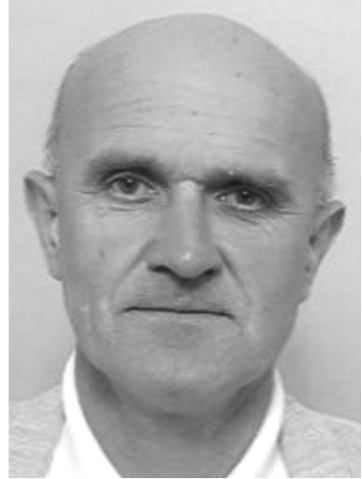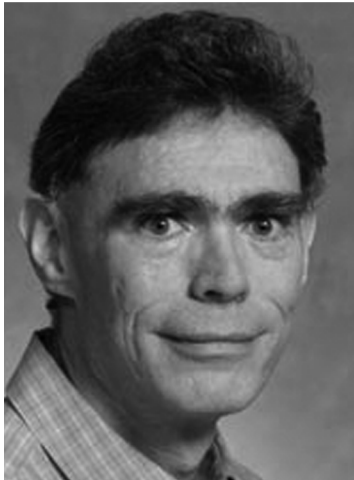Philip Benedict

Nora Berend
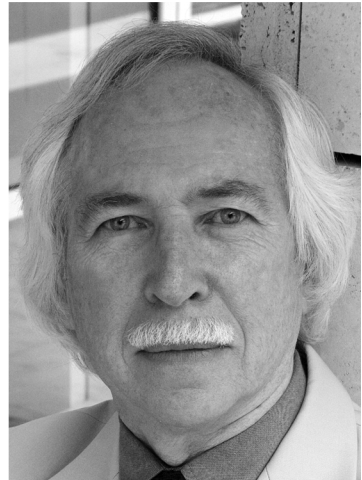

Stephen Ellis

Jeffrey Kaplan

Ussama Makdisi

Jack Miles

AHR *Conversation:*
Religious Identities and Violence

PARTICIPANTS:

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JEFFREY KAPLAN, USSAMA MAKDISI, and JACK MILES

There are few topics that challenge the analytical capabilities of historians more than religion and violence. When the two subjects are combined, the challenge is only increased. How do historians, whether secular-minded or believers, discuss the often extreme, obscure, or alien manifestations of religious belief? How do we understand violence in its many forms without lapsing into explanations that merely evoke the irrational? And how should we explain religiously motivated violence—or violence that seems to be inspired by religious beliefs or authorities?

These and other questions are at the heart of this AHR *Conversation on "Religious Identities and Violence." Although the discussion, for obvious reasons, often turned to the contemporary situation in the Middle East, the participants were careful to draw from their knowledge of past historical experience. Most insistently, they warned against taking either religion or religious violence out of its historical context and treating it like a timeless, isolated phenomenon. The participants are Philip Benedict, an early modern European historian who has written widely on Calvinism and the Wars of Religion; Nora Berend, a medievalist who specializes in the religious history of Hungary and Eastern Europe more generally; Stephen Ellis, a historian of modern Africa who has written on religion and politics; Jeffrey Kaplan, who has published on religion and violence from a global perspective; Ussama Makdisi, a scholar of Ottoman and Arab history who has also written on American involvement in the Middle East; and Jack Miles, a journalist and scholar with wide knowledge of religion and religious affairs. The Conversation took place over the summer and fall of 2007.*

AHR Editor: To discuss the connections between religion and violence is to open up a very large territory for our consideration. To start, it might be best to confront an issue that often arises when the topic is discussed, especially in more public venues. This is the assumption that religious violence is really not fundamentally about religion—that other interests, claims, or identities of an economic, ethnic, political, or even psychological nature are at stake. What this assumption seems to imply is that religion can be reduced or referred to something else, some other layer of identity or interest. And yet in recent years, historians and social scientists have clearly become more open to what we might call the "irreducibility" of religion as an identity

and affiliation. So my first question relates precisely to this issue: How should we think of religion in relationship to other social identities? How "irreducible" is it?

Philip Benedict: I certainly endorse the idea that in most situations in medieval and early modern Europe, religious violence is "really" about religion. This may be less true of more recent times. I wonder, however, how consistently useful it is to think of religion as a social identity in medieval and early modern Europe. Situations certainly existed in which people assigned religious labels to one another and/or thought of themselves as part of a religious group, most obviously in religious borderlands or in regions where multiple religious groups lived alongside one another. But the insight first provided by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and subsequently refined by a number of historians, namely that it was only over the course of the late Middle Ages, and especially in the wake of the Reformation, that the concept of "religion" took on something approaching its modern sense of an organized set of beliefs and practices about the divine rather than an attitude of piety toward the gods, is an important one to keep in mind.[1] And while it is certainly true that many forms of religious violence in late medieval or early modern Europe were directed against neighbors assigned some fixed label such as "Jews," "Huguenots," or "Papists," incidents of religious violence may have been especially likely to occur at moments when new beliefs were spreading into an area and the religious situation was far too fluid to be neatly defined. So when public scenes of disrespect to the consecrated host sparked violent Catholic retaliation in France around 1560, the violence was motivated by outrage against those so depraved as to attack God's body, but the clash cannot be usefully analyzed as one between two groups with fixed social identities. The violence was all about rival beliefs and their public manifestation and defense—a clear matter of "religion" as a symbolic system. To go from there to speaking of religion as an irreducible identity is a linguistic step it probably isn't useful to take.

Stephen Ellis: Religion varies from one society to another, so something that we consider today as belonging to the sphere of religion may not have been thought of that way by our ancestors. However, one thing that seems to be common to religion in every historical time and place is the perception of an invisible world that exists alongside the visible one. Sometimes the invisible world is even thought to suffuse the visible world. A person brought up in such an intellectual environment is likely to develop a distinctive view of the world in which events or trends that have an obvious material explanation—a road accident, say, caused by a vehicle with faulty brakes—may be considered also to have a cause in the invisible world. When it comes to trends that affect an entire society, such as a war, a plague, or a famine, people typically develop a rather dense explanation that includes political, economic, and religious elements. Hence the perception by intelligent people, quite capable of sophisticated analysis, that a plague not only might be caused by germs, but might have a religious explanation as well. In this sense, historians are well advised to take the

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[1] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York, 1963); Peter Biller, "Words and the Medieval Notion of 'Religion,'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 351–369.

religious thought of other times and places seriously. That does not exclude being fully aware of political operations, for example by holders of political power who may deliberately invoke religious arguments or religious institutions in the service of a policy aimed at controlling material resources. Perhaps this provides us with a way to think about religious identity as well. The concept of a religious identity is clearly one that has a connection to politics, in the sense of the manipulation of control over resources. In today's world, it is generally possible to distinguish the religious and political aspects of conflicts in which religious identity appears to play a key role. It may well be that in certain societies in the past, however, such a distinction between religion and politics was less easily thinkable.

Nora Berend: I agree that it is unhelpful to talk about "irreducible" religious identity. This is not the same as saying that religious identity is necessarily a cover for other interests or motives. Just as religion is part of society, so is religious identity part of social identity.[2] It is interrelated with other aspects of identity rather than being a discrete entity. Religion as a phenomenon as well as particular religions changed over time. For example, as Christianity spread with the conversion of whole societies, it also adapted to the societies it penetrated. Scholars even talk about the Germanization of early medieval Christianity to highlight the scale of the changes linked to the adaptation of Christianity to new populations.[3] What was accepted and what was not (therefore what was "Christian") was continuously redefined. Examples include but are not restricted to dietary regulations, the emergence of new tenets and practices such as the cult of saints, and new organizational structures such as centralization under the papacy.[4] Christianity also split into a number of competing branches (Catholicism and so-called "heresies," then Protestantism and so on), each laying claim to be the "true" Christianity. So the content of religious identity correlates with the social context: social customs, which differ radically in different periods, are part of religious identity. An early medieval monk could utter ritual curses and beat the relics of a saint to remind the saint of his duty to protect the community that looked after the relic; in the fourteenth century, a controversy developed over whether it is heretical to claim that Christ lived in complete poverty.[5] The Christian identity of many earlier people has often been called into question by modern Christians whose criteria are so different; yet both identified themselves as Christians. Religion therefore is always part of a whole society, and religious identity is inseparable from the social context.

[2] See, e.g., Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1968; repr., New York, 1990).

[3] James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York, 1994).

[4] Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (1990; repr., Cambridge, 1997); Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (Malden, Mass., 1997).

[5] Lester K. Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); Patrick Geary, "Humiliation of Saints," in Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (1983; repr., Cambridge, 1987), 123–140; Patrick Nold, *Pope John XXII and His Franciscan Cardinal: Bertrand de la Tour and the Apostolic Poverty Controversy* (Oxford, 2003).

I also agree that historically types of group identity changed, but I would like to take issue with the idea that it may not be useful to think of religion as a social identity in the Middle Ages. The meaning of "religion" certainly changed over time, since modifications in religion reflect social transformation, but socially constructed religious identity existed in the Middle Ages just as much as, say, in the nineteenth century, even if in different forms. Religious identity may dominate or be more or less important compared to other social identities, but there is no single model even within one period or society. Medieval society was not uniformly religious; the "Christian Middle Ages" is a modern concept.[6] For example, wars in medieval Iberia started out as opportunistic warfare not just between Christians and Muslims, but also between adherents of either religion. Over the course of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, this warfare was redefined as a religious war, the *Reconquista*. Even though realities continued to be more complex and both war and alliances cut across the religious divide, the rhetoric increasingly focused on a just war against the enemies of the faith.[7] Complex social institutions such as military orders were established around this idea; a member of such an order had a religious identity, but I do not think one could argue that this was not a social identity. Any formulation of religious identity was also open to competing interpretations. For example, in the thirteenth century, popes and kings both subscribed to the idea that kings were defenders of Christendom, but they had rather different ideas about what this meant.[8]

Jack Miles: The cover photograph in today's *Los Angeles Times* [June 15, 2007] shows a Hamas jihadi in the familiar black stocking mask, holding a gun in one hand and a Qur'an in the other, standing atop a desk in the Gaza headquarters of the Preventive Security Service, one of four security agencies run by Fatah. There can be little doubt that this man believes his fight is about Islam, but do we?

I sense that those at this electronic table do not share this view. Philip Benedict endorses the idea "that in most situations in medieval and early modern Europe, religious violence is 'really' about religion." He adds the qualification "This may be less true of more recent times." Can we agree, though, that if it was true once, it is possible in principle and may be true again in a given situation?

While writing on the Balkans for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1990s, I was struck by one way in which this conflict differed from that in Northern Ireland, with which at the time a good many commentators compared it. I had some familiarity with the Northern Ireland conflict through members of my extended family who live there. (A third cousin of mine was interned by the British.) What struck me was that in virtually every case of a Serb attack on a Muslim town in Bosnia, the first two acts

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[6] Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Religion, Folklore and Society in the Medieval West," in Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein, eds., *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Malden, Mass., 1998), 376–387.

[7] The chronology of the "invention" of the *Reconquista* and its equation with crusading is debated; see, e.g., Peter Linehan, *History and the Historians of Medieval Spain* (Oxford, 1993), chap. 4; Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia, Pa. 2003).

[8] Nora Berend, "Défense de la Chrétienté et naissance d'une identité: Hongrie, Pologne et péninsule Ibérique au Moyen Âge," *Annales HSS* 5 (September–October 2003): 1009–1027.

of the invaders were to burn down the mosque, and if there was a library or archive, to burn that down as well. By contrast, the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland never burned down each other's churches, schools, or libraries. Pubs were the more usual target. Closer to that conflict, moreover, one only sometimes heard the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" used as prime designators. More often, one heard of Unionists (or Loyalists) and Nationalists (or Republicans). This may surprise inasmuch as this conflict at least to some extent has continued the early modern wars of religion that Philip Benedict alludes to. Perhaps by the time of the Act of Union, colonialist wealth mattered rather more than religion, but religion surely mattered to Cromwell in an earlier stage of the conflict. In any case, by the late twentieth century, we were dealing with irredentist nationalism vs. residual colonialism rather than with religion, and the identities of the combatants were only secondarily established by their religious affiliation.

So, then, sometimes yes and sometimes no. Hamas, with its operative standing on the Gaza desk, is engaged in genuine religious warfare. Sunnis and Shiʿas in Iraq, who bomb each other's mosques and funerals, would seem to be engaged in genuine religious warfare as well. And how do we determine the difference? Just what is it that we encounter when we encounter religion in a form that cannot be reduced to some more tangible consideration such as territory?

I submit that there are two elements: one lateral or social, the other vertical or transcendent. As to the social element, what we now call religion is what the Western world first called church. The church was a social novelty in that it functioned rather as an ethnic group (the New Israel) but had a creedal rather than genealogical criterion for membership. One had to join it as one did not have to join either Greco-Roman international polytheism or any of the empire's national blends of ethnicity and myth. This social construct, though "religion" was not the word for it at its creation, remains close to what is meant by "a" religion not just in the West but wherever Western influence has been strongly felt. It is the combination of this social construct with transcendence—the intractable "invisibility" factor to which Stephen Ellis alludes—that creates the matrix for religious violence. Without the transcendence, martyrdom would never seem worth it. Without the social construct, martyrdom would be as unthreatening and inconsequential as private suicide.

Ussama Makdisi: To suggest that religion is an "irreducible" identity strikes me as a blunt response to the relatively recent call to take religion or religious thought "seriously." I think we all agree that religious identities are complex and have changed enormously over time, and that it is unhelpful to think of religion in essentialist terms. In other words, the problem we seem to be facing is not so much to analyze religious identity as a dynamic manifestation of a specific context (which we in this group appear to encourage). Rather, the problem seems to be whether we should attempt to bridge the gap that exists between those who believe in one religiously exclusivist way of viewing the world and those who believe in a secular view of the world, and also between those who espouse narrow orthodoxies and those who embrace a wider ecumenism. As to the point that was made by Philip Benedict, that

religious violence in the medieval world was—perhaps—more about religion than the "more recent times," I am not sure. Religious violence in the modern world does, of course, depend on the context as much today as it did in medieval history. But to suggest, as does Jack Miles, that Hamas is "engaged in genuine religious warfare" is, I think, to the miss the point about Hamas completely: they are engaged in political warfare, in a struggle for power and a form of liberation, in which religion, or religious idiom, is but one of several important strands that constitute Palestinian Islamist identity. My point is that they are as aware of this as we are. Certainly, we cannot and should not ignore religion. But the Qurʾan held aloft by the Hamas fighter to which Jack refers is simply one picture, illustrative more of the choice of an American newspaper editor than of the situation on the ground in Gaza. The picture was probably chosen because the fighter was holding a Qurʾan, whereas the vast majority of images of Hamas fighters conveyed in the Arab media that I am following here in Beirut do not have them holding up Qurʾans. This brings up a more general point: Why is it that when we are talking about the Middle East, and the Islamic world more generally, we privilege the "religious" over the far more (or at least equally) obvious and plausible secular factors and explanations? Why do we ignore the fact that what is at stake in Gaza, for example, has virtually nothing to do with "religion" or "Islam" in any abstract or textual sense, and far more to do with nationalism, colonialism, occupation, racism, and corruption? Why, in other words, do we see the "medieval" when it comes to the Middle East, and ascribe to it an unbroken continuity with its medieval past, whereas we don't when it comes to the West?

Jeffrey Kaplan: Some years ago, I taught at the University of Helsinki. Wonderful place!! I took with me the assumption, drilled into me as orthodoxy in the course of my education, that by the eighteenth century, a watershed had occurred in the human psyche. The world had been gradually "demagicalized" to the extent that secularity was at least an option—that causation could be accepted as accidental and that events might conceivably be random and unrelated. At this time, I envisioned something along the lines of the first edition of Norman Cohn's description of bewildered urban migrants in his *Pursuit of the Millennium*, men who would literally be unable to function if their religion-centered zeitgeist were significantly disturbed.[9] In Helsinki, though, I came to know a fellow University of Chicago alum, an Assyriologist by trade, who was engaged in a project of translating and digitizing existing fragments of Assyrian texts. He took the opposite view, holding that given sufficient time to adapt to technological change, an Assyrian could probably successfully make the transition from his own time to the modern world. As proof, my colleague offered an impressive number of letters, each at the beginning of the text invoking the gods with great piety, but many revealing the same streaks of cynicism, indifference, or doubt that would be familiar to each of us in our own everyday lives. It took many evenings and untold liters of beer for me to come around to his view, but my faith in the academic apprehensions of the religious certainties of others was never quite the same again. Especially if those others were in distant historical ep-

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[9] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. and expanded ed. (London, 1970).

ochs or cultural milieus. Religion, as Jack Miles notes, is certainly a motive force in history, but is certainly seen in quite different ways by co-religionists, or even by members of seemingly tightly knit radical or combatant groups. Their actions are, in the view of the actors, certainly categorized as "religious" (although the Islamic doctrine of "tawhid" rather rounds the circle by sacralizing all aspects of life—political, economic, social, etc.). And from the perspective of the outside observer, it would be hard to argue with this contention. It is all "religion," after all. It has textual sources, and its dreams and visions are shaped by the hermeneutical legerdemain of religious authorities freely chosen by each believer. Of course, the texts may be retrieved quite selectively, and the formal religious training of those doing the retrieval may be—in the eyes of more orthodox/conservative/moderate/co-opted or simply Westoxicated Muslims (to borrow from Jalal Al-e Ahmad)—quite wanting.[10] But in all cases, what we are seeing is ineluctably and authentically religious production and is understood as such by the faithful of all ideological hues.

We are, of course, speaking at a very high level of generality. What I find of greater fascination than whether the wave of violence we are experiencing is perceived by its perpetrators as religious is how the precise tone and content of the religious vision appears to the individual actor. From the textual complexities of the eschatological visions written of by religious scholars on one end of the spectrum, to the simple vision of sweet-breasted huris among flowing springs and scented gardens on the other end of the spectrum, to the vast and highly individualized "stuff of dreams" in between these two extremes—both visions are authentically religious, but beyond this observation, they can hardly be said to greatly resemble each other.

The Editor's question, in sum, should remind us of the necessity of approaching the topic of religious violence with great sensitivity to the insider/outsider dimensions of the issue. I hope that our discussion will, to the best of our ability, highlight both— bringing to bear our own scholarly approaches, but with a sensitivity to the authenticity of the lived experience of those whose lives we wish to better apprehend through our interchange.

AHR Editor: Several different positions have already been staked out in this conversation, and I would like to keep them in play while moving on. My own formulation regarding religion as an "irreducible" identity has been contested by several of you. The question was meant to suggest the specificity or even singularity of religious identity, which I believe most of us recognize, although most of us would be quick to qualify this assertion by noting, as several of you have, the interrelatedness of *all* identities. Stephen Ellis, however, has reminded us of the otherworldly aspect of religion for many throughout history, suggesting a distinctiveness that cannot easily be compared or related to other experiences. Nora Berend has queried Philip Benedict's claim that religion as an identity was an early modern phenomenon, pointing to "socially constructed religious identity . . . in the Middle Ages." Jack Miles, for his part, wonders about Philip's skeptical aside regarding the link between religion and violence in more recent times. Ussama Makdisi's comment challenges

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[10] Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* [*Weststruckness*] (Costa Mesa, Calif., 1997).

Jack's assumption that religion is at the heart of even "jihadist" militancy. Finally, Jeffrey Kaplan implicitly challenges us all to think about the subjective, interior aspect of religious experience (where, I might add, the "irreducible" might be relevant as a self-description).

A common theme in most of these comments is the historicity of religion. Indeed, Jeffrey's comment introduces, only to dismiss, the notion of the Enlightenment as an instrument of secularization, which still leaves us with the question of how religion has changed and can change according to context, period, and culture. How do we understand the ebb and flow, the changing strength of religion as having a more or less fundamental purchase on people's identity across time? Ussama's comment should force us to examine our oft-voiced privileging of the "religious," as opposed to other interests and identities, when thinking about the Middle East or Islam. Do we likewise too easily do the same when thinking about the more distant past? And what might this imply about our analytical capacity to deal with "religion"?

Jack Miles: Let me begin by conceding the broad legitimacy of the question but then proceed to challenge the validity of what it assumes about the present moment. The late Wilfred Cantwell Smith once wrote, "Believers talk about God. Unbelievers talk about religion." Historians are, by this definition, all unbelievers. The grounds for their unbelief are methodological and surely familiar to the participants in this conversation. Though some believe that they need be unbelievers only when functioning as historians, even then they may often look on the past as "another country" where—just as in some actual, contemporary other countries—God or the gods are invoked as they never are by Western historians themselves. Moreover, the resort to religion as an explanatory hypothesis in these temporally or culturally remote locations might seem, in principle, to come more readily to hand than it does when explaining more proximate locations. I think here of the old archaeologist's advice that when you can't figure out what a building is for, call it a temple.

That said, I do not believe that, in fact, when dealing with the contemporary Middle East or with the ummah as a whole, Western historians, journalists, or policymakers have readier recourse to Islam as an explanation than they have, say, to Christianity when dealing with Europe or the United States. In fact, I believe the opposite to be the case. What we see is a refusal to honor as authentic the invocations of God or religion offered in these locations as the grounds for action, and an insistence on looking past such invocations to the "real" grounds that the benighted actors themselves fail to grasp.

Let me offer a rather humble illustration. The September–October 2006 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* includes a review essay by Bill Berkeley entitled "Know Thine Enemy: A Rash of New Books by Persian Writers Offer the West a Chance to Re-Imagine Iran." Berkeley has no pronounced thesis. His goal is to introduce complexity rather than eliminate it. But here are the "pull quotes"—words lifted from the text of the article and printed in red block letters by the editor to give the gist and attract the reader: (1) "Are the ruling mullahs truly religious, or do they

merely use religion for power?" (2) "To understand Iranian politics, the book to read is not the Koran but Machiavelli." (3) "For all its bluster, most experts on Iran insist, the Iranian leadership is not irrational." The import of the essay is, ultimately, to eliminate Islam as even one explanatory factor among many and to seek explanation without remainder in considerations of money and power. I submit that Berkeley's procedure is typical of contemporary journalism about Islam and consonant with much "normal history," in which religion—far from being privileged—is marginalized. The marginalization typically comes about by the translation of religious motivations into nonreligious ones.

What is true of journalism is true as well of political policy. Early in the Iraq War, Attorney-General John Ashcroft said, "This is not a religious war. This is a freedom war." President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were relentless in invoking the antinomies of freedom/oppression and democracy/tyranny rather than ever employing the language of religion/irreligion, much less of Christian/heathen. The factors they considered when forming policy were, like those in Berkeley's review essay, resolutely secular. They never expected that in administering occupied Iraq, they would find themselves forced to defer to the judgment of an Ayatollah Ali Sistani when scheduling Iraq's first post-invasion elections. To extend such deference in the United States to any American Christian leader would be unthinkable. (Recall the easy indifference of the administration to declared opposition to the invasion by all Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant leadership, including that of the Methodist and Episcopal denominations to which the president and his wife owe nominal allegiance.) At the level of policy formation, this "methodological atheism," this refusal as a matter of policy to regard Iraq as the scene of past and possibly of future religious strife, this determination to conceive that country ("this young democracy") as and only as the scene of past tyranny and future freedom—all this has cost the world dearly.

And it does not seem to be changing under the impact of impending defeat. Who can forget Jeff Stein's op-ed in the *New York Times*, "Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?"[11] In the very recent past, the word "theology" was popular slang for inconsequential quibbling or meaningless theorizing. I submit that that attitude, rather than any privileging of religion in general or Islam in particular, continues to define the discourse of our day. Perhaps at the deepest level, the bias—shared by historians, journalists, and policymakers—is toward material explanation over ideological. To be sure, *cui bono* is a consideration always worth raising. The study of classical antiquity has been invigorated by a determination to look for self-interested, material explanations for, e.g., the spread of Christianity around the Roman Empire. Carried to an extreme, however, the hermeneutic of suspicion toward all invocations of an ideal, not just religious invocations, can end in a culturally induced blindness to the sometimes very material consequences of adherence to an ideal. To speak more plainly, sometimes people really mean it; and when they do, it pays to take them seriously.

[11] Jeff Stein, "Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?" *New York Times*, October 17, 2006.

Nora Berend: It is true that there is a fairly pervasive trend to depict people in past societies as more at the mercy of the environment and having less control over their lives and therefore being more religious than men and women in the present. Although it is easy to pick holes in this claim, it is not entirely without merit, but I think it would be more useful to shift the line of argument. Rather than asking if people in the past were more religious (or more sincere in their religiosity), we should focus on the loss of power for religious institutions created by the rise of mass secularization. Such secularization is indeed a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of society. In analyzing the ebb and flow of the strength of religion in determining people's identities, instead of referring to more religiosity in the past, less in the present, we should introduce some distinctions, most crucially between the issues of the sincerity of personal beliefs, on the one hand, and the political-institutional context, on the other hand. In other words, we should distinguish between personal beliefs, which in any period may be sincere or insincere, and the vested interest of religious institutions. The latter will obviously be a much stronger determinant of at least outward conformity in states based on institutional religious power than in secular states.

I agree with Jack that "sometimes people really mean it," but in that case we still need to analyze why they do. Do they "mean it" more in societies governed by religious institutions? To complicate the picture, I do not think that strong personal religiosity necessarily corresponds to the strong power of religious institutions in a society. It is very helpful to have recourse to analytical categories from sociology and social scientists here, whether we think of religion as an answer to death or more generally as a system of compensators. As Stark and Bainbridge pointed out, as long as people are unable to get all the rewards they want, religion will continue; while secularization erodes the power of established denominations, it opens the way for sects and cults, and I think in part this also explains fundamentalist resurgence.[12]

A person's religious beliefs or lack of them is surely the result of a complex web of factors: socialization, fashion, conformity to or on the contrary rebellion against the norm (whether that norm is religious or secular in a given society), rebellion against the previous generation's standards, social and peer pressure, religious or secular prescriptions and their enforcement by a state or political power. The domination of religious institutions, tied to political and economic interests, is an interrelated but distinct matter. Such domination may lead people sincerely to believe the religious tenets propagated by these religious institutions and specialists, but there are historical moments when we can clearly distinguish how the interests of the institutions determined social conformity. For example, the conversion of central and northern Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries proceeded mainly from above. Rulers, together with ecclesiastics, made sure of the conformity of the population to Christian regulations. Laws were issued to this effect, which focused on behavior: for example, people had to go to mass on Sundays and listen without murmuring,

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[12] Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996).

because otherwise they were flogged.[13] The emphasis was not on the sincerity of belief, but on conformity, and of course this conformity can be a powerful means of making societies "religious." Here is a final example that brings together these lines of analysis and demonstrates the potential complexity of analyzing "religion." A Christian woman in medieval Spain swore that she would rather become a Muslim than marry the man she was promised to. The case went all the way to the papal court, because her words were taken to constitute a binding oath, which would have led to her apostasy. How "religious" was this woman? Did she "mean it," or was she simply very angry? The Catholic Church, the religious institution that provided a basic framework for society at the time, took her words at face value as concerning her willingness to leave the Christian religion. This set the institutional machinery in motion. In a secular society, the same words might have been treated as a joke, while the woman's religious beliefs might have been just as sincere or insincere in either type of society.

Philip Benedict: Big questions! Rather than responding directly to all of the Editor's three questions, I'd like to try to nudge the conversation in another direction. A common theme in the first round of comments, as mentioned, was the historicity of religion. What this means to me is that as we try to understand violence in the name of religion, or conflicts where religious identities are one of the sets of labels to distinguish friend from foe that are in play between the contending sides—and I assume that the purpose of this conversation is to advance that enterprise—we should try to avoid talking about "religion" as a thing. We need to talk about different specific religions at different specific moments in time, and more precisely yet about the beliefs and currents within these religions at any given moment. Religious violence does not ebb and flow because religion *en bloc* has more or less hold on people. It ebbs and flows in relation to the degree of credence and legitimacy accorded specific religious beliefs that justify force to defend something considered sacred, and in relation to the frequency with which situations arise in which believers feel that they are compelled to fight for these beliefs. As I have written in a recent essay, "to understand the motivations of religious conflict, it is necessary to unpack the black box we label 'religion' and identify the specific beliefs or attitudes that particularly encouraged or discouraged people to act in ways that provoked conflict."[14] It is equally important to understand the circumstances in which religious conflicts are particularly likely to arise. This is the approach adopted by Norman Housley, for instance, in his excellent *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400–1536*, which seeks to identify, first, the situations in this period in which religious warfare was particularly likely to arise (in the borderlands between Christianity and Islam; in the conflicts touched off by the Hussite movement in Bohemia), and then the beliefs, tropes, and practices that accompanied and legitimated it (crusading bulls and symbols, sectarian apocalypticism, national messianism, the conviction that defending doctrinal truth against external assault was one of the fundamental ends of secular

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[13] Nora Berend, ed., *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus', c. 900–1200* (Cambridge, 2007).

[14] Philip Benedict, "Religion and Politics in the European Struggle for Stability, 1500–1700," in Philip Benedict and Myron Gutmann, eds., *Early Modern Europe: From Crisis to Stability* (Newark, Del., 2005), 128.

government).[15] The Reformation, in turn, would bring new situations where religious violence was particularly likely to erupt, notably those moments when Protestant ideas first began to spread widely within communities, especially communities that defined themselves to a significant degree as sacral communities. At the same time, it led, for complex reasons, to the gradual abandonment of other practices that once widely justified religious violence, most surprisingly the issuing of crusading bulls for conflicts against Christian heretics, which rarely accompanied sixteenth-century wars between Catholics and Protestants and disappeared for good after 1600.

I have the feeling from our first round that all the participants in this discussion would pretty much agree with this analytical approach. (Dissent, of course, is welcome!) If I'm right, then it seems to me that our conversation can best advance by identifying specific beliefs that have justified violence in the name of defending the sacred within different eras and religions and tracing how and why they either gained or lost persuasive power over time. It might also help to identify the situations in which religious violence tended/tends to arise within different civilizations and parts of the globe and what might account for changes in the frequency with which such situations present themselves across the centuries. Of course, to do this, we also need to have some useful working definition of what does and doesn't constitute a religious war or religious riot. On that last, I found Jack Miles's comparative observation about the Northern Irish and Bosnian situation—namely that in the former region places of worship were rarely objects of attack, while in the latter they were often the first places attacked—most illuminating, and perhaps also illustrative of a broader analytical point worth making. One helpful approach to labeling something as religious violence is phenomenological: to look at the character of the violence and the people and objects singled out for attack.

In early modern European religious violence, churches were often targets of the violence. They might be attacked in several ways. One recurring pattern involves the attempted destruction of entire churches, whether by fire or by sack. In seventeenth-century France, this was often done in triumph when the Protestants lost their rights to worship in a given community, or else, earlier in the century, as a warning that a Protestant temple was not wanted in a predominantly Catholic community or that a Catholic religious order was not wanted in a predominantly Protestant community. The message here was: you are not a legitimate part of our community. Another rite of violence was the attack on specific features of church decoration or furnishing: altar rails in the English Revolution, images of saints within and without churches at the initial moment of the Reformation or during conflicts like the French Wars of Religion. The message here was: these specific objects are contrary to the pure worship of God and must be purged from our churches. The attacks on churches or mosques in Bosnia would seem clearly to be sending the first message, the much-publicized Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan perhaps the second. In the internal conflicts in Palestine right now, are places of worship, religious symbols, or clerics being attacked with any regularity? If not, then Ussama Makdisi's point that publishing a photo of a Hamas fighter holding up a

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[15] Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400–1536* (Oxford, 2002).

Qurʾan tells us more about the choices of American editors than Hamas militants is spot on. But that is not to say that the same point could be made if an American newspaper showed a member of a Sunni or Shiʿite militia unit in Iraq holding up a Qurʾan. There shrines are obviously one prime target of attack. Why? In what ways are they attacked, and what does that tell us about this conflict?

My initial suggestion that conflicts often classified as religious in medieval and early modern times may more often really have been about religion than those of more modern times was a talking point that I threw out on the basis of a little reading that I did about the Northern Irish and Balkan conflicts a few years ago when I offered a seminar on religious wars. I was more struck then by the differences between these conflicts and the French Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century than by the similarities. Obviously this is the kind of broad hypothesis that needs to be tested and refined by the careful investigation of specific cases, and I'm delighted to see others challenging and refining it. Perhaps we can keep on refining it in a comparative manner by asking about the contemporary Middle East as well: How often in different conflicts are religious buildings or holy places the objects of attack? What are the means of attack and the specific features of the places that are targeted? Asking specific questions like these might be one useful way of continuing the conversation across religious and chronological borders without getting tied up in self-reflexive knots about why the Middle East or the Middle Ages are so often figured as religious.

AHR Editor: I'd like to push back a bit on Philip's laudable attempt to "nudge" the conversation forward into the topic of religious violence per se—which in fact I planned to be the focus of our next round. But before we confront this matter directly, I wanted to give us all a chance to comment on what I still believe—*pace* Philip—to be a legitimate analytical concern. That is, the question regarding the persistence or waning of "religion" in various societies across time and cultures. I'm assuming that we largely reject what we might call a modernization view of this dynamic, whereby it is posited that religion will recede as modernity progresses. But do we then, as seems to be implied by Philip's impatience with my formulation, entirely dismiss notions of development, tradition, or culture as possible bearers of (or obstacles to) religious commitment? This may be to force some of you to a level of generalization that induces intellectual discomfort. And I certainly would agree that we should be careful about resorting to facile generalities that cannot possibly be tested. But I think the issue is legitimate, in part because it informs, often unthinkingly, the approach of many, including many historians. More particularly, it seems relevant when trying to puzzle out one of the most glaring contradictions in the contemporary world with regard to the uneven geographical distribution of religious commitment—that is, its low level in Europe and other industrialized nations and its robustness in the United States.

Ussama Makdisi: At the risk of offending Philip's desire not to have us get tied up in "self-reflexive knots," I feel that the larger point I raised about how certain cultures and parts of the world are perceived to be more religious than others, which the Editor reiterated, still needs to be addressed more precisely. I simply do not

believe that it is true that, as Jack Miles asserts, "Western historians, journalists, or policymakers" have not overemphasized Islam; the great champion of the Iraq War, the most ardent defender of a "clash of civilizations" ("Islam" against the "Judeo-Christian West"), and one of the most recognized and celebrated (in the U.S.) authorities on Islam (and the modern Middle East, of course!) is none other than Bernard Lewis. His work over the past few decades has been built on a polemic against what he considers to be the inability of the "Muslim" world to face modernity and in a sense to be enraged by it. In Lewis's influential work, he places a great deal of emphasis on the medieval Islamic world to explain current Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the West. He also minimizes the role of Western colonialism in shaping our contemporary world. He does not do this by chance, nor does he do what Philip and Nora Berend argue passionately and in my view correctly for, contextualizing religious violence or even religion more broadly. Is it a coincidence that Lewis, whose academic specialization was the premodern Muslim world, has become the, or at any rate a, leading authority on the contemporary Middle East? What does this mean? I don't think we would accept for a minute, and certainly not celebrate in the manner that Lewis has been, an expert on medieval Christendom, or even early modern Europe, who started publishing polemics about the ills of modern America on the basis of his knowledge of medieval Christendom or early modern Europe.

My point is that Lewis can do what he does in large part because of a *general* perception, evident among historians as well as among most journalists and pundits, and certainly among policymakers, that the West as we understand it has decisively broken with its premodern past, whereas the Islamic world has not. When we analyze figures such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, or even George W. Bush, we do not go around, at least not in mainstream academic journals, quoting verses from the Bible to help us decipher contemporary positions. Nor do we pretend that the medieval Christian world has any immediate or direct bearing on contemporary Christian fundamentalist politics. We are far more careful, nuanced, and contextualized when it comes to analyzing Christian fundamentalist movements than we are Islamic ones.

To be clear, I am all for letting the "actors" speak for themselves, but I find Jack's argument about Iraq even less compelling than his argument about Hamas (and to answer Philip's specific question, no, places of worship were not specifically attacked in this last round of fighting—my point is that it would be impossible to analyze this "internal" Palestinian fighting, and the rise of an Islamic movement within Palestinian politics, without including in the analysis the profound implication of the Israeli occupation, to say nothing of the role of various competing Arab regimes, the corruption of Fatah, *as well as* religious inclinations and beliefs). Since when did the American occupation forces in Iraq "defer" to Sistani on any of the crucial issues that have defined U.S. interests in Iraq and the region (like, say, oil, which Bush has also not really mentioned, although this does not mean it is not important for the U.S. in Iraq)? From the outset, the U.S. language of occupation in Iraq has been replete with religious simplification: terms such as the so-called "Sunni triangle," Saddam as a "Sunni" dictator, the dissolution of a secular Iraqi identity by cham-

pioning a Lebanese model of sectarian politics, and today endless discussion (which rarely includes Iraqis themselves) of the "historic" Sunni-Shiʿa divide, as if the U.S. occupation were not a major exacerbating factor. More to the point, when Bush and Blair talk about good vs. evil, the "moral" thing to do, the liberation of women, and spreading freedom, they are very much building on assumptions that they—and their respective constituencies in America and Britain—believe to be the essence of a Christian West that is endangered by Islamic fundamentalism, which—again, this is important—most people cannot dissociate from their notions of "Islam." The operative contrast is not, therefore, Christian/heathen but Christian/Muslim.

Again, to be clear, I am not suggesting that religion is not important—it is—but for me the real difficulty is how to introduce religion and religiosity into a discussion of the Middle East and elsewhere while also letting actors speak and to the greatest extent possible represent themselves. When it comes to Islam, the Middle East, and/or the Arab world, we are still far from that ideal. Unquestionably, a lot of writing on Islam and the Middle East is still generated out of fear, ignorance, and hostility—we have only to go to any U.S. bookstore to verify this for ourselves.

Jack Miles: Professor Margaret C. Jacob of UCLA recently drew my attention to *Religion and History*, a lively theme issue of the journal *History and Theory*.[16] The issue is perhaps most noteworthy for a remarkable *coincidentia oppositorum*. The concluding contribution, by Brad S. Gregory, is entitled "The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion." In it, Gregory identifies the moment in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* when the postulate that the miraculous does not occur and the transcendent does not exist hardens into a dogma to that effect. Durkheim's dogma, he further argues, has now so pervaded history as a discipline, going far beyond the status of mere methodological postulate, that we must regard history as a species of religion whose adherents and practitioners, true to their own unproven and unprovable faith, misapprehend and distort the religious beliefs and practices of others. The remarkable coincidence that I note above is that between Gregory's view—transparently an indictment—and the view of Constantin Fasolt in his contribution to this same theme issue. In "History and Religion in the Modern Age," Fasolt steps forward as an unapologetic adherent to something very like the faith that Gregory describes. In a kind of confession, Fasolt concludes that history is, yes, a new species of religion, but he is bold to declare it an improvement on its predecessors. To quote the last sentence of his opening abstract, "History does not conflict with the historical religions merely because it reveals them to have been founded on beliefs that cannot be supported by the evidence. History conflicts with the historical religions because it is a rival religion."

Stephen Ellis: I am glad someone has used the word "methodological." It seems to me that we urgently need to consider some questions of method if we are to go any more deeply into the matters we are discussing. Ussama Makdisi has asked why so many commentators emphasize the religious aspect of violent struggles in the Middle East, and even in the Islamic world more generally, rather than lending their at-

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[16] *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 45, no. 4 (December 2006).

tention to the political, economic, or social aspects of these same struggles. Jack Miles, on the other hand, suggests that the religious element might actually be understated by many commentators and politicians. Both Ussama and Jack are referring to contemporary conflicts, but historians have to consider precisely the same point in regard to contests that took place in the past, that is, to decide what is properly considered religious and what is not. We cannot do this unless we have at least an approximate understanding of what religion is—in the context of those particular societies that we, as historians, are seeking to understand, but also in our own time. In other words, we must have at least a working definition of religion. This is no easy matter. I think it has already become clear in our conversation that the nature of religion varies over time. In the seventeenth century, for example, European travelers to Africa quite often wrote that the societies they found there had no religion at all, yet those same travelers described all manner of rituals intended to communicate with an invisible world. The reason so many Europeans reacted this way was generally that they could not identify in African societies any sacred book, any body of dogma, or any class of priests that in their own view added up to a religion. So we need to decide what constitutes "religion" and what does not. Religion changes over time, and yet we don't have much difficulty talking about ancient Greek or Roman religion. This implies that, in spite of all the changes, there is some element in most or even all human societies that corresponds to the word "religion." We need to study the nature and the role of this element in particular contexts.

A further issue of method that has already arisen in our conversation concerns the matter of taking religious thought seriously. There is no contradiction between doing this and yet maintaining a secular stance as a historian. In terms of method, it means that two stages are necessary. The first step is to understand the religious thought of the society we are investigating in its own terms, to the best of our ability. The second stage is to interpret what we find, which we do in our own terms. This is pretty much how historians proceed habitually. I don't think it poses any more problem in principle in regard to religion than in regard to other aspects of historical thought or practice. Finally, even if we were to identify a violent struggle as being motivated largely by religious ideology, we still need to ask basic questions about why the struggle turns violent at a particular time and place. Here, political and other issues are almost certain to be on the agenda. If we apply this principle to Palestine, for example, we may ask why a previously political struggle adopts a religious rhetoric at a certain moment.

Nora has raised a couple more important points of method. The first of these concerns the matter of sincerity. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what someone "really" believes. (In many circumstances, I am not always sure what I "really" believe myself!) In researching matters of religion, in societies past and present, what we can do is to investigate religious practices, which are visible and may therefore be studied empirically, and religious ideas, inasmuch as the latter are discussed and may be recorded.

Another issue concerns the rise of mass secularization. It is increasingly apparent that many of the utopian ideas of the twentieth century were in fact based on a secularized reading of history as having a meaning, which is a distinctly Christian way of thinking about the passage of time. This was pointed out by Eric Voegelin in regard to Nazism more than fifty years ago, and is a point of view one hears with increasing frequency these days. I am thinking of recent books by Michael Burleigh and John Gray.[17] In some senses, even in western Europe, where people go to church less than they did a couple of generations ago, religious ideas and even religious practices remain current, but in a secular guise. This means that we must tread carefully when interpreting fundamentalism in our own time, especially in the former developing world. To some extent, academics are noticing religion where they used to ignore it—it never really went away.

Jeffrey Kaplan: The question of "ebb and flow" when applied to the embrace of religious identity speaks to the heart of my body of research, which involves millenarian/messianic violence. This, as participants in this discussion will probably agree, is the rarest form of religious violence, but it is at the same time the most intractable, for it is religious in the eschatological sense—which is in the deepest recesses of the religious consciousness. It is the level at which the question of whether religion is the "real" reason for violent action with which we began this discussion—and which runs as a persistent undercurrent in contemporary policy discussion and in most press accounts—becomes irrelevant. This is a battle that is joined for chiliastic goals which no terrestrial "powers or principalities" have the power to meet, even if they so wished, and without God's direct intercession in history, even the victorious revolutionaries themselves would be unable to institute the perfected "government of God" which the faithful expect them to, in short order, enact.

This line of discussion naturally leads to a crisis model, and crises in which faith communities see themselves as sorely tested—as "righteous remnants" holding out in the face of overwhelming power—are timeless. David Rapoport in his early work identified the first religious terrorist movement in the fully modern sense, the Sicarri, to have emerged in the time of Christ (roughly the first century C.E.).[18] The history of the Peoples of the Book—the three Western faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are rife with such movements, and in the American context Michael Barkun wrote a rather good book on this process some years ago.[19]

This is not to suggest that perceived crisis invariably leads to a religious response, nor that even the most religious of responses necessarily eventuates in violence. Indeed, violence of the millennial sort is relatively rare. Once catalyzed, however, it is remarkably like a wildfire. It burns all in its path, and the flame, meant to purify in the mind of the believer, horrifies audiences of the unengaged, often frightens and

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[17] Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (London, 2006); John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London, 2007).

[18] David Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (1984): 658–677.

[19] Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986).

disgusts the pool of potential adherents, and alarms states into acting against movements not yet ready to stand against such an opponent. Thus a crisis few movements historically survive.

To work further with the crisis model in the context of the "ebb and flow" of the "changing strength of the fundamental purchase of religion on people's identity across time," one might well be able to make a rather convincing case for a man or woman choosing to take the road to Martyrs' Square (a case that was undreamed of during the first wave of the Intifada, was intensely difficult to make for a time during the early stages of the al-Aqsa Intifada, but today, for a number of fascinating reasons, is almost normative in Palestine and lauded throughout many sectors of the Arab world).[20] Yet no such defense of the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was made, nor can such a case be expected. The degree of the crisis does not rule out proportionality; nor does it annul rationality.

What I am suggesting, however, is simply a surface-level analysis. "Religion" is a big tent, while crises, as they deepen, divide people into smaller and smaller camps. Relative safety for much of the world is ultimately found in ties that are far more primordial than the generalized concepts of "Muslim," "Christian," or "Jew" could hope to describe. Ties of family, faith, sect, clan, tribe, and region all blend together, and what may be thought of by outsiders as a particularly stubborn or premodern form of xenophobia or religious fanaticism, from the inside in the Islamic world is understood as an organic, beautifully wrought form of "tawhid" or unity.

I think Jack may be right that historians are all by nature unbelievers—but only until they spend significant amounts of time in the Middle East. There, historians too talk about God, for God, not religion in the Western academic analytical sense, is imbued into the language and the tradition. More important, the historian is soon humbled by the weight of what he does not, cannot, and will never know. I always tell my students on the first day of term that the Middle East is such a fascinating place because it functions on a number of simultaneous levels. At the surface is what you see and hear. Believe none of that. Then there is something deeper— unknown but knowable. And then something below that and again something below that. Ultimately, there is *the* truth (not *a* truth, as we would be satisfied to have it here). But it is known only to God. The broad acceptance in Middle Eastern societies of the existence of a single underlying truth known ultimately only to God, yet perhaps accessible to man, is the essence of *religion* in all revealed faiths, is it not? Therein lies our essential commonality.

But then there is the question of violence, in the pursuit of that truth or in the perception that there are particular religious authorities or autodidacts who are in possession of that truth, and things change again.

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[20] Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg, *The Road to Martyrs' Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber* (New York, 2005).

AHR Editor: So far we have been discussing religion, with all the complexity and ambiguity which that capacious term invites; and in particular we have been trying to deal with the vexed issue of the place of religion in the hierarchy of commitments in different periods and cultures. Along the way, a number of insights and concepts have been introduced, some contested. Some frustration has been expressed with the lack of precision in how we readily assume or imagine religious commitment or a level of religious motivation for different peoples and periods, and not for others. Clearly it would be preferable always to contextualize religion, to specify precisely what we mean when we invoke "religion," to isolate what other competing interests and motivations are at play, and to analyze the forces—institutional, cultural, or ideological—that legitimize, promote, or otherwise canalize religious sentiments and commitments. Might I suggest that part of what we are seeing in this conversation has to do with the difficulties historians and others encounter once they step out of their zones of intellectual comfort where this level of precise analysis can be managed and try to discuss these issues in a venue where it is really very difficult? How, then, do we talk about "religion" across the chronological, cultural, subdisciplinary, and historiographical divides that our different scholarly orientations have created? With difficulty, obviously. But I would suggest that the difficulties generated by our exchanges are themselves interesting and worthy of exploration. Like comparative history, these exchanges should help us both refine our vocabulary for talking about these big issues and identify what is essential in our own analyses.

But another way to promote a discussion where the issues are genuinely joined is to move beyond "religion" and into the specific realm of religious violence. Philip Benedict has already helped us think about violence as an indicator of religious commitment when he cited examples of the targeting of religious buildings, structures, or other signs of religious identity. Subsequent comments picked up on this insight. Is it useful to approach religious violence in terms of, shall we say, an inventory of targets, and thus open the door for the kind of cross-cultural and even cross-period comparisons that historical sociology promotes? More than a generation ago, early modern historians began to approach religious violence in an anthropological sense, as "rites of violence," seeing it not as irrational, utterly inarticulate mass behavior but rather as meaningful, purposeful, even didactic forms of collective action. How do you "read" religious violence? Are there aspects of this kind of behavior that make it categorically different from other forms of violent collective action? How precisely can we infer crucial aspects of religious identity or commitment—or passion, for that matter—from the phenomenology of religious violence?

Stephen Ellis: There is no such thing as meaningless violence. And if we want to investigate the meaning of violence carried out in the name of religion, I think we should adopt the same approach as in regard to any other sort of violence. An obvious starting point is to consider what the perpetrators—but also the victims—have to say on the matter. Why do they say they are doing these things, or suffering them? As with other forms of violence, it is also useful for historians to look for antecedents of the phenomenon they are studying, to see whether it fits into a historical pattern.

We have already discussed some interesting cases where the perpetrators of violence send mixed messages, such as Northern Ireland. There were many cases of people being attacked simply because they were thought to be Catholic or Protestant, and yet churches were not targeted. Random attacks of this sort—"sectarian killings," they were called—corresponded to the fact that many working-class areas in Northern Ireland were segregated, so there was a high chance that a passerby in a particular neighborhood would be someone of the religious identity that fitted the political message that sectarian killers wanted to send. This should perhaps alert us to the possibility that religious identity or religious rhetoric can have a sociological character and can actually be enlisted to serve political causes.

In other words, violence that at first sight is religious in nature or motivation may actually not be very religious. Again, we have already had a spirited exchange on this matter with reference to Palestine and the Middle East more generally. Invoking a religious doctrine or symbol does not in itself make an act of violence religious in motivation. I would say that in today's world, even violence that makes use of religious symbolism is very likely to be political. I may take the example of Sudan. For years, the war there was considered by most international commentators to pit the Muslim North of the country against Southerners who either were Christian or adhered to traditional religious forms. This was always a simplistic analysis. The fact that the war in Sudan is currently most violent among populations that are overwhelmingly Muslim suggests that the underlying motivations have all along been more political than religious in nature.

Forgive me for repeating myself, but I do not think we can go very far in this line of analysis without thinking what we mean by "religion." I have learned from religious studies that people in the West nowadays tend to consider religion as the location of ultimate meaning. But there are, and have been, many societies in which religion does not have much to do with meaning. In such cases, religion may play an important part in an armed conflict not because the warring parties are concerned with identities and meanings, but simply because they believe that power can be derived from the invisible world, and that religion can therefore be used to enhance military skills. I am interested by the observation that has often been made that European nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stole the clothes of religion, turning the traditional object of Christian worship into a this-worldly entity such as the nation, or a this-worldly principle such as socialist revolution. This is what writers were referring to when they called Marxism a secular religion. We may thus have violence that is essentially political in nature but is suffused with religious language and symbolism. Think of Irish nationalism, drawing on the symbolism of death and resurrection, with the Easter Rising and the Good Friday agreement.

Jack Miles: In principle, where definitions are known to be in contention or to have varied over time, the sensible procedure is simply to state the definition that will be operative in a given discussion or program and then proceed. In practice, when American historians, journalists, and policymakers use the word "religion" without bothering with any opening definition of the term, their use of it seems to me to

stand—with one crucial qualification—not far from anthropological functionalism as so influentially crystallized by Clifford Geertz. His definition, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, was: "a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[21] In a religiously pluralistic society, this definition has had great appeal because it seems to apply to all religions equally, conceding to all a potentially real and durable effect. It has had appeal to academics, who work in a sector of American society where religious belief is often rare and never to be taken for granted, because it allows them to discuss religion without ever taking up the question of whether there is any factuality behind the aura.

The great limitation of this definition, and the source of the qualification just mentioned, is that—surprisingly in the work of an anthropologist—it applies as well to a lone man adhering to a secret symbol system that he never speaks aloud as it does to the Roman Catholic Church. To the extent that in common parlance "a religion" implies "organized religion," as in the sentence "I don't belong to *a* religion," Geertz's definition assumes rather than includes (other than by the use of the plural "men") the social dimension of religion. But since this assumption seems so easily to be shared, accepting Geertz's definition as a working definition for the purposes of this discussion would mean being prepared to ask how a given general conception of reality produces, if it does, moods and motivations tending significantly toward violence.

Doing that, we can easily enough do as Stephen suggests and engage, say, nationalism as one instance of a general conception of existence clothed with the aura of factuality and taken as the basis for violent action. We need not confine ourselves to the commonsense instances of religion. In the 1960s, in Italy, I saw a faded old Fascist slogan painted on a Piedmont wall: *Noi non discutiamo la frontera, la difendiamo*.[22] The slogan obviously calls a halt to reason and invokes an unquestioning patriotism to rationalize its call to arms. Obviously, again, Italy had real interests that could conflict with those of neighboring France, and this invocation of a nationalist faith could coincide with plenty of material motivations. There was nonetheless a distinct and proper power in the nationalist faith, which, in a given case—as in fighting on for a lost cause—could manifest its distinctness. In Europe, the plausibility of this faith has suffered at least as much in the twentieth century as Christianity did in the seventeenth.

In the Muslim case now so much on everyone's mind, it will not do to leap from the peak to the plain in a single bound, inferring from verses in the Qurʾan or the Hadith general conceptions of existence supposedly productive of violent moods and motivations in all Muslims. Nor will it do to sweep away such basic differences as that between Sunni and Shiʿa in a statement like the one President Bush made in his 2007

[21] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 90.
[22] "We don't discuss the frontier, we defend it."

State of the Union address: "The Shia and Sunni extremists are different faces of the same totalitarian threat. Whatever slogans they chant, when they slaughter the innocent they have the same wicked purposes." No, the differences are deeper than slogans, and there must be a long, careful descent from the peak to the plain. It is at incalculable cost that the Bush administration has so cavalierly dismissed the Sunni/Shiʿa difference. At the same time, when descending to those individual cases, if a definition like Geertz's is the working definition, then credence will be given to a statement like the following, from an interview in the *Washington Post* with a former officer in Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen who claims now to be the "'general coordinator' between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Omar Brigade, an insurgent group founded . . . by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi" and in that capacity to have killed more Shiʿites than he can count: "I personally don't have a hatred of the American people, and I respect American civilization. They have participated in the progress of all the nations of the world. They invented computers. Such people should be respected. But people who are crying over someone who died 1,400 years ago"—referring to Shiʿites and their veneration of a leader killed in the seventh century—"these should be eliminated to clear the society of them, because they are simply trash."[23]

This statement surely makes at least a prima facie conjunction between, on the one hand, an appropriation of the Sunni tradition within Islam and, on the other, an agenda of violence against Shiʿa Muslims. Though one need not accept the statement uncritically, the burden of proof would seem to be on those who would dismiss it as merely a mask for other, unnamed, material considerations.

Jeffrey Kaplan: The Editor's idea of the "rites of violence" in the context of targeting does bring up a fascinating area of investigation. We have known for a very long time that violence targeting religious symbols is a great deal more effective in both breadth and depth of effect on a variety of potential audiences than simple violence against persons. Indeed, I would argue that even mass casualty incidents, for all their shock and brutality, do not leave as lasting an effect in terms of anger, bitterness, and, in the final analysis, the ability to transform a struggle between adherents of conflicting religions into religious violence on the deepest imaginable level as do attacks on structures in which religious communities have invested symbolic meaning.

Think, for example, of the profound changes in Judaism wrought by the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent diaspora. Judaism—whose very survival seems miraculous at that point—was transformed from a temple-based cult under the guidance of a priesthood to a decentralized faith based on text and a scattered group of teacher/interpreters (rabbis) whose knowledge of text and halacha (Jewish law) held the faith, albeit utterly transformed, together. Closer to our own day, the Indian government's attack on the Sikhs' sacred precincts at Amritsar (Operation Blue Star) catalyzed the extreme radicalization of elements of that faith—especially in diaspora—that we see today and that resulted in the downing of a Canadian passenger plane with great loss of life. The 2005 destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque

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[23] "Sunni Insurgent Leader Paints Iran as 'Real Enemy,'" *Washington Post*, July 14, 2007.

resulted in communal riots, poisoning the already tense relations between Hindus and Muslims in India, which we can see in the level of confrontation in more distant reaches such as Kashmir.[24]

Sacrality is more easily invested in structures—in great buildings or in natural features of the environment—than in people, for our lives are fleeting, and in many cultures, some degree of predestation is an accepted fact of life (or death, as the case may be). But structures, humble or magnificent, may serve as a means of connecting the believer or the believing community to the sacred, and are thus invested with great religious power. Americans tend to be rather blasé about such things, frankly. The Constitution and the Super Bowl would be a greater loss than, say, the National Cathedral if terrorists were to strike effectively. But the West is not the Islamic world, and if future historians were to point to a single moment in time when the last tattered shreds of American hopes that some sort of face-saving outcome in Iraq could be salvaged were lost, I am convinced it would be the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Samarra.[25] More than all the tit-for-tat atrocities that led up to that moment between the various communities in post-Saddam Iraq, that was the one that tipped the nation clearly and visibly into civil war and made the already ongoing process of neighborhood-by-neighborhood ethnic cleansing a seemingly unbreakable cycle.

We target the sacred to most deeply wound our adversaries, but we sacralize the formerly mundane when we ourselves are struck. One has only to visit the Oklahoma City Memorial at the site of the former Federal Building, with its biblical quotations, its religiously inspired designs and biblical imagery, and the crosses that are still laid at the gateways by members of the public.[26] The Oklahoma City bombing is fascinating in this regard: it was not intended as an act of religious violence, but it called forth a religious response and was widely perceived as being religiously motivated. Fascinatingly, Eric Rudolph, the recently captured killer and bomber of abortion clinics—the rescue movement was a small but remarkably violent movement that was deeply religious in nature—also professes no religious motivation for his crimes.[27]

Which makes me wonder whether Stephen Ellis's statement that "I do not think we can go very far in this line of analysis without thinking what we mean by 'religion'" is of as much import as Stephen appears to believe. First, there is the problem of who are "we"? If "we" are outside observers, members of the academy or part of the guild of religious scholars, I fear then we are fated to get nowhere in any case, for we will probably never fully agree on what we mean by "religion." It the "we" is extended to the actors themselves—perpetrators and direct victims of religiously

[24] A good one-stop source for these comparative histories would be the five-volume Fundamentalism Project, especially the first volume, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago, 1991).

[25] For a good insider view of the Iraqi occupation from the perspective of an Arab-American officer, see Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, Conn., 2007).

[26] Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford, 2001).

[27] Jeffrey Kaplan, "Absolute Rescue: Absolutism, Defensive Action and the Resort to Force," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 3 (1995): 128–163.

motivated violence—we may well get much further. Timothy McVeigh and Eric Rudolph saw their actions as outside the boundaries of religion. Their audiences, their tiny cadres of supporters and the legions who were appalled by what they did alike, were quick to classify their actions as examples of religious violence. I suspect that if "we" (the we who are a party to this discussion) were ever to have the chance to ask them, the Samarra bombers would classify what they did as a religious act. Yet if we were to dig deeper, each would have his own story—a set of very individual perceptions, experiences, and events which brought him to the decision to take the action and to the determination to carry out the bombing. The "pure case" of religious violence would in this case become rather too muddled for easy use in academic models, I fear.

How, then, are we to read religious violence? My arguments seem to constantly hark back to the individual, to the family, to the clan, and to the tribal group—to the most basic units of human organization. Analysis of questions with the complexity and importance of those which the Editor poses simply seem to be more logically approached from this level, building gradually to the level from which Stephen Ellis begins his analysis: the complex and highly variegated modernity of the Western world. But perhaps I could suggest this for consideration: We can "read" violence that is religiously motivated, and perhaps differentiate it from other forms of violence, at base by how the forms which the acts of violence take address in the eyes of perpetrator and victim alike deeply ingrained symbolic understandings of the sacred, of the divine order, of theodicy, of history, or of the prophetic import of inerrant text.

Ussama Makdisi: The relationship between religious violence and religious identity is, as Stephen, Jeffrey, and Jack have already indicated, a complex one, and I am not willing to generalize across cultures and time. I appreciate the Editor's call for us to think beyond our intellectual comfort zones. On some questions there is indeed merit in generalizing, but not on this one concerning religious violence, at least not beyond a regional perspective. What, after all, do we gain from a cross-cultural or cross-period theoretical formulation regarding the relationship between religious identity and violence, especially when it seems to me that so much of the current interest and concern about religious violence stems directly from events in and relating to the contemporary Middle East? I think we tend to agree that there is no such thing as "purely" religious violence, but if I understood the question correctly, the problem arises when trying to infer larger meaning from specific moments of religious violence.

Are certain sets of religious identities (Hindu/Muslim, Christian/Muslim, Christian/Jewish, Jewish/Muslim, Catholic/Protestant, Sunni/Shiʿa) in such opposition that their antagonism is inevitable, and waiting only for a specific set of events and/or conditions to become manifest? Or is it the context that actually produces the imagination and possibility of such antagonism? Is sectarianism in Iraq, India, Ireland, and Lebanon produced, or is it primordial—and are the religious passions and violence exhibited in these places an endless repetition of the same, or something

historically contingent, and thus liable to change? Jack, for example, points to the Iraqi Sunni leader speaking of the Shiʿa in the context of the U.S. occupation, and Jeffrey underscores the importance of the bombing of the mosque in Samarra, so the question here would be: Is this Sunni-Shiʿa violence latent, an underlying condition which the U.S. occupation brings to the surface, a malaise which perhaps has been exacerbated by the Americans in Iraq, but which can be analyzed independently of the U.S. occupation? Or is this violence a condition, a phenomenon, that can only be analyzed and understood as an integral part of the moment of U.S. occupation?

I strongly suggest the latter, especially given that many of the major bouts of religious or sectarian violence in the modern Middle East—from Mount Lebanon in 1860, to Muslim-Jewish violence in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, to Sunni-Shiʿa violence in Iraq today—are undeniably connected to various forms of blatant Western intervention. I concede, and Jack and I have had a productive exchange in this regard, that there are factors and discourses that long predate the U.S. occupation in Iraq, and that must be included in an analysis of current violence in Iraq, but these do not explain why it is that the Samarra mosque was bombed at one point in time and not another. Anything short of constant historicizing when it comes to the question of religious violence leads us, I fear, to an intellectual dead end.

Nora Berend: I agree with the previous respondents that we must historicize religious violence, but at the same time I think it is possible to come up with criteria that can then be compared across cultures. Targets of religious violence, as the Editor indicated, might be one such criterion. I would argue that we can infer religious identity or commitment to some extent from religious violence, but religious violence is not necessarily a very precise indicator of such identity. Medieval religious violence has also been interpreted using anthropological and sociological approaches. Such analyses do demonstrate that in certain cases, especially when it is recurring violence, we can indeed speak about rituals rather than spontaneous mass violence.[28] In other cases, such as the massacre of the Jews during the first crusade, the ecclesiastical message of fighting against Christ's enemies was reinterpreted by the masses to mean the killing of Christ's enemies nearer home. Clearly, different types of religious violence exist.

Going back to the question of targets, it seems to me that we should perhaps distinguish between objects as targets, which I think do allow us a view of religious identity, and people as targets, where differences tend to blur. For example, we can ask whether specifically religious objects (including buildings) are targeted, or objects of symbolic value, or things that are interpreted in a negative light by adherents of a religion, and so on, and in what way these are targeted. Medieval Christian stories of Jewish desecration of the host depicted physical attacks (drawing a parallel to torturing Christ's body) or dishonoring the host (e.g., throwing it in a latrine).[29] In Spain, in areas that Christians conquered from Muslims, mosques were trans-

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[28] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J., 1996).

[29] Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven, Conn., 1999).

formed into churches: one can still see this in Cordoba's cathedral, the "Mezquita." Obviously this is a different message from destroying the building. Muslims had done the same, turning, for example, the church in Constantinople into a mosque. It is a taking over of religious space, turning places of religious worship into a long-lasting visible sign of victory. Where Christians came into contact with pagans, they destroyed holy trees, pagan sanctuaries, statues. Sometimes they built churches over previously holy springs or the cut-down stumps of holy trees.[30]

Whereas if we look at violence against people, the real or purported motive behind the violence may be religious, but violence itself aims at killing the "enemy," and often cannot be distinguished from violence motivated by other things such as ethnic cleansing or nationalism. Again, to cite medieval examples, during the course of one century alone, medieval Hungarians massacred Germans because the nobility objected to the influence of the German-born queen and her entourage; Cumans (a pagan Turkic people) because they were seen as the spies of the Mongols who were attacking Hungary; and Jews because they were accused of having desecrated the host.[31] Just based on the violence alone, it would be impossible to tell which of these was motivated by religion.

Philip Benedict: Reading over the extremely interesting comments made since I last spoke up, it seems to me that there is a fair amount of agreement among us about at least four things: (1) there is no such thing as meaningless violence; (2) episodes of violence need to be read by paying close attention to the specific targets of the violence, the actions of the aggressors during the violence, and what they and the spokesmen they honor say that justifies or encourages their actions; (3) the most illuminating analyses of situations of religious violence find a middle ground that contextualizes the violence carefully within the precise historical context in which it occurred while recognizing that attention needs to be paid to the larger context of shared beliefs that justify and at least partially motivate the violence; and (4) it is necessary to be fairly clear what definition of religion is being used any time one speaks of religious violence. Now if only journalists, political commentators, and above all political actors could absorb these points and put them into practice . . .

The last few comments from Ussama Makdisi and Nora Berend suggest that there may be some difference of opinion about the possibility of constructing useful large generalizations across space and time. I agree with the former that we need to be careful about making cross-regional or cross-cultural comparisons about this issue, but I agree with the latter that we should not entirely abandon the effort. One of the essential public roles of our guild is to inform the public about just the kinds of large questions of present relevance that are at issue in our conversation. How can we do it helpfully and responsibly?

[30] Berend, *Christianization*, 27–28, 124, 187, 383.
[31] Nora Berend, "Immigrants and Locals in Medieval Hungary: 11th–13th Centuries," in Klaus Herbers and Nikolas Jaspert, eds., *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich: Der Osten und der Westen das mittelalterlichen Lateineuropa* (Berlin, 2007), 205–217.

One observation in the last round of comments that struck me was Stephen Ellis's observation that there are many societies in which religion does not have much to do with meaning, and that in such cases religion may play an important part in armed conflict because the warring parties think that power can be derived from the invisible world and be used to enhance military skills. The interest for a historian of Christian Europe of a remark like that from somebody coming from a very different field of specialization is that it suddenly makes one think, "Is there anything like that going on in the society I know?" I wonder what Nora Berend would say about the applicability of this observation to early medieval Europe and conversion from paganism to Christianity. In early modern Europe there was undoubtedly a conviction that power can be derived from righteousness, and thus that armies must be purged of sins such as blasphemy and prostitution if they are to be successful—never an easy thing to do, of course. It also appears that rulers and their theologico-political advisers were tempted at times to think, "We are the righteous, therefore God will aid us in our battles to defend His cause and His honor." This belief thus served to encourage military action at times when pure calculations of political prudence might have argued against it, although the caveat should immediately be added that this was just one of several competing ways of thinking about the question, and rarely the most powerful. The analogies I'm offering here may not be exact ones, but I think this attempted comparison suggests that one benefit of cross-cultural or cross-temporal comparison may simply be to call one's attention to phenomena or methods of approach that might not otherwise be observed or applied in a given context.

We could also build on Ussama's interesting observation that many major bouts of Sunni-Shiʿa violence in the modern Middle East have come in situations where Western intervention has destabilized the local political situation. As he wisely warns, this shows the importance of historicizing moments of religious conflict. But as he also admits at the same time, the fact that such conflicts have recurrently erupted in such moments of destabilizing outside intervention reveals the presence and the force within the region of enduring antipathies and discourses that can be reactivated in such situations. If one makes a comparison with Protestant-Catholic differences in Europe, it is clear that in the early modern centuries, these differences also generated such powerful mutual suspicions, and the presence of the other party within the polity was seen as so illegitimate or dangerous, that a similar underlying potential for violence existed that could be activated at moments of destabilizing outside intervention, or in a number of other recurring situations that we could identify and list. By the nineteenth century, for all the continuing suspicion that marked Catholic-Protestant relations in many parts of Europe, the frequency and intensity of such conflicts had diminished. By the late twentieth century, this particular opposition had ceased to generate conflict in all but the exceptional case of Ireland, where it had blended with very modern questions of nationalism, anti-colonialism, and civil rights, and where the rituals and targets of the violence had become quite different from those typical of other parts of Europe in earlier periods. One way of approaching a comparative history of religion and violence over the *longue durée* would be to explore the features of both the religion(s) of different regions that justified or even encouraged violence in certain situations, the characteristic forms of violence to

which they gave rise, and the situations in which this was particularly likely to erupt. Obviously, this would have to be done for starters on a faith-by-faith and region-by-region basis, recognizing that religious traditions are not permanently fixed entities but change over time. As I said in my last comment, it can only be done by identifying the specific beliefs within each tradition that have justified violence in the name of defending the sacred and by tracing how and why they either gained or lost persuasive power over time. In the case of religions of a book, attention would need to be paid to the text of the holy book, and to the changing exegesis of key passages pertinent to the theme. But in the construction of such a history, those working on each particular religious tradition could surely learn from comparing the texts and the contexts they know best with those of other traditions. If the end result were a comparative history of several different religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?—over a span of several millennia, it would be a fascinating history of considerable potential contemporary utility.

Obviously we can't ourselves construct such a long and vast history in a conversation like this. Whatever dream team of scholars might be assembled with the courage to take this on would first have to do a lot of reading and a lot of collaborative teaching of ambitious comparative courses. But how this might be done, and whether or not it makes any sense to think about doing it, seems worth talking about.

Nora Berend: In answer to Philip's question, deriving power from the supernatural was certainly a motivating factor for conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages, in situations where the Christian god was seen as more powerful than the local god(s).

AHR Editor: Throughout this discussion we have tried, I think, to find a way to talk about religion and violence from a comparative perspective without lapsing into meaningless generalities. There are clearly many variables in play which make this difficult, and if anything I think we have erred, correctly so, on the side of the particular, offering a warning to those who would glibly make pronouncements without an awareness of the complexity of the subject—without appreciating how difficult it is to compare religious cultures across time and space. But there is one aspect of this topic that we have only skirted around, an aspect which has the virtue of both bringing us down to earth and offering the possibility of a common denominator in looking at religious cultures. Mention has been made of the importance of membership and "church" in discussing religion. Obviously there have been many people whose beliefs and commitments can dispense with these sorts of affiliations. But by and large, the history of religion—and religious violence—has entailed group affiliation and identification with a church, sect, cult, or the like. I would like to ask you to explore one aspect of this institutional or social side of religion, and that is the role of an established and recognized leadership—let's call it the clergy. Does examination of the importance, prestige, intellectual orientation, traditions, and the like of the clergy in a particular society shed light on either the propensity or the reluctance of people to engage in religious violence? When a clerical elite eclipses in prestige the established secular leadership, are we in a situation ripe for sectarian

religious violence? Clergymen can obviously play a role in legitimating violence. How have they played a role as pacifiers and mediators?

Jeffrey Kaplan: The Editor's last question is acute. The role of leadership—Weber's "religious virtuosi" (a term I still love)—in catalyzing, slowing, or avoiding the onset of religious violence. The classic example that comes to mind is the most common, I suspect, but the least remarked. In the 1980s, a radical sect that came to be known as the Jewish Underground (actually a radical faction of the Gush Emunim settlement movement with a few independent settlers thrown in for good measure) had decided to move beyond vigilantism to true terrorism.[32] They accomplished a few signature operations, most notably planting bombs that targeted various West Bank Palestinian mayors. At the time they were rounded up by Shin Bet, they were cutting the brake lines on Palestinian school buses, which apparently was to make up for the failure of an earlier operation to leave a car bomb outside an East Jerusalem girls' school. These were, however, minor-league operations compared to "the dream": a bomb that would destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque and make way for the rebuilding of the Third Temple, which by Jewish law would have to be built on the spot where the mosque stands today. Fortunately, since the time of Maimonides, Jewish law has also forbidden Jews to set foot on the peak of the hill on which the mosque stands and has decreed that no human hand may contribute to the project of rebuilding the temple. Thus no rabbinical authority, not even the most radical of the Gush rabbinical personalities such as Moshe Levinger, would quite dare to sanction the operation. It therefore did not take place, and a cataclysm was thus avoided.

Religious authority is more often used to block rather than to facilitate violence, but there is a proviso to this rule, I believe (and a set of interesting exceptions). When religious authority is used in opposition to violent acts, one can reasonably expect that authority to be wielded in the name of some institutional source of religious charisma. A rabbinate in the modern world rather stretches this rule given its diffuse lines of authority and the complications introduced by the existence of the Israeli state, but it exists nonetheless.

Shiʿite Islam provides a more defined hierarchy, and a set of teacher/student relationships and intra-familial client relationships that can more or less be traced, and in any case is well known to the faithful, if a bit mystifying to outside observers.[33] In periods when a marj al-taqlid (model for emulation or senior scholar) exists, the ulama or religious leaders can be a conservative force indeed. When the last publicly acknowledged marja, Ayatollah Borujerdi, died in the early 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini was at last able to step forward and openly preach revolution. One of those historically exceptional times had occurred, and the intuitional leadership, or at least

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[32] By far the best early work on Gush Emunim is Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: The Bloc of the Faithful in Israel (Gush Emunim)," in Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, 265–344. For later developments, see Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother against Brother: Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination* (New York, 1999).

[33] A good primer on this arcane world is Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (New Haven, Conn., 1985). For the less committed, a much more enjoyable read would be Roy P. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York, 1986). A new OneWorld edition of the latter was reprinted in 2004.

a radical minority of it, was able to move in the direction of violence. Such men and such times, though, I would argue, are exceptional in Shiʿism. More common, and more interesting by far, are periods such as the present when there is no publicly acknowledged marja (although there is an authority in Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq who does seem to hold that position). In such cases, public pronouncements enjoining peace and private hints that the state should be an instrument of Shiʿite justice again complicate the picture.

Sunni Islam presents a different picture yet. There is today a major undertaking by conservative scholars to seize back from the radicals the momentum, or more precisely the perception of popular approval, or contemporary legitimacy.[34] This has not been overly successful, but it is an interesting illustration of the basic democracy of the tradition. The Sunni ulama have been in eclipse (again a personal argument) for almost a millennium, since the closing of the gates of ijtihad or interpretation of text in the light of contemporary events was accomplished and the Sunni men of religion became comfortable vassals of the state—"Court akunds," in Ayatollah Khomeini's terminology; that indeed summed up the situation well enough.[35] In Sunni Islam, where every man has the right to choose his own authority, every man is in effect his own pope. One may follow the best-educated products of the great institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo or the self-made men such as those who compose combatant groups like al-Qaeda. One's fatwa carries no more intuitional weight than another's, making the ulama or "clergy" in the sense of the Editor's question a neutral force in terms of catalyzing or avoiding violence. You follow whom you will, so every man in effect decides for himself. Had that been the case in the world of the Jewish Underground, the al-Aqsa Mosque would be as much a memory today as the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan.

The interaction of religious leaders and those who follow them constitutes a complex push-pull relationship that bears much study, but that remains little understood. In the War on Terror, for example, it was thought that if only this or that leader could be eliminated, his followers would be leaderless, and less effective. Perhaps they would lose heart altogether. Of course, this did not and could not happen.

The last part of his question, on how religious leaders have played the role of mediators, I leave to others in the discussion more qualified to comment.

Nora Berend: The example of medieval Europe after about 1000 fits perfectly into the scheme suggested by the Editor. The Catholic Church claimed the affiliation of all Christians at the time, and actively persecuted dissidents. The clerical elite, particularly the papacy, claimed spiritual superiority over secular power (understood in divergent ways) during the central medieval period. Nonetheless, the role of the clergy in religious violence, either as instigators or as peacemakers, is a complex issue. First of all, it is worth keeping in mind the connection between the level of

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[34] Angel Rabasa, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, Calif., 2007).
[35] For Khomeini's views on this and much more, see the indispensable Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, trans. Hamid Algar (New York, 2002).

social development and the status and role of the clergy, a connection that analyses of the history of religion often establish.[36] In that case social development itself, rather than the clergy, would be ultimately the source of violence. Specifically in the medieval context, ecclesiastics played a role both as instigators of violence and as peacemakers. More interestingly, they were often behind formulations of concepts and ideas that fed popular violence, although that was not necessarily the intended aim of the ecclesiastics themselves.

Let me illustrate this with some examples. Christian attitudes to Jews, the most widespread religious minority in medieval Europe, were greatly influenced by the ecclesiastical elite, but popular attitudes were not always in line with ecclesiastical ones, and even within ecclesiastical circles there existed conflicting ideas. Ecclesiastical views themselves changed over time, becoming increasingly anti-Jewish. Nonetheless, if we look at papal and theological pronouncements, these did not advocate physical violence against the Jews, but, on the contrary, their protection. From the end of the eleventh century onward, ecclesiastical ideas about Jews were sometimes interpreted as grounds for religious violence. By the thirteenth century, especially, this official ecclesiastical attitude itself, while stopping short of violence, can be seen as preparing the ground for large-scale anti-Jewish violence. Jews were to wear distinguishing marks; they were not allowed to mingle with Christians (eat with them, have sexual relations with them, etc.); they were held responsible for the death of Christ; and their conversion to Christianity was encouraged. At the same time, papal bulls insisted on protecting their lives and property. But is it surprising that many people who lived in a culture that held that Jews were inhuman, lacked reason, and killed Christ concluded that Jews should be persecuted, even though the official line maintained that this was not to be the case?[37] Already during the first crusade, some bands, mobilized by the preaching of a popular crusade preacher, Peter the Hermit, interpreted the message as authorizing the killing of Jews, Christ's enemies. What started as spontaneous violence by relatively small groups of crusaders became premeditated massacres in which not only crusaders but also local burghers and villagers took part.[38] During the preaching of the second crusade in 1146, the situation was even less clear-cut, as one Cistercian monk, Radulph, who preached the crusade, incited Christians to murder Jews, while another Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux, preached against such persecution. Bernard left behind a large body of sophisticated writings, while the same cannot be said of Radulph.[39] Nonetheless, intellectual sophistication within the clergy was not the only criterion that determined their attitude to religious violence. Eleventh- and twelfth-century Christian intellectuals created the image of the inhuman, carnal Jew. Thirteenth-century mendicant friars spread anti-Jewish views through their preaching. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, accusations of ritual murder and host dese-

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[36] E.g., R. N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *American Sociological Review* 29 (1964): 358–374.

[37] See, e.g., Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute: Disputational Literature and the Rise of Anti-Judaism in the West, c. 1000–1150* (Aldershot, 1998); Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

[38] Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (1987; repr., Berkeley, Calif., 1996).

[39] David Berger, "The Attitude of St. Bernard of Clairvaux toward the Jews," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972): 89–108.

cration emerged. Without Christian theology and ritual, such accusations could not have been invented: for example, the new ecclesiastical insistence on Christ's real presence in the consecrated Eucharist meant that the host was a "living" body that could be harmed. Clerics were sometimes active in the propagation of the cult of alleged victims of Jewish ritual murder; for example, the canons of the cathedral, the local bishop, and a monk all contributed to the cult of William of Norwich in the twelfth century. Such blood libels led to the murder of many Jews. Yet medieval popes did not canonize such alleged martyrs and even issued bulls against the ritual murder charge. Similarly, the expulsion of Jews from most of medieval western Europe between the end of the thirteenth and the fifteenth century is at least in part linked to ecclesiastical propaganda, yet Jews were not expelled from the papal states.[40] So some ecclesiastics openly incited religious violence. Yet even those who openly advocated the protection of Jews in fact contributed to fomenting violence by creating such a negative image of the Jews.

Already Pope Urban II's call for the first crusade contained the idea that Christians should be freed from savage Muslim rule, painting a particularly negative picture of life under such rule. He drew on already existing ideas about holy war, and propagated religious violence by Christians against Muslims. The clerical ideology of religious violence was, at the same time, linked to the idea of achieving internal peace among Christians. It was partly an attempt to channel violence that existed (and that was condemned by ecclesiastics) into what was defined as an acceptable and even holy undertaking against enemies outside Europe. Later popes often tried to mediate between Christian rulers or even threaten them to achieve peace in order to enable the organization of a crusade. Thus the pope and subsequent propagandists of the crusade created a particular type of violence (against non-Christians), but did not create violence as such; they lived in an already violent society. War as penitence was a radically new idea; violent warfare was not new, but rather part of everyday life.[41] According to one view, people did not even see crusading as distinctive; for them, it was just one form of war in an already violent society.[42] Ecclesiastics also created the negative image of Muslims, although different variations of this image existed (a total condemnation of the enemy, or Muslims as pagans and therefore likely to convert, etc.).[43]

Therefore in medieval Europe, the clergy was clearly in some way a factor in the outbreak of religious violence. Yet even when they were its direct cause, we cannot discount preexisting social factors (a violent society). And at other times, their ideas prepared the ground for violence that they themselves did not espouse.

[40] Dominique Iogna-Prat, *Ordonner et exclure: Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'islam, 1000–1150* (Paris, 1998); Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (1990; repr., Berkeley, Calif., 1996); Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

[41] Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (1987; repr., London, 1996), is an excellent introduction.

[42] C. J. Tyerman, "Were There Any Crusades in the Twelfth Century?" *English Historical Review* 110, no. 437 (1995): 553–577.

[43] John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York, 2002).

Stephen Ellis: Human beings are capable of great violence and destructiveness as well as wonderful creativity. One way of understanding religion is as an arrangement for the limitation of violence—in other words, a very fundamental social mechanism. I am guided by the work of René Girard on this matter.[44] In this respect, religion has a close resemblance to politics. Although we now regard religion and politics as two different things, there have been many societies known to history that have not made a clear distinction between the two. In some parts of the world that were colonized by Europe in the nineteenth century, there was previously no word corresponding to the semantic fields of "religion" and "politics" before they were subject to the colonial apparatus of control, which included a separation of church and state as had become normal in Europe itself.

Jeffrey, Nora, and Philip have all offered erudite readings of how religious authority may have served to either propagate or limit violence in particular circumstances. I wonder if it is possible to develop a method for cross-cultural comparison in this regard. I think historians instinctively dislike generalizations of this sort, but it might be worthwhile at least to give the matter some thought. After all, it is in its institutional aspect that religion is most amenable to analysis by the methods of sociology. If we were to go further on this point, we might need a contribution from some social scientists.

Jack Miles: Religion makes people do things that make no sense, and this constitutes both its worst weakness and its greatest strength. Justice makes clear sense; and when religion sanctions it—sanctions, for example, a living wage, truthful testimony, or honest scales in the marketplace—its sanction can seem superfluous. The self-sacrificial pursuit of justice for others is to some extent another matter, but even then the collective goal is one whose rationality remains evident. The same may be said of valor in battle, including even valor in the suicidal/murderous pursuit of justice as the religiously inspired killer understands it. When a Huldrych Zwingli or a Joan of Arc dons armor and sallies forth, a message is sent to the faithful that God smiles on such conduct. But I repeat: The armed pursuit of justice usually makes such natural sense that the supernatural smile is *de trop*.

It is mercy—the forgoing of that to which one has a clear right—that makes least sense and that, for this reason, is so often taken as the core of religion. The Tanakh, the New Testament, and the Qurʾan—perhaps precisely because they arose in a culture of such fierce revenge—make mercy the quality by which the deity most wishes to be known. *Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim*—"In the name of God, the compassionate the merciful": So begin all serious statements in Muslim cultures. "Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin, yet letting nothing go unchecked, and punishing the parent's fault in the children and in the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6)—the quote bespeaks a struggle, does it not? It opens celebrating mercy but ends nostalgic for revenge. In the Talmud, Tractate Berachot 7a, God is said to pray: "May it be my

[44] René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris, 1972).

will that my mercy may suppress my anger . . . so that I may deal with my children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice." And Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:33).

Mercy entails the surrender of something to which one has a perfect right; and so long as the focus remains on right and wrong, and on the righting of wrongs, mercy plays no role. But that it plays none does not mean that material equity is ever actually achieved. On the contrary, if a truly equitable settlement is a rarity in our divorce courts, it is an impossibility in the aftermath of major armed conflict: Some always come out winners, and others losers. Derek Evans, former deputy secretary-general of Amnesty International for postwar mediation, compares the usual result of post-conflict mediation to a divorce in which the parties are neither reconciled nor separated, and so conflict always threatens to break out again. True separation could be a solution, but separation is decreasingly possible in our overcrowded world. What, then, are the resources for reconciliation? If we judge as the jury for the Nobel Peace Prize judges, one such resource would seem to be the religious leader who enables the alienated to make religious virtue of their human necessity by forgiving rather than avenging the wrong that they have suffered. Among the leaders who have played some such role are Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, Mother Teresa, Desmond M. Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo and José Ramos-Horta, Kim Dae-jung, and Jimmy Carter. The Editor asks specifically about clerical elites and their potential to foment or quell violence. A few on this list are actual clergymen, but others are laymen, even secular officeholders, who—like Kim Dae-jung—publicly or privately invoke religion as their motive to seek peace.

Mercy is supremely irrational and yet may be the price of peace. Your children are living in my house. My children are freezing in a refugee tent. But with my God I look down upon you and forgive you because we are merciful, he and I. It may not be because religion is the restatement of material interests in symbolic form that it lives on but, paradoxically, because it offers, sometimes, an indispensable path to the renunciation of material interest when nothing less than renunciation will suffice. Justice must be pursued; but when that pursuit has gone as far as it can go, mercy may close the remaining gap.

David Sloan Wilson, author of *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, sees this kind of voluntary renunciation as rooted in the genetic predisposition of the human species, as a "dispersed organism," to organize into societies that can function only by mutual dependence and a variety of renunciations or, if you will, acts of mercy. In his most recent book, *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives*, Wilson cites the anthropologist C. M. Turnbull, who wrote in the 1960s of Mbuti master hunters who would share the catch because to do otherwise would "displease the forest."[45] Advanced societies may achieve relative or temporary independence from the human

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[45] David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago, 2002); Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives* (New York, 2007), 56.

evolutionary heritage, but never absolute or permanent independence. They, too, may need the equivalent of the Mbuti forest to ground the renunciations without which they, too, may starve.

Ussama Makdisi: In this conversation, we have indeed run up again and again with our apparent need for generalization, some rule of religious action or thought which we can apply across space and time, and the job which I believe we all practice, which is to constantly historicize. To have significant meaning, the answer to the Editor's question therefore must be placed in a particular historical context. I think it is imperative that we do study the importance, prestige, and intellectual orientation, etc., of the clergy in a particular society at a particular point in time to help us make sense of particular episodes of religious violence, but I am (again) not willing (or frankly able) to go beyond that. As Nora has done for the case of medieval Europe, so must we do, say, for "Islam"—whether we are talking about the Sunni or Shiʿa Muslims. Without doubt, in the Ottoman Empire the "clergy"—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—played varying, often contradictory, roles in different periods: at some points they actively encouraged violence, at other times they mediated conflict, and on occasion they did both, such as in the first bouts of modern sectarian conflict in Ottoman Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century, during which the Maronite clergy encouraged sectarian solidarity but simultaneously also sought to contain uncontrolled popular sectarian mobilization.

I see the point as well that Jeffrey is putting across, but I wonder how useful it is to say that in Sunni Islam "every man is in effect his own pope." This appears to treat religion textually and ideologically and not historically, that is, to privilege what we distill as the "essence" of this or that religion or religious tradition at the expense of constant and vigilant historicization. An argument from theology is not the same thing as a historical argument. If we actually examine the historical record of the Ottoman Empire, there were so many institutions and offices—from the shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul to the provincial shariʿa courts—that it was hardly the case that Sunni Muslim religion or religious sensibility was ever articulated in individual or autonomous terms, let alone that there was relatively equal weight given to various interpretations of faith.

Philip Benedict: Historians who are themselves practicing Christians often are prone to revealing lapses when writing about the situations in which certain forms of Christianity encouraged and legitimized religious violence. They think that this really shouldn't be happening. Thus, even in as good a book as Robert Sauzet's recent *Au grand siècle des âmes: Guerre sainte et paix chrétienne en France au XVIIᵉ siècle*, the topic sentence of a paragraph explaining why Catholic missionaries in New France favored a violent solution to the "Iroquois problem" is the remarkably ahistorical declaration "The Gospel is a message of peace."[46] But one understands where such statements are coming from. Any fair-minded reader would have to agree that the emphasis of Jesus's message as conveyed in the four gospels is indeed upon

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[46] Robert Sauzet, *Au grand siècle des âmes: Guerre sainte et paix chrétienne en France au XVIIᵉ siècle* (Paris, 2007), 137.

forgiveness and nonviolence. And very, very few late-twentieth-century Christian churches or clergymen actively advocate violence against those who question their tenets, mock or desecrate their sacred symbols, or impede Christ's second coming. Very few can fairly be accused of legitimizing such violence through their preaching even if they do not call openly for such action. All major Christian churches have now rejected the doctrines that once prevailed within many of them that legitimized forms of religious violence in different times and places. In light of that, we have to answer in the negative to the very large generalization embedded in the question proposed to us: When a clerical elite eclipses in prestige the established secular leadership, are we in a situation ripe for sectarian religious violence? There are many Christian sub-communities in America and elsewhere in the world today where clergymen have greater moral prestige than the secular leadership, yet few of these are situations ripe for religious violence. We are in a situation ripe for religious violence only where the political theology of such groups claims that their vision of proper worship is the only acceptable one for the public face of religion, that God demands that those who commit blasphemy against sacred tenets be publicly punished, and that if the state fails properly to punish them, private individuals can do so, that the elimination of certain enemies can hasten the coming of the millennium, or some other such argument legitimizing violence against individuals or groups.

However much Christ's teachings as recorded in the gospels may have been a message of peace, historically it is evident that the content of what Christian theologians have understood to be "the Gospel" has varied over time, and that the Bible is a complex assemblage of texts from different eras whose total message lends itself to multiple interpretations, including ones that bring a sword rather than peace. The history of Christianity's relationship to violence in the name of its defense is a long and complex story that a growing number of historians are beginning to tell well.[47] There were many periods in that history when viewpoints and considerations that could encourage violence stood in tension with those that encouraged mercy and forgiveness. The sixteenth century in Europe, like the years 1000–1500, is one such period.

I would thus like to echo Nora Berend's analysis. Historians of the French Wars of Religion have recently drawn attention to the preaching and publications of a number of Catholic clergymen who directly encouraged violence against the Huguenots in the 1560s, appealing to longstanding traditions that linked the kingdom's prosperity to its freedom from the taint of heresy, arguing that it was the crown's sworn obligation to purge the land of heretics, and indicating that if the king did not fulfill this duty, others had to do it for him. On the Protestant side of the equation, a theologian such as Calvin occupied a very complex position. He appealed repeatedly to new converts not to express their displeasure at the false teachings and practices that had previously held them captive by attacking and removing the images or "idols" found in their local churches, unless the magistrates authorized their removal. To this extent he can be said to have directly opposed forms of religious

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[47] I especially recommend Jean Flori, *Guerre sainte, jihad, croisade: Violence et religion dans le christianisme et l'islam* (Paris, 2002).

violence. At the same time, the force of his attack on such forms of Roman idolatry contributed powerfully to legitimizing these kinds of acts in the eyes of those who committed them, and thus he can be said to have encouraged them indirectly. He also quickly embraced a series of debatable legal arguments that the Protestants developed to advance their cause and even was involved in raising arms for uprisings so long as the appropriate legal requirements were met.

How often did clergymen play a role as pacifiers and mediators as France was coming apart religiously? In the nineteenth century, legends grew up to the effect that certain bishops had intervened to prevent the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre from spreading to their town when instructions went out from Paris to kill all the Huguenots. These legends were exposed as such when historians came to realize that no letters ever ordered a general massacre and thus that no causes had to be sought for certain cities remaining calm in this season of violence. That these legends grew up suggests that by the nineteenth century, French Catholicism had come to reject "fanaticism" and to prize peacemaking more highly than it did in the sixteenth century. A small number of individuals did work to define a common ground that might reunite all Christians and restore concord, but without much success. There may have been cases where churchmen were involved in defining the terms of the local pacts of friendship that the members of the rival confessions sometimes jointly swore. To the best of my memory, instances of this, or instances of clergymen intervening directly to stop an incident of violence that was about to break out, haven't yet been identified. But this may just reflect the historiography of the subject. Until very recently, historians have been busier trying to understand the logic of religious violence than cases where it was prevented. The key point that I would stress once again is that in this period a variety of specific attitudes and convictions within the religious outlook of both churches encouraged or legitimized violence; other attitudes and convictions encouraged and legitimized peace and nonviolence. Understanding these specific convictions and their precise, shifting mix is essential to making sense of both clerical attitudes and the wider influence they could exercise.

AHR Editor: Throughout this conversation we have been pulled, sometimes tentatively, sometimes reluctantly, along several axes. One is from the particular to the general, where several of you have voiced discomfort with the intellectual compromises and papering-over that this inevitably entails. Another is that which moves from West to East. Here, Ussama, in particular, has warned us against comparisons that are as invidious as they are historically inaccurate. There is also a third, intersecting axis: from the remote past to the contemporary present. As historians, I think most of us usually operate without much concern for the present-day relevance of what we research, write, and even teach—which in a sense is how it should be. After all, the essential remoteness of the past, its specificity in a time (and place) *not* our own, is part of what makes the knowledge we generate important and unique. But clearly we are also called—by our students, by an interested public, by our own awareness and conscience—to reflect on the relationship between what we know and study and what is happening in our world that cries out for some move toward comparison. Sometimes, as in our conversation, the really proper move is to insist that

the comparison is unwarranted, misleading, or even mischievous, especially in the face of a public so hungry for simple analogies disguised as explanations. But surely we can conceive of legitimate responses that go beyond this cautionary, essentially negative reaction. Readers of this conversation will come to it alert to the contemporary relevance of this topic. Indeed, I would be less than honest if I did not admit—no surprise—that it was conceived with the contemporary world in mind. My sense is, however, that professional historians are somewhat reluctant to confront and discuss out loud how they think about the past they write about and the present they live, for fear that it would compromise the disinterested stance they cultivate. The question, then, is to ask you to reflect on how you respond—and with our topic in mind—as a professional student of the past to the pull of the present.

Stephen Ellis: I think most writers on historiography or on the philosophy of history would agree that reconstructing the past always involves our current situation. We cannot dissociate ourselves from who we are. Even if we are investigating a very distant period, the questions we ask and the judgments we inevitably bring to bear are related to our point of view now. Moreover, the task of reconstructing the past in its full complexity is quite impossible, even if we had unlimited primary sources of information, and it therefore involves making choices. In view of this, any claim that historical research does not in some way reflect our present preoccupations would not be convincing.

We are being invited to reflect on what is sometimes called contemporary history. The latter could be described as the history of processes that are operative today. The methodology of researching contemporary history therefore involves, first, considering what are the most salient or interesting processes at work now, and second, determining in what period and in what circumstances they were formed or became operative. There is no doubt that this is a particularly hazardous undertaking. Perhaps rashly, it is something that I have striven to do for quite a few years. Originally I became committed to contemporary history not out of choice, but simply because after I had done my Ph.D. I had a couple of jobs outside the academy that required me to analyze contemporary events. I found my historian's training very useful, and since then, contemporary history is something I have become engaged in on my own initiative.

Even more than in other branches of our profession, contemporary history carries a risk of teleology. If we adopt the technique of identifying current patterns and then following them backward to see where and when they started and how they have changed over time, there is an obvious danger of losing sight of other factors and of producing a highly determinist form of history writing. I think this is probably the single biggest risk involved in the whole enterprise. But it can be countered by cultivating an awareness of ideas or events that seemed very important in the past but that hardly speak to us any longer because they do not appear to have had lasting consequences. This is something like what A. J. P. Taylor meant when he referred

to turning points at which history failed to turn.[48] Since the Editor has revealed that the subject of our current conversation was conceived with the contemporary world in mind, let me say that I have often detected this tendency to teleology in official (and sometimes also in academic) discourses on religious violence, by people who trace certain patterns of violence backward in time in such a way as to give the impression of an almost inevitable progression from one state of affairs to the next, a straight line from the past up to our own time. It seems important to be aware of the element of human error and of coincidence in human history and the fact that historical lines from A to B are rarely straight. In this respect, historians would do well to maintain a certain skepticism in regard to social science, which has had such a huge impact on history writing. Although social science can help us a great deal, there are many historical events and processes that cannot be understood by strictly scientific techniques alone. Why did the First World War start in 1914, and not a couple of years earlier? Why did it happen at all? Was it unavoidable? I don't think social science can answer these questions fully, any more than it can predict the future.

However, we are being asked to think not only about the roots of the contemporary world, but also about deliberate comparisons. I am sure the Editor is correct in thinking that historians instinctively dislike comparisons for the obvious reason that one is never comparing like with like. But I don't think it is very helpful for a historian to protest indefinitely that his or her own preferred period of study is unique and therefore not suitable material for comparison. If *we* don't make the comparisons, someone else will, quite likely a politician. This may cause us to think about what elements are really consistent in the human condition or in society over time, and how we can study them. Which brings us back to social science. It seems that we can neither fully accept social science nor fully reject it.

Jeffrey Kaplan: The Editor's question raises a particularly interesting set of issues for the historian in the current wave of religious violence and religiously motivated terrorism. Of course, the historian instinctively recoils from the public demand—and even more so from the demand of policymakers or intelligence agencies—to draw too close a parallel between the actions of contemporary actors and the historic contexts in which the actions are rooted. The complexity, however, is that religiously motivated groups are often explicit in their adherence to "Golden Age" models, will often couch their demands in the textually based language of the distant past, and will even base their contemporary demands on the restoration of conditions, legal systems, or the reconstitution of polities of the distant past. If the actors themselves raise the specters of past epochs, and if press and public demand of the historian to be told in accessible terms "what it all means," and if states themselves demand explanations of the seemingly arcane dreams of the "enemy" so as to better "understand" and thus "defeat" them, the historian's pleas that without vital historical context much of the meaning of the actions and events is lost are in vain. The cost

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[48] A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany since 1815* (London, 1945), 68.

of absolute fealty to this principle is irrelevance, and in the age in which we live, that can be a high price indeed.

The dynamic is not new, and examples abound, as do examples of the costs of scholarly irrelevance. In the U.S., the event that best illustrates the case is the disaster at Waco, Texas, in which the Branch Davidians under the leadership of a self-styled messiah named Vernon Howell (who dubbed himself David Koresh as a Davidian leader) rather clearly spelled out his aspirations to an audience of scholars—particularly historians of Christianity such as James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher.[49] For the FBI, however, Koresh was spouting "Bible babble," the warnings of historians were ignored, and the result was a tragedy for all concerned. The example is particularly apt, for in good historical fashion, the event itself is in the past. Even scholars of new religious movements, the most critical of our number about the actions of state authorities, have in the last few years concluded their interviews with surviving members of the community and come to a rough consensus on the events. But here was an example, somewhat contra to the spirit of the Editor's question, perhaps, where the distant (biblical) past and the present came together in a way in which the historian had a unique insight to offer the public and the authorities without compromising, I believe, his or her integrity as a historian.

Stephen's observation on the teleological nature of history is interesting in this regard. In the view of religiously motivated terrorists, and to a degree the most extreme of the communities that the media lumps together under the convenient heading "fundamentalists," history is not only teleological, but it runs in one continuous stream. The distant past was just yesterday, the eschatological future is tomorrow (or perhaps sooner), and all this has practical implications for the movements themselves, and thus for the historian called on to explain the movements to a perplexed public and their elected representatives.[50]

Examples again? One of the best which comes to mind was Gush Emunim in Israel. To make their intense focus on the Whole Land of Israel as the marker of redemption work (i.e., 1 centimeter of the biblical patrimony put back under the control of Israel = 1 centimeter further in the messianic process of redemption for the Jewish people, and through them for all the world's peoples), the laws, commands, examples, and lessons derived from the Hebrew Bible as interpreted through the rabbinical literature that flourished in the first two centuries after the Exile must be seen as every bit as binding and relevant in the world of today as it was in the ancient days that the texts describe. The distant past was just yesterday. And by stringently applying these laws and principles, and especially by repatriating the Land to Jewish control, the messianic process is taken into human hands, much like fulfilling a contract. With

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[49] On Waco and the religious freedom questions it raised, see James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995). For a much wider-ranging consideration of the interactions of scholars, governments, and intelligence agencies, including primary source documents, see Jeffrey Kaplan, ed., *Millennial Violence: Past, Present, and Future* (London, 2002).

[50] How this works in the lives of adherents of radical movements is fascinating. For a number of fieldwork-based examples, see Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1997).

God's help, it could happen tomorrow—or perhaps this very afternoon. Not the stuff of the historical method, to be sure, but historians can well understand the process, would know the precedents, and can act in good conscience in the role of intermediary, translating the historical background of the "Torah Babble" or "Mishna Babble" of such groups into the realm of—as in the task that Jonathan Z. Smith famously called on historians to undertake in the wake of Jonestown—the "known and the knowable."[51] We have seen all this before.

The public educational role in this sense for historians is perhaps greatest in the Western world with regard to Islamist groups which make specific reference to the reconstitution of the Caliphate (although this is never done in very specific terms; the devil is always—as Nasser and the generation of the Arab Nationalists before them learned to their cost—in the details). Here, the appeal to history is so strong, and the knowledge of even recent Islamic history so utterly lacking among the Western public, that virtually any contribution made by the historian—or at least in so polarized an arena, the historian without an overriding personal or ideological agenda à la Bernard Lewis of late—could and should make a positive contribution to the public discourse without worrying overmuch about compromising his or her integrity by the unavoidable omission of contextual material.[52] For this, we have our classrooms, and at least in my own experience, three-hour blocks of time per week are barely sufficient to scratch the surface of what I would want my students to know in this field. But for the public, the press, the makers of policy, so dire is the image of Islam in many cases that what linkages we can make in explaining the ideology, the demands, or the future dreams of the movements which we study allow us to serve as bridge-builders. Some will listen, and take pause. Most will not. But we try, and that, I think, is what is important and unique about our topic.

In contrast to many historical disciplines, the student of religiously motivated violence or religious terrorism almost of necessity is thrust into the role of public scholarship. I was trained by Martin Marty at the University of Chicago, and in truth, despite my involvement in the Fundamentalism Project and contra Professor Marty's teachings and personal example, I was always, for many of the reasons outlined in the Editor's message, rather ambivalent with regard to the role of the public scholar. The misinformation and outright disinformation that has been the common coin of the post-9/11 American media has brought me, not for the first time and I'm sure not for the last, to see that Marty was right all along. Historians do have at times to, quoting the Editor, "compromise the disinterested stance they cultivate."

Nora Berend: I agree with Stephen on the impossibility of dissociating ourselves from our own times, and would like to challenge the notion, expressed by the Editor, that historians conduct their research in an ivory tower, cut off from the present. The rebuttal of such an idea was eloquently formulated by one of my favorite historians, Marc Bloch. Writing about a visit with Henri Pirenne to Stockholm, he reported that

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[51] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), 111–112.

[52] For example, Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford, 2002).

Pirenne wanted to visit the most modern building first, and seeing Bloch's surprise, said: "If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for ancient things. But I am a historian. That is why I like life."[53] Bloch maintained that it was vital to keep this link between historians and the present, that the ability to understand the living was a key to historical understanding. As with our judgments and questions, referred to by Stephen, our choice of topics is often influenced by the present. This choice is not the same as the manipulation of the past to suit a present ideology or aim.

Engagement with the present may even include direct partisanship by historians, as Eric Hobsbawm discussed. Debunking myths and standing up against the improper use of the past (such as "historical" claims to territories) can be a crucial aspect of historical writing. Such partisanship can be beneficial to history and academia as well as to politics.[54] I agree with Jeffrey that historians should make their knowledge available to the public in the hope that some may listen.

Historical method is the other way in which we can bridge the gap between the past and the present. As historians, we try to understand the actions of human beings. This is good training for applying the same analytical skills and critical thought to the present, as Stephen has done.

Thinking about religious violence, what I have found most helpful from my study of medieval history is the understanding that religion can be a real motivating factor, but that religion does not stand on its own, and needs to be understood in the context of a given society. That applies just as much to the present situation as it does to the Middle Ages. Religious conviction can lead people to incite violence through treatises and rhetoric, and to perpetrate violence against adherents of other faiths, "heretics," etc., but it does not always do so. Christianity existed for centuries before the invention of the crusades and continued to exist after their demise. Christianity in itself can be, but is not necessarily, a trigger for religious violence. Therefore we need to understand what conjunction of factors leads to religious violence. And that can be applied to religious violence in the contemporary world as well: the presence of religious ideas that can lead to violence, but not without the existence of other motivating factors. Analyzing rather than labeling religious fundamentalism, we can draw on our knowledge of the past. For example, it would be possible to compare medieval Christian fundamentalists (although of course they were not known by that name) to modern Islamic fundamentalists, studying the combination of religious beliefs and social context (which of course in their specificities will differ in the two cases) that created such fundamentalism. This would undermine any easy conclusions about the inherent characteristics of one specific religion leading inevitably to violence. Instead of facile analogies or comparisons based on superficial similarities, we can bring the analytical and critical method that we use for the study of the past to issues of the present.

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[53] Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire; ou, Métier d'historien* (Paris, 1993), 95–96.
[54] Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1998), 164–185.

Jack Miles: Let me respond as a consumer rather than a producer of history—that is, not as a fellow historian but as the opinion journalist that I have been and, intermittently, still am. Journalism is proverbially history's first draft; and because opinion journalists or pundits write the first draft of historical interpretation, punditry no less than reportage is a part of history's first draft. Increasingly, our leading pundits have advanced degrees and even academic appointments. George Will, Paul Krugman, Niall Ferguson, and Thomas L. Friedman are just four who come quickly to mind. And yet, as producers of punditry or commentary, they are, if only because they write on deadline, necessarily consumers of published history. As such, it is they, more often than professional historians themselves, who mediate the application of deep historical knowledge to incoming reportage on contemporary life.

My point is simply that when historical knowledge is sought for application outside the classroom, it is usually the press rather than the government doing the seeking. While working as an editorial writer, I developed great respect for the best members of the professional staffs of, especially, our best-educated and most experienced senior senators. But at the same time, I learned to expect organized expertise from these members of the permanent government mainly on a range of complex technical questions. One could turn to them for help on a topic like toxic waste disposal, but not for help with the historical background on the Third Balkan War. One sensed that on a topic like that one, they would be turning to journalism for help.

Let me close this last contribution to a conversation in which I am honored to have been included by taking up two more substantive questions inspired in part by the crash course I had to give myself on the history of the Balkans and in part by this very conversation.

First, when was the last time *before* the Third Balkan War (of the 1990s) that the West found itself threatened by a true religious war? Don't the textbooks that some of you have co-authored say that past the late seventeenth century, religious war generally faded away in the West? With one of our group, I have privately raised the question of whether Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* could be considered the last gasp of substantial, conventionally religious conflict before Slobodan Milošević. I set aside the rhetorical inflation of Nazism and Stalinism into pagan religions. I set aside the conflict in Northern Ireland as marginal, geographically contained, and finally nationalist. If, in fact, the Third Balkan War marked the first major recrudescence in more than a century of something Europe had not expected to see ever again, should we ask "Why the recrudescence?" or instead "Why the surprise?" The question matters.

Second, is the secularization/modernization paradigm really in trouble or not? The critique of it was familiar among social scientists well before 9/11, but I find this paradigm, on the whole, operative in much of the conversation I have just taken part in. Yes, 9/11 has forced the question of religiously motivated violence to the fore, but must one, in the process of problematizing it, concede anything serious to religion other than its intermittent capacity to motivate violence? If one thinks not,

then one tends naturally to seek other-than-religious explanations for even violence of ostensibly religious motivation. Thereby, I would maintain, one tends to reaffirm or rehabilitate the secularization/modernization paradigm. The specifically historical question—and for me, it truly is a question—is one of contending scotoses: Are our historians, the ones the journalists must turn to for help, seeing something as over when it isn't, or not over when it is?

Philip Benedict: In responding to the Editor's interesting question, I first have to ask: Do professional historians as a group really cultivate a disinterested stance anymore? Objectivity is not neutrality, as Thomas Haskell stressed in a very important review of Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*.[55] Disinterestedness is probably something slightly different again, on the far side of neutrality. All three terms, but chiefly "objectivity," may once have helped make up the dominant professional ideal. Now all three too often get scrambled together and rejected *en bloc* as an impossible delusion. Many historians make no bones about writing from a distinctive subject position with more or less explicit political goals. It has been twenty years since the AHA's Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession resolved that historians have a responsibility not to allow scholarship to be used against the interests of their political cause. One need hardly add that in carelessly rejecting the ideal of objectivity along with that of neutrality while taking transparently political stands, those who embrace and voice such positions undercut the real influence historians can have on public discussions by making it easy for the nonacademic public to dismiss historical knowledge as merely disguised special pleading. So let's rephrase this question and speak about the stance of objectivity and respect for the complexity of the evidence that historians cultivate. Some historians.

Surely most historians study the subjects they do in part because they think these subjects echo with their own time, and in part out of their sense as researchers that there are insights to be had or discoveries to be made about them that haven't been made before. The exact mix is probably different from case to case. As I look back on the evolution of my own research interests, I can clearly see that I chose the subject I did for my thesis because it had interesting resonances with the upheavals of the 1960s. My undergraduate professor had argued that the Catholic League, which I intended to study, was the first "revolutionary party" in European history. When I went to the archives, however, the sources didn't permit me to continue working on the League as I had expected. I altered the scope of my thesis, and since then my research has chiefly engaged with what seemed to me to be the most interesting large questions suggested by the friction between the archival documents I encountered and the prior reading I had done, both in the secondary literature of my field and in the social sciences more broadly. I've followed the meanders of my own curiosity—in the rich eighteenth-century meaning of that word—more than I have followed the solicitations of the present. Often it has only been well after getting deep into my research on a given topic that I have seen whatever contemporary

[55] Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 129–157; reprinted in Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, Md., 1998).

relevance it had. But when it suddenly happened that one of my subjects, religious civil war, came to have a degree of topicality it had lacked when I first worked on it, this provided strong incentive to continue working on the subject. I've now made it one of my goals to try to write the final product of my current long-term research project on the critical years of the French Reformation and the origins of the Wars of Religion in a manner accessible to general readers. As of yet, however, I haven't let go of my ambition to work through all the most important relevant sources before starting to write, even if there are times when I think that the subject is so timely that I really should get a book out on it soon, even if this means cutting some research corners.

I agree with the remarks of the others who have already said that while historians will always resist overly facile comparisons between past and present, they have an obligation to try to communicate to a larger public what they know about the past that is relevant to the present. This is not simply because if we don't try to explain these things to the best of our capacity, others will do so, and often less well. It's because providing as informed and balanced a picture of those aspects of the past relevant to present debates as we can is one of the most important social functions we historians have. We owe it to the public in return for their support of our research and the freedom they give us to follow our curiosity where it leads us. That said, I have to add right away that I haven't found it easy to live up to this obligation. It's *hard* to boil down the complexities of what we know well into the short paragraphs of journalistic prose. Some years ago I tried to write an op-ed piece linked to the four-hundredth anniversary of the Edict of Nantes. I wanted to suggest how the provisions of that successful edict of pacification with regard to questions of memory and forgetting, truth and reconciliation, differed from the practices for restoring order and justice in the wake of civil wars that many human rights activists advocate today. But I just couldn't write that kind of prose any longer, even though long ago I did so as an undergraduate working for what we then proudly called Ithaca's only morning daily. Maybe the problem was just that I only worked on the essay late at night—a sign of how low a priority these kinds of initiatives have in comparison with the classroom, administrative, and research obligations that press in upon us.

While we're in confessional mode, let me add that the question of how we should respond to contemporary concerns in our teaching is worth attention as well. Joining in this conversation has reawakened the sense of guilt I've felt ever since I let drop an idea I had in the wake of 9/11 to mobilize colleagues in religious studies who were specialists in the history of Islam and Judaism to create with me a comparative course on war and violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Such a course seemed to me an essential service to the university and its students when I returned to the States in 2002 after a year of research leave abroad. Alas, nothing whatsoever came of those good intentions. The specialist in Islam was on leave the year I returned from leave. Far from there being active university support for organizing new supra-departmental team-taught courses, attempting to do so meant overcoming all sorts of resistance from deans and chairs alike. The investment in preparation time required for such a course was daunting. I quickly took the measure of the difficulties and let the idea

drop. Joining in this discussion has shown me how much I and a lot of students might have learned from such a course and made me regret that so few universities have effective means for nurturing the creation of such courses.

So, yes, historians should not be so concerned about respecting every nuance of what is particular about their subject that they shun wider comparisons and questions suggested by present concerns, even while they are right to resist overly facile comparisons and questions framed in excessively loose categories. Informing a wider public about unfamiliar aspects of the past while showing their contemporary relevance isn't easy to do, and we should honor those of our colleagues who can do it well more than we do. We should also reflect about why so few academic historians do it as well as nonacademic journalists and historians, and what features of current American academia, both institutional and intellectual, account for this.

Ussama Makdisi: This last question is, for me, perhaps the easiest to answer. Most scholars who specialize in the Middle East are immersed, whether they like it or not, and whether they acknowledge it or not, in the politics of the present. Not all, of course, choose to respond directly to contemporary affairs. Nevertheless, in a manner inconceivable, I believe, for a French medievalist or an American antebellum historian, a historian of medieval Islam or nineteenth-century Ottoman history is often asked, at any rate often expected, to speak about current affairs. In other words, I don't think the field of Middle East history is nearly as insulated from the "pull of the present" as are many other fields of history. What also separates the field of Middle Eastern history from, say American or French history is the enormous mass of hostility, ignorance, and orientalism toward the Middle East in the public sphere. This is more akin to the "burden of the present" than any pull. This is something that Jeffrey has already raised in his reference to the "dire" image of Islam here. This hostility/ignorance is readily apparent in mainstream American politics, on the airwaves, and in the print media, which together have consolidated a belligerent attitude toward a diverse region of the world. My own students are not only deeply aware of, but quite steeped in, the pervasive discourse about a fanatical Islam. Moreover, those of us in Middle Eastern studies face today an unrelenting assault by organizations such as Campus Watch which are intent on muzzling academic freedom. Even now, tenure decisions are being subjected to brazen nonacademic considerations relating directly to the Arab-Israeli conflict. These are issues, I believe, which affect the integrity of the entire academy, but which are most acutely felt by those of us who work in Middle Eastern history.

The way to respond to this assault, or more generally to what the Editor has described as the "pull of the present," is to try to get students to think historically about present-day problems, rather than think politically about history. The distinction, for me, is crucial because it separates those of us who historicize from those of us who simply politicize the past. I would agree here, obviously, with the point raised by Stephen that we should impress upon our students an awareness, as he puts it, of ideas and events that were deeply relevant in the past but are no longer compelling, and also, by extension, of the contingency of ideas that seem so timely today—on

this note I cannot help but ask why we always frame the problem of 9/11 as a question of "religious violence" as opposed to simply "political violence"—as if contemporary Islamic fundamentalism/fanaticism/radicalism (whatever one chooses to call it) can be and must be analytically separated from American policies and violence in the region, or from repressive Arab and Israeli state policies. By framing the problem as "religious violence," we seem to be encouraging comparisons to "Christian" or "Jewish" violence, even medieval episodes of such violence, as suggested by Nora. In any case, rather than start from today and think backward, which is what I believe most students are inclined to do when they enter our classrooms, it is imperative that we reverse this way of thinking and illustrate how and why the contemporary political positions which seem so entrenched, so fixed, so natural, were constructed and have changed over time. As Jeffrey admits, we may not have much of an effect, we may ultimately educate only a small percentage of our students, but that should not stop us from trying.

The more difficult assignment is raised by Philip and Jack, namely how to insert ourselves effectively into the public arena, where our knowledge is not necessarily a comparative advantage—perhaps it is even a disadvantage. Journalists are trained to compress, and have less difficulty and inhibition about generalizing than we historians do. The problem, as I reflect on what is out there in terms of accessible histories about the Middle East, is not so much our willingness to engage in the public arena, but our ability to change an entrenched discourse even when we do enter this arena. Philip seems to indicate that if we don't, others will; my fear, given how the Middle East is still being represented (despite the efforts of a generation of scholars from all backgrounds who took seriously books such as *Orientalism*), is that even if we seek to make ourselves "relevant," it takes far more than historians to change public perceptions.[56] Despite the sincere attempts to recover silenced voices of the past, from slaves in the United States to the subaltern in colonial India, here we are in 2007 with Guantanamo, and not much we can do about it. My fear is that we are only able to make an impact after the fact, when, as it is said, the question is merely academic.

AHR Editor: This has been a wide-ranging, stimulating, and long conversation. Just as it has prompted several of you to reflect upon these matters in different ways—especially in terms of comparisons across time and religious cultures—so I hope readers will come away from this discussion with a renewed appreciation of the advantages of sharpening our knowledge against the grain of others' expertise. Ussama's final, rather pessimistic comment about the dubious impact of historians beyond the academy is, I fear, well-placed. But if we truly believe that—beyond any specific ideological positions or policy prescriptions—the most important lesson we as historians have to impart to a wider public ultimately rests on the conviction that ignoring historical context and the specificity of historical experience can only produce error and ignorance, then our job is clear: to keep doing what we do best but try to do it in a way that does not exclude all but scholars. This is, indeed, one of the impulses behind this very Conversation.

[56] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

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