

HIS101 (Histories of Violence)

Religion and Violence: Ancient, Middle Age, and Early Modern Histories

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Civilizations of the premodern world were commonly characterized by social, political, and economic structures established chiefly on religious grounds, and by public lifestyles shaped primarily through religious duties. Forces or institutions that could amend or challenge pious norms seldom existed. This essay revolves around the thesis that the introduction of institutionalized frameworks (e.g. widespread justice systems) and the subsequent departure from ritualized, religious mandates of behaviour led to an overall decrease in the toleration of violence both as normative behaviour and as a solution to private conflict. The essay will analyse the relationship between violence and religion in two subtopics: the persecution of minorities and the maintenance of order. For each, one Ancient and one Middle Age or Early Modern civilization will be compared. These comparisons will display the inference that alongside societal advancement generally came the recognition of the need to pacify violence, and the consequent introduction of institutional frameworks. Finally, the essay will come to an evaluative conclusion.

When compared, Ancient Rome of 1000 B.C.E.–400 C.E. and the Early Islamic World (600–1400 C.E.) offer interesting implications for how states persecuted minorities and the role religion played in this process. Prior to the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E., Christianity and Judaism were callously persecuted for confronting polytheistic norms in Rome¹. Christian martyrdom signified rebellion against religious intolerance; a mark of an isolationist society where religious uniformity was mandated by emperors hoping for divine ‘restoration of blessings on Rome’². Continued, faith-based persecution of minorities led to further and more polarized martyrdom; Tertullian wrote that *“blood of the martyrs [was] the seed of the [Christian] church”*³. The absence of an

¹ Alexandra G. De Oliveira, “Persecution and Martyrdom in the Roman Empire,” *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2021), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/8d93572dfd1a2eb9a8a291f3992a0697>. <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/8d93572dfd1a2eb9a8a291f3992a0697>

² Roger B. Beck et al., *A History of World Societies*, 11th ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martins, Macmillan Learning, 2021), 421.

³ De Oliveira, “Persecution and Martyrdom in the Roman Empire.”

available civic infrastructure which the oppressed could use to appeal their concerns led to a wicked cycle of state violence provoking public violence. Oppressed Christians could only respond to this societal deficiency with martyrdom, the only method they could deliver their oppositionist message. This cycle would only end once political authority recognized Christians, terminated their condemnation, and institutionalized their rights in law⁴.

By contrast, attitudes towards minorities in early Islamic states were largely pragmatic and Qur'an-derived⁵. The *dhimmah* classified the rights of minorities and prevented their violent revolt, although it did not reduce inequalities⁶. It is not the case, however, that early Islam was foundationally less hostile to religious minorities than Ancient Roman polytheism⁷. The Qur'an does mention the persecution of the 'enemies of Islam'⁸ stemming from Prophet Mohammed's 'recitations' that believers "*not in God and the last Day*" were to be fought. However, while the Roman Empire strived to impose religious dogma on its people and dominate religious oppositionists⁹, the objective of the Muslim expansion was not to convert all peoples into Islam, but to conquer the world's political authorities and impose universal Islamic rule¹⁰. Muslim society recognized that internal societal violence was disruptive, that death was a "*horror*"¹¹, therefore the need for Islamic political supremacy was manifested via the *dhimmah*; it transformed physical

⁴ Roger B. Beck et al., "A History of World Societies," 421.

⁵ Mark Meyerson, "Muslim-Christian Encounter in the Medieval Mediterranean," *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2021), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/503631de3813b0a1ec8f350363fc5929>.

⁶ Meyerson, "Muslim-Christian Encounter in the Medieval Mediterranean."

⁷ Mark Meyerson, "Religion, Violence, and Territorial Expansion: Muslim Conquests," *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2021), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/07eaf7769b6ffdf68db1e12d9d8c3f6d>.

⁸ Ibn Rushd, "The Legal Doctrine of Jihad," in *Bidayat Al-Mujtahid Wa-Nihayat Al-Muqtasid*, trans. Rudolph Peters (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 39.

⁹ De Oliveira, "Persecution and Martyrdom in the Roman Empire."

¹⁰ Meyerson, "Religion, Violence, and Territorial Expansion: Muslim Conquests."

¹¹ Ibn al-Athir, "Saladin and The Third Crusade," in *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, trans. Francesco Gabrieli (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 142.

into economic exploitation of minorities. Muslim jurist Averroes wrote that enemies were to be fought until conversion “*or until they [were] willing to pay poll-tax (jizya).*”¹²

In the context of social and political order, both Athenian society of Archaic Greece (800–400 B.C.E.) and Early-Modern European states (1500–1750 C.E.) introduced institutionalized systems of justice following revelations about the disruptiveness of everyday private violence. Social responsibility to mitigate violence developed within the citizenries¹³. Archaic Greece consisted of poleis where political organization (hence behavioural norms) differed. Sparta, faced with intense rebellion from helots, became highly militarized¹⁴. Athens, conversely, considered the interest of its various demographic groups; its government took the form of a primal (contemporarily dysfunctional) democracy shaped by adversarial discussion. Its political structure pioneered in that it separated religious practise from semi-secular governance and redistributed public dispute away from violent civil conflict and towards peaceful judiciary proceedings. Athenian governance was ‘semi-secular’ because trials were still often held in accordance to religious convention. Traditions painted vengeance as retribution for violence; the developed judicial system modified physical vengeance to its new adaptation, vengeance in court. This resembles an evolution of religious practise beyond violence and towards a less disruptive, institutionalized solution. The vilification of homicide and slaughter in the Athenian court system also helped shift the pious doctrine. Athenians began to consider death as *miasma*; contaminable “*pollution of the killer*”¹⁵. Religious

¹² Ibn Rushd, “The Legal Doctrine of Jihad,” 39.

¹³ Mark Meyerson, “Early Modern European State and Violence,” *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2021), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/eab1ae741205bddc3ac5062737cb4a68>.

¹⁴ Mark Meyerson, “Violence, Law and Society in Golden Age Athens,” *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2021), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/cee58affac3f889a7577a29a099a66cd>.

¹⁵ Meyerson, “Violence, Law and Society in Golden Age Athens.”

repulsion paired with the abolishment of most violent acts stigmatized bloodshed and ensured order in Athenian society without the necessity for high internal militarization.

Monopolized justice in Early Modern European States (1500–1750 C.E.) ultimately led to the erosion of private justice¹⁶, i.e. resolution through violent feud. Private armies were no longer used to settle disputes allowing states to make considerable advancements towards sovereignty¹⁷. Similar to the fear of *miasma* in Athens, German psychologist Norbert Elias outlined that people of Early Modern Europe gradually developed psychological inhibition when it came to expressing their emotions, a “*civilization process*” occurred¹⁸. Nevertheless, in the dawn of the protestant reformation of 1517 C.E., a series of religious disagreements triggered widescale, violent conflict. Just as Europe began straying away from violent feud, events like the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre spurred civil war for decades and wreaked havoc on the stability of European states¹⁹. This is evidence that religious motivations for violence took precedence over institutional mandates, and that violence would only relent if religious norms changed alongside institutional reform, the case in Ancient Rome and Archaic Greece. In Early Modern Europe, only once Spanish authorities granted religious legitimacy to Protestants of northern provinces did hostilities end²⁰.

As the analysis in this essay strives to suggest, societies throughout our civilized history demonstrated an intense connection between religion and violence. Violence was (and in many instances today still is) inexorable when religious doctrines were challenged or unappeased, although the introduction of institutionalized frameworks for regulating and judging behaviour helped to ensure stability of the state. Scrutinizing the relationship between religion and violence

¹⁶ Meyerson, “Early Modern European State and Violence.”

¹⁷ Roger B. Beck et al., “A History of World Societies,” 1107.

¹⁸ Meyerson, “Early Modern European State and Violence.”

¹⁹ Roger B. Beck et al., “A History of World Societies,” 1100.

²⁰ Roger B. Beck et al., “A History of World Societies,” 1100.

in civilizations of both ancient and premodern eras can provide valuable explanations for modern manifestations of this phenomenon.

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