

The Journal of Interreligious Studies

A Collaboration Between Hebrew College and Boston University School of Theology

Issue 27
May 2019

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From the Managing Editor

This collection of articles marks the second issue published in collaboration with the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) Religions and the Practice of Peace (RPP) initiative. As noted in the introduction to the first collaborative issue, the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* has partnered with RPP at HDS for a multiyear project to publish article-length pieces authored by presenters at the RPP Colloquium and at other RPP talks.

RPP invites scholars, practitioners, religious leaders, community organizers, and other professionals to share their learned experiences and academic expertise regarding the religious, spiritual, and cultural resources for the cultivation of positive relationships, well-being, justice, and sustainable peace. This HDS initiative recognizes the constitutive role that religious leaders and communities play in conflict transformation and peacebuilding at the local and global levels, and so seeks to share best practices and scholarship with the larger Harvard community and the global public.

The recent and shocking uptick in violence at houses of worship worldwide makes this collaboration all the more urgent. Residents of formerly colonized regions replete with religious diversity and with the sociopolitical tensions resulting from postcolonialism remain physically and psychologically aware of the many attacks on their shrines and places of worship; sadly, this is “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The increase in overt antisemitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Christian violence, and white supremacy in the North American, European, and otherwise “Western” contexts has led to a surge of violence at houses of worship in these regions as well; indeed, residents of these regions are only beginning to comprehend the physical and psychological terror historically experienced by members of religious communities worldwide. Of course, indigenous communities of the Americas and Africa have suffered this violent oppression for centuries.

Perhaps there is hope for effective action given the newfound solidarity between, say, an American Christian and a Pakistani Shi‘a Muslim; the former has now experienced the anxiety of no longer being safe in their house of worship, just as the latter has felt for decades. Members of the secure, privileged, and dominating global and local regions are able not only to imagine but also to embody what members of the postcolonial, neocolonial, and subjugated global and local regions have experienced ever since European colonialism, the rise of the U.S. military-industrial complex, and the establishment of a U.S. foreign policy that seeks to maintain its hegemony in a unipolar world. Even as protracted a list as the one below is far from comprehensive:

- June 17, 2015: Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina
- April 9, 2017: St. George’s Church in Tanta, Egypt; Saint Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria, Egypt
- Aug. 1, 2017: Jadwadia Mosque in Herat, Afghanistan
- Nov. 5, 2017: First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas
- Nov. 24, 2017: al-Rawda Mosque in Bir Al-abed, Egypt
- Dec. 17, 2017: Bethel Methodist Memorial Church in Quetta, Pakistan
- Aug. 3, 2018: Khawaja Hassan mosque in Gardez, Afghanistan

- Oct. 27, 2018: Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Jan. 27, 2019: Roman Catholic Cathedral of our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo, Philippines
- March 15, 2019: Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center in Christchurch, New Zealand
- March 21, 2019; March 21, 2018; and October 11, 2016: Shia Karte Sakhi shrine in Kabul, Afghanistan
- March 26, April 2, and April 4, 2019: Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, St. Mary Baptist Church, and Greater Union Baptist Church in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana—historically black churches that were set ablaze by the same person
- April 21, 2019: Shrine of St. Anthony in Kotahena, Colombo, Sri Lanka; St. Sebastian in Negombo, Sri Lanka; The Zion Church in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka
- April 27, 2019: Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California
- May 8, 2019: Data Darbar Sufi Shrine in Lahore, Pakistan

An attack on a community of people that is partly motivated by religious affiliation is always terrible, but an attack at a place of worship is additionally and uniquely distressing. Houses of worship are especially intended to be sacred, peaceful places wherein religious adherents may gather, pray, and contemplate together; they are to be places of refuge, not zones of violence.

The human mind is characteristically trained to apportion simple and singular causes to events in the world. As humans, we want to be *certain* of what *produced* such horrific attacks. We are thus quick to assert that religious hatred and bigotry, theological extremism, and so-called radical doctrines are the monocausal ideas that effected these embodied acts of violence. However, as the study of religion at the interdisciplinary nexus of, inter alia, sociology, history, economics, legal studies, foreign policy and geopolitical studies, critical race and gender studies, and postcolonial and decolonial studies inexorably concludes, there are as many “nonreligious” aspects to these attacks as there are “religious” (notwithstanding the manufactured separation between the two).

The field of interreligious studies does not aim to absolve religion from its role in these hate crimes and acts of terrorism; this performance of apologetics would be just as disingenuous as blaming *only* religion for this violence. The discipline of interreligious studies does, however, aim to complicate the analysis of just *how* individuals and communities are ideologically enabled to execute such crimes, and *how* other discourses intersect with religion to produce these acts of terror. Racism, misogyny, untreated mental health issues, psychological and emotional isolation, lack of empathy or compassion, economic vulnerability, xenophobia, transphobia and homophobia, marginalization and oppression produced by neoliberal capitalism and self-interested Western foreign policy, the military-industrial complex, charismatic leaders coopting religious ideologies, historical subjugation in many parts of the world, the immediate deleterious effects of anthropogenic climate change on precarious populations—some or all of these and so many more intersect with religious beliefs to coalesce and subsequently produce unequivocally terrible acts like the shootings at the Emanuel AME Church, the Tree of Life Synagogue, and Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center, and the bombings at the Shia Karte Sakhi shrine, St. George’s Church, and the Sri Lankan Christian places of worship.

RPP, however, seeks to expand the discussion even more. How do religious beliefs and practices intersect with hegemonic and marginalizing discourses and contexts to *prevent* and *counter* violence and hate? The news is awash with stories of hate crimes and terrorist attacks, and so the study of religion has tended to respond to this large presence, interrogating it critically and analytically, deconstructing the assumption that religion *alone* produces these ideologies. RPP shines a light on historical and contemporary moments, and in some cases even extended legacies, in which religious communities and leaders resolved or prevented conflicts; interrogates this critically and analytically to understand how religious beliefs and practices produced positive relationships, well-being, justice, and sustainable peace; and explores how this accumulated experience and wisdom might beneficially inform contemporary peace practice and leadership.

Accordingly, let us take a look at the five articles in this issue. Jeffrey R. Seul joins us once again with a contribution entitled “Inclusion of Religious Actors in Peace and National Dialogue Processes.” He looks at the different ways in which religious actors should be involved as stakeholder-participants in peace and national dialogue processes. Religious actors contribute to the resolution of conflicts in ways different from “civil society” actors more generally, and so careful consideration should be given to how inclusion functions. Trelawney J. Grenfell-Muir offers her article, entitled “Minefield Prophets: The Methods and Effectiveness of Clergy Peacebuilders in Northern Ireland,” as a needed contribution to the discussion. Therein she gives a concrete example of religious actors involved in peace and national dialogue processes; in this case, she examines the positive role that clergy peacebuilders played in promoting positive peace and stability in the implementation and post-agreement periods of peacebuilding activities in Northern Ireland. Daniel L. Shapiro contributes an article, entitled “Negotiating the Sacred: Turning Impossible Divides into Opportunities for Peace,” that draws from Relational Identity Theory to propose four principles to overcome obstacles when not only sacred spaces and objects are contested, but also one’s sacred religious identity. Donna Hicks draws from her experience facilitating dialogues in numerous unofficial diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Colombia, Cuba, Libya, and Syria in her contribution, entitled “Reflections on Love and Dignity in Resolving Conflict,” wherein she reflects on the central and constitutive role that the recognition of dignity, or lack thereof, plays in successfully, or unsuccessfully, resolving conflict. Last but not least, Melissa Wood Bartholomew contributes an article, entitled “Racial Justice and Healing through Love: Lessons from My Ancestors,” that draws from the experiences and wisdom of her enslaved ancestors and from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to elaborate a framework for pursuing racial justice and healing in the United States through love.

Once again, this collection of articles demonstrates the public benefit and common good generated by the *Journal’s* partnership with RPP. As part of their missions, both RPP and the *JIRS* seek to promote innovative ideas and methodologies for interreligious work, to discuss interreligious disputes and their possible solutions, and to provide a venue in which religious leaders and community organizers from disparate regions may learn from one another. These articles do just that. But this collaboration does not pretend to be the key to opening the treasury of religious peace and harmony. Such an idealistic goal is not within our purview, much less attainable. There is an acknowledgment that to be human is to err; however, this should not lead to despair and quietism but to acts of faith and courage, and a determination to seek justice however we can. It is in this spirit that RPP and the *JIRS*, working together, strive to provide careful, critical, and constructive analysis of how certain errors occur, and how religious and cultural traditions may be

a resource for reconciliation, well-being, and justice—even if, to reprise Ecclesiastes, unjust power dynamics are ever emerging on one horizon as they set on the other.

I remain grateful to Dean David N. Hempton of HDS and Elizabeth Lee-Hood of the RPP initiative for their continued collaboration with the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. To many more issues to come!

Axel M. Oaks Takacs
Managing Editor