Mark Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence

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This book is written by a professor of Sociology as a result of his researches in the Middle East and also in the United States. These researches are not only factual but are accompanied by an interpretation about the phenomenon of terrorism in its relation with religion. The latter appears to be more present in the public life at the beginning of the New Millennium than expected in a world where modernity and secularism are the rule. The main question is why religion reinforces, both ideologically and culturally, terrorist movements and (even worse) acts. Why is this dark side of religion present in this manner in postmodern societies? This is the type of questions posed by the author in this book, and the responses are given after detailed analyses on specific movements and interviews with key figures in contemporary terrorism.

The fact that violent acts find their justification in religion can be studied not only by analyzing the deeds of those terrorists but also the ideologies and the communities that are behind the actual events and which make them possible. "Cultures of violence" are the basis on which the author's research is directed, resulting in a cultural approach to terrorism. The first half of the book deals with the description of the cultures of violence that often make possible religious terrorism and the second half discusses the patterns found in those cultures in order to respond to the question about the necessary link between religion and violence.

Cultures of violence are not found only in the Middle East. The author starts with different Christian sects whose members, called metaphorically "Soldiers for Christ," which is the title of the second chapter, are to be found in the United States and in Ireland. They are postmillennialist anti-abortion "crusaders" like Mike Bray and Paul Hill or members of Christian Identity movements like Eric Robert Rudolph and Timothy McVeigh, famous for the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. Their views are in some ways apocalyptical, the world being already engaged in a war in which the modern and valueless society confronts a Christian "subculture" for which a Christian kingdom must be established on Earth before Christ's return, as in the version called "Reconstruction theology." Irish nationalists from Northern Ireland are similar to the soldiers of Christ found in America. Adherents act as if secular laws do not apply to the followers of their movements, some of them being con-

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victed for murders that they do not regret for a single moment, despite their "Christianity".

In the following chapters of the first half of the book we find historical descriptions, analyses, and interviews about Jewish, Islamic, Sikh and Japanese religious terrorism. Figures such as Yoel Lerner, Mahmud Abouhalima and Abdul Aziz Rantisi are interviewed and movements like the Palestinian Liberation Front and Aum Shinrikyo are analyzed.

The second part of the book tries to determine "the logic of religious violence," which is seen as a "theater of terror" in the seventh chapter and as a "cosmic war" in the eight. The author considers terrorist acts to be mostly symbolic and not political or strategic in that they refer to something that is behind their actual target. The most obvious example is September eleventh, 2001, and the destruction of the Twin Towers: capitalism and American economic and political authority were the "real" targets, not just the two buildings, despite their value and position in one of the most important cities of the world. Thus terrorist acts become "performance violence," which needs a dramatic time and space to happen and is opposed to tactics, being analogous to religious ritual, which was traditionally part of all public rituals. The result sought by the activists is always a symbolical one because of its significance compared to the possible strategical or tactical results. People will indeed believe afterwards that behind those concrete events lies a cosmic sense and that the movement capable of accomplishing these results has a huge power of action in the real world. Terrorists are, in another way, obligated to such manifestation of their alleged power in a modern society where, as Don Delillo prophetically expressed it in his 1980s novel *Mao II*, "only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for his faith" is taken seriously. Terrorism therefore is defined by the novelist and proves to be in this book "the language of being noticed," the horrified audience constituting a necessity for the terrorist acts. According to one of the convicted Islamic activists interviewed by the author, Mahmud Abouhalima, the greatest threat to Islam is "media misrepresentation," proving once more that the impact of terrorism is media-dependent and that its effect is merely symbolic.

The violent images broadcast through the media form, together with the religious meaning attached to them by the subsequent religious ideology, symbols which reflect a cosmic war conceived as a ritual scenario, situated beyond any possible earthly struggle. But not all religious symbols are ipso facto related with real violence, the meaning of symbolism being to surpass the violence contained in it. The question, then, is why the cosmic war becomes worldly war? How can symbols sustain real violence? The author starts from real-world conflicts that are in need of religious justification. The following criteria are thought to be relevant for the explanation of religious violence: an entire culture is thought to be on the verge of extinction, like Sikhism or Islam in certain parts of the world; when it is impossible to conceive losing the struggle before an adversary that is religiously opposed; or

when the worldly struggle cannot be won in due time and in "real terms," the latter being symbolically transferred on another plane, a sacred place where God will decide who the ultimate winner is. As an argument for these theses the author reminds us that "the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, was not widely regarded as a sacred battle from the perspective of either side until the late 1980s."

The author also defines four stages of "symbolic empowerment" in the next chapter, "Martyrs and Demons," which treats the stages through which the sides in the conflict pass as the symbolical perspective and interpretation deepens. The movements pass through a first stage in which they perceive the world as "a world gone awry". The second stage is defined by the "foreclosure of ordinary options," which is when those who are a part of cultures of violence see no possibility of improvement of the worldly circumstances in which they are captured. In the third stage takes place a "satanization of the enemy" who is seen as a force of evil, and then cosmic war appears to be in order for the world to make sense for the activists. The fourth stage is the most dangerous one because the communities that have arrived at this stage are extremely close to terrorism as an ultimate solution for regaining the lost power through a symbolic act.

The final chapter, "The Mind of God," deals with the relation between extreme religious actions and public life. The spiritualization of violence made possible by religion gives huge power to terrorism, but the reciprocal effect is also important: because of these extreme terrorist acts religion has another status in contemporary public life. This happens even though most terrorist groups are marginal within their society and are not always authorized by the clerical hierarchy. An example given by the author is Hamas, which only in Gaza was widely supported by the traditional Muslim clerics, elsewhere in Palestine being on the margins of "social respectability." As a consequence, the function of terrorist violence is to promote "marginal religious movements into positions of power vis-á-vis their moderate, mainstream rivals."

One of the conclusions of the book is that postmodern religious "rebels" aren't completely abnormal or anachronistic. They are trying in fact to counter "modernism" understood as an opposite ideology, which in their view is reduced to individualism and skepticism.

The book ends with one question and five possible answers. The question concerns the outcome of the war opposing terrorism and secular states. The first two answers are based on governmental power and violence that can eventually destroy or dissuade terrorist groups. In the third case "violence wins" and the conflict will continue for a long period of time. This is the "solution" that terrorists desire and what in fact they are fighting for. The fourth and the fifth answers are based on a more metaphysical or ethical option: they involve the separation of religion from the political sphere, or "healing politics with religion." In the latter option secular authorities will be obliged to embrace some of the religious values.