

Book Reviews

Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terrorism in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

A spate of books has been hastily written or rushed to publication since the infamous attacks on New York and Washington, DC. But this book is not one of the crowd. *Terror in the Mind of God* was prepared when terrorism studies barely interested the news media, much less undergraduates, and when those who studied the phenomenon were still suspected of an odd and unhealthy fascination with a laughable, lunatic fringe.

The book was published in 2000 and might never have circulated much beyond academic libraries, but was rushed into paperback with a new preface in the autumn of 2001. Yet not only was it carefully prepared when few were paying attention, the book stands out because the author presents traditional, well-informed terrorist studies in an unusual way. He interviews terrorists.

In this interview process, the author is not merely journalistic. He has clearly read the literature on terrorism. Nor is his work merely a re-hash of the literature as other writers have recently got away with. And it is definitely not the grinding, boastful polemic of the sort that star policy-makers and politicians have foisted on the market.

The first half of the book explores a variety of terrorist movements and, more important, includes telling conversations with principles of those movements. Moreover, the author selects a range of subjects. In addition to the now familiar Islamic terrorists (including Mahmud Abouhalima who participated in the first attempt to bring down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993) are chapters on Zionists, Christian anti-abortionists, Sikhs, Hindus, and the queer cult of Aum Shinrikyo.

Each chapter begins with an adequate description of the movement and each ends by attempting to answer the question of how these people justify their violence. And here the commonalities emerge. The terrorists' call-to-duty supercedes any societal strictures or norms. They are among the few truly just, clear-eyed, and able people on God's earth. Their targets (but only sometimes the actual victims) perpetrate true evil. Other victims, whether attacked symbolically or who are incidental, or even accidental, casualties are only barely human – if human at all – their humanity having been drained from them by the evil enslavers. Alternatively, such victims are dismissed as willing co-conspirators to the dominant evil, or simply as ignorant, uncaring, self-absorbed by-standers. In any case, they are not innocents. They are simply irrelevant.

As for a soul, "they have none" says Abouhalima. "They're moving just like dead bodies." Or, as explained by Rabbi Meir Kahane, a man who

Abouhalima probably helped to murder, “war is war” and “we believe in collective justice.” In such a world, individuals cannot stand by. They are all soldiers, or they are sheep.

The second half of the book describes at length the commonalities the interviewees have already made clear. So, Juergensmeyer breaks no new ground as he moves into his theory of religious terrorism, but that is precisely why his writing seems so sensible and his conclusions drawn un-self-consciously. His themes are: that terrorists seek to have an impact far in excess of their numbers or military or economic power; that their act is purposely mind-numbing, mesmerizing “theater” meant to “elicit feelings of revulsion or anger”; that they attack symbolic targets because symbolism is one of the few resources they can exploit and without it they remain obscure if not powerless; war itself is symbolic and allows terrorists to see themselves in grandiose terms; and finally that terrorism requires an audience, and thus the target and the audience are not the same.

The author does not address the literature on terrorism directly and thus starts no quarrels. Historians may gripe nonetheless that Juergensmeyer does not offer enough deep background on the various movements his subjects represent. Sociologists might say his theory, particularly that of a “culture of violence,” is not explicit enough. Policy makers might add that there is scant meat on the bones of his response scenarios in the last chapter of the book. Finally, political scientists will recognize him as a sociologist, more concerned with group interactions, culture, and perceptions of legitimacy than with the *animus dominandi* of intellectually marginal but well-organized and determined leaders.

Nor does Juergensmeyer pick up the debate over whether the new terror is really new. He clearly sees the current resurgence of religious violence as something remarkable – as the subtitle of the book suggests – but he is not far out on a limb when he suggests that these days terrorism cloaked in religiosity stands out all the more starkly against a long trend of the secularization of governments and the absence of the great confrontation between two superpowers.

The work is all the more remarkable because Juergensmeyer does not come from the traditional, small groups interested in terrorism: law enforcement and a handful of political scientists. His specialty is the sociology of religion and he is the editor for a series of books published by the University of California Press on Comparative Religion and Society many of which focus on religious violence and nationalism. His own previous book, *New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, prepared the ground for this one. And, if only because the author presents such a lucid view of some of the most notorious terrorists of our day, this one belongs in even the smallest collection on terrorism.

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