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Religious Terror and the Secular State

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No one who watched in horror as the twin towers of the World Trade Center crumbled into dust on September 11, 2001 could doubt that the real target of such terrorist assaults was the global power of the United States. Those involved have said as much. Mahmood Abouhalima, one of the al Qaeda-related activists who was convicted of his role in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center told me in a prison interview that buildings such as these were chosen in order to dramatically demonstrate that “the government is the enemy.”

The US government, its allies, and secular governments that it has supported have frequently been the enemy in the world’s recent terrorist acts. Other religious leaders or groups are seldom the targets. The assault on the Shi’ite shrine in the Iraqi city of Najaf on August 29, 2003 that killed over eighty including the venerable Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim was an anomaly in this regard. The al Qaeda activists who allegedly perpetrated the act were more likely incensed over the Ayatollah’s implicit support for the US-backed governing council in Iraq than they were jealous of his Shi’ite popularity. Since the United Nations also has indirectly supported the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan the UN has been another subject of Osama bin Laden’s rage, and this may well be the reason why its office in Baghdad was targeted for the devastating assault on August 19, 2003 that killed the distinguished UN envoy, Sergio Vieira de Mello. Despite the seeming diversity of the targets the object of most recent acts of religious terror is an old foe of religion: the secular state.

Secular governments have been the objects of terrorism in virtually every religious tradition—not just Islam. A Christian terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building. A Jewish activist, Yigal Amir, assassinated Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. A Buddhist prophet, Shoko Asahara, orchestrated the unleashing of nerve gas in the Tokyo subways near the Japanese parliament buildings. Hindu and Sikh militants have targeted government buildings and political leaders in India.

In addition to government offices and leaders, other targets have been symbols of modern secular life and its decadence promoted—or at least allowed—by the secular state. In August 2003 the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, frequented by Westerners and Westernized Indonesians, was the object of a terrifying car bombing, reminiscent of the devastating attack in December 2002 on nightclubs in Bali where the main patrons were young college-aged Australians. In Atlanta and elsewhere in the United States, abortion clinics and gay bars have been targeted. The 2003 bombings in Morocco were aimed at clubs frequented by foreigners from Spain, Belgium, and Israel.

Two questions arise regarding this spate of vicious religious assaults on secular government and secular life around the world. Why is religion the basis for opposition to the state? And why is this happening now?

Why religion?

Religious activists are puzzling anomalies in the secular world. Most religious people and their organizations are either firmly supportive of the secular state or quiescently uninterested in it. Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, like most of the new religious activists, comprise a small group at the extreme end of a hostile subculture that itself is a small minority within the larger Muslim world. Osama bin Laden is no more representative of Islam than Timothy McVeigh is of Christianity, or Japan's Shoko Asahara is of Buddhism.

Still one cannot deny that the ideals and ideas of activists like bin Laden are authentically and thoroughly religious. Moreover, even though their network consists of only a few thousand members, they have enjoyed an increase in popularity in the Muslim world after September 11, especially after the Afghan and Iraqi occupations by the US military and its allies. The authority of religion has given bin Laden's cadres the moral legitimacy of employing violence to assault the symbols of global economic and political power. Religion has also provided them the metaphor of cosmic war, an image of spiritual struggle that every religion contains within its repository of symbols--the fight between good and bad, truth and evil. In this sense, then, attacks such as those on the World Trade Center and the UN headquarters in Baghdad were very religious. They were meant to be catastrophic, acts of biblical proportions.

Though the World Trade Center and United Nations assaults and many other recent acts of religious terrorism have had no obvious military goal, they are meant to make a powerful impact on the public consciousness. These are shows meant for television. They are a kind of perverse performance of power meant to ennoble the perpetrators' views of the world and to draw us into their notions of cosmic war. In my study of the global rise of religious violence, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Juergensmeyer 2003), I have found a strikingly familiar pattern. In virtually all of the recent cases of religious violence, concepts of cosmic war have been accompanied by strong claims of moral justification and an enduring absolutism that transforms worldly struggles into sacred battles. It is not so much that religion has become politicized, but that politics have become religionized. Worldly struggles have been lifted into the high proscenium of sacred battle.

This is what makes religious warfare so difficult to combat. Its enemies have become satanized--one cannot negotiate with them or easily compromise. The rewards for those who fight for the cause are transtemporal, and the time lines of their struggles

are vast. Most social and political struggles look for conclusions within the lifetimes of their participants, but religious struggles can take generations to succeed.

I once had the occasion to point out the futility—in secular military terms—of the radical Islamic struggle in Palestine to Dr Abdul Aziz Rantisi, the head 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.

Insofar as the U.S. public and its leaders embraced the image of war following the September 11 attacks, America's view of this war was also prone to religionization. "God Bless America" became the country's unofficial national anthem. President George W. Bush spoke of the defense of America's "righteous cause," and the "absolute evil" of its enemies. Still, the U.S. military engagement in the months following September 11 was primarily a secular commitment to a definable goal and largely restricted to limited objectives in which civil liberties and moral rules of engagement, for the most part, still applied.

In purely religious battles, waged in divine time and with heaven's rewards, there is no need to compromise one's goals. There is no need, also, to contend with society's laws and limitations when one is obeying a higher authority. In spiritualizing violence, therefore, religion gives the resources of violence a remarkable power.

Ironically, the reverse is also true: terrorism can give religion power. Although sporadic acts of terrorism do not lead to the establishment of new religious states, they make the political potency of religious ideology impossible to ignore. The first wave of religious activism, from the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978 to the emergence of Hamas during the Palestinian intifada in the early 1990s, was focused on religious nationalism and the vision of individual religious states. Increasingly, religious activism has a more global vision. Such disparate groups as the Christian militia, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, and the al Qaeda network all target what their supporters regard as a repressive and secular form of global culture and control.

Part of the attraction of religious ideologies is that they are so personal. They impart a sense of redemption and dignity to those who embrace them. Those attracted to them are often men who feel marginalized from public life, and in that way, humiliated. One can view their efforts to make satans out of their enemies and to embrace ideas of cosmic war as attempts at ennoblement, empowerment, and dehumiliation. Such efforts would be poignant if they were not so horribly destructive.

Yet they are not just personal acts. These violent efforts of symbolic empowerment have an effect beyond whatever personal satisfaction and feelings of potency they impart to those who support and conduct them. The very act of killing on behalf of a moral code is a political statement. Such acts break the state's monopoly on morally sanctioned killing. By putting the right to take life in their own hands, the perpetrators of religious violence make a daring claim of power on behalf of the powerless, a basis of legitimacy for public order other than that on which the secular state relies.

Why now?

What makes these acts of religious violence occur now, and in a way different from the various forms of holy warfare and sanctimonious killing that has occurred throughout history, is that they are responses to a contemporary theme in the world's political and social life: globalization. In an interesting way, the World Trade Center symbolized bin Laden's hatred of two aspects of secular government—a certain kind of modernization and a certain kind of globalization. I say "a certain kind," in both cases, since the al Qaeda network was itself both modern and transnational in its own way. Its members were often highly sophisticated and technically-skilled professionals, and its organization was comprised of followers of various nationalities who moved effortlessly from place to place with no obvious nationalist agenda or allegiance. In a sense they were not opposed to modernity and globalization, as long as it was of their own design. But they loathed the Western-style modernity that they imagined that secular globalization was forcing upon them.

Some twenty-three years earlier, during the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini rallied the masses with a similar notion, that America was forcing its economic exploitation, its political institutions, and its secular culture on an unwitting Islamic society. The Ayatollah accused urban Iranians of having succumbed to "Westoxification"—an inebriation of Western culture and ideas. The many strident movements of religious nationalism that have erupted around the world in the more than two decades following the Iranian revolution have echoed this cry. This anti-Westernism has at heart an opposition to a certain kind of modernism—its secularism, its individualism, its skepticism. Yet, in a curious way, by accepting the modern notion of the nation-state and by adopting the technology and financial instruments of modern society, many of these movements of religious nationalism have claimed a kind of modernity on their own behalf.

One could regard religious politics as a kind of opportunistic infection that has set in at the present weakened stage of the secular nation-state. Globalization has crippled the secular nationalism and the nation-state in several ways. It has weakened it economically not only through the global reach of transnational businesses but also by the transnational nature of their labor supply, currency, and financial instruments. It has eroded its sense of national identity and unity through the planetary expansion of media and communications technology and popular culture, and through the unchallenged military power of the United States. Some of the most intense movements for ethnic and religious nationalism have arisen in nations where local leaders have felt exploited by the global economy, unable to gain military leverage against what they regard as corrupt leaders promoted by the US, and invaded by American images of popular culture on television, the internet, and motion pictures.

Another aspect of globalization—the emergence of multicultural societies through global diasporas of peoples and cultures, and the suggestion that global military and political control might fashion a "new world order"—has also elicited fear. It is this specter that has been exploited by bin Laden and other Islamic activists, and which caused many concerned citizens in the Islamic world to see America's military response to the September 11 attacks as an imperialistic venture and a bully's crusade, rather than the righteous wrath of an injured victim. When US leaders included the invasion and

occupation of Iraq as part of its “war against terror” it was commonly portrayed in the Muslim world as a ploy for the expansion of America’s global reach.

This image of America’s sinister role in creating a new world order of globalization is also feared in some quarters of the West. In the United States, for example, the Christian Identity movement and Christian militia organizations have been alarmed over what they imagine to be a massive global conspiracy to control the world, involving liberal American politicians and the United Nations. Timothy McVeigh’s favorite book, *The Turner Diaries*, is based on the premise that the United States has already succumbed unwittingly to a conspiracy of global control from which it needs to be liberated through terrorist actions and guerilla bands. In Japan a similar conspiracy theory motivated leaders of the Aum Shinrikyo movement to predict a catastrophic World War III, which their nerve gas assault in the Tokyo subways was meant to demonstrate.

As far-fetched as the idea of a "new world order" of global control may be, there is some truth to the notion that the integration of societies, communication among disparate peoples, and the globalization of culture have brought the world closer together. Although it is unlikely that a cartel of malicious schemers has designed this global trend, the effect of globalization on local societies and national identities has nonetheless been profound. It has undermined the modern idea of the nation-state by providing nonnational and transnational forms of economic, social, and cultural interaction. The global economic and social ties of the inhabitants of contemporary global cities are intertwined in a way that supercedes the idea of a national social contract--the Enlightenment notion that peoples in particular regions are naturally linked together in a specific nation-state. In a global world it is hard to say where particular regions begin and end. For that matter, in multicultural societies it is hard to say how one should define the "people" of a particular nation.

This is where religion and ethnicity step in to redefine public communities. The fading of the nation-state and the disillusionment with old forms of secular nationalism have produced both the opportunity for new nationalisms and the need for them. The opportunity has arisen because the old orders seem so weak; and the need for national identity persists because no single alternative form of social cohesion and affiliation has yet appeared to dominate public life the way the nation-state did in the twentieth century. In a curious way, traditional forms of social identity have helped to rescue one of Western modernity’s central themes: the idea of nationhood. In the increasing absence of any other demarcation of national loyalty and commitment, these old staples--religion, ethnicity and traditional culture--have become resources for national identification.

In the contemporary political climate, therefore, religious and ethnic nationalism has provided a solution to the perceived insufficiencies of Western-style secular politics. As secular ties have begun to unravel in the post-Soviet and post-colonial era, local leaders have searched for new anchors to ground their social identities and political loyalties. What is significant about these ethno-religious movements is their creativity—not just their use of technology and mass media, but also their appropriation of the nation-state and global networks. Although many of the framers of the new nationalisms have reached back in history for ancient images and concepts that will give them credibility, theirs are not simply efforts to resuscitate old ideas from the past. These are contemporary ideologies that meet present-day social and political needs.

In the context of Western modernism this is a revolutionary notion—that indigenous culture can provide the basis for new political institutions, including resuscitated forms of the nation-state. Movements that support ethno-religious nationalism are, therefore, often confrontational and sometimes violent. They reject the intervention of outsiders and their ideologies and, at the risk of being intolerant, pander to their indigenous cultural bases and enforce traditional social boundaries. It is no surprise, then, that they get into trouble with each other and with defenders of the secular state. Yet even such conflicts serve a purpose for the movements: it helps define who they are as a people and who they are not. They are not, for instance, secular modernists.

Understandably, then, these movements of anti-Western modernism are ambivalent about modernity—whether it is necessarily Western and always evil. They are also ambivalent about the most recent stage of modernity (or post-modernity): globalization. On the one hand these political movements of anti-modernity are reactions to the globalization of Western culture. They are responses to the insufficiencies of what is often touted as the world's global standard: the elements of secular, Westernized urban society that are found not only in the West but in many parts of the former Third World, and which are seen by their detractors as vestiges of colonialism. On the other hand these new ethno-religious identities are alternative modernities with international and supernational aspects of their own. This means that in the future some forms of anti-modernism will be global, some will be virulently anti-global, and yet others will be content with creating their own alternative modernities in ethno-religious nation-states.

Each of these forms of religious anti-modernism contains a paradoxical relationship between certain forms of globalization and emerging religious and ethnic nationalisms. It is one of history's ironies that the globalism of culture and the emergence of transnational political and economic institutions enhance the need for local identities. They also create the desire for a more localized form of authority and social accountability.

The crucial problems in an era of globalization are identity and control. The two are linked, in that a loss of a sense of belonging leads to a feeling of powerlessness. At the same time, what has been perceived as a loss of faith in secular nationalism is experienced as a loss of agency as well as selfhood. For these reasons the assertion of traditional forms of religious identities are linked to attempts to reclaim personal and cultural power. The vicious outbreaks of anti-modernism in the incidents of religious terrorism that have occurred in the first decade of the twenty-first century can be seen as tragic attempts to regain social control through acts of violence. Until there is a surer sense of citizenship in a global order, therefore, religious visions of moral order will continue to appear as attractive though often disruptive solutions to the problems of authority, identity and belonging in a global world.

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