



The Sacrifice of Isaac, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1602).

Session 3 – Sacred Violence

“...there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 1940.

Session Goals



Max Beckmann, *Die Nacht*,
1918-19.

7:00pm Welcome and Introduction

7:10pm [First Breakout Room](#)

7:20pm The Violence of 1096

7:35pm [Second Breakout Room](#)

7:45pm A Contemporary Justification of Sacred Violence

7:55pm How Do Our Religious Traditions Grapple with the Realities of Sacred Violence?

8:10pm [Third Breakout Room](#)

8:25pm Parting Thoughts

8:30pm Adjourn



What is the Origin of Sacred Violence?



In the Beginning was the Word.

John 1

In the Beginning was the Deed.

Goethe, *Faust*

In the Beginning is the Relation.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

A Few Assertions:

1. Sacred Violence can be found in seemingly every religious tradition, not only in its holy wars but in its sacred rites.
Violence protects the sacred.
2. Violence is a universal problem and manifests in many different ways.
3. Thinking about the link between acts of destruction and religious thought has been pondered by a diversity of scholars, ranging from anthropologists to literary theorists. We all think about violence.
4. In an interreligious setting, we need to resist the impulse to argue that *my religious tradition is less violent than yours.*



W. Kandinsky, *Cossacks*, 1910-11.



Is there any other way to return home?
Arpita Singh, 2019.

Breakout Room #1:

What is so sacred to you that you would defend it with violence?

Do you think violence is necessary to support or justify a greater good?

How Do We Define “Sacred Violence?”



Mirror of Humanity, Joseph Kangi, South Sudan, 2019.

1. Even today people often justify violence in the service of a “greater good.”
2. What happens when we value ideas or culture more than people?
3. Answering this question is essential to understanding the category of “Sacred Violence.”
4. The Crusades offer countless examples of how extreme violence leads to extreme—at times, unthinkable—responses to it.

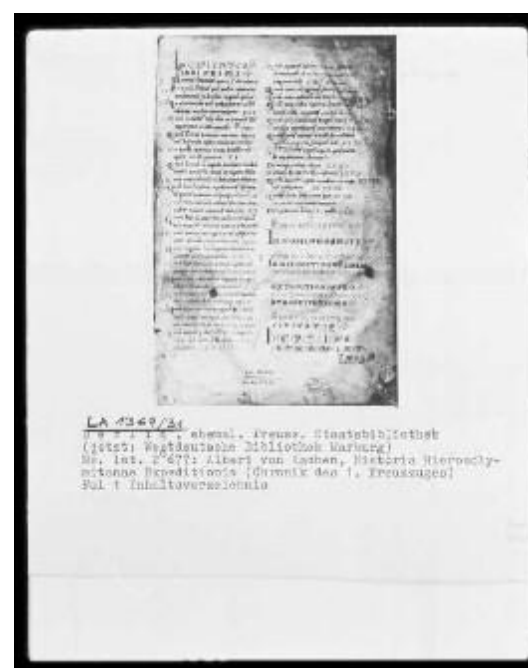
The Violence of 1096



Miniature of Peter the Hermit leading the People's Crusade, Avignon, 14th century,



Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz ve-Zarfat



Historia Hierosolymitanae expeditionis

Shlomo ben Shimson Chronicle and Albert of Aachen (or Aix)

“They said: ‘Why are they occupied with doing battle against the Muslims in the vicinity of Jerusalem? Indeed among them is a people which does not acknowledge their deity. What is more, their ancestors crucified their God. Why should we let them live? Why should they dwell among us? Let our swords begin with their heads. After that we shall go on the way of our pilgrimage.’”

“Behold we travel to a distant land to do battle with the kinds of that land. We take our souls in our hands in order to kill and subjugate all those kingdoms which do not believe in the Crucified. How much more so [should we kill and subjugate] the Jews, who killed and crucified him.”

Hebrew Chronicle According to Shlomo ben Shimson in Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, 47.

“Let us take vengeance first upon them. Let us wipe them out as a nation; Israel’s nation will be mentioned no more. Or let them be like us and acknowledge the son born of menstruation.”

The Mainz Anonymous in Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, 1.

“They cried out and gathered—all who bore and unsheathed [a sword], from great to small, saying: ‘Behold the time has come to avenge him who was crucified, whom their ancestors slew. Now let not a remnant or residue escape, even an infant or suckling in the cradle.’”

Hebrew Chronicle According to Shlomo ben Shimson in Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, 49.

“It came to pass on the new moon of Sivan that the wicked Emicho—may his bones be ground up on iron millstones—came with a large army outside the city, with crusaders and common folk. For he also said: ‘It is my desire to go on the crusade.’ He was our chief persecutor. He had no mercy on the elderly, on young men and young women, on infants and sucklings, nor on the ill. He made the people of the Lord like dust to be trampled. Their young men he put to the sword and their young pregnant women he ripped open.”

Hebrew Chronicle According to Shlomo ben Shimson in Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, 49.

Albert of Aix



Albert von Aachen zu Füßen Christi –
Fresko in der Apsiskalotte der Kirche des
Klosters Knechtsteden (around 1160).

First Report (Cologne)

“When the Jews saw this cruelty, approximately two hundred took flight by boat in the silence of the night to Neuss. The crusaders, discovering them, inflicted upon them a similar slaughter and despoiled all their goods leaving not even one alive.”

From: *Recueil des historiens des croisades, historiens occidentaux* (5 vols; Paris 1844-1895), IV., 292.



Charles Joseph Auguste Migette, The Massacres of the Jews of Metz, 19th century

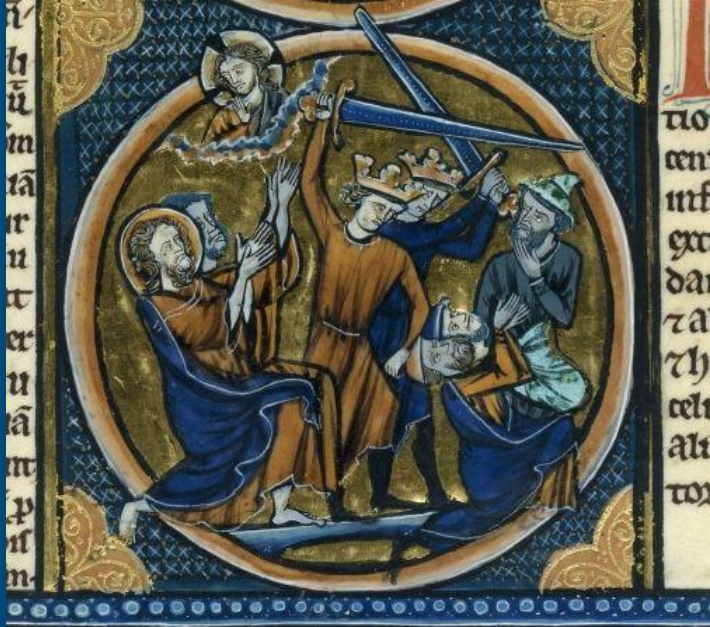
From: *Recueil des historiens des croisades, historiens occidentaux* (5 vols; Paris 1844-1895), IV., 293-94.

Second Report (Mainz)

“Emicho and the rest of his band held a council and, after sunrise, attacked the Jews in the courtyard with arrows and lances. When the bolts and doors had been forced and the Jews had been overcome, they killed 700 of them, who in vain resisted the attack of so many thousands. They slaughtered the women also and with the point of their swords pierced young children of whatever age and sex. The Jews, seeing that their Christian enemies were attacking them and their children and were sparing no age, fell upon one another—brothers, children, wives, mothers, and sisters—and slaughtered one another. Horrible to say, mothers cut the throats of nursing children with knives and stabbed others, preferring to perish thus by their own hands rather than be killed by the weapons of the uncircumcised.

Third Report (Shlomo ben Shimshon)

“After the children of the holy covenant who were in the archbishop’s chambers were killed, the crusaders came upon them, to strip the corpses and to remove them from the chambers. They threw them naked to the ground through the windows—heap upon heap, mound upon mound, until they formed a high heap. Many were still alive as they threw them. Their souls were still attached to their bodies and they still had a bit of life. They signaled to them with their fingers” ‘give us a bit of water that we might drink.’ When the crusaders saw them, they asked: ‘do you wish to sully yourselves? Then we shall give you water to drink and you will still be able to be saved.’ They shook their heads and looked to their Father in Heaven, saying: ‘no.’...



“Bible Moralisée”, 1250.



A 19th-century stained-glass depiction of Urban receiving St. Anselm, exiled from England by William the Red amid the Investiture Controversy.

Third Report (Shlomo ben Shimshon) continued....

“They pointed with their fingers to the Holy One blessed be He, but could not utter a word from their mouths as a result of the many wounds which had been inflicted upon them. They continued to smite them mightily, beyond those earlier blows, until they killed them a second time.”

From: Hebrew Chronicle According to Shlomo ben Shimshon in Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, 14.

Breakout Room 2

Please consider the following quote:

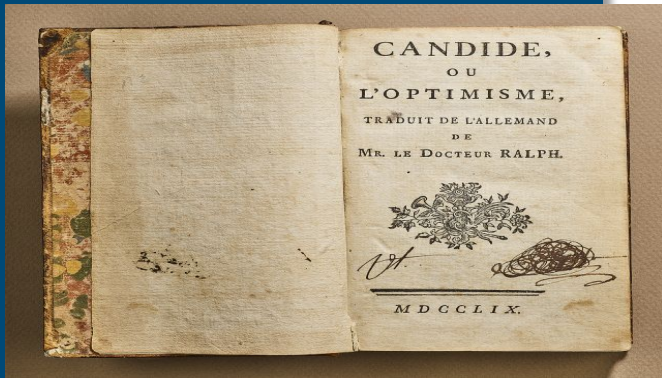
“When the crusaders saw them, they asked: ‘do you wish to *sully yourselves*? Then we shall give you water to drink and you will still be able to be saved.’ They shook their heads and looked to their Father in Heaven, saying: ‘no.’...”



Jews Burned to Death in Strausburg,
anonymous, 1349.

1. Kindly think about the language. Crusaders are mocking Jews by asking if they would “sully themselves” in order to convert to Christianity. Why not simply ask, will you repent, convert, and be saved? What’s the message here?
2. If the Jews in this account answered “yes,” do you think their fate would have been different?
3. How is this an example of “sacred violence?”

A Contemporary View: Pangloss's Law Is Violence always evil?



Voltaire's *Candide*, Geneva, 1759. Rare Book Division, NYC Public Library.

1. Divine examination, evaluation, calculation, and choice operate within a complex economy in which good and bad could be transferred and exchanged.
2. Leibniz wrote, “if a lesser evil is relatively good, so a lesser good is relatively evil ... to show that an architect could have done better is to find faults in his work.”
3. If this description of the economy of divine government is already reminiscent of the logic of contemporary wars, with its own scale of risk and proportionality used to evaluate the desired and undesired consequences of military acts, it should not be surprising to find in it an early reflection on the concept of “collateral damage.”

Collateral Damage



1. In this immanent order of human and divine life, the destructive result of floods, for example, are nothing but the collateral effect of necessary rain.
2. In their theological and military contexts, as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben observed, the collateral effects are **structural** rather than **accidental**.
3. It is through the collateral—*flood or blood*—that a government—divine or human—can demonstrate, indeed exercise, its power.
4. Here, in its secularized form, political rather than metaphysical, **a similar structure of argument sets up the sphere of morality as a set of calculations aimed to approximate the optimum proportion between common and necessary evils.**

Necessary Evil



1. Today when we engage with the problem of violence in moderation and minimization, mostly with state violence, it is managed according to a similar economy of calculations and justified as the least possible means.
2. The deeper question here is whether the modern notion of moderation of violence is a part of the very logic of sacred violence that we see in the Crusades.
3. Humanitarianism, human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL), when abused by the state, supra-state, military action have become the crucial means by which the economy of violence is calculated and managed.
4. The principle of the lesser evil is often presented as a dilemma between two or more bad choices in situations where available options are, or seem to be, limited.

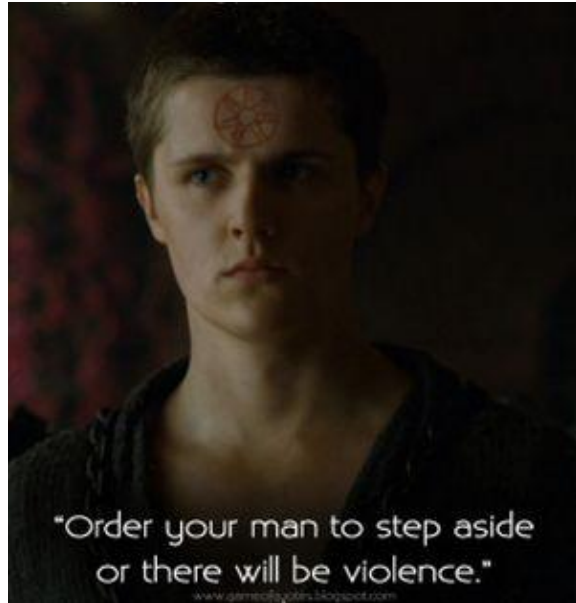
Is Choosing Necessary Evil morally good?



Portrait of Saint Augustine in 6th Century Fresco, Lantern, Rome.

1. The choice made justifies the pursuit of harmful actions that would be otherwise deemed unacceptable in the hope of averting even greater suffering.
2. Those who seek to **justify necessary evils** as “**lesser ones**,” especially when searching for a rationale to explain recent wars and military expeditions, like to appeal to the work of **St. Augustine**.
3. Augustine’s rejection of the principle of Manichaeism—a world divided into equally powerful good and evil—meant that he no longer saw evil as the perfect mirror image of the good; rather, in platonic terms, as a measure of its absence.
4. Since evil, unlike good, is not perfect and absolute, it is forever measured and calibrated on a differential scale of more and less, greater and lesser.

Choosing Violence



Augustine taught that it is **not** permissible to practice lesser evils, because to do so violates the Pauline principle "do no evil that good may come." But—and here lies its appeal—lesser evils might be tolerated when they are deemed necessary and unavoidable, or when perpetuating an evil results in the reduction of the overall amount of evil in the world. **This is when violence is necessary.**

The Dogma of Sometimes Breaching Dogma



1. The economy of the lesser evil is always cited as a justification for breaching rigid rules and entrenched dogma; indeed it is often used by those in power as the primary justification for the very notion of “exception.” [i.e. the less civilized?]
2. For example, Michael Ignatieff wrote that if governments need to violate rights in a terrorist emergency, then this should be done, he thought, only as an exception and according to a process of adversarial scrutiny: “Exceptions do not destroy the rule but save it, provided that they are temporary, publicly justified, and deployed as a last resort.”
3. So, would Hiroshima and Nagasaki be tolerated under the defense of the lesser evil?



Lee Krasner, *Living Color*, 1969.

How Do Our Religious Traditions Grapple with the Realities of Sacred Violence?

A Jewish View: The Rodef Sanhedrin 73a

1. In 1995, Yigal Amir justified his murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin on the basis that a public figure could be considered a *rodef*.
2. British historian Geoffrey Alderman argued that Palestinians in Gaza who voted for Hamas were *Rodefim*, and thus could be murdered.

מתנני' ואלו הן שמצילין אותן בנפשן הרודף אחר חבירו להרגו ואחר הזכר ואחר הנערה המאורסה אבל הרודף אחר בהמה והמחלל את השבת ועובד עבודת כוכבים אין מצילין אותן בנפשן:

And these are the ones who are saved from transgressing even **at** the cost of **their lives**; that is to say, these people may be killed so that they do not perform a transgression: **One who pursues another to kill him, or pursues a male** to sodomize him, **or pursues a betrothed young woman** to rape her. **But** with regard to **one who pursues an animal** to sodomize it, **or one who** seeks to **desecrate Shabbat, or one who is going to engage in idol worship**, they **are not saved at** the cost of **their lives**. Rather, they are forewarned not to transgress, and if they proceed to transgress after having been forewarned, they are brought to trial, and if they are found guilty, they are executed.



A Muslim View: Meanings of Jihad

The term “Jihad” is a complex theological concept that has acquired a range of meanings over the years to Muslims, but also to non-Muslims.

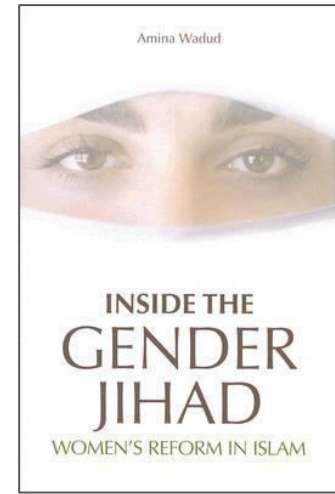
- Jihad in the Qur'an and the Muslim traditions: Jihad as pious struggle.

Muslim views

- Jihad as “holy war”
 - Osama bin Laden and the *Mujahideen*
 - Al-Qaeda
- Jihad as a struggle for social justice.
 - Amina wadud and the Gender Jihad.



Charlie Wilson and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan



A Christian Example

In the lead-up to the January 6th Insurrection, hundreds of thousands of Charismatic (spirit-filled, supernaturalist) Christians believed that demons were manipulating the election results to steal the 2020 election from Donald Trump. They believed that through spiritual warfare and political mobilization they could thwart these demonic aggressions, return America to its covenant destiny with God, and enact God's will for Trump to have a second presidential term. This spiritual-warfare mobilization was one of the central contributing factors to what became the Capitol Riot.



Appeal to Heaven flags referencing Dutch Sheets on January 6, 2021



Prayer Leader and Apostle Dutch Sheets

December 12, 2020



Proud Boys leading skirmishes in DC - December 12, 2020





The Two Fridas, Frida Kahlo, 1939.

Breakout Room 3

In defending culture or religion, can interreligious dialogue help us think beyond the choice of the “lesser evil?” Or, is sacred violence always the answer?