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Fighting for God: Scriptural Obligations and Holy Wars

We begin our discussion of religion and violence by focusing on the earliest and most elemental expression of religious violence, holy wars. The holy war perspective deals with the scriptural call and religious duty to engage in war, violence, and mass murder on behalf of religion. This perspective highlights, as perhaps no other one does, the close affinity between religion and violence found in many of the world's great religions. It is not easy—and perhaps downright uncomfortable—for religious leaders, theologians, clergy, and just plain, ordinary, pious believers to admit that at the center of the most sublime religious scriptures known to humankind is the obligation to wage war, to kill and to maim others in the name of God and his teachings. The fact of the matter is that despite all apologies and excuses, the scriptures and sacred traditions of the world's religions prescribe violence. Martin Marty, the distinguished Lutheran religious thinker and historian, explains that violence is not something alien to religion but has been a feature of religion from its origins to the present day. "Positive thinkers and public relations officers with a face would repudiate this notion or evade the fact. They want religion to be nothing but Godspell, good news. Yet, if the pursuit of truth is still to be cherished, one must note the feature of religion that keeps it on the front page and prime time: it kills."¹

The obligation to wage war, destroy the enemy, and dese-

crate their sacred places, is not a farfetched or an idiosyncratic outlook but something encouraged and justified by the earliest and most prominent prophets, saints, and religious messengers.² Holy wars and religious violence, in the view of the holy war perspective, are not aberrations or tangential to religious life but are at the very core of religious faith. This perspective insists that religious violence is not a cover-up for economic or cultural disputes or group competition and envy but a spiritual and theological essence of religious organizations. What this perspective teaches is that religious conflict and violent encounters are, above all, sacred struggles on behalf of religious truth and divine revelation. Holy wars are encounters between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between the children of God and the offspring of Satan. In this encounter, pious believers are not free agents permitted to choose between violence and nonviolence but are drafted into God's infantry to fight the Lord's battles and proclaim his message to all the world. This is not a mantle easily assumed. The burden is heavy and the dangers great, but if believers are to be consistent and faithful to their God, they must answer the call to arms and use every means possible, including murder, assassination, bombings, arson, and collective punishment, to fulfill God's mandate for war.

Holy war is a serious business and the protagonists are aware of the stakes involved. The scriptures are explicit in their directions: killings, murders, and mayhem must be carried out. There is a kind of brutal honesty in holy war rhetoric and religious warriors do not deny the death, suffering, and destruction that their violence will bring. To the contrary, this is clearly acknowledged and glorified as essential to God's plan for the universe. The enemies of a particular religion, including other "false" religions, idolaters, and defectors from one's own camp, must be destroyed so that the sacred prophecies foretold in the scriptures will come to pass. Believers are expected, perhaps even driven, to fulfill the divine mandate for violent struggle so that they may be deserving of God's blessings and ultimate redemption. Violence and religious wars are, in this view, pleasing to the deity and will pave the way for the much-longed-for eschatological and messianic transformation, for the endtime,

when the group's expectation of God's kingdom will be established. The faithful, however, are always in danger of the human temptation to substitute reasoning, compassion, and empathy for the victims in place of meticulous conformity to the religious direction to wage war. This is wrong and would only result in prolonged and perhaps greater suffering for all humanity, for these wars and violent outbursts, as bloody and terrible as they are, mysteriously will pave the way for ultimate peace and harmony.

The theologian Richard Rubinstein has shown that holy wars are not random and haphazard but are, to the believers, acts of faith which are eminently reasonable and "rest on a coherent principled theological rationale."³ The motivation is religious and the waging of war is a religious duty comparable to other rituals of faith and religious obligation. Rubinstein argues that these wars and violent conflicts are not meant to inflict pain per se—which they surely do—as much as they are an effort to use violence in order to transform the world into a moral order in line with God's decrees. Holy wars, then, have religious goals which will bring about an improved human order, well worth the costs of the human suffering. Other religion scholars have argued, similarly, that religious wars have emerged from the desire of many religions to dominate all aspects of social and personal life and that victory in war will enable them to be the sole power to properly govern social, religious, and political life. Brian Victoria, a Soto Zen priest who has written about the strong involvement of Japanese Buddhism in Japan's wars, sees holy war as religion's refusal to purge itself of what he calls "tribal consciousness" and acknowledge a universal humanity. Victoria argues that so long as religion is attached to its own parochial view of truth and revelation, holy war will continue as a legitimate form of religious activity endangering the lives of countless people all over the world.⁴

The Phenomenology of Holy War

Holy war is a necessary and essential element in virtually all religious systems. What are its characteristics and functions in com-

parative perspective? How has the concept evolved over time? How is it justified and legitimated in the light of other religious teachings stressing peace and human brotherhood? The most helpful way to understand holy war is to appreciate how the faithful—those who plan, execute, and ultimately kill or are killed in these battles for God—conceive, interpret, and explain their behavior. Firstly, through *theological reinterpretation*, these religious battles, involving violence and killing, are redefined as supernatural undertakings which cannot be explained through human logic and secular reasoning. The violence in holy war is not conventional human violence, where individuals or groups contend with one another for secular goals such as money, power, or status; they are sacred events, being fought for God and his honor. Indeed, they are, in this theological view, not violence at all. It may look like violence, but these are battles to bring truth and redemption, to inspire truth and faith for which even the fallen enemies will eventually be grateful. The religious battles taking place on God's command are never defined by scripture as events of violence; they are battles for justice. The God of the Hebrew Bible, for example, though portrayed as a warrior God demanding warring action from his people, is above all a God of mercy and justice who uses battle to create a peaceful and just world.⁵ In the case of Muslim holy wars, similarly, the religious conflict and the violence and killing that follows are carried on in the name of Allah and are meant to instruct and inform those who dwell in idolatry and ignorance.⁶ The violence against infidels is actually a call to those living in sin and ignorance to acknowledge the superiority and truth of monotheism and the rule of divine law as seen in Muslim scriptures and teachings.

Religious traditions certainly acknowledge the religious justification for religious wars but redefine them as *situational* events limited to divine directive. This means that the violence is not meant to be an essential part of the tradition but is, merely, a response to a pressing emergency situation as directed by God. In this way, the scriptural injunctions calling for peace, tolerance, and respect for life can remain consonant with the call for battle. The situational and temporary nature of violence com-

bined with the understanding that the war itself is not a fully human event but directed and sanctioned by God shows that the holy wars are not inconsistent with other religious teachings. For the religious community engaged in religious battles, holy war is a not challenge to the Golden Rule, "love thy neighbor as thyself" or of the commandment, "thou shalt not murder." Put directly, holy wars are not about murder, they are situational moments of divine-human cooperation in furtherance of God's plan for justice and human redemption. In religious thinking, holy wars are manifestations of what the sociologist of religion Peter Berger refers to as *cosmization*, activities that occur in the ordinary routine world of human existence but are simultaneously enacted in a supernatural realm of divine truth whose significance transcends all human understanding.⁷ Holy wars, as terrifying and violent as they may be, are among the most profound experiences of religious awe and divinity, for they link the religious warrior with God and the transcendental powers of the universe.

The earliest textual expressions of holy war occur in the Hebrew Bible. In the very earliest passages, God is viewed as an actual person, in the guise of soldier and general, fighting alongside his faithful. Gradually, this view of God's presence amidst holy war battle changes to that of a spiritual presence. The earlier holy war narratives also describe God as personally ordaining the battles, whereas over time God's wishes are communicated to the faithful through religious officials and, particularly in the contemporary period, through individual charismatic leaders. The scriptural cases of holy war are generally seen as situational and highly selective, while modern holy wars have become almost routine in some religious groups. Christianity and Islam incorporated many of the holy war elements from the Hebrew Bible but have added many ideas and beliefs from their own traditions.⁸ In the global world of the twenty-first century, holy war has become global and is a phenomenon found all over the world and in religious cultures far removed from Western monotheism and their tradition of holy war. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism, as well, have now incorporated elements of holy war in their religious out-

look. Each instance of holy war, as we shall see, has its own unique history, justification, and purpose. We can describe, however, three general, characteristic motivations for holy war:

- *Holy war is fought to defend religion against its enemies.* This idea of holy war is used to fight against those who are believed to threaten the spiritual or material well-being of the religious community. This includes governments and societies whose legal systems, political orders, and social organizations persecute and discriminate against one's religion or threaten the practice and free expression of religious life. These "enemies" of religion can also include, at times, secular governments that, though promoting the free expression of religion, encourage or tolerate cultural expressions like pornography, the sale of alcohol, or sexual practices which are seen as a danger to religious morality and the continuity of the religious community. "Enemies" is a relative term and a social organization or alien religion can be redefined, at any time, by religious authorities and be subject to holy war.
- *Holy war is fought to ensure religious conformity and punish deviance.* Here violence and war are pursued to protect "true" religion against heretics and those who challenge religious orthodoxy. This was frequently the justification for the post-Reformation wars between Protestants and Catholics and is today a major justification of jihad against modernizing Muslims in the Islamic world. It is also used to justify violence by ultraorthodox Jews against those Jewish groups they consider deviationist sects in their own communities. Christian extremists in the antiabortion movements have also justified violence against Christian prochoice groups on these grounds.
- *Holy wars fought under the direction of charismatic religious leaders.* This is a general and somewhat all-embracing category which legitimates violence as holy war when fought at the direction of charismatic leaders who are believed to represent the divine will. Charisma, the gift of grace, the gift of leadership, is a unique quality of leadership which

enables special individuals to endow their directions with sacred meaning and motivate individuals to participate in religious wars.⁹ Charismatic leaders often deviate from religious traditionalism and are frequently opposed by established religious authorities, but their religious and psychological hold on followers is so great that followers will obey the charismatic leaders' bidding, despite the objections of the traditional clergy. Rabbi Meir Kahane and Osama bin Laden are contemporary examples of such charismatic leaders. The traditional clergy by and large do not recognize their religious authority to declare holy war but their charismatic leadership enables them to declare holy war against those they define as enemies.

The Theological Basis for Holy War: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Judaism's approach to holy war is based on the biblical narratives which tell of God's covenant with Israel, where God promises the land of Israel to the Israelites as an eternal possession and commands them and their leaders and prophets, Moses and Joshua, to wage war against the indigenous inhabitants of the land, then called Canaan. God tells the Israelites to annihilate all the inhabitants and destroy all the Canaanite cities, leaving no trace of their civilization. To the Israelites, as the biblical scholar Harry Orlinsky once explained, violence and holy war was eminently reasonable, since they were to inherit the land by decree of the Almighty God, whom they called Hashem.¹⁰ The Canaanite nations who were to be dislodged saw things differently, but Deuteronomy 20 records God's instructions as absolute. The Canaanites were evil and idolatrous and had to be destroyed. The Bible puts the matter as follows:

But from the cities of these peoples that Hashem your God, gives you as an inheritance, you shall not allow any person to live. Rather you shall utterly destroy them; the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivvite, and the Jebusite, as Has-

hem your God has commanded you, so they will not teach you to act according to their abominations that they performed for their gods, so that you will sin to Hashem your God. (Deut. 16–18)

The book of Joshua describes in great detail the various battles for the conquest of the land of Canaan and the necessary killing and obligatory nature of extermination decreed by God as a way to root out the evil and idolatrous culture of the local peoples. Israel's periodic loss of will and lapses into mercy for the indigenous population are derided by God and Joshua and are seen as only leading to greater and more pernicious evil. Total destruction, as in the case of the Canaanite cities of Ai and Jericho, is applauded and shown to be a true sign of religious fidelity, while mercy for the Canaanites, occasionally shown, is derided as moral weakness and infidelity to the Lord, Hashem. The Bible records that residents of entire cities were to be killed, leaving no person alive. After the final destruction of the prominent city of Ai, special sacrifices were brought on behalf of the community to Hashem and the entire Torah, the extant scriptures and traditions, was read in reverent and joyous celebration. The destruction of the city of Ai is a milestone in the holy war quest of the Holy Land.

All who fell on that day, both men and women, were twelve thousand, all the people of Ai. Joshua did not withdraw his hand that he had stretched out with the spear until he had destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Only the animals and booty of that city Israel took as spoils for themselves, according to the word of Hashem, which he had commanded Joshua. Joshua burned Ai and made it a wasteland until this day. (Josh. 8:25–29)

In these narratives, we see the essential Jewish understanding of holy war. It is war ordained by God to conquer or restore Jewish sovereignty to the land of Israel, which is covenantally promised by God to the Jewish people. This original motivation for holy war has been enshrined in Jewish history and jurisprudence as *milchemet mitzvaah*, an obligatory war, and has come to

mean that whenever feasible, a religious war must be fought for the maintenance of Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. In the course of Jewish history other categories of holy war evolved, including holy wars of defense and religious wars fought in honor of religious teachings, referred to in Jewish theology as wars for the "sanctification of God's name," *kiddush Hashem* wars. However, all these later versions of holy war are based upon the original biblical formulation for the conquest of the Holy Land in ancient Israel.¹¹

After the Babylonian exile from the land of Israel in 70 C.E. and the loss of Jewish political autonomy, the concept of holy war was felt to be irrelevant to a dispersed and stateless Jewish community. Many leading rabbis proclaimed the holy war obligation to be null and void in the historical situation of statelessness and claimed that only a miraculous and supernatural divine intervention could restore Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. However, other authorities, including the authoritative medieval commentator and jurist Moses Maimonides, go so far as to rule that despite the exile and the impossibility to wage war, holy war remained a religious obligation, if only through a ritualistic and liturgical reenactment.¹² The theological basis for holy war was deeply embedded in Jewish law and tradition and remained so during centuries of Jewish exile. The Zionist movement and the 1948 proclamation of an independent Jewish state of Israel in the Holy Land restored the practical relevance of holy war theology and showed once again how theological ideas and sacred history can influence international affairs.¹³

The Christian approach to holy war is based, in large measure, on earlier biblical traditions and, although Christian theology has preferred the term "just war," the just war doctrine has functioned effectively, as James Johnston illustrates, as holy war doctrine.¹⁴ The Christian understanding, following the writings of classical thinkers, is that violence and a "call to arms" are justified to defend threats to Christian religion and to punish heretics. "The enemies of the church," wrote the authoritative Christian jurist Gratian, "are to be coerced even by war."¹⁵ Although Christianity, in its beginnings, was pacifist and opposed to violence of any sort, many historians argue that only so long

as Christianity was a sectarian and minority religion could it hold on to its pacifist sensibilities. When Christianity became identified with the Roman state, it was forced to defend its doctrines. Being in power and concerned with security and order gradually forced Christianity to articulate a holy war doctrine to justify violence in the name of religion.¹⁶

Theologically, as well, Christianity as a world religion had to protect its doctrines from theological contamination, and the just use of war and violence was understood as a way of preserving the genuine and authentic Christian faith. As a universalistic faith meant to offer the sole possibility of salvation for all humanity, Christianity viewed all other religions as false and therefore dangerous to the spiritual well-being of the faithful. Enemies of Christianity came to mean, over the course of Christian history, not only those who represented a material threat to Christianity but also sectarians and heretics who rejected conventional and official Christian orthodoxy. Non-Christians, including Muslims and Jews who rejected the Christian savior and continued their own religious beliefs and practices, were similarly enemies of the church, and force and violence against them were justified. The underlying idea in justifying Christian violence was that the church had the sacred obligation and divine mandate to oust evil and champion the true word of God and, in this way, continue as "God's obedient and faithful servant."¹⁷ The various wars, persecutions, and inquisitions throughout Christian history need to be viewed in the context of the church's self-understood obligation to defend "correct faith" against the dangers of heresy and alien faith.¹⁸ These wars, mass murders, and the planned destruction of towns and communities where enemies of the church lived were justified as a religious duty to protect the faithful and maintain Christian communal life and religiosity. The Crusades, while surely influenced by a variety of economic factors, were very much a holy war for Christianity to maintain theological and social control and to stop alien religions and heretical sects from having undue power and influence. On the way to conquer the Holy Land from the Muslims by force of arms, the crusaders destroyed dozens of Jewish communities and killed thousands because the Jews would not ac-

cept the Christian faith. Jews had to be killed in this religious campaign because their very existence challenged the sole truth espoused by the Christian church. The Jews, in the words of the liturgy, were “perfidious” and were seen by the masses as responsible for the Christian savior’s death. Their very existence amidst Christendom was seen as a challenge and threat to Christian faith and intermittent violence pursued them throughout the medieval and early modern periods of Christian history. The Muslims were seen as a threat to the Christian faithful and murder and mayhem were religiously justified as the crusaders made their way to the Holy Land. The Christian-Muslim wars were frequently fought over territory, but an underlying motivation, as historians have shown, was the religious goal to remove their alien spiritual presence from Christian lands.¹⁹

In its role of defender of faith, the church declared war during the medieval period on any deviationist sect, orthodox or liberal, within the precincts of Christianity. Two such Christian groups persecuted and killed over the course of several centuries were the Albigensians and Waldensians, who espoused a more rigorous piety than the medieval church thought justified. This involved, in the case of the Albigensians, complete celibacy for all Christians and, for both of these groups, the establishment of alternative clerical hierarchies. Members of these groups, who were defined as threats to the church and to genuine faith, were labeled heretics, persecuted, and burned at the stake.²⁰ During the Reformation, wars between Catholics and Protestants were fought all over Europe. This was a particularly stressful time of religious competition between Christian groups, and each side appealed to holy war arguments to justify violence against the other side. The influential sixteenth-century Swiss Protestant theologian Heinrich Bullinger, defending Protestant theology, argued that wars against Catholics were justified, for Catholics were blasphemers and violence against them could be regarded as the “defense of true religion against idolaters.” In almost the same characterization, the distinguished contemporary of Bullinger, William Cardinal Allen, justified violence against Protestants for their “wilde condemned heresies.”²¹

The Christian ethicist Jean Bethke Elstain is perhaps the lead-

ing contemporary Christian proponent of the “just war” doctrine. Elstain maintains that Christian values justify military strikes against terrorists and criminal regimes that engage in indiscriminate violence against innocent victims. Elstain makes the case that by not responding to the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s, for example, the United States was avoiding its moral responsibility to use its power to stop mass murder. The al-Qaeda attack on the United States, as well, permits military retaliation. Christians, argues Elstain, are not free to avoid confrontation but have a Christian religious obligation to engage in just, reasonable, and focused wars to prevent greater bloodshed.

However, Jacques Ellul, a highly influential French Christian thinker, has argued that a widespread sense of remorse over the violent events of European Christian history, together with the rise of secularization and the modern nation-state, has appropriately resulted in Christianity’s virtual retreat from engagement in holy wars.²² This view, now popular and influential in Christian mainstream theology, sees holy war violence as a relic of the past, part of Christian religious infancy. But recent and continuing events in Bosnia, Croatia, Ireland, Nigeria, and the United States put this conclusion in question. Be that as it may, Christian violence and just wars continue, although some Christian circles seek to distance themselves from these conflicts. Indeed, religious violence as scriptural obligation is now enjoying something of a renaissance in radical Christian liberationist movements, particularly in Latin America. These movements continue to invoke holy war justifications in their struggle for increased equality and material well-being for the world’s poor and needy.

Islam’s approach to holy war can be traced to the pre-Islamic polytheistic religious culture of Arabia. In the view of Islam, Arabian society at that time was living in an age of *jahiliyya*—an age of ignorance and a culture bereft of ethics and morality.²³ It was a time of indiscriminate violence and immorality, an age of barbarism where no person was really safe, and this state of *jahiliyya* was encouraged by the prevalent pre-Islamic pagan religious cults. The prophecy of Muhammad and the message of the Koran constituted a call by Allah to reject pagan practices and

immorality and establish an ethical and moral order in accordance with the will of God as delineated in the messages contained in the Koran. This meant that considerable effort and struggle—jihad, in the Muslim understanding—would have to be expended to transform a pagan, immoral society living in jahiliyya into a Islamic state governed by laws and authority which emanated from the one supreme God Allah. Practically, this meant that the struggle or jihad fought on behalf of Allah might have to involve coercive and violent battles in order to destroy the culture of jahiliyya and achieve the goals and society ordained in the Koran. Jihad could involve political or ideological battles, but jihad also could be a holy war resulting in death and destruction in order to obliterate an immoral social and political order and replace it with a Muslim community governed by divine law, *sharia*, as interpreted by Muslim clerics. The Koran was aware of the difficulties of waging war and conducting violence on behalf of religion and did not suggest it lightly. Nonetheless, it had to be done to eliminate immorality and establish God's order.²⁴

The scriptural call to establish a Muslim *ummah*, an embracing Muslim community, has led Islam since the time of the prophet Muhammad to divide the world between the lands and states under Muslim control, referred to in Muslim jurisprudence as *Dar al-Islam*, the domain of Islam, and those lands and territories not under Muslim jurisdiction, called *Dar al-Harb*, the domain or abode of war. The faithful Muslim's duty is to engage in religious struggle, jihad, to transform non-Muslim lands, the *Dar al-Harb*, into *Dar al-Islam* lands, governed by Muslim law. The goal of jihad is not to force individual conversions but to bring about the transformation, by force and violence if necessary, of non-Muslim areas into Muslim-controlled states, whereby they become part of the Islamic world, the *Dar al-Islam*. Islam from its earliest periods permitted monotheistic religions like Christianity and Judaism to maintain their religious institutional life within Muslim societies, but these communities, known as *dhimmi* communities, while permitted religious and economic rights, were consigned to an inferior status and subject to special taxes and obligations. Unlike *dhimmis*, citizens of

non-Muslim societies are seen as *harbi*, people living in a war zone and therefore subject to conquest. Bernard Lewis, the distinguished Islamic historian, has explained that holy war, in appropriate settings, is an essential element in the Muslim religious mission. "There is a canonically obligatory perpetual war," Lewis writes, "between Islamic civilization and non-Islamic societies which must be fought by faithful Muslims" until the whole world either accepts the message of Islam or submits to those who bring it.²⁵ The world, in the Muslim view, is divided between "Islam" and "war," and the devout believer must answer the call of jihad to advance Allah's message for all mankind. From a classical Islamic perspective, believers should throw themselves into an unending jihad until their religious duty of world transformation is complete. Despite these theological considerations, political reality, military strategy, and evolving religious understandings have modified Islam's approach to holy war. Throughout the course of Islamic history, the precise contexts and meanings of jihad and Dar al-Islam and the concomitant justifications for holy war have changed. In the earliest periods of Islamic history, when Islam was steadily advancing in the ancient and medieval world, it was assumed that all non-Muslim lands would be conquered and take their place in the greater Dar al-Islam. After the Spanish *Reconquista* and the expulsion of Islam from the European continent, the classical view of total and constant jihad was modified to fit the gradual loss of Muslim hegemony. Despite these changes and many other theological adjustments and controversies throughout the centuries to this day, the call to jihad and holy war remains central to Islamic doctrine and religious culture.²⁶

Contemporary Holy Wars: Case Studies

Judaism, Islam, and the Middle East Conflict

We now turn to a series of case studies describing and analyzing holy wars being fought around the world. We begin with the Middle East conflict, which is, perhaps, among the most serious

and dangerous religious confrontations. It threatens not only the immediate region with war and destruction but could envelop Europe and America in a global war, with the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons. This is not a new conflict and it has its origins in the rise of modern Zionism in the nineteenth century and the return of Jews in increasing numbers to the biblical Holy Land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Palestine, as the territory was known, was then a sparsely populated land with both a Muslim and Jewish populace but under the governance of the Muslim Ottoman empire. After World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman empire, the governance of Palestine was given over to Great Britain as a League of Nations mandate to run affairs until the territory could be equitably divided between Jews and Muslims. Earlier, in November 1917, the British government had issued the so-called Balfour Declaration promising a national homeland for the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland in Palestine, and Jews from many lands, particularly from Eastern Europe, emigrated to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. World War II and the European Holocaust, in which six million Jews were killed in European death camps, accelerated migration to Palestine and convinced Western governments that a national home for the Jewish people was necessary. After much diplomatic negotiation between representatives of the Jewish and Arab communities and because of the impossibility of establishing a pluralistic binational state, a partition plan organized and approved by the United Nations was put into effect and the historic land of Israel was divided between Jews and Arabs. One state, Israel, became a Jewish state, while the other was to be an Arab state.²⁷

The Jewish community in Palestine accepted the partition plan but the Muslim world, believing the partition arrangements to be unfair, refused to participate, and the first of several Arab-Israeli wars broke out in 1947 after the announcement of the partition plan. An armistice, but not a permanent peace treaty, was agreed upon in 1949, but violent clashes continued, with major wars breaking out in 1956 and again in 1967. The 1967 war, sometimes referred to as the Six-Day War but also considered by Muslims to be a "war of humiliation," was to have major reper-

cussions, as it changed the geopolitical arrangements between the two sides. Israeli forces occupied the entire Muslim territory in 1967, and several years later, under pressure from religious nationalists like the Gush Emmunim, the Bloc of the Faithful, began settling lands in the Palestinian West Bank, which the Jewish settlers called Judea and Samaria, the sites of ancient Jewish cities in biblical times.²⁸ By the beginning of the twenty-first century, some 250,000 Jews lived in dozens of communities on the West Bank or, in the Jewish nationalists' view, in the ancient Jewish homeland of Judea and Samaria. The new Jewish settlements on the West Bank exacerbated an already tense conflict between the two sides and considerable violence erupted as Arab groups organized a series of *intifadas*, violent protests, to force the Israelis from what they saw as their ancestral Muslim land. The Israeli army was called in to stop the rioting and protests, and this in turn resulted in a seemingly unending chain of violence and counterviolence. Some elements on both sides turned to terrorism and killings, justifying these actions in the name of holy war. Suicide bombings, in which religious martyrs are wrapped in explosives and blow themselves up in public places to cause death and destruction to the religious enemy, became not-uncommon events. As the twenty-first century dawned, the violent confrontations became more serious as both sides began using increasingly sophisticated weaponry, including rockets and massive suicide bombs able to kill hundreds of people in civilian settings.

Both sides have many justifiable political arguments and legitimate historical grievances, but the conflict, at its root, is a religious conflict over rights to a land both sides consider holy and exclusively their own by religious fiat. The Jews, given their theology and holy scriptures, consider themselves to be God's "chosen people," to whom God has given the entire land of Israel as an eternal inheritance as part of the covenant which God made with their biblical patriarch, Abraham. The Hebrew Bible in Genesis records the promises which traditional Jews consider binding to this day:

I will ratify my covenant between me and you and between your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an

everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and your offspring after you; and I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourns—the whole of the land of Canaan—as an everlasting possession; and I will be a God to them. (Gn. 17:7–9)

Even earlier in the biblical text, as part of God's initial encounter with Abraham, who is to bring the message of ethical monotheism to the entire world, God tells Abraham: "For all the land you see, to you will I give it, and to your descendents forever." For Zionist Jews throughout the world these divine reassurances are indeed eternal and no political arguments can alter the divine arrangements. Foreign armies and nations have come to the Holy Land and with superior weaponry and power have taken possession of the land but all this is transitory, in the Jewish theological understanding, as the divine bond between the land of Israel and the Jewish people can never be broken. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, one of the twentieth century's most authoritative Zionist thinkers outrightly denied any other claim to the Holy Land. In his words, "This Land is ours; there are no Arab territories or Arab lands, but only Israeli territories—the eternal land of our forefathers which belongs in its Biblical territories to the government of Israel."²⁹

The state of Israel, in this view, is not an ordinary political state and cannot engage in political compromise. The miraculous return to Jews to the land of Israel, in this view, is part of a divine plan for the redemption of all humanity, ushering in an age of peace and tranquility. The divine plan, however, is predicated on Jewish occupancy and sovereignty over the land of Israel. Consequently, the return of any part of the divinely promised land of Israel, any compromise over Jewish ownership, will retard messianic transformation and must be opposed.

The State of Israel is divine. Not only must there be no retreat from a single kilometer of the land of Israel, God forbid, but on the contrary we shall conquer and liberate more and more. In our world encompassing undertaking there is no room for retreat.³⁰

Islam, as well, is based on revelation and the special mandate of believers to create and maintain an ummah, an Islamic world community faithful to the sharia, the Muslim religious canon, and governed by the wisdom and learning of established religious authorities. In Islamic religious understanding, once an area has come to be part of the Muslim world, it is considered Muslim and should rightfully, forever, remain an integral part of the ummah. The areas of the Holy Land are, in Islamic understanding, Muslim lands, areas where Muslims have lived as an ummah for centuries and places where Islamic holy sites like al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and the Ibrahimi mosques in Hebron are located. The sacred site of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem is located where the prophet Mohammed is believed to have ascended to heaven, and this sacred area continues to be under Israeli political sovereignty. These lands and holy sites are part of an extended Dar al-Islam, which may never be ceded to non-Muslims. Consequently, the Jewish state of Israel is an illegal and illegitimate entity in the midst of the Muslim world, an alien society foisted upon Islam by a military financed by a Christian West hostile to Islam.³¹

For the Islamic faithful, this situation cannot continue to exist. Palestine must be returned to Muslim authority and control and restored to its place as an essential and holy part of the Islamic world. In the Muslim view, the conflict can be resolved if the current Jewish government agrees to the full return of Muslim land. However, if Israel refuses, a holy war is to be fought to destroy the Jewish state and to remove the Jews, by violence if necessary, and take all their property. The distinguished Islamic scholar Ismail R. al-Faruqi, a committed Muslim and a professor of Islamic studies at Temple University, objects to indiscriminate violence and terrorism against Jews but insists that the state of Israel "had to be dismantled" and a war fought to destroy "the Zionist army, state and all its public institutions."³² Al-Faruqi gives voice to deep elements in Islamic theology which would justify an all-out religious war, arguing that on moral, legal, and theological grounds, a Muslim holy war against Israel is justified.

Reality is recalcitrant of religious hopes and aspirations, and

despite decades of conflict and negotiation, neither side, Muslim nor Jewish, has had its religious vision realized. The state of Israel is only on a portion of the homeland promised in the Bible and is, in many ways, a pluralistic, secular state with a substantial Arab population rather than the all-Jewish religious state awaiting the messiah envisioned by the faithful. For Islam, the holy sites and much of Muslim Palestine remain under Israeli domination, and the integrity of Dar al-Islam has not been restored. A Jewish government and powerful military supported by the United States hinders Muslims from reclaiming their lands and holy sites. Moderates and secularists on both sides are willing and able to compromise and work out some political solution akin to the 1947 calls for partition. For them it is a practical matter, a sort of win-win proposition. For the faithful on both sides, however, it is not a matter of politics at all but of divine imperative. The call, now, is for holy war on both sides, for the faithful to destroy and remove the other and realize, finally and totally, God's will.

The Christian War against Abortion

Christianity, in the view of many Christian and non-Christian scholars, appears to be eminently a religion of peace and reconciliation in the modern world. For most Christians, war is a thing of the past, and much of contemporary Christian theology has taken on a distinctly pacifist stance. Nonetheless, the just and holy war traditions of the Crusades and the wars against heretics in medieval and early modern Europe persist in sectors of radical Christianity. The desire to root out evil and establish God's order in this world with acts of what these believers consider sacred violence is still a not-unimportant part of Christianity in the contemporary world.

Radical Christian antiabortion groups approve and encourage violence and bombings against abortion clinics and justify the murder of what they call "abortion workers": physicians, nurses, drivers, security guides—in short, anyone who makes it possible, in any way, for a woman to obtain an abortion. In the view of these Christian activists, abortion is murder and the

faithful Christian must act to stop this ongoing mass murder in America. Many Americans, surveys show, are similarly opposed to abortion, but while this opposition sometimes leads to civil disobedience and attempts to close abortion facilities, the mainstream groups all oppose violence as a means of opposition.³³ The radical Christian abortion opponents, however, consider the bombing of abortion clinics and the planned murder of abortion providers to be a religious obligation for faithful Christians. For them, mere protest and political action are an avoidance of the Christian's responsibility to create a Christian society faithful to the gospel. These Christians are members and followers of an informal confederation of ministers, churches, and antiabortion groups, many of which follow reconstruction Christian theology, which teaches that it is Christians' duty to transform secular materialistic society into a Christian theocracy which will eventually be able to properly welcome Jesus Christ when he returns in triumph to establish the kingdom of God. Followers of reconstruction theology have a postmillennial view of Christian history, believing that Jesus will return to earth only after Christians have reconstructed society to make it conform to the social and political morals and standards compatible with Christ's teachings. Not all reconstruction thinkers condone indiscriminate violence, but the movement urges its followers to do all they can to destroy secular American society and set up the Bible as the law of the land.³⁴

The murder of abortion providers and the destruction of clinics are all part of a self-understood holy war which Christians are fighting to create a Christian society. Violence is indicated and appropriate under the conditions of contemporary America, which is portrayed in the literature as a neopagan society where the killing of unborn babies has become routine. Neal Horsley of the Creator's Rights Party, a spokesman for this extreme antiabortion movement, writing in defense of *The Army Of God* manual, a radical manifesto encouraging and justifying bombing and terrorism against government installations, contends that violence is necessary and justified in opposing abortion facilities. In his view, the government's support and legalization of abortion is, itself, a "declaration of war" because

it gives people the right to “kill and slay” innocent babies. In a condition of war, Horsley argues, Christians have the right to fight back on behalf of the unborn and entirely innocent victims. *The Army Of God* position is correct, Horsley explains, in urging all sorts of terrorist acts because the “government of the United States has become a godless and apostate body” and violence is entirely appropriate to destroy such “idolatry.”³⁵ A similar stance is taken by Rev. Michael Bray, a Lutheran-raised graduate of a Baptist Bible college in Colorado who is the author of *A Time to Kill*, the influential book laying out the theological justifications for violence against abortion facilities. Bray, who was convicted in 1985 of destroying seven abortion clinics, explained in an interview that “Americans live in a situation comparable to Nazi Germany” and that Christians need to call attention to the nation’s depravity and immorality.³⁶ It is really only courageous Christians willing to serve time in prison or even be put to death by the state, in this view, who can save the nation from its downward spiral. Violence is, for these groups, a small price to pay for the ultimate transformation of secular, godless America into a nation living under Christian rule.

In reading the writings and speeches of these radical Christians, one is struck by how alienated, angry, and intimidated by contemporary culture they are. American culture and its separation of church and state, its values of tolerance and freedom of religion, its openness to non-Christian immigrants—all are seen as signs of moral decay and corruption and are, in this view, inherently anti-Christian. The United States, itself, has become a religious enemy. Paul Hill, a former Presbyterian minister who shot and killed a Pensacola, Florida, abortion doctor and his escort in 1992 and is now on death row in the Florida State Penitentiary, talks about “the inner joy and peace that has flooded my soul since I have cast off the state’s tyranny.” Hill, who willingly surrendered to police after his double murder, explains that the happiness and contentment he now experiences on death row is the result of the certainty of “having freely obeyed Christ after long being enslaved to fearful obedience to men.”³⁷ Hill acknowledges his murders and accepts his imprisonment and perhaps his eventual execution but justifies his behavior as

a “Phineas action” along the lines of the biblical priest Phineas, who killed an Israelite and his heathen consort for violating God’s prohibition against consorting with foreign women. In the biblical narrative, Phineas’s action is utterly pleasing to God and saved the Ancient Israelites from destruction. As recorded in Leviticus 25:10, God rewards zealotry, telling the assembled, “Phineas turned back my wrath from upon the Children of Israel when he zealously avenged Me so I did not consume the people the children of Israel in My vengeance.” Murder and holy war against abortion facilities, are, in this view, acts of compassion and redemption for a sinning nation. The biblical story of Phineas has been made contemporary and the actions of those involved in the killing of abortion providers and the bombing of abortion sites are compared to the hero of the biblical narrative. In this view, engaging in violence is a religious act.³⁸

While these Christian violent activists are outside the contemporary Christian mainstream, they nonetheless partake in a larger conservative and fundamentalist understanding of Christian faith which calls Christians to act against what they view as illicit and immoral political authority. This Christian imperative to stand up against evil, to wage war and engage in violence on behalf of the Christian mission, has been and remains an essential part of the Christian mosaic. Violence and murder in the antiabortion movement are understood by many as a direct continuation of the religious activism which once animated Christian history. When a Wichita judge in 1993 told the now well-known Shelly Shannon, a devout born-again Christian who fired at and wounded Dr. George Diller, a doctor at an abortion clinic, that what she did was morally and legally wrong, she replied, “That’s what they said about Jesus.” In speaking to sympathetic Christians, she proclaimed, “It was the most holy, the most righteous thing I have ever done.”³⁹

The American Christian antiabortion movement has been linked to about two dozen attempted murders and hundreds of cases of assault and bombings. From all reports there are not a very large number—probably only a few hundred—of active participants who are willing to participate in the planning and execution of violence. Nonetheless the movement, as *New York*

Times' writer David Samuels has shown, has a wide network of sympathizers and supporters.⁴⁰ Some provide safe houses and permit suspects to evade police by providing cover for the suspected assailants. Others help finance weapons purchases, transportation costs, and living needs. Still others provide public support by writing letters to newspapers and politicians in support of the religious violence or give large sums for the defense of those activists who are arrested. All see themselves—both those who contribute funds and those who pull the triggers—as Christian warriors motivated by religious faith and passion. They are convinced that it is God's work they do. The rather extensive infrastructure of faithful Christians who support the actual violence is critical to the success of the movement, which has in the last decade been able to severely limit access to legal abortions, and it is their continuing vision of an army of God marching to reclaim an idolatrous nation that empowers their struggle.

Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the Holy War against America

Perhaps the most dangerous holy war is the war declared in 1998 by the radical Islamic sheik, Osama bin Laden, and his al-Qaeda organization against the United States of America. Bin Laden is a charismatic Muslim radical sheik, born into a rich and prominent Saudi family, with thousands of followers all over the world who are committed to his program of militant Islam. The al-Qaeda network itself is organized as a secret society operating in terrorist cells all over the globe, ready to strike against enemy targets. For al-Qaeda, the United States is a "satanic" empire, a land of *kufirs*, immoral infidels who in consort with the apostate Muslim elites in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim states, cooperated with the United States in the 1991 Gulf War, and have, against Islamic religious law, permitted American troops to be stationed in the sacred precincts of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the United States is a land of sexual immorality and idolatrous beliefs and guilty of exploiting Muslim countries for their oil and other natural resources.

The United States, moreover, is seen as the world power rep-

resenting world Christianity and Judaism, “the Zionist-Crusader alliance,” in Osama bin Laden’s rhetoric, who are determined to destroy Islam. The United States uses all its power, influence, and foreign aid to subvert Muslim religiosity and Islamic institutions. Bin Laden’s call for war and violence against all Americans is based on his fundamentalist but highly traditional and pious interpretation of Muslim texts, which he argues demand that all Muslims participate in a holy war which will bring violence and death to Americans as individuals and to the United States as a nation. In several of his formal *fatwas*, religious verdicts or proclamations, bin Laden makes a case for Muslim holy war against the United States because of alleged U.S. involvement in the arrest of Muslim scholars, the destruction of Muslim governments and economies, the violation of Muslim holy sites, and encouragement of the massive abnegation of sharia in Muslim society. Failure to participate in his call to jihad will, bin Laden argues, result in punishment by Allah and can lead to recalcitrant Muslims who cooperate with the enemies of Islam themselves being labeled sinners. There is great theological sophistication and deep insight into Islamic law and history in bin Laden’s declarations, but also a complete rejection of the West as wholly evil and a civilization which conspires against Islam and all Muslim people and seeks to destroy them physically and spiritually. Western scholars and diplomats have underestimated the religious esteem in which faithful Muslims hold bin Laden. In his famous 1996 declaration to the Islamic world, particularly to the clergy and those knowledgeable of the sacred texts, bin Laden put it this way: “It should not be hidden from you that the people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusader alliance and their collaborators to the extent that the Muslims’ blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hand of the enemies.”⁴¹

Bin Laden’s writings have argued that the proper Islamic answer to these Jewish and Christian enemies is not political negotiation or religious dialogue but violence and holy war organized by Islamic clerics and their faithful followers. In his call for holy war, bin Laden has been able to selectively interpret

Islamic history, demonstrating, from his point of view, that war is the required response to the threats now posed by the United States in its role of oppressor of Islam. The United States and its ally Israel imprison Muslim religious leaders like Sheik Abdul Rahman, who called for the 1993 attack against the World Trade Center and was involved in the assassination of charismatic fundamentalist Sheik Abdullah Azzam in Afghanistan. Bin Laden's essays and writings always touch upon the humiliation that the West, particularly America, has caused to pious Muslims and their leaders. This rhetoric has had great influence on faithful Muslims and helps explain somewhat his continuing popularity and religious standing. Bin Laden calls upon the ummah, the faithful Muslim community, to rise up "against its enemies as their ancestor scholars, may Allah be pleased with them, like Ibn Taymiyyah and Al'z Ibn Abdes Salaam did."⁴² Invoking these great figures in Islamic history and scholarship has great resonance in the Muslim world, and sensitive and educated Islamic readers understand bin Laden to be part of a long line of Islamic warriors.⁴³ His Arabic poems are read and recited widely in the Muslim world and his language and style capture the flavor of the glory days of the caliphate and the era of Muslim world hegemony. For these reasons, bin Laden has gained respect, financial help, and protection from important Muslim constituencies who may disagree with his program of violent holy war and terrorism against the West. The al-Qaeda faithful are not viewed as outlaws or terrorists but as dedicated traditionalists who espouse a sectarian but historic view of Islam as presented in the Koran and in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. For many traditionally pious Muslims, Bin Laden's program of Muslim world dominance is a legitimate religious objective.

The al-Qaeda movement has translated their holy war declarations into highly organized and strategically successful terrorist attacks all over the world. The most spectacular, of course, was the September 11 suicide bombings of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington in which thousands were killed and the entire World Trade Center destroyed. Prior to the September 11 attacks, the al-Qaeda move-

ment launched successful attacks on American naval vessels and U.S. military installations overseas and in 1998 carried out bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing hundreds of people in the name of holy war. The al-Qaeda movement suffered a series of setbacks during the war in Afghanistan and many al-Qaeda members were killed or captured and imprisoned by American antiterrorist forces in that war. American troops, however, were unsuccessful in capturing or locating Osama bin Laden himself. It appears that bin Laden remains in hiding but continues to lead the movement, directing its holy war operations and regularly issuing religious proclamations and communiqués to his followers urging them on in their jihad campaigns. The al-Qaeda movement, from all reports, has been under severe attack but still operates as a viable movement with the ability and determination to continue its violent campaign of holy war against the United States.

The continuing al-Qaeda war against the United States was publicized dramatically during the January 2003 trial of the so-called shoe bomber Richard Reid, a British convert to Islam and a member of the al-Qaeda network, who concealed explosives in his shoes and was caught and captured during a transatlantic American Airlines flight as he attempted to detonate the bomb. Reid was unrepentant and claimed that he was not a criminal but a soldier fighting in a jihad battle. The United States was guilty of killing innocent Muslims all over the world, he told the court, and he claimed that “ I don’t see what I done as being equal to rape and torture or the deaths of two million children in Iraq.” The judge in the case told Reid that he was a criminal and terrorist who would spend his life in prison, but Reid proclaimed his continued allegiance to bin Laden, yelling at the judge, “You will be judged by Allah. Your flag will come down and so will your country.”⁴⁴

Bin Laden’s ultimate goal is the destruction of the United States, the dismantling of what he calls “infidel” regimes in the Muslim world, and the establishment of a worldwide Muslim society, a caliphate, under the rule of Muslim clerics and religious authorities. This goal and the hatred of America are rejected by many Muslims, but they have considerable appeal

among radical and militant Islamic groups. It is among these groups, their mosques and religious schools, that bin Laden operatives and warriors are recruited. Though bin Laden represents a highly sectarian Islamic religiosity, his astute use of Muslim scripture and sharia and his appeals to Muslim pride and resentment of the West appeal to Muslims all over the Islamic world. His call for holy war resonates with many Muslims and his religious arguments cannot be easily dismissed. Bin Laden continues to attract recruits from all over the world, including the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. There are estimates that thousands of holy warriors have been trained in al-Qaeda facilities. From captured documents, it is clear that the training is technically sophisticated and severe, and commitment to the movement is expected to be total.⁴⁵ One document from an al-Qaeda house in Afghanistan captured in 2002 contains a written oath signed by an al-Qaeda soldier declaring, "I, Abdul Maawia Siddiqi, son of Abdul Rahman Siddiqui state in the presence of God that I will slaughter infidels all the days of my life." Indeed, some al-Qaeda warriors captured by United States intelligence in Afghanistan and elsewhere have refused to surrender and have sought to fight to their death in their war against the infidels.

Conclusion: The Significance of the Holy War Perspective on Religious Violence

The holy war perspective discussed in this chapter alerts and sensitizes students of religious violence to the continuing importance of religious scripture, tradition, and history in the modern world. While it may be true that secularization and the loss of religious faith and religious involvement in politics and society have taken place among educated elites in the United States and Western Europe, much of the rest of the world still takes religious faith seriously and desires that religion play a strong role in politics and society. Religious scriptures, which are viewed in highly secular societies as perhaps interesting and inspiring but

still only literature or myth, are, in more traditional societies, taken to be the literal word of God. Faith and religious behavior are not based upon science, practical politics, or Western notions of logic and efficiency but on following the word of God regardless of the cost. Holy wars, as this perspective makes clear, may not be amenable to logical and rational solutions. Faithful holy warriors, whether in Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, or Florida, live in a psychic and social reality entirely different from the world inhabited by secularized people. They think and feel differently about life and death, war and peace, war and killing, or dying a martyr's death. Perhaps Sheik Ahmed Yassim, the charismatic leader of the Palestinian Hamas movement explained it best. Pressed by a sympathetic *New Yorker* magazine journalist to explain the motivation behind suicide bombings, the sheik demurred, explaining that Westerners simply cannot understand religious martyrdom. They are so distant from a sense of connection with the divine, Sheik Yassim told the Arabic-speaking reporter, that religious sacrifice, instantaneous forgiveness for sins, and entrance to eternal life—the reward for suicide bombers—are entirely beyond American understanding. Tell your audience, the sheik instructed, that we do “all for Allah.”⁴⁶

For holy warriors, history is not a matter of the past, something to be studied for its inherent interest or even for the practical lessons that can be learned. History is the arena for the realization of God's blueprint, and things that have gone wrong must be made right. There is really no past and present for these believers, for they live in sacred time beyond the calculations of academic historians and journalists. The Beit Hamikdash, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, destroyed two thousand years ago and the ancient center of the Jewish cult, remains a Jewish holy site and is worth defending in a holy war. For Muslims, the Haram al-Sharif, the place where Muslim narratives describe the prophet Muhammad ascending to heaven, is a Muslim holy site. Defeats or victories recorded in the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita, whether based on historical fact or religious myth, are indeed still to be taken as truth. Jack Hawley, the distinguished professor of Hinduism at Columbia University, explains that history always matters in religious disputes, but what

is important is not what actually happened but what the faithful take to be the historical past. The holy war perspective, finally, forces us to confront the radically different realities in which warring religious groups exist. Religious conflicts and holy wars are ultimately battles over the nature of reality, truth, and values. Each protagonist sees its truth claims as absolute and within the parameters of the logic and calculus of its society; each group is convinced of its claims. Secularized people without a strong anchor in absolute reality and faith are often cultural and religious relativists, seeing no one commitment or faith as inherently superior. The continuing reality of religious wars fought on behalf of religious faith in the postmodern era demonstrates that in many quarters the old gods are very much alive, and despite the Western assumption of universal secularization, materialism, and rationality, many religions continue to maintain their own religious realities and are willing to die for them.

Notes

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SACRED FURY

Understanding Religious Violence

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A Division of
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

ALTAMIRA PRESS

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200

Lanham, MD 20706

www.altamirapress.com

Estover Road

Plymouth PL6 7PY

United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Selengut, Charles.

Sacred fury : understanding religious violence / by Charles Selengut.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7591-0361-5 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7591-0362-3 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Violence—Religious aspects. I. Title.

BL65.V55S33 2003

291.1'78—dc21

2003012057

Printed in the United States of America

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