

Paul Pinto, Graduate student coordinator

Conference on Religion and Violence

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The MacMillan Center Initiative on Religion, Politics & Society at Yale University hosted its inaugural conference on the topic of Religion and Violence on February 16th, 2008. The motivating question of the conference was, according to faculty coordinator and Assistant Professor of Political Science Vivek Sharma, "if there is something unique or different about religion that leads particular patterns of conflict across time and space." To begin answering this question, the conference gathered eminent scholars from the social sciences and history, starting with the keynote speaker, the distinguished professor of history Robert I. Moore (Emeritus, Newcastle University).



Professor Vivek Sharma (center), faculty coordinator of the conference and faculty member of the Initiative on Religion, Politics & Society, listens to the panel on religion and violence in the modern world with Professor Harry Blair of the Political Science Department (left) and Professor Carlos Eire, faculty member of the RPS Initiative.

Professor Moore underlined the formative role of religion in medieval Europe, pointing out that the revolution responsible for endowing European civilization with its distinctive forms of social organization based on patrimonial forms of secular property-holding in conjunction with a tithe-funded Church explicitly set apart from lay society relied both on the exercise of violence and the expression of faith. As Moore put it, "[The revolution] needed religious faith, with its power to override traditional family ties and obligations, and to unite its devotees indissolubly to one another and to their cause, in the face of every threat and every temptation – in Weber's terms, to replace the community of blood by a community of faith."

The keynote address was followed by a panel on religion and violence in the premodern world, which featured Professor Mack Holt, Professor of History at George Mason University, and Professor Hugh Kennedy, Professor of Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. With approximately 50 members of the Yale community in attendance, Professor Holt's paper, on the French Wars of Religion, pointed out that although religion was the motivating force behind the overall conflict, expressions of violence depended on local political conditions and the actions of local secular magistrates. Professor Kennedy's presentation, describing the rapid expansion of the Arab armies across areas of the Byzantine and Persian Empires in the seventh century, made the crucial point that "Islam was not spread by the sword but without the sword it would not have spread." Kennedy argued that conversion was not forced on conquered populations by Arab soldiers; rather, communities of other faiths were preserved in an environment where conversion was encouraged but certainly not forced. The conquests therefore laid the political foundations of later conversion, which took place over the ensuing centuries.

In the afternoon, about 60 members of the Yale community attended the afternoon panel, on the topic of religion and violence in the modern world. Paul Brass, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Washington, presented a paper on the political structure of acts of collective violence in India, explaining the dynamics of violence as driven by highly strategic political entrepreneurs concerned with maximizing electoral success. These entrepreneurs sought to inflame and profit from religious cleavages in Indian society. Jennifer Todd, Associate Professor of Politics at University College, Dublin, analyzed the role of religion in the conflict in Northern Ireland, arguing that "religion played a role in making conflict more meaningful, more intense, more totalizing." Professor Malika Zeghal reversed the implicit causal association between religion and violence, arguing that expressions of violence themselves alter the public discourse of religion. The panel was followed by vigorous questions and discussion.



Professor Jennifer Todd (left) explains her views on religion and politics in Northern Ireland as Professor Malika Zeghal and Professor Paul Brass look on.

The Conference on Religion and Violence was the first step towards constructing an analytical framework for understanding the complex relationship between religion and violence. The MacMillan Center Initiative on Religion, Politics and Society plans to hold a follow-up workshop of scholars in the fall of 2008, the papers from which will go into an edited volume of *Politics and Society*. Scholars from the social sciences and humanities interested in this topic are encouraged to contact Paul Pinto, graduate student coordinator of the workshop (paul.pinto@yale.edu) if they would like to submit papers for this workshop.