

RITUAL, VIOLENCE, AND RECONCILIATION
IN THE ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS

Convener and Moderator: Leo Lefebure, Fordham University
Presenter: Leo Lefebure, Fordham University
Respondents: Jean Donovan, Duquesne University
Daniel Speed Thompson, Fordham University

In light of the current world climate, in which religions often incite animosity and violence, Leo Lefebure explored the dangers of ritual responses to violence in certain aspects of the Abrahamic traditions. Ritual responses to violence are ambiguous. They frequently proclaim paths of peace and visions of harmony, but in practice they risk being mimetic in a twofold sense: they symbolically re-present acts of violence, rendering their memory vivid in the consciousness of participants, and they can call forth more violence in retaliation for the original injury. Lefebure examined Christian celebrations of the passion and death of Jesus in Holy Week, Shi'a Muslim celebrations of 'Ashura, the Tenth of Muharram, and Jewish celebrations of Purim. Lefebure proposed that each of these has remembered narratives of violence, has interpreted the present in light of the past, has given birth to a form of drama that makes the narrative vividly present, and has, at least on occasion, led to indiscriminate violence against members of other groups.

Christian commemorations of the death of Jesus from Melito of Sardis in the second century to various local practices in twentieth century blamed all Jews of every generation for the death of Jesus and frequently led to attacks on Jewish communities. To understand the dynamic of this process Lefebure used James Gilligan's analysis of certain acts of violence as proceeding from a logic of shame. Persons can engage in violent actions in an attempt to protect themselves from feelings of exposure and vulnerability, vainly seeking to "kill shame." Lefebure also turned to René Girard's analysis of the surrogate victim mechanism, or scapegoat effect.

Shi'a Muslim celebrations focus on the killing of Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, and the desecration of his corpse by Umayyad forces on the plains of Karbala in present-day Iraq. In these celebrations, some participants engage in violent gestures of mourning, seeking to share Husayn's sufferings. Shi'a Muslims ritually curse the corrupt Umayyad ruler, Yazid, and the first three Sunni Caliphs; frequently, they have blamed all Sunni Muslims as sharing responsibility for the murder of the grandson of Muhammad. In Shi'a majority areas, these celebrations have repeatedly led to violence towards Sunnis, seeking to avenge the humiliating death of Husayn.

The Jewish feast of Purim centers on the reading of the Book of Esther, which recounts a narrative of deliverance from the threat of violence in the Persian Empire. The conclusion of the narrative describes Jews killing over 75,000 of their enemies, inflicting upon their foes the destruction that had been

threatened upon the Jewish community. On the feast of Purim in 1994 Baruch Goldstein entered the mosque in Hebron and opened fire on the Muslim worshippers, killing twenty-nine and wounding many more before he was killed. While most Jewish leaders condemned this act as an atrocity, a vocal minority of Jews, including some rabbis, honored him as a martyr who died for the sake of Jewish honor and to sanctify the Name of Heaven. Followers and admirers of Goldstein began the custom of gathering at or near his grave each year on the feast of Purim to celebrate his action.

Lefebure suggested that at their best, each of the Abrahamic traditions has resources to challenge rigid models of self-righteous vengeance, to break the cycle of shame, and to frustrate the scapegoat mechanism by demanding that believers accept responsibility for their own actions. While believers have frequently sought God's forgiveness only for sins committed against members of their own tradition and have neglected crimes against members of other traditions, each of the Abrahamic traditions does contain a vision of a broader community embracing all humanity and honoring the dignity of every human being.

In her response, Jean Donovan emphasized that rituals are so powerful because they effect social change. She also noted that early in the history of Islam the Caliph Omar entered Jerusalem in peace with only a small number of followers, and she held up Sayyed Hossein Nasr's retrieval of Islamic law regarding toleration of other religions as a challenge to Christians, whose history of missionary activity often involved disrespect for other religions and led to failure.

Daniel Speed Thompson suggested that the dynamic of shame and expiation and possible violence lies closer to the heart of the Catholic tradition than to Shi'a Islam or Judaism. He also noted the important difference that original sin makes for Christianity, requiring expiation through a sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus. This doctrine can help illumine how all traditions can be twisted to violent ends.

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MORAL AND SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Eucharist and Social Reconciliation
 Convener and Moderator: Joyce K. McClure, Oberlin College
 Presenters: William Cavanaugh, University of St. Thomas
 John Berkman, The Catholic University of America
 Respondent: David Fagerberg, University of Notre Dame