CHAPTER 155

Genocide

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What does it mean to think of genocide in terms of religious ethics? This question immediately highlights the need for contextuality, to avoid limiting the analysis to the question of theodicy and thus positing the relation between religious ethics and genocide as one of reaction. The other mode of connecting religion and genocide appears inconceivable because surely religious traditions do not condone or cause the destruction of human communities. Neither a discussion of otherworldly caused calamity nor vague assumptions about the essential prosocial and humanistic impulses inscribed in religious traditions will help us think about genocide through religious ethics. Indeed, we need to reverse the question: what can we learn about religious ethics through a contextual examination of genocidal events? On the one hand, genocide stands in obvious contrast to the ethics of religious traditions. On the other, religious people and institutions certainly participate in genocidal practices, justifications, and rhetoric. Indeed, functionalist and sociological accounts of religion illuminate the centrality of violence to defining communal boundaries, social cohesion, and morality (e.g. Durkheim 1915; Girard 1977, 1986; Strachey and Freud 1961). While religious traditions have a long history of authorizing force and targeted killings, the focus of this entry is limited to the question of religious ethics and genocide in modernity.

Genocide does not just happen. Its occurrence is always explicable in terms of human agency and the systems of meanings and justifications that humans weave. To the degree that religion and genocide are linked, human actions and their ideological underpinnings constitute the main targets of analysis. Certainly, the study of religious ethics cannot rest on the presumption that religious traditions offer countervailing forces to collectivistic genocidal proclivities. In addition to identifying the complicity of religion with genocidal practices, also relevant are explicitly religious actors' responses to atrocities that reach the depths of traditions' ethical commands and spiritual practices in challenging chauvinistic ethics of solidarity through an articulation of universalistic concerns with humans as humans. Religiosity, in other words, is both implicated in genocidal violence and in resistance to mass targeted murder and other forms of communal destruction, as well as in resources for transgenerational healing processes. Indeed, the discussion of genocide and religious traditions illuminates the need to examine religion within its historical (and, in this instance, genocidal) contexts. This entails paying careful attention to nationalist and imperial/colonial discourses, along with their embeddedness within modernity and secularity as well as their Christian- and Eurocentric legacies (Anidjar 2003, 2014). This entry proceeds in several steps. First, what is meant by genocide is examined, then an exploration of complicit actors and institutions in genocidal contexts is given, and finally the place of religious resistance to genocide is considered.

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What Is Genocide?

It is crucial to clarify the legal working definition of genocide. According to Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (United Nations 1948), genocide is defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical [*sic*], racial or religious group." A wide array of practices qualify. The timing of the convention, like the timing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not incidental, but rather denotes the impact of World War II. While recent scholarship on human rights challenges the centrality of the Holocaust and European fascism on the birth of the human rights regime (Moyn 2010, 2015), the Holocaust is pivotal in the background – through the person and work of Raphael Lemkin – of the UN convention and its definitional work and applicability, both globally and comparatively. Lemkin's legacy has been conscripted into a variety of agendas (e.g. Dirk Moses 2010; Loeffler 2017). His contested legacy indicates that enshrining genocide as a category of crime in international law does not solve the fluidity of its interpretation as encompassing not only obvious instances of mass killing, but also a whole spectrum of practices (such as systematic rape or the forced removal of children for the objective of "cultural assimilation") intended to destroy entire communities.

Indeed, genocide studies, as a scholarly field, has grappled with the Holocaust. One set of conversations interprets the genocides of the twentieth century as "intrinsic" and integral to broader world developments. These include the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the European imperial order, and its eventual disintegration into totalitarian and dictatorial regimes (Levene 2014, 5; see also Snyder 2010). Or it examines the Holocaust within the broader story of European colonization and racial (e.g. *Lebensraum*) and frontier imperialism (Kakel III 2013; Kay 2006; Madley 2016). Another set of conversations lessens the uniqueness of the Holocaust through a global comparative study of analogous cases that likewise challenge the conceptual and empirical boundaries of genocide by questioning whether the Holocaust should constitute the metric according to which all other cases are measured (e.g. Dirk Moses 2013). This line of critical genocide studies also investigates hidden and forgotten genocides, identifying biases as well as sociocultural and political mechanisms that enable sites of remembering and forgetting (Bloxham and Moses 2010; Hinton et al. 2013; Lemarchand 2011). In particular, the fluidity of the conceptual and empirical boundaries of genocide manifests in efforts to differentiate it from other practices such as "ethnic cleansing," broadly understood as the forced removal (through terror and killing) of civilian populations from their land, which is a central mechanism in exclusionary nationalist programs. The difficulty of differentiating "ethnicity" from "religious identity," as in the Balkans, illuminates why the analysis of religion and genocide immediately works against the abstraction of religion from ethnicity, nationality, and cultural contextuality. This is regardless of whether the Bosniak Muslim or Orthodox Serb actually operates within any theological depth or belief.

A scholarly exchange between Shaw and Bartov (2010) reveals this complexity. In response to Bartov's complaint that counting "ethnic cleansing" as genocide dilutes the meaning, Shaw retorts that "the idea of 'ethnic cleansing' is contaminated by perpetrator assumptions (the idea that removing and murdering people 'cleans' society, the opposite of any genuine idea of purity in social relations)" (2010, 249). Indeed, Lemkin's awareness of the potential convergence of genocide studies with politicized scholarship on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict led him to distance himself from his pre-World

War II political Zionist identification in order to promote the more universal concept of genocide (Loeffler 2017). The question of whether the “ethnic cleansing” of Palestinians in 1948 constituted genocide points us back to nationalism, colonialism, and modernity as key to the analysis of religious ethics and genocide. Now, it is important to catalog a few instances where religious institutions, authorities, narratives, and people were deeply implicated in articulating mass killings, as well as other forms of communal destruction, as morally justifiable and even “benevolent.” This is to avoid theorizing religion as a force countering the logic of modern secular genocides. Succumbing to such logic would entail an unreconstructed modernist account of “religion” as interiorized and individualized in terms of “belief,” cognition, and choice, and as neatly differentiable from ethnicity, nationality, culture, and other identity markers.

Religious Institutions and Actors within Genocidal Contexts: Complicity

The topic of genocide and religious ethics is linked to a broad examination of religion and violence and is consistent with exclusionary nationalist rhetoric and practices. The study of genocide, in particular, however foregrounds the relevance of religion to “state-organized murder” (Bartov and Mack 2001, 1), clearly evidenced in modern cases, including those of the Armenian, Jewish, and Rwandan genocides. Authoritative religious experts such as Kittle in Nazi Germany (Ericksen 2001) or others who partook in the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence of German Religious Life (Heschel 2008) actively worked on manufacturing and disseminating so-called “Aryan Christianity.” This enhanced the respectability of Nazism and its genocidal practices (Bartov and Mack 2001, 5), which were sanctioned down to low-level military chaplains who offered spiritual refuge and comfort to foot soldiers at the ground zero of a murderous regime (Bergen 2001). Indeed, Bartov and Mack (2001) conclude that, with some exceptions, German churches during World War II exhibited “a combination of resentment, approval, silent indifference, or narrow-minded concentration on religious piety resulting in moral numbing in the face of widespread inhumanity” (6).

There is nothing particularly unique about the case of Nazified Christianity. Nor did it emerge out of nowhere. The groundwork had been prepared by antecedent philosophical and theological developments from Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century (Lawrence 2014; Mack 2003) and his positing of the “Jew” as a foil to his conceptions of rationality and autonomy, to the founding comparative religious studies scholar Max Müller in the nineteenth. A product of his era, Müller differentiated Judaism and Christianity through the mechanism of philological and racial theories, thereby disrupting, but cohering with, classical anti-Jewish interpretations of supersessionism. This detour to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is to stress that the manifestation of atrocities does not signal the absence, but rather the presence, of various intellectual and theopolitical scaffolding, which contributed to the apparent morality and/or justifiability of their occurrence.

Years after the Holocaust, in 1994 Rwanda, churches turned into killing chambers and some church leaders into executioners. Longman (2010) writes:

> Organizers of the genocide, exploited the historic concept of sanctuary to lure tens of thousands of Tutsi into church buildings with false promises of protection; then Hutu militia and soldiers

> systematically slaughtered the unfortunate people who had sought refuge, firing guns and tossing grenades into the crowds gathered in church sanctuaries and school buildings, and methodically finishing off survivors with machetes, pruning hooks, and knives.
>
> (4–5)

In addition, in some locations, “clergy, catechists, and other church employees used their knowledge of the local population to identify Tutsi for elimination. In other cases, church personnel actively participated in the killing” (Longman 2010, 5). Like the military chaplains in Nazi Germany, the appearance that churches supported the genocidal regime was further strengthened when death squads held masses before killing episodes. “In some cases militia members apparently paused in the frenzy of killing to kneel and pray at the altar” (Longman 2010). Indeed, “practicing Christians could kill their neighbors without feeling that they were acting inconsistently with their faith” (Longman 2010, 191).

How can the practice of genocide and killing be consistent with religious ethics? This is the question. And it can only be confronted contextually by resisting the abstraction of religion and religiosity, along with religious ethics, from an examination of power and other substantive variables associated with identity, such as ethnicity, race, and nationality. The overwhelming evidence of active participation and the enabling of genocide by religious leaders notwithstanding, official responses of the Catholic Church attributed blame to individual sinfulness of clerics rather than the church writ large (Longman 2010, 7). Still, *Nostra Aetate* or the Declaration of the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (also referred to as Vatican II), which was promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, presented an effort to grapple with the Christian sin of the Holocaust and to reassess the Church’s relations with Jews and other faith communities (see also Ochs 2011). Even while the Nazis distanced themselves from religious institutions, their capacity to implement racial policies drew strength and public traction from centuries of Christian anti-Semitism.

That the Nazification of Christianity drew on established intellectual patterns of racializing religion has also been noted. The Christian process of atonement for the one sin against Jews (the Holocaust), Jewish Palestinian liberation theologian Ellis (1997) contended, has been pivotal for rendering the suffering of Palestinians invisible and inaudible (see also Magid 2017). The invisibility and inaudibility of Palestinians illuminate the relevance of interrogating religion and the ethics of confronting the memory of genocide on the level of discourse, with a special emphasis on the endurance of orientalism in authorizing communal-targeted violence. Certainly, the case of Palestine has become a site for contesting genocide’s definitional boundaries (e.g. Shaw and Bartov 2010) as well as for highlighting the complex ways in which religious meanings, institutions, and people inform, in the *longue durée*, the possibility for murderous policies to be enacted and publicly supported as morally justifiable. This is where the fields of critical genocide studies and religious studies could converge in expanding the interpretive scope of the analysis of religion’s relation to genocide. Anti-Semitism’s religious roots are as relevant to a comparative analysis of religion and genocide as is orientalism and the othering of Muslims. Indeed, these two discourses are related and coextensive with the construction of Christian modernity (Anidjar 2014).

The disciplinary convergence of orientalism and anti-Semitism in underwriting Christian modern coloniality illuminates that the relevance of religion to an underpinning discourse informing the ground zero of genocidal episodes is broader than the story of Nazi Germany. As orientalism authorizes the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, beyond the immediacy of examining why religious actors and institutions became engrained with the Hutu’s genocidal agenda, the events of 1994 in Rwanda illuminate the enduring colonial legacy of churches and their long-term relevance to modern genocides and policies of ethnic cleansing. Indeed, the very classification of the inhabitants of Burundi and Rwanda into distinct ethnic groups was manufactured by Belgian and French colonialisms and sanctioned by churches (de Lespinay 2001) and missionaries who had complex and mutually benefiting relationships with colonial authorities. That years later the Hutu–Tutsi distinction constituted the boundaries along which genocide occurred stresses the long-term impact of colonialism, which itself was authorized and sanctioned by claims to religio-cultural superiority, racial imperialism, and civilizational mission. Accordingly, settler colonialism, dispossession, classification, and elimination of human communities were necessary for "progress" and modern-state making.

The colonial legacy, likewise, tells the stories of multiple (and eventually hidden) genocides and communal destruction in the form of the transatlantic slave trade, for example (see Hinton et al. 2013). Like the South African regime of apartheid, the American institution of slavery was authorized with religious warrants, allowing for high consistency between slaveholding and Christian beliefs (Rae 2018). Of course, this institution was likewise challenged by, among other paths, reclaiming Christianity from slaveholders' interpretations as were the religious warrants employed openly to authorize the apartheid era (Villa-Vicencio 1977, 1992).

At the time of its ratification, the Genocide Convention's definitional scope resonated, for many activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, with the legacy of slavery and its endurance in Jim Crow laws as well as the ghettoization and segregation of African-Americans. Such activists pointed to the interrelation between an analysis of race and racialization, colonialism, and the practices of genocide (Civil Rights Congress 1951). Such practices always involve power and knowledge production that determine patterns of perpetuating, remembering, and forgetting, where some atrocities are remembered and others are hidden or construed as necessary stages in teleological conceptions of modernity and progress (Hinton et al. 2013).

Indeed, employing genocide as a comparative term intersects with intellectual and political processes of decolonization, which delineate the intersections of race and religion in the taxonomies of exclusionary nationalisms and imperial programs. These processes also involve examining, as Du Bois had done, the modern logic of what Foucault calls "biopolitics" and how its grammar underpins both Jim Crow America and the Warsaw Ghetto in that it seeks to control life and death in their totality. Following Agamben's (1998) notion of the "bare life" and resonating with Arendt's discussion of naked and disposable humanity in Nazi concentration camps (1973, 296), Du Bois (1952) recognizes the Warsaw Ghetto and the death camp as highly consistent with a broader racial geography that underpins modernity.

Biopolitics, as a central technology of modernity (Agamben 1998, 123) is more aptly captured in Achile Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" (2019) denoting the power to dictate death. This conveys the relevance of race and colonialism to the discussion of genocide, a policy often targeting racialized religious communities framed also along and through national and ethnic lines of identification. This point returns us to the complex relations between "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" (Mojzes 2011) and how religious symbols, vocabularies, historical narratives, and textual sources are employed to construct exclusionary interpretations of nationalisms, which contain the potentiality for genocidal policies.

Sells (1998), for example, examines the emergence and consolidation of the national mythology of Christo-Slavism or "the premise that Slavs are by essence Christian and that conversion to another religion is a betrayal of the people or race" (51). Accordingly, and consistent with any other forms of ethnoreligious nationalism's invocation of authenticity through mythologizing and converging narratives of religious and national existential threats, Muslims in the Balkans are merely the product of forced conversion and thus alien to the land. Through his examination of Christo-Slavism, Sells explains that the Bosnian genocide "was religiously motivated and religiously justified. Religious symbols, mythologies, myths of origin (pure Serb race), symbol of passion (Lazar's death), and eschatological longings (the resurrection of Lazar) were used by religious nationalists" (Sells 1998, 89). Political entrepreneurs in the late 1980s and leading up to the war in the 1990s manipulated the story of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo and the martyrdom of Prince Lazar in his fight against the Ottomans. The battle supposedly denotes the martyrdom of the Serbian nation in the name of Christendom. The politicians of the 1980s did not invent this mythology. Indeed, Sells shows how already in the nineteenth century, artistic works portray Prince Lazar as a Christ-like figure, a symptom of the reliance of Serb nationalism on this long circulating mythology in constructing its identity.

The question of the relation between religion and genocide will need to examine the role of religion in such nationalist mythologizing. This is especially the case considering that political entrepreneurs and manipulators do not invent such myths *ex nihilo* and that they resonate culturally, even if not through simplistic conceptions of causality. The trajectory between the consolidation of such exclusionary mythologies and, in the case of Bosnia, the events of, say, Srebrenica in July 1995, when more than 8,000 Muslim Bosniaks (mostly men and boys) were systematically massacred by the Bosnian Serb forces, defies reductive accounts of religion that seek its isolation as either a dependent (epiphenomenal) or independent (causal) variable. Religion interacts with the production and reproduction of national ideologies in myriad complex ways.

In addition to this clear case of genocide targeting Muslims, many regions in the former Yugoslavia were "ethnically cleansed" as a result of the wars, presenting particular challenges for religious leaders as potential instruments of healing. Decades later, the Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, Jews, and others in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), for instance, remain deeply segregated in terms of education, residence, and so forth. Further, the memories of cohabitation and intermingling are distant, and communal and ethnic markers are synonymized with religious ones. The synonymy of ethnicity and religion, once again, highlights the biologizing of religious modes of identification: to be a Muslim means to be a Bosniak – an ethnic and thus biologically (racially) inscribed identity, whose sustainability supposedly depends upon the logic of biopolitics/necropolitics. One of the ironies of genocidal histories is their capacities to "transform ... an imaginary community into a 'real' one by attempting to obliterate the members of the imagined group" (Hinton et al. 2013, 9). The boundaries between Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Jew in BiH are real in this regard. Religion explicitly participates in such geographies.

Indeed, one common denominator of modern genocides – one directly related to the legacy of religion as a comparative category of taxonomy employed within colonial structures (Chidester 1996, 2014) – is the construction of religious groups in racial and cultural terms rather than in terms of theologies and/or contents and intricacies (as well as internal pluralities) of beliefs and methods of learning. "People were murdered," Bartov and Mack (2001) write, "because they were Jews or Armenians or Bosnian Muslims, regardless of whether or not they (or their killers) actually believed in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim precepts" (2–3). The dynamics and structures of modern nationalisms signaled the transformation of religiosity into "culture" and "heritage" or "our values" (e.g. Roy 2010), which are nevertheless presented as causes worth dying, discriminating, or killing for. The conflation of religion and other markers of political, cultural, and social identification allows for the supposed subordination of ethics to the logic of realpolitik. It does so in ways that facilitate the sanctioning of violence, regardless of genocidal intent, by religious authorities as well as other manipulators of religio-cultural symbols and meanings, whether these are the theologians of the Nazi regime, the priests of the Hutu-directed genocide in Rwanda, or the Serbian paramilitary leaders of the former Yugoslavia.

Nationalisms themselves and their claims of authenticity (and a sense of existential threat, martyrdom, and/or civilizational mission) rely on mythologizing communal coherence, often by targeting supposedly inauthentic communal elements (Marx 2003). Indeed, the language of authenticity does not constitute a perversion of modern nationalism (Fein 1990). It is highly consistent with this modern political mode of imagining social organizations in terms of the biological metaphor of "pollution." Nationalist mythologizing should not simply be accepted as given, but rather always be open for hermeneutical scrutiny and contextual power analysis that examines why, how, and by whom religious meanings, institutions, and people become conscripted onto exclusionary schemes with potential genocidal outcomes.

The reverse processes, or how religion disentangles from and challenges chauvinistic patterns, is also relevant and demands that we scrutinize what counts as "religious" to begin with. This category fluidly intersects with race, ethnicity, nationality, and other markers that work to flatten and essentialize "religion" (often through ethnicization and racialization) as identity, often without any theological or ethical depth. In fact, what is "ethical" for leaders such as Ratko Mladić in Srebrenica or for Théoneste Bagosora, in Rwanda, is subordinated to the logic of colonialism and biopolitics/necropolitics (segregation, division, classification). In the case of the former Yugoslavia, such flattening is understood in terms of a selective retrieval of religious motifs in the construction of national mythologies, without dismissing the many other variables that contributed to the emergence of chauvinistic interpretations of national identities. In the case of Rwanda, religion's complicity needs to be primarily understood, as noted, in terms of the churches' links to colonization and the invention of ethnic divides in Rwanda.

Notably, in all the cases touched upon above, from transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust to Bosnia and Rwanda, extensive discourses involving religion operate in a variety of forms, including in terms of institutional support and theologizing the justness of "purification" and sanctity of slavery. These modes of involvement contribute to authorizing the atrocities of genocide or their potentiality. Their sanctification is framed as both ethical and necessary for the survival of nations (often interlaced in the mythologizing of ethnoreligious nationalism with the apparent threat to the survival of religious traditions themselves) and for their self-actualization and/or promulgation of manifest destiny or "progress."

Religious Resistance

The complexity of the discussion of religion, and specifically religious ethics and genocide, relates to the fact that religious leaders and religiosity also have a strong record of resisting genocidal or potentially genocidal regimes and policies (e.g. Doughty and Ntambara 2005). Authoritative interpreters of traditions have the hermeneutical capacity to tap into constructive memories of cohabitation and resources promoting tolerance in the same ways that they can access divisive and violence promoting cultural currents (Dulin 2017). The religious fields, however, always intersect with and are populated by multiple and fragmented authorities. What counts as an "authoritative" interpretation of religious tradition is not always self-evident. Nor are such authorities confined to traditional religious institutions and their modes of training and reasoning.

Still, stories of bravery and actions of resistance grounded in religious convictions abound. In Hungary, during the Nazi era, Margit Schlachta, who founded (in 1923) and led the Roman Catholic Society of the Sisters of Social Service (Sheetz-Nguyen 2001), publicly condemned anti-Jewish laws as soon as they passed. To resist the forced removal, deportation, and eventual elimination of Jews, the Sisters sheltered many Jews. They likewise supplied Jews with baptismal certificates. Consequently, "they were willing to de-value a specific Christian sacrament and practice for the sake of universal charity … motivated by a universal interpretation of religious dogma" (Bartov and Mack 2001, 9). Ironically, it was often the recognition of the human as human, regardless of their various affiliations, that generated an urgent moral requirement to respond to their suffering and prevent their destruction. This is "ironic" in that seeing human in their nakedness and looming perishability is not only the essence of biopolitics/necropolitics, but it also deepened humanistic compassion and courage grounded in religiosity as interpreted in embodied and embedded ways. In the case of the Sisters of Social Service, the supposed "devaluation" of the sacrament of baptism indeed denoted its sacralization through saving lives.

The ability of religious actors to respond with compassion, in ways that see humanity beyond narrow communal divisions, often invokes references to Emmanuel Levinas's discussion of the face of the other (e.g. Smith 2011) and his contention that relationality ought to be assessed in terms of ethical responsibility (e.g. Levinas 1995, 86). Levinas writes about an obligation to the other who is seen exposed in their defenselessness and dehumanization as a mechanism for asserting one's humanity, but often also as a mirror of one's murderous potential (1997, 294). In their powerlessness, the other embodies an "ethical resistance to power" (Smith 2011, 243). Thus, the relationality to the face "is incommensurable with the exercise of power" (Smith 2011, 243) and offers optimal resources to resist the logic of biopolitics/necropolitics. Levinas's phenomenology of the stranger conveys, therefore, that the face is "the primordial site for both moral goodness and radical evil" (Smith 2011, 244). Accordingly, Levinas employs religious tropes and imageries "to highlight the radical moral authority the Other possesses" (Smith 2011, 247) and to denote that the divine can be contemplated through this essential asymmetry (Smith 2011, 247). However, despite the appeals of Levinas's phenomenology as fundamentally ethical, religious actors are not particularly disposed to resist the murderous tendencies of chauvinistic politics demarcated along religious and/or ethnic lines. They can, as noted, offer their sanctuaries for the murderous acts and their prayers for the spiritual comfort of those engaged in such acts. Levinas himself failed to recognize the suffering of Palestinians by Zionist policies and actions, illuminating once again the need to examine the question of genocide and religion discursively and through the lenses of decolonization (see Slabodsky 2015, 93–114).

To conclude, comprehending the active participation and/or complicity of religious actors, institutions, and leaders with genocidal episodes requires that we contextualize religion within a broader analysis of nationalism, colonialism, modernity, and biopolitics/necropolitics. The insights from critical genocide studies, therefore, broadens the analysis of religion and genocide beyond the obvious acts of violence as mass killing to a deeper engagement with religion's complicity with discursive violence, including the elimination of religio-cultural diversity through conversion in the context of colonialism and racial imperialism. Understanding religion and resistance to genocide and acute violence illuminates religious actors' appeals to universal ethics, which enable them to see the suffering other as a human deserving life and, through this relationality, engage in ethical resistance to power. Of course, being Christian or Jewish or Muslim or otherwise religious can also be perfectly consistent with engaging with (and celebrating) the acts of enslavement and massacres as ethically sound or at least as requiring the suspension of ordinary ethics for the demands of realpolitik or messianic and apocalyptic scenarios.

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