September 11, the war in Iraq, bombing in cities from Madrid, London to Oslo—recent years have seen an alarming global increase in religiously motivated violence, often inspired too by nationalism, colonialism, ethnic conflict, and fundamentalism.

There has perhaps never before been a time when the study of religion and violence has been so relevant to global society. RELS 450 will engage this timely and controversial topic by examining Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India, conflicts between Christian evangelicals and African animists, terrorism and the “war on terror” after 9/11, and the escalating role of religious rhetoric in American politics today.

“The cardinal doctrine of modern democratic practice is the separation of the state from religion. The idea of a religious state has no place in the mind of the modern man.” -- Jawahalal Nehru, 1950

“The idea that religion and politics don’t mix was invented by the Devil to keep Christians from running their own country.” -- Jerry Falwell in a sermon delivered on July 4, 1976
RELS 450 Capstone Seminar on Revisiting Religion after 9/11: Religion & Violence (MW 4-5:15 MYBK 119)

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Course Description

Religious violence is a slippery topic, one that is sensitive, complex, potentially offensive, but of major importance. Defining “religion” is notoriously difficult. Defining “violence” turns out to be just as tricky. Due to the nature of the topic, then, this seminar will be exploratory in nature. This course will provide students with critical tools from a variety of disciplines within the field of Religious Studies to make sense of current events in which religion is intertwined with nationalism and the preservation of ethnic and racial identities, for these toxic combinations often result in tragic violence. We will rely on a variety of methods to examine instances of violence and reconciliation, including ethnography, social psychology, rhetorical analysis of religious speech, gender and ritual studies, and the history of religions.

As case studies, we will examine Hindu-Muslim conflicts in modern India, terrorism and the “war on terror” after 9/11, the escalating role of religious rhetoric in American politics today, and conflicts between Christian evangelicals and African animists. We will discuss the role of religious violence in contemporary society and foster both sympathetic and critical interpretations of religion. As we inquire into the history, causes, and characteristics of religious violence, none of us should expect to leave the class with a definitive explanation or solution for it. There are no clear “right answers” that cannot be questioned. What we can do, however, is place acts of religious violence in their proper context, and learn to ask questions and explore different means to answer those questions. What might some of those questions be?

There are many possible starting points and you will undoubtedly bring your own questions and ideas with you. We will initially organize our inquiry around the following:  
*Why do individuals involved in terrorism rely so heavily on religious texts and traditions to justify vengeful ideologies? What is the logic that provides moral justifications for violence? Does violence represent an aberration born of human weakness or is it the inevitable result of religious teachings? What does it mean to “understand” something that we find morally reprehensible or simply bizarre? What is the proper balance between empathy and critical judgment for the scholar of religion? Should scholars of religion be neutral detached observers or serve as religious and cultural critics in the public arena? Finally: what is religion, how do you know, and why do you care?*

Seminar Goals

- To re-examine “religion” and its intersection with power, identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and race
- To develop the skills of analyzing acts of religious violence and statements about those acts, which will make you a much more informed consumer of the news media
- To engage in self-reflective, open, informed, and civil conversation about diverse religious traditions and their role in acts of violence
- To improve the clarity and profundity of your spoken and written expression about a complex and controversial topic
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This is a seminar and participants are expected to do all the required readings for each class.

* Active participation in seminar, including a class presentation (20%)
  Asking questions, raising concerns, and offering your own ideas during seminar discussions is a crucial part of this course. You are expected to be an active participant in class discussions. Grades for class participation will be assigned on the basis of the quality and consistency of your involvement in class discussions, including those provoked by other students’ comments. Each student will be required to do one class presentation. The presenter will give a ten-minute overview of a theoretical article (usually an ER) and apply that theory to the travelogue, novels or films that feature acts of religious violence. As class presenter you should raise a few theoretical/methodological questions for our seminar discussion.

* Maintain a reading journal (15%) in which you will cite important passages for each reading assignment and then record your reading responses or reactions. The controversial subject matter of this course can provoke anger, shock, and disagreement in you, all of which you can note in your journal, but I’m also looking for new insights, new ways to process, contextualize, and critique what you’ve read. Journal entries may be handwritten or typed and I will collect them regularly for evaluation. Preparing in this manner will enable us to move our discussions along in a lively and interesting way.

* 5 short papers (35%): There will be five brief (2-4 page) essays on assigned topics that review the basic ideas and analyze the themes from the assigned reading. Grades will be based on accuracy, analytic insight, and clarity of organization and expression.

* Term Research Paper of 13-15 pages (30%): For this research paper you will be required to apply one theoretical perspective and a method learned from those studied over the course of the semester to some current controversy that features religion, politics, identity and violence. A two page description and outline, with research questions and a bibliography, is due March 14; a complete draft of the paper is due on April 2; the final revised draft is due May 2.

There are Five Required Texts available at the CofC Barnes & Noble Bookstore:

5) Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (2nd ed. ’06)


There are also required Electronic Readings (ER), pdf of articles by scholars and former students available on OAKS, which registered students can access and download after they login to MyCharleston (http://my.cofc.edu) under RELS 450.

Please print out each article and bring it to class on the day that it will be discussed.

Grading Scale:  

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Academic Integrity and the Honor Code: There is a zero-tolerance policy toward plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty in this course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own will receive a failing grade for the entire course. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. I will provide a handout that discusses the ethics of learning, intellectual honesty, plagiarism, and the College’s Honor Code to remove any ambiguity about what this zero-tolerance policy entails.
Readings and Topics for Seminar Discussions

Week 1  Studying Religion and Violence: Introduction to the major themes

1/9  How to Discuss Religion and Politics with Civility; or Why We Were Warned Not to Talk about Religion and Politics—and Why We Will Ignore This
( Discuss “Why the World Needs Religious Studies”)

1/11  How and why do we associate “religion” with “violence?” Major themes for this course
(ER#1-2: “Is Religion the Problem?” and “Does Religion Cause Violence?”)

Seminar topics: If religion has been linked to violence, then why is Juergensmeyer (in ER#1) reluctant to conclude that religion is the source of violence? According to Cavanaugh (ER#2), what does the distinction between the “religious” vs. the “secular” causes of violence tell us about where the boundaries of “religion” are understood? How might religion serve as a cure for violence? What important insights do Juergensmeyer & Cavanaugh offer us?

Week 2  The Ramayana & Ayodhya, Contested Sacred Site for Hindus & Muslims

1/16  Martin Luther King Holy Day—Day of Service
(Reflect on MLK’s legacy of non-violent resistance, equality, economic and social justice, peace)

1/18  Introducing the Ramayana Epic and Ayodhya: Mythmaking in Modern India
(ER#3: “Myth” and Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God, pp. ix-24; 53-80; optional: 235-262)

Seminar topics: In ER#3 McCutcheon first identifies seven ways in which scholars have made use of “myth” as extraordinary “deeply true” or “false” stories, but then he proposes that ordinary “myth-making” informs how people “construct, authorize and contest their social identities.” As you read about the Ramayana and how it shapes the consciousness of modern Indians, how does McCutcheon’s typology of “myth” help us understand Blank’s retelling of the Ramayana and its interpretations by Hindus today? How do Hindus make use of the Ramayana in a “process of constructing, authorizing, and reconstructing [their] identities?”

Week 3  Retelling the Ramayana

1/23  The Formation of Hindu Identities: the Politics of Caste and Race
(Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God, pp. 111-139, 201-229; ER#4: “The Violence of Illusion”)

Essay topic #1a: On pp. 207-8, Blank celebrates India’s great ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as India’s ability to assimilate foreign languages, cultures, and peoples. He has more difficulty identifying what exactly binds India together into a “nebulous sense of Indian-ness.” Are Hindus free to choose their identities, as recommended in ER#4? How has the caste system (and varna, with its racial connotations) served both to promote and undermine any sense of unity? In your opinion does the Indian government’s affirmative action program for “scheduled castes” promote or undermine India’s unity-in-diversity?

1/25  Debating Reality & Illusion in the Media and Good & Evil in India
(Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God, pp. 141-200; ER#5: “The Indian Mind”)  Beyond Good & Evil

Essay topic #1b: Respond to the following statement from Blank: “How could Rama, the very personification of good, commit an act of evil? How could Ravana, the Lord of the Demons, behave like a true gentleman? These are questions that Indians debate every day, at the dinner table, at the temple, at the tea hut near the village well. Truck-driver philosophers and seamstress theologians come up with many explanations, but never with an answer. There is no answer. Good and evil are not the separate entities we would like to believe.” (p. 173) Explain how Blank reaches this conclusion. Is the relativist view of ethics that Blank presents here compatible with Hindu Dharma?

Week 4  Gender Roles, Sexuality and Violence: Sita & Ram; Father, Son, and Holy War

1/30  Duty vs. Desire: Sita as the Ideal Hindu Wife
(The Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God pp. 263-272; 301-334; ER#6 “Yes to Sita, No to Ram”)

Seminar topics: What ideals does Sita stand for? How might a feminist critique the view of Sita as “Mother Earth?” Blank writes: “A recent poll asked women to name their role models, and more than half chose Sita as their ideal. To follow the path of Sita is to live vicariously through one’s mate. The highest piety of a woman (such a view holds) is to serve her husband…. A man gains virtue by action, a woman by helping her man to act.” (321) How are Blank’s comments undermined by the testimony of both Indian women and men in ER #6 as well as by the conclusion of the Ramayana? How might Sita’s story serve as a source of inspiration for women, who seek their own independence and agency rather than surrender in servile faith to her husband?
Week 5 Hindu and Muslim Responses to Modernity

2/6 The Past in the Present: Competing Hinduisms and Competing Memories of the Past (ER#8-9: “Religious and Spiritual Life” and “The Setting”)

Seminar topics: What values do the Hindu nationalist and flexible Hindu share (according to ER#8), and how do they differ? “The Setting” begins with a very disturbing image of a young girl that haunts Kakar’s imagination; what does this image tell us about the limits of empathy and his role as a psychoanalyst? Kakar then distinguishes between the Indian secularist and Hindu nationalist representations of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations. What are the key ideological points found in each form of historiography? What is problematic about each viewpoint? Which historical perspective comes closer to the “truth” in your estimation?

2/8 The Rhetorical Magic of Demagogues: Hindu and Muslim Stereotypes of the “Other” (ER#10-11: “Conflict: Hindus and Muslims” and “Search for Hindu-ness”)

Essay#2 due—the value of RELS in developing your skills for engaging the world

Seminar topics: How is an enduring Hindu identity identified? Is it new or old, both or neither? Is it a manifestation of group narcissism? Why do Hindus need Muslims for their national agenda, while Muslims do not need Hindus for theirs, according to Kakar? How does the powerful rhetoric and political “magic” of the Hindu demagogue, Rithambara (ER#11), tap into the subconscious fears and wishes of her audience? How does her celebration of Hindu “tolerance” turn Muslims into scapegoats?

Week 6 Setting the Scene for a Riot

2/13 Introducing Riot: Coca-Colonialism, Love & the Death of an American Woman (Riot: 1-63)

Seminar topics: “We have given passports to a dream, a dream of an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional society.... But who allowed for militant Hinduism to arise, challenging the very basis of the Indianess I’ve just described to you?” asks Laxman. How does the Hindu militant Ram Charan Gupta challenge Laxman’s secular and pluralistic ideals of Indian democracy? When Gupta voices his own perspective, what echoes do you hear of Kakar’s Hindu subjects?

2/15 Reading Riot: Intertwining Love and Lust, Hate and History (ER#12: “Contemporary Sexuality;” continue reading Riot, in whatever order of events you wish)

Seminar topics: Riot presents a sharp contrast between the two lovers Priscilla’s and Laxman’s attitudes towards sexuality and public displays of affection; how does each reflect distinct cultural norms about sexuality, gender, selfhood, and power? Why does control of the body and sexuality generate such strong moral and religious feelings, which are expressed in a language of virtue and vice, sin and redemption? What collisions of cultures, religions, race and class occur in this novel?

Week 7 Interpreting Riot

2/20 Cross-Cultural Clashes and Political Polemics (ER#13: “Clash of Civilizations?” and continue reading Riot)

Seminar topic: Why might Huntington’s “clash of civilization” theory (ER#13) be so appealing? Is there a singular “Hindu civilization” distinct from an essential “Muslim civilization?” Does this theory reinforce the ideological interests of religious nationalists? Does it help to clarify the conflict between Hindus and Muslims that we’ve read about in Riot or in earlier readings?
Post-modern Plots: Is the riot and the murder really unknowable?
(Wrap up Riot)

**Essay #3 on Riot due:** On pp. 136-7 Laxman describes to Priscilla his dream of writing a book about religion without an omniscient narrator, a book of interconnected events that can be read in whatever order the reader wishes to reveal that Truth is “elusive, subtle and many-sided.” How successful is Tharoor in writing a mystery with a plot that cannot be completely unraveled about a murder (and a riot) that can never be completely known? Is truth really unknowable and subjective in this novel? Do all of the antagonists believe themselves to be in sole possession of “the truth,” including Laxman himself?

**Week 8 ** Rethinking Terror and Violence: Christian Terrorists?

2/27  Theorizing Violence and Terror; a Norwegian Christian “Terrorist” Inspired by Hindutva in 2011
(*Terror in the Mind of God, xi-xii, 3-15; ER#14-15 articles on Anders Breivik*)

**Seminar topics:** How is Juergensmeyer’s cultural approach to the study of religious terrorism different from Huntington’s clashing civilizations model? Does a “war on terrorism” create more religions of rebellion? The violence of Breivik & McVeigh is undoubtedly political and probably racist, but what role does Christian theology or a desire for a theocracy play in their actions? How does Breivik rely on the “clash of civilizations” to justify his war against Islam, Marxism, and multiculturalism?

2/29  Onward Christian Soldiers
(*Terror in the Mind of God, pp. 19-36; ER#16-17: “Michael Bray” and “Dangerous Religion”*)

**Seminar topics:** Are the Christians who justify their acts of violence acting in defense of the American status quo or in revolution against it? Bray appeals to a divine mandate for righteous violence (with God as wrathful warrior) to justify the acts of Christian “soldiers” who attack abortion clinics. What do we make of his use of the American revolution and to the anti-slavery abolitionists during the Civil War to justify his position? Is it fair to single out WASP men as the most “dangerous religious individuals in American history?” (ER#17)

3/5-7  Spring Break!

**Week 9 ** What Motivated the Muslim Suicide Bombers on 9/11?

3/12  Redefining Religion and Understanding the *Spiritual Manual* of the Suicide Bombers
(*Holy Terrors: 1-18; 93-98; ER#18: “Defining the Present Situation of Muslims”*)

**Seminar topics:** According to Lincoln, what is wrong with labeling the hijackers as “evil-doers?” Should we abandon the “F” word “(Fundamentalism) in favor of “religious maximalism?” Is religion most vital when it is in conflict with mainstream or surrounding cultures? What would motivate the American mainstream media and the 9/11 Commission to disregard the *Spiritual Manual*, a manual that prescribed how the hijackers ought to perform rituals of purification and recite prayers? The *Manual* allows us to understand the motivation of the hijackers: how does their quest for martyrdom reference the battles of Muhammad?

3/14  Symmetric Dualisms: Analyzing the Rhetoric of Bush and Bin Laden
(*Holy Terrors: 19-32, 99-103*) **Term paper topic, outline and bibliography due**

**Seminar topics:** What are some of the dualisms shared by Bush and Bin Laden? How does the basis for their authority (whether religious or secular) produce different rhetorical styles in their public speeches? Can we clearly distinguish between “religious” vs. “political” motivations when we examine President Bush’s policies?

**Week 10 ** The Long Shadow of 9/11: Our “Culture Wars” and Torture at Abu Ghraib

3/19  The Jeremiads of Jerry & James (Falwell & Dobson)
(*Holy Terrors: 33-61, 104-107; ER #19: “SpongeBob and the Emasculating Arm of Flesh”*)

**Seminar topics:** When Jerry Falwell stated that liberal secularists in America (feminists, abortionists, gays and lesbians) made God mad, which resulted in the attacks of 9/11 on American soil, how does this mobilize an evangelical Christian revival? How does Dobson’s campaign against SpongeBob as a “gay conspiracy” reflect his larger claim that evangelicals are “victimized” in our culture today? Are leaders like Falwell and Dobson, who protest against “deviant” sexuality and gender roles in today’s society, fomenting a patriarchal protest movement? How do scholars like Lincoln, Kakar and Juergensmeyer help clarify what is at stake in these “culture wars,” where the “warriors” make tactical moves in their “struggle” to reclaim God’s territory (in a jihad of sorts)?
Week 11  Missionary Agendas: America’s Civil Religion and Colonialism in Africa

3/26   “In God We Trust”: Civil Religion in America and America’s Mission in the World  
        (ER #21-22: “Civil Religion in America” and “The Bush Agenda”)  
Seminar topics: Is the analysis of American “civil religion” (in ER #21) a neutral description or an endorsement?  
        Does civil religion provide the State with religious legitimation for war? Are you convinced that President Bush substituted his  
evangelical Christianity for the generic “civil religion” that Americans are accustomed to (as argued in ER #22)? Does America have a  
special historic mission to liberate the whole of humanity from bondage?

3/28 Missionaries, Colonialism, and the Study of Religion in Africa  
        (ER #23: “Frontiers of Comparison” and Poisonwood Bible: Genesis)  
Seminar topics: According to ER #23, there are three phases in the history of the study of African culture/religions; how does each  
phase manifest colonial interests and the desire for control of African subjects? How is the foreign in Africa made more familiar to the  
western colonizer? Does ER #23 shed light on the setting of the Poisonwood Bible, e.g. when Ruth May says “God says the Africans  
are the Tribes of Ham”? What other themes from the Old Testament are used in telling the family’s story? What are the implications  
of the “poisonwood bible” in the title?

Week 12  Missionaries and Fundamentalists Encounter the “Other”: Words about the Word

4/2 The Poisonwood Bible: Different Revelations in Africa  
        (Poisonwood Bible: The Revelation) Complete rough draft of term paper due!  
Seminar topics: How does Kingsolver differentiate among the Price sisters in terms of their voices and their attitudes towards their  
religious mission in Africa? What differences and similarities are there among Nathan Price’s relationship with his family, Chief Tata  
Ndu’a’s relationship with his people, and the relationship of the Belgian and American authorities with the Congo?

4/4 The Rhetoric of Fundamentalist Preachers, the Magical Power of Naming in an Animist Culture  
        (Poisonwood Bible: The Judges; ER #24: “Speaking is Believing”)  
Seminar topics: According to ER #24, what are the rhetorical strategies used by Baptist ministers to foster conversion to the Word?  
Language is vitally important in Kingsolver’s novel: misused words fill the interior monologues of both Rachel and her little sister  
Ruth Ann, e.g. when she reports an overheard adult remark that the missionaries “are trying to make amens” for the depredations of  
the colonists. The central metaphor of the novel features Reverend Price’s attempt to disseminate the Word in the language of  
Kikongo: “Tata Jesus is Bângala.”  
What is the significance of the Kikongo word nommo and its attendant concepts of being and naming? Are there Christian parallels to  
the constellation of meanings and beliefs attached to nommo?

Week 13 Mimetic Rivalries and Violence in The Poisonwood Bible

4/9 Poisonwood Bible and Mimetic Violence  
        (Poisonwood Bible: Bel and the Serpents; ER #25: Violence & Religion: Cause or Effect?)

4/11 Revelations from The Poisonwood Bible: Understanding the “Word” and World in Africa  
Essay #4 due: What do you consider the most important lessons learned by Orleanna and the Price girls about the language and  
religion of the Congo? What “revelations” do they learn about themselves, their earlier assumptions about Africa, and their religious  
mission there once they begin to listen to the voices and learn the language of the Congolese? Finally, what lessons can we learn from  
the novel about the study of other religions?

Week 14 The Symbolism of Religious Violence: Theater of Terror or Catharsis?

4/16 Cosmic Wars: When Symbols Become Deadly  
        (Terror in Mind of God: 121-166)  
Seminar topic: Do the events of 9/11 support Juergensmeyer’s generalizations about ritualized violence performed in a “theater of  
terror”? Are the acts of terror by the hijackers more important for their symbolic value than for achieving any strategic goal? Does an  
appeal to the “symbolism” of cosmic warfare, which need not result in acts of violence, require that make distinctions between  
“actual” vs. “potential” violence, or private “inner” vs. public “outer” religiosity?
4/18  Healing Politics with Religion: How can we bring RELS theory closer to home?
   (Terror in Mind of God: 219-249; ER#26 “Theorizing Closer to Home”)

Seminar topics: What role might theology and ritual play in healing radical religious violence? Is ritualized violence (such as sacrifices or the Crucifixion) cathartic? Does RELS theory about violence and terror only deal with abstractions and arise from too much “distance” from the real lives of religious folks (as argued by Orsi)? In ER#26 Orsi uses the bloody image of the Cross to evoke his father’s sacrificial love: what is his point in weaving together the narrative about his father with his general points about RELS theory? How can we empathize with and understand the religious lives of others (whether fathers or “terrorists”) yet retain the capacity for moral judgment?

Week 15  The Scholar as Public Intellectual: What’s at Stake in the Study of Religions?

4/23  Wrapping Up the Semester: What’s at Stake in the Study of Religion and Violence?
   (ER #27-28: “The Religious Critic in American Culture” and “Default of Critical Intelligence?”)

Essay #5 due: According to Dean, what is the role of the “religious critic” in American society? How does that role differ from McCutcheon’s view of the scholar as a “cultural critic?” Is McCutcheon’s method of critical analysis and ideological critique hostile towards religion? From among the theorists that we’ve read in this seminar, whose scholarship do you admire most and how does it meet the criteria identified by Dean or McCutcheon?

5/2  Final Draft of Term paper due

Resources on Religion and Politics in Current Events

2. Religion Dispatches: http://www.religiondispatches.org/
5. Indic Mandala: www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/society_essays_frameset.htm
6. Christianity Today: www.christianitytoday.com
7. Soujourners: Faith, Politics, Culture: www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.home