

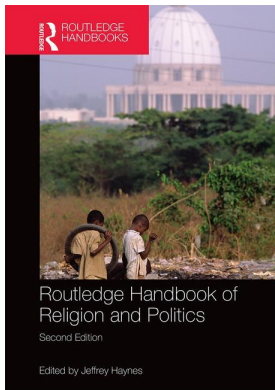
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RELIGIOUS TERRORISM IN GLOBAL POLITICS

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The rise of the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) in the Middle East, the appearance of The Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, attacks by Buddhist extremists on minorities in Myanmar and Sri Lanka—these and many other acts of violence related to religion give the impression that the twenty-first century is the age of religious terrorism. Such acts have appeared through the centuries and in every religious tradition, though have been seen with increasing frequency in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The reasons for this increase are matters of scholarly and public discussion. Samuel Huntington has posited that a “clash of civilizations” might be replacing the ideological confrontation of the Cold War as the new form of geopolitical struggle.¹ Benjamin Barber regards globalization as a primary factor leading to the centrifugal forces of tribalism and the centripetal spread of superficial consumer culture, two trends characterized as “jihad versus McWorld.”² My own analyses also identify the forces of globalization as critical, forces that undermine the world-wide supremacy of the idea of the secular nation-state and the notion of secular nationalism as its ideological basis, and offer religious nationalism and transnational politics as an alternative.³

Religious terrorism around the world

Radical political movements with religion as part of their identity and ideology have emerged to challenge the secular state in every part of the world, in every major religious tradition. There are some areas of intensity, however. In Latin America, for instance, there are relatively few instances of religious-related extremist movements in recent decades. The Middle East and South Asia tend to have more instances of religious-related violence than elsewhere. Why this is the case is the subject of debate. Some critics of religion have identified Islam as a more violent religious tradition than Christianity, though other observers point out that the violence is specific to those geographic regions where American and European culture and political power is being rejected, and hence point to political rather than religious reasons. Within the United States there have been far more acts of terrorism and extreme violence related to Christianity than Islam, though the impact of the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, overshadows most other acts of terrorism within the United States in recent years and gives the appearance of Muslim rather than Christian groups

in the US as a greater threat. The following overview of extreme violence related to different religious traditions demonstrates that religious-related terrorism is a global phenomenon.

Christianity

The tradition of Christianity has had an ambivalent relationship with violence. The proclamations of the New Testament affirm nonviolence, and the early Christians were pacifists. But after Christianity became associated with Roman imperial rule in the fourth century, its religious authority was used to buttress political power—and also to challenge it, by giving religious legitimacy to the protests of political rebels.⁴

In the second half of the twentieth century, violence became a method of defending Christianity in communities, sometimes in internecine warfare. During the decades of the “troubles” of Northern Ireland, Roman Catholic activists identifying with the Irish state were pitted against Protestants who wanted to continue the region’s relationship with the United Kingdom. Though the struggle was essentially a political contest between ethnic groups, religious leaders and images were involved on both sides of the dispute.⁵

In the United States, a number of groups protesting against multiculturalism and the secular state arose in the 1990s, continuing into the twenty-first century. Some of these were related to the Calvinist Christian Reconstruction movement and others to the racist Christian Identity movements.⁶ Members of the movement were involved in bombing abortion clinics and in shootouts with the US government, including the standoff at Ruby Ridge in 1992. Timothy McVeigh, who was convicted and executed for his role in bombing the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995—the largest act of terrorism on American soil prior to the September 2001 attack—was motivated by a religious ideology designed by the White Supremacist novelist William Pierce, an ideology he called “cosmotheism.” Like many Christian Identity activists, McVeigh expected that his act of terrorism would initiate a widespread racial struggle and the advent of a guerilla war, hoping to liberate the United States from what he regarded as its anti-Christian secular despotism. Another militant who had ties to the Christian Identity movement, Eric Robert Rudolph, was convicted of a bombing attack on Olympic Village in Atlanta in 1996. Rudolph hid out in the Appalachian Mountains for years until his arrest in 2003. The election of Barack Obama as president of the US in 2008 was the occasion of a new burst of Christian militancy. In 2010, the FBI uncovered the preparation for a full-scale military assault on the US government by the Michigan-based Hutaree group. Though their name was invented, its followers claimed that it meant “Christian warriors.”

In Europe, Christian activists opposed to multiculturalism and the acceptance of Muslim immigrants have been involved in a series of violent acts. One of the most dramatic was the mass killing conducted by Anders Breivik in Norway in July 2011. After exploding a bomb in downtown Oslo he went to an island in a nearby lake where young people associated with a liberal political party were encamped and systematically shot them with automatic weapons. Over seventy were killed. Breivik’s manifesto proclaimed his intentions to deter Norwegian politicians from following a path of multiculturalism that would, in his mind, allow Islamic civilization to dominate Northern Europe.⁷ And in Africa, a movement called “The Lord’s Resistance Army,” led by Joseph Kony, terrorized villagers in Uganda, claiming to protect Christian culture.⁸

Judaism

Since they constitute a minority religious community in most parts of the world, Jews have traditionally shied away from political activism. In Israel, however, an extreme form of Jewish

nationalism has developed that has a violent side. One of the leading exponents of this kind of violent Judaism was Rabbi Meir Kahane, who immigrated to Israel from the United States in 1971 and founded the Kach (Thus) Party dedicated to the creation of an Israeli nation based on Torah (biblical law) rather than secular principles. Kahane advocated a catastrophic form of Messianic Zionism that urged confrontation with Arabs, secular Jews and others perceived to be enemies of a Jewish religious state. Although Kahane was assassinated in New York City in 1990 by Muslims associated with the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiya, his movement continued to advocate violent encounters.⁹

One of his followers, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, overcome with shame that Jews had been humiliated by Muslim hecklers near the settlement of Kiryat Arba at the edge of the West Bank city of Hebron, entered a mosque at the Shrine of the Cave of the Patriarchs where he massacred Muslims during their prayers in a savage incident Hebron in 1994. Yigal Amir, propelled by ideas similar to Kahane's and angered by the peace accords that brought Israel close to a concession with the Palestinian authority that would cede much of the West Bank to Palestine, assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Supporters of this extreme Israeli Messianic nationalism resist any concession of territory to Palestinians and continue to be at the forefront of support for expanding Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory on the West Bank.

Islam

Like most religious traditions, the teachings of Islam praise nonviolence, and the very name of the tradition means "peace." Again, like most religious traditions, the teachings of Islam justify the use of military force in limited cases, primarily for defensive purposes. Terrorism or any killing of noncombatants is not approved by the Qur'an or by any mainstream Muslim authority. Despite this prohibition, however, some activist groups at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first have regarded terrorism as an instrument of protest and a tool in seizing political power that they assert is legitimized by Muslim teachings.¹⁰

Some of these activists refer to the political writings of Pakistan's Maulana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, who founded the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Association) in 1941, and Egypt's Hassan al-Banna, who established the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) in 1928. These thinkers regarded Western imperialism as the enemy of Islamic society and called for an overthrow of Western influences, by force if necessary, in order to establish a political order based on Islamic law. They have been the forefathers of a host of radical Muslim-related movements in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia.

In Egypt, radical groups have exploited these Muslim political ideologies for political purposes. Extreme factions related to the Muslim Brotherhood have led to acts of violence within Egypt, including attacks on tourist boats on the Nile River and tourist groups at Luxor, as well as targeting political leaders. Egypt's President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by members of a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, al-Gama'a al-Islamiya, in 1981. In nearby Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine, these Egyptian groups influenced a growing Muslim movement of Palestinian nationalism that eventually rivaled the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This Muslim movement was founded by Sheik Ahmed Yassin and other religious activists in 1987 and was named Hamas, an acronym for the phrase, *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, "Islamic Resistance Movement"; the word *hamas* means "zeal."

In the 1980s, Muslim activists from around the world joined the Mujahidin struggle against the Soviet-supported government in Afghanistan. There, activists from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and elsewhere intermingled and created alliances. The Afghan struggle became a crucible in

which a transnational jihadi collaboration was forged. From it emerged the al Qaeda movement led by Osama bin Laden. The global jihadi movement was, however, a complex network of groups and leaders that allowed it to spread widely and adopt a variety of tactics. Its targets were usually secular political leaders and centers of American and European economic and military power, indicating that the primary concern of its leaders was Western political domination. An expatriate Pakistani activist, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, and his nephew, Ramsi Youssef, plotted a series of terrorist attacks, including the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and the more successful September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon and the twin towers that turned the tallest buildings in New York City to a cloud of dust and killed over 3,000.¹¹

In Afghanistan, a conservative political regime, the Taliban, allowed bin Laden to base his operations there. As a result, the Afghan regime became targeted by the United States military following the 9/11 attacks. After it was toppled, the occupation of the country by US military created an extreme backlash both in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan, where its own version of the Taliban attacked the Pakistani government as well as US military and political entities.¹²

A similar anti-American extremist movement emerged in Iraq after the US-led ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003, where religion became a factor in resurgent nationalist movements among both Shi'a and Sunni activists. Some of them, including the Jordanian-born militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had ties to the al Qaeda. Zarqawi was notorious for his savage anti-Shiite attacks and for decapitating Western and indigenous victims in gruesome displays aired on video over the Internet. After he was killed by US forces, one of his successors was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who led a new movement in 2014 that solidified extremist groups in eastern Syria and western Iraq. In a remarkable blitzkrieg, it occupied major sections of territory, including Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and several strategic oil fields. He named his newly seized territory "the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (al-Sham refers to greater Syria, also called the Levant, so the acronym could be either ISIS or ISIL). Later he changed the name simply to "the Islamic State." Like Zarqawi before him, al-Baghdadi essentially ruled by terror, using public decapitations and burning his captives alive as a way of intimidating his followers and threatening his rivals and enemies.¹³

Elsewhere in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia—home of the largest Muslim countries in the world—relatively few acts of violence are related to Islam. Among the exceptions have been attacks in Delhi, Mumbai, and Jakarta by small militant cells. The virulence associated with a large movement of Muslim separatism in the southern islands of the Philippines was muted by a peace agreement signed in 2014. In Africa, acts of violence have been associated with a group known as Al Qaeda in the Mahgreb, and with a Nigerian group, Boko Haram, whose name implies that Western-style book learning is forbidden. The group has savagely attacked Christian villages and schools, killing male students and abducting young women. Though the group claims to be defending Islam, it also lays claim to tribal-based power in the northern region of the country.¹⁴

Hinduism and Sikhism

The Indic traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, have a reputation for honoring nonviolence and subscribing to peace. Yet images of warfare are part of their legendary past. The Hindu epics the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are all about battle, and Sikh history celebrates the struggles against Moghul rulers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the martyrdom of several of its founding gurus. These legendary and historical battles of the past have been inspirations for militant Hindu and Sikh activists in recent years.¹⁵

In 1992, a Hindu mob assaulted an old mosque in the North Indian town of Ayodhya on the site of what was reputed to be the birthplace of the Hindu God Rama, rendering it to dust. In riots between Muslims and Hindus that followed this event over two thousand people were killed. This momentum of Hindu activism brought the Hindu-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a series of successful victories in state-level elections, and in 1998 it was able to establish a coalition national government that ruled India until 2004, when the Congress Party again regained control. In the 2014 elections, the BJP, led by Narendra Modi, returned to power. Behind many of the clashes between religious communities in India the central issue at stake has been the very idea of a multicultural state—whether India will be dominated by one tradition or incorporate a diversity of cultures. In other cases the very unity of India has been challenged: in these incidents religion has been fused with political separatism. The independence struggle in Kashmir is one example of religious separatism in India in which terrorism has played a role. The militant campaign to create a separate nation, Khalistan, for Sikhs in the Punjab region of North India is another where terrorism was an instrument of warcraft.

Though Sikhism is related to Hindu culture, Sikhs have emerged as a separate religious community in the five hundred years since it was founded by Guru Nanak and a series of nine other gurus who followed in his lineage in northern India. When Pakistan was created out of British India to be a separate country for Muslims, many Sikhs thought that there should be a similar state in the Punjab for Sikhs. In the 1980s, a movement for Sikh separatism led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was aimed at creating a new nation that would privilege the Sikh community and honor its principles and traditions. Members of the movement became engaged in acts of terrorism, including hijacking airplanes and attacking busloads of Hindu pilgrims. Bhindranwale was killed in the Indian army's assault on the Sikhs' Golden Temple in 1984, and thousands of Sikhs perished in the ensuing riots against the Sikh community.¹⁶

Buddhism

Like Hinduism, the Buddhist tradition is regarded as nonviolent and not political. Yet Buddhist societies have had their share of religious violence, and in some cases Buddhism has been a vehicle for political power and rebellion.¹⁷ In Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks were at the forefront of Sri Lanka's independence movement in 1948, and in 1953 an influential pamphlet, *The Revolt in the Temple*, began a religious critique of secular nationalism and the claim that "Buddhism had been betrayed." The demand for a Buddhist state resurfaced in the 1980s in part in response to the government's attempts to appease the Tamil separatist movement of Hindus and Christians in the northern region of the island nation.¹⁸ In a series of assaults scores of secular political leaders were killed or injured, and one of Sri Lanka's Prime Ministers was assassinated by a Buddhist monk. In the twenty-first century cadres of radical Buddhist monks continued their protests against the secular government. A Buddhist group, Bodu Bala Sena, singled out the small Muslim community in Sri Lanka as somehow threatening to Sinhalese Buddhism. In 2013, activist Buddhist monks led Sinhalese mobs in attacks on Muslim shops and mosques.

In Myanmar, the small Muslim minority is also the target of the wrath of angry Buddhists. The fiery monk Wirathu is said to have stirred up crowds of Buddhists in 2012, inciting them to attack Muslim shops, mosques, and individuals in Mandalay and elsewhere in the country. Over 200 people were killed and thousands displaced. He was also instrumental in founding the "969 Movement"—a number referring to precepts of the Buddha—aimed at purifying the country of alien cultural elements, primarily Muslim.

In Japan, the Buddhist-related Aum Shinrikyo movement was implicated in a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subways in 1995. The movement was one of Japan's new religious movements and based its teachings on an eclectic pastiche of ideas from Buddhism to Hinduism and millenarian Christianity.¹⁹ The prophetic teachings of the movement warned its followers about what was imagined to be an impending apocalyptic war, a third world war, in which poisonous gas and other weapons of mass destruction would be unleashed. The leader of the movement, Shoko Asahara, was tried and sentenced to death in 2004 for encouraging an elite corps of his own religious movement to use sarin gas in an attack on the Tokyo subways in an effort to show that Asahara's dark prophecies were being fulfilled. By 2015 the execution had yet to be carried out.

The global rise of religious terrorism

Why have these violent movements related to religion arisen at this moment in late modernity? A plethora of studies have emerged to explain the resurgence of religion in public life. Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah survey the global rise of religious politics and extremism in *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*.²⁰ Jeffrey Haynes examines the emergence of transnational religious activists in *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power*.²¹ Isak Svensson has confronted the challenge of how to bring religiously involved violent struggles to a close in *Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars*.²² My own books, including *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* and *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*, try to make sense of the religious dimensions of public violence both as a political creation of the post-Cold World War and as an ideological challenge to the secular state.²³ In these books and essays on the topic, I elaborate on the idea that religion may not be the problem—it does not cause violence—but it is problematic. It is problematic in two ways. One is the way that religious identities and ideologies have become aspects of a global rebellion against the European Enlightenment notion of a secular state, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century. The other is the way that certain features of religious actions and images—such as the performance of religious ritual and the awesome notion of cosmic war—are appropriated by violent actors seeking to justify their savage attempts at power and cloak them in religious garb. Let me elaborate on both of these points.

The rise of anti-secularism

In recent years there has been considerable discussion in American and European scholarly circles about the concepts of religion and secularism, how they emerged in modern history as opposing social ideologies. A task force of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York convened a multi-year project on “rethinking secularism,” involving theorists of secularism such as Talal Asad and Charles Taylor, as well as the president of the SSRC, Craig Calhoun, and myself.²⁴ It concluded that secularism is itself *something*—not just the absence of religion, but also a world view laden with value assumptions about the nature of the self and its relationship to society. This means that the idea of secular society itself can be a challenge to traditional religious world views. The two are sometimes seen as competitive.

In fact, the competition between secularism and religion was integral to the creation of these concepts. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, when the terms came into common use, secularism was thought to be an ideology of order that would replace religion as the central force in organizing society. Instead of religion informing public values and ideals,

rational thought would be the only true measure of the worth of social goals. For this reason in France, England, the United States, and elsewhere in the Western world the role of religion was restricted to the rites and beliefs of churches, which were consequently relegated to the margins of public life. They were to be enjoyed on Sunday and forgotten for the rest of the week.

This marginalization of religion never worked perfectly in the West. Religious societies embracing religious values in public life cropped up in small religious communities such as the New Harmony colony in nineteenth-century Indiana and the Mormon community that expanded in Utah and spread throughout the western United States and now across the seas. Elsewhere in the world, the secularization that came with European colonialization was never completely integrated. In these regions, communities of people have increasingly turned towards traditional religion to find a resource for thinking about the moral basis for social and political order when secular politics seems to have lost its moral bearings. This appears to be a global phenomenon: religion enters politics when the old secular politics seems corrupt or insufficient, and there is what I have described elsewhere as “a loss of faith in secular nationalism.”²⁵

When the secular nation-state has been weakened through challenges over who (or what group) should control or dominate it, or been made obsolete through the transnational forces of globalization, it is not surprising that religious identities and ideologies should rise up to be a part of the challenges to the old status quo. This global rebellion is not caused by religion.²⁶ But because the Western framework of secular nationalism is what is being contested, the attacks against it take on a religious hue.

Extreme secularization can in fact provoke violence in the name of religion. Many activist groups related to religion—from the Christian militia in the United States to al Qaeda in the Middle East—claim that they are simply trying to defend religion from the forces of secularization. In these cases, secularism is imagined to be an ideology bent on the destruction of religion. It is thought to be not a neutral thing, but rather the hostile enemy of religious communities. Inadvertently, then, the promotion of secularism as a tolerant and moderating element in multicultural societies is sometimes perceived as an attempt to destroy religious faith.²⁷ The controversies in Denmark and France over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad have pitted the secular principle of free speech against religious sensitivities. This clash of cultures is a contemporary inheritance of the dichotomy between secularism and religion that has been a pattern of thinking since the time of the European Enlightenment, and that has led to the politicization of religion in recent challenges to the secular state.

Religious justifications for violence

At the same time that religion has been a part of the vehicle for challenging secular authority, certain aspects of religious tradition and practice make it useful for political activists. There are elements of religious language, ideas, ritual, and symbols that are ripe for adoption by those eager to challenge the authority of the state. One of the reasons for this is that religious traditions often embrace positions of absolutism; they contain a repository of symbols of “ultimate concern,” as the theologian Paul Tillich put it.²⁸ This means that a reliance on religiously inspired law can trump secular law, since it refers to a higher order of morality. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously challenged the unjust racist laws of the United States in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Religious ideas also have the ability to sanction the taking of human life—though usually in rare cases, such as the defense of the culture or society of a religious community. In these cases, religious codes challenge the monopoly on morally sanctioned violence that is, according to Max Weber, the basis of state power. Without the state’s ability to threaten

to kill, for reasons of military protection, policing, and punishment, anarchy would ensue. Thus any act of religion-related violence is revolutionary, in that it challenges the state's monopoly on the use of force.

But in addition to the ideas that sanction violence in religious texts and sacred law, violent actors are excited by the powerful and enduring images of religiously related warfare that exist in virtually every religious tradition. This is the notion that I have called "cosmic war." Though every violent conflict and every military encounter contain a certain moral hubris about who is right and who is wrong, and such clashes tend to absolutize the evil of the opponent, cosmic war is an imagined contest of virtually metaphysical proportions. It is the idea or image of an ultimate encounter that is found in every religious tradition: a grand struggle between opposing elements of the human condition, between good and evil, right and wrong, order and disorder, religion and irreligion.

The idea of cosmic war is different from the idea of holy war, which usually refers to a battle between worldly forces—two nations, perhaps—in which one side or the other thinks that religious values are at stake and that God is on their side. Cosmic war is a grander notion, one that need not be realized on a mortal plane; it is the metaphysical battle that occurs on a transcendental level. And yet it can be imagined to be taking place in an actual conflict on the mundane level of the real world. What is striking about the positions taken by violent activists who justify their actions through religion is that they invariably see themselves as soldiers in a dramatic, cosmic war. In my own interviews with activists in every religious tradition, as well as in case studies undertaken by other scholars, the image of cosmic warfare is pervasive.²⁹ Though they are perceived by the broader world to be terrorists, they do not think of themselves this way. They regard themselves as soldiers who have taken defensive actions in a great struggle. When questioned about the nature of the struggle they usually deny that it is only about political power and social control, but elevate the conflict to the cosmic level, a battle between good and evil, and right and wrong, but not about competing political forces—even when, from the observer's perspective, the combat appears to be all about earthly power and social dominance.

Seeing a worldly struggle as part of a cosmic war can give several benefits to those activists engaged in it. First of all, it allows them to see the enemy not just as a political opponent, but also as an agent of evil, an arm of the devil. During the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini described President Jimmy Carter as a "great Satan"; and during the troubles in Northern Ireland, Rev. Ian Paisley, a Protestant Unionist leader, talked about the Pope as an antichrist, using images of evil from the biblical book of Revelation. Imagining one's enemy in satanic terms allows one to dismiss anything that they say as devious or irrelevant. There is no point, after all, in negotiating with an agent of Satan. The only thing one can do is to fight it and destroy it. Moreover, one has the moral license to carry out acts of unspeakable violence because the enemies are, after all, subhuman. They are not really human because they are part of the cosmic satanic army. Thus the image of cosmic war provides the ethical basis for extreme violence.

The image of cosmic war can also enable an activist to persist in the struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds, and for what may seem to be a hopelessly long period of time. A cosmic war is, after all, waged on a metaphysical plane as well as on an earthly one, where the usual odds and ordinary time are transcended. When I had the opportunity of discussing with the Hamas leader, Dr. Abdul Azis Rantisi, about the strategy of using suicide terrorist attacks against an overwhelming Israeli military that was impervious to such a strategy, Dr. Rantisi appeared undeterred. I pointed out that his Palestinian movement could not win with such methods, and he responded by concurring that perhaps in his lifetime, or his children's

lifetime, they would not prevail. Ultimately, however, he said they would succeed since the struggle in which they were engaged was God's war, not theirs alone.³⁰ If one believes that the struggle in which one is involved is a cosmic war, then it can persist beyond mortal time lines or earthly limitations.

When acts of violence are conducted as a part of an imagined cosmic war they may appear to someone outside the movement as terrorism. To those within the movement, however, they are salvos within a cosmic war. In most cases, the perpetrators use these acts of violence not to achieve territory or conquer their opponents but to bring their imagined war into reality, to act out the imagined war so that all can see it. Hence they are performances of warfare, symbolic acts of violence meant to jar all who view it—even at a distance through television or the Internet—into an acceptance of the reality of their imagined cosmic war.

For this reason, religious-related acts of violence are calculated performances. Often the violence is exaggerated, done for dramatic effect. Suicide attacks, car bombs, public beheadings, and other extreme acts are carried out in such a manner as to be both vivid and horrifying. Targets are often chosen because they are familiar and secure—such as shopping malls, marketplaces, and centers of mass transit. On many occasions the events are timed to insure that the maximum number of people are gathered at the target sites—such as New York City's World Trade Center, US embassies in Africa, the Oklahoma federal building, the Tokyo subway system, Tel Aviv shopping centers. The explosive devices used are often aimed at wounding people rather than damaging buildings. Nails have been embedded in the bombs of Hamas suicide bombers, for instance, to increase their maiming capability. The Buddhist perpetrators of Tokyo's sarin gas attack considered adding a floral scent to the deadly odors they were about to unleash to encourage more people to inhale it.

Such instances of exaggerated violence are constructed events: they are mind-numbing, mesmerizing theater. At center stage are the acts themselves—stunning, abnormal, and outrageous murders carried out in a way that graphically displays the awful power of violence—set within grand scenarios of conflict and proclamation. The spectacular assaults of 9/11 were not only tragic acts of violence; they were also spectacular theater. In speaking of terrorism as “performance,” however, I am not suggesting that such acts are undertaken lightly or capriciously. Rather, like religious ritual or street theater, they are dramas designed to have an impact on the several audiences that they affect. Those who witness the violence—even at a distance, via the news media—are therefore a part of what occurs. Moreover, like other forms of public ritual, the symbolic significance of such events is multifaceted; they mean different things to different observers. This suggests that it is possible to analyze comparatively the performance of acts of religious terrorism. There is already a growing literature of studies based on the notion that civic acts and cultural performances are closely related.³¹ The controversial parades undertaken each year by the Protestant Orangemen in Catholic neighborhoods of Northern Ireland, for instance, have been studied not only as political statements but also as cultural performances.³² They are a form of public ritual.

Public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion, and this is one of the reasons that performance violence comes so naturally to activists from a religious background. In a collection of essays on the connection between religion and terrorism published some years ago, one of the editors, David C. Rapoport, observed that the two topics fit together not only because there is a violent streak in the history of religion, but also because terrorist acts have a symbolic side and in that sense mimic religious rites.³³ The victims of terrorism are targeted not because they are threatening to the perpetrators, he said, but because they are “symbols, tools, animals or corrupt beings” that tie into “a special picture of the world, a specific consciousness” that the activist possesses. The street theater of performance violence forces those who

witness it directly or indirectly into that “consciousness,” the alternative view of the world that the perpetrators possess.³⁴ When we who observe these acts take them seriously—when we are disgusted and repelled by them, and begin to distrust the peacefulness of the world around us—the purposes of this theater are achieved.

These cases of terrorism and extreme violence conducted by activists in the name of religion in recent decades show a mixture of themes, motives, and expectations. Most of them are related to political power and the defense of religious communities perceived to be in danger. Yet in virtually all of these cases ideas, images, practices, social identities, and organizational networks related to religion have played a role, in some of them a significant role, even though religion does not cause violence—few activists are motivated by religious beliefs alone. Yet when religious ideas, images, and identities are embraced in a conflict situation they often make matters worse. The practice of ritual performance when applied to violent encounter can turn killing into a dramatic and gruesome spectacle. The notion of cosmic war can provide an exhilarating image of the world caught up in cosmic struggle, elevating ordinary competition into the high proscenium of sacred drama. And the transcendent timelines of a cosmic struggle can permit fighters to soldier on despite rational calculations about the futility of their efforts. Thus religion may not be the problem that causes people to turn to violence in social struggles, but its role in such encounters can often be deeply problematic.

Notes

- 1 Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.
- 2 Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*
- 3 Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion*.
- 4 For the history of violence and Christianity see Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*; Buc, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror*; and Fine, *Political Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.
- 5 Dillon, *God and the Gun*; Dunlop, *A Precarious Belonging*.
- 6 For the Christian Reconstruction movement, see Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom* and for Christian Identity, see Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*.
- 7 Bangstad, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*.
- 8 Cline, *The Lord’s Resistance Army*.
- 9 On Kahane, see Kotler, *Heil Kahane* and Mergui and Simonnot, *Israel’s Ayatollahs*. On Jewish extremism in Israel in general, see Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord* and Nasr, *Arab and Israeli Terrorism*; and two books by Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel’s Radical Right* and *Brother against Brother*.
- 10 For the rise of militant Islam in the late twentieth century see Jansen, *The Neglected Duty*; Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*; Hiro, *Holy Wars*; Abu-Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*.
- 11 Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*.
- 12 Rashid, *Taliban*.
- 13 Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*.
- 14 Comolli, *Boko Haram*.
- 15 See Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, and Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*.
- 16 Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation* and Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*.
- 17 Jerryson and Juergensmeyer, *Buddhist Warfare*.
- 18 Tambiah, *Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, *Buddhism Betrayed* and *Leveling Crowds*.
- 19 Murakami, *Underground*.
- 20 Toft, Philpott and Shah, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*.

- 21 Haynes, *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power*.
- 22 Svensson, *Ending Holy Wars*.
- 23 Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God and Global Rebellion*.
- 24 Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism*.
- 25 Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion*, p. 10.
- 26 Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion*.
- 27 Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*.
- 28 Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 4.
- 29 Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.
- 30 Author's interview with Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, a leader of Hamas, in Khan Yunis, Gaza, on March 1, 1998, quoted in Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, p. 165.
- 31 See, for example, Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*; and Fisher, *The Politics of Cultural Performance*.
- 32 Jarman, *Material Conflicts*.
- 33 Rapoport, "Introduction," to Rapoport and Alexander, *The Morality of Terrorism*.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

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