-European languages are poor derivatives. The religious chauvinism in this early movement is the seed for nationalist passions that followed.

⁴⁸ Juergensmeyer 2021:362.

⁴⁹ Jaffrelot 2007:4.

⁵⁰ Jaffrelot 2007:4.

⁵¹ Cf. Manjari 2019.

Subsequent religio-political groups, such as the Arya Samaj, took this a step further, and posited British colonialism, with its concomitant Christian missionizing, as a threat that Hindu civilization must resist. Those who converted to Christianity were and are urged to undergo shuddhi, a ceremony of purification and reconversion to an authentic Vedic Hindu faith. This shuddhi movement today targets not only Christians, but Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains, understood to be Hindu by birth, but lapsed.⁵² “Scheduled castes,” or Dalits, have been particularly attracted to the shuddhi concept, as undergoing shuddhi elevates their caste status and was designed to discourage conversion to those traditions that denied caste.⁵³

In 1925 some of these ideas gave birth to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, a “character-building” organization for Hindu men, which agitated for cultural war particularly against Muslims. Later, in 1951, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, was born as the RSS’s political arm. Initially secular, the BJP over time has promoted religious ideas, agitating against cow slaughter and the destruction of Hindu temples,⁵⁴ while promoting Hindutva, the elevation of the Hindu Rashtra (nation). Hindutva, an off and on again a dream for Hindu nationalists since Savarkar coined the term in the 1920s, was the catch-all term for the four-pronged markers of Hindu identity: first, origins in a sacred land—Aryavarta, as described in the Vedas; second, race—Hindus were understood to be autochthonous descendants of the Vedic Aryans; third, Hindu religion—although Savarkar apparently viewed Hinduism more as a superimposed national identity than an organic religious product—and, finally, language, which he sometimes referred to as Sanskrit but others as Hindi.⁵⁵ It should be noted that astute historians repudiate any pristine, unitary, age-old national identity in India, observing the complicated penetration of different peoples into the subcontinent

⁵² Jaffrelot 2007:233-254.

⁵³ Jaffrelot 2011:149-150.

⁵⁴ Manjari 2019:208-211.

⁵⁵ Jaffrelot 2007:14-15.

for millennia. Nonetheless, the reinvigoration of ideologies associated with early Vedic texts is heralded by Hindutva proponents today as essential for a nativist rebirth and for protection against rival religious ideologies.

One problem, of course, is the Muslim population, which was seeded in India from approximately the tenth century. One legacy of the British which unwittingly hardened religious tension was the decennial census. In 1921 the census showed that Hindus constituted 68.6 percent of the population, while Muslims constituted 21.7 (now roughly 14 percent⁵⁶). Reifying religious identities, the census led to the question of dominion. Should the majority's viewpoints be woven into the constitution? Should India's Muslims strive for a state of their own? Or was the Indian National Congress right that India should absorb people of all religious affiliations?

This came to a violent crescendo in 1947 when the British left India, whereupon India was partitioned into Muslim majority Pakistan and Bangladesh and Hindu majority India. The partition was catastrophic, as history is witness. Between 200,000 and two million people were killed in interethnic attacks, approximately fifteen million more were displaced, and this is not to mention the crimes against women.⁵⁷ Despite these horrors, Hindus and Muslims remaining in India had little choice but to get along, until the 1980s when, first, the question of maintenance of an elderly woman (Shah Bano) by her separated husband inspired passionate controversy between those who favored Muslim Personal Law versus those who favored universal women's rights. But a second and more significant breaking point was the destruction of the medieval Babri mosque in Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh. Seen by the Hindu nationalists as a symbol of Mughal religious imperialism, the mosque ostensibly was built over the site of a Hindu temple commemorating the birthplace of Lord Ram, hero of the famed Indian epic, the Ramayana. From the late 1980s, agitation by Hindu

⁵⁶ Frøystad 2023:349-368.

⁵⁷ Frøystad 2023-349-368.

nationalists for the mosque's demolition increased until, in 1992, it was destroyed by a mob, which unleashed Muslim-Hindu riots; about 2,000 people died.⁵⁸ Thereafter stereotypes of Muslims as violence-prone fanatics fed the Hindu nationalist narrative regarding the urgency of restoring Hindu sensibilities as well as temples. The BJP, which promotes Hindutva, prevailed in the elections of 2014 and 2019, and religious tensions are still simmering.

Balkan Conflicts

However staggering for the numbers killed and the gruesome nature of the killings, the various wars in the former Yugoslavia over the twentieth century are also staggering for the degree that ethnoreligious loyalties underlay ethnonationalist ones. True motives for nationalist violence can always be disputed, but Paul Mojzes points out that killings based on ethnoreligious identity took place in the first and second Balkan wars (1912, 1913), the Second World War (1941-1945), followed by the series of wars in Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991–1996), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), and the war over Kosovo (1999).⁵⁹ In documenting the later of those wars, those which took place in the 1990s, Michael Sells highlights the powerful concept of Christoslavism, which holds that all ethnic Slavs who were assimilated into Balkan populations since the sixth century and who came to be known as Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Bulgarians, were Christian by nature, and therefore degenerated by conversion to other religions.⁶⁰ During the wars of the 1990s, this was the view of the Serbian Orthodox Christian nationalists, who are accused of 80 to 90 percent of the ethnic cleansings.⁶¹ Muslims, ostensibly converted to Islam at the time of the fourteenth century Ottoman rule of the Balkans, were seen by nationalist Serbs as racially and

⁵⁸ Frøystad 2023:349-368.

⁵⁹ Mojzes 2009:151.

⁶⁰ Sells 2003:312. Readers will recognize the chauvinistic similarity with the aforementioned Hinduva philosophy.

⁶¹ Mojzes 2011:151.

religiously treasonous.⁶² The Croatians, while Catholic and so ostensibly religious kin to the Christian Orthodox Serbs, were seen by Serbs as genocidal by nature, due to their Nazi affiliations during the Second World War and their history of war crimes and death camps. Indeed, the onus of the religious violence in the 1990s is typically placed on the Serbs, in part due to notorious warlords such as Radovan Karadžić, Sloboban Milošević, and Ratko Mladić, but perspectives vary. It is generally ignored that thousands of Serbs fled abroad to avoid serving in Serbian armies.⁶³

It is impossible to understand what happened in the former Yugoslavia without exploring its history and sociology following the Second World War, but we can touch on only a few key moments here. Under the communist governance of Josip Broz Tito (1945-1980), ethnic tensions between Orthodox Christian Serbs, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims were ostensibly suppressed due to Tito's vision of a multiethnic nation built on the model of the Soviet Union's 1936 constitution. The six republics, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, as well as two autonomous provinces established within Serbia, including Kosovo, were regulated under a Communist Politburo, their peoples conceived as comprising a 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' When Tito died, the Communist 'brotherhood and unity' fell apart. Old grievances arose, such as that Tito had failed to recognize the Nazi-inspired atrocities of the Croatians in the Second World War and had failed to visit Croatia's Jasenovac, Europe's third largest concentration camp where up to 100,000 people, the majority Serbs, had died.⁶⁴ Ensuing conflicts and comparative victimologies are discussed below, with a focus first on Croatia, then Bosnia-Herzegovina, and finally Kosovo.

In the 1990s, with Serbs comprising the largest ethnic group of eight million people, and three million living outside the Republic of Serbia, some Serb leaders agitated for ethnic

⁶² Sells 1996:29-60 and 2003:312.

⁶³ Mojzes 2011:24.

⁶⁴ Mojzes 2011:117-119.

consolidation. The argument was that Serbs living in Croatia should be absorbed into greater Serbia and Serbian majority territories within Croatia should be annexed to its eastern neighbor (Serbia). A bloody war broke out from 1991-1996, with death camps and genocidal atrocities on both the Serbian and Croatian sides, amounting to 10,000 deaths.⁶⁵ At the time, the Catholic Croats were pushing for the canonization of Cardinal Stepinac, the archbishop whom Serbs accused of remaining silent regarding the Croat Ustashe atrocities in the Second World War, and with the complicity of other Catholic priests as well.⁶⁶ The beatification of the cardinal was also supported by Catholic pontiff John Paul II. Not surprisingly, all of this was seen by the Orthodox Serbs as evidence of acute religious animus. The Serb effort to annex Croatian territories failed, however, when a Serb withdrawal was negotiated in 1995 by secret agreement between Serbian commander Milošević and Croatian president Tudjman, both of whom came to be accused of war crimes by the Hague (Milošević died in prison; Tudjman was never prosecuted). Mojzes provides an account of which cities were and were not ethnically cleansed and points out that Croatia is today an ethnically cleansed and thoroughly Catholic state.⁶⁷

The bloodiest war of all, however, was in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), initially a multi-ethnic state of Muslim Bosniaks (44 per cent), Orthodox Serbs (33 per cent), Catholic Croats (18 per cent), and mixed marriage Yugoslavs and others (5 per cent). The territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina was coveted by both the Croatian Catholics and Serbian Orthodox Christians, but also of course by its own Bosniak Muslims, themselves championed by perhaps the most enlightened leader of the 1990s, Alija Izetbegović. The population of Bosnia-Herzegovina was generally accepted as the most educated and least religiously identified of the former Yugoslavian states, and the romantic view is that people of different religious affiliations spoke basically the same language and lived in relative

⁶⁵ Mojzes 2011:121.

⁶⁶ Sells 2002:326.

⁶⁷ 2011:133-142.

harmony for generations. But after the Serbian onslaught, and the establishment of infamous death camps (for example, at Srebrenica) and rape camps (for example, at Spa Hotel Vilina Vlas), Itzetbegović sought outside help from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and various mujahideens, while foreign volunteers fought too on the Serbian and Croatian sides. In the end, an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people died between 1992 and 1995, 80 per cent of them Bosniak Muslims.⁶⁸ It was not until the Dayton accords in 1995 that a semi-peace treaty was negotiated, although as late as 2010 the president of Bosnia Herzegovina declared it was still subject to militant forces wishing to partition it.

One difference between Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina is that the two major religio-ethnic groups in Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox Christians and Albanian Muslims, did not speak the same language, did not share culture or religion, and nurtured longstanding narratives of victimization by the other. The history is complicated, ostensibly rooted in the Ottoman Turkish conquest in the fourteenth century, when Albanians converted to Islam in large numbers (ostensibly 70-90 per cent).⁶⁹ By the 1970s and 1980s, Muslims strove to secede either by joining with Muslim Albania or by establishing an independent state. The minority Serbs in Kosovo felt beleaguered. Slobodan Milošević, initially a representative of the Communist government, took up the Serb rallying cry against Muslims in Kosovo in 1987, promoting claims that Muslims were genocidal by nature and were carrying out genocide against Serbs at that very time. At Pristina's Field of Blackbirds, the legendary site of the 1389 battle of Vidovdan, a crowd of 10 million reputedly gathered to hear Milošević promise to protect Serbs by military means. Tensions rose to a fevered pitch that June 28, 1989, the 600th anniversary of the legendary battle at Pristina's Field of Blackbirds, which was commemorated by a ceremonial drama. By ritualized reenactment, an actor

⁶⁸ Mojzes 2011:121.

⁶⁹ See Mojzes 2011:170-251.

playing Prince Lazar, reputedly personifying the Serbian people, was theatrically killed in the battle of Serb revolutionaries against Ottoman rule. As celebrated, Lazar was betrayed by one of his twelve knight disciples and tended in death by the Maiden of Kosovo, a Mary Magdalene figure, at Kosovo Polje, the Kosovar ‘Golgotha.’ The Christlike mimicry was unmistakable. As Michael Sells sees it, during the ritual reenactment of the 1389 celebration, the historical legend and ritualized performance collapsed, and the memories of victimization were revived. The Mountain Wreath, a poetic drama that glorifies the extermination of the ‘Turkifiers,’ was performed to heighten passions against Muslims. To a similar end, the relics of Prince Lazar were ritually transported throughout the area claimed by the greater Serbia, and unveiled at the Gracanica monastery near the Kosovo battle plain.⁷⁰ Serbian clergy aided the hysteria by blessing weapons while militiamen memorized and recited verses of the Mountain Wreath. At the height of the conflict, about 2,000 Albanians were killed, over 40,000 homes were burned, 300,000 to 400,000 people were displaced, and massacres occurred at various cities, including Sarajevo.⁷¹

Rwandan Conflict of 1994

The 1994 conflict in Rwanda is frequently argued to be ethnic and not particularly religious, as both Tutsi and Hutu sides of the conflict were and are today majority Christian of various sects. Yet, in keeping with our broad conception of religious imagination and exploring imagery resonating since precolonial times, we can see the persistence and lethal implications of certain pre-imperial notions traceable to the blocked *imaana* fecundating liquid once understood to emanate from the bodies of Rwandan sacred kings. Christopher Taylor has argued persuasively that undergirding the extraordinary killings—as many as one seventh of the country’s population died —were generative

⁷⁰ Sells 2002:312-313.

⁷¹ Mojzes 2011:179.

schemes regarding Rwandan sacred kingship, the internalized bodily schema of ordinary Rwandans, and by extension the Rwandan polity as a whole.⁷² These schemata were not necessarily top of mind for the genocidal actors, but, as he argues, they did lend patterning to the violence and cruelty perpetrated by individual Rwandans against a 'perceived internal other who threatened, in their imaginary, both their personal integrity and the cosmic order of the state.'⁷³

The mythico-historical animus between the Hutu and Tutsi is reputedly based on historical origins, as some Hutu claim pre-Christian roots in the region, while arguing that the Tutsi arrived a scant four centuries ago and seduced the Hutu into servitude by gifts of cows.⁷⁴ Some of the more creative foundation myths are difficult to reconcile with historians' reconstructions,⁷⁵ but what matters in this case is perception, as well as propaganda, some of it likely congruous with nineteenth and early twentieth century German and Belgian imperial authorities before Rwanda and Burundi became independent states in 1962. Among the most pernicious and still lingering propaganda is the Hamitic hypothesis, a quasi-biblical ideology stemming from John Hanning Speke's 1863 *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, which postulated that the Tutsi, a tall and European-featured people, were descendants of Noah's grandson Ham. According to the biblical story, Ham's father Canaan had dishonored Noah by calling attention to his naked body while he lay drunk. Noah cursed Canaan's son Ham to be the lowest of slaves to Canaan's brothers (Genesis 9:18-28). According to the Hamitic hypothesis, Ham and his descendants became 'cattle-herding 'Asiatic' invaders who migrated south, lost their original language and religion, and darkened through intermarriage.'⁷⁶ Despite the curse, these descendants of biblical personae ostensibly brought

⁷² Christopher Taylor 2002:138, 152.

⁷³ Christopher Taylor 2002:139.

⁷⁴ Malkki 1995:60-68.

⁷⁵ Cf. the history provided by the Penn African Studies Center, <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/rwhistory.htm>; and Uvin 2000:160-161.

⁷⁶ Haynes 2009: 192.

‘civilization’ to Africa, which is why the Belgians reportedly attributed cultural and intellectual superiority to the Tutsi. Historians consider the Tutsi to be a cattle-rearing people who likely migrated south from Ethiopia in successive waves during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while the Hutu are understood to comprise numerous agricultural groups who migrated into fertile Rwanda centuries before. Once the *bazungu*, largely Europeans, conquered Rwanda by force and diplomacy a century ago, they initially supported a Tutsi aristocracy and a fixed class system based on such extraneous frames of reference as Tutsi facial and bodily features: the Tutsi were seen as tall, graceful, and Asiatic, while the Hutu were seen as a medium sized people ‘whose ungainly figures betoken hard toil, and who patiently bow themselves in abject bondage to the later arrived yet ruling race, the Tutsi.’⁷⁷ Despite revolts by the Hutu in the late 1950s to 1960s, the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy, and the departure or change in allegiance on the part of the *bazungu*, the ethnic distinctions were largely reified by mid-century, and remained resonant among participants in the Hutu-Tutsi conflicts, both in Burundi in 1972 (where Tutsi were seen as perpetrators) and in Rwanda in 1994 (where Hutu were seen as perpetrators). Taylor suspects that this historiography of difference formed a substrate for the ideology of Hutu ethnic extremism in 1994.⁷⁸

The most remarkable aspects of the 1994 genocide were the means of torture and death. There were not only impalings, cutting out fetuses, forcing parents to eat children, but also a fixation on border crossings and boundary blockages, whether figurative or literal. The behavior of the Hutu youth group named the Interahamwe (‘to launch together’) reveals a number of underlying schemata which are seen by Taylor as representing centuries old notions about the royal body as a cosmic conduit for fecundating liquids (*imaana*) flowing on the land, and enacting too the symbolic means by which that flow might be obstructed, as well as archaic means for overcoming that obstruction.

⁷⁷ Lemarchand and Martin (1974:6), citing A.F. Duke of Mecklemburg, *In the Heart of Africa* (1910), in Malkki 1995:28. Uvin 2000:161.

⁷⁸ 2002:140.

Traditionally such overcoming was managed by regicide or by shedding sacrificial blood at auspicious boundaries.⁷⁹ As a bipolar field of meaning, the flow/blockage symbolism is said to continue to penetrate contemporary healing practices in Rwanda, just as it penetrated older ritual practices relating to agriculture and national polity. According to Taylor, this bipolar field of meaning underwrote the torturous acts of the Interahamwe.

That is, the Interahamwe 'blocked flow' not only by damming rivers and blocking roads, but by symbolically and concretely preventing the free movement of bodies and of bodily fluids. They inhibited movement by cutting the legs, feet, and Achilles' tendons of Tutsi humans as well as of their cattle and more graphically by castrating men, debreasting women, and impaling both men and women. They simulated the releasing of blocked flow by shedding blood, as in hacking Tutsis to death at roadblocks on major thoroughfares as well as on narrow footpaths.⁸⁰ The bipolar field of meaning of blocked and released flow is argued to have lent ritualized shape to the methods of killing, however subliminally. As Michael Taussig noted, torture and terror can be ritualized art forms and 'far from being spontaneous, *sui generis*, and an abandonment of what are often called the values of civilization, such rites of terror have a deep history deriving power and meaning from those very values.'⁸¹ Of course other concepts, such as the shared and emplaced reality that Bourdieu called *habitus*, might also be invoked to understand the unacknowledged persistence of the alternating thematic of blockage and flow. But the very dramatic actualization of this blockage and flow symbolism among the Interahamwe may be argued to attest to the grip of an ancient ritual imaginary relating to the formalized killings and healings tied to failed kings from whom the flow of *imaana* to the people had ceased.

⁷⁹ Taylor 2013:273.

⁸⁰ Taylor 1999:99-150.

⁸¹ Taussig 1987:133.

Conclusion: Whither Religious Violence?

It is certainly not the case that conflicts over the last 100 years have been more flagrantly religious than in earlier centuries, but the evidently religious dimensions to violent conflict since the First World War are nonetheless exceedingly rich. Despite premodern precursors to contemporary religious violence, technological changes, particularly in terms of weaponry and forms of communication, have made some conflicts more globally conspicuous as well as more ominous.⁸² On the conspicuousness, since the turn of the last century we have seen not only terrorist attacks dramatized on the world stage, but also the symbolic and seemingly religious dimensions to those attacks highlighted by written missive and video. The last instructions of 9/11, for instance, showcased ritual strategies—such as prayers, recitations, purifications—intended to saturate the airplane attacks on the twin towers with religious mission and its perpetrators with the heroic personae of the earliest companions to the Prophet Mohammed.⁸³ On the ominousness of such attacks, one Islamic State beheading video of 2014 was deliberate, somber and ritualized, arguably replicating oath-rituals of the early days of Islam, but also oath-rituals more broadly in that its menacing dimensions were exaggerated and its killing outstandingly gruesome.⁸⁴ However disturbing these ritual reports, it is arguable that they continue a trend we have seen in various iterations already for a century or more and from a variety of religious traditions.⁸⁵ As we saw in the Serbian and Rwandan situations, the ritualized dimension of some of these conflicts would seem aimed at elevating the register of the enmity, of rendering it unmistakable. However, religious enmity itself is hardly new and it would be foolish to presume that it is only rituals that communicate

⁸² Edwards, Penn and Winter 2020.

⁸³ Kitts 2010.

⁸⁴ Kitts 2018, 2020.

⁸⁵ See, e.g. Kitts 2018.

it. Nor would it make sense to presume that this level of religious violence is particularly new; rather, today we seem primed to take notice.

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