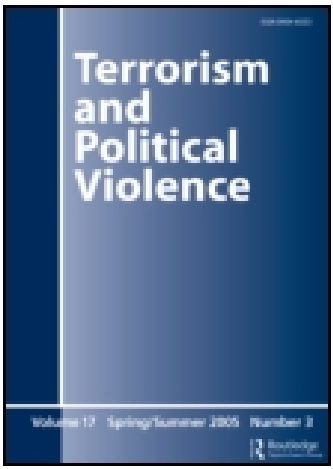

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Sacrifice and cosmic war

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Sacrifice and Cosmic War

MARK JUERGENSMEYER

A small design at the center of the cover of the paperback edition of René Girard's impressive *Violence and the Sacred* admirably states the theme.[1] There, in blood red, is the silhouette of a kneeling, bound human victim, his head on a chopping block. Above him stands the priestly figure, holding a menacing axe suspended in air in the final horrible moment before it falls and strikes its unhappy target. As the cover suggests, sacrifice is indeed at the heart of Girard's reflections on the relation of religion and violence – and human sacrifice at that. For in Girard's way of thinking, the idea of sacrifice is linked with the impulse of humans to destroy one another, even when this savage desire is symbolically deflected towards a scapegoat foe. What the ritual of sacrifice does, according to Girard, is to allow the impulse to be vented symbolically with relatively little bloodshed. This aspect of Girard's thought is also captured in the cover's design: the artist's axe, frozen in time, never actually falls.

Yet in recent years religious axes seem to be falling everywhere. For this reason, although it is easy to assent to the first premise of Girard's thesis – that sacrifice is an important and frequent characteristic of religious imagination – it remains open to question whether sacrificial rites and symbols discourage violence in the real world, including the sort of religious terrorism that we have seen so much of in the past decade. Is this terrorism due only to the failure of religious ritual to function correctly, creating what Girard calls a 'sacrificial crisis'? Or, when ritual swells 'the surging tide of impure violence instead of channelling it', as Girard puts it,[2] is it due to something else, perhaps a tendency towards violence more endemic to religion than Girard's theories would admit?

In this essay I want to reflect on these questions. Although enormously indebted to Girard for stimulating my thinking about these matters, I will look for a strand of logic somewhat different from the one proposed by Girard to comprehend the role of sacrifice in religious thought and to discern the connection between symbolic violence and violence that is actually aimed at harming another person. The difference between my approach and Girard's is partly a matter of our starting points. My interest in the topic has come from analyses of contemporary acts of

violence rather than textual images of them. The ideas with which I have worked emerged from my research on militant Sikhs in India, Sinhalese Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka, and other present-day religious revolutionaries around the world.[3] I found in all of these cases that religious language is combined with specific attempts to impose perceptions of order on disorder. Those who attempt to impose their notion of order feel that there is a basic conflict between the two, and the battle between order and disorder is ultimately waged on a cosmic plane. It is this grand struggle, sometimes mythic and sometimes meta-physical, that seems to lie only slightly beneath the real engagements of religious activists, and that often connects their acts with what Girard rightly identifies as that other, safer, form of religious violence: the sacrificial event.

The Centrality of Sacrifice

The altar – symbol of a sacred chopping block – and the priest, originally a sacred executioner, remain today at the focal point of worship throughout the world in a surprising variety of religious contexts. They, and the notions of sacrifice and martyrdom that lie behind them, are so integral to religion that without them many religious concepts would be almost unthinkable.

One finds sacrificial acts at the center of some of the most ancient religious traditions. Many of the Vedic texts of Hinduism, which are at least 2,500 years old, seem to be formulae for performing animal sacrifices. The Vedic Agnicayana ritual – some 3,000 years old and arguably the world's oldest ritual still being performed – involves the elaborate construction of a sacrifical altar on which is made an offering. Today the offering is *ghi*, butter oil, which might well be a stand-in for the blood originally shed by a sacrificial animal.[4] To take another example from the Western tradition, the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible – virtually a guidebook for priestly conduct – features especially the proper conduct of sacrificial acts; the festival events of ancient Judaism, and the very architecture of its temple, were organized around animal sacrifice.

Sacrifice is also a central theme in Judaism's most famous off-shoot, Christianity. The New Testament contains a sacrificial paradox, however, for its most holy figure largely eschews the role of priest; instead he plays the role of the sacrificed lamb.[5] The paragon of pathos that Jesus provides is a beacon to the whole of Christendom. According to Girard it is this identification with the sacrificial victim that makes Christianity unique.[6] It is also what makes sacrifice no longer necessary

in Christianity, since Jesus, the perfect offering (and in Girard's terms, the perfect rival to oneself), has himself ended the spiral of competition between oneself and one's ideal rival that leads to the violence that requires new sacrificial scapegoats.

Perhaps for that reason – or simply because of the trivialization that comes with familiarity – in modern-day Christianity the sacrifice of Jesus is sentimentalized. One wonders that familiarity can prevent Christians from being repulsed by the central symbol of the faith: an execution device from which, at least in the Catholic tradition, the dying body still hangs. In some versions of the symbol, such as in Latin American Catholicism, the images are bloody indeed. And yet they are safely bloody. They are such caricatures of crucifixion that they domesticate the act; so too do such pious and comforting Protestant hymns as 'The Old Rugged Cross', 'Washed in the Blood of the Lamb', and 'There is a Fountain Flowing with Blood'. In conjuring up the terrible event of Christ's execution, the image is artistically diffused: the awful image is softened and the memory of it is eased by theological interpretations.

The idea of a hero, like Jesus, offering him or herself as a sacrificial victim is not unique to Christianity. Self-sacrifice – martyrdom – may be found in several ancient traditions. An early version of this idea is to be found in the Jewish notion of kiddush hashem (purification through holding true to the name of God). When faced with an oppressor, Jewish leaders would defend the faith to their deaths rather than betray their allegiance to it, and by so doing they became sanctified. The whole of the nation Israel became sanctified in the suffering role – implicitly the sacrificial victim's role – foreseen by prophets such as Isaiah. This theme in the Hebrew Bible no doubt had a great deal of influence on the New Testament's notion of self-sacrifice, and it was probably also in the background of the early Christian Church's concept of sainthood. The word 'saint' means having become sacred; and the first Christians to be sanctified in that way were the Christian martyrs persecuted by the Romans.

With these Jewish and Christian themes to precede it, it is no surprise that in Muslim thought martyrdom also became a prominent motif. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Shiite Islam, where the memorial day of the suffering of the martyr Husain is the central festival of the tradition. During the month of Muharram, Shiites throughout the world parade through city streets, flagellating themselves with whips and, in some cases, with barbed wire, reminding themselves of the suffering of their victim hero.

Sikhism, an offshoot of medieval devotional Hinduism that flourished in a region of northern India dominated by Muslim rule, may well have

been influenced by the Islamic notion of martyrdom. The concept is central to the faith. One of the ten gurus who founded the tradition – Guru Tegh Bahadur – is perceived as a martyr to hostile Mogul forces, and many of the most glorified heroes in Sikh history were martyred as well. One of these was Baba Deep Singh, whom modern religious artists portray as being so valiant in his struggle against the foes of Sikhism that he fought on even after his head was severed from his body. With such a reputation, it should not be surprising that the most recent leader of the order founded by him became a martyr as well. Baba Deep Singh's spiritual descendent, Jernail Singh Bhindranwale, led a militant band of Sikhs in a seemingly suicidal mission against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; he was himself killed in her army's invasion of Sikhism's major shrine, the Golden Temple at Amritsar. In retaliation, Mrs Gandhi was assassinated – some pious Indians would say martyred – a few months later.

Soon after Mrs Gandhi's death, villagers from the rural areas surrounding Delhi came in long lines to her house to give offerings in front of pictures of the fallen leader as they would to images of a temple goddess. The reason why some Hindus could regard Mrs Gandhi as a marytr is that Hinduism has a precedent for such a concept. In the act of *sati*, when a widow throws herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, she becomes sanctified. Indeed, she becomes virtually a god.[7]

There are differences, however, between the martyrdom of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre and the martyrdom of Baba Deep Singh. The most obvious one is that the latter takes place in a time of war. Is it appropriate to speak of martyrdom on the battlefield as a sacrificial act? If so, the lines have blurred between symbolic and real violence, and between sacredotal and political events.

It seems to me that the line between the symbolic and the real is frequently a blurry affair, and that the themes of sacrifice, martyrdom and religious warfare intertwine in virtually every religious tradition. They are conceptually linked. They are all about destruction, of course, but more importantly they are about human destruction on behalf of a divine purpose. For that reason, they are related; each can be explained in terms of the others. Sacrifice can be regarded as a symbolic form of warfare or as symbolic form of noble self-destruction (martyrdom); martyrdom can be seen as the internalization of sacrifice or of war; and religious warfare can be viewed as a litany of sacrifice and martyrdom. But which is primary and which are secondary?

From Girard's point of view, it is sacrifice that is basic, for it symbolically portrays a horrible and hidden desire. This is the longing to

conquer and destroy something (or rather, someone) intimately similar to oneself: one's rival. The rival is one who, in Girard's terms, 'serves as a model for the subject [oneself], not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires'.[8] To conquer the rival one has to destroy it. But before one does, the rival will fight back, and thus will begin a hideous spiral of reprisals and counterviolence. To prevent this, and the rift in the social fabric that occurs when one's rivals are one's own friends and kinfolk, one seeks a sacrificial victim who can symbolically stand in for the rival and deflect the brunt of the violence.

Thus, in Girard's view, sacrifice is basic to human interaction because it is an expression of an even more basic human need: identity. One wants to understand one's self, and in order to do so one identifies with an idealized other, who becomes one's rival. The identification with one's rival and the craving for whatever the rival craves is what Girard calls 'mimetic desire', the desire to imitate. He regards it as a fundamental aspect of the human condition; mimetic desire in Girard's reckoning is virtually instinctual.

This explanation for the origins of sacrifice is hauntingly familiar. Freud advances a similar thesis in *Totem and Taboo*, although here the motor that drives the sacrificial vehicle is not mimetic desire but oedipal aggression.[9] Freud thought that human nature possessed a destructive instinct, and to keep it from tearing apart a family or tribe or civil society, its violence had to be visited upon a sacrificial foe. Freud concluded that this violent streak was not just destructive but self-destructive, a form of thanatos, a death wish. This desire to purify oneself through suicide was for him a sort of martyrdom, and in that sense one could say that Freud regarded martyrdom as the primary impulse. Violence aimed at another person and the sacrificial acts that are devised to contain it are the consequences.

One might ask whether Freud was right in thinking that aggression and self-destruction are instinctual building-blocks of the human condition, and Girard raises this and other questions in his penetrating analysis of Freud in *Violence and the Sacred*.[10] One could also question, in turn, whether Girard was right in the concepts he chose to replace Freud's. I do not see that Girard's mimetic desire is more basic to the human condition, or more all-encompassing as a motive for violence, than Freud's instincts of aggression and sexual competition.

For the moment, however, let us say that the matter cannot be easily settled, and that Freud and Girard may be equally right in their attributions of a motive for violent behavior. Moving away from the subject of motivation, and returning to the displacement of violence

and the role that religion plays in it, according to both Freud and Girard, symbolic sacrifice is the primary mechanism for displacing violence.

In considering an alternative to theories of symbolic displacement based on sacrifice, my hypothesis is that images of religious warfare are prior to both sacrifice and martyrdom in the mechanism of symbolically displacing violence, and that the motivation behind the creation of these images of spiritual war is a basic longing for order.

Religious Language and the Language of Ultimate Order

Soon after the outbreak of the Gulf War on 16 January 1991, religious television programs throughout the United States capitalized on the theme and drew parallels between the conflict and the spiritual struggle of everyday life. One television evangelist dressed up in desert battle fatigues and stood in front of a battle bivouac set. 'There is a war going on', he sternly warned his viewers, explaining that 'the devil has invaded our minds and hearts with bad thoughts and fear of the unknown.'[11] Only a fully-fledged spiritual assault comparable to that of the allied forces in Operation 'Desert Storm', he implied, would be able to liberate the soul.

This television evangelist is hardly an anomaly among preachers of most religious faiths. The rhetoric of warfare is as prominent in modern religious vocabulary as is the language of sacrifice, and virtually all cultural traditions are filled with martial metaphors. The ideas of a Salvation Army in Christianity and a Dal Khalsa ('Army of the faithful') in Sikhism, for instance, are used to characterize a disciplined religious organization. Images of spiritual warfare are even more common. The Muslim notion of jihad is the most noticable example, but Protestant preachers everywhere encourage their flocks to wage war against the forces of evil. Their homilies might be followed with hymns that speak of becoming like 'Christian soldiers', fighting 'the good fight', and struggling 'manfully onward'.

In a recent Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Harvard University, the author, Harriet Crabtree, surveyed the images that are prominent in what she called the 'popular theologies' projected in the hymns, tracts and sermons of modern Protestant Christianity. She finds the 'model of warfare' to be prominent.[12] What is significant, Crabtree states, is that the image is meant to be taken in a more than metaphorical way. Not only do the writers of hymns urge 'soldiers of the Cross' to 'stand up, stand up for Jesus' symbolically, but in a real, albeit spiritual, combat. Preachers and religious writers such as Arthur Wallis claim that 'Christian living *is* war'. Wallis explains that the warfare is

not 'a metaphor or a figure of speech' but a 'literal fact'; the character of the war, however – 'the sphere, the weapons, and the foe – are spiritual rather than material'.[13]

In earlier times warfare was at least as common to religion as sacrificial rites; perhaps more so. Whole books of the Hebrew Bible are devoted to the military exploits of great kings, their contests relayed in gory detail. The New Testament does not take up the battle cry immediately, but the later history of the Church does, supplying a Christian record of bloody crusades and religious wars. In India, warfare is part of the grandeur of mythology. The great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are seemingly unending tales of conflict and military intrigue. These epics, more than Vedic rituals, define subsequent Hindu culture. The indigenous name for India, Bharata, comes from the epics, as does the name, Sri Lanka, given to Ceylon by its people after independence. The epics continue to live in contemporary southern Asia. The soap opera versions of the epics produced in the mid-1980s were the most popular television series ever aired in India (and, considering that country's vast population, perhaps the most-watched television series in history).

Even cultures that do not have a strong emphasis on sacrifice have persistent images of religious war. In Sri Lanka, for example, Sinhalese legendary history as recorded in the Pali Chronicles, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa* – which have assumed almost canonical status in Sri Lankan society – amounts to a triumphal record of great battles waged by legendary Buddhist kings.

The interesting thing about the battles of the *Mahavamsa*, the Bible and the Hindu epics is that they are generally not moral struggles; unlike the Manichaean notion of a cosmic conflict between good and evil, these battles testify to a different sort of ultimate encounter. The motif that runs through these mythic and legendary scenes of warfare is the theme of 'us' versus 'them': the known versus the unknown. In the battles of the Bible and such epics as the Ramayana, the enemy are often foreigners who come from the shady edges of known civilization: places like Babylonia or Lanka. These murky foes embody some of the conceptual ambivalence of their locations: that is, they stand in for what is chaotic and uncertain about the world, including those things that defy categorization altogether. In cases where the enemy possesses a familiar face – as in the Mahabharata, where the war is between sets of cousins – the theme of chaos is carried out by the battle itself. It is the wickedness of warfare that the battle depicts, as the mythic figure Arjuna observes at the outset of his encounter with Lord Krishna on the battlefield.[14] To fight in such a circumstance is to assent to the disorder of this world, knowing that in a grander sense this disorder is corrected by a cosmic

order that is beyond killing and being killed. Such is the message of Lord Krishna in his colloquy to Arjuna that is called the *Bhagavad Gita*.[15] Ultimately such struggles are battles against the most chaotic aspect of reality: death.[16]

Crabtree asserts that the image of warfare is attractive because it 'situates the listener or reader in the religious cosmos'.[17] This is true, but the opposite is also the case: the sense of being situated in a religious cosmos leads naturally to images of warfare. The reason this is so is that religious rhetoric always, ultimately, affirms the primacy of order. In order to affirm the primacy of order, it must conquer disorder, and nothing is more disorderly than violence. Thus religious harmony and violent disruption are locked together in a cosmic struggle. Religion must deal with violence, not only because violence is unruly and has to be tamed, but because religion, as the ultimate statement of meaningfulness, has always to assert the primacy of meaning in the face of chaos. For that reason, also, religion is order-restoring and life-affirming even though it may justify the taking of life in particular instances, as when a heroic or sacrificial act is seen as tipping the balance of power and allowing a struggle for order to succeed.

This notion of religion as the grand purveyor of order in the world is not my view alone. The recent attempts of a number of scholars to find a definition of religion that is not specific to any cultural region or historical period have also settled on meaningfulness and order as religion's defining characteristic. As my earlier article on this topic observed, these definitions reach for ways of stating that religion gives significance to the inchoate and unruly aspects of daily life.[18] Clifford Geertz, for instance, sees religion as the effort to integrate everyday reality into a pattern of coherence that takes shape on a deeper level.[19] Robert Bellah also thinks of religion as the attempt to reach beyond ordinary reality in the 'risk of faith' that allows people to act 'in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability'.[20] Peter Berger specifies that such faith is an affirmation of the sacred, which acts as a doorway to a different kind of reality.[21] Louis Dupre prefers to avoid the term 'sacred', but integrates elements of both Berger's and Bellah's definitions into his description of religion as 'a commitment to the transcendent as to *another* reality'.[22]

What all of these definitions have in common is their emphasis on a certain experience of meaningfulness shared within particular communities over a long period of time. It is an experience of a stratum of reality deeper than the one we know in everyday life. As Durkheim, whose thought is fundamental to each of these thinkers, was adamant in observing, religion has a more encompassing force

than can be suggested by any dichotomization of the sacred and the profane. To Durkheim, the religious point of view includes both the notion that there is such a dichotomy, and that the sacred aspects of it will always, ultimately, dominate the profane.[23] Following Durkheim, and incorporating elements from the above definitions of religion, religion could be described as the shared perception that there is a difference between reality as it appears and as it really is (or has been, or will be), and the shared conviction that the real order does (or will) ultimately reign supreme.

This definition helps us think of religion as a kind of language, or a way of looking at the world, rather than as an experience or a set of beliefs.[24] When we talk of the various 'religions', then, we mean the communities that have a tradition of sharing a particular set of images and terms for speaking about meaningful things in the world. The use of religious language (or rather, the language of religion) implies that there is more to life than appearances suggest; or to put it another way, that there is an essential conflict between appearance and deeper reality. The religious way of thinking implies that the deeper reality holds a degree of permanence and order quite unobtainable by ordinary means. As many religious people would affirm, the city of God is more real than any made by humans. Yet as Durkheim reminds us, the sphere of religion is not just the sacred realm alone, it is both sacred and profane areas of existence; it is the sacred encompassing the profane. The conflict between the two is what religion is about: religious language contains images both of grave disorder and tranquil order, bound together in a cosmic struggle. It often holds out the hope that despite appearances to the contrary, order eventually will triumph, and disorder will be contained.

There is nothing in this view that requires religion to be violent, but it does lead one to expect religious language to make sense of violence and to incorporate it in some way into the world view it expresses. Violence, after all, shocks one's sense of order and has the potential for causing the ultimate disorder in any person's life: physical destruction and death. Since religious language is about the tension between order and disorder, it is frequently about violence.

Religious images allow for peace and order to conquer violence and chaos; so it is understandable that the violence religion portrays is in some way limited or tamed – for instance, in the normalcy with which the Christians' eucharist is eaten and their blood-filled hymns are sung. In ritual, violence is symbolically transformed. The blood of the eucharistic wine is ingested by the supplicant and becomes part of living tissue; it brings new life. In song a similarly calming transformation occurs as the images are ingested aurally. For as Christian theology explains, in Christ

violence has been bridled. Christ died in order for death to be defeated, and his blood is sacrificed so that his faithful followers will be rescued from a punishment as gruesome as his.

Other religious traditions deal with violence in much the same way. In the Sikh tradition, for instance, the two-edged sword provides an image of the domestication of violence. This familiar symbol is worn on lockets and proudly emblazoned on shops and garden gates. It is at the forefront of worship centers in Sikh *gurdwaras*, where it is treated as reverently as Christians treat their own emblem of destruction and triumph, the cross. Other images of violence in Sikhism also function like their counterparts in Christianity: the gory wounds of Sikh martyrs, like those of Christian saints, bleed on in calendar art, reminding the faithful that because their blood was shed, the faithful need fear no harm. Sikh theologians and writers, like their Christian counterparts, are eager to explain the meaning of such symbols and stories allegorically. They point toward the war between belief and unbelief that rages in each person's soul. In a similar way, interpreters of Jewish and Islamic culture have transformed the martial images in their traditions. The chroniclers of the Hebrew Bible saw acts of war as God's vengeance. So too have Muslim historians; and some Islamic mystics speak of the true jihad as the one within each person's soul.

Rituals of sacrifice fit into this general pattern of religious rhetoric: they are enactments of cosmic war. Like the enemy in a religious battle, the sacrifical victim is often ambiguous or categorically out of place, and is therefore a symbol of disorder. Animals used for sacrifice, for instance, are usually domestic beasts, and are for that reason in the ambiguous middle ground between the animal kingdom and the human. If the victim is human, he is frequently also from an ambiguous category: a captured enemy made into a member of the household, for instance – a phenomenon that occurred among Huron and Seneca Indians.[25] Or, as in the case of Amal martyrs in Lebanon, the sacrificial victims are unmarried men of marriageable age.[26] In the case of the *sati* conducted by Indian widows, the victims are inauspicious anomalies: married women bereft of living husbands. Sometimes it is God himself or herself who is offered up, or a divinely inspired person such as Jesus or Husain, whose very existence is an anomaly. It is not their sacrifice that makes them divine; their almost unhuman holiness is precisely what makes them candidates for sacrifice.[27]

Thus images of sacrifice, like other symbols of violence in religion, are ordinarily symbols of a violence conquered – or at least put in place – by the larger framework of order that religious language provides. But if religious images are supposed to conquer violence, one must

ask the obvious but difficult question: why and how are these symbolic presentations of violence occasionally linked to real acts of violence? Ordinarily they should prevent violent acts by allowing the urges to conquer and control to be channelled into the harmless dramas of ritual. Yet we know that the opposite is sometimes the case. The violence of religion can be savagely real.

When the Cosmic War Becomes Real

What about real acts of religious violence? The death squads of Sikh and Sinhalese revolutionaries, the terrorist acts of Lebanese and Egyptian Muslims, and the religious soldiers of militant Jewish and Christian activists are all engaged in violence in direct and significantly non-symbolic ways. At first glance it would appear that their actions do not result in the peaceful displacement of disorder that ritualized forms of religious violence produce. At second glance, however, it would appear that some of these real cases of violence fit the pattern after all, when the violence is committed in a ritualized and symbolic way. Some of the acts themselves – such as the hijacking of American planes by Muslim terrorists and the murder of a busload of Hindu pilgrims in the Himalayan foothills by a band of radical Sikh youths – are done dramatically. These are abnormal, illegal, shocking acts that are done with the intention of vividly displaying the destructive power of violence.

All acts of killing are violent, of course, but unlike murder committed in the context of ordinary warfare or capital punishment, these acts seem deliberately designed to elicit feelings of revulsion and anger from those who witness them.[28] In some cases the killing has taken the form of religious sacrifice.[29] Yet most of these acts of religious violence are less like sacrifice than they are like war. Of course one can think of religious warfare as a blend of sacrifice and martyrdom, or even as an exchange between the two, where one sacrifices members of the enemy's side and offers up martyrs on one's own. But behind this gruesome litany is something that encompasses both sacrifice and martyrdom: the triumph of sacred order over the disorder of the profane world.

There is a difference between wars justified by religion, however, and religious wars. It is one thing when the moral sanction of religion is brought to bear on such worldly and non-spiritual matters as political struggles. It is quite another when the struggles themselves are seen primarily as religious events. The crusades, for instance, are examples from Christian history when a military expedition was carried out with religious zeal. To engage in such a struggle was a salvific act. Many of the present-day religious revolutions are conducted with the same spiritual

intensity, and are regarded as carrying a similar power of salvation for those who take part in them. These revolutionary activities are not just political exercises justified by religion, they are perceived by the faithful as facets of a more fundamental confrontation. Conflicts in the real world are linked to an invisible, cosmic war: the spiritual struggle between order and disorder, light and darkness, faith and doubt.

When the militant Sikh leader, Jernail Singh Bhindranwale, exhorted his followers to action, his rhetoric was crowned with the image of struggle: a 'struggle . . . for our faith, for the Sikh nation, for the oppressed . . .'.[30] On the personal level it was the tension between faith and the lack of faith; on the cosmic level it was the battle between truth and evil. Often his rhetoric was vague about who the enemy really was. 'In order to destroy religion', Bhindranwale informed his congregation, 'mean tactics have been initiated', and they came from 'all sides and in many forms'.[31] But rather than explain what these forces were, who were behind them, and why they would want to destroy religion, Bhindranwale dwelled instead on what should be the response: a willingness to fight and defend the faith – if necessary, to the end. 'Young men: with folded hands, I beseech you', Bhindranwale implored, reminding them that the ultimate decision between truth and evil was up to them.[32] Since the cosmic war is waged against disorder, it is understandable that the foes are amorphous; they are, in fact, symbols for amorphousness itself.

This link between a worldly struggle and the cosmic one is found in the rhetoric of other religious activists as well. 'Life is faith and struggle', says Khomeini, indicating that the notion of fighting is basic to human existence, and on a par with religious commitment.[33] Khomeini's one-time associate, Banisadr, wrote at some length about the notion of struggle in Islam, explaining how, although the monotheism of Islam will not allow for the notion of a struggle between the world and the spirit – for it does not recognize that duality – it does allow for a struggle against duality itself.[34] When Khomeini and Banisadr talk about the struggle against evil and injustice in these vague terms, they are at home with preachers in every religious tradition who speak about the need to struggle against a generalized sense of falsehood and unbelief.

What makes the language of Banisadr and Khomeini different from the language used by many of their fellow preachers in Islam and elsewhere is that they see the struggle occurring on a social and political plane. When Khomeini prays to his 'noble God for protection from the evil of every wicked traitor' and asks Him to 'destroy the enemies', he has particular traitors and enemies in mind.[35] His list of the 'satanic' forces that are out to destroy Islam include Jews, of course, but also the

even 'more satanic' Westerners. When he refers to these evil Westerners Khomeini is not speaking of Christians, particularly, but of merchants, politicians and corporate leaders with 'no religious belief' who see Islam as 'the major obstacle in the path of their materialistic ambitions and the chief threat to their political power'.[36] Prior to the Iranian revolution, the Shah was understood as a companion of these satanic forces and a tool of colonialists.[37] As in the case of the radical Sikhs' enemies, the Ayatollah's foes are often vaguely described.

Interestingly the Ayatollah's diatribes identify American colonialism as a threat to Islamic faith as well as to social and political interests: 'All the problems of Iran and of the Moslems are the work of the foreign colonialists and the work of America', Khomeini asserts.[38] On another occasion, the Ayatolloh blends political, personal and spiritual issues together in generalizing about the cosmic foes – now described as Western colonialism – and about 'the black and dreadful future' which 'the agents of colonialism, may God Almighty abandon them all', have in mind for Islam and the Muslim people.[39]

Christians supporting the Sandinista revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua also perceived their opponents as being more than political enemies: they were cosmic foes, sometimes amorphously described. Their's were not just ordinary political conflicts, they implied, but conflicts that had sacral dimensions. Ernesto Cardenal explains that the revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua was 'totally different from the case of political parties that are all trying to come to power' in what he describes as 'a normalized, organized country', Cardenal searches for biblical metaphors in explaining what made the revolution in Nicaragua different: 'We're taking sides, yes – with the good Samaritan'. He goes on to say that 'here you have to take sides, you have to be partisan. Either you're with the slaughtered or you're with the slaughterers. From a gospel point of view I don't think there was any other legitimate option we could have made'.[40]

In Sri Lanka, the metaphors of sacred struggle are drawn from Buddhist theology. 'We live in a time of *dukkha*', a militant bhikkhu explained.[41] As he elaborated this point it became clear that he was more than simply restating the first of the Four Noble Truths, that all life is suffering. In the bhikkhu's mind the concept of suffering – *dukkha* – had a definite social significance. 'We live in an immoral world', he stated, using the term *adhammic*, which can also be translated as 'disorderly' or 'irreligious'. Behind the notion is the conflict between *dhamma* and *adhamma* – order and disorder, religion and irreligion – and by invoking that image, he couched the political concerns that he and other Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka have expressed in the most ultimate of terms.

Right-wing Jewish activists in Israel also use the images of cosmic war to justify their actions. Rabbi Meir Kahane, for instance, speaks of God's vengeance against the Gentiles which began with the humiliation of the Pharaoh in the Exodus from Egypt over three thousand years ago and continues today with the humiliation of the Gentiles that results in the creation of Israel.[42] 'When the Jews are at war', Kahane says, 'God's name is great'.[43] An Israeli activist who was once arrested for his participation in a plot to blow up the Muslim's Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem echoes Kahane's words, and claims that 'God always fights against His enemies', adding that activists such as himself 'are the instruments of this fight'.[44] Once again, the identity of the enemy – like the cosmic foe itself – is beyond any easy description or demarcation.

Summary

In the rhetoric of religious activists in Israel, Iran, India, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, it is the image of warfare, rather than sacrifice, that is most frequently invoked in describing and justifying contemporary instances of religious violence. Elsewhere I develop at length the implications of this invocation and attempt to show why religious language is easily exploited for political purposes by activists seeking a moral justification for violence, and why religion is part of new nationalist movements world wide.[45] Many of these movements are violent in their rejection of secular nationalism in favor of more culturally specific forms of democracy. Cosmic warfare, in these cases, is more than just a metaphor; it is the grand context in which all of life's struggles, including political ones, make sense. Cosmic war and real war become one.

This article has tried to show that violent images are endemic to religious ways of thinking because of the nature of religion. At the heart of religious language is the attempt to impose order on disorder. The effort to impose order involves the encompassing of chaos by a grander scheme, and this means that images of chaos (including the most chaotic things imaginable, violence and death) must be conjured up so that chaos may be contained. It also means that there is sometimes the perception of an encounter between the two, order and disorder; it is a struggle that is frequently imagined as proceeding on a cosmic plane. It is when this cosmic war is confused with a struggle in the social world that religious violence becomes savagely real.

This is a somewhat different explanation of religious violence than the one offered by Girard. But my point of view does affirm the value of many of Girard's insights, including his suggestion that violence may

be displaced symbolically through sacrificial rites. When these rituals help to defuse violent impulses – including especially those associated with notions of religious war – they are indeed blessed acts.

NOTES

1. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), orig. published as *La violence et le sacre* (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1972).
2. Ibid., p.40.
3. See my 'The Logic of Religious Violence,' in David Rapoport (ed.), *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, (London: Frank Cass, and New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.172–192; and my 'What the Bhikkhu Said: Reflections on the Rise of Militant Religious Nationalism,' *Religion*, Vol. 20, (Spring 1990), pp.53–75.
4. See J. Frits Staal, in collaboration with C. V. Somayajipad and M. Itti Ravi Nambudiri, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Vol. 1, (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), p.18.
5. While the theme of Christ as suffering servant is dominant in the Christian tradition, its theology is not entirely united on this point. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament, for instance, portrays Jesus as both priest and sacrifical offering.
6. See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1986) (orig. pub. as *Le bouc emissaire*, Paris: Grasset, 1985).
7. For explanations for the continuing significance of *sati* in India today, see John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *New Light on Sati* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
8. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.145.
9. For Girard's perceptive and appreciative critique of Freud in general and *Totem and Taboo* in particular, see *Violence and the Sacred*, pp.169–222.
10. Ibid.
11. Rev. Wayne E. Anderson, 'Battle Cry' television program, KWHE-TV, Channel 14, Honolulu, I, 30 Jan. 1991.
12. Harriet Crabtree, 'The Quest for True Models of the Christian Life: An Evaluative Study of the Use of Traditional Metaphor in Contemporary Popular Theologies of the Christian Life,' Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1989. Her findings with regard to warfare are summarized in her article, 'Onward Christian Soldiers? The Fortunes of a Traditional Christian Symbol in the Modern Age,' *Bulletin of the Center for the Study of World Religion, Harvard University*, Vol. 16, No 2, (1989–90), pp.6–27.
13. Quoted in Crabtree, 'Onward Christian Soldiers', p.10. The italics are in the original.
14. *Bhagavad Gita*, Ch. 1, verse 45.
15. *Bhagavad Gita*, Ch. 2, verses 19–34.
16. Ibid. As Ernst Becker has observed in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, religious imagination serves to enlarge one's sense of the potential for life and deny death altogether. Although in general I agree with Becker, he is not right in every case: it is possible to employ the language of sacrifice, marytrdom and warfare to reassert the primacy of structure over chaos in general, rather than death in particular.
17. Crabtree, 'Onward Christian Soldiers', p.7.
18. Juergensmeyer, 'The Logic of Religious Violence,' p.178.
19. Clifford Geertz defines religion as 'a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with

such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' ('Religion as a Cultural System', reprinted in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, (1972), p.168.

20. Robert Bellah, 'Transcendence in Contemporary Piety,' in Donald R. Cutler, *The Religious Situation: 1969*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p.907.
21. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p.38. See also his *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
22. Louis Dupre, *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life*, (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1976, p.26. For a discussion of Berger and Dupre's definitions, see Mary Douglas, 'The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change', *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (Winter 1982), pp.1–19.
23. Durkheim describes the dichotomy of sacred and profane in religion in the following way: 'In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. . . . The sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common . . . In different religions, this opposition has been conceived in different ways' (Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans by Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin., 1976), [orig. published in 1915], pp.38–39). Durkheim goes on to talk about the sacred things that religions encompass; but the first thing he says about the religious view is the perception that there is this dichotomy.
24. On this point I am in agreement with Wilfred Cantwell Smith who suggested some years ago that the noun 'religion' might well be banished from our vocabulary, and that we restrict ourselves to using the adjective 'religious': *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1962), pp.119–53. In the terminology suggested by George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine*, my understanding of religion is 'cultural-linguistic' rather than 'experiential-expressive'.
25. Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York, NY: Random House, 1969), pp.102–7.
26. See Martin Kramer's article in this volume.
27. Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* trades on this same theme. In a recent book of essays on sainthood and morality, the authors consistently come to a similar conclusion, that social misfits make good candidates for sainthood. They must be perceived as 'sublimely wacky' in order for their martyrdom and self-sacrifice to be seen as saintly. See John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).
28. For an interesting discussion of the definition of violence and terror in political contexts see Thomas Perry Thornton, 'Terrorism as a Weapon of Political Agitation', in Harry Eckstein (ed.), *Internal War: Problems and Approaches* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1964), and David C. Rapoport, 'The Politics of Atrocity', in Y. Alexander and S. Finger (eds), *Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York, NY: John Jay, 1977).
29. See the article by Martin Kramer in this volume.
30. Jernail Singh Bhindranwale, 'Two Lectures Given on 19 July and 20 Sept. 1983', transcribed and translated into English from the videotaped originals in Punjab by Ranbir Singh Sandhu and distributed by the Sikh Religious and Educational Trust, Columbus, OH, 1986, p.2.
31. Jernail Singh Bhindranwale, 'Address to the Sikh Congregation', a sermon given in the Golden Temple in Nov. 1983, transcribed and translated from the audiotape original in Punjab by Ranbir Singh Sandhu, distributed by the Sikh Religious and Educational Trust, Columbus, OH, 1985, p.1.
32. Bhindranwale, 'Two Lectures', p.22.

33. Ayatollah Khomeini, *Collection of Speeches, Position Statements*, translations from 'Najaf Min watha 'iq al-Imam al-Khomeyni did al-Quwa al Imbiriyaliyah wa al-Sahyuniyah wa al-Raj'iyah' From the Papers of Imam Khomeyni Against Imperialist, Zionist and Reactionist Powers), 1977; translations on Near East and North Africa, Number 1902 (Arlington, Va: Joint Publications Research Service, 1979), p.6.
34. Banisadr, pp.28–35.
35. Khomeini, *Collection*, p.30.
36. Imam [Ayatollah] Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) [orig. published by Mizan Press, Berkeley, CA, 1981], pp.27–28.
37. *Collection*, p.24.
38. Ibid., p.3.
39. Ibid., p.25.
40. Ernesto Cardenal, in Teofilo Cabestrero, *Ministers of God, Ministers of the People: Testimonies of Faith from Nicaragua*, trans. from the Spanish by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), pp.22–23.
41. My interviews with the bhikkhu were conducted in Sri Lanka on 4–5 Feb. 1988, in English. For a fuller account, see my article, 'What the Bhikkhu Said'.
42. Rabbi Meir Kahane, speech on the announcement of the creation of the independent State of Judaea, Jerusalem, 18 Jan. 1989 (from my notes taken on that occasion).
43. Ibid.
44. Interview with Yoel Lerner, Jerusalem, 20 Jan. 1989.
45. See my articles, 'The Logic of Religious Violence' and 'What the Bhikkhu Said'. I am also developing this theme for a forthcoming book on the new religious nationalisms.