

Rethinking secularism:

Cosmic war on a global scale: an interview with Mark Juergensmeyer

posted by Nathan Schneider

As director of the [Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies](#) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, [Mark Juergensmeyer](#) brings the sociology of religion to bear on the analysis of violent conflict in the contemporary world. His recent books include *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* and *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, both published by University of California Press, and he is currently working on *God and War*, based on his 2006 Stafford Little Lectures at Princeton University. Together with the SSRC's [Craig Calhoun](#) and [Jonathan VanAntwerpen](#), he is a co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford University Press). We spoke at his home office at UCSB, perched atop a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.



This interview was conducted in conjunction with the SSRC's project on [Religion and International Affairs](#).—ed.

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NS: After your tenure last year as president of the American Academy of Religion, what do you think are the deepest challenges facing the study of religion today?

MJ: That's an interesting question, because, in some ways, religion has never been of greater interest to a greater number of people than it is at present. Whenever something blows up, religion seems to be in the news. But, on the other hand, scholars are less and less sure about what religion actually is, and it has become an increasingly problematic subject to study. The self-confidence that an earlier generation had in the ideas of the "secular" and the "religious" has come into question. Because of globalization, we're intensely aware of all of the diversity of perspectives in the world, and we're increasingly aware that our perceptions are not necessarily the only ones, the right ones, or the dominant ones. The way we have come to conceive of religion in the post-Enlightenment West—as something reified and essentially different from the secular—is falling apart. Maybe the religious and secular never really existed in quite the ways that we thought about them. Religious studies remains, in large part, what it has always been—the study of religious literature, ritual, organizations, and the like—but at the heart of it, there is the very difficult conceptual question of how to think about religion in a globalized world.

NS: You've worked in a number of different departmental settings, including Asian studies, divinity schools, religion departments, and now global studies. Do you think that religion needs its own department? Or can it be addressed, fruitfully, in other contexts?

MJ: The answer is both. It's like mathematics. You can't imagine mathematics not having its own department, but you also can't imagine physics, or accounting, or even political science and sociology without it. In the same way, I think religion has a part to play in other ways of understanding the contemporary world—whether political, anthropological, social, or economic—but there is also the danger that it can become too easily slivered off into pieces. Departments of religion allow people to look at the whole. Not everybody in those departments studies everything, of course, but they're aware of what one another are doing in a way that they wouldn't be if they were separated in different departments.

There have been attempts to make religious studies into a discipline or a science, and I'm not sure that has entirely worked. But the same is true about political science and sociology. Academic life is a coffeehouse with a whole bunch of tables, and there are different people sitting around the tables discussing different things, and each table is a field or a discipline. You can pick up and go from one table to another and talk about the same thing but find that you're in a different conversation. Religious studies deserves its own table.

NS: What, then, can those conversations offer outside of the academic coffeehouse? I remember when Madeleine Albright came to the AAR and said that religion experts should participate more in matters of international policy, for instance.

MJ: I agree. When people like me, who study religion and violence, are called upon to advise an intelligence agency, or the State Department, or people in the military, I think that's great. But it's not like I'm telling them something different from what I'm telling anybody else. All I know is what is in my books. I don't have a treasure chest of secret information that intelligence agency people would want. Probably the most valuable thing I can offer a government agency is an outsider's perspective about the way in which other people view the world.

NS: Is there a particularly urgent message that you try to convey to them?

MJ: What I've found is that I'm most useful for alerting them to the one thing that they don't have, and don't want to deal with: a view of America's role in the world, and the way in which our actions affect the actions of others. People don't act in a vacuum. They respond to their perceptions of us, and the role that they see us playing in the world. If we're perceived as the Great Satan—whether we think we are or not—it's very important to know that, because it helps us understand why people respond to us as if we were. Within their sphere of perception, they're simply responding to an image that they have of us.

NS: Is this a lesson that you've learned from the terrorists and religious militants you've talked with over the years?

MJ: Sure. To be a good social scientist, I have to try and understand another person's frame of reference. My job in those interviews is not just to get information from these people but to try to get into their minds, into their views of the world, into their worldviews. As a sociologist, and also as a religious studies scholar, I'm what Ninian Smart used to call a "worldview analyst." In the course of a conversation, I try to understand the other person's frame of reference. I try to find out how they want to present themselves to me. That helps me understand them.

A good example of this is [Mahmud Abouhalima](#), one of the key people in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. I had a series of remarkable interviews with him in prison after he was convicted. He's an affable, friendly, very talkative fellow. The way he explained the role of religion in his life and in society gave me a profound window into his view of the world. He regarded Islam as having rescued him at a couple of points in his own past—from an aimlessness when he was a kid in Egypt to another aimlessness when he was in Germany and was being wooed by the easy pleasures of Western life and Western women. He was struggling for a sense of identity and coherence in a world that is fractured and immoral. He made an attempt to justify himself—including several horrible

murders of Muslim clerics in Brooklyn—by casting himself as a soldier for virtue in a war in which immorality and secular irreligiosity are the great enemy. At one point he leaned over to me and whispered intensely, “Mr. Mark, you just don’t get it. There’s a war going on, Mr. Mark. There’s a battle between good and evil and right and wrong. You just don’t see it!” And so I asked him if that was why people blow buildings up, to try to make that point. And he looked at me and smiled and said, “Well now you see, don’t you? Now you see.” His violence was meant as a demonstration to the world, to make visible for everybody else that we are living in a war and that we need to wake up.

NS: Is such religious violence fundamentally different from violence understood in secular terms? Is it necessary to draw a distinction there?

MJ: I hesitate to use the words “religious violence,” because it sounds as if I’m promoting the idea that religion causes violence. I don’t believe that for a moment. I sometimes have to [defend myself](#) and remind people that I don’t say that. I think that violence happens for a complex variety of social and political and economic reasons.

On one level, violence is violence; it is a social phenomenon. What religious images and language can bring to a violent situation, though, is a structure of justification and meaning. It can be an ethical justification, or it can also be a more dramatic, visual one, touching on the symbolism of the cosmic war, the great battle between good and evil, right and wrong, religion and irreligion. I call it “cosmic war” rather than “holy war,” because I mean to imply, not just a fight fought for religious reasons, but the image of a broader conflict between good and evil. Or, in many Eastern traditions, it’s a battle over chaos and order, as in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

NS: Religion has become the language of resistance against modern states much more in recent decades than at the height of the Cold War, when secular economic or social theories tended to be structuring the ideologies of resistance movements. What might be the consequences of such a shift from secular to religious ideologies?

MJ: In some cases, as in Egypt, it’s the same people; they just take off their Marxist hats, put on their Muslim hats, and they’re good to go. One needs a great ideological template of moral struggle with which to justify a challenge to power, authority, and order. Marxism supplied that, and so does a certain kind of politicized religious language. They’re both ideologies of order. But the way in which you perceive the nature of a struggle makes a huge difference. If you think of it in religious terms, the timelines can be vast. They can be eternal.

I’ll give you an example. When I was interviewing Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, the political head of the Hamas movement, I brought up the futility of using suicide bombing against the Israelis. I pointed out that Israel has one of the strongest armies in the world, and certainly the strongest in the Middle East. These suicide attacks can certainly annoy them, but it’s not going to topple the political institutions of Israel or create a Palestinian state. He just looked at me and smiled, as if he were speaking to a small child, and said, “Well, maybe not in my lifetime. Maybe not in my children’s lifetime. Maybe not in my children’s children’s lifetime. But in my children’s children’s children’s lifetime, it might succeed. We cannot lose. This is God’s war.” If you think it’s God’s war, then you’re able to put up with temporary failure. If this is God’s war, that changes the whole equation of the struggle. And, of course, cosmic war justifications exist in all religious traditions—you see this difficulty not just on the Muslim side of the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian situation but also on the Jewish side, often with people associated with the settler movement. If you’re a certain kind of messianic, Zionist Jew, your actions, like those of the Muslims on the other side, are for much greater reasons than mere conquest. A temporary setback doesn’t matter because it is an eternal war.

NS: So how does one address another’s cosmic claims? Some want to ignore them and focus on underlying political and economic conditions; others say these people cannot be reasoned with and must be answered with violence.

MJ: There’s a third option: a conversion from within the religious community, one that persuades people that they are not engaged in a cosmic war and should redirect their activities. I think there has to be a combination between the first and the third. Addressing the social and economic issues that help to give rise to tensions in the first place can play a part in disarming the ideology. I have no doubt that if there were to be a solution tomorrow to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, it would deflate a lot of the jihadi rhetoric in the Middle East. Getting the U.S. military out of Iraq and Afghanistan would be an even bigger pin in that bubble, because then you wouldn’t have the same Great Satan doing Great Satanic things. The second choice, which is to fight fire with fire, only magnifies the image of cosmic war.

This is what the “war on terror” did. Even calling it a “war” was a mistake. I’ve gone back to look at the newspapers on 9/11, and none of them used the word “war.” It didn’t appear in the newspapers until the next day, 9/12, in quotation marks: “Acts of war,” said the headlines. That, of course, came from President Bush’s speech. Suddenly, the war against terror became the image that defined our response to the attacks, and that has been driving our foreign policy ever since. My thought was then, and has been ever since: Why on earth are we promoting the ideology of Osama bin Laden? We’re taking that jihadi view of the world and validating it with our own rhetoric and our own actions. If you want to deflate the impression of being an enemy in a cosmic war, there’s a very simple way of doing it: stop acting like the enemy that they think we are. I have no doubt that the whole thing would then begin to collapse. It takes two to do this kind of bellicose tango. Radical religion can dissipate as quickly as it was created, like a summer storm. In that sense, I’m an optimist.

NS: Have you seen this happen in any of the conflicts you’ve studied?

MJ: During the 1980s a spiral of hideous violence arose between young Sikhs and the Indian government. But after a decade, it just unraveled. Yes, the Indian government exerted strong police pressure, as they always had. What really changed in the end, though, was that people in the villages no longer supported the radicals, and the movement fell apart. Just a couple of years later, I went to one of those villages where virtually all of the young people of a certain generation had been wiped out. I asked their families, “What about the cause they were fighting for?” One of the fallen Sikh militant’s brothers, who had become the head of his village, was obviously embarrassed to be talking about it. “What about your dead brother?” I asked. “Oh, we loved him.” he said. “We paid our respects.” Now the surviving brother was busy trying to work with the government to get more benefits for the town, to improve the road—doing all the normal things that people do. And what about the Sikh revolution? It was simply over. It was gone. The image of great warfare had vanished and worldly matters had returned. The same thing could happen with the great jihadi war.

NS: How does your early work on Gandhi and nonviolence affect your analysis of religious violence?

MJ: In several ways. It helps explain why I became interested in violence in the first place. Pacifists like myself are often fascinated with social violence because it seems so odd. What is there in the human imagination that allows us to switch gears so easily between the normalcy of civil society and the overdrive of warfare? I wanted to understand what happens in people’s minds when they’re so seized with passion about a struggle that they’ll go out and kill in such horrible ways.

What I’ve learned most from my understanding of the Gandhian mode of conflict resolution is the importance of trying to understand another’s perspective. For Gandhi, this was the fun of conflict—and I do mean fun, because Gandhi loved conflict. He was a pacifist, but that doesn’t mean he was *passive*. Conflict, as Gandhi pointed out, is one time when you’re forced to see the world from another person’s point of view. Unless somebody challenges you forcefully, in a way

that makes you stop and think, you'll just go idly about your business. We all know that from our own relationships; it's not until somebody comes at you from a different point of view, seemingly from left field, that you really begin to question yourself and look carefully at what you're doing.

I began my work on religion, politics, and violence by trying to understand worldviews that clash with ours—and by that I mean not only theirs but ours as well. I did so with the awareness that my way of seeing the world is not necessarily the only way. It was, in a sense, a Gandhian project.

NS: And you also studied with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union?

MJ: Niebuhr was probably my greatest single influence as a professor. I was literally his last student. My first year at Union was the last year he taught a seminar, and I was in it. The second year, there was a group of us who met in his apartment every Friday afternoon. Then, the third year, the other two had left Union, and I went up there on my own. One of the things that drew me to Niebuhr—though it was his ideas that drew me more than anything else—was that his family and my family came from the same German immigrant community in central Missouri.

NS: He was someone who began as a pacifist but went on to develop a critique of pacifism. How did Niebuhr's thought play into how you think about violence?

MJ: Well, I disagree with Niebuhr on his analysis of Gandhi. I think he didn't understand Gandhi. He regarded Gandhi as a sentimentalist, the same way he regarded Marx as a sentimentalist: as someone with vaunted expectations about human nature. But Gandhi was more of a realist than Niebuhr assumed, and his method of conflict resolution involves exerting a certain kind of pressure. This is not exactly the coercion Niebuhr accused him of, because Gandhi tried to make a distinction between coercive and non-coercive force. Force that is coercive doesn't give you any choice about accepting or not accepting your opponent's position. Non-coercive force is about making you dramatically aware of a situation while leaving you to make a choice on your own. Gandhi would want concessions to be made out of free will rather than by coercion. Actually, I don't think that Niebuhr was as different from Gandhi as he thought.

NS: For both, a deep moral sensibility seems to have kept their realism from falling into cynicism.

MJ: That's what I liked about Niebuhr, of course. He tried to take seriously the moral dimension of public life and to understand where it could come from in a world that is, alas, populated by sinful humans. And, despite his understanding of Original Sin, he knew that we can be capable of fellowship and of selfless love. But collectivities are less morally adept, because they're never capable of selfless love. A corporation might say it's sorry, but it would never try to show its contrition in a way that would bring about its own demise. Parents sacrifice for their kids, soldiers perform acts of bravery in warfare, but collectivities can't do that, and that was Niebuhr's great insight. He insisted on the necessity for us to create buffers against the power of collectivities like nations and corporations: he thought that we needed structures of justice, on the one hand, and countervailing powers, like labor unions, on the other.

NS: What kinds of things did you talk about with him?

MJ: He told stories about his time in Detroit and what he learned as a pastor there. His last book was on the nature of man and his communities. Niebuhr felt that churches actually have a greater moral capacity than other collectivities do. He tried to make that argument. Sometimes I doubt it, with the way churches eat each other and are, in my mind, subject to the same terrible limitations as other kinds of human enterprise. It's so depressing to see churches on the wrong side of the moral issues in our day. Occasionally you see them on the right side, and that at least gives me some hope.

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