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In her book, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (Ecco: 2003), Jessica Stern raises a question every student has in mind after watching internationally publicized events such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India, the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack by Aum Shinrikyo, the suicide bombings of the IRA, Hamas and Tamil Tigers, and the still vivid destruction of September 11. Stern interviewed true followers - Jewish, Christian, Muslim - who took it upon themselves to fulfill the promise of divine justice captured in dictums such as "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!" Showing striking similarities, most of her subjects avow they are doing God's will to defend faith against evil.

The question itself — how and why violence is sanctioned in the context of religions — is intriguing and consequential. Theories abound. Tracing how militant leaders in different faiths found recruits among the disenfranchised, and successfully convinced them that it was their sacred duty to commit violent acts to attain divine order and justice, Stern sees alienation, fear of chaos in a godless world, and social and political grievances as ripe conditions for militants to strike "spiritual dread" in the enemy through terrorist acts. This buttresses the view that not religions but deprivation and humiliation are at the root of violence; so, the former are exploited for their affective and symbolic capital to legitimize violence as a strategy of redress.

But the very fact that religious literatures and histories provide such fodder for terrorizing in the name of God is no minor point. The sanction of violence against women, slaves, and one's kith and kin draw from powerfully embedded religious paradigms: Adam is made in God's image but Eve is not; the devil is black and God is light; Arjuna's duty is to fight bravely not to cringe at killing his cousins. As James Aho describes in *Religious Mythology and the Art of War* (Westport: 1981), world religions have a copious mythology of violence. Burnt offerings and human sacrifice are valorized: Abraham's willingness to give up his beloved son; the devout

wife or Sati who immolates herself at her husband's pyre; and Iranian mothers blessing their sons to become Imam Hussayn-like martyrs in the Iran-Iraq war.

Regina Schwartz's provocative study *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: 1997) is another attempt to theorize the relation between religion and violence. Of particular interest is her idea that divinity in monotheistic traditions is often imaged either in terms of plenitude or scarcity. Exclusive monotheisms premised on visions of scarcity promote a competitive and violent worldview by reducing divinity to a jealous God whose favors are confined within boundaries guarded by insiders against outsiders. This is emblematic I think of the deeper, perennial human challenge of accepting and negotiating difference and diversity. Since an exclusivist vision cannot cope with difference, or does so by trying to obliterate it, religious terrorism signals a rejection of pluralism.

The ambiguity of religions, like the human beings that construct and vivify them, is a difficult concept to sustain in popular discourse in part because virtually every religion fundamentally claims itself to be good. Rudolph Otto's description of the ambivalence of the holy as both fascinating and horrifying, attractive and repulsive, applies equally well to those who interact with the holy. In her embrace of both light and shadow, Kali, the Hindu goddess, manifests an ambivalent image of divine plenitude and stands as a mirror of humanity's promise and peril, warning against the proud certitude that girds the faith of those who hurt and maim in God's name. Speaking pedagogically, the challenge is this: how do we demythologize the sacred without trivializing the profound manner in which human societies have engaged it? The articles in this issue of *Spotlight* offer perspectives and strategies on tackling such complexities.