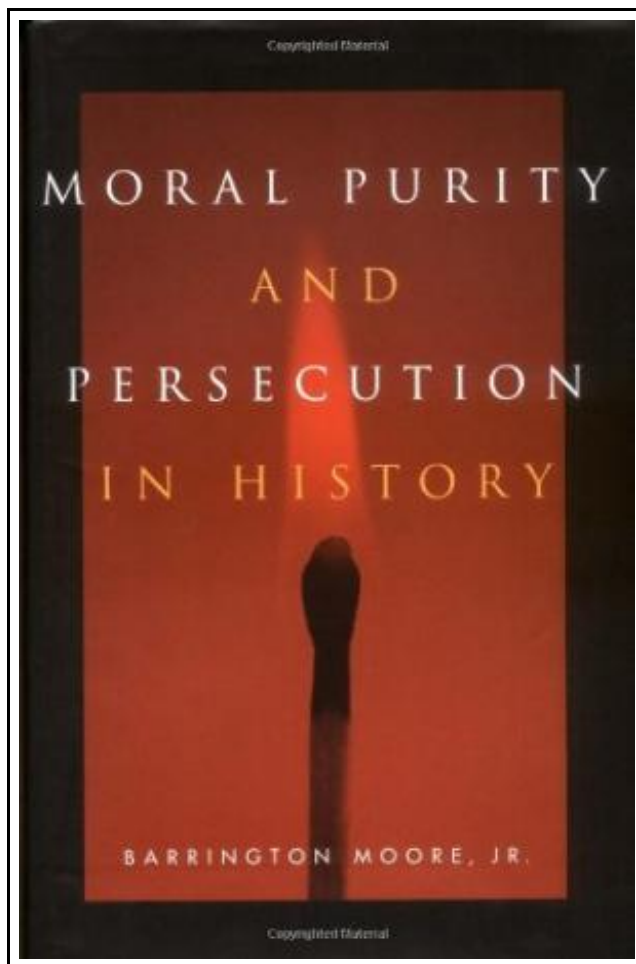


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(Mrs. Winifred Fritsch)

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The origins of religious and ideological oppression lie in monotheism, with its dangerous claims to a monopoly of grace and virtue: so argues Moore (Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy), a longtime Harvard lecturer in sociology, in this punchy, provocative but deeply problematic book. The Old Testament, he writes, is pervasively concerned with pollution and cleanliness and with the right to legitimate aggression against offenders. This antipathy toward moral pollution is then magnified by Christianity, which "took over ancient Hebrew vindictive intolerance, amplified it, and institutionalized it"-although Moore neglects to note the yoking of Christianity to the Roman empire. Monopolistic value systems were secularized in 18th-century France, bringing an intolerant insistence on revolutionary purity that would later be bequeathed to Stalin, the Nazis and Mao (whose aggressive instincts the author contrasts with the tolerance of Confucianism before the pernicious impact of the West). The thesis is bold and simple, but extremely fragile. Moore's attempt to draw a direct ideological line between the Old Testament and the Holocaust is torpedoed by his own admission that during the conflicts between the Protestant and Catholic monotheisms of 16th-century France (to which he devotes a full chapter), "Religion served mainly as a cover for other forms of hatred." His analysis is impressionistic and superficial: for example, in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, described hyperbolically as the worst slaughter of noncombatants in premodern times, "Ordinary human viciousness at its worst came to the fore, not for the first time and certainly not for the last." The book's shock value does not compensate for its lack of deeper reflection.

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