

VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE IN SCRIPTURE

TENTATIVE SYLLABUS

Instructor: Mary Criscione, RSM, PhD

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Course description:

An examination of the biblical mandates for and against the use of violence in God's name. This course will probe the historical and ethical foundations of pursuing or renouncing violence as evidenced in Jewish and Christian scriptures. Of particular concern will be the weighing of these differing moral imperatives in light of the social questions and global concerns we face today.

Course objectives:

By the successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Identify the various ideologies of "holy war" in the bible
- Present examples of "voices for peace" in Jewish and Christian scripture
- Illustrate the connection of theology and ethics in the various divine "faces" found in the bible
- Demonstrate competency in reading biblical texts in context, both ancient and contemporary
- Articulate their own critical positions regarding the ethical implications today of biblical authorization/rejection of violence.

Required texts:

- John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* Augsburg Fortress 2004.
- Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, ed., *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence.* Orbis Books, 2007.
- Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way.* Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed.
- Other readings TBA

Course requirements:

Attendance: Being present and on time to each class is essential for passing this class. Unexcused absences and/or a pattern of tardiness will result in lowered grades. Four unexcused absences will lead to a failing grade.

Preparation, participation, written assignments: Students should read carefully and prepare their critical response to the readings assigned for each class meeting. Each

class will begin with students raising their own questions/observations or responding to the instructor's questions regarding the readings for that particular day. Active, engaged participation in small and large group discussion is expected of each student (this includes raising questions, presenting positions, summarizing points, responding to other students, etc.). Written assignments for homework will also be factored into this participation grade. (20%)

Take-home exams: Three take-home exams will be distributed in the course of our study. They will feature short-essay questions for student synthesis and analysis of class material. (40%)

Group research presentation: Students in small groups will select, research, and present a topic of interest relevant to course discussion. (15%)

Take-home final exam: A take-home final exam will be distributed the last week of class, and will be due during finals week. (25%)

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

- Sept 22** **Introduction**
Terms and timelines. The normative claims of scripture: selecting, accepting, contesting the tradition. Ancient texts and contemporary ethics.
- Sept 24** **Cain: Murdering the Brother**
The connections of jealousy, anger, and violence. Limits and consequences, communal norms and theological issues. Lamech and Cain's legacy.
- Sept 29** **The Zeal of Phineas and the Wrath of God**
Images of a warrior deity; righteous wrath; appeasing a jealous God.
- Oct 1** **The Conquest Tradition**
The story of Israelites' "conquest" of Canaan; the hand of God and the hands of seizing and laying claim. Later uses of this tradition in Western history.
- Oct 6** **The Ban: "Devotion to Destruction"**
No mercy: the Near Eastern context of destruction/sacrifice of peoples and villages offered to the deity.
- Oct 8** **Successful Warrior King: Divine Imagery, Royal Ideology**
David and his God; stories and psalms of divine/royal victory.
- Oct 13** **Calling for Vengeance: Psalms of Violence**
How to read these calls for violent retribution? Anger and prayer. Context of exile. The theme of righteous suffering.

- Oct 15** **Violence and the Kingdom of God: Matthew's Gospel**
A violent eschatology: end-time retribution in Jesus' language. The "cleansing of the Temple" incident: prophetic action and its implications.
- Oct 20** **The Book of Revelation: "Jezebel" and "Whore Babylon"**
The violent undoing of the "loose woman." Effects of using female imagery for the enemy.
- Oct 22** **The Book of Revelation: Vision of Armageddon**
The holy war of the last days. Sanctioned bloodbath and its consequences. Referenced in Crusades.
- Oct 27** **Divine Mercy and Forgiveness: Prophets and Wisdom**
Promises of divine forgiveness and refusal of retribution. Divine mercy and lovingkindness. The salvation of the just.
- Oct 29** **Divine Mercy and Forgiveness: Psalms**
Psalms of thanksgiving and salvation. Assertions of divine fidelity and covenant love.
- Nov 3** **Rejecting Politics of Violence: Prophets**
Advocating nonparticipation in political violence; "turning swords into ploughshares," peaceful lions and lambs, and other images of *shalom*.
- Nov 5** **Rejecting Weapons of War: Psalms**
Deriding the power of military might. The lasting power of faithful trust.
- Nov 10** **Sermon on the Mount**
The framework of nonviolent resistance: refusing retaliation, going the extra mile, forgiveness, and reconciliation
- Nov 12** **Loving the Enemy**
Rejecting vengeance and the *lex talionis*. Luke's picture of Jesus: forgiving until the end. The crucifixion and its implications for Christian ethics. The love commandment in Paul.
- Nov 17** **Refusing to Retaliate**
Nonviolence as resistance, not passivity. Receiving mercy, demonstrating mercy. Connecting justice and mercy.
- Nov 19** **"Peace Is My Gift to You"**
John's Jesus and the promise of peace in a hostile world. Paul's letters and the peace of God "surpassing understanding."
- Nov 24** **No class—Enjoy Thanksgiving!**

- Dec 1** **Group research presentations.**
Take-home final exam distributed.
- Dec 3** **Group presentations continued.**
Last class discussion: final conclusions, continuing questions, ethical critique.
- Dec 10** **No class meeting. Final exam due.**