

UC Santa Barbara

Other Recent Work

Title

Is Religion the Problem?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4n92c45q>

Author

Juergensmeyer, Mark

Publication Date

2004-03-01

Is Religion the Problem?

MARK JUERGENSMEYER

In the rubble following the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in the violent assault of September 11 lies the tawdry remnants of religion's innocence. In those brief horrifying moments our images of religion came of age. Religion was found in bed with terrorism. Whatever bucolic and tranquil notions we may have had were rudely replaced by those that were tough, political, and sometimes violent.

Is this the fault of religion? Has its mask been ripped off and its murky side exposed—or has its innocence been abused? Is religion the problem or the victim?

The answers to these basic questions have run in extreme directions. Religion's role has been hotly debated in the public discussion after September 11 among journalists and policy makers, and among academic researchers and observers. Yet there is seldom agreement about the most basic issue, whether religion is the cause of violence or its unwilling servant. For this reason the very starting point in discussions about religious violence often contain assumptions about religion's role that should be contested. Interestingly, two of these assumptions are diametrically opposed to one another.

On the one hand, religion—Islam in particular—is often assumed to be the problem. Despite the cautionary words of President George W. Bush imploring Americans not to blame Islam for September 11, a certain Islamophobia has crept into public conversation. The implication is that the whole of Islam has supported acts of terrorism. The inevitable attachment of Islam to terrorism in the ubiquitous phrase “Islamic terrorism” is one example of this habit of thinking. Another is the vaunting of *jihad* to a place of supreme Islamic importance—as if all Muslims agreed with the militarized usage of the term by unauthorized extremist groups. The most strident expositions of this way of thinking are found in assertions of Christian televangelists such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell that the Prophet himself was a kind of terrorist. More moderate forms are the attempts by political commentators and some scholars to explain—as if there was need for it—why Islam is so political. Even Connecticut's liberal Senator Christopher Dodd, in a television interview in November 2003, cautioned

Americans not to expect too much tolerance from Islam given its propensity for ideological control over public life. He referenced a recent book by historian Bernard Lewis for this point of view, a book that he recommended to the viewers.

The assumption of those who hold this “religion is the problem” position is that Islam’s relationship to politics is peculiar. But this is not true. Most traditional societies have had a close tie between political leadership and religious authority, and religion often plays a role in undergirding the moral authority of public life. In Judaism the Davidic line of kingship is anointed by God; in Hinduism the kings are thought to uphold divine order through the white umbrella of *dharma*; in Christianity the political history of Europe is rife with contesting and sometimes merging lines of authority between church and state. Violent Jewish, Hindu, and Christian activists in recent years have all, like their Muslim counterparts, looked to traditional religious patterns of politicized religion to justify their own militant stance.

The public life of contemporary America is no exception. It is one in which religion is very much involved with politics and politics with religion. The evangelical professions of faith of President Bush and advisors such as Attorney General John Ashcroft fuel the impression that U.S. foreign policy has a triumphant agenda of global Christendom. This characterization of religion’s hand in US politics is often exaggerated by foreign observers in Europe and the Middle East, but the Christian rhetoric of American political leaders is undeniable and lends credibility to such a view.

Even more troubling are strands of Christian theocracy that have emerged among extreme groups in the United States. Some employ violence in their opposition to secular society and their hatred of a globalized culture and economy. A neo-Calvinist theology of a religious state lies behind the bombing of abortion clinics and the shooting of abortion clinic staff by Lutheran and Presbyterian activists in Maryland and Florida. The Christian Identity philosophy of race war and a government enshrining a White Christian supremacy lies behind the attack on the Atlanta Olympic park, the bombing of gay bars and abortion clinics, the killing of a Denver radio talk-show host, an assault on a Jewish day care center in Los Angeles, and many other incidents—including Ruby Ridge—perpetrated by Christian militia in recent years. The Christian Cosmotheism espoused by William Pierce and embraced by Timothy McVeigh was the ideological justification for McVeigh’s bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. In fact, there have been more attacks—far more, in fact—by Christian terrorist groups on American soil in the last fifteen years than Muslim ones. Aside from September 11 and the 1993 attempt to destroy the World Trade Center, almost all of the other terrorist acts are Christian.

Yet somehow, despite evidence to the contrary, the American public labels Islam as a terrorist religion rather than Christianity. The arguments that agree—or disagree—with this position often get mired in the tedious task of dredging up historical examples from the past to show the political and militant side of Islam (or contrarily, of other religions like Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism, as I have just done)—and then opponents will challenge the utility of those examples, and the debate goes on and on. The arguments would not be necessary, however, if one did not assume that religion is responsible for acts of public violence in the first place.

This is exactly the position taken by the other extreme in the public discussion over religion after September 11—those who deny that religion is the problem. They see religion as a victim. The implication is that when religion enters into the public arena in a

violent way it is because its innocence is exploited by nasty politicians. This is usually what is meant when reporters and other observers talk about religion being “used” for political purposes. A U.S. State Department official once told me that religion was being “used” throughout the Middle East, masking problems that were essentially economic in nature. He assured me that if jobs were to be had by unemployed Egyptians and Palestinians the problem of religious politics in these impoverished societies would quickly vanish. From his point of view it was unthinkable that religious activists would actually be motivated by religion, or at least by ideological views of the world that were framed in religious language. Similarly Michael Sells’ excellent study of the role of Christian symbolism in resurgent Serbian nationalism, *The Bridge Betrayed*, was ridiculed by a reviewer for *The Economist* who saw the conflict as purely a matter of secular nationalism in which religion played no role. The assumption of the reviewer, like that of the State Department official with whom I spoke, was that religion was the dependent variable, a rhetorical gloss over the real issues that were invariable economic or political.

This position—that religion is essentially innocent—is supported by many mainstream religious leaders in the faiths in which violent occurs. In these cases they do not explain away the religious motives of the violent activists, but they deny that these extreme religious groups represent the normative traditions. Most Buddhist leaders in Japan, for instance, distanced themselves from what they regarded as the pseudo-Buddhism of the Aum Shinrikyo sect that was implicated in the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subways. Most Muslims refused to believe that fellow members of their faith could have been responsible for anything as atrocious as they September 11 attacks—and hence the popular conspiracy theory in the Muslim world that somehow Israeli secret police had plotted the terrible deed. Most Christians in America saw the religiosity of Timothy McVeigh as anti-Christian, even anti-religious, despite the strong Christian subtext of the novel, *The Turner Diaries*, which McVeigh regarded as his Bible.

In some cases scholars have come to the defense of religion in a similar way, by characterizing the religion of activists groups as deviant from the religious norm and therefore uncharacteristic of true religion. This is essentially the stance that Bruce Lawrence takes in defending Islam in *Shattering the Myth*. The term “fundamentalism”—applied not just to Christianity but to a whole host of religious traditions—is another way of excusing “normal” religion and isolating religion’s problems to a deviant form of the species. It is used sometimes to suggest an almost viral spread of an odd and dangerous mutation of religion that if left on its own naturally leads to violence, autocracy, and other extremes. Fortunately, so this line of thinking goes, normal religion is exempt. Recently, however, “Islam” and “fundamentalism” are tied together so frequently in public conversation that the term has become a way of condemning all of Islam as a deviant branch of religion. But even in this case the use of the term “fundamentalism” allows for the defenders of religion to take comfort in the notion that their kind of nonfundamentalist religion is exempt from violence or other extreme forms of public behavior.

Are they right? Is religion only an innocent victim that is misused by a small number of extremists. Or is religion itself the problem, a force for intolerance and violence around the world?

It is not easy to answer the question of religion's role in contemporary world politics by an all-or-nothing answer. As anyone who has ever taken a multiple choice test knows, there is a dilemma when presented with such absolutes. The most accurate responses are often to be found in the gray categories: c) none of the above, or d) all of the above. In the case of the question regarding the involvement of religion in contemporary public life, the answer is not simply a matter of peculiar religion gone bad or good religion being used by bad people. We know that there are strata of religious imagination that deal with all sides and moods of human existence, the peace and the perversity, the tranquility and the terror.

Hence my own answer to the question is a variation of answers c) and d), none of the above and all of the above. I do not think that religion is the problem. But I do think that the involvement of religion in public life is often problematic.

I came to this conclusion by a circuitous route. Through a series of case studies and interviews over several years, I explored the question of why religion has surfaced at this moment of late modernity as a force in public life. As the seemingly endless series of vicious attacks associated with religion around the world reveal, religion has returned with a vengeance from its banishment from public life by the European Enlightenment. Moreover its return has been curiously ubiquitous. Virtually every religious tradition in the world has been associated with a violent act or group, and both highly industrialized and underdeveloped societies have been involved. There has been Christian terrorism in the US and Ireland; Buddhist terrorism in Japan; Muslim terrorism in Indonesia, North Africa and the Middle East; Jewish terrorism in the US and Israel; and Hindu terrorism in India.

My own quest for answers to the questions of religion's political extremism began with the Sikhs. For years I had lived and taught in the Punjab region of India where most Sikhs live, and knew them to be affable, intelligent and interesting people. Thus it was with a deep sense of personal anguish as well as intellectual curiosity that I observed from afar the mounting spiral of violence between a faction of young Sikhs from the elite stratum of the rural Jat caste and the increasingly belligerent agencies of the Indian government, including its military and police. Thousands were killed yearly in terrorist acts on the part of the Sikh militants and violent encounters with the Indian police. The crisis came to a head in 1984 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave the approval for the Indian government to raid the most sacred site of Sikhism, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where the militant Sikhs' leader, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, had sought sanctuary. Sikhs around the world were incensed at what they perceived as desecration of this holy place, and later that year Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in an act of retaliation.

Why did the Sikh militants and the Indian government arrive at this sad confrontation, and what, if anything, did religion have to do with it? I knew enough about the Punjab to know that young rural Sikhs had perfectly good reasons for being unhappy. Economically they saw their agricultural products receiving what they thought to be less than fair market; politically they felt their own authority was being undercut by the ruling Congress party; and socially they regarded their status and influence waning in comparison with the urban castes. But none of these things explained the vitriol and religious passion with which their opposition to the government was expressed.

To understand how religion was related to these grievances I turned to the speeches of the fallen martyr, Bhindranwale. What I expected to find was an example of how religion was used by a wily politician. That is, I expected to find an example of the politicization of religion. What I discovered, however, was that Bhindranwale was essentially a country preacher. Like the legion of Protestant Christian revival speakers that traipsed through the Mid-American rural countryside where I was raised, he spoke of the struggles between good and evil, truth and falsehood, that reside within each troubled soul, and called for renunciation, dedication, and redemption. It seemed that he was speaking to young men in particular about their easy compromises with the lures of modern life.

Initially I was baffled at the apparent lack of political or social content to Bhindranwale's message. Examining closely these tapes and transcripts, however, I found an occasional aside or reference to contemporary political leaders. I realized that unlike the internal spiritual war that most Protestant Christian revival preachers proclaimed in my Midwestern rural youth, Bhindranwale's war had an external dimension. The satanic forces had somehow come to earth and were residing in the official residence of India's head of state.

What this meant was that Bhindranwale had skillfully merged the spiritual conflict that is found in every religion with the social and political tensions in modern society that young men often experience. He portrayed a sacred war, but one that could be waged in the streets as well as in the soul.

Thus it appeared that my initial conclusions about the political use of religion by Bhindranwale had to be amended. Instead of the politicization of religion, it appeared in the Sikh case that Bhindranwale was describing the religionization of politics. The social and political conflict of Sikhs with their secular government and society was seen in religious terms. The template of religious drama was imposed on social situations, and what might otherwise be seen as a secular conflict with government was lifted to the high proscenium of religious drama. Here, it seemed to me, was an interesting case of how religion was used to characterize the perceived failure of the secular state and to mobilize its opposition.

In a postmodern and post-Marxist world, it seemed that religion—at least in the Punjab—had become an ideology of protest. What I didn't know was whether this was idiosyncratic to the Sikh case, or whether it was a world-wide phenomenon. If it was a global occurrence, I wanted to know why.

For these reasons I took my thesis on the road. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 90s and after, I began looking at a variety of cases of recent religious activism. I didn't have to look far. Outside of the Punjab, elsewhere in India there was a rise of Hindu political violence, and in Kashmir there were Muslim activists. Buddhists were supporting anti-government protests in nearby Sri Lanka, and soon came word of a new religious movement in Japan with Buddhist roots that saw the government involved in an apocalyptic war. In Iran, Shi'ite Muslims had already waged their own successful revolutionary campaign. Sunni Islamic ideologies accompanied nationalist movements in Iran, Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East, and in Israel violent activists were motivated by Messianic Judaism. Christianity was merged with nationalism in Ireland and formed the ideologies of anti-state militia in the United States.

I found that in all of these cases an interesting replication of the main thesis that I found in the Sikh situation. Of course each group was responding to its own set of local social, economic, and political factors. But in all cases there was a common ideological component: the perception that the modern idea of secular nationalism was insufficient in moral, political and social terms. In many cases the effects of globalization were in the background as global economic and communications systems undercut the distinctiveness of nation-state identities. In some cases the hatred of the global system was overt, as in the American Christian militia's hatred of the "new world order" and the al Qaeda network's targeting the World Trade Center. In each case, religion was the ideology of protest. Particular religious images and themes were marshaled to resist the global secular systems and their secular nation-state supporters.

There were other similarities among these cases. In each case those who embraced radical anti-state religious ideologies felt personally upset with what they regarded as the oppression of the secular state. They experienced this oppression as an assault on their pride and identity, and felt humiliated as a result. The failures of the state, though economic, political and culture, were often experienced in personal ways as humiliation and alienation, as a loss of selfhood.

It is understandable then, that those men (and they were usually men) who experienced this loss of pride and identity would lash out in violence—the way that men often do when frustrated. Such expressions of power are meant to at least symbolically regain their sense of manhood. In each case, however, the activists challenged these feelings of violence through images of collective violence borrowed from their religious traditions: the idea of cosmic war.

The idea of cosmic war was a remarkably consistent feature of all of these cases. Those people whom we might think of as terrorists regarded themselves as soldiers in a what they imagined to be sacred battles. I call such notions of warfare "cosmic" because they are larger than life. They evoke great battles of the legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflicts between good and evil. Notions of cosmic war are intimately personal but can also be translated to the social plane. Ultimately, though, they transcend human experience. Often activists employ images of sacred warfare that are found in every religious tradition--such as the battles in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the epics of Hinduism and Buddhism, and the Islamic idea of *jihad*. What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation.

This brings us back to the question of whether religion is the problem. In looking at the variety of cases, from the Palestinian Hamas movement to al Qaeda and the Christian militia, it was clear that in most cases there were real grievances at issue—economic and social tensions that were experienced by large numbers of people. These grievances were not religious. They were not aimed at religious differences or issues of doctrine and belief. They were issues of social identity and meaningful participation in public life that in other contexts were expressed through Marxist and nationalist ideologies. Curiously in this present moment of late modernity these secular ideological expressions of rebellion have been replaced by ideological formulations that are religious. Yet the grievances—the sense of alienation, marginalization, and social frustration—are often much the same.

So religion is not the problem. Yet the fact that religion is the medium through which these issues are expressed is, as I earlier said, *problematic*. It is problematic in that religion brings new aspects to conflicts that were otherwise not a part of them.

For one thing religion personalizes the conflict. It provides *personal rewards*—religious merit, redemption, the promise of heavenly luxuries—to those who struggle in conflicts that otherwise have only social benefits. It also provides *vehicles of social mobilization* that embrace vast numbers of supporters who otherwise would not be mobilized around social or political issues. In many cases, it provides an *organizational network* of local churches, mosques, temples, and religious associations into which patterns of leadership and support may be tapped. It gives the legitimacy of *moral justification* for political encounter. Even more important, it provides *justification for violence* that challenges the state's monopoly on morally-sanctioned killing. Using Max Weber's dictum that the state's authority is always rooted in the social approval of the state to enforce its power through the use of bloodshed—in police authority, punishment, and armed defense—religion is the only other entity that can give moral sanction for violence and is therefore inherently at least potentially revolutionary.

Religion also provides the image of *cosmic war*, which adds further complications to a conflict that has become baptized with religious authority. The notion of cosmic war gives an *all-encompassing world view* to those who embrace it. Supporters of Christian militia movements, for instance, described their "aha" experience when they discovered the world-view of the Christian Identity totalizing ideology that helped them make sense of the modern world, their increasingly peripheral role in it, and the dramatic actions they can take to set the world right. It gives them roles as *religious soldiers* who can literally fight back against the forces of evil.

The image of cosmic war is a potent force. When the template of spiritual battle is implanted onto a worldly opposition it dramatically changes the perception of the conflict by those engaged in it, and it vastly alters the way that the struggle is waged. It *absolutizes the conflict* into extreme opposing positions and *demonizes opponents* by imagining them to be satanic powers. This absolutism makes compromise difficult to fathom, and holds out the promise of *total victory* through divine intervention. A sacred war that is waged in a godly span of time need not be won immediately, however. The *time line of sacred struggle is vast*, perhaps even eternal.

I once had the occasion to point out the futility—in secular military terms—of the Islamic struggle in Palestine to Dr Abdul Aziz Rantisi, the leader of the political wing of the Hamas movement. It seemed to me that Israel's military force was such that a Palestinian military effort could never succeed. Dr Rantisi assured me that that "Palestine was occupied before, for two hundred years." He explained that he and his Palestinian comrades "can wait again—at least that long." In his calculation, the struggles of God can endure for eons. Ultimately, however, they knew they would succeed.

So religion can be a problematic aspect of contemporary social conflict even if it is not *the* problem, in the sense of the root causes of discontent. Much of the violence in contemporary life that is perceived as terrorism around the world is directly related to the absolutism of conflict. The demonization of enemies allows those who regard themselves as soldiers for God to kill with no moral impunity. Quite the opposite—they feel that their acts will give them spiritual rewards.

Curiously the same kind of thinking has crept into some of the responses to terrorism. The “war on terrorism” that was launched by the United States government after September 11 is a case in point. To the degree that the war references are metaphorical, and meant to imply an all-out effort in the manner of previous administrations’ “war on drugs,” and “war on poverty,” it is an understandable and appropriate response. The September 11 attacks were, after all, hideous acts that deeply scarred the American consciousness, and one could certainly understand that a responsible government would want to wage an all-out effort to hunt down those culpable and bring them to justice.

But among some who espouse a “war on terrorism” the militant language is more than metaphor. God’s blessing is imagined to be bestowed on a view of confrontation that is, like cosmic war, all-encompassing, absolutizing, and demonizing. What is problematic about this view is that it brings an impatience with moderate solutions that require the slow procedures of systems of justice. It demands instead the quick and violent responses of war that lend simplicity to the confrontation and a sense of divine certainty to its resolution. Alas, such a position can fuel the fires of retaliation, leading to more acts of terrorism instead of less.

The role of religion in this literal “war on terrorism” is in a curious way similar to religion’s role in the cosmic war imagined by those perpetrating terrorism. In both cases religion is a problematic partner of political confrontation. Religion brings more to conflict than simply a repository of symbols and the aura of divine support. It problematizes a conflict through its abiding absolutism, its justification for violence, and its ultimate images of warfare that demonize opponents and cast the conflict in transhistorical terms.

This is a dismal assessment of religion’s role, and one might well wonder if religion does not, in some instances, have something positive to bring to conflict. I am happy to report that it does. Although our attention recently has been riveted on examples that display religion’s dark side of justifying violence and demonizing opponents, religion can also bring more positive elements to a situation of conflict. It can offer images of a peaceful resolution, justifications for tolerating differences, and a respect for the dignity of all life. It was these images and arguments that brought Hindu values into the notion of *satyagraha*, or “truth force,” the idea of conflict resolution advocated by Mohandas Gandhi. Similar concepts from Christianity informed the insights of the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who advocated countervailing power and the institutions of justice as peaceful ways of countering social evil. Niebuhr and Gandhi both influenced the thinking behind the nonviolent struggle of the American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.

On a theoretical level, one can appreciate the long line of theorists from Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud up to and including such contemporary thinkers as the literary theorist René Girard. Theirs is a line of reasoning that sees religion as the cultural tool for defusing violence within a social community. They see the symbols and rituals of religion as essential in symbolically acting out violence as a way of displacing real acts of violence in the world. If this position has any utility at all—and I think that it does—what the world needs now is more ritual and symbol, not less of it.

In a curious way, then, the solution to religious violence is not more violence but more religion. That is, the solution to our current moment of religious violence may

involve an understanding of religion that is not parochial and defensive, but expansive and tolerant in the manner advocated by virtually all religious scriptures and authorities. Beyond particular religions, moreover, there is a broad sense of the moral and spiritual unity of the family of humanity that can be dimly heard in the background even in the discordant moments of the 21st century's clashes of religion. It is good to be assured that there are religious resources for peace to be tapped, even as we know that religion provides the ammunition for some of our generation's most lethal acts. Though religion can be a problematic partner in confrontation it also holds the potential of providing a higher vision of human interaction than is portrayed in the bloody encounters of the present.

REFERENCES

- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. (Translated from the 1972 French edition by Patrick Gregory.)
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Third edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Lawrence, Bruce. *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Macdonald, Andrew [pseudonym for William Pierce]. *The Turner Diaries*. Hillsboro, WV: National Vanguard Books, 1978. (Reprinted by the National Alliance, Arlington, VA, in 1985, and by Barricade Books, New York, 1996.)
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Scribner Publishing, 1932.
- Rantisi, Abdul Aziz, co-founder and political leader of Hamas. Interview with the author, Khan Yunis, Gaza, March 1, 1998.
- Sells, Michael A. *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation." In Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER is a professor of sociology and religious studies and director of global and international studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is author or editor of fifteen books, including *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*.