

When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends

by Mark Juergensmeyer, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2022, xiv +179 pp., US\$21.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 052 038473 6

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and artifacts up for grabs to be recontextualized for new audiences and their needs. To borrow a simile from Thomas Tweed, these Buddhist artifacts which have been loosed from their traditional contexts are like found objects for new collages (2013). Black Americans are now taking up the work of creating new Buddhist forms, ones suited to their own needs and interests as a distinct cultural group.

As I mentioned above, it seems that Vesely-Flad's intended audience is not scholars of Buddhism in America such as myself but activists in the Movement for Black Lives who she believes could benefit from the model her interviewees provide. Nevertheless, her book stands to become a classic ethnographic study for the field of Buddhist studies and should be consulted by those looking to do further research on Black Buddhists in America and elsewhere. I believe Vesely-Flad's book would be best suited to the graduate seminar or on the reading list of doctoral students looking to study American religion more broadly. While I recommend the book highly for these purposes, I must also give a strong *proviso* to readers unfamiliar with Buddhism to consult other sources for a more robust and less-slanted presentation of the tradition.

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In 2020, Mark Juergensmeyer published a 'meditation' on religion and war: *God at War*. By then, it was not quite clear that this meditation was an extended chapter of a book that would be published a few years later in 2022 under the title *When God Stops Fighting*. In this earlier book, the distinguished professor of sociology from the University of California, understands war in terms like 'ideas' or 'images' that relate to others as enemies

(Juergensmeyer 2021, 38). This imagery portrays ‘images of enemies’ that are projected as the cause or source behind the perceived social or political chaos that poses a threat to societies; these enemies ‘can be engaged, conquered, destroyed’ (2021, 42). To understand how this works, we should understand how religion is related to imageries of peace. Religion has always longed for peace, Juergensmeyer asserts. However, it has also embraced ideas about how to attain this peace and, as ‘the ultimate statement of meaningfulness’ asserted the primacy of this meaning in the face of chaos (God at War, 72). Hence the basics of so-called religious warfare. The 2022 book continues and further explores this idea of religious warfare as an imagination of how religion projects ideas of good and evil onto the order and chaos we so often face in our world. After an introduction in which the argument of his earlier book is repeated, Juergensmeyer discusses three cases based on interviews he had with actors of former religion-related violence and some of their contesters. He introduces us to former sympathizers of the Islamic State and people who had to deal with its rule in Iraq, to former militants of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and related branches struggling for more autonomy in the Philippines, and to Sikh militants who fought for a free Khalistan in India. Even though his interviewees often seem to share only limited pieces of information, Juergensmeyer succeeds in encouraging his interviewees to reflect on why they did what they did and on how their struggle came to an end. In the final chapter, he collects the insights from the interviews and presents them in such a way that they can function as advice for people working in the security industry or the many counter-terrorist businesses we currently have.

Juergensmeyer’s work has critically examined the commonly assumed causal connection between religion and violence, effectively debunking popular myths. According to him, religion itself is not inherently problematic, but it can provide moral justifications for acts of violence. The notion of ‘cosmic war’ plays a central role in almost all Juergensmeyer’s writings and is revisited in this book. Cosmic war is central to many ‘strident religiously-related movements around the world’ and imagines worldly conflict to be, in essence, a ‘true confrontation’ on ‘a transhistorical and metaphysical level’ (11). Although cosmic war can be a distinct characteristic of religious violence, yet, in my view, its applicability is not always successful, as evident in this book. While some actors may perceive themselves as participants in a cosmic war, such as members of American fundamentalist apocalyptic groups eagerly awaiting the millennium, Juergensmeyer’s attempt to use this framework to understand his data, feels forced and detracts from the actual interviews. Nobody mentions any cosmic war really, or refer to God or any transcendent power or order to justify violence, despite Juergensmeyer claiming the opposite (143). None of those interviewed mention a battle between good and evil. And none of those interviewed talk about a fighting God (as the title of the book suggests). Indeed, Juergensmeyer interviewed people in post-conflict situations and sometimes it is not clear how his interviewees relate to the violent movements he studies, which is indeed typical for post-conflict contexts. But then again, cosmic war is clearly Juergensmeyer’s own interpretation of the discourses he collects from his interviewees. His interviewees prefer to speak about a Caliphate, or a free Khalistan. These are not really images of cosmic warfare or transcendent realities but longings for very mundane social situations. My problem is that the cosmic war-idea is applied to very different contexts without clear support from the interviewees, both in terms of discourse and content (see for e.g., 41, 46, 95, 128, 140, 143). A focus that is too strongly on cosmic warfare as the kernel of religion-related violence poses a risk as it may prevent a comprehensive analysis of the social and historical factors that contribute to a nuanced understanding of the situation in each specific context. In my view, one of the dangers of relying heavily on this idea is that it can overshadow a thorough examination of the social and historical elements that


are crucial for comprehending the social, political, and – indeed – religious dynamics at play. Such a view may lead policymakers and peace workers with little knowledge of religious traditions to adopt a one-dimensional interpretation of religion-related conflicts, thereby overlooking the genuine grievances and exclusion experienced by people involved. It is important to note that this critique does not necessarily imply that Juergensmeyer is engaging in this practice. Rather, it highlights a potential consequence of reading his book.

Another critique I have of this book is that Juergensmeyer does not reflect on his position as a white American male scholar. Undoubtedly, given his expertise, he must be aware of this fact, but nowhere in the book does he explicitly address it. It is highly plausible that his appearance and identity could have influenced the information he obtained from people, such as IS supporters, despite his convincing academic credentials (31). The mention of identity perception arises only clearly once during an interview with ‘Muhammad’ when the prison’s warden is absent and Muhammad shares with Juergensmeyer that he would like to join a revived Caliphate and ‘if the situation was ripe’ kill Shia, Jews, and Americans. When Muhammad detects Juergensmeyer’s unease, he comforts him saying: ‘not you, professor, not you’ (144). At this point, the different positions of the interviewer and the interviewee becomes clear. This distinction leads again to the question of what information each interviewee shares and why, and how the perceived identity of the interviewer influences how and what information is shared. A reflection on the role of identity perception and its possible influence on the research process would have added strength to the book.

What is interesting and challenging is the final part of the book where Juergensmeyer hints for solutions to prevent conflict becoming violent. Although he does not position himself in the academic discussions that are going on in the field, he makes valuable comments on how people lose eventually the idea that peace can only be obtained through violent conflict. Although most of these comments are not new, they line up very smoothly with the information gathered from the interviews. All in all, despite the critical points I mentioned above, this book is a valuable read for all those interested in militant violence. It provides interesting interviews that shed light on how people think about past violence and highlights important perspectives to consider when contemplating possible solutions.

Reference

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