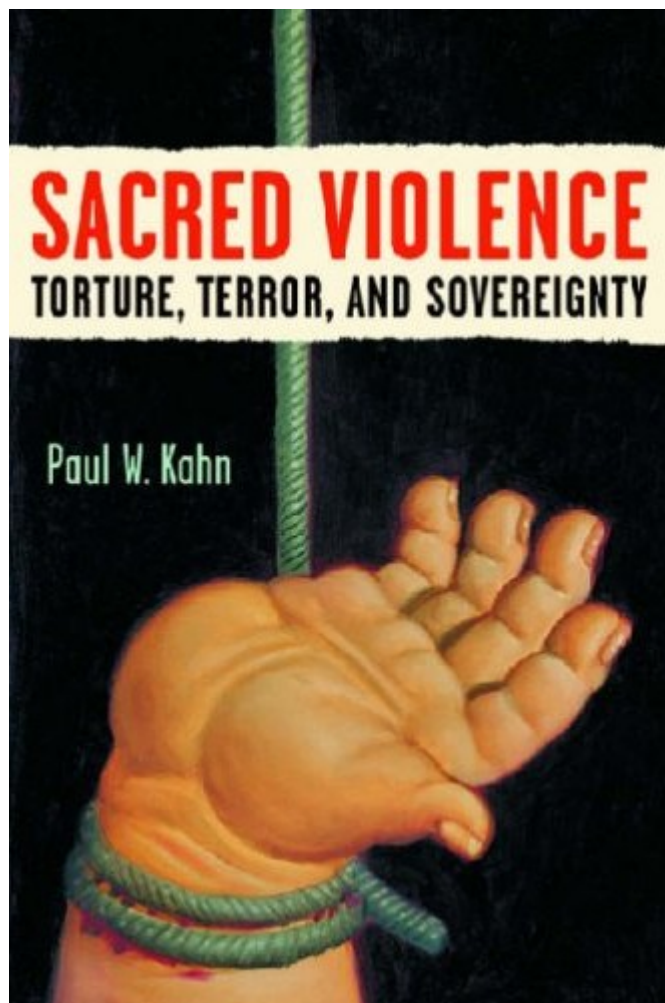


The foundation of politics

By [David Heim](#)

July 26, 2011

In Review



Sacred Violence

by Paul W. Kahn

University of Michigan Press

Of

all the books that might be read to mark the tenth anniversary of 9/11, one of the most probing is by a law professor at Yale, Paul Kahn. In *Sacred Violence*, Kahn

picks out two distinctive political problems of our post-9/11 world--terrorism and torture--and argues that they are parallel. Both activities occur outside the realm of the law, and both "inscribe meaning on bodies through pain or the threat of pain."

Kahn's

point is not the obvious one that both torture and terrorism should be condemned as illegal. He is interested in the fact that their illegality neither stops these practices from occurring nor prevents them from being politically defended by those who see them as the only way to save their community. The rise of torture in response to terrorism reveals "a space of sovereignty beyond law; it is the space of killing and being killed for the state."

As

Kahn sees it, terrorism and the U.S. response to it reveal a fundamental truth about all political life, one that the modern humanitarian project has sought to minimize but has not been able to overturn: politics is founded not on rationally arrived at laws but on violence. Indeed, what "sovereignty" means is the power to determine the violence that people will commit or submit to. And sovereignty operates just as much through the directives of a democratically elected president as through the commands of a king.

What

people sacrifice their lives for--and what they are willing to sacrifice others for--offers a glimpse of what they regard as sacred. The sacred is the transcendent source of meaning that promises life and justifies death. Politics itself, Kahn concludes, is founded on a vision of the sacred, for it is sealed by violence--constituted by a willingness to kill and be killed, to degrade others and to let oneself be degraded. "Terror and torture are contemporary forms of this experience of the sacred."

Kahn's

account of the connection between sovereignty, violence and the sacred is

filled with theological implications. It prompts reflection on what political community we belong to and who or what is sovereign for us.