Sanctifying Violence and the Biblical Tradition  
Fall 2016

Religion 840:549 graduate seminar  
Religion 840:401 senior seminar  
Tuesdays, 10:55am-1:55pm  
Loree room 131

We will explore the relationship between biblical traditions and justifying violence,  
through critical analysis of how violent acts may be legitimated by appeal to notions of  
the divine. We will begin with theoretical questions such as: What is violence? What are  
possible relationships between religion and violence? The bulk of the seminar will  
involve in-depth readings of particular biblical stories that feature violence, from  
mutilating corpses of enemies to slaughtering children. When and how are such acts  
portrayed as legitimate? When are such acts deemed unacceptable? We will also examine  
broader ancient Near Eastern themes of ritual violence and sanctified combat in order to  
better understand biblical descriptions of violence. We will conclude with the use of  
biblical “scripture” to frame violence within Jewish and Christian traditions.

Our primary objective is to examine the relationship between biblical traditions and the  
rhetorical act of sanctifying violence. In order to do so, we examine instances of ritual  
violence and sanctified combat from ancient Mesopotamian literature, iconography, and  
the Bible. A second objective is for students to develop understanding of scholarly  
methodologies used within religious studies and biblical studies. This is accomplished  
through critical analysis of primary texts, and discussion of current scholarship. More  
broadly, we emphasize recent developments in the theorization of religious violence.

Requirements and assessment:
10% preparation for class  
10% participation in class discussion  
30% three brief presentations of reading materials  
20% presentation of research project  
30% final research paper: 10-15pg undergrads; 20-25pg grad students

We will adhere to the University’s policy on academic integrity.

Books:  
need a copy of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, preferably the NRSV or the NJPS  
for the Hebrew Bible. We will discuss various translations in class as well as suitable  
online versions.

All articles and book chapters are available on Sakai.
Topics and Reading Schedule
The course will be divided into three main units: (1) comparative study and theories of “religious” violence; (2) sanctified violence in ancient texts and art; and (3) the use of biblical tradition in subsequent justifications of violence.

Week 1 - Background for our study: the academic study of religion; scholarly approaches to the Hebrew Bible; overview of ancient West Asian and Greco-Roman history
Read: Lincoln, “Theses on Method”; Collins, “Israel”; Oxford Study Bible essays

Unit 1: What is the relationship between religion and violence?
Week 2 – an exemplary treatment of our topic; how does ideology work?

Week 3 - What is violence?

Week 4 - Comparative study of religious violence; religious justifications for violence
Read: Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence, edited by Juergensmeyer and Kitts (Princeton University Press, 2011), intro and part 1 (each student presents 1 section)

Week 5 - Roles of religion in violence
Read: Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence, part 2 (each student presents 1 section)

Unit 2: Sanctified violence in ancient West Asian texts and art
Week 6 - Violence in Israelite/Judean culture and the bible

Week 7 - Ancient West Asian texts and monumental art: divine combat, mutilation of defeated gods, war-related violence as glory
Read: Lincoln, “Sanctified Violence”; Noegel, “Dismemberment, Creation, and Ritual”; Zainab Bahrani, intro and ch. 8; Jacob Wright, “Urbicide: The Ritualized Killing of Cities in the ANE”; selections from the Mesopotamian Enuma Elish; Ugaritic Baal Cycle; Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris; ANE royal inscriptions; and Hebrew Bible

Week 8 - Violence in biblical prophecy and royal traditions
Politics and Mythology: Joshiah’s Assault on Bethel in 2 Kgs 23:15-20”; all biblical citations in essays

**Week 9** – Violence in biblical legal traditions
Read: Wright, “Homicide, Talion, Vengeance, and Psycho-Economic”; all biblical citations

**Week 10** – Ritualized violence in the bible

**Unit 3: Sanctifying violence using the biblical tradition**

**Week 11** – Sanctified violence in antiquity
Read: *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, 79-134; all biblical citations in essays

**Week 12** - no class meeting; Professor away at conference

**Week 13** – into modernity
Read: *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ch. 4, 5, 14, 15; Review: *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence*

**Weeks 14-15** – Student Presentations of Research Projects

Final papers due Monday, Dec 19