

Saints in Divided Societies

Panel at the 2020 AAR Annual Meeting, Boston, MA

Comparative Studies in Religion Unit and Comparative Approaches to Religion & Violence Unit

Abstract

In societies where interaction and understanding across diversities of wealth, ethnicity, religion, or political values give way to fear and blame between identity groups, such diversities can ossify into intractable divisions—often manifesting as sectarian violence or the closing of physical borders. In such societies, religious phenomena are only ever part of the picture, yet their symbol-systems and invitations to identification and exclusion become particularly motivating in the dynamics of division. This panel focuses attention on how *holy people*, *religious exemplars*, or *saints* (these themselves being contested categories) are constructed and mobilized in modern divided societies, exploring the ways that saintly figures are understood and used so as to reinforce, undermine, or reconfigure the social divisions in whose interstices they are perceived to move.