



DEBATE: RELIGION AND REVOLUTION

The Future of Religious Rebellion

Mark Juergensmeyer

For some decades, the religious rebellion of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries was characterized by political violence, terrorism, and strident rhetoric. Then in 2011, the events collectively known as Arab Spring seemed to offer a new model: mass movements leading to democratic reform and electoral change. The elections of 2012 swept religious parties and leadership into office in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Is this the face of the future of religious rebellion around the world?

For the past 30 years, the jihadi movement crested on a wave of popular unrest, propelled by the moral legitimacy associated with its violent interpretation of the Muslim notion of ethical struggle. Although jihadi activists, such as those connected with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, were regarded outside the region simply as immoral terrorists, much of their popularity within the Islamic world was due to their moral appeal.

The jihadi ideology has had two dimensions—political and ethical. The political attraction was the alleged necessity of violence to end despotic regimes. Before the protests at Tahrir Square that toppled the Mubarak regime in 2011, many Egyptian activists were convinced that bloodshed was the only strategy that would work against such a ruthless dictator. They imagined that their acts of terrorism—against the regime and against the 'far enemy' of America that they assumed was propping up Mubarak's rule—would eventually lead to a massive revolt that would bring the dictatorship to an end.

They also thought that only the jihadi ideology of cosmic warfare—based on Muslim history and Qur'anic verses—provided ethical legitimacy for the struggle. Ideologists such as the Egyptian theorist Abd al-Salam Farad and al-Qaeda activist Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote as if violent clashes, including ruthless attacks of terrorism on civilian populations, were the only form of struggle that was advocated by Islam.

These assumptions were proven wrong. The dramatic popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Islamic world demonstrated that protests that were non-violent in their inception (and which became violent only in response to bloody attempts to repress them) were far more effective and supported by a more widespread moral and spiritual consensus.

What brought down the tyrants in Tunisia and Egypt, as it turned out, was about as far from jihad as one could imagine. It was a series of massive non-violent movements of largely middle-class and relatively young professionals who organized their protests through Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of electronic social networking. No doubt the passivity of the Egyptian military



was also a critical factor; the army did not forcibly resist the protests, as the military did in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Libya.

Yet one cannot underestimate the importance of Tahrir Square and similar protests in Alexandria and throughout Egypt. Clearly, they constituted the catalyst for change. Perhaps not since the peaceful overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines has the world seen such a dramatic demonstration of the power of non-violent resistance. The protests were not the weapons of jihad, nor were the voices of opposition the strident language of Islamist extremism.

There was also a religious element to the protests. The peak moments came after Friday prayers, when sympathetic mullahs would urge the faithful to join the protests as a religious duty. But theirs was not the divisive, hateful voice of jihadi rhetoric. In a remarkable moment, when Mubarak's thugs tried to attack Muslim protestors, who were attempting to conduct their prayers in Tahrir Square, a cordon of Egyptian Coptic Christians circled around their Muslim compatriots, shielding them as they prayed. Later a phalanx of Muslim protestors protected their Christian comrades as they worshipped in the public square, an urban intersection that was transformed during that time into a massive interfaith sanctuary.

The religiosity of Tahrir Square is far from the religion of radical jihad. Rather than separating Muslim from non-Muslim and Sunni from Shi'a, the symbols that were raised on impromptu placards were emblems of interfaith cooperation. When I attended a similar rally in Tahrir Square later in 2011, I was struck by the appearance of posters that portrayed the Muslim crescent and the Christian cross side by side in an image of joint opposition to the growing post-revolution power of the military regime.

Imagine what Osama bin Laden must have made of all of this, as news trickled into his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Imagine, too, the puzzled chagrin of someone like bin Laden's primary lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian medical doctor who had joined the most extreme Islamist jihadi movement years earlier, convinced that only violent guerrilla warfare would topple someone like Mubarak. Tahrir Square clearly showed that al-Zawahiri was wrong. Does this mean that al-Qaeda is finished and that the radical struggles of jihad will fizzle into history?

Although elements of the jihadi insurgency will no doubt live on, as they do in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, I think that the answer is largely 'yes.' Arab Spring has been a defeat for the global jihadi ideology—the worldview of cosmic warfare that the jihadi rhetoric has espoused for several decades. This was a view of the world enmeshed in a tangle of sacred warfare, a view that has been an exciting and alluring image among a large number of mostly young and largely male Muslims around the world. It was brought to dramatic attention by the 11 September 2001 attacks and was encouraged by the perception that US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq were wars against Islam. This jihadi vision of sacred warfare was propagated via the Internet through postings on chat rooms and the dissemination of YouTube and similar videos showing graphic acts of US military destruction in Islamic countries. The faithful were called on to respond.

Some did, and the response was a series of attacks during the first decade of the twenty-first century. These global jihad attacks—in Madrid, London, Bali, Jakarta, Mumbai, and elsewhere—were not orchestrated by any single terrorist command. Some were connected with sophisticated regional organizations, although they were not in any direct sense conducted by al-Qaeda. However, they were all united by the jihadi vision, a vision that provided the moral and strategic legitimization for the terrorist attacks. The jihadi image of warfare provided the moral justification by linking real acts of violence in the world with the divine struggle between the forces of good and evil, of order and disorder, that lies within the mythology and symbolism of every religious tradition, including Islam. And the jihadi idea of cosmic warfare provided a

strategic legitimization of violence based on the implicit promise—as a leader of Hamas once told me—that if one is fighting God’s war, one can never lose. God always wins.

Yet as Tahrir Square showed, God does not always have to fight, at least not in the terrorist ways that the jihadi warriors imagined. After a couple of weeks of protests, the peaceful resisters demonstrated the moral and strategic legitimacy of non-violent struggle: they had succeeded, whereas years of jihadi bloodshed had not produced a single political change.

What will happen next? The trajectory of religious activism over the years does not afford any simple answers. The religiously related political movements that entered the public arena starting in the late 1970s through the first decade of the twenty-first century have had diverse careers. Several religious revolutions have been attempted—including the Taliban’s harsh regime in Afghanistan and the brief rise to power of the Islamic Courts Council in Somalia—but Iran remains the only long-term example of a successful attempt to establish a religious state. It has founded a political order based on religious ideology, has fanned the fires of nationalism with religious zeal, has enacted laws that privilege particular religious ideas and practices, and has brought into the sphere of political influence clerics whose only credentials are their theological acumen. Even in Iran, though, the main business of government has been the same as anywhere else—providing a stable and just political order and supporting economic development. These aspects of mundane politics have no particular religious claim. Moreover, the influence of the clergy and religious ideology in Iran has waxed and waned since the 1979 Revolution.

The successes of Muslim parties in the 2012 elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and, to a lesser extent, Libya were direct results of the Arab Spring movements. In other countries, however, religious movements have also assimilated into the political process in a non-revolutionary way. They have become political parties or have used their political support to back particular candidates. In the United States, the Tea Party movement in 2010 brought a militant Christian political perspective into politics, one that greatly influenced the Republican Party in the 2012 presidential campaign. In Europe, the Christian religious right has been on the rise, often with a strident anti-immigrant posture, in Hungary, France, and several Scandinavian countries.

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was brought into power by a Hindu religious nationalist movement. The BJP dominated the Indian Parliament from 1996 to 2004, forming a succession of coalition governments. In Palestine, the Hamas movement transformed itself into a political party and soared to victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections. In Algeria, the Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front) continued to be politically influential even after it was outlawed following the military crackdown that terminated its electoral success in 1991.

In other cases, religious rebellions have been brutally suppressed before they have had a chance to take the reins of power. The Sinhalese arm of the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People’s Liberation Front) in Sri Lanka was essentially killed off in the 1990 military action against the movement, but the JVP then resurfaced in later years. In India, rebellious Sikhs were killed in the thousands, along with large numbers of armed police, in a protracted 10-year war that ended early in the 1990s, as much from exhaustion and infighting as from the government’s militancy. Eventually, many villagers, weary of all the violence, refused to give the Sikh militants safe shelter.

Elsewhere, factionalism weakened a good number of other movements, including Shi’a factions in Lebanon and rival Muslim groups in the Palestinian resistance movement. In Iraq, extremist groups of Shi’a and Sunni Muslims have turned on one another in a pattern of violence that has at times shifted the pattern of militancy in the post-Saddam era from anti-occupation insurgency to civil war. These developments give rise to the possibility that some movements might end up turning against themselves, essentially being destroyed from within.

In other cases, the violence of rebellious religious movements has been suppressed by governments through military actions or by means of legal restrictions. In Japan, after the 1995 nerve gas attacks in the Tokyo subways, the Aum Shinrikyo was placed under extensive government surveillance. All of the major participants in the terrorist attack were arrested and, after lengthy trials, were sentenced to long prison terms and more. The leader of the movement, Shoko Asahara, was sentenced to death by hanging in 2004. Although the movement resurfaced, changing its name to Aleph in 2000, it was now non-violent. In China, the government outlawed religious movements it regarded as potentially dangerous, including Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa). Although the group protested that it was being persecuted by the Chinese, there has been little bloodshed on either side.

Perhaps the most successful conclusion to movements of religious terrorism through non-violent means was the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that put 'the Troubles' of Northern Ireland onto a path of peace. The Northern Ireland solution brought an end to acts of violence that had terrified London, Belfast, and other cities for decades. It showed the value of not responding in kind to provocative terrorist attacks and letting the patient process of negotiation and compromise work out a solution of accommodation. The agreement, made between the Irish and British governments and political parties from Northern Ireland, called for guaranteeing the political representation of both Protestant and Catholic communities in the region.

Could other violent situations be settled in a manner similar to the Good Friday Agreement? It would not take a huge stretch of imagination to think that they could, especially when the issue is largely over contested land. The Kashmir conflict is remarkably similar to Northern Ireland in that two religious communities occupy and lay claim to the same territory. India and Pakistan could join in a settlement surprisingly comparable to the Good Friday Agreement. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more complex, but like Northern Ireland it is essentially a dispute over territory in which both sides have a moral and political claim. Since the Oslo Agreement of 1993, a negotiated settlement in the region has seemed a realistic, though still elusive, possibility.

To a large degree, the future of religious rebellions against the secular state depends not only on the movements themselves but also on the way that government authorities respond. Much of the passion behind many religious rebels' positions has come as a reaction to what they have interpreted as the secular government's attitude of arrogance and intolerance toward them. If they could perceive a change in the state's stance—with at least some aspects of their positions being respected—perhaps their response would be less violent. It is this sensitivity that has been behind some of the more cautious responses in Europe and the US to acts of terrorism. In Spain, for instance, one reaction to the 2004 Madrid train bombings was an attempt by the newly elected Spanish government to be more hospitable to the Muslim minority living in the country. In Norway, after the 2011 massacre by Anders Breivik, aimed at ridding Northern Europe of Muslims, the government reaffirmed its support for a multicultural society. In the case of Palestine, the entrance of Hamas into electoral politics greatly diminished the number of violent incidents associated with it.

It is still difficult, however, for Americans and Europeans to accept the legitimacy of the idea of religious politics. Although Jürgen Habermas has proclaimed that we now live in a 'post-secular age', the ideology of secularism still dominates public life. Most Westerners are not used to the notion that religion has a role to play in defining public order and in stating its basic values. Although religion is historically part of the background of Western secular nationalism, that heritage is now largely ignored. If religion were a more vital force in Western societies in ways that were seen to be facilitating public life and promoting the common welfare, perhaps it would be easier to accept religion's public presence in other parts of the world.

Even in the West, though, one occasionally hears calls for a more active role for religion in American public life. One of the reasons that figures such as Bishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, and Mohandas Gandhi appeal so much to the Western imagination is that, without being aggressively religious, they have brought a moral and spiritual consciousness into the public sphere. Reinhold Niebuhr, the American Protestant theologian who influenced the Roosevelt government in the 1940s, decried the limited moral ability of nations. They could not be selfless, Niebuhr claimed, because they are by nature nothing more than a collection of the self-interests of all the individuals contained within them. He added, however, that religion can help to transform political organizations and make them more like communities: it can ameliorate some of the harsher characteristics of self-interest and draw people together through a common recognition of the profound elements of their common morality.

Yet both Gandhi and Niebuhr can be faulted for not providing adequate models for the fusion of religion and public responsibility. In Gandhi's case, it is said that he went too far, and his politics are criticized as being excessively moralistic. In Niebuhr's case, he may not have gone far enough. Despite his appreciation of the values that religion provides, when it came to politics, he was the consummate secular liberal. Deeply concerned about the destructive role that 'illusions' of religion and other moral ideals could play, his greatest fear was that nations would become too religious and absorbed in their own illusions of power and grandeur. As Niebuhr (1932: 255) put it: "Illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason." Even so, he cautioned against overreacting, for keeping religion too far from political life can obscure the positive images of a perfected society that the religious imagination is capable of producing. "One can only hope," he added, "that reason will not destroy it before its work is done" (*ibid.*).

Over 80 years after Niebuhr wrote those words, religion is not at the brink of being destroyed by reason, nor has reason succumbed to religion. Yet it is possible that Niebuhr's dark vision could at some future time come to pass, and reason and religion might war with one another on a global plane. Arab Spring could turn into Arab Winter if popular movements are crushed by strong-willed autocrats, religious or secular, and if elected governments turn out to be mere window dressing for military regimes. Violent insurrections could indeed surface to battle them, and the jihadi ideology could return as a motivating force. The Internet offers a whole new arena of networking, making possible the illusion of involvement in an imagined war. Such cyber connections can promote decentralized bands of activists engaged in acts of sabotage and terrorism in almost any part of the world. The new religious wars could truly be global confrontations.

Barring this apocalyptic vision of worldwide conflict between religious and secular nationalism, we have reason to be hopeful. Most religious activists, after all, long for society to be tranquil and prosperous, and they know that this will take some kind of economic and political accommodation with the secular world. Increasingly, a grudging tolerance has developed between religious activists and secular nationalists. To some degree, each admires what the other provides: communitarian values and moral vision, on the one hand, individualism and rational rules of justice, on the other. After all, both are responses to, and products of, the modern age.

In Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Central Asia, China, Japan, the United States, Eastern and Western Europe, and many other places, groups of religious activists have experimented with forms of politics related in some way with religion, and they have done far more than resuscitate archaic ideas of religious rule. They have created something new—a synthesis between religion and modern politics. In some cases, this has led to a merger between the cultural identity and legitimacy of old, religiously sanctioned monarchies and the democratic spirit and organizational unity of modern industrial society.

This combination can be incendiary, for it blends the absolutism of religion with the potency of modern politics. Yet it may also be necessary, for without the legitimacy conferred by religion, the authority of political order cannot easily be established in some parts of the world. In some of these places, even the essential elements of democracy have been conveyed in the vessels of new religious politics. In a curious way, at the same time that politics has embraced religious ideologies, religious values have buttressed some of the ideals of the modern state. The revival of moderate, tolerant forms of religion may therefore be part of the cure for the excesses of its rebellious and intolerant extremes.

■ **MARK JUERGENSMEYER** is the Director of the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2003), *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* (2008), and other books on global religion and politics; juergens@global.ucsb.edu.

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