Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence
by Charles Selengut

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I would like to begin this review apologetically because I have never felt compelled to give such a thoroughly negative assessment of any published work. However, *Sacred Fury* fails in almost every meaningful category of assessment and I recommend any serious scholar or student to steer clear of this comedy of errors. I will begin the review with the less serious problems and work my way through to the more serious failures, and then finally assess the guiding thesis of the book.

First of all, the book suffers from an obvious absence of any editing or peer review. The lack of a good editor, or any editor whatsoever, is immediately apparent as Selengut uses run-on paragraphs throughout, cramming multiple distinct topics into single gargantuan paragraphs, some of which can go on for almost two pages. The book is a monograph, yet the author consistently refers to the way in which “we” are going to consider a point or move forward in the argument. These basic problems along with some other fundamental grammar, style and factual blunders, that I don’t think need to be repeated here, made the entire book read like the rough draft of an undergraduate thesis.

The book also seems to lack any sort of peer review. In fact, the introductory section begins with Selengut arguing with colleagues who apparently had a chance to read a draft and shared reactions that were similar to my own. Most disturbingly, the book is riddled with factual errors, some of which even non-expert readers should be able to identify. Below are samples of some factual errors in the book:

- Selengut writes, “After the Babylonian exile from the land of Israel in 70 C.E., and the loss…” (p. 25. The Babylonian exile occurred in 586 B.C.E. 70 C.E. is obviously a reference to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans.)
• Selengut writes that the Albigensians proposed “complete celibacy for all Christians” (p. 27. The Albigensians (Cathars) required only a certain elect few, known as the perfecti, to be celibate.)

• Selengut claims that the Waldensians established “alternative clerical hierarchies” (p. 27. The Waldensians began as an egalitarian, anti-hierarchical movement, and developed internal structures only later in their existence when they become a target of the 13th century inquisition.)

• Selengut claims that the Medieval Inquisitions begin in the 11th century. (p. 82. Officially, the Inquisitions began late in the 12th century with the papal bull Ad Abolendam, in 1184 C.E.)

• Selengut writes about Timothy McVeigh’s military career, claiming that he served “with honor in Vietnam…” (p. 88. Timothy McVeigh was born in 1968. He served in the first Gulf War.)

• Selengut claims that Jewish scriptures “describe an apocalyptic war between the two world empires, Gog and Magog, in which untold numbers of people will be burned and killed in the devastation…” (p. 96, 108. Here he has confused the reference to ‘Gog from the kingdom of Magog’ found in Ezekiel, chapters 38 & 39, with the reference to Gog and Magog in the Christian Book of Revelation, chapter 20, where they are symbolic references to the nations of this world coming together in a final battle. Even the reference in Revelation to Gog and Magog is not made in a way that suggests two actual world empires vying with one another.)
Once an author makes a few glaring factual errors like the ones above, it becomes difficult to trust any information in the book. It made reading the book tedious because I found myself constantly checking any piece of information that was unfamiliar to me.

Aside from these egregious factual errors, I found that the author’s use of absolute terms like “all,” “every,” “never” and “none” often led him to make false statements in situations where a simple qualifier like “many,” “most,” or “few” might have saved the day. For instance, at the beginning of Chapter 3 he writes, “All religions have a vision of the ideal society which will come at the ‘end of time,’ the eschaton, when the universe will be in full harmony with God’s plan and all predictions for the ideal society described in the scriptures will come to pass.” Here he has mistaken Judaism, Christianity and Islam with “all” religions, since these traditions clearly have the most developed eschatological theologies. I can think of a number of indigenous religious traditions that have nothing of the sort. Mainstream Buddhism as well tends to lack a sense of communal or social destiny, which is a basic requisite for apocalyptic theologies. Passages like these are typical of the way in which Selengut approaches a discussion of a religious tradition. Given the language and phrases used to describe them, one gets the impression that the author sees no ambiguity, difference of opinion, or internal dissent operative in any of these religions or movements.

The book is teeming with these sorts of gross generalizations and facile reductions of plural voices down to a single point of view. For instance, Selengut claims at a number of points to know “the Muslim perspective,” (205) on a topic, and, in another chapter, he seems convinced that all “traditionalist Christians” think and behave in a consistent manner (166). The author’s reductionism becomes disturbing when it is applied in
obviously biased ways, as one can witness in relation to Islam. For instance, Selengut believes, “martyrdom by suicide bombing has become an integral part of contemporary Islam.” (206) This kind of reductionism is at work even in regards to Judaism, the tradition in which the author claims special expertise. For instance, Selengut portrays Judaism as essentially messianic (95) and seems unaware that there are Jewish scholars who argue that messianism is a peripheral element of the faith. (William Scott Green, the Philip S. Bernstein Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Rochester is one such scholar)

So far I have only shown that the book is sloppy. What about the central thesis? Does the book have something to offer in spite of its premature publication? The main thesis of the book was apparently developed in reaction to some of the author’s colleagues who too easily reduced religion and religious violence to the expediencies of political, social and economic forces and their manipulation by powerful elites. To the extent that the thesis criticizes an easy reduction of religious motivations to mere social expediency, it has value. However, in his attempt to preserve a place for a specifically religious explanation for violence, Selengut seems to think there is a way we can easily distill the religious from the social and speak of distinctly religious motivations without reference to the multitude of other influences that are either reinforcing or contradicting the religious ones.

Indeed many religions have theologies and moral theories that encourage violence in a variety of ways that are both direct and indirect, real and potential. And it is also very true that much, even most, contemporary violence cannot be explained appropriately without reference to the specifically religious motivations of the key people and
movements involved. However, religions, their texts and their theologies are not hermetically sealed worlds of pure religiosity. All emerge out of and exist within social contexts, which, in most cases, cannot be divorced from the religious belief systems that subsequently develop. Selengut and the authors he seems to be fighting apparently view the world through much more clear-cut categories where “the religious” explanations for an act of violence are thoroughly distinct from “the social scientific” ones. From my perspective, and that of much of interdisciplinary religious studies, this kind of clear and total distinction is artificial.

If you have made it this far, my conclusions will be no surprise to you. I cannot recommend this book for either the classroom setting, or as a scholarly reference work. The inaccuracies alone make it problematic for use with students. In fact, just for fun, I compared the information in the book against the articles in Wikipedia on the same topics and in relation to all of the errors listed above, Wikipedia had more accurate information. Clearly something is amiss at Altamira. Aside from the factual errors, the book seems unfamiliar with the state of scholarship in interdisciplinary religious studies, and a book on religious violence from a sociological perspective most definitely falls within this category. The thesis seems to be unconsciously reconstructing walls between the social sciences and religious studies – the same walls that the field of interdisciplinary religious studies has been trying to break down for decades. The reason Selengut does this is so he can subsequently make the argument for purely religious motivations in regards to certain acts of violence. This position counters arguments for the purely social scientific explanations of his opponents, but so does simply pointing out that religious belief and practice have a powerful and often decisive influence over its adherents. Finally, it
appears that no one at Altamira Press bothered to subject the book to editorial scrutiny, let alone a thorough peer review process. The publication of this book in this form is simply irresponsible.