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**Book Review: Hassner, R. E. (2009). War on Sacred Grounds. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press**

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Hassner, R. E. (2009). *War on Sacred Grounds*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

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In October 1967, 4 months after Israel took control of the Old City of Jerusalem for the first time, 56 rabbis issued a decree forbidding all Jews entrance to the Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site. By doing so, they reduced dramatically the potential for violence in what is also one of Islam's most revered sites, known as the Noble Sanctuary (p. 121). This case and others serve to support the provocative argument of Ron Hassner's recent book: The key to mitigating conflict over sacred sites lies not in the disengagement of religion and politics, as often advocated, but in the enlistment of religious leaders to reshape the parameters of sacred sites and allow for political accommodation. Hassner advances his argument in an engaging and informative book that draws on a range of scholarly fields, in particular religious studies and international relations. The evidence for this argument consists

of an impressive array of historical examples, from the Punjab, through Mecca, to Little Bighorn.

Two questions guide the book in substance and structure: "Why are so many sacred sites plagued by intractable conflict?" and "How can these conflicts be mitigated?" (p. 2). Answering the first question, Hassner focuses on the meaning attached by believers to sacred sites, taking their beliefs at face value. Drawing on insights from the sociology of religion, he defines sites as sacred when they provide worshipers with direct communication with the divine, contain a permanent divine presence, and provide meaning to believers through their design and layout (p. 22). The significance of sacred sites makes them attractive to political actors as well—from within and from outside the faith—producing the most visible loci of religious-political conflict. The more central a site to religious adherents and the more vulnerable it is to outside interference, Hassner predicts, the more likely it is to attract conflict (pp. 28-34).

Sacred sites differ from other valuable territory in an important respect: they are necessarily *indivisible*, according to Hassner (p. 38). Sacred sites have unique value and require physical cohesiveness delimited by commonly recognized boundaries (pp. 43-50), which, he claims, prohibit bargaining over the sites or their partition. Issue indivisibility is widely discussed in theories of conflict in international relations (e.g., Fearon, 1995) as a potential explanation for war by rational actors; by limiting the number of available compromises, issue indivisibility can eliminate the bargaining range on a given dimension and preclude the peaceful settlement of conflict.

Yet, as Hassner notes, Fearon and others (e.g., Walter, 1997) are skeptical of issue indivisibility as a cause for war, in particular because conflict tends to be multidimensional, with potential bargains created by issue linkage and side payments. Others (e.g., Goddard, 2006) have argued that issue indivisibility does cause war but locate the problem in the process of bargaining, not in the indivisibility of any particular good. Hassner disagrees with these approaches (pp. 38-41), claiming that sacred sites constitute indivisible goods, irrespective of the terms of a conflict as a whole. Yet even if sacred sites are inherently indivisible, it remains unclear when and if they will come to dominate a conflict to such a degree that it is effectively reduced to a unidimensional dispute where an indivisible good would preclude settlement. Some sacred sites may do so (Hassner gives the example of Jerusalem in the negotiations at Camp David in 2000), yet many do not. Relating the argument on indivisibility to the conditions under which sacred sites will dominate a conflict would help clarify this central point.

Turning to the second question—how conflict over sacred sites might be mitigated—Hassner draws on a social constructivist perspective. Although in the first part of the book the argument takes religious beliefs at face value, demonstrating that the meaning believers attach to sacred sites is politically consequential, the second part argues that the conventions that define the sacred sites are also partially malleable and susceptible to intentional reframing. This argument is nuanced and convincing and provides the basis for Hassner's answer to mitigating conflict over sacred sites. Hassner claims that religious leaders with enough authority, at particular historical junctures, may reshape the properties of sacred sites to alleviate conflicts. Alongside the example of Jerusalem noted above, Hassner details the events surrounding the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979, where religious leaders reinterpreted a widely accepted prohibition on the use of force against fellow Muslims in the Mosque to allow Saudi authorities to regain control after a hostile takeover by a radical group (pp. 135-151). Again, the enlistment of religious authority allowed for the reshaping of sacred sites for political (albeit bloody) ends.

The use of different theoretical approaches illustrates a central contribution of the book: the bridging of the divide between the study of religion and the study of conflict. Evoking Clifford Geertz (1973), Hassner calls his methodology *thick religion* (pp. 174-178), one that combines broad positivist theory on conflict with in-depth, interpretivist analysis of the characteristics of sacred sites. Even while maintaining approaches common to the study of international relations, Hassner calls on scholars of conflict to take religious beliefs, dogmas, and practices more seriously: "Symbols are not merely superstructures: power has a cultural as well as a material base" (p. 10).

Hassner goes further and sets out to convince the reader that "religion and politics are inextricably intertwined" (p. 5), a stance that underpins his policy recommendations, which many will find provocative. He critiques the widespread desire to extricate religion from the management of political conflict, common to "Hobbesian pragmatists" who disregard religious symbols as epiphenomenal to material interests and to "Huntingtonian pessimists" who view religious disputes as intractable and beyond the realm of political influence (p. 70). This attempt to separate the religious from the political misunderstands the foundations of many conflicts, Hassner contends, and, worse, dooms attempts to resolve them. In the second Camp David summit of 2000, he shows, the parties lacked expertise and authority to manage the delicate religious issues surrounding Jerusalem's holy sites, contributing to the failure of the talks and their violent aftermath (p. 83).

The book offers a variety of avenues for future research, many of them relevant to theories of comparative politics. In particular, the analysis offers refreshingly clear predictions of the likelihood of conflict over sacred sites, noted above (pp. 32-33), but doesn't test them fully. The analysis of conflict mostly focuses on sites where conflict has occurred and less on the multitude of peaceful sacred sites. It is possible, for example, that the cases where violence has erupted are precisely those in which a separation of religion and politics is difficult, whereas sites that remain peaceful are those where politics has been successfully extricated from the religious sphere. If so, case selection may be driving the conclusion that religion and politics cannot be separated in sacred sites. Identifying the full set of sacred sites in a given context—peaceful as well as conflict ridden—would allow one to test Hassner's predictions systematically.

One may also wonder whether the management of conflict in one sacred site may simply divert conflict elsewhere. Given the same distribution of political interests, would the political entrepreneurs who helped stoke the flames at the Babri Mosque/Ramjanmabhumi in Ayodhya, India (pp. 76-78) not have instigated violence at any number of other suitable sites? This is especially relevant given Hassner's argument for the possibility of constructing and emphasizing the sanctity of sites. The religious narratives surrounding Ayodhya, as Hassner notes (p. 30n16), are partly the product of the site's heightened political saliency that accompanied the violence (Friedland & Hecht, 1998). Similar political action may have produced, in other words, alternative sites for the same conflict, again raising the question of whether the sites themselves or the conflicts in which they are situated drive the patterns we observe.

Yet these critiques do not diminish the contribution of the book. Scholars of comparative politics in particular will find it useful for understanding the role of sacred sites in intrastate violence. Sacred sites, as Hassner shows, have particular characteristics that may differentiate them from other strategic locations in times of conflict. The prevalence of sacred sites worldwide and the role of religion in many political phenomena make this contribution especially noteworthy.

Journalistic accounts of conflict often take their religious underpinnings too far. The opposite may be true of central traditions in the social sciences that regard religion as merely epiphenomenal and of negligible consequence for political life. Such tendencies overlook decades of social phenomena that, at least in the eyes of believers, are heavily imbued with religious meaning. *War on Sacred Grounds* is an illuminating work that takes religious beliefs seriously while placing them within the context of strategic political

action. It provides comparative politics with theoretical insights on a highly salient issue, supported by a rich and nuanced treatment of historical examples.

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Although conflict scholars continue to expand our understanding into war-time politics, not much attention had been paid to how states terminate ongoing wars. *How Wars End* steps into this void and provides a rather nuanced theory to explain how states end the wars they fight. Reiter starts from rationalist arguments of why wars begin and applies the same logic to how wars end. The theory attempts to join insights regarding information asymmetries and commitment problems to form one unified theory of war termination; instead of two competing arguments, Reiter sees information and commitment working together to explain when states choose to negotiate an end to war and when they bypass negotiations and try for total victory. Reiter also provides a detailed discussion of the difficulties of using statistical methods to test theories of war termination and argues for the need to gain contextual information from case studies to understand the complex decision-making process that leaders follow during wars.

The theory at first blush seems very simple; however, it is actually rather complex with many moving parts. Combined, the theory leads to a range of predictions about when states will make concessions or when they might demand more from their opponent; many of these predictions are opposite of