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Foreword

De-sacralizing Violence

After unfortunate and unexpected detours, this timely and relevant collection of essays, exploring the conditions for exiting religious violence, is going to press at a time when tragically, once again, a particular religious tradition, the Russian Orthodox Church, is contributing to the sacralization of a war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, a war which is affecting adversely global humanity.

Ultimately, the question concerning the relation between religion and violence hangs upon the conditions under which religion serves to sacralize socio-political violence, helping to make it “legitimate.” Prior to the ethical prophetic breakthroughs, which were associated with what has been termed “the Axial Age” in various Eurasian civilizations, “religion” and “the sacred” were undifferentiated in all societies. The socio-political sacred can be defined precisely as that which has the power to sacralize political violence, turning it into a legitimate “sacrifice” pleasing to God(s) or to “the higher powers.”

During the Axial Age, for the first time in the history of humanity, communities of ascetic “renouncers” and prophetic “denouncers” put into question the sacred violence of sacred kings and socio-political rulers, calling for an end of animal (or human) sacrifice, and announcing the coming of some transcendent sacred Kingdom of Peace and Justice.¹ Indeed, “the end of sacrifice” was one of the most important religious transformations at the beginning of our common era in societies throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East.²

But very soon post-Axial religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, which had been borne as religions of peace, indeed as “atheist” religions that refused to participate in sacred imperial rituals and sacrifices, became implicated anew in the sacralization of imperial cults and socio-political establishments.

Thereafter, it has been an open question throughout history if and when do religions serve to sacralize socio-political violence and, alternatively, when do they serve to challenge and to “de-sacralize” socio-political violence as illegitimate.

¹ On the Axial Age, cf. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), and Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

² Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Modern processes of secularization, particularly the secularization of the modern territorial nation-state, once again have transformed the conditions for the legitimation of political violence. It is the modern state, the nation, and national citizenship which have become the publicly “sacred” in modern societies, with monopoly of the means of legitimate violence, while religion has often been relegated to the “private” sphere.

The 20th century was probably the most violent and genocidal in the history of humanity. Yet most of the extreme violent conflicts – WWI, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Ukrainian Holodomor, the Stalinist purges and the Gulag, the Arminian genocide, the “Bloodlands” of Eastern Europe, WWII and the Jewish Holocaust, the post-independence massacres in the Asian sub-continent, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields in Cambodia, the Balkan ethno-religious massacres and the Rwandan genocide – all of them were “sacralized” primarily by modern secular ideologies, even when the massacres may also have had a religious component.

World War I was the apotheosis of the sacralization of the modern nation state and of secular nationalist political theologies. All European Christian churches blessed the nationalist struggle, indicating the extent to which they had become national churches embracing modern nationalist ideologies. Millions of European youth were sacrificed in the trenches of the Western and Eastern fronts and after the war national monuments were erected in squares across Europe honoring the sacred martyrs of the “fatherland.” Pope Benedict XV was one of the few prophetic critical voices lamenting “the useless slaughter” that was turning Europe into a “charnel house.”

The sacralization of the ethnic group and of the nation have remained a constant throughout the wars of the 20th century. Socialist, communist and anarchist ideologies added the sacralization of revolutionary class violence. The sacralization of the Aryan race by the Nazi regime was the culmination of a long history of colonial violence sacralizing the White Man’s Burden of “civilizing” imperialism and Black slavery, first throughout the Americas and then throughout the globe, a racial sacralization which still lives on in the supremacist ideology of White Christian nationalism in the United States today. While primarily promoted by modern secular ideologies, religious groups and religious traditions have frequently been implicated in all those sacralizations of political violence.

Yet, in all these historical instances one finds also religious individuals and communities raising prophetic voices against the unjust criminal violence, while serving as peacemakers and as potential agents of restorative justice, truth and reconciliation. The names of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Bishop Desmond Tutu are paradigmatic of contemporary global human prophecy, in the same way as the names of Old Testament prophets, Greek philosophers, Indian

religious reformers and Chinese sages, all of whom were contemporaries, which we associate today with the prophetic critiques of the Axial Age.

The great value of the collection of essays gathered in this volume rests in its dual purpose of highlighting, on the one hand, the ambiguous, indeed ambivalent, hermeneutic traditions of sacralization and de-sacralization of socio-political violence, which are to be found in the sacred texts of all religious traditions while, on the other hand, exploring the contemporary conditions under which different religious traditions are able to exit religious violence, pointing to ethic-religious principles and practices which serve to de-sacralize and de-legitimize all forms of human violence.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which were perpetrated in the name of jihadist Islam, there has been a widespread tendency, particularly within secularist circles, to blame religion in general and most particularly Islam for the sacralization of religious violence. This collection of essays serves as a corrective to the widespread prejudices about Islam, as a uniquely violence-prone religion, by pointing out that no religion per se is immune to the temptation to fall into the sacralization of socio-political violence.

At the same time, many of the essays show how all religious traditions possess within their own sacred texts and within their collective memories the hermeneutic sources and the moral-practical resources not only to exit religious violence but also to serve as powerful prophetic critique against modern secular ideologies, which tend to sacralize either state violence and unjust established structures of domination or libertarian revolutionary violence against established structures.

The war of aggression against Ukraine has laid bare once again the role of a particular Christian religious tradition, that of the Russian Orthodox Church, in developing the ideology of the *Russkii Mir* (“Russian World”) as a political theology that serves to “sacralize” the war against Ukraine as a “Holy War.” The *russkii mir* ideology serves a dual sacralization. It serves, firstly, to sacralize the ecclesiastical institution of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate as the sole canonical Christian Church with monopolist jurisdiction over the entire Russian World, which is supposed to comprise Great Russia, White Russia or Belarus, and Little Russia or Ukraine. According to this ecclesiastical ideology, the Christian faithful in Ukraine have no right to religious freedom, much less the right to establish their own Ukrainian churches, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which is in communion with the Bishop of Rome, and the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.³

³ José Casanova, “The Three Kyivan Churches of Ukraine and the Three Romes,” *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Volume IX, No. 1 (2022):209–234. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus714>.

Following the annexation of Western Ukraine by the Soviet Union after WWII, the Russian Orthodox Church participated willingly in the Stalinist violent liquidation of the two historical Ukrainian churches and maintained its monopoly as the only officially recognized Christian church in Soviet Ukraine until the end of the Soviet Union. To this day, the Russian Orthodox Church has not questioned its role in the violent liquidation of the Ukrainian Christian churches and continues to reject their right to exist, condemning them as “unitatist” and “schismatic” “nationalist” churches. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church continues to sacralize the Russian imperial aggression as a just and holy war, needed to “de-nazify” and “de-ukrainize” the population of Ukraine, who should rightly belong to the Russian World.

In addition, the *russkii mir* political theology serves to sacralize the war as a “metaphysical conflict between good and evil,” between the culture and civilization of Holy Russia, which is the defender of the true “orthodox” traditional Christian family values, against the decadent secularist liberal West and against the European Union, which are supposedly trying to impose its gender ideology and its feminist values and gay rights upon the entire globe.⁴ From this perspective, the war in Ukraine is a “proxy war” between, on the one side, Russia and its right to be a global nuclear superpower and to maintain its geopolitical dominance over the former Soviet Eastern European nations and, on the other, the European Union and the US-led Western military alliance, which have expanded illegitimately eastward into the very borders of the Russian Federation, even though it was the Eastern European countries themselves who solicited the expansion to protect themselves from the Russian imperial threat.

The letter signed by hundreds of Orthodox Christian theologians criticizing the political ideology of the Russian World as a heretical unchristian political theology offers a way of de-sacralizing this particular form of religious violence and a potential avenue for peace-making and Christian reconciliation between Ukrainian and Russian orthodoxy, indeed within global orthodoxy.

On May 24–25, I accompanied a multi-confessional international delegation of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders who following the appeal of the Mayor of Kyiv, Volodymyr Klitschko, visited Kyiv to pray for a just peace jointly with Ukrainian Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders.⁵ Only ecumenical interreligious encounters and dialogue can serve as antidote to “the ecumenism

4 Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2022).

5 https://risu.ua/en/representatives-of-religious-denominations-from-abroad-prayed-for-peace-in-ukraine-in-babyn-yar_n129571; and https://risu.ua/en/head-of-ugcc-meets-with-representatives-of-various-faiths-who-were-on-a-solidarity-mission-to-ukraine_n129649.

of hate” promoted by the global culture wars around gender moral conflicts.⁶ Indeed, today’s global conflicts revolve most frequently around the difficulties of coming to terms with public moral pluralism, even within societies which have learned to leave with religious pluralism.

Ultimately, only the sacralization of the dignity of the human person against any form of socio-political violence and the recognition of religious, cultural and moral pluralism as an irremediable fact of our global human condition and as a “sign of the times” of our common global age, of “*Nostra Aetate*,” can help all religious traditions and all human groups to exit religious violence and to resist the temptation to sacralize any form of socio-political violence.⁷

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⁶ Antonio Spadaro SJ and Marcelo Figueroa, “Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/> [accessed June 6, 2022].

⁷ From this perspective, “*Dignitatis Humanae*” and “*Nostra Aetate*” were the two most consequential documents of the Second Vatican Council.

