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Review Essay

Paradoxes of Religion and Terrorism

JOSEBA ZULAIKA

Bruce Lincoln (ed.), **Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An Interdisciplinary & Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays.** *New York: St. Martin's Press*, 1985. Pp.311. $35. ISBN 0-312-67061-3

Bruce Lincoln, **Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification.** *Oxford: Oxford University Press*, 1989. Pp.238, illus. ISBN 0-19-505757-0

What do Robespierre's Reign of Terror, millenial cults, the ritual killing of kings, the alleged institution of European witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, infamous massacres such as the one on St. Bartholomew's Day in France, macabre exhumations of corpses in revolutionary Spain during the 1930s, the Kenyan Mau Mau, the North American Ghost Dance, the Iranian revolution, and the like, have in common? That, upon reflection, they may force bold writers such as Bruce Lincoln to a despondent confession: 'It was not so much that the events were weird as it was our theories which were inadequate'. What can students of terrorism learn from the comparative studies of such bizarre phenomena? That, 'serious analysts (unlike polemicists) can dismiss no human action as aberrant but must seek the sources and meanings of even the strangest and most repugnant actions that on closer analysis often prove to be more revealing than the stereotypical, automatonic behaviors that we are pleased to think comprise "normal"'. The authors in the collection edited by Lincoln, as well as his own comparative studies of myth, ritual, and classification, provide a sustained effort to remove such unexplained historical events and cultural institutions from the realm of the aberrant.

These writers force on us nothing but the relations between 'Religion, Rebellion, Revolution'; the exercise is 'interdisciplinary' and 'cross-cultural'; invocations of revered ancestors, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Gluckman, Hobsbawm and others are well taken; yet nowhere are we deceived into believing that the dark obscurity of the subject has been finally unveiled. Indeed, we are reminded from the very first line that religion and revolution are 'two different classes of phenomena, both of them extreme types within their respective categories'; fortunately, however, the unbridgeable categorical domains ('What roles has religion played in revolutionary upheavals?') are side-stepped from the beginning by their translation into historical and cultural context ('What roles have ideas played in history?'). Aware that the traps of reified categories are hard to overcome, the various papers of the collection are a strong antidote against such misplaced categorizations.

Take, as an instance, the first label in the comparative scheme – 'religion'. Grotanelli begins by telling us that 'both religion and revolution mean something profoundly different in pre-industrial state societies than in industrial ones'; and concludes that 'the very definition of terms . . . is culturally determined, if not downright subjective'. Garrett likewise observes that 'there is a world of

perception, conviction, and action which is the world of popular religion, as distinguished from the more formal, more literate, and far more structured and institutionalized world of official religion'. Similarly, by rejecting either Marxism's 'opiate of the people', or the optimistic view of religion as 'the supreme way of redemption', Lanternari states that 'I believe that no absolute and simplistic theory concerning the historical and socio-cultural role of religion can be considered acceptable within a critical and dislectical perspective'. Burridge observes that 'what is religious is also clearly political, and what is seen as political is also deeply religious'.

As a compelling ethnographic instance, Jorgensen describes the starkly different uses to which 'religion' has responded among North American natives during the short period of a century. A simple list of the various stages is illustrative enough; the transformative movement of the Ghost Dance ritual in the context of oppression deprivation in 1869; this gave way to the interpretation of that religion as a harbinger of the millenium by the Mormons, who had some success in converting the natives to their religion; then Wovoka revived a second version of the Ghost Dance in 1889 which called for an accommodation to Whites and the strengthening of the Indian community; after dropping the Ghost Dance, the pre-contact Bear Dance was reactivated around 1892, its purpose being to bring good health to the people of the community; subsequently the Sun Dance religion, a redemptive religious movement born of misery and repression, became paramount among Utes and Shoshones, some of their leaders rebelling against tribal and federal administration in 1960; presently, after the rebellious acts of the 1970s, such as Wounded Knee, the movement has shifted from forms of Christian redemption towards the community well-being and spiritual power that can be gained from various Indian religious practices. If 'religion' can transform itself so chameleon-like into such different forms and substances from generation to generation in one single tradition, what can the *Ding an sich* of universal religion be cross-culturally? This applies no less to the other terms – rebellion, revolution or, for that matter, terrorism.

Then, further to shake our belief that 'religion' must refer to some identical reality, we are taken from the beliefs and practices of the Indians themselves into how their theoretical chiefs have proceeded in framing the category in question. This is the task of Robertson's paper, which in a brief survey shows us the philosophical and sociological perspectives on which the contemporary notion of religion is founded. He tells us that during the Enlightenment period, when the belief that revelatory religion was the major impediment to rationality was paramount, at least four ideal-typical positions (represented by Rousseau, Condorcet, Robespierre, and Montesquieu) can be delineated concerning the issue of the extent to which conventional religion, and the call for a substitute secular religion, were necessary. These debates continued during the nineteenth century mostly in the work of Hegel (who argued that modern societies needed both types of religion: the new forms of the State as the spiritual realization of the idea of religion, and the traditional private forms); Marx and Engels (which updated the straightforward anti-religious attitude of the previous century); Comte (who saw religion cognitively redundant but at the same time necessary for societal cohesion); and de Tocqueville (who advocated the promotion of religion as conductive to moral discipline and the viability of democracy).

Thus we arrive at the founders of the modern sociology of religion, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Max Weber (1864–1920) whose interest in it grew in

tandem with the notion of revolution in European societies, and who attempted to show that what the Enlightenment had heralded as rationality was not the antithesis of religion but had issued largely from religious-ethical foundations. Weber insisted on the connection between Protestant ethics and capitalism, and he emphasized the quasi-religious dimension of the French Revolution as the culmination of charisma – the belief in the power of 'the spirit' or inner-directed conscience. Likewise Durkheim wanted to discover the quintessential character of human societies and found it in the study of religion; going beyond the old distinction between faith and reason, a higher level of civil religion centred upon humanity was needed.

The point of this exercise is simple: if religion is indistinctly what these various authors claim it to be (Supreme Being, State, Morality, Charisma, Society, Spirit of Capitalism, and so on), then we had better consider first whether such a category, which can refer to things so vastly different, is not a rather empty one. We surely need general categories, but 'fake universals' become insurmountable obstacles to understanding; this is also what the authors of these two books alert us not to do with religion, namely, reduce it 'to a single, monolithic entity, whereas even in the politically and technologically simple societies, multiple religious forms, styles, contents, currents of opinion, and organizational structures are always present'. Thus, religion being so ubiquitous, any violence is likely to be 'religious', and any terrorism is possibly connected with some religious tradition, but the lesson is that we need to go beyond such generalizations and face directly the diversities of human conduct.

The case of Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94), with whom students of terrorism have a special debt for reputedly having coined the term and the concept of 'Terrorism', might be taken as illustrative of the religion/terrorism encounter. This man of Terror was also the leader of the Jacobins who sought to establish the Cult of the Supreme Being and who saw themselves as apostles going forth to establish a new religion. If you examine his spirited speeches searching for the founding rhetorics of Terror, you will be surprised to find that he opposed war and capital punishment; instead of being shocked by harangues inciting bloody terrorism, you might be lured by his impassioned pleas for personal virtue, public morality, and civic liberty. Robespierre, whose very name evokes horror and contempt, enjoyed the greatest of followings in his time for being perceived as a 'virtuous man'. Such penchant for morality in the original predecessor and quintessential 'terrorist' has not been totally forgotten among present-day terrorists either, as attested by some writers. Religion and revolution, morality and violence, self-transcendence and terrorism – these appear to be starkly antinomian realities, yet on closer inspection exceedingly related. René Girard has made well known the argument that 'violence and the sacred are inseperable'. The books under review provide first-rate materials to show how such problematic constellations take place in history and culture, and suggest analytic ways to approach and unravel them.

'The morality of terrorism' is indeed one of the ironic topics in the literature. Of course terrorists scorn any rules, whether civic or military. Yet the literature on the historical antecedents of modern terrorism has focused precisely on the religious culture behind the bloodiest of assassins. Such blind willingness to kill and be killed for an ulterior religious purpose appears most puzzling to modern man. That supreme 'Fear and Trembling' captivated the Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard (1813–55), who took the parable of Abraham ready to kill his

son Isaac as the paradigm of religious belief; the biblical story condenses the paradoxical absurdity of transcendent faith, be it religious or patriotic. Kierkegaard's argument about the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' is particularly revelatory of terrorism's play with purpose. The greatness of the tragic hero consists in his moral virtue, in that he abandons one expression of the ethical in order to find a higher form of it. This is not the case in the biblical story, Kierkegaard argues, for in Abraham we watch the teleological suspension of the ethical – the ethical is eclipsed altogether by a higher telos outside of it. For Abraham (as for the terrorist, we might add), the ethical is the temptation that will keep him from fulfilling the transcendent will. 'Abraham is therefore at no instant a tragic hero but something quite different, either a murderer or a believer'. Persons who are simultaneously priests and murderers are not uncommon in anthropological literature; it is the old theme of murder turned into ritual sacrifice. The writers of these volumes abound in the same topic with cases taken from the history of religions and world ethnography. The 'absurdity' of contemporary terrorism shares some of these paradoxical features.

The authors insist on the eschatological ideology of numerous uprisings and revolutionary movements. That is, they are not primarily concerned with causality but rather pay attention, as did Kierkegaard, to issues of purpose and teleology. Millennialisms offer compelling instances; they have been interpreted, Burridge tells us, as social 'sicknesses', 'irregularities', or 'madnesses'; they were 'marginal' phenomena, with the exception that 'the sickness that persists achieves a normality', and thus one may characterize all major religions as millennarian in their inception. Terrorist groups have also been described as 'millennial' and the above characterizations are frequent in the literature on terrorism. What they share is the manipulation of teleology, a topic towards which terrorism studies should redirect their analytical efforts instead of gravitating around issues of causality.

Paradox is a hard thing for the mind to accept. Walter Benjamin held that revolutions are the moments in history during which humanity is frozen to a standstill, in the effort to make real the myth of some non-existent past or future. Hence Robespierre's Revolution, with all its atrocities, was a *civilizational* event, Robertson reminds us. Durkheim and Weber were concerned with the highly problematic relationship between faith and reason; in particular, they insisted on the inevitable contradictions arising from the clash between the expansion of the impersonal bureaucracy and market versus the spread of the modern cult of the individual. Contemporary militarism condenses such paradoxes. It hardly needs to be added that terrorism, as a form of struggle, is deliberatedly paradoxical; leaving aside the Abraham-like *credo quia absurdum* of transcendental ideologies, the arrogation of the right to kill by a typically small group with no formal legitimation is what makes terrorism such a repugnant phenomenon.

In this respect Lincoln presents an instructive contrast between the nature of Swazi kingship prior to colonial domination and during the Boer and British colonial periods: the essential difference is that in pre-colonial times the Swazi kings possessed a formidable system of defense, namely, 'the right to kill' those suspected of sorcery against the throne. Ironically, the right of summary execution came to be a major weakness against the new colonial enemies who made royal executions a prominent item in their campaign to undermine independent Swazi rule. That is, Europeans were justified in executing Swazi kings on charges that these, so barbaric, themselves executed their enemies. This

is but a minor example in colonial history whereby depriving a group of the right to kill might be seen by the colonizers as a great step towards civilization, whereas for the colonized it marks essential subordination. As a royal councillor put it to Europeans, 'We do not see that unless you allow us to rule in our own way there is any independence at all. Our way of ruling is to kill each other, and what shall be the rule if we are not allowed to kill?'

Guerrilla or terrorist organizations use much the same logic of 'not allowing the state the monopoly of violence'. It is not difficult for them to point out in self-legitimation the atrocities in history and the present injustices in world affairs. The paradoxes between 'we' and 'they' regarding the barbaric right to kill – if they yes, then why not we; if we should hold a higher morality, then why not they, etc. – are too obvious for a Swazi or a terrorist to ignore. Even social scientists might find some incongruities between the unquestioning morality of militarism in liberal democracies versus the intrinsic criminality or substate terrorist struggle.

In the end, what these texts show is the relevance of anomaly for social science. In this regard, Lincoln's book on myth, ritual, and classification, with materials taken from the history of religions as well as from contemporary history, affords a much needed corrective. His dialectical use of force and discourse in the construction and deconstruction of society is provocative and convincing. For students of terrorism particularly significant is his thesis that 'a paradoxical relation and a dialectic tension thus exists between taxonomy and anomaly'. Anomaly and danger are closely related; taxonomic structures are potentially threatened by marginal anomalies that, in the very fact of their existence, reveal the shortcomings, contradictions and arbitrariness of such structures. Deliberate sacrilege, violation of taboos, displays of obscenity are common in revolutionary or millenial upheavals. This liminal stage of 'no rules' evokes the existence of underlying ritual processes before 'new rules' are found. 'To speak of such actions as the Terror of the French Revolution as ritual is not to deny the reality of their effects'. Regicides provide clear instances of such ritual institutions not only in the ethnographic literature but in European history as well.

One may differ with Lincoln's characterization of myth and ritual as relying overly on sentiment. Still, they prove to be incisive tools for unveiling the social dynamics of force and discourse. His criticisms of writers who invoke a nonritual sphere (i.e., productive labor) to talk about society's mystified discourses (ideology for Marx, ritual for M. Bloch, myth for Barthes) are crucially relevant in the study of subjects such as religion and revolution; he is skeptical of their assertion that true knowledge lies beyond Durkheim's notion that cognition is socially determined and their claims to 'afford an objective, nonmystified perspective that allows one to talk *about* society and not just *within* society'. To say that thought is socially determined does not imply that all thought replicates the established structures, he replies, but that all the contradictions of any given society as a whole are present in its thought and discourse. Lincoln's book provides examples that true change results not from using 'knowledge' to challenge ideological mystifications, but rather from activating social modes of discourse including myth and ritual, as effective instruments of transformation.

This might also be a noteworthy point for students of terrorism, dismayed as we are by the atrocious consequences of ethnocentric violence and all too ready to advance solutions grounded on moral indignation and scientific expertise. It seems that the last thing we want in the newly constituted discourse on terrorism is that the writer speaks from 'within'. Having written volumes on the savages, when

the armchair anthropologist James Frazer was asked whether he had ever seen one of them, 'God forbid!' was his reply. Knowledge on terrorists may also be premised, not only on never speaking to them, but on legitimizing a discourse in which any contact with the tabooed subjects is anathema. By emphasizing the nonritual causation of social determinants and psychological impulses, the whole phenomenon is so reduced to a residual category that the knowledge one gains about such anomaly is not even 'about society' but rather about a cancer-like pathology or an instinctive drive closer to nature than culture or history. These books about religion and revolution, society and discourse will assist those writers intent on rescuing weird phenomena from the realm of the aberrant and faced with the need to formulate new interpretations for old realities.

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