



TYPE: Article

Title: Terror and the Sacred

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Source: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

Published by: Whitestone Publications

Stable URL: <https://jcrt.org/archives/03.2/hale/>

DOI (newest version): [10.17613/6h0jh-af706](https://doi.org/10.17613/6h0jh-af706)

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Hale - Book Profile: Terror and the Sacred - JCRT 3.2

Book Profiles:

R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000. 429 pages. ISBN: 0847685551.

Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 316 pages. ISBN: 0520223012.

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Like many in America, I was dumbfounded by the “events” of September 11. Add horrified and transfixed as well. A “grotesque obscenity” I heard one British newscaster say. So how do we make sense of such senselessness? How do we comprehend the incomprehensible?

3. Juergensmeyer and Appleby’s books offer us some tentative steps towards understanding the events of September 11. Not that we can ever hope to understand fully those who so greatly desire death for themselves and others. For those of us who believe in the sanctity of all life, such madness can never fully be understood.
4. Both books are big books, crammed with facts. Both books are also somewhat theoretical, but to different degrees.
5. Appleby’s theoretical orientation is less sophisticated than Juergensmeyer’s but also more ambitious. Attempting to build upon Rudolf Otto’s ideas regarding the “Holy” (Appleby prefers the word “sacred”) he tries to construct an interpretative framework for tolerance and understanding (p. 28-30). This gambit makes reading what would normally be an interesting and informative book rather tiresome. “A community’s *foundational experience* of the sacred assumes complex mythical, scriptural and ethical shape” (p.55 italics mine). These experiences are not just foundational but also “*primordial*” (p.78 italics mine). “The experience of the “sacred discloses... a transcendent source” with “all religious tradition [being] an ongoing attempt to symbolize and ritually reenact *experience* and to codify and refine...the holy” (p.55 italics mine). For those interested in reductionism ‘the reducing of religion to one (“primordial,” “foundational”) idea, or set of ideas’ I suggest starting with two contemporary critics of Otto’s who took him head on: E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Nuer Religion* or R.C. Zaehner’s *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*.
6. Appleby then goes on to say that experiences of the sacred are always ambivalent or ambiguous, and this “ambiguity characterizes human experience as any adult well knows” (p.29). The function of religion for Appleby is primarily as an interpreter of this ambiguity of the (experience of the) sacred. It acts as an “interpreter of the sacred” (p.8). Finally, it is Appleby’s conclusion that this ambiguity and ambivalence in religion “provides an opening, an opportunity to cultivate tolerance” (p.307).
7. Like so much of what was written prior to September 11, this particular discourse just seems like so much la-la talk. To say that ‘ambiguity characterizes human experience’ and then to follow it with a remark like ‘as any adult well knows’ sounds like the height of western liberal condescension. The so-called “adults” flying those hijacked jets into the World Trade

Center did not seem the least bit ambivalent or ambiguous. For someone as obviously as well informed as Appleby to assume that extremists and fundamentalists of any stripe are ever going to recognize their religion as simply comprised of various ambivalent and ambiguous interpretations of the sacred, is just, well, mind boggling. Isn't that why we even have terms like 'extremists' and 'fundamentalists' in order to signify inflexibility and intolerance?

8. But there is a deeper issue. It is a shame that people like Appleby no longer read authors such as E.Evans Pritchard and R.C. Zaehner. Pritchard and Zaehner spent much of their scholarly lives trying to show the uselessness of Otto's emotionalism when it came to the study of indigenous religions, ritualism, or the study of religious ethics. Not to mention the inappropriateness of such definitions when it comes to certain strains of Buddhism and Orthodox Judaism. Religious "experience" is an idea born out of Otto's liberal Protestantism, and while it may still find a home in that language game it does not seem suitable for a study on religious violence and terror.
9. Despite my theoretical aversions to Appleby's book, it remains quite informative. For example, the roots of the al-Qa'ida organization and its relationship to the teachings of Syyyid Qutb and Maulan Syyyid Abul Ala Maududi, make a fascinating read. And to Appleby's credit he has dug deep into the historical antecedents of today's terrorism, including its theoretical constructs.
10. Juergensmeyer's book is much more chilling and compelling. There are no sweeping definitions, no solutions, no attempts at fomenting some kind of mushy experientialism. Terror lies in the very mind of God himself. Conceived and condoned by God, terror is of the cosmological order. It is comprised of the forces of good versus evil, light versus darkness. In this Manichean scheme of things, even the notions of tolerance and moderation are hateful (179). What Appleby fails to understand and Juergensmeyer fully accepts, is that in this mindset, the very concepts of moderation and tolerance are the most loathsome forms of evil. This has always been a tough proposition for those of a more liberal persuasion to accept.
11. Everything is permissible for the cosmic warriors of God, since war is self-justifying (154). Juergensmeyer writes of the "Satan-ization" of the enemy in such conflicts, whereupon opponents are de-humanized and convenient for slaughter, since they have no ontological status. Juergensmeyer uses the examples of Osama bin Laden and Timothy McVeigh in this connection.
12. Juergensmeyer's discussion of sexuality is quite amusing. We have all heard about how terrorist suicide-bombers (they like to be called martyrs) in Israel as well as in America are promised many virgins upon their entrance to heaven. He wonders how a life of sexual repression and frustration might make these notions more enticing to the weak-minded. He calls these sexually repressed and frustrated Islamic extremists "cowboy monks." But Juergensmeyer speculates on other causes as well. And as he himself admits, the reasons for terrorism are as many as there are perpetrators. Economic, racial, social factors are all considered, as are the passions of desperation, anger, humiliation and social marginalization (191-2). Which one of these, or which combination is likely to result in terrorist acts is of course impossible to guess. But whatever the causes, Juergensmeyer is clear that the most successful means of combating terrorism is likely going to be the carrot and stick method employed by the Indian government in fighting Sikh extremists. This is much like the policy adopted by the Bush Administration in Afghanistan.

13. There is a bit of Old School versus New School in a comparison of Appleby and Juergensmeyer. It is maybe best summed up by Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he remarked on how “extraordinarily interested” his teacher Edmund Husserl was in Levy-Bruhl’s *Primitive Mythology*. Husserl had always maintained “that a mere imaginative variation of the facts would enable us to conceive of every possible experience we might have. In a letter to Levy-Bruhl that has been preserved, he seems to admit that the facts go beyond what we imagine... the imagination, itself, is unable to represent the possibilities of existence which are realized in different cultures.” (215) Husserl saw the limits of his own phenomenological enterprise. Our own experiences could not rise to the level necessary for the conception of all the facts in the world. There are just too many wild and bizarre things out there. Flying hijacked planes into skyscrapers is just one of those things. But phenomenology showed another crippling weakness on September 11. For who was able to “bracket” out their feelings of horror and pain (or delight and glee in the case of bin Laden) at the sight of such hideous devastation?

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Updated 07/28/21.
jcrt.org/archives/03.2/hale
