

***Transforming Violence:
Cult, Culture, and Acculturation***
Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R)
June 30-July 4, 2010
University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

Norma Claire Moruzzi

Title:

“Reading Arendt in Tehran: Politics, Violence, and the Author as Scapegoat”

Abstract:

Hannah Arendt is one of the twentieth century’s pre-eminent thinkers of politics. Her willingness to think through modern political history to controversial theoretical interpretations made her an intellectual scapegoat for certain arguments about identity, politics, violence, and guilt. But for Arendt, as for Aristotle, politics is most essentially speech, and especially the free speech among equals that is untainted by formal or informal coercion. The intimate relation Arendt establishes between speech and action—the doing of deeds and the telling of those deeds in words—is opposed by her adamant hostility to violence as the enemy of political possibility. Thus, Arendt’s political sphere can seem empty of material gestures, especially to readers yearning for immediate and fundamental political change or simple moral judgments. Students in my graduate seminar on Arendt’s political philosophy at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy during Spring 2007 had exactly this reaction. Three years later, Arendt’s unconventional lessons of collective political power and politics without violence have been adapted by the Iranian Green Movement and its youthful adherents. No longer a scapegoat to their frustration, Arendt now provides Iranian democratic actors with a relevant theory of political pluralism and activist citizenship.