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On the Sacred Power of Violence

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Understanding Religion and Popular Culture
Theories, Themes, Products and Practices

Edited by
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Introduction to violence in religion and popular culture

Contemporary theorists of religion and violence have not looked so much at how religions or religious people can engage in violence in spite of religious beliefs and attitudes. There is no doubt that they can and have for millennia. Instead, contemporary theorists have focused on the violence that is constitutive of religion. In other words, religions are not institutions that may or may not engage in violence. They are institutions that are inherently violent. Religion and violence are intertwined. While all violence is not religious, much of it is or at least has religious overtones or dimensions. In this chapter, we will review some approaches to religion and violence and utilize them to interpret violence in popular culture, particularly in the films of Quentin Tarantino and in the sport of football.

Theory and method

Violence by people in religious communities on the basis, and in the service, of religious beliefs or institutions has often been seen as something that happened only in “primitive” or tribal religions and cultures. But even the major religious traditions in more “civilized” areas of the world have been bound with violence. Krishna encourages the warrior Arjuna to engage in warfare in the Hindu Bhagavad Gita. Krishna argues it is Arjuna’s sacred duty. The Abrahamic traditions are punctuated with acts of violence, often by God. Whether it is Yahweh’s wrath against the Egyptians (the story of the Exodus) or his own people (Exodus 32:25–35 describes the plague that the Lord inflicts on his people, even after his servants—the Levites—had slaughtered about 3,000 of them), God’s brutal sacrifice of his own son in the Christian New Testament (not to mention the apocalyptic violence in the book of Revelation), or Allah’s legitimation of military force and conquest against unbelievers (see surah 9:73 in the Qur’an), violence is central to the histories and narratives of the Abrahamic traditions. Today, religious adherents often turn to violence as a means of protecting or forwarding explicitly or implicitly religious objectives. In the following sections I explain three functions of violence in religious contexts. All three are interrelated. We then will see how these perspectives or functions can be used to interpret violence in seemingly secular contexts.

Cosmological function: the holy and the damned

Central to understanding religious violence perpetrated between groups is to understand the dichotomy of “us versus them” in religious thinking. This dichotomy is part of a larger dualistic worldview in which there is good and evil. In such a Manichean worldview, “we” are good and “they” are evil. Regina Schwartz brilliantly illustrates the “us versus them” dichotomy that is central to the Biblical traditions. Central to her argument are the ideas of identity and scarcity (Schwartz 1997: 3–6).

All groups, by definition, go through a process of identity formation. There has to be some process by which those included in the group are conceptually and physically separated from those outside the group. But identity formation is not something that simply happens at the initial formation of a group. It must continue for as long as the group exists. The parameters and rules of the group must be affirmed continuously to distinguish the group from others. For example, the ancient Israelites formed a group characterized by physical marking (circumcision for the men), particular religious beliefs (e.g. belief in one God), and dietary restrictions (e.g. prohibitions against eating pork). This process of identity formation means that religion by definition is violent. It is not just that religion, through identity formation, can lead to violence. It is that religion, as a form of identity formation, always already is violent—if nothing else symbolically, in that it cuts one group off from another (in this case, the cutting literally of the male foreskin).

Schwartz also draws our attention to the fact that the physical world and human social structures are characterized by a scarcity of resources. Scarcity is a fundamental condition of group life, and it dramatically shapes relations among groups. There is only so much land or food or other resources to go around. Each group is in competition with other groups for limited resources. But there also are psychological or theological scarcities. God or the gods only can provide for some groups, not all. Only some groups will receive divine blessings. We see this most starkly in the identification of Jews as God’s “chosen people.” But the idea persists in Christianity and Islam. What complicates the matter even more is when the psychological or theological blessings are intertwined with tangible goods like land or food or other resources. So, for example, God’s blessing on his people (Jews) entails their possession of the Holy Land (Israel).

When the “us versus them” conflict over scarce resources is understood in the context of a greater, transcendent battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, then we have the makings for a cosmic war. Reza Aslan identifies a cosmic war as “a conflict in which God is believed to be directly engaged on one side over the other ... a cosmic war is like a ritual drama in which participants act out on earth a battle they believe is actually taking place in the heavens” (Aslan 2009: 5).

An important aspect of cosmic war is the demonizing of the other—the opponent or combatant. Mark Juergensmeyer describes this as satanization. “The process of satanization is aimed at reducing the power of one’s opponents and
discrediting them,” he writes. “By belittling and humiliating them—by making them subhuman—one is asserting one’s own superior moral power” (Juergensmeyer 2003: 186). Satanization is part of the Manichean dualism that is central to cosmic war. In a cosmic war there is no room for compromise. As Bruce Lincoln notes, in cosmic war “Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist on one side or another, without possibility of neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground” (Lincoln 2006: 20). Thus, “the stage is set for prolonged, ferocious, and enormously destructive combat” (Lincoln 2006: 95). Even someone who suggests a compromise then is considered an enemy by his own side (Juergensmeyer 2003: 157). Ultimately, this mindset results in apocalyptic thinking—the final confrontation of good versus evil, with good prevailing in the end (Selengut 2008: 88).

Juergensmeyer notes that putting conflicts into a religious context ultimately is about meaning. Opposing the chaos and violence of the world (even with violence) is the raison d'être of religion—and through religion that chaos and violence is given meaning.

**Ethical function: justice, order, and vengeance**

Combating the chaos and evil that the other represents is not just about restoring order for the sake of restoring order. The restoration of order is a matter of justice—divine justice to be exact. The universe is characterized by a moral order established by God—an order that occasionally can get “out of whack” and that requires the righteous actions of God’s soldiers to restore it.

Individuals act justly or righteously when they use violence to establish or re-establish divine order. Such violence often is in response to previous violence, the latter being the source of the creation of disorder. Thus, the use of righteous violence to combat evil violence frequently is a matter of revenge—the revenge of the good (us) against the evil (them). It is an effort to strike back upon those who do harm to others and who disrupt the harmony of the divine order. So the violence is not simply a matter of retaliating against those who perpetrated evil (though such revenge can be sweet), it is a matter of serving a greater divine purpose. Ultimately, that divine purpose makes the use of violence a moral (because commanded—implicitly or explicitly—by God) action. In fact, we can take it a step further and insist that one is obligated morally to perform acts of violence in the service of a greater purpose or order. For example, Christian radicals who blow up abortion clinics or kill abortion providers frequently feel it is their moral and religious duty to engage in such acts. While this perspective is best represented in the Abrahamic traditions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), it also can be found in those major traditions from India (Hinduism and Buddhism) that are based on the karmic system. In the Bhagavad Gita the impending violence of the warrior Arjuna is justified both in terms of restoring divine order and by the fact that those who will die in battle are paying their karmic debt.

**Sacred power of violence in popular culture**

Social-psychological function: sacrifice

Violence in religion is more than simply the acts of God or divinely ordained warfare. It includes that violence that we do to ourselves—self-imposed privations or sacrifices done for religious reasons. Émile Durkheim, the early twentieth-century sociologist, provides good examples of the role of sacrifice in his analysis of aboriginal totemic religions in Australia (Durkheim 1995: 84–95). According to Durkheim, the totem, ancestor, or god for whom sacrifices are made ultimately is an expression of the collectivity. Thus, the sacrifices made symbolically for the totem, ancestor, or god reflect the real sacrifices that must be made by the individual for the good of the collectivity. We sacrifice something of ourselves (our freedom, our selfishness) and/or something that is good for us (an animal given for slaughter on the altar or part of our harvest burned to the gods) to forward the aims of the group.

Sacrifices raise us toward something that transcends our individual ego, but that transcendent thing is the collective itself. In this light, the sacrifices made by “ primitives” may not seem so strange to us when we consider our own sacrifices (for example, in war) that we are willing to make for the good of the collectivity. In this sense, the fundamental nature of sacrifice has not changed for millennia (Durkheim 1995: 330–354).

A more contemporary scholar like René Girard also tries to make connections between the violence we find in religion (particularly ancient) and events and structures in the world today. Girard is interested especially in the sacrifice of the other, whether that be of animal or human. His hypothesis is that “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (Girard 1977: 4). How does sacrifice do this? “The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence,” Girard writes, “it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice” (Girard 1977: 8). Any community necessarily will have tensions as individuals vie with one another for a limited amount of goods. By directing negative emotions and energy onto the shoulders of the sacrificial victim, the “scapegoat,” members of the community are able to overcome those negative emotions and energy through the ritualized killing of the victim.

What Girard is getting at clearly has roots in religious life. Indeed, for Girard violence and the sacred are “inseparable” (Girard 1977: 19). Put more strongly, “the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process” (Girard 1977: 258). The purpose of religion is to prevent “reciprocal violence” (Girard 1977: 55). This continuous retaliation or revenge—fuelled by the frustration of the necessary curbing of our egoism or selfishness and our competition for scarce resources—is the never-ending cycle of violence that eventually will destroy a society. Thus, instead of providing an unending cycle of revenge that produces real victims of violence, societies develop religions with sacrificial rituals in which surrogate victims suffer the violence of the community. As Girard concludes, there
is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist (Girard 1977: 221).

The function of ritual is "to 'purify' violence; that is, to 'trick' violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals" (Girard 1977: 36)—"that is, to keep violence outside the community" (Girard 1977: 92). Girard looks across time and cultures to find ritualized behavior that supports his thesis. One of the most common rituals in which the surrogate-victim mechanism is operative is the festival (Girard 1977: 119). The festival will include a variety of behaviors that affirm the social norms via the ritualized practice of breaking those norms. In other words, by permitting only through ritual practice what is otherwise prohibited (e.g. sexual promiscuity), the norms of the society during everyday or profane times are affirmed for the members of the community. Festivals also are the events in which the surrogate-victim mechanism is operative. While killing is normally prohibited, during the festival it is permitted—either literally or symbolically.

While most of the examples that Girard uses are from more ancient times, he nevertheless affirms the role of sacrificial rituals in the formation of all societies and the continuing need for them. Girard believes that we more often than not are in a state of "sacrificial crisis" (Girard 1977: 39–67). This crisis is a consequence of the disappearance of sacrificial rituals, preventing the society's ability to find or create a surrogate-victim and perpetuate its violence against that victim. Girard argues that "the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When that difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community" (Girard 1977: 49). When all violence is condemned, then we are incapable of ritually affirming violence through the surrogate-victim mechanism. The consequence, ironically, is an increase in non-ritualized violence (including vendetta) throughout the society. This is why Girard writes:

Sacrifice is the boon worthy above all others of being preserved, celebrated and memorialized, reiterated and reenacted in a thousand different forms, for it alone can prevent transcendental violence from turning back into reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts, setting man against man and threatening the total destruction of the community.

(Girard 1977: 124–125)

Sacrificial rituals are an effective way to prevent sacrificial crises and thus guard societies against excessive violence.

While sacrifice and promiscuity may be stereotypical aspects of festivals, so too is play. Durkheim argues that games originated in a religious context (Durkheim 1995: 385). Games or play also give rise to collective effervescence—the ecstatic bonding of individuals into a collectivity (Durkheim 1995: 385). Play, for Girard, is an expression of the sacred. It is another means by which genuine violence is avoided by virtue of the ritualized nature of the play itself.

[We] must subordinate play to religion, and in particular to the sacrificial crisis. Play has a religious origin, to be sure, insofar as it reproduces certain aspects of the sacrificial crisis. The arbitrary nature of the prize makes it clear that the contest has no other objective than itself, but this contest is regulated in such a manner that, in principle at least, it can never degenerate into a brutal fight to the finish.

(Girard 1977: 154)

The play may be rough and even violent at times. There even is a victim in the form of the loser. But play never gives itself over to unwarranted violence or reciprocal violence. The rules of the ritual prohibit this possibility.

Case studies

Play, ritual, and violence in American football

American football is an exemplary intersection of religion, play, and violence. Michael Oriard, one of the most insightful scholars writing on the cultural history of American football, recognizes the integral role that violence plays in the sport:

Football is the dramatic confrontation of artistry with violence, both equally necessary. The receiver's balletic moves and catch would not impress us nearly as much if the possibility of annihilation were not real; the violence of the collision would be gratuitous, pointless, if it did not threaten something valuable and important. The violence, in fact, partially creates the artistry: the simple act of catching a thrown ball becomes a marvelous achievement only in defiance of the brutal blow. Football becomes contact ballet.

(Oriard 1993: 1–2)

Violence is central to the beauty and power of the game. American football is ritualized violence—it is composed of prescribed and proscribed acts that serve a collective purpose and provide shared meaning. In this way it is religious in character.

In many locales, particularly university campuses, the ritual of American football is performed in the context of a festival, one characterized by the violation of norms that in turn affirms those norms for more profane times. For example, while many people on game day drink alcoholic beverages (sometimes to great excess) on the grounds of the university, they would be escorted off campus or even arrested if they consumed alcohol in the same place at other times. In this case, the exception (being allowed to drink publicly on campus) affirms the rule (no public consumption of alcohol on campus). The festival context sets the stage for the ritual violence.

Football certainly entails violent confrontations between players, but it is controlled violence nonetheless. Michael Novak argues that the controlled conflict "ventilates" our rage (Novak 1994: 84). "The human animal suffers enormous
daily violence," he adds, echoing both Durkheim and Girard. "Football is an attempt to harness violence, to formalize it, to confine it within certain canonical limits, and then to release it in order to wrest from it a measure of wit, beauty, and redemption" (Novak 1994: 94).

Sacrifice is a necessary element in football. This sacrifice is not only the "surrogate" or loser of the contest, but all the players. As Novak notes:

Once an athlete accepts the uniform, he is in effect donning priestly vestments. It is the function of priests to offer sacrifices ... Often the sacrifice is literal: smashed knees, torn muscles, injury-abbreviated careers. Always the sacrifice is ritual: the athlete bears the burden of identification. He is no longer living his own life only. (Novak 1994: 141)

Examples of sacrifices abound. Whether it is broken bones or concussions or even death, American football players sacrifice themselves in the performance of the ritual. Novak concludes "football dramatizes the sacrifice, discipline, and inner rage of collective behavior" (Novak 1994: 207)—sacrifice, discipline, and rage that Durkheim and Girard would find to be fundamentally religious.

Football is a "revelatory liturgy," Novak explains. "It externalizes the warfare in our hearts and offers us a means of knowing ourselves and wresting some grace from our true natures" (Novak 1994: 96). We might not always want to know of our violent and aggressive selves, but at least some cultural creations can turn that violence and aggression into something that has some merit and beauty. American football perhaps is such a thing. It is, as Oriard describes it, "contact ballet."

"Since the earliest times," Michael Mandelbaum writes, "from gladiatorial contests in ancient Rome to public hangings in early modern England to boxing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—not to mention Hollywood movies of the twenty-first—staged events with violence at their core have commanded public attention." (Mandelbaum 2004: 176-177). Several questions emerge in our recognition of this historical fact of life. What does it tell us about sport? Is the "staged violence" of sports like American football what gives them their vast appeal? And what is it precisely that the spectator gets from witnessing such a violent spectacle?

Everyone seems to be in agreement that the catharsis theory of sports violence is not sufficient. The catharsis theory suggests that the violence we engage in or watch in sports relieves us of our excessive violent urges and thus allows us to function better psychologically and certainly socially. Robert J. Higgs argues that explanations like the catharsis theory may help to explain the "ubiquity" of sports, but they do not explain "the reverence paid to them" (Higgs 1995: 97). Michael Oriard insists that the catharsis theory may not be wrong, but it at least is "over-simplified" (Oriard 1993: 6). Higgs and Oriard are not social scientists, nor psychologists, but their conclusions are supported by such researchers. Daniel L. Wann and his collaborators note that "there is virtually no empirical evidence validating the existence of catharsis in sport ... The "blowing off steam" theory of sport spectating may be attractive, but it is quite inaccurate" (Wann 2001: 198).

John H. Kerr likewise is suspicious of a catharsis theory of sports violence, insisting that there is little experimental evidence to support it (Kerr 2005: 124).

These perspectives (especially those from Wann et al. and Kerr) would seem to contradict Girard and the application of his theory to sport. Girard's work seems to rely upon some notion of a catharsis theory—the sacrificial victim relieving us of the violence that we otherwise would commit against one another. But note that the catharsis theory is not completely and conclusively discredited.

Kerr argues for a more comprehensive psychological understanding of sports violence than simply a catharsis theory. He notes that contemporary life (at least in Europe and the United States) is not very exciting. The range of emotions, especially at the highest or most pleasant end, is fairly narrow (little wonder then that many Western cultures seem fixated on sex, particularly orgasms). Consequently, "people have to actively seek out thrills and vicarious risk-taking through, for example, watching sports" (Kerr 2005: 118). Anyone watching a crowd at a major sporting event can witness the intensity of the emotions that many fans experience. Fans attain high levels of arousal (akin to Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence), and this intense experience is a "pleasure excitement" (Kerr 2005: 98). This experience is particularly prevalent with violent sports like American football and ice hockey. Kerr concludes that "watching violent sports produces increases in levels of arousal, and ... people deliberately watch to achieve elevated arousal" (Kerr 2005: 118). Here then we might have an explanation not only of the psychological appeal of violent sports, but of certain stereotypical religious rituals (e.g. sacrifices) as well.

Is such arousal good or bad for us? The flip-side of the catharsis theory is that participating in or watching violent sports spurs people to act violently in other contexts. This argument is similar to ones made about violence on television or in the movies—that such violence encourages others (especially children) to act violently. Higgs, for example, tries to connect violence in sports with aggression or violence towards women in America (Higgs 1995: 320-322). Along with Michael C. Braswell, they argue that sports initiate a cycle of violence or aggression. "Instead of ventilitating aggression," they claim, sports "refuel it so that a loss or setback in sports as in war is a call for stronger retaliation. In the Church of Sports, there is no answer to this that we can see, only rivalry, revenge, and redemption from season to season" (Higgs and Braswell 2004: 107). We then have exactly the kind of violence that Girard claims religion helps to avoid. While such retaliatory violence usually is contained within the context of the rules of the game, there are instances in which the violence of a sport spills into the stands—leading to physical confrontations between players and fans or between rival fans. Kerr's work recounts many of these instances, including some (such as soccer hooliganism in Europe) that led to the deaths of non-participants.

Kerr notes that the research is split on the issue of the connection between violence in various forms of popular culture and among those who participate in or view them. He concludes that the "popular wisdom which suggests media
violence and media sports violence has harmful effects on people, especially where those viewers are young children, may not be correct” (Kerr 2005: 130). So if sports violence perhaps does us no harm, does it do any good? The answer, for Kerr, is affirmative. The “pleasant excitement” of violent sports can be an important part of our overall psychological health. He concludes: “[T]here are situations where certain types of aggressive and violent acts are central to people’s enjoyment of activities. These activities range from athletic contests to viewing violent sports as a spectator, or watching violent sports movies. Being a part of these activities does no psychological harm to the vast majority of those who participate and may actually benefit their psychological health” (Kerr 2005: 148). The argument that participating in or watching violence produces a psychological good may go a long way to explaining why violence has been such an integral part of our games and sports and religion through the centuries—perhaps redeeming (in some way) Girard’s theory as well. The argument, in short, helps explain the pervasiveness of violence in popular culture and why we seem to like it so much (despite our occasional protestations to the contrary).

In addition to the social-psychological function, sports also facilitate “us versus them” thinking. “Our” team is better than “yours.” Rivalries run across the athletic landscape—and perhaps none are more heated than those between college football teams and fans in the American South. The South is divided up into “us” and “them,” Rebels and Tigers, Gators and Bulldogs.

In a college football game, only one team can win (college football’s adoption of an overtime system in 1996 eliminated the possibility of ties). Even more, only one team can earn the honor and adulation that comes with victory. Only one team can have “bragging rights” after the game. In other words, there is a scarcity of goods to go around. This situation undoubtedly contributes to the fervor and even violence of the game. Not surprisingly, violence breaks out occasionally among fans. It is not unusual then to have stories like the one where the University of South Carolina fan shot his friend, a Clemson University fan, when they argued about a $20 bet on the game (the game having been won by South Carolina). One would imagine that it was not so much the sum of money that was in dispute, but what the money signified—victory, honor, superiority, etc. In short, college football in the American South is an exemplary model of how sports reflect a “cosmic war” perspective in which no compromise is possible and it is “winner takes all.”

From its sacrifice and pay to its “cosmic war” framework, it is little wonder why sports are such an important part of popular culture. The example of football shows how sports not only function religiously, but how violence is part of why that is the case.

Violence in film (Quentin Tarantino, of course)

With American football and many other sports, violence is ritualized in ways similar to religion. In both cases, the ritualizing of violence may be a way of coping with the inherent aggression and violence of individuals in society. The contesting of American football games and the violence that ensues also replicates a fundamental religious perspective (the Manichean divide between good and evil, “us and them,” the prerequisite for a cosmic war). Another place where we see the ritualizing of violence is in film, and perhaps no contemporary filmmaker is as noted for his treatment of violence as Quentin Tarantino. Joshua Mooney describes Tarantino’s early films as “ultra-violent crime stories [in which] almost everyone dies... And they do not, as the poet said, go gently. Usually they have to be shot. Their blood doesn’t spill so much as it gushes, spurts, splatters, soaks and coats. Sometimes it takes the stranglers an excruciatingly long time to die, but in the end, they get there too” (Peary 1998: 70).

Tarantino certainly is not afraid to take on religious themes or ideas in his movies. Take the example of Pulp Fiction (1994), a film written and directed by Tarantino. Hit man Jules (played by Samuel L. Jackson) not only quotes scripture before blowing away those who have wronged his boss, but also he claims to have experienced a miracle when he narrowly survives a shooting. In From Dusk Till Dawn (1996), written by Tarantino and directed by Richard Rodriguez, two dangerous criminals (played by George Clooney and Tarantino) hijack a family and its mobile home in order to escape into Mexico (where they end up at the infamous club The Titty Twister, fighting off vampires in a gory, graphic battle). The father (played by Harvey Keitel) is a preacher who, after his wife’s death, has turned his back on God. Tarantino directed and wrote both Kill Bill (movies 2003, 2004), starring Uma Thurman and David Carradine. The films are extremely violent and contain extensive martial arts sequences. The plot draws on magical and philosophical elements of Eastern religions (we might assume Buddhism and Taoism in particular).

Though films like Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino’s first film from 1992) and Inglourious Basterds (his most recent from 2009) do not deal substantively with religious themes, they nevertheless include his trademark violence. The failed heist in Reservoir Dogs not only has ample gunshot violence, it also has a torture scene in which one of the criminals cuts off the ear of a police officer, prancing around his bound-to-a-chair body to the music of the 1972 pop classic “Stuck in the Middle with You” (originally performed by the band Stealers Wheel). The scene has been described as “perhaps the single most cited moment of violence in all of the 1990s American cinema” (Gronstad 2008: 171). Inglourious Basterds, on the other hand, features a renegade American military unit (made up mostly of Jews) that tracks down, kills, and scalps Nazis. It also features a young female survivor of a “Jew hunt” who plots the demise (in her Paris movie theatre nonetheless) of top Nazi brass (including, we find out, Hitler).

Thomas S. Hibbs argues that violence in film is both a symptom and cause of the aestheticization of evil (Hibbs 1999: 66). In other words, evil increasingly is becoming “art” or “cool” and violence is both one of the ways in which it is happening as well as a reflection that it is happening. Hibbs’ argument is drawn from Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil”—the idea that evil that becomes ordinary or normal can no longer be fought against effectively (Arendt 1994: 287–288). For Hibbs, movie violence is part of our cultural drift toward the banality of evil.
Hibbs also claims that violence in film is both a symptom and cause of the pervasive nihilism in our culture. In part, we are becoming incapable of articulating ethical values—and thus increasingly incapable of living moral lives. All values and moral systems are relative. The values inherent in the moral system of an organized crime syndicate can be judged no better or worse than the values inherent in the moral system of the Amish. As he concludes, the “new problem is that the meaning of evil is elusive, but that it is increasingly difficult for us to distinguish between evil and goodness” (Hibbs 1999: 49).

While Hibbs represents a common concern about the impact of media violence on culture, others have a particular concern with the impact on children. Psychiatrist Eugene V. Beresin cites studies that indicate that a typical American child will have viewed more than 200,000 acts of violence (including 16,000 murders) by the age of 18. Most of the viewing would be on television (the typical American child watches approximately 28 hours of television a week), but certainly film should be included as well as (more recently) video games and online gaming. Beresin notes that while the causes of youth violence are varied, the “research literature is quite compelling that children’s exposure to media violence plays an important role in the etiology of violent behavior” (Beresin 2009).

Given the concerns of scholars, parents, and professionals, it is little wonder that Tarantino has been denounced for the violence in his films. Johann Hari credits Tarantino for the realism of the violence in Reservoir Dogs, but sees the use of violence in subsequent films to be morally dangerous. “I’m not saying it makes people violent,” Hari argues. “But it does leave the viewer just a millimeter more morally corroded. Laughing at simulated torture—and even cheering it on, as we are encouraged to through all of Tarantino’s later films—leaves a moral muscle just a tiny bit more atrophied” (Hari 2009). Concerns about the gratuitous or “hollow violence” in Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds are also at the core of the negative review of the movie by Lee Siegel (Siegel 2009).

But what the critics miss is that the violence in Tarantino’s movies is far from gratuitous or “hollow.” Aaron Anderson makes a compelling argument that violence in film, at least the kind of violence that Tarantino uses, is critical for creating meaning and developing the narrative and the characters. He argues that personal action “necessarily involves a wide array of inner thoughts, both conscious and unconscious. That affect other people—as violence does—therefore constitute a type of pragmatic ethics in which inner views about how one actually interacts with the world become outwardly embodied” (Anderson 2004).

One of the central meanings or themes of Tarantino’s violence is revenge. In this regard, he certainly is not an unusual case in American popular culture. As William D. Romanowski argues, “Violence has a central place in American mythology as a means of justice and retribution” (Romanowski 2007: 209). Romanowski consequently points us in an important direction. Revenge is never without meaning or a connection with the idea of justice. Thus, violence associated with vengeance or revenge—either in Tarantino films or as religious acts—is far from nihilistic (in other words, arbitrary or without meaning).

The problem, as we have seen with Girard, is that acts of violence (whether committed in the name of justice or not) simply give rise to more acts of violence. The cycle of revenge is never ending. While Tarantino’s films certainly reflect this idea of never ending violence, that is not the message of the films. As Bence Nanay and Ian Schnee claim, “Tarantino’s films are concerned with ways to end violence … the theme of the cycle of violence, and of breaking out of the cycle of violence, is perhaps strongest in Pulp Fiction” (Greene and Mohammad 2007: 185). In this regard, many of Tarantino’s films can be read effectively through a Girardian lens. His films, like religious, sacrificial acts, seek ways to overcome the never ending cycle of violence.

In Pulp Fiction, many of the occasions for violence involve revenge—the administering of punishment or retribution, the meting out of justice. Hit men Jules and Vincent kill several men who betrayed the boss. The boss likewise seeks revenge on a boxer who double-crossed him—failing to throw a fight as agreed. Later in the movie, the boss prepares for revenge on two rednecks who anally raped him. Early in the movie, there also is a conversation between Jules and Vincent in which they consider the moral dimensions of a story they had heard about the boss throwing an associate off a building because the associate had massaged the boss’ wife’s feet. In short, almost all the violence in the film involves revenge. In all cases, there is an implicit or explicit understanding of justice, and from that understanding of justice violence is demanded (perhaps even morally demanded). Justice is not treated as simply a human construct, but as a given in the universe. In other words, it has a transcendent or religious dimension. While the characters may disagree about what constitutes justice, they are not nihilists. They talk and act as if justice does exist.

An important plot development in the movie is the dramatic religious experience of Jules—an experience that leads to a conversion of sorts. Early in the film, Jules recites a passage from the Bible (the claim is that it is Ezekiel 25:17, though only the last two lines are close to the Biblical verse). The passage he quotes is about the punishments that God will administer to evil men, and the shepherding and protection of others that is characteristic of the righteous man.

Given his murderous ways, the vengeful voice of God from this passage fits well with Jules’ lifestyle. But after experiencing the “miracle” (Vincent has doubts about this) of having been shot at but having every bullet miss him, Jules identifies more with the first part of the passage—the part about shepherding “the weak through the valley of darkness.” Jules realizes perhaps that his lifestyle simply perpetuates the cycle of violence. In the last scene of the film, Jules does not use violence to end violence, he simply walks away. Vincent, as we already have learned from the temporally disjointed nature of Pulp Fiction, does not walk away and is killed.

“At the end of the movie,” Tarantino reminds us, “for all the talk about the film being violent and this, that and the other, the guy who actually becomes the lead character … is a killer who has a religious epiphany! And it’s played straight. It’s not a big joke. That’s supposed to be meaningful—and not in a sanctimonious way” (Peary 1998: 147). It is meaningful (whether or not Tarantino meant it this
way) because Jules moves beyond the cycle of violence. But the power of that movement comes from the violent context of the film. The violence was needed for the epiphany to have any force.

David Kyle Johnson argues that “for a clear portrayal of revenge as morally justified, one need look no further than Kill Bill” (Greene and Mohammad 2007: 59). Uma Thurman plays Beatrix Kiddo, a member of a company of assassins who decides to leave the business and marry a record store owner. Her boss and former lover Bill, played by David Carradine, feels betrayed upon discovering her plans (he initially thought she was dead). He seeks revenge for his hurt feelings, and his band of assassins kills the wedding party at the rehearsal and mercilessly beats Beatrix. Bill then shoots her in the head. Unbeknownst to Bill, however, Beatrix survives the gunshot and after a lengthy coma seeks her revenge on the assassins and finally on Bill.

In the case of Kill Bill, the audience most certainly sides with Beatrix in her rampage of vengeance. She has been wronged terribly, and justice demands retribution. In this regard, her violent acts are a way of restoring order out of chaos—a typical function of religious action and central to creation mythologies. Revenge thus becomes a religious exercise. As Beatrix tells us, “When fortune smiles on someone as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other that not only does God exist, you’re doing his will.” Revenge then is a moral duty. It is righteous action, for it restores the divine and just order.

Anderson notes that “the film itself is not simply a revenge drama, but also a story of redemption. The only way that Kiddo can deserve a normal life is to pay penance for her own past life. This penance, however, takes the form of more violent actions, involving both Kiddo’s ability to inflict harm upon others as well as her ability to endure pain and injury herself” (Anderson 2004). In other words, she must make certain sacrifices (including sacrificing others) in order to re-enter the collective.

By the end of the second film, after coolly killing Bill with the Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique, Beatrix ends her rampage of revenge and drives off with her daughter. The hope, of course, is that the cycle of revenge is ended. Maybe, in the first film we watch as Beatrix kills Vernita. When confronted by Vernita’s young daughter Nikki, Beatrix says “It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that I’m sorry. But you can take my word for it, your mother had it coming. When you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I’ll be waiting.” Here we see the prospect of the never ending cycle of violence.

In his review of Tarantino’s most recent film, Inglorious Basterds, Charles Taylor notes that “the director wants us to relish the revenge taken on the Nazis.” In the culminating scene of Nazi destruction, “it’s the lust for vengeance that powers the film’s most delicious and daring passage” (Taylor 2010: 105). As in other Tarantino movies, the dichotomy between good and evil is clear. Nazis, in fact, are a stereotypical symbol for evil incarnate. Their destruction brings justice to an otherwise chaotic and evil situation. The silver screen heroes of Inglorious Basterds (much like the football heroes on the gridiron) are warriors in contemporary cosmic wars—warriors who (hopefully?) judge the evil doers, destroy them, and restore order.

So, in Tarantino films we see extensive use of violence—but not violence that is completely disconnected from a conception of justice and righteous order. The violence at least implies a sense of justice, and often the connection is made explicit. While Tarantino’s films seem to include a never ending cycle of violence, certain plot developments suggest ways of escaping that cycle (or, at least, the merits of doing so). In these ways, Tarantino’s violence serves an ethical function.

Another way to think about the violence in Tarantino movies is related to the idea of sacrifice. As we saw with football, fans vicariously experience the violence of games. This experience is one of sacrificing the victim—the loser, the one being tackled or hit, etc. Such violent sacrifice of the victim compensates for the internal violence we must do to ourselves as members of a society (for example, repressing our instinctual desires). Through Tarantino films, we get to vicariously sacrifice victims—and even vicarious victims who really deserve such sacrifice. We particularly relish the destruction of the bad or evil characters, such as those who sought to kill Beatrix Kiddo. In a sense, these characters represent all those who have wronged us as well, and their destruction at least provides some psychological reckoning in the context of the film and perhaps also in our lives. This reaffirmation of order helps to maintain the communal value system—a system that helps to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil.

We also are drawn to the personal sacrifices that characters make as they pursue their aims through the narrative of the films. Beatrix literally risks life and limb in order to exact her revenge. Similarly, the “basterds” in Inglorious Basterds are willing to risk everything in order to destroy the Nazis. As Durkheim notes, such risk-taking and willingness to bear pain raise these characters (and vicariously raise us) above our meager and profane selves (Durkheim 1995: 317–321). And, as Kerr observes, such risk-taking provides audiences with the opportunity to vicariously participate in it and thus to elevate our emotional lives out of the doldrums of contemporary existence (Kerr 2005: 118). In these ways and others, Tarantino films provide psychological benefits akin to those provided in religious settings.

Conclusion

As institutional religions come to have less influence on the majority of people in the West, popular culture comes to be the place where violence is ritualized and controlled. Whether we are watching violence in various sports or actors on television and film, violence continues to be central to our psychic and social lives. It is not gratuitous and barbaric, it is necessary and meaningful—whether that be in a religious or a secular context.

Summary

- Religion is inherently violent.
- The violence in religion serves important social-psychological functions.
- The violence in sports functions in similar ways to the violence in religion.
The violence in popular media (television, film, etc.) functions in similar ways to the violence in religion.

Violence in popular culture may serve as a substitute for stereotypically religious violence in an increasingly secular society.

**Glossary terms**

**Bhagavad Gita** – literally “Song of the Lord”; an Indian religious text that is the sixth part of the *Mahabharata*; the text is approximately 2000 years old.

**Karma** – literally meaning action, it is the Indian law of cause and effect as these pertain to individual behavior and its consequences either in this lifetime or future ones.

**Manicheanism** – a view attributed to the Manichees (third century) in which the world is divided into the world of light and the world of darkness, good and evil, and history is the working out of the struggle between the two.

**Ritual** – prescribed actions or behaviors that express communal and/or religious meanings.

**Scapegoat** – a surrogate victim that bears responsibility for the evil or ills faced by a community.

**Totem** – a natural object (typically an animal or plant) that represents the community and/or its gods.

**Transcendent** – Referring to which is qualitatively different and separate from this world; for example, God is transcendent (other-worldly) even if he/she/it also works in the world.

**Points for discussion**

- Are human beings inherently violent?
- Is religion inherently violent?
- Is violence in popular culture a reflection of human violence or does it encourage human violence or both?
- Is violence in sports like ice hockey or football an important reason for why they are so popular?
- Is violence the key to why many films are so popular?

**Further reading**


A classic theoretical work that has influenced numerous scholars in regard to theories of religion, ritual, and violence.


Perhaps the most important and frequently cited book on contemporary religious violence. A standard in the field.


A powerful critique of the discourse surrounding 9/11 and how it reflects upon the study of religion.


A powerful genealogy of violence in the Abrahamic traditions.


An excellent introduction to various ways of interpreting religious violence, with ample historical examples.

**Bibliography**


6 On the job and among the elect

Religion and the salvation of Sipowicz in
NYPD Blue

Dan W. Clanton, Jr.

Introduction

NYPD Blue, which ended its twelve-season run in 2005 as one of the most honored and influential series in TV history (the series has received eighty-two Emmy nominations, and won twenty times), premiered on 21 September 1993 to a flurry of media attention. The show’s Executive Producer, Steven Bochco, had a proven track record with evening dramas such as Hill Street Blues and L.A. Law, and this new show boasted an impressive ensemble cast, along with a brand new disclaimer for night time viewers: “This police drama contains adult language and scenes with partial nudity. Viewer discretion is advised.” In fact, most of the hype surrounding the show’s early seasons centered on the rawness of the language and imagery, but slowly people began to take notice of the writing and acting. Specifically, fans began to watch the show to see the development of Detective Andy Sipowicz, played by Dennis Franz, a veteran of Hill Street Blues. The series started strangely for Sipowicz, as we’re shown an irresponsible racist drunk, who’d rather spend time with prostitutes than do his job. As far as I can tell, Blue is one of the only, if not the only prime time series that shows its main character being brutally shot six times only twenty-three minutes into its very first episode. However, it’s during his recovery that Sipowicz sober up and begins to realize he wants his life to improve.

Most critics agree that even though Blue has one of the most effective casts in recent memory, the show really centers on Sipowicz. Denver Post TV critic Joanne Ostrow writes,

We knew immediately that Sipowicz, a balding, bullying, racist pig, was offensive; we had no idea how complex or long-suffering he would be. As he inched toward reining in his twin demons of prejudice and alcoholism, we became more invested in his struggle. As the demons multiplied, the anti-hero, alternately simmering and exploding, dared us to care.

(Ostrow 2005: 6)

In the same article, she quotes David Lavery, who writes, “TV may well be the only medium, and that includes literature, capable of showing, in something like

Filmography


Inglourious Basterds, Quentin Tarantino, dir. (2009)

Kill Bill, Quentin Tarantino, dir. (2003)

Kill Bill 2 Quentin Tarantino, dir. (2004)

Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino, dir. (1994)

Reservoir Dogs, Quentin Tarantino, dir. (1992)