

## Radicalism, Violence, and Religious Texts

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As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, biblical texts are to be found on both sides of violent struggle. On the one hand, they have provided spiritual, theological, and ideological nourishment for those engaged in fights against injustice, exploitation, and the abuses of power. On the other hand, the Bible has frequently been weaponized to justify domination over the subjugated classes and exacerbate the exclusion of the marginalized. For Roland Boer, this double-edged function of the Bible speaks to the crux of Christianity as caught in a complex tension between reaction and revolution (2012, 225). Religious texts are themselves imbued with multiple layers of divinely-sanctified violence. Their canonization and authorization as sacred Scripture has destined violence once safely contained within the page or scroll to seep out and wreak havoc on the world around us.

This murky association between violence and the interpretation of religious texts prompted us to organize an international colloquium on the topic in New Zealand during September 2015. The colloquium built upon an earlier seminar on *Radical Interpretations of the Bible* co-organized by Robert Myles and held in Sheffield the same year. The proceedings of the Sheffield meeting were published as a special issue of [\*Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds\* \(7.3\)](#) and guest edited by Michael Sandford. In the present issue of the *Bible and Critical Theory* we have published a selection of articles which mostly had their genesis at the New Zealand meeting.<sup>1</sup>

The colloquium sought to facilitate critical discussion on the associations and contradictions between radicalism, violence, and religion in an age of terror, conflict, and abuse. Radicalism, broadly understood, refers to political beliefs, discourses, practices, and movements that attempt to alter social structures in fundamental ways and often through revolutionary means. The association of radicalism with violence is a poignant one. According to Vladimir Lenin, “[t]he replacement of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution” (1992, 21). Lenin detects at the heart of Marx and Engels’ theory of radical societal transformation the *necessity* of violence. In today’s liberal ideological constellation, however, questions surrounding the use of violence to achieve political ends tend to adopt a moralizing tone. Any manifestation of violence not congruent with the aims of the establishment is deemed illegitimate. As a result, many left-wing protest movements have internalized this verdict and

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<sup>1</sup> A number of the papers were not published in this volume. These include: Johanna Stiebert, “Too Close for Comfort? First-Degree Incest in the Hebrew Bible and Contemporary Contexts”; Teguh Wijaya Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary: Virgin Mary, Whore of Babylon, and Sexual Violence”; Caroline Blyth, “‘And you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire her’: Plundering the Woman’s Body in the Bible and Louis John Steele’s *The Spoils of the Victor*”; Tat-Siong Benny Liew, ‘Journey-s to the West and Journey-s without Rest: (Re)Writing Scripts, Scriptures, and Scripturalization;’ and Robert J. Myles, “The Fetish for a Subversive Jesus” (Myles, 2016).

often stress the ‘non-violent’ nature of their resistance. A problem here is that violence is still framed on the master’s terms. Automatic and knee-jerk reactions against ‘ethical violence’ disavow the role that entrenched layers of structural violence has already played in establishing and maintaining state power to begin with.

Indeed, a broader definition of violence is required if we are to properly assess and complicate the ways in which religious texts invoke, legitimate, and resist violence. (The categories of ‘religion’ and ‘biblical texts’ could similarly be problematized; however, we leave that task aside for now.) In his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Slavoj Žižek conceptualizes contemporary forms of violence according to Jacques Lacan’s ‘trinity’ of the Real (imaginary, symbolic, real). The first level concerns directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, specifically, violence performed by a clearly identified agent. This is the most obvious layer of violence—it is the form the bourgeois state desires its subjects to immediately recognize. The second and third levels of violence are both considered ‘objective’ forms. Unlike subjective violence, objective forms are ideologically legitimized through various state apparatuses like the regulatory, educational, and judicial systems. This includes, first, the ‘symbolic’ violence encoded within language; according to Žižek, this violence can be defined as, “cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination [that are] reproduced in our speech forms” (2008, 1). This is the level at which violent struggle might be anatomized on linguistic terms: who owns the means of discursive production, and how might the subjugated re-take control? Second, a more fundamental form is what Žižek labels ‘systemic’ violence, or, the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (2008, 1). This bottom level represents the abstract and invisible layer of the real; a repressed kernel of violence that operates as the underlying driver for seemingly irrational or malicious bursts of subjective violence. For Žižek, objective violence of bourgeois-democratic society forms the backdrop against which any manifestation of subjective violence can and should be measured.

The articles in this issue align in some ways to this tripartite schematization of violence. Certainly, they all extend beyond analysis of *subjective* violence, which, in the past, has occasionally been the focus of debate on this topic within biblical scholarship. While such analysis continues to be important, if not vital, the articles here look beyond this to consider the manifold ways that objective, symbolic *and* systemic violence are engaged with, both in the Bible and its afterlives. Moreover, the authors all contribute to a growing discourse on the role of the biblical interpreter in engaging with issues around contemporary violence and the (witting or unwitting) contribution of the Bible to this violence. As Mieke Bal notes, “The Bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill” (1989, 14; see also Collins 2003). Given this power, biblical interpreters may, as Esias Meyer (2011) insists, have a moral duty to handle the text with extra care, critiquing its seeming endorsement of objective and subjective violence and highlighting the continued impact that it has on religious, cultural, and political expressions of violence and oppression. This too is part of the conversation that took place at the New Zealand colloquium, and one that we see uniquely reflected in each article within this volume.

Beginning this conversation with her paper, “The Biopolitical Bible: Conservative Christianity, Capitalized Bodies, and the Subject of Interest in the U.S.,” Erin Runions considers the objective violence stirred up by Conservative Christian rhetoric that draws the Bible into U.S. political debate. Examining the ways that biblical texts have been used in public discourses on abortion, marriage, and the penal system, Runions traces in particular the biopolitical underpinnings of these discourses (“the production of life for capital”). While such underpinnings remain culturally conservative, she nevertheless argues that they are also radical, particularly in their use of the Bible as a lens through which viewers can gaze upon the materiality of bodies in, for, and as capital.

This materialist analysis of the body in light of violence is explored further in Julie Kelso’s essay, “The Institution of Intercourse: Andrea Dworkin on the Biblical Foundations of Violence against Women.” Kelso explores Dworkin’s radical text *Intercourse*, paying particular attention to the way that Dworkin connects the systemic violence of heteropatriarchy with the subjective violence of rape. Engaging with Dworkin’s analysis of Gen. 2:4b-4:1 and the “sodomy laws” in Leviticus, Kelso considers the foundational role that these biblical texts have played in constructing intercourse as an institution that sustains rape culture within male-dominated and male-supremacist societies.

Gender violence remains a key concern of James Harding’s article, “Homophobia and Masculine Domination in Judges 19-21.” Here, Harding considers the subjective sexualized violence in which this text is steeped, focusing in particular on the threatened rape of the Levite priest. He suggests that through the processes of scripturalization, this narrative has given rise to the symbolic violence of Jewish and Christian homophobia. Yet more than this, Harding argues that the text’s overload of sexualized aggression betrays the complexity of the relationship between religion and violence. Moreover, such an excess of violence recalls the pervasive influence of Pierre Bourdieu’s “masculine domination” (2001), which is not only at work within and behind the acts of subjective violence in the text itself, but also shapes the symbolic violence that is a key part of the text’s effect.

Continuing this theme of gender and gendered violence, Yael Klangwisan’s article, “*Mad Max Fury Road*: Escaping the Phallic Economy of the Exodus” considers the spectacle of subjective and objective violence in the latest (2015) offering from the *Mad Max* movie franchise. Klangwisan explores a number of allusions to the Exodus narrative that she perceives within the film’s dystopian landscape. Particularly, she focuses on the gendered roles adopted (and subverted) by the film’s two main characters, Max and Furiosa. Identifying Max as Hegel’s “first man of history” and Furiosa as Cixous’s “first woman”, Klangwisan destabilizes the phallic economy of the Exodus tradition, recasting the role of Moses to Furiosa herself. In the process, she ponders the objective violence of biblical and contemporary gender norms and the liberating potential that female violence can offer as an antidote to patriarchal structures of power.

In Roland Boer’s article, “On the Question of Sin: Stalin and Human Nature,” we move away from gendered violence to consider instead issues of objective violence that interweave with the theological and biblical concepts of sin and punishment. Through a rigorous study of Joseph Stalin’s writings, Boer

identifies an apparent convergence between Augustine's theology of sin and evil and Joseph Stalin's development of "sin" in relation to the socialist project and the party. By carefully sketching the ways Stalin conceptualized the *personal* dimensions of sin (individual and collective), Boer highlights the novelty of this approach, within both its Russian Orthodox and Marxist contexts. Such novelty, he argues, suggests that Stalin's work in this area made a significant contribution to the development of a socialist counter-tradition.

A final article in this volume was not presented at the *Radicalism, Violence, and Religious Texts* colloquium but nonetheless fits well against the backdrop of radicalism and biblical interpretation. In "Alain Badiou and the Book of Acts," Bruce Worthington and Hollis Phelps consider Badiou's previous work on the Apostle Paul and the philosophy of event, extending Badiou's reading strategy beyond the Pauline epistles to consider its relevance to the Acts of the Apostles. By examining Badiou's criteria for a formal truth procedure, they maintain that Acts is a "superior heuristic tool" for articulating Badiou's notion of truth as it proceeds from an event, despite the philosopher's own dismissal of this biblical book. Studying Acts using Badiou's model is shown to shed light on the way that the text imaginatively organizes the resurrection event within its historical location. This, they suggest, offers new insights into the value of Badiou's reading strategy within biblical interpretation.

Finally, we would like to mention some recent changes to the journal's editorial board. We extend our gratitude to departing members, Stephen D. Moore, Avaren Ipsen, Judith McKinley, and Yvonne Sherwood, who have served the journal well over the past years, and extend a warm welcome to our new appointments, William Arnal (University of Regina, Canada), Jeremy Punt (Stellenbosch University, South Africa) and Hannah M. Strømmen (University of Chichester, United Kingdom).

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