

Religion and Violence

James G. Mellon

Volume 22, Number 2, Fall 2002

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs22_2re02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Mellon, J. G. (2002). Religion and Violence. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 22(2), 147–151.

allowed to intrude on process in the Belfast Agreement and both books continue the tradition.

James Dingley
University of Ulster

Religion and Violence

Hoge, Jr., James F., and Gideon Rose. *How Did This Happen?: Terrorism and the New War*. New York: Public Affairs, Perseus Books, 2001.

Talbott, Strobe, and Nayan Chanda, eds. *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*. New York: Basic Books and the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, 2001.

Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Updated ed. Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2001.

Appleby, R. Scott. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Berger, Peter L., ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

On 11 September 2001, the attention of the entire world was riveted on the hijacking and commandeering of passenger aircraft that culminated in the deaths of several thousand people when those aircraft were flown into the World Trade Center twin towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Not only were observers perplexed that anyone could commit such atrocities but what was profoundly confusing to many was that such acts had been committed in the name of religion. Initial reactions took one or the other of two forms. Some saw such acts as simply confirming their belief that religion fostered fanaticism and violence; others asserted that such acts were so at variance with their understanding of religion as to be an inherently inauthentic expression of religious faith and practice. Although most of the works reviewed here were written prior to 11 September, and, as a consequence, do not discuss these specific events, all the works reviewed here address the issue of the relation between religion, on the one hand, and violence, on the other.

How Did This Happen?: Terrorism and the New War, edited by James F. Hoge, Jr. and Gideon Rose, is a collection of essays on the events of 11 September, and on subsequent events, sponsored by the Council on Foreign

Relations and the editors of Foreign Affairs, and written by such prominent figures as Fouad Ajami, Samuel Berger, Richard Betts, Richard Butler, Wesley Clark, Walter Laqueur, Michael Mandelbaum, Joseph Nye, William Perry, Alan Wolfe, and Fareed Zakaria. Not surprisingly under the circumstances, without any apparent attempt on the part of the editors to impose a single perspective, one finds certain themes recurring in various contributions.

One of these is the view that, for all of the distaste for Western values on the part of Osama bin Laden and his followers, America was, in some sense, a secondary target. Bin Laden's primary targets, it is suggested, were existing governments in Arab states, whose claims to reflecting Islamic values he dismisses as fraudulent. Bin Laden's hope, it is suggested, was that the West would be compelled to respond, and that that response would force the issue, bringing about a polarization that would place Western states and their sympathizers in the Middle East clearly on one side, and true followers of Islam as that truth is understood by Bin Laden, on the other. Karen Armstrong suggests that conflict between Islam and the West is not inevitable. She writes that "[y]et despite what many Muslims and non-Muslims alike may now believe, nothing in the history of Islam and its relations with the West made anything like the attacks of September 11 inevitable. The terrorists and their extremist cohorts hijacked not only several planes, but one of the world's great religions as well." (Armstrong in Hoge and Rose, p. 70) It was apparently bin Laden's expectation, it is observed by Michael Scott Doran, for example, that the West's response would be viewed throughout the Islamic world as an attack on Islam itself, and that Arab governments either would be forced to accede to this popular upheaval and religious revival or would be swept aside.

One finds a similar interpretation expressed by Abbas Amanat, in *The Age of Terror*, a collection of essays reflecting on the events of 11 September, edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda. Amanat observes that "[t]he issue is not only the danger that he or people like him will turn their extremist dream into a religious war between Islam and the West. Equally important is that they will provoke an escalating conflict between militant neo-Wahhabi Islam and the retreating forces and quavering voices of moderation and tolerance in the Muslim world." (Amanat in Talbott and Chanda, eds., p. 49) Some of the contributions are more impressive than others. That of Charles Hill seems to blur the vital distinction between Islamic extremism, on the one hand, and Islamic liberalism and moderate Islamic revivalism, on the other.

Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* was written prior to 11 September, and, reading it today, the references to Bin Laden and to the World Trade Center, in regards to the 1993 bombing, bring to mind even more than the author could have intended. Juergensmeyer examines religiously-inspired terrorism arising out of the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Sikh, and Buddhist traditions, demonstrating that no tradition has a monopoly on fanaticism and violence. Whichever the tradition, there seems to be a marginal element that sees

themselves as living in exceptional times confronted by such an assault on fundamental values that they are faced with a war in world-historical or “cosmic” (the word used by Juergensmeyer) terms. This demands a symbolic response that calls attention to the cause, and justifies resort to violence answering the conditions associated within each tradition for morally justifiable use of force and overriding the tradition’s restraints on resort to violence in typical times.

In each case, a marginal element within some religious tradition seeks, according to Juergensmeyer, to make itself more prominent within its own tradition, relative to the mainstream elements of that tradition. Juergensmeyer argues that, at the most fundamental level, religious terrorists see other more moderate elements within their own tradition as the “enemy” in that these more moderate elements claim to represent the authentic tradition but, in the view of the extremists, are frauds who have compromised the authentic values of the tradition in order to accommodate themselves to a secular world increasingly hostile to those values. Contrary to cynics who dismiss the religious pretensions of the extremists themselves, Juergensmeyer attests to the deeply-held spiritual convictions of extremists. What distinguishes their response from that of other members of their particular tradition, he suggests, is an analysis of the political forces, and their moral implications, associated with trends of modernity and globalization. While some may see religion itself as the culprit, Juergensmeyer reaches a different conclusion, observing that:

... religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two – some assertion of moderation in religion’s passion, and some acknowledgement of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life. In a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself. (Juergensmeyer, p. 243)

R. Scott Appleby adopts a similar argument in *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, also written prior to 11 September 2001. He challenges two common responses to instances of religiously-inspired violence. One that he identifies, and which he explicitly challenges is the assumption that such invocations of religion to justify resort to violence are necessarily disingenuous or inauthentic. The other common response that he identifies, and which he also explicitly challenges is the view that religion or the involvement of religion in the political sphere represents an inevitable source of violence, discord, and instability. Like Juergensmeyer, Appleby accepts that individuals who turn to violence may, nevertheless, hold sincere and authentic spiritual beliefs. The authenticity of such beliefs, however, need to be considered, Appleby argues, in light of the characters of individual religious traditions as representing a range of responses, continually evolving and being reinterpreted in response to each other and to the times, oriented around a core set of beliefs.

The Desecularization of the World, a collection of essays edited by Peter Berger, focuses less narrowly on the issue of religion and violence than these other works but, instead, more broadly on asserting the continuing influence of religious factors on domestic and international politics throughout the world. The contributors challenge the “secularization thesis” for its claim that, with development and modernization, a diminution of the influence of religion necessarily takes place. The contributors observe that, contrary to what the secularization thesis suggests, there would appear to have been a resurgence in the influence of religion in recent years. This resurgence, they note, has been particularly noteworthy among those movements that, for all their differences, are conventionally thought of as “fundamentalist.” Like Juergensmeyer and Appleby, the contributors observe that the influence of this religious resurgence can encourage either bellicose or pacific positions.

To inquire whether or not the followers of Osama bin Laden are authentic representatives of Islam or whether or not those of Rev. Ian Paisley, for example, are authentic representatives of Christianity presumes that Islam or Christianity are, respectively, homogenous traditions, and, as Appleby points out, each of these traditions, as similarly with Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, are living traditions in which differing interpretations of the tradition are continually being expressed. The followers of bin Laden, as a consequence, are an authentic, but by no means the only authentic expression of Islam. Islamic liberalism, for example, is another authentic expression of Islam. Appleby argues that there is an ambivalence in approaching political questions from the vantage of the sacred in that, with the pluralism characteristic of each of the major religious traditions in practice, each tradition encompasses not only some who will be inspired to resort to violence but some who will be inspired by that same tradition to devote themselves to building peace. Appleby writes:

Specifically, I refute the notion that religion, having so often inspired, legitimated, and exacerbated deadly conflicts, cannot be expected to contribute consistently to their peaceful resolution. I argue, to the contrary, that a new form of conflict transformation – ‘religious peacebuilding’ – is taking shape on the ground, in and across local communities plagued by violence. (Appleby, p. 7)

To bin Laden and his sympathizers, even more reprehensible than the representatives of modernity and liberalism in Western Europe and North America are those in predominantly Islamic societies who claim to uphold Islamic principles and to see those principles as being open to the influence of liberalism and modernity but who are, in the eyes of bin Laden and his followers, frauds. Juergensmeyer observes that frequently religiously-inspired terrorists view moderate representatives of their own tradition as the real enemy. In the Middle East, militant Zionists opposed to the peace process, to curbs on new settlements, and to land transfers see Israel’s own leaders as traitors and as the real enemy, and the consequence was the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Similarly, in Northern

Ireland, Paisley and his supporters view Protestant moderates and the British government as traitors. As a consequence, even more challenging than winning the war in Afghanistan may be winning the peace in the region more broadly.

Although written prior to the events of 11 September 2001, the Juergensmeyer, Appleby, and Berger books have a considerable amount to say that is relevant to these events. Prior to these attacks, of course, there were other instances of religiously-inspired terrorism, and both Juergensmeyer and Appleby examine these instances. It should be noted that, as these books point out, no tradition has had a monopoly on terrorism. Juergensmeyer, for example, identifies and analyzes instances of terrorism within the Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh, and Buddhist traditions. Similarly, no tradition enjoys a monopoly on peacemakers – those who are prepared to attempt to put aside ancient grievances in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation. There is sometimes a tendency either to forget about the influence of religion or to view it entirely in terms that assume the homogeneous character of religious traditions. These books and a number of the contributions in *How Did This Happen?* and *The Age of Terror* are valuable in that they provide a much broader and richer appreciation of the role of religion.

James G. Mellon
Dalhousie University