Confronting Genocide

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Judaism, Christianity, Islam

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Introduction: Genocide in the Name of God: Thoughts on Religion and Genocide

In his academically autobiographical essay, Israel W. Charny, one of the true doyens of the field of genocide studies, related the following:

> A second section [of the 1994 work *The Widening Circle of Genocide*] was devoted to religion and genocide by Leonard Glick. There is quite a story to be told about how many years it took before we succeeded in getting this important open treatment of the subject of religion as both setting the expressed moral direction of Thou Shalt Not Kill [*sic*], while in itself being responsible for so many genocidal killings over the centuries. Before Leonard Glick's fine contribution, there had been several well-known scholars in the field of religion who had agreed to do the project and then dropped it at a very late stage, almost without explanation. To me, it seemed that what happened was that they were unable to tell the truth about the religious establishments with which they were variously connected.

If truth be told, the reason for such difficulty is far more significant than that of personal "religious discomfort." Those whose field is religious studies come late to the study of genocide, and, thus, that which is commonly identified in the popular mind as "religion" is all too often overlooked as an important factor in contributing to either the implementation and perpetuation of genocide, or as a foundational underpinning and rationalization for such collective acts. To be sure, even where the evidence is incontrovertible (e.g., the Armenian, Rwandan, Darfur [Sudanese] genocides), it is approached from the perspectives of historians, political scientists, sociologists, and the like, with no attempt to address the theological frame

out of which religions operate or their institutional structures—buildings, liturgies, curricula, etc.—which proceed from those orientations. An example of this tendency is the otherwise excellent text edited by Bartov and Mack (2001), *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, papers delivered at a 1997 conference held at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. This volume focuses primarily on the Holocaust, the most documented of genocides, and less on Armenia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, through the five significant questions with which the editors were concerned. A focus on theology or institutions would have necessitated a very different set of papers in the main, with more work needing to be done, not only on Christian "preparations" for genocide, but with regard to both the Jewish and Islamic concepts of exclusivity ("chosenness") and their relationship to genocide (Jacobs, 2003/2004).

Then, too, many of those who study religion, like many of their colleagues in the academy, are themselves distanced from parochial religious commitments or heretofore have not chosen to address this intersection of religion and genocide. For those whose own religious commitments exercise a primary influence, Charny is, quite possibly, somewhat correct: to chastise or denounce their own communities for active presence in a given genocide or failure to speak out against it, and meanwhile remain faithful adherents of that religious tradition, becomes painfully problematic if not downright onerous, burdensome—or worse. Slowly, however, addressing this topic of religion and genocide is beginning to change as scholars, both inside and outside the field of religious studies, realize the all-too-prominent role of religion in this horror. Indeed, Professor Henry R. Huttenbach, City College of New York, recently wrote:

> Thus, religion—meaning the faithful, the doctrine, the clergy and their institutions—can *easily* be prompted to buttress genocidal thought and action in a wide array of capacities. The religion-genocide nexus needs to be carefully studied in general, and, in particular, must be carefully monitored in times of social crisis. The worst-case scenario would be to continue underestimating, or even denying, that the nexus exists. *It is the task of scholars to expose and explore it, and for policy-makers to dismantle the religion-genocide connection.* (Huttenbach, 2004: 23; emphasis added)

With the exception of Kuper's seminal essay (1990) and Glick's essay, noted above (1994), all of the contributors herein wrote specifically for this book, thus answering, at least initially, Huttenbach's challenge. (None, however, are policy-makers.) All the essays are discomforting in their own right and this initial volume opens the door to yet more research, field work, writing, etc., by scholars, policy-makers, and concerned citizens of all countries—and not only those who define themselves as "religious" or scholars of religion.

Part I, "Textual Warrants for Genocide," on the study of texts held sacred and used/abused by religious communities, provides the framework and logical beginning point for any discussion and subsequent discourse on this nexus between religion and genocide:

For Leo Kuper, lawyer and sociologist, himself a "pioneer of genocide studies," the initial point of entry must be an examination of the sacred texts of the three dominant monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—realizing in the process the religious differences between genocidal perpetrators and victim-recipients and noting, too, how fundamentalist understandings enhance the texts' central significance for those committed to them. Kuper died before the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, and how the perpetrators of 9/11 "read," and thus understood, Qur'anic passages as validating their behaviors has yet to be fully critically examined by religious studies scholars. Carefully, however, Kuper does note that ultimately such work is "indeterminate," and that further exploration must address the larger cultural context in which religion functions, the very nexus—to use Huttenbach's term—that religious studies addresses.

My own contribution to this discussion is to focus specifically on the sacred texts of these three monotheistic traditions—Torah, New Testament, Qur'an—by citing what I continue to regard as representative examples of those texts, which read out the other and pave the way for pregenocidal behaviors, texts exclusivising the in-group (Jews, Christians, Muslims) by claiming both inherent superiority and privileged access to God. I also suggest that, given the reality of continuing genocides, the "midrashic" way of reading such texts, historically linked to the Jewish religious tradition, may very well be the only way to move such conversations about sacred text forward.

Chris Mato Nunpa's essay addresses a genocide little examined in the United States outside of those recipient communities whose historical legacies are the events themselves. He does so, however, by addressing what he regards as the "divine sanction" that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to allot to genocide, most particularly in the two textual affirmations of "chosen people"—ness and "promised land"—ness, neither of which was applied to the Native Americans themselves, but which seemingly validated the behaviors of white, largely Christian persons and groups who attacked them, displaced them, and murdered them. Growing up on the Reservation (or "Rez" as he has referred to it in personal communications with the editor), he personally experienced the too-frequent use of biblical texts in the churches there, accompanied by continuous denigration of his own religious and cultural ways of life. Much more research and writing are thus needed by scholars of religion addressing specifically the Native American experience in this country and the religious commitments and rationalizations of the perpetrators themselves.

Lutheran theologian and Holocaust scholar James Frazer Moore in his essay suggests a new direction for religious studies research in relation to genocide. Noting that the Rwandan genocide took place in the aftermath of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, to what extent, he asks, was the liturgical theology of Roman Catholicism manipulated by those committed to the practice of genocide in the most Catholic of African countries? He further raises the larger question—yet to be explored not only with regard to Rwanda, but in other cases of genocide as well—about the use of religious myth, religious practice, and the actual texts of Christian worship in legitimating genocidal violence. (It should also be noted, therefore, that issues of myth, texts, and worship, of course, are among the central concerns of those who study religions.)

Gary Phillips, addressing the Balkan genocide, sees a decided linkage between unholy violence and Holy Bible, and quests for explanation. Significantly, he regards the nineteenth century Serbian national epic *The Mountain Wreath* as paralleling the Gospel of Matthew's condemnation of the Jews as the anti-Christ—except that in the case of the Bosnian genocide, it is the Muslims who fit the analogy so as to deserve genocidal extermination and annihilation. Thus, for Phillips, such thinking becomes translated into a nationalist-racist ideology undergirded by religious thought. The horrific tragedy that frames his essay again reminds the reader that in this "nexus" our overarching primary concern must be the human beings involved, those who survive the genocide as well as those who do not, and what he calls the "real world impact" of the use of such texts as they manifest themselves in different cultural settings.

Part II, "Religion and Mass Violence: Empirical Data and Case Studies," begins with anthropologist Leonard Glick's (previously published) essay which draws distinctions between localized religion (a term brought to prominence by a fellow anthropologist, the late Clifford Geertz), specifically Judaism, and the universalist religions of Christianity and Islam. No religion, however, escapes its genocidal potential because of its orientation. The ongoing crises between Israel and her Arab neighbors, and more pointedly between Israel and the Palestinians—in which both sides condemn the other as having "genocidal intent"—is more often than not inflamed by paralleling rhetoric, which has yet to be explored as such by religious studies scholars. The missionizing thrusts of both Christianity and Islam, over the course of their own histories, have sustained a genocidal degradation, annihilation, and extermination of both peoples and groups that continues in the present moment, ofttimes with Islam and Christianity at loggerheads with each other. Though the United Nations Special Commission of Inquiry on the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, genocide has rejected the term genocide as applicable as recently as 2005, the perpetrators have, in the largest numbers, been Muslims and the victims Christians. The new-

ness of these events has not, however, yet allowed religious studies—and other—scholars to fully examine the data.

Richard L. Rubenstein, profound Holocaust thinker and scholar, minces no words in acknowledging the "significant part" played by religion in the perpetration of genocide, as well as the "genocidal potentiality" of Islam, and chooses to reexamine an early "genocide of the twentieth century," that of the Armenians by the Turks. Even while affirming the essentially secular orientation of the Young Turks and their newly formed state, the Armenians' "choiceless choice" between conversion to Islam or death was a religious one. For Rubenstein, defining a targeted group as radically evil, and thus as "enemies of God," provides a powerful legitimation of genocide. Unremitting mass murder on the part of those who commit it can then become a seeming defense of truth, goodness, and even civilization itself.

Mohammad Omar Farooq writes about a lesser-known genocide in 1971 in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), which he regards as a clear case of the abuse of Islam—both religion and text—for the purpose of genocide by the ruling elite. The implications of his essay in the present post-9/11 moment, and the credibility given by those in positions of religious, governmental, and political power to Harvard professor Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilization" (Huntington, 1996) are particularly timely. What does it say about religions, their institutions, their texts, their manner of practice if they can be too easily recruited into the practice of genocide? What countermeasures, if any, are to be taken by various religious communities themselves, as well as by others, to correct, prevent, and inhibit such abusive manipulations?

Paul Mojzes's lengthy essay provides a thorough historical overview of complex occurrences of what took place in the Balkans, both at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century, and draws upon a large variety of documentary evidence not readily available to those unfamiliar with or unread in the native languages. He also makes an important distinction between genocide and "ethnic cleansing," and turns his attention as well as to the question of justice for the perpetrators and the role of religion in this tragedy. Drawing the critically important distinctions between "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," "mass murder," "democide," and "politicide" is important for scholarly work examining both instances of large-scale megadeath as well as contemporary manifestations of such. These distinctions have widespread, international legal implications translating into nation-states' abilities to punish the guilty, maintain the viability of judicial systems and overall governmental function, and so on. From the "on the ground" perspective of the victims themselves, however, both the living and the dead, the distinctions are irrelevant to their experiences.

Presbyterian scholar and thinker Stephen R. Haynes sees parallel situations. Addressing both the Holocaust and the case of Rwanda, and, like

Donald Dietrich, realizes that both confront issues of Christian complicity and Christian credibility. He also raises four questions worthy of further exploration: (1) Why is Rwanda an exceedingly unattractive venue for Christian self-examination? (2) Why is it important for Christians to ask *theological* questions in the aftermath of Rwanda? (3) What are the lessons for Christians who want to remember Rwanda? (He posits four.) (4) Why does the genocide in Rwanda present us with compelling evidence of the "ineptitude" of Christian leaders and institutions in resisting genocide?

Part III, "Alternative Readings of Troubling Texts: Religion as a Force against Violence," opens with David Patterson's strongly theological essay, faulting not only intellectuals and scholars but all serious persons steeped in what he calls the "ontological mode of thought," freed from any sense whatsoever of the absoluteness of the God of Abraham, Judaically understood, and the demands such a God makes on humanity. He thus forcefully argues that there is more of a relationship between such thinking and genocide than there is between "religion" and genocide, and that this mode is framed by categories of thinking that lead to genocide, and then makes a case for *religious* teaching as the only antidote to genocidal ideologies. As a counter argument to "normative" academic-intellectual thinking, Patterson's comments are worthy of serious reflection—and response.

Historian Paul R. Bartrop's essay on the relationship between a denial of the Ten Commandments—long understood as a genuinely Judaic contribution to the civilizing of humanity, and one taken over by both Christianity and Islam and incorporated into their own religio-theological and moral-ethical structures—and the acts of genocide as we understand them by the Nazis in the Holocaust, the Rwandans, the Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslims raises even further complicating questions of the role of religion as foundational to pregenocidal and genocidal activity. For Bartrop, too, then, religion has become a "root cause" of genocide and the very antithesis of what it is supposed to be.

Christian scholar Henry F. Knight turns to the same biblical texts as does Judaic scholar Zev Garber, but Knight's treatment of the issue of fundamentalism in all three monotheistic traditions that directly involves textual readings and understandings, and does take some issue with Garber, seeing the destruction of Amalek as divinely sanctioned. For him, however, the central issue is that of "mythologizing the other," which in turn becomes a justification for genocide. Long understood to be a central category of examination by religious studies scholars, the role, place, and function of myth in religious—and other—communities may yet prove a valuable contribution toward improving our understanding of the relationship between religion and genocide. Knight also addresses the conceptions of reconciliation, hospitality, and vulnerability in the post-Holocaust world of today's genocides, and, by implication, suggests how communities, perhaps by

drawing upon other aspects of religion, can engage in the process of post-genocidal rebuilding.

Part IV, "Theologies and Practices of Reconciliation," starts with a chapter by John K. Roth—philosopher, Holocaust scholar, committed Christian—in which the repeated term "uselessness" is central: the uselessness of violence and suffering inflicted upon the victims—of the experience of those who have been so brutalized—and the negative uselessness of knowledge learned about a genocide but not used in further or future prevention. Additionally, using as his point of departure a different understanding of restitution to Jews by Christians after the Holocaust, he thus opens a new avenue of thinking about Knight's concept of reconciliation: that is, how after the genocide, perpetrator groups and victim groups, who now find themselves living together can begin any sort of "dialogue of healing." The cases of Rwanda (e.g., the contemporary work of psychologists Erwin Staub and Yael Danieli) and Bosnia come immediately to mind, though the precedent was set in the case of the Holocaust with the children and grandchildren of victimizers and victims coming together in dialogue—Jews and Germans and others—and may prove useful in other settings.

Catholic theologian Donald Dietrich sees "a surprising moral inconsistency" between the position of the Roman Catholic Church and the publication of the document "We Remember" with regard to the Holocaust, and the lack of a comparable document in the case of Rwanda, which he regards as "astounding." For him, evidently, this failure is the result of the Church—his Church—refusing to recognize its own historic role as complicitous in both scenarios. He also addresses the complex topic of ecclesial repentance and its demands in the context of genocide and dialogue with others.

Like Dietrich, fellow Roman Catholic scholar and professor of social ethics John T. Pawlikowski too realizes the logical disjunct between the document "We Remember" as a response to the events of the Holocaust and the document and the lack of any official document in the case of Rwanda. For him, his Church "has remained largely silent" and thus by doing so provides its followers with little or no moral guidance in how to address this or any future genocide.

Judaic scholar Zev Garber calls for a far closer reexamination of biblical texts, following Kuper, specifically the Hebrew Bible together with rabbinical commentaries, as they relate to the genocidal destruction of the seven nations understood to be ancient Israel's enemies (Deuteronomy 7:2 and 20:17), and argues that there is no divine sanction for genocide whatsoever suggesting that such is more an "evolving cultural imperative" and less a religious warrant. His work thus suggests a direction for *all* religious studies and other scholars of texts, particularly in this area of genocide: a far more careful reading of not only sacred religious texts, but political texts and

public speeches and media presentations (radio, television, film) as they are understood by religious communities, nation-states, and others, and used to foment and carry out genocide.

Concluding this collection is Carol Rittner's essay about the unholy trinity of rape, religion, and genocide. Institutional religions, primarily the providence of males, are criticized for failing to address and condemn the use of rape as a tool of genocide, blindly perpetuating their own gender biases, and evincing little if any compassion to the female victims. Her essay is disturbing, to say the least, and as do many others opens doors to further study and investigation.

The essays that comprise this volume are not intended to be the final word on the questions of religion and genocide and the interconnection between the two. They are, at best, a preliminary exploration of a too-little addressed topic in a relatively new field—genocide studies—whose own origins are only of post-World War II vintage. Since 1990, however, numerous volumes, many by reputable scholars or extremely competent journalists, have addressed the topic of "religion and violence." Of more than thirty volumes examined, only four—in addition to Bartov and Mack's (2000) *Genocide in God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*—even include the word "genocide" in their titles: two, Anzulovic (1999) and Sells (1996) are concerned with Bosnia; one deals with the genocide of Native Americans (Tinker, 1993) and one, most recently, with Rwanda (Rittner et al., 2004). Clearly, much more research is needed, more publications are warranted, and more conversations must take place. Ideally, this volume is a contribution to present and future work.

A project such as this one is truly a collaborative effort. The editor gratefully and appreciatively acknowledges with profound thanks all the contributors who so graciously and immediately responded to the initial invitation to write for *Confronting Genocide* and for their patience from initial submission to final product. Their willingness to participate, it is hoped, is reflected in the finished volume. (Any errors, of course, remain with me.) To my colleagues as well in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama—Tim Murphy, Maha Marouan, Steven Ramey, Ted Trost, and Chair Russ McCutcheon—for providing an interactive and intellectually stimulating environment conducive to research, writing, and thinking about issues large and small, thank you. Very, very special thinks are also extended to Ms. Toby Whitman, typist extraordinaire, and Mr. Bernard Pucker of the Pucker Gallery, Boston, Mass., for permission to use Samuel Bak's painting *Crossed Out II* for the front cover. Acknowledgement with grateful appreciation must also be extended to Taylor and Francis to republish Leo Kuyper's essay "Theological Warrants for Genocide" (Autumn 1990) form *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2(3): 351–379; and Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J. (and series editor Israel W. Charny)

to republish Leonard Glick's essay "Religion and Genocide" (1994) from *The Widening Circle of Genocide [Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review,* Volume 3], 43–74. And to my spouse, Dr. Louanne Clayton Jacobs, whose love and support enable me to examine, yet again, the worst of which we human beings are capable, but who always brings me back into the light: this book is dedicated to you.

Steven Leonard Jacobs
Tuscaloosa, Alabama
August 25, 2008

I

TEXTUAL WARRANTS FOR GENOCIDE