

Religion in the New Global War

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When Mohammed Atta boarded the airline on September 11, 2001 that soon thereafter slammed into the World Trade Center towers, he left behind a manual of instruction. Apparently prepared by his colleagues in the al Qaeda network, it instructed him and his fellow activists how to behave and what to do in preparation for their fateful act. What is interesting about this document is not only the text, but the subtext. Lying beneath the pious rhetoric of the manual and its eerie ties to the World Trade Center tragedy are hints about the perplexing issue of the role of religion in the contemporary world, and answers to the persistent question, how could religion be related to such vicious acts of political violence?

The common sense way of putting this question about the September 11 attack and all of the other recent acts of religious terrorism is “what’s religion got to do with it?” The common sense answers to this question are varied, and they are contradictory. On the one hand some political leaders—along with many scholars of comparative religion—have assured us that religion has had nothing to do with these vicious acts, and that religion’s innocent images have been used in perverse ways by evil and essentially irreligious political actors. On the other hand there are the radio talk show hosts and even a few social scientists who affirm that religion, especially Islam, has had everything to do with it—and not just ordinary religion, but a perverse strain of fundamentalism that has infected normal religion and caused it to go bad.

A reading of the Atta manuscript shows both answers to be incorrect. In an analysis of this manual undertaken by a scholar of comparative religion, Bruce Lincoln, he leaves us with no doubt that Mohammed Atta and his eighteen accomplices on that dark morning of September 11 were filled with a religious zeal and undertook their hideous assignment in a ritualistic act of self-sacrifice following traditional tenets.¹ Moreover, although the ideology of their mentors was influenced by a certain strain of Islamic political thought characterized by the writings of Mawdudi, al Banna and Faraj, to which only a minority of Muslims subscribe, the religious practices and rituals were themselves not deviant. The actions prescribed for the nineteen on the morning of September 11 were well within the norm not only for Islamic belief and practice, but also for many other religious traditions. Skewed though their political views may have been, one could say on the basis of this text that Atta and his colleagues died as good Muslims. Had they been Christians or Hindus they would have died as good adherents of those faiths as well.

What the Lincoln reading of the Atta manuscript shows is that Atta’s act was done in a classically religious manner. Yet we cannot say much more than that. We cannot say, for instance, that Atta’s act was motivated by religion or meant to achieve a religious purpose. In other words, it is clear that the form that the activity took was a religious one, but the content of that activity—the point of the terrorist act—was not. It seemed, at least at first blush, to be elsewhere. The content was about politics, and society, and many other things other than the ideas and images that we narrowly ascribe to the realm of religion. Atta and his crowd were not trying to promote Islam, at least not in a narrow sense. Although they have little use for modern secular Western culture, the al

Qaeda program has not targeted Christianity or any other religion as its opponent. Bin Ladin's battle with the West is not a war between religions. Hence it seems that his acts of terrorism, and the many other contemporary acts of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh terrorism, are done in a religious way without necessarily being about religion.

This brings us back to the violence of religious terrorism and the central question—"what's religion got to do with it?"—without a simple answer. Such acts of terrorism are not religious in that they are certainly not about the imposition of one kind of traditional religion on others. And yet they are clearly about religion in the form that their actions take, and perhaps also—in a nontraditional way—in their substance as well.

These acts are symbolic statements about an imagined war, a war between world views. This is a point made by Lincoln when he describes the September 11 event as a statement describing the encounter between "two different types of society and two different types of power." The type of society and type of power that Mohammed Atta represented was one in which religious ideas and images suffused all aspects of social order. We ordinary citizens of the modern secularized West and the culture, politics, and society with which we are associated represent the "other" in this dichotomous view of the world.

This way of thinking was brought home to me by another representative of the far-flung al Qaeda network, one of the men convicted of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. When I interviewed Mahmud Abouhalima in prison in the mid-1990s he told me a little parable to illustrate what it was like for someone like him to live in American society. It was a story commonly told in the Middle East and South Asia about an orphaned lion that was abandoned at birth and raised by a flock of sheep. The lion did not know that he wasn't a sheep. But one day as the flock gathered at the water hole he peered in at his reflection and saw that he was not like the others.

"That's what Islam has taught me in America," Abouhalima said proudly. "I'm not a sheep."

Ordinarily I hesitate to argue with the people I interview, but on this occasion I felt personally challenged. "I'm not a sheep either," I said to Abouhalima. I explained to him that one cannot tell much about American people simply from their vacuous popular culture. In my case, I explained, I felt in touch with spiritual values and experienced a moral rudder in my life that had religious depth.

Abouhalima simply smiled and resisted my attempts to declare what must have appeared to him to have been a kind of pseudo-religiosity. "You are a secularist," he declared.

From Abouhalima's point of view the two worlds cannot easily mix. The lions and sheep of this world cannot lie down together easily, nor can they co-exist in a world of globalization that seems designed by and for the benefit of sheep.

Hence the movements of religious activism represented by al Qaeda can be seen as resistance movements. Religion has replaced Marxism as the ideology of opposition. In most cases the religious rebels are opposed to a secular state, one that they want to replace with a religious nationalist authority. In other cases, such as al Qaeda, the activists are transnationalists. Their theater of action is on a global scale, and their opposition is globalization itself. They are to a large extent guerrilla antiglobalists.

At the same time, however, the transnational network of their movement and the global vision of the great war in which they imagine themselves points in a global direction of its own. In his videotaped statements, Osama bin Laden has referred to the Ottoman Empire as the kind of transnational Islamic entity that could be revived on a global scale. In this sense bin Laden and his ilk are alternative globalists. The social world suffused with religion that they hope for is not a

traditional society of the past but a new, alternative modernity—or perhaps more accurately a postmodernity—one with global dimensions.

The Role of Religion

What is odd about this new global war is not only the difficulty in defining it and the non-state, transnational character of the opposition, but also the opponents' ascription to ideologies based on religion. The tradition of secular politics from the time of the Enlightenment has comfortably ignored religion, marginalized its role in public life, and frequently co-opted it for its own civil religion of public religiosity. No one in the secular world could have predicted that the first confrontations of the 21st century would involve, of all things, religion--secularism's old, long-banished foe.

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 world of their religious cultures. 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 and could conceivably become popular among their religious compatriates. The authority of religion has given bin Laden's cadres the moral legitimacy of employing violence in their assault on the very symbol of global economic power. It has also provided the metaphor of cosmic war, an image of spiritual struggle that every religion has within its repository of symbols--the fight between good and bad, truth and evil. In this sense, then, the attack on the World Trade Center was very religious. It was meant to be catastrophic, an act of biblical proportions.

Though the World Trade Center assault and many other recent acts of religious terrorism have no obvious military goal, they are meant to make a powerful impact on the public consciousness. These are acts 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 comparative study of cases of religious terrorism around the world I have found a strikingly familiar pattern.² In all of these cases, concepts of cosmic war are 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. When I pointed out to political leaders of the Hamas movement in Palestine that Israel's military force was such that a Palestinian military effort could never succeed, I was told that "Palestine was occupied before, for two hundred years." The Hamas official assured me that he and his Palestinian comrades "can wait again--at least that long," for the struggles of God can endure for eons.³ 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.

Global War

The September 11 attack and many other recent acts of religious terrorism are skirmishes in what their perpetrators conceive to be a global war. This battle is global in three senses. The choices of targets have often been transnational. The World Trade Center employees killed in the September 11 assault were citizens of 86 nations. The network of perpetrators was also transnational: the al Qaeda network that was implicated in the attack--though consisting mostly of Saudis--is also actively supported by Pakistanis, Egyptians, Palestinians, Sudanese, Algerians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Filipinos, and a smattering of British, French, Germans, Spanish and Americans. The incident was global in its impact, in large part because of the worldwide and instantaneous coverage of transnational news media. This has been terrorism meant not only for television but for global news networks such as CNN--and especially for al Jazeera, the Qatar-based news channel that beams its talk-show format throughout the Middle East.

Increasingly terrorism has been performed for a televised audience around the world. In that sense it has been as real a global event as the transnational activities of the global economy and as vivid as the globalized forms of entertainment and information that crowd satellite television channels and the internet. Ironically, terrorism has become a more efficient global force than the organized political efforts to control and contain it. No single entity, including the United Nations, possesses the military capability and intelligence-gathering capacities to deal with worldwide terrorism. Instead, consortia of nations have been formed to handle the information-sharing and joint operations required to deal with forces of violence on a international scale.

This global dimension of terrorism's organization and audience, and the transnational responses to it, gives special significance to the understanding of terrorism as a public performance of violence--as a social event that has both real and symbolic aspects. As the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has observed, our public life is shaped by symbols as much as by institutions. For this reason, symbolic acts--the "rites of institution"--help to demarcate public space and indicate what is meaningful in the social world.⁴ In a striking imitation of such rites, terrorism has provided its own dramatic events. These rites of violence have signaled alternative views of public reality: not just a single society in transition, but a world challenged by strident religious visions of transforming change.

What is extraordinary about such performances is their success in bringing the rest of the world into their world view-- specifically their view of the world at war. War is an enticing conceptual construct, an all-embracing view of the world that contains much more than the notion of forceful contestation. It points to a dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy who is determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is either crushed or contained, one's own existence cannot be secure. What is striking about a martial attitude is the certainty of one's position and the willingness to defend it, or impose it on others, to the end.

Such certitude may be regarded as noble by those whose sympathies lie with it and dangerous by those who do not agree with it. But either way it is not civil. One of the first rules of conflict resolution is the willingness to accept the notion that there are flaws on one's own side as well as on the opponent's side. This is the sensible stand to take if one's goal is to get along with others and avoid violence.⁵ But often that is not the goal. In fact, a warring attitude implies that the one who holds it no longer thinks compromise is possible or--just as likely--did not want an accommodating solution to the conflict in the first place. In fact, if one's goals are not harmony but the empowerment that comes with using violence, it is in one's interest to be in a state of war. In such cases, war is not only the context for violence but also the excuse for it. This reasoning holds true even if the worldly issues that are at heart in the dispute do not seem to warrant such an extreme and ferocious position.

This logic may explain why acts of terrorism seem so puzzling to people outside the movements that perpetrate them and entirely understandable to those within them. The absolutism of war makes compromise unlikely, and those who suggest a negotiated settlement can be excoriated as the enemy. In the Palestinian situation, the extreme religious positions on both sides loathed the carefully negotiated compromise once promised by Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine's Yasir Arafat. "There is no such thing as co-existence," a Jewish activist in Israel told me, explaining that there was a biblical requirement for Jews to possess and live on biblical land. This was why he despised the Oslo and Wye River accords and regarded Rabin and Netanyahu as treasonous for signing them.⁶ Hamas leaders told me essentially the same thing about the necessity for Arab Muslims to occupy what they regarded as their homeland. They expressed anger towards their own secular leader--Yasir Arafat--for having entered into what both Jewish and Muslim extremists regarded as a dangerous and futile path towards an accommodation deemed by them to be impossible.⁷ The extremes on both sides preferred war over peace.

One of the reasons why a state of war is often preferable to peace is that it gives moral justification for acts of violence. Violence, in turn, offers the illusion of power. The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a world view and an assertion of identity. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered. It provides cosmology, history, and eschatology, and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most importantly, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of religious war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself.

The idea of warfare has had an eerie and intimate relationship with religion. History has been studded with overtly religious conflicts such as the Crusades, the Muslim conquests, and the Wars of Religion that dominated the politics of France in the sixteenth century. These have usually

been characterized as wars in the name of religion, rather than wars conducted in a religious way. However, the historian Natalie Zemon Davis has uncovered what she calls "rites of violence" in her study of religious riots in sixteenth century France. These constituted "a repertory of actions, derived from the Bible, from the liturgy, from the action of political authority, or from the traditions of popular folk practices, intended to purify the religious community and humiliate the enemy and thus make him less harmful." Davis observed that the violence was "aimed at defined targets and selected from a repertory of traditional punishments and forms of destruction."⁸ According to Davis, "even the extreme ways of defiling corpses--dragging bodies through the streets and throwing them to the dogs, dismembering genitalia and selling them in mock commerce--and desecrating religious objects," had what she called "perverse connections" with religious concepts of pollution and purification, heresy and blasphemy.⁹

Anthropologist Stanley Tambiah showed how the same "rites of violence" were present in the religious riots of South Asia.¹⁰ In some instances innocent bystanders would be snatched up by a crowd and burned alive. According to Tambiah, these horrifying murders of defenseless and terrified victims were done in a ritual manner, in "mock imitation of both the self-immolation of conscientious objectors and the terminal rite of cremation."¹¹ In a macabre way, the riotous battles described by Davis and Tambiah were religious events. But given the prominence of the rhetoric of warfare in religious vocabulary, both traditional and modern, one could also turn this point around and say that religious events often involve the invocation of violence. One could argue that the task of creating a vicarious experience of warfare--albeit one usually imagined as residing on a spiritual plane--is one of the main businesses of religion.

Virtually all cultural traditions have contained martial metaphors in their symbols, myths, and legendary histories. Ideas such as the Salvation Army in Christianity or a Dal Khalsa ("army of the faithful") in Sikhism characterize disciplined religious organizations. Images of spiritual warfare are even more common. The Muslim notion of jihad is the most notable example, but even in Buddhist legends great wars abound. In Sri Lankan culture, for instance, virtually canonical status is accorded the legendary history recorded in the Pali Chronicles, the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, that related the triumphs of battles waged by Buddhist kings. In India, warfare contributes to the grandeur of the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which are tales of seemingly unending conflict and military intrigue. More than the Vedic rituals, these martial epics defined subsequent Hindu culture. Whole books of the Hebrew Bible are devoted to the military exploits of great kings, their contests related in gory detail. Though the New Testament does not take up the battle cry, the later history of the Church does, supplying Christianity with a bloody record of crusades and religious wars.

What is unusual about contemporary acts of terrorism is that the vision of religious war is not confined to history and symbols but is a contemporary reality. Politics have become religionized as struggles in the real world become baptized with the absolutism of religious fervor. Acts of violence are conducted not so much to wage a military campaign as to demonstrate the reality of the war to a unknowing public. In such cases, the message is the medium in which it is sent: the bombings provide moments of chaos, warfare and victimage that the perpetrators want a slumbering society to experience. These acts make the point that war is at hand by providing a bloody scene of battle in one's own quiet neighborhoods and everyday urban streets.

What is buttressed in these acts of symbolic empowerment is not only the credibility of their cause. These acts, for the moment, place the perpetrators on a par with the leaders of governments that they target, and equate the legitimacy of the secular state with their own vision of religious social order. Through the currency of violence they draw attention to what they believe to be

significant and true about the social arena around them. In the language of Bourdieu they were creating a perverse "habitus," a dark world of social reality, and forcing everyone to take stock of their perception of the world.¹² Thus the very act of performing violence in public is a political act: it announces that the power of the group is equal or superior to that of the state. In most cases this is exactly the message that the group wants to convey.

The establishment of political rule based on religious law was the primary aim of many Muslim groups. Members of Hamas regarded this as the main difference between their organization and the secular ideology of Fateh and other groups associated with Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority. A similar argument was made by activists associated with Egyptian groups. Mahmud Abouhalima told me that President Hosni Mubarak could not be a true Muslim because he did not make shari'a--Islamic law--the law of the land.¹³ A cleric in Cairo's conservative Al-Azhar theological school told me he resented his government's preference for Western law. "Why should we obey Western laws when Muslim laws are better?" he asked me.¹⁴ It was this position that was assumed by many Muslim activists: that Western political institutions and the ideology on which they were based should be banished from their territories. They wanted to rebuild their societies on Islamic foundations.

Yet the images of political order that these activists yearned to create have been deliberately fuzzy. Sometimes the goals have appeared to be democratic, sometimes socialist, sometimes a sort of religious oligarchy. Sometimes the goals have been nationalist, at other times international in scope. A Hamas leader told me that what distinguished his organization from Yasir Arafat's Fateh moment was that Fateh was waging a "national struggle" whereas Hamas was "transnational."¹⁵ The al Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden was especially striking in its global reach and curious in its lack of a specific political program. It is as if the idea global struggle was sufficient, its own reward. Although it is clear who the supporters of al Qaeda hate, nowhere have they given a design for a political entity--Islamic or otherwise--that could actually administrate the results of a victory over American and secular rule and the emergence of a religious revolution, should they achieve it.

My conclusion is that acts of religious terrorism are largely devices for symbolic empowerment in wars that cannot be won and for goals that cannot be achieved. The very absence of thought about what the activists would do if they were victorious is sufficient indication that they did not expect to win, nor perhaps even want to do so. They illustrate a peculiar corollary to the advice of the French theorist, Frantz Fanon, during Algeria's war of independence some years ago when he advocated terrorism as the Algerians' mobilizing weapon. Fanon reasoned that even a small display of violence could have immense symbolic power by jolting the masses into an awareness of their own potency.¹⁶ What Fanon did not realize is that for some activist groups the awareness of their potency would be all that they desired.

Yet these acts of symbolic empowerment have had an effect beyond whatever personal satisfaction and feelings of potency they have imparted to those who supported and conducted 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 have made a daring claim of power on behalf of the powerless, a basis of legitimacy for public order other than that upon which the secular state relies. In doing so, they have demonstrated to everyone how fragile public order actually is, and how fickle can be the populace's assent to the moral authority of power.

Empowering Religion

Such religious warfare not only gives individuals who have engaged in it the illusion of empowerment, it also gives religious organizations and ideas a public attention and importance that they have not enjoyed for many years. In modern America and Europe, the warfare has given religion a prominence in public life that it has not held since before the Enlightenment, more than two centuries ago.

Although each of the violent religious movements around the world has its own distinctive culture and history, I have found that they have three things in common regarding their attitudes towards religion in society. First, they reject the compromises with liberal values and secular institutions that most mainstream religion has made, be it Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist. Second, radical religious movements refuse to observe the boundaries that secular society has set around religion--keeping it private rather than allowing it to intrude into public spaces. And third, these movements try to create a new form of religiosity that rejects what they regard as weak modern substitutes for the more vibrant and demanding forms of religion that they imagine to be essential to their religion's origins.

During a prison interview, one of the men accused of bombing the World Trade Center in 1993 told me that the critical moment in his religious life came when he realized that he could not compromise his Islamic integrity with the easy vices offered by modern society. The convicted terrorist, Mahmud Abouhalima, claimed that the early part of his life was spent running away from himself. Although involved in radical Egyptian Islamic movements since his college years in Alexandria, he felt there was no place where he could settle down. He told me that the low point came when he was in Germany, trying to live the way that he imagined Europeans and Americans carried on: one where the superficial comforts of sex and inebriates masked an internal emptiness and despair. Abouhalima said his return to Islam as the center of his life carried with it a renewed sense of obligation to make Islamic society truly Islamic--to "struggle against oppression and injustice" wherever it existed. What was now constant, Abouhalima said, was his family and his faith. Islam was both "a rock and a pillar of mercy."¹⁷ But it was not the Islam of liberal, modern Muslims: they, he felt, had compromised the tough and disciplined life the faith demanded. In Abouhalima's case, he wanted his religion to be hard, not soft like the humiliating, mindnumbing comforts of secular modernity. Activists such as Abouhalima--and for that matter, Osama bin Laden--have imagined themselves to be defenders of ancient faiths. But in fact they have created new forms of religiosity: like many present-day religious leaders they have used the language of traditional religion in order to build bulwarks around aspects of modernity that have threatened them, and to suggest ways out of the mindless humiliation of modern life. It was vital to their image of religion, however, that it be perceived as ancient.

The need for religion--a "hard" religion as Abouhalima called it--was a response to the soft treachery they had observed in the new societies around them. The modern secular world that Abouhalima and the others inhabited was a dangerous and chaotic sea, in which religion was a harbor of calm. At a deep level of their consciousnesses they sensed their lives slipping out of control, and they felt both responsible for the disarray and a victim of it. To be abandoned by religion in such a world would mean a loss of their own individual locations and identities. In fashioning a "traditional religion" of their own making they exposed their concerns not so much with their religious, ethnic, or national communities, but with their own personal, perilous selves.

These intimate concerns have been prompted by the perceived failures of public institutions. As Pierre Bourdieu has observed, social structures never have a disembodied reality; they are always negotiated by individuals in their own strategies for maintaining self-identity and success in

life. Such institutions are legitimized by the "symbolic capital" they accrue through the collective trust of many individuals.¹⁸ When that symbolic capital is devalued, when political and religious institutions undergo what the German social philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, has called a "crisis of legitimacy," this devaluation of authority is experienced not only as a political problem but as an intensely personal one, as a loss of agency.¹⁹

It is this sense of a personal loss of power in the face of chaotic political and religious authorities that is common, and I believe critical, to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda group and most other movements for Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu nationalism around the world. The syndrome begins with the perception that the public world has gone awry, and the suspicion that behind this social confusion lies a great spiritual and moral conflict, a cosmic battle between the forces of order and chaos, good and evil. The government--already delegitimized--is perceived to be in league with the forces of chaos and evil.

Secular government is easily labeled as the enemy of religion, because to some degree it is. By its nature, the secular state is opposed to the idea that religion should have a role in public life. From the time that modern secular nationalism emerged in the eighteenth century as a product of the European Enlightenment's political values it did so with a distinctly anti-religious, or at least anti-clerical, posture. The ideas of John Locke about the origins of a civil community, and the "social contract" theories of Jean Jacques Rousseau required very little commitment to religious belief. Although they allowed for a divine order that made the rights of humans possible, their ideas had the effect of taking religion--at least Church religion--out of public life. At the time, religious "enemies of the Enlightenment" protested religion's public demise.²⁰ But their views were submerged in a wave of approval for a new view of social order in which secular nationalism was thought to be virtually a natural law, universally applicable and morally right.

Post-Enlightenment modernity proclaimed the death of religion. Modernity signaled not only the demise of the Church's institutional authority and clerical control, but also the loosening of religion's ideological and intellectual grip on society. Scientific reasoning and the moral claims of the secular social contract replaced theology and the Church as the bases for truth and social identity. The result of religion's devaluation has been "a general crisis of religious belief," as Bourdieu has put it.²¹

In countering this disintegration, resurgent religious activists have proclaimed the death of secularism. They have dismissed the efforts of secular culture and its forms of nationalism to replace religion. They have challenged the notion that secular society and the modern nation-state are able to provide the moral fiber that unites national communities, or give it the ideological strength to sustain states buffeted by ethical, economic and military failures. Their message has been easy to believe and has been widely received, because the failures of the secular state have been so real.

The moral leadership of the secular state was increasingly challenged in the last decade of the twentieth century following the breakup of the Cold War and the rise of a global economy. The Cold War provided contesting models of moral politics--communism and democracy--that were replaced with a global market that weakened national sovereignty and was conspicuously devoid of political ideals. The global economy became controlled by transnational businesses accountable to no single governmental authority and with no clear ideological or moral standards of behavior. But while both Christian and Enlightenment values were left behind, transnational commerce did transport aspects of Westernized popular culture to the rest of the world. American and European music, videos and films were beamed across national boundaries, where they threatened to obliterate local and traditional forms of artistic expression. Added to this social confusion were

convulsive shifts in political power that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Asian economies at the end of the twentieth century.

The public sense of insecurity that came in the wake of these cataclysmic global changes was felt not only in the societies of those nations that were economically devastated by them--especially countries in the former Soviet Union--but also in economically stronger industrialized societies. The United States, for example, saw a remarkable degree of disaffection with its political leaders and witnessed the rise of right-wing religious movements that fed on the public's perception of the inherent immorality of government.

Is the rise of religious terrorism related to these global changes? We know that some groups associated with violence in industrialized societies have had an anti-modernist political agenda. At the extreme end of this religious rejection in the United States were members of the American anti-abortion group, Defensive Action; the Christian militia and Christian Identity movement; and isolated groups such as the Branch Davidian sect in Waco, Texas. Similar attitudes towards secular government emerged in Israel--the religious nationalist ideology of the Kach party was an extreme example—and, as the Aum Shinrikyo movement has demonstrated, in Japan. As in the United States, contentious groups within these countries were disillusioned about the ability of secular leaders to guide their countries' destinies. They identified government as the enemy.

The global shifts that have given rise to anti-modernist movements have also affected less-developed nations. India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Iran's Riza Shah Pahlavi once were committed to creating versions of America--or a kind of cross between America and the Soviet Union--in their own countries. But new generations of leaders no longer believe in the Westernized visions of Nehru, Nasser or the Shah. Rather, they are eager to complete the process of de-colonialization and build new, indigenous nationalisms.

When activists in Algeria who demonstrated against the crackdown against the Islamic Salvation Front in 1991 proclaimed that they were continuing the war of liberation against French colonialism, they had the ideological rather than political reach of European influence in mind. Religious activists such as the Algerian leaders, the Ayatullah Khomeini in Iran, Sheik Ahmed Yassin in Palestine, Sayyid Qutb and his disciple, Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman, in Egypt, L.K. Advani in India, and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in India's Punjab have asserted the legitimacy of a postcolonial national identity based on traditional culture.²²

The result of this disaffection with the values of the modern West has been a "loss of faith" in the ideological form of that culture--secular nationalism, or the idea that the nation is rooted in a secular compact rather than religious or ethnic identity.²³ Although a few years ago it would have been a startling notion, the idea has now become virtually commonplace that secular nationalism is in crisis. In many parts of the world it is seen as an alien cultural construction, one closely linked with what has been called "the project of modernity."²⁴ In such cases, religious alternatives to secular ideologies have had extraordinary appeal.

This uncertainty about what constitutes a valid basis for national identity is a political form of postmodernism. In Iran it has resulted in the rejection of a modern Western political regime and the creation of a successful religious state. Increasingly, even secular scholars in the West have recognized that religious ideologies might offer an alternative to modernity in the political sphere.²⁵ Yet, what lies beyond modernity is not necessarily a new form of political order, religious or not. In nations formerly under Soviet control, for example, the specter of the future beyond the socialist form of modernity has been one of cultural anarchism.

The al Qaeda network associated with Osama bin Laden takes the challenge to secularism to yet another level. The implicit attack on global economic and political systems that are leveled by

religious nationalists from Algeria to Indonesia are made explicit: America is the enemy. Moreover, it is a war waged not on a national plane but a transnational one. Their agenda is not for any specific form of religious nation-state, but an inchoate vision of a global rule of religious law. Rather than religious nationalists, transnational activists like bin Laden are guerilla antiglobalists.

Postmodern Terror

Bin Laden and his vicious acts have a credibility in some quarters of the world because of the uncertainties of this moment in global history. The fear that there will be a spiritual as well as a political collapse at modernity's center has, in many parts of the world, led to terror. Both violence and religion have appeared at times when authority is in question, since they are both ways of challenging and replacing authority. One gains its power from force and the other from its claims to ultimate order. The combination of the two in acts of religious terrorism has been a potent assertion indeed. Regardless of whether the perpetrators consciously intend them to be political acts, all public acts of violence have political consequences. Insofar as they have been attempts to reshape the public order, these acts have been examples of what Jose Casanova has called the increasing "deprivatization" of religion.²⁶ In various parts of the world where attempts have been made by defenders of religion to reclaim the center of public attention and authority, religious terrorism is often the violent face of these attempts.

The postmodern religious rebels such as those who rally to the side of Osama bin Laden are therefore neither anomalies or anachronisms. From Algeria to Idaho, they are small but potent groups of violent activists who represent masses of potential supporters, and they exemplify currents of thinking and cultures of commitment that have risen to counter the prevailing modernism. The enemies of these groups have seemed to most people to be both benign and banal: such symbols of prosperity and authority as the World Trade Center. The logic of this kind of militant religiosity has therefore been difficult for many people to comprehend. Yet its challenge has been profound, for it has contained a fundamental critique of the world's post-Enlightenment secular culture and politics.

Acts of religious terrorism have thus been attempts to use violence to purchase public recognition of the legitimacy of this view of the world at war. Since religious authority can provide a ready-made replacement for secular leadership, it is no surprise that when secular authority has been deemed morally insufficient, the challenges to its legitimacy and the attempts to gain support for its rivals have often been based in religion. When the proponents of religion have asserted their claim to be the moral force undergirding public order, they sometimes have done so with the kind of power that even a confused society can graphically recognize: the force of terror.

What the perpetrators of such acts of terror expect--and indeed welcome--is a response as vicious as the acts themselves. By goading secular authorities in responding to terror with terror, they hope to accomplish two things. First, they want tangible evidence for their claim that the secular enemy is a monster. Second, they hope to bring to the surface the great war—a war that they have told their potential supporters was hidden, but real. When the American missiles began to fall in Afghanistan on October 2, less than three weeks after the September 11 attacks, the al Qaeda forces must initially have been exhilarated, for the war they had anticipated for so long had finally arrived. Its outcome, however, likely gave them less satisfaction: their bases were routed, their leadership demolished, and the Muslim world did not rise up in support in the numbers and enthusiasm they had expected. Yet the time line of religious warfare is long, and the remnant forces of al Qaeda most likely still yearn for the final confrontation. They are assured that the glorious victory will ultimately be achieved, for they are certain that it is, after all, God's war, not theirs.

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¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Excerpts from this book are utilized for this essay.

³ Author's interview with Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, cofounder and political leader of Hamas, Khan Yunis, Gaza, March 1, 1998.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 117.

⁵ One interpretation of the basic rules of nonviolent conflict resolution may be found in my book, *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶ Author's interview with Yoel Lerner, Director of the Sannhedrin Institute, Jerusalem, March 2, 1998.

⁷ Interview with Dr. Rantisi, March 2, 1998.

⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riots in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 59 (May 1973) pp. 52-53.

⁹ Davis, "Rites of Violence," op. cit., pp. 81-82.

¹⁰ Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) pp. 310-11.

¹¹ Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, op. cit., p. 311.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 131.

¹³ Author's interview with Mahmud Abouhalima, convicted co-defendant in bombing of the World Trade Center, United States Penitentiary, Lompoc California, August 19, 1997.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Dr. Muhammad Ibraheem el-Geyoushi, Dean of the Faculty of Dawah, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, May 30, 1990.

¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Rantisi, March 1, 1998.

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

¹⁷ Interview with Abouhalima, September 30, 1997.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 72-76. See also his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) pp. 171-83.

¹⁹ Jurgen Habermas, trans. by Thomas McCarthy, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

²⁰ The phrase originates with historian Darrin McMahon, in his fascinating book on the religious roots of the far right. D. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²¹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, op. cit., p. 116.

²² For a forceful statement of this thesis, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²³ I describe this "loss of faith" at length in Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*, op. cit., pp. 11-25.

²⁴ Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity--An Incomplete Project," reprinted in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 148.

²⁵ See, for instance, Roger Friedland, "When God Walks in History: The Institutional Politics of Religious Nationalism," in *International Sociology*.

²⁶ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 211.