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When students take a course in religious studies dealing with peace and violence, they usually come with two kinds of questions. First, they want to know what the “world religions” have to say on these issues, and how the “world religions” lead people to start and stop violent conflict. Second, they want to learn about the ethical guidance religion can offer; ultimately, they want to know when (if ever) it is moral to shoot people and drop bombs on them. These are both important areas of study. Instructors in religious studies courses should be willing and eager to help students learn more about them.

It would be selling religious studies short, though, to think this is all we have to offer. There is a third kind of question we can help our students explore, which they may find the most valuable of all: How can the tools of religious studies — our concepts, theories, and methods of study — shed new light on issues that are normally deemed secular? When we ask how and why people do violence — especially the organized violence we call war (my own major interest) — or how and why they end violence, what can we see, because of our professional expertise, that specialists in other disciplines might not see? The answer turns out to be: Plenty!

In teaching about war and peace, religious studies can help provide a desperately needed corrective to what I would call the “four naivetés.” In departments of political science, history, international relations, sociology, economics, and the like, the approach to war and peace most often falls into one of four categories, reflecting four political orientations.

On the left, war is usually explained by the elite’s greed, lust for power, and ability to manipulate the gullible masses. In the liberal center, war is generally chalked up to conflicts between ever-expanding modernity, with its ideals of individual freedoms, and the many forces resisting modernity. Among “realists,” the common explanation is the supposedly inevitable competition for power among nation-states and would-be state actors. On the right, students hear that there is indeed evil in the world, which must be overcome by force, because that is the only language evildoers understand.

Each of these views holds some truth, no doubt. But each, and even all four taken together, leave the student with naively simplistic views. There is so much more going on when a group engages in, or ceases from, violence than these four approaches can explain. Those of us trained in religious studies can help students see that “so much more” by approaching secular processes as if we were approaching a religious phenomenon. This does not mean that war and peace are always religious phenomena. Sometimes they may be; that must be evaluated on a case by case basis. But we can always understand the processes of war and peace more deeply, fully, and accurately if we approach them as if we were studying a religious phenomenon.

For many of us, that means starting from a basic assumption: When nations or groups engage in, or cease from, organized violence, they are using processes of cultural symbolization to create a meaningful structure. To use Jonathan Z. Smith’s language, they are negotiating the complexities of life and carving out a space within which to live their shared life. To use Clifford Geertz’s language, they are symbolically enacting a worldview, an ethos, and the fit between the two. To use Peter Berger’s language, they are employing language and behavior to legitimate their nomos in the face of perceived threats of chaos. Of course, there are many other theoretical approaches to religion that we can employ. The variety of models available to us points up the richness of resources our discipline holds for studying war and peace. Whatever model we use, we can bring it into fruitful dialogue with the empirical historical realities that must be the foundation of any study of war and peace.

Consider, for example, the study of the Cold War. When students come into my course on “Cold

War Culture and Religion,” they have learned from their history and political science professors that the U.S. followed a policy of containing communism. I ask them to think about precisely what was supposed to be contained. The Cold War was not merely a geopolitical battle between dominant states, nor a struggle between competing ideologies. The words of U.S. leaders — in top-secret documents for internal use, as well as in public pronouncements — and the mass media reveal a much richer cultural context. They speak of the U.S. carrying an awesome responsibility for protecting civilized order against a barbaric chaos that threatened to dissolve the U.S. and, with it, all of civilization.

To probe the meaning of this discourse, we start with the earliest English colonists, who saw themselves as the agents of civilized order, pushing back a wilderness filled with barbaric native peoples. We discuss the unbroken tradition of the discourse and enactments of white America’s “mission” to overcome the forces of chaos. We trace this tradition back to its roots in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic dualism and the dualistic patterns of English Calvinism.

Against that background, we then consider the unique feature of the Cold War era in the U.S. The forces labeled chaotic and evil were still seen as apocalyptic threats to civilization itself. But now they could never be eliminated, it seemed. At best, they could be contained, managed, and kept at bay forever. All the resources of the nation were mobilized toward a new goal, which I call “apocalypse management.” The students may already have heard a simple explanation from their instructors in other disciplines: “Of course, nuclear weapons made it too dangerous to fight the final apocalyptic battle.”

In a religious studies classroom, this becomes only one part (and a surprisingly small part) of a much larger picture. We note that nearly all U.S. elites in the early Cold War years, and most throughout the Cold War era, were raised as Calvinist Protestants. As children, they imbibed some form of a doctrine of original sin. Though they may have jettisoned the specific theological context, they continued to assume that evil at work in the world could never be eliminated by the ordinary historical forces at their disposal. I label this assumption “Augustinian” (acknowledging the simplification that is inevitable in the classroom). I ask the students to consider what happens when apocalyptic dualism and Augustinianism are unconsciously intertwined in the creation of national security policy. Once they grasp this interpretive framework as a lens, they begin to see the details of history and the decisions of policymakers in a new and richer light.

I also ask them to consider why this particular constellation of discourse and enactment was so readily accepted by so many Americans. Why did the end of World War II usher in an era, not of triumphant confidence, but of sustained and increased anxiety about threatening enemies? Was it a refusal to abandon a long-familiar cultural pattern? Was it an attempt to manage growing

fears of social, cultural, and economic change? Did the national security state come to dominate American life because it offered a way to structure, and thus contain, mounting insecurity? Did it end up, ironically, only exacerbating the insecurity it was meant to contain? These are hypotheses that are most likely to arise, and can be very effectively explored, within our discipline.

Religious studies can also help students understand the influence of the institutionalized traditions — what they think of as “real religion” — upon secular processes. In the United States, at least, the mass public as well as elite leaders are significantly influenced by religious factors (most of them Christian), whether they acknowledge it or not. These factors are part of the environment, perhaps as invisible as the air we breathe. Specialists in religious studies have a unique capability to make these factors and their effects visible.

For example, my students find it a creative exercise to look at Cold War culture through the categories of “spirituality of dwelling” and “spirituality of seeking” developed in Robert Wuthnow’s *After Heaven* (though some rightly critique Wuthnow for a bit of over-simplification). They see complex connections between “dwelling” — spiritual life aiming at security in a stable place, sheltered from dangerous uncertainty — and the policy of containment. They see how “seeking” — spiritual life as an endless exploration of new possibilities for individual fulfillment — undermined the power of the containment model, and how it may have subtly reshaped that model (e.g., by validating containment as a way to make “seeking” a safe lifestyle). They also recognize that national security discourse and policy acted back upon institutional religion and individual spirituality in complex ways. They learn to look for a dialectical interaction between religion and national security policies, and for the common threads tying the two together.

Approaching secular phenomena of war and peace from the perspective of religious studies broadens the boundaries of our discipline. It opens up new avenues for interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues in other fields. Most importantly, perhaps, it shows that our own field can be an important voice in the public conversation about the most important problems of our day. It can help to move the discussion beyond the four naivetés, to take into account the powerful forces of cultural symbolization and meaning construction that always shape the concrete processes of policy formulation (and shape the naive explanations of those processes, too). These cultural forces will remain largely invisible unless we use our professional expertise to bring them to light.

Since September 11, 2001, our students, like the public at large, have taken a new and urgent interest in questions of war and peace. As I teach about the Cold War or any other topics of war and peace, I current situation in light of what they are learning. That reflection is what they want.

It brings the course material alive for them. It helps them realize that, as citizens, they can participate in making national decisions of global importance. It helps them fulfill the responsibility entailed by citizenship: analyzing the issues carefully in the largest possible context.

Religious studies can offer this kind of analysis. By turning good scholarship into good citizenship, and vice versa, we assume our full responsibility as both scholars and citizens. This is what our students will remember, even if they forget the details of apocalyptic eschatology or the Truman Doctrine. They are more likely to take a lifelong interest in their nation's policies of war and peace, and to feel responsible for continually deepening their understanding of those issues, if we set a good example for them in the short time we have them in our classrooms.

Resources

Campbell, David. *Writing Security*, 2nd ed. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Chernus, Ira. “[Fighting Terror in the National Insecurity State](#) .”

_____. [The Idea of Nonviolence in U.S. History](#) .

Engelhardt, Tom. *The End of Victory Culture*, 2nd ed. University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Stephanson, Anders. *Manifest Destiny*. Hill and Wang, 1995.

Tuveson, Ernest. *Redeemer Nation*. University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven*. University of California Press, 1998.

Course syllabi can be accessed from www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/chernus/ .