

The Wrathful God: Religious Extremism in Comparative Perspective ICIS

Graduate Student Seminar, MESAS 570R.00P

Spring 2008

Wednesdays, 5:30pm to 8:30pm

ICIS Conference Room #108

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The aim of this seminar is to map the culture of religious extremism through the comparative study of discourses of violence, intolerance, and triumphalism in world religions. Particular attention will be devoted to the monotheistic or "Abrahamic" traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as posing the greatest potential for violence toward the religious other and as challenging liberal and secular ideologies of pluralism and self-determination. At times, varieties of non-Abrahamic religious extremism, such as Hindu and Buddhist extremism will also be examined for comparative purposes.

Most previous studies of religious extremism have tended to view extremism as the "wild side" of mainstream religious traditions that are not prone to violence under normal circumstances. In such a view, extremism is seen as a deviation from an imagined norm of orthodoxy. This model is inherently political, in that it relies on notions of authenticity that reflect power relations within a tradition and at the same time are susceptible to manipulation by outside forces that seek to domesticate religious expression. Sometimes, as is currently the case with Islam, pundits and culture critics have seen extremism as endemic to certain religious traditions. However, the perspective of this seminar seeks to avoid both of these essentialist views of religious extremism. Instead, its major theoretical concern will be to ascertain whether extremism is best viewed as a tradition itself; in other words, whether extremism is independent to a greater or lesser degree from the traditions of which it is normally seen as a part. A corollary hypothesis is the notion that extremism may constitute a quasi-religion in which sectarian discourses have more in common with each other than they do with the discourses of religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy in their own traditions.

Because of this theoretical focus, the seminar will investigate the conceptual language of extremist discourses and the factors that contribute to the development of extremist worldviews. During the course of the semester, participants in the seminar will examine a wide variety of extremist religious writings in detail. At the end of the semester, the class will attempt to assess whether a common language of extremism can be found, either across the Abrahamic monotheisms or beyond them. As the title of the seminar indicates, a major focus will be on the God of extremism. Is the God of extremism different from the God of the mainstream Abrahamic traditions? How does the theological aspect of religious extremism differ from Abrahamic models when it is found in Bhakti Hindu or non-theistic Buddhist contexts? As part of this investigation, we will examine the perspective of Critical Orthodoxy as a possible alternative to extremist ideologies.

The seminar will also examine the discourses of extremism from historical, sociological, and ideological perspectives. Topics to be discussed will include the sociology and social psychology of religious extremism, extremism and religious law, extremism and mysticism, extremism and martyrdom, extremism and terrorism, extremism and modernity, extremism and the construction of national identities, extremism and honor, networks of extremism, and extremism and self-transcendence.

Although the seminar will be organized around a working hypothesis, it assumes no preconceived conclusion or outcome. The students and visiting scholars who participate in the class will be part of a think-tank project that will test the course hypothesis and examine related questions from a variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives. For example, we may discover that Jewish and Muslim extremist discourses have more in common with each other than they do with traditional rabbinic or juridical discourses in each tradition. On the other hand, we may find that a Jewish extremist is still more of a Jew than he is an extremist and that a Muslim Al Qaeda activist draws upon concepts in his own tradition that are not translatable to other traditions. Because of the open-ended nature of our inquiry, participants in this seminar should think of themselves more as participants in an ongoing research project than as students in a class.

The seminar will be conducted in tandem with the international conference, "The Wrathful God: Discourses of Extremism in the Abrahamic Traditions." Participants in the seminar will be expected to attend the conference, participate in informal sessions with visiting scholars, and write a 25-30 page research paper on a topic related to issues discussed in the conference or in class sessions. Original research on subjects that relate to the participants' personal academic interests is encouraged. One of the planned outcomes of the conference is an edited volume on the comparative study of discourses of religious extremism, to be published in 2009. The best original research papers by graduate student participants will be considered for publication in this volume, along with papers by conference participants.

Preliminary Reading List

(This is a very preliminary list and is likely to be revised.)

Gabriel Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Immanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: the Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999)

Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2000)

Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House, 2006)

Walter Reich and Walter Laquer, eds., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998)

Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: the Prophet and Pharaoh* (University of California Press, 1984)

Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: the Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Harper Collins, 1989)

Bruce Lawrence and James Howarth, *Messages to the World: the Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (Verso, 2005)

Zainab al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison* (The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, U.K., 1994)

Seyyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Dar al-Ilm, Damascus, n.d.)

Kimberly Blaker, ed., *The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America* (New Boston Books, 2003)

Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996)

Lise Mckean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (University of Chicago Press, 1996)

Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (University of California Press, 1998)