

## Culture, Values, and Identities

# Which Is More Compelling: Religion or War?

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Among the volunteers who heeded the call of the Islamic State in 2014 to come to Syria and Iraq and join the army of the caliphate were two brothers from the Ruhr region of western Germany. They were identical twin brothers, Mark and Kevin K., who, unlike many of the recruits from abroad, were not raised Muslim in an immigrant community.

The blond, blue-eyed lads were born in 1989 in the town of Castrop-Rauxel, near the city of Dortmund, where the prevailing religious culture was Roman Catholic. Their parents were devoted to the twins, and their father was a police officer. The brothers appeared to have a conventional childhood, an upbringing dedicated to school and sports. According to an internet-accessible curriculum vitae obtained by the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Kevin was the adventuresome one of the pair and in high school ventured abroad for a yearlong student exchange program in California (Diehl and Lehberger 2015). (The twins' last names were usually not published by the German press out of respect for the privacy of their surviving family members.) In 2009, after high school and before going to college, Kevin again spent a year traveling, this time to Istanbul, where he apparently became interested in Islam. When he returned to Germany, he entered Ruhr University, in Bochum, where he studied law, excelling in a program focused on the legal aspects of energy and mining law. At the same time, he began regularly attending a mosque for prayers, and fell under the sway of the radical Muslim cleric Abu Walaa, who operated out of a mosque in the northern city of Hildesheim, where he is said to have recruited a number of Germans for service to ISIS (*Local De* 2017).

In the meantime, Kevin's brother, Mark, avoided college by joining the German military in 2010 for a four-year commitment. During that time, he served a tour of duty in Afghanistan. But he and Kevin kept in touch, and Kevin apparently persuaded Mark to take Islam seriously. In 2012, according to *Der Spiegel*, during a break from his military obligations Mark converted to Islam in a mosque in his hometown of

Castrop-Rauxel, presumably with his brother at his side (Diehl and Lehberger 2015). The German military authorities began to get wind of Mark's increasing radicalism, and in 2013 he was declared a security risk and his ties with the German army were severed.

In August 2014 the twins told their mother that they were going to Turkey on vacation. They were, in fact, going to Turkey, but not on vacation. They slipped over the border into Syria and joined the forces of the Islamic State. Letters that they sent home assured their parents of their well-being but were also filled with a heartfelt commitment to their new faith and to the cause of the Islamic State.

The twins were with ISIS in Syria and Iraq for only a few months when Kevin was assigned to go on a strategic mission. Early in 2015 ISIS commanders were seeking to cut off the supply line in Iraq between Baghdad and the city of Fallujah. The critical connection in the supply line was a military base. In a carefully planned assault in May 2015, ISIS fighters distracted the Iraqi army defenders of the post and were able to open the main gates (*Dabiq* 2015). This was the signal for Kevin—now dubbed Abu Mas'ab al-Almani—to barrel through the opened gates in an armored military vehicle carrying seven tons of highly explosive substances. He drove into the heart of the military complex and blew up the vehicle, instantly destroying the base and incinerating himself and everyone around the vehicle. Weeks later, his brother, Mark, also conducted a suicide mission. The ISIS online propaganda magazine *Dabiq* proclaimed both men to be *shahid* (martyrs) and devoted an article to praising their bravery and their commitment to the faith.

To most Germans, as to most of us, the question is why? Why would these average young men with reasonably successful careers have abandoned it all to seek the momentary glory of being soldiers for the Islamic State, a mission that they must have known would quite likely end the way it did, with their tragic and explosive deaths?

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## DOES RELIGION LEAD TO WAR?

One answer to the questions about why the German twins, Kevin and Mark, pursued a path that led to war and their deaths is that they did so because of religion. The motivations of ISIS supporters are diverse, however, and it is not clear that there is any one answer to why people joined the movement.

In some cases, it clearly was for war and for what war might achieve: political power and social acceptance. As the former members of ISIS whom I interviewed in Iraq told me, they were fighting for ethnic pride and empowerment. As a social group, the Sunnis had been left out of the power circles of both Iraq and Syria, where Shi'a rather than Sunni Muslims were in charge. In the ethnoreligious politics of those two countries, they were made to feel like second-class citizens. The Islamic State gave them a land of their own. Whether or not they were interested in the religious aspects of the movement, ISIS employed and empowered Sunni Arabs in what amounted to a Sunnistan of ISIS-controlled territory.

For others, however, especially for the thousands of young men and women—perhaps as many as thirty thousand of them—who flocked to the region from around the world, the motives may have been more complicated. When ISIS through its glossy media and sophisticated internet social networks sent out the call, it is likely that some who felt marginalized in their countries of residence may have been attracted to battle in order to find social acceptance of their own. The young Algerians in Brussels, for instance, were members of an immigrant community that was not fully welcomed in Belgium. Others may have come for the excitement, as soldiers of fortune looking for the thrill of being part of a glorious battle, whatever it was for.

Yet others might have had religious motivations, and perhaps this could have been the appeal for the German twins. In the brief sketch of their life history in the German media, the progression seems clear: first they became interested in Islam, then they became converts to a fundamentalist form of the faith, and this conversion led them to joining ISIS and becoming soldiers on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, where they were promptly killed. In the narrative related in the newspaper and magazine articles about the brothers, the implication is fairly clear: their interest in religion led to their participation in war.

Behind this reporting is the assumption that religion has the capacity to drive people to war. That is an interesting assumption, and to test it empirically, one would have to isolate the religious factors apart from all other possible motivations and see if this in fact was the driving force. I know of no study that has tried to do that, at least successfully, and we are left with

anecdotal accounts that are subject to the observer's prejudices. The question remains, however, how likely it is that religion by itself leads to violence.

In a highly readable book, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*, the journalist Graeme Wood (2017) explores the role of religion in understanding the background of ISIS activists. It is based on several interviews with supporters of the radical Salafi Muslim views on which much of the ISIS ideology relies. Though Wood never says it, the focus solely on religious ideas may give many readers the impression that these ideas are what leads to violence. This impression is buttressed by the way the book is structured. It starts with the Salafi views of an Egyptian tailor and turns increasingly to more radical versions of that vision. A discussion of Salafi fundamentalism turns to the forms of Salafi thinking about jihad. The discussion about fighting the forces of evil leads in turn to the role of religious ideas in real acts of violence. For many readers, the implications will be clear: radical religious ideas lead to violence; thinking about the world in terms of confrontation leads to real conflicts.

Curiously, though, none of the men whom Wood interviewed for his book actually went to the front lines; none literally picked up a sword or suicide belt in defense of their version of the faith. Wood tells us that most Salafi Muslims are nonviolent, and even those who espouse a jihadi worldview seldom act on it in violent ways, including those whom Wood interviewed for his book. In an earlier article in the *New Republic*, Wood described three types of people who fight for ISIS as "psychopaths," "the true believers," and "the Sunni pragmatists." So presumably the religious motivations are characteristic of only the "true believers"—but even then it is not clear why some "true believers" go to Syria and Iraq to fight, and others just stay home and cheer them on.

As I have mentioned, my own interviews with former ISIS members and refugees who fled from ISIS-controlled areas have provided a more complicated picture. I asked them whether they thought the motivations to fight were political or religious. Most of the refugees said that the motives were political, though one thought for a moment and ventured that ISIS may have believed in a religion but that it was "a strange religion" (interview with refugees, near Mosul, February 11, 2017). It was not his kind of Islam. When I interviewed actual ISIS fighters in prison after the end of the conflict, I found that their motives were mixed: some proclaimed that the idea of an Islamic caliphate was their main attraction, others focused on the bad treatment of their Sunni Arab community in Iraq and Syria as the motivation for the anger and the attraction of a Sunni Arab-led ISIS regime, and many said both.

So it remains unclear whether and to what extent

religion is the key to understanding the motivations for participation in the ISIS movement. Though I do not discount the possibility of a role for religion in the motivations, it seems to me that whether or not religion was a factor is something that would have to be examined on a case-by-case basis. I don't think it's fair to assume that just because religion is in the background, that is what has propelled people into violence.

But this is precisely the assumption that is popular with a certain segment of the general public. The idea that religion leads to violence has become almost a mantra. Leading the charge are several aggressive atheists, including Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who assert that the very nature of religion leads to violence. "Religion causes war because it generates certainty," Dawkins (2008, 343) is frequently quoted as having said, adding that recent acts of terrorism were motivated by religion, because "only religious faith is strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people." Sam Harris (2005, 26), a neuroscientist and writer, chimes in on the same theme with what seems to him to be an obvious remark, that "religion is the most prolific source of violence in our history."

On the other hand are the sympathizers with religion, including Karen Armstrong, who feel called upon to defend religion against these spurious claims that religion causes violence. In a well-researched book, *Fields of Blood*, Armstrong surveys the history of religion's relationship to violent actions. She analyzes specific cases in depth and concludes that these are political confrontations where religious language is used simply to justify and support a conflict that is based on social confrontation and the acquisition of power. Armstrong (2014, 412) ends with the observation that "the problem lies not in the multifaceted activity that we call 'religion' but in the violence embedded in our human nature and the nature of the state."

I tend to side more with Armstrong than with Dawkins in this debate, though I'm not really comfortable with either side. What is missing from both is an exploration of the actual role that religious language and ideas play in real situations involving violence. Is religion simply part of the social identity of people who are fighting for their community? Are leaders of the battle clerics who rely on religious authority for their leadership? Do they use the flag of religion to urge the faithful into war? Or is it a case where scripture inspires people to slay the infidels, any infidels who may be at hand? One would have to examine each case to see what role religious ideas or images or scriptures or leadership or social identity have to do with each act of violence.

But behind all of these questions about how particular

aspects of religion may be related to violence is a more basic question: is religion an entity that can cause anything, much less violence?

This is indeed a basic question, and it touches philosophical depths. The issue of whether ideas emerge from social conditions or whether they lead to social change has been a part of intellectual conversations for ages. It is part of Karl Marx's challenge to the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in asserting that social conditions give rise to ideas rather than ideas producing social change, and thereby Marx "stood Hegel on his head," as Marx (1867, 102–3) himself describes it. Though mainstream social science is hardly Marxist, it owes something to him and other early sociologists in asserting that material conditions shape ideas about society. In general, ideology is thought to come from social relations and not the other way around. It is partly for this reason that religion is often ignored in the social sciences.

As a social scientist, I tend to accept this materialist perspective, and my instinct is to question whether ideas of any sort play the major role behind social actions. When presented with a religious or other ideological view of the world, I usually want to know what people hold these ideas and why and what is in it for them to hold such views. I don't deny that ideas, including religious ideas, play an important role, but my instinct is to see these ideas in social, economic, and political contexts rather than as disembodied entities that can influence things on their own.

Still, I agree with the great sociologist Robert Bellah (2011), who wrote in his last book, *Religion in Human Evolution*, that religion is something. Maybe it is not an entity, but it is a collective perception, a worldview, or, as Bellah calls it, an alternative reality. So as an alternative reality, it provides a template of meaning for people who have embraced that perception. For example, the end-times worldview of premillennial Evangelical Christians provides believers with the conviction that behind ordinary reality is the contestation of great forces of good and evil and that at any moment the world as we know it may be interrupted by dramatic transformative events, like the rapture and the tribulations described in the book of Revelation. This might convince the Christian believer that deeper things are going on beneath the surface of everyday reality.

But would that conviction about an alternative religious reality lead in some cases to violence? It is an interesting question, since certainly another construct of alternative reality—war—almost by definition leads to violence. So we might then ask: How is the alternative reality of religion related to the alternative reality of war? How are war and religion related?

Though they are not the same, war and religion play

a role in human imagination that is so similar that they could easily reinforce one another. Both war and religion provide visions of alternative perceptions of order, ways of seeing the world that absorb anomalies and explain why chaos and disorder exist. They explain and ultimately contain and control these untidy and dangerous aspects of life. Though war's alternative reality is a this-worldly version of reality and religion holds a transcendent vision, they function so similarly that the two are often in tandem. War frequently utilizes religion, and religion often incorporates images of war.

Still, war and religion are perceptions of reality—alternative realities—and they are not entities capable of action on their own. Neither war nor religion are agents that can do things by themselves, so what I mean by "war leads to violence" is that war's perception of a world locked in absolute moral conflict can provide justifications for acts of violence within that sphere of reference. The degree to which religion is involved in that kind of justification of violence depends on the relation of religion to war.

There are several ways in which we can think of this relationship. When we think of war embracing religion, we usually mean those occasions when religious images, ideas, and organizations are employed to buttress notions of war. When we say that religion embraces war, we usually mean those moments when images of war are crafted to buttress ideas about religion. The outcome of this relationship between war and religion depends on where one begins and how one frames the other. The relationship between religion and war depends on which perception of reality is the dominant one.

#### WHEN WAR EMBRACES RELIGION

Let us return to the problem of Kevin and Mark, the German twins who became jihadis and martyrs. Why did they do it? What was the appeal? Were they in it for the religion or the war?

At one point in Graeme Wood's book, Wood reports a conversation with an Algerian supporter of the Islamic State who was defending the movement against charges that it was in opposition to the principles of Islam. In particular, he was responding to Wood's accusation that ISIS had too much "killing, slavery, amputation." The Algerian nodded, saying that he understood Wood's reservations, but then he explained in simple terms why it all made sense: "this is a war" (Wood 2017, 248).

The implication of the Algerian's comment was that in this case, war trumped religion. He may have seen ISIS ideology as the fulfillment of Islamic prophecy. He may have agreed that ordinarily religion is a moderating force regarding the use of violence. Most Muslims, including most Muslims of the extremist Salafi variety, are nonviolent. But when it came to

the necessities of acquiring power and administering control, the Islamic State had to do what it had to do. This meant following the dictates of war.

This view is something that anyone can understand, from marginalized Sunni Arabs in Anbar province in Iraq to disaffected immigrant youth in Brussels who have been raised on battle-saturated computer games. ISIS has proclaimed that a war is going on, a big war, and it has opened its doors to anyone who wishes to join the adventure. War achieves strategic goals of power and conquest, but the very act of warfare is for many a grand adventure. The language of religion helps, to be sure. It is reassuring for even the most ignorant fighters to know that this view of war is authenticated by ancient scripture and tradition and that it is legitimate, even though they might not know or even want to know the specifics. For them, the fighting was the point—to be engaged in a great battle that will give life meaning.

Thomas Hegghammer, the Norwegian scholar who has followed ISIS perhaps more closely than any other scholar, has written extensively about "jihadi culture." He argues that the lure of the movement is not so much in its ideas but in its total worldview, a view of a world at war, one maintained by a diverse remnant of the faithful who have created their own community and culture (Hegghammer 2017). Their worldview is everything. Their community and culture are all-encompassing. But these are not solely social and political entities, and they are not secular. Religious ideas do play an important and formative role, and they have helped to frame the stunning and disturbing ISIS worldview.

Virtually every war—especially a great war, a war of such magnitude that the very existence of a people and their culture hangs in the balance—is a war in which God is enlisted on either side. When a videotape smuggled out of Afghanistan soon after 9/11 showed Osama bin Laden using his hands to describe the moment in which the two airplanes struck the twin towers, it might have appeared to many watching the videotape that bin Laden was boasting. But the al-Qaida leader quickly attempted to correct that impression by saying that this was a great act of God, and its success was all due to God's graciousness.

At that very moment, flags were waving throughout the United States in solidarity against the perpetrators of the act of terrorism that brought down the World Trade Center towers. "God Bless America" was the slogan on bumper stickers and the refrain of the patriotic anthem sung throughout the country. Soon God appeared to be backing the war on terrorism, as the fervor of religiosity was fused with the fever of war, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. One US military commander rallied his troops on the eve of the assault on Fallujah in 2004 with the clear message that their military charge was directed by God. He told his troops

that it was not true that they were fighting an unseen enemy; he knew who the enemy was, and his name was Satan.

Warfare often unites a sense of nationalism with religious purpose—fighting for "God and country." Few political leaders in a time of warfare are able to resist the temptation to claim God for their side. Fewer still would admit to the humility that Abraham Lincoln was said to have displayed during the Civil War in the United States when he was asked whether God was on his side. Lincoln was said to have claimed that he did not know which side God was on, but that he certainly hoped that he was on God's side.

Part of the reason that religion is an attractive ally in a time of warfare is that it provides a host of benefits. It puts the competition into the absolute terms that religious language provides and clarifies the do-or-die nature of the struggle. It demonizes opponents and valorizes the leaders of one's own side. Religion provides a moral justification for killing and eternal rewards for its martyrs. The networks of religious institutions provide a ready-made arena for recruitment and provide the blessings of moral authorities. Religious images can take a political struggle and personalize it—showing that a nation's foe is linked with one's own personal hardships and that political success is tied to a spiritual redemption that is personally experienced. In this sense, war can be seen as part of the essential transformative character of religion's promise of salvation.

The ideas that witches exist, or Jews are a problem, or Muslims are all terrorists are inventions of a shared perception and in all of these cases are part of alternative worldviews of war in which evil enemies needed to be invented in order for a war worldview to be viable. Someone has to be the scapegoat. This is where religion provides conceptual support for a war worldview.

War is the moral absolutism of social conflict, and as such, one might well ask whether all wars are to some extent religious wars. I think the answer is, in part, yes. Since all wars involve the idea that enemies are evil and that great good must prevail, ideas of religion are often in the background. As we have seen, it is easy for sacred language and images to become enlisted in a military cause. Most wars are thought to be conducted for a high moral purpose, and often this means seeing them as blessed by God. For this reason, there is something of a sliding scale between worldly war and religious war, between military activities that are rational calculations for the sake of civil order and those that are thought to be manifestations of a sacred struggle. This means that those who think about how we might live in a world without war must deal with the religious dimensions of the construct—the images

of spiritual war that may be lurking behind military maneuvers and their public supporters—as well as the worldly issues for which a war might be waged.

#### WHEN RELIGION EMBRACES WAR

The German twins, Kevin and Mark, might well have been lured into the jihadi struggle because of the glamor of war. One of the twins, Mark, had already served a tour of duty in Afghanistan, and perhaps he was eager to enter into a conflict that he thought was more meaningful and in which his role was more direct. But it probably helped that this war was justified by his newfound religion.

Then again, religion might have been the primary motivation and war simply a burdensome commitment that came with the package. Ordinarily, however, when images of warfare appear within religious worldviews, those images are sanitized and bent toward the purposes of religion. They are meant to validate the religious worldview by providing analogies and symbols for religious meanings, and for that reason, seldom do religious ideas themselves lead to actual war.

Though religious language and legends are full of war, it is the image of warfare that is woven into religious text and myth more than the actual fighting. Religious images are filled with warfare, whether it is the great conflict of the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; the wars between Buddhist and Tamil kings in the Sri Lankan chronicles; the grand adventures of Japanese and Chinese warriors; the biblical images of warfare in the books of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and 1 Samuel; and the triumphant wars of Islamic tradition that can be traced back to the military force of the Prophet. In the case of Christianity, it is the ultimate war before the last judgment. So it would seem that warfare is an image that religion could scarcely do without.

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, the creation of the world is presented as the triumph over chaos. This image is thought to have had its origins in earlier Babylonian mythology about the war against chaos—*Chaoskampf*, as it is known to textual scholars. In the ancient Babylonian epic the *Enuma Elish*, the world is created by conquering the chaos monster who is split in half, separating the earth from the heavens, exactly the way that it is described in Genesis 1:6–8.

The internal war between good and evil within each person is a frequent theme in most religious traditions. In Islam, it is what jihad means to most pious Muslims, who think of this struggle as the battle for purity that rages within each person's heart. Protestant hymns are full of battle. In them, the faithful are urged to march "onward, Christian soldiers," as if "going on to war." Other hymns challenge the believer to "stand up, stand up for Jesus"

as "soldiers of the cross," to fight "the good fight," and to struggle "manfully onward" to subdue the enemy, identified in this case as "dark passions." One scholar of popular Protestantism, Harriet Crabtree (1991), surveyed the images that are prominent in what she called the "popular theologies" projected in the hymns, tracts, and sermons of modern Protestant Christianity, and she found the "model of warfare" to be one of the most enduring. The Protestant writer Arthur Wallis, in his book *Into Battle*, claimed that "Christian living *is* war." Wallis explained that this warfare is not "a metaphor or a figure of speech" but a "literal fact"; the characteristics of the war, however—"the sphere, the weapons, and the foe"—are spiritual rather than material (Wallis 1973).

The Indic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism also portray a full panoply of battle images in their legendary traditions. We have already discussed the dramatic and fierce battles that consume much of the narrative of the two great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Theravada Buddhist text, the Mahavamsa, also chronicles great battles, in this case between Sinhalese Buddhist and Tamil kings. The calendar art of popular Sikh culture vividly portrays the bloody encounters with Moghul warriors, including the martyrdom of two of the founding gurus in the Sikh lineage, Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur. Another great Sikh figure, Baba Deep Singh, who fought against the Moghul army, is portrayed in some calendar art as still fighting manfully on, sword in one hand and his own severed head in the other.

What should we make of these gory images and bloody battles? Sikh theologians and writers, like their Christian counterparts, explain the meaning of such stories about warfare 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 have seen acts of war as God's vengeance, undertaken by the divine so that humans will not have to fight. This interpretation has also been popular among some Muslim writers, who speak of the true jihad as the one within each person's soul.

Thus, violent images have been given religious meaning and have been domesticized by this meaning. These acts, although presented visually and in stories as being terribly real, have been sanitized by becoming symbols; they have been stripped of their horror by being invested with religious meaning. They have been justified and therefore exonerated because they are part of a religious template that is even larger than myth and history; they have been elements of a ritual scenario that makes it possible for people involved in it to experience vicariously the drama of transcendent war.

In most cases, when religious traditions portray warfare, religion rises above all of the messiness of life, its disorder, and eventually its death. When religious cultures portray warfare as something that is acknowledged and ultimately controlled, they are presenting an almost cosmological reenactment of the primacy of order over chaos. When the creators of the stained-glass windows of the great European cathedrals portrayed Christ as king, emerging from his grave like a general victorious in battle, they were stating something fundamental about Christianity and every other religious tradition: religion reaffirms the primacy of order over disorder, of life over death. To make this point, however, violence and other forms of disorder must be vividly portrayed and ultimately conquered.

The irony of these bloody images is that faith has always longed for peace. But in order to portray a state of harmony convincingly, religion has had to show disharmony and its ability to contain it. As I have suggested elsewhere, religion has dealt with violence, therefore, not only because violence is unruly and has to be tamed but because religion, as the ultimate statement of meaningfulness, always has to assert the primacy of meaning in the face of chaos.

It is true, however, that people within all religious traditions have engaged in violence in ways that incorporate religious symbols and images. Followers of the Shiv Sena in India, for example—the "army of Lord Shiva"—have savagely attacked Muslims in the city of Ahmadabad for appropriating the image of Shiva's sword. Christians have entered battle with the hope that God was on their side, and Muslims have waged what they would like the faithful to accept as holy wars.

For these reasons, religious critics such as Dawkins and Harris rush in, pointing to these as examples of how religion can lead to violence. They have a point, of course, since religion is undeniably an element in many instances of violence in recent years as well as throughout history. But it returns us to the question of causation. Is religion using war in these instances, or is war using religion? It is true, as Dawkins says, that the language of religion is absolutistic, sometimes dogmatic; but so are many other totalizing ideologies, including science. Is there anything about religion that would by itself conduce to violence?

One of the most peculiar notions—and an oddly popular one in the general literature—is that the presence of violent images in scripture commands the faithful to go and act in a similar way in real life. The idea, I take it, is that people may be sitting in their comfortable living room chairs, reading scripture, and when they come to the passages about war they will suddenly be so fired up that they will get up and run out of their houses, swords in hand, looking for infidels to slay on the spot.

I suppose such a scenario is possible, though not likely. There are millions of Muslims in Asia—which is where most of the world's Muslims live—who read the Qur'an faithfully and do not seem to be propelled toward violence. In fact, Islamic-related violence seems to occur mostly in areas of the world with severe social and political tensions. Moreover, there are even more millions of Christians and Jews reading biblical scriptures that are even bloodier than the Qur'an, and few of them seem to be motivated to violence simply by the weight of textual advice. It seems unlikely that biblical texts or theological positions in themselves lead persons into arenas of warfare and violence.

I know of almost no reputable scholar who would argue such a thing. Dawkins and Harris are unusual in this regard, but one is a biologist and the other a neuroscientist. Neither is a scholar of religion. No scholar of religion would say what they say without careful qualification and evidence to support their position.

There is one scholar of religion, however, who does argue that religion itself conduces to violence. This scholar is Hector Avalos, but his approach is quite different from that of Dawkins and Harris. Rather than leveling a broadside against the history of religion in general, Avalos takes seriously the notion of religion as alternative reality, as a worldview. His argument is that the idea of religion involves a scarce resource, spiritual truth, and that competition over this asset is what may lead to violence (Avalos 2005). It is an interesting argument, though not one that is accepted with enthusiasm in most academic quarters, and in any event it is quite different from the knee-jerk notion that reading violent scriptures leads to violent actions.

With the exception of Avalos, most religious studies scholars would concur with the notion that the role of warfare in religious language and tradition is ordinarily used metaphorically. When religion is graphically a part of warfare, as in the case of the Shiv Sena in India or the Christian militia in the United States, these are usually instances in which war is using religion, as we have discussed in the previous section of this essay. When war embraces religion, war is exalted and religion is servile to its purposes. But when religion embraces war, ordinarily religion is exalted and war is the symbolic servant, and a domestic servant at that. In this sense, war is neutered by religion. Only rarely is religion involved in warfare in a more direct way, and this is what happens in the fusion of religion and war.

#### WHEN RELIGION AND WAR ARE FUSED: COSMIC WAR

Ordinarily, when people such as the German twins convert to a new religious belief, they are not motivated to go to war. But the German twins were ready for war, it seemed, as soon as they completed

their religious conversion—or perhaps because of it. What made their situation different? Where they attracted to war or to religion? Or could they have been attracted to both?

Perhaps, for the German twins, the point of ISIS was that it was both religion and war. It is an interesting third option to add to the two that we have already considered—that of war embracing religion, and religion embracing war. These are cases where it appears that the religion is war and the war is religion.

This is the point that some writers have made about the Islamic State. In an interesting book, *ISIS Apocalypse*, William McCants (2015) makes the argument that the worldview of ISIS is one that is by its nature a vision of sacred confrontation that is both religion and war. Probing into the theological ideas of the ISIS leadership, McCants shows that these ideas are rooted in a marginal Muslim notion of extreme prophecy. In a process of thinking that is not entirely different from the end-times prophecies of premillenarian Evangelical Protestants, ISIS leaders imagine that history is moving toward a cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil that will result in a whole new era of righteous order. The main difference between the Christian end-time beliefs and the ISIS apocalypse is that the ISIS leaders think that before the savior comes—the Mahdi, in prophetic Muslim apocalyptic thinking—a new caliphate has to be established in real battles that are conducted by righteous Muslim soldiers. In other words, their religious worldview is a world of war.

Not all the supporters of ISIS buy into this apocalyptic scenario, at least not with the same enthusiasm that many of the leaders have shown for it. As I have said before, my own interviews with Sunni Arabs in Iraq, including former ISIS fighters and refugees from ISIS-held territories, affirm that for most of the ISIS foot soldiers from the region, their motivations are primarily for Sunni Arab empowerment. And many of the foreigners who have flocked to the region have done so because of the lure of war, any war, the excitement and thrill of a slightly sketchy dangerous encounter without any apparent real knowledge of or interest in the theological aspects of the war worldview.

But there is no question that for some of the former ISIS fighters I interviewed and most of the movement's leaders, the apocalyptic image of righteous religious war is what appeals to them. And it is what animates them. Graeme Wood, in reporting on this way of thinking in the Islamic State in his book, *The Way of the Strangers*, says that for many of the followers of ISIS, "this war is the main event in human history—not a skirmish decades away from the end." He goes on to quote the Swedish scholar Magnus Ranstorp, the former director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism at the University of St. Andrews

in Scotland, who says that for those who believe in this vision of religious war, joining the Islamic State is "better than getting tickets to the World Cup," since it's like being able to "play in the championship and score a goal" (Wood 2017, 264).

This is an instance where the two, religion and war, are fused. This fusion creates a powerful construct of human imagination that in other writings I have called "cosmic war" (Juergensmeyer 2017, 2016). The term *cosmic war* refers to the idea of a divine intervention in human history, an existential battle between religion and irreligion, good and evil, order and chaos. It is a remarkable combination of the concepts of religion and war that is often expressed in real war and not just in its literary and legendary representations. When it takes on a life of its own and is not contained within the symbolic language of religion, it can pose a whole new kind of alternative reality that is both religious and bellicose.

When one embraces the idea of cosmic war, however, real war does not necessarily have to be the next step. We have already seen how some Christians have taken the idea of apocalyptic war that is described in the book of Revelation and portrayed in the *Left Behind* novels and have imagined it as cosmic war, though without actually fighting anyone because of it. They do believe, however, that current events are evidence that it is coming to pass in the current day. The cataclysm described in Revelation 16 is in part a "battle," but it also involves a series of acts of nature presumably triggered by God: "flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth" (Rev. 16:18). Islands would vanish, and mountains would be leveled (Rev. 16:20). At the culmination of the conflict, the old world would be swept away and "a new heaven and a new earth" would be established (Rev. 21:1). A new holy city, a new Jerusalem, would rise up, and God would dwell with the citizens. "Behold," the book says, "I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Some Christian activists have seen the global war on terror as that apocalyptic moment described in the book of Revelation. It is cosmic war, God's war, one described in the Bible.

There have been other moments in Christian history in which millenarian movements have erupted, often in response to dire social and economic conditions. Norman Cohn (1970) has chronicled some of these in the late Middle Ages in Europe, including the Anabaptists, the Ranters, and the theocratic King John of Leiden, who took over the city of Münster in 1534. Many other religious traditions also contain apocalyptic visions similar to the second coming that is awaited in Christianity. In Judaism it is a first coming, in that the Messiah, David, has not returned for the first time; it is his coming that is anticipated by Messianic Jewish Zionists in Israel, who want to take over the West Bank to prepare the biblical land

of Israel for his return in what Rabbi Meir Kahane described as "catastrophic Messianism"—the arrival of the Messiah after a period of real earthly conflict (Kahane 1978; Sprinzak 1991). In Hinduism there is a notion of Kalki, a future avatar of Vishnu, returning in the golden age of Satyayug. According to the German religious studies scholar Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2017, 190–93), this idea from Hinduism is picked up by Buddhists in the eleventh century, where the Kalki figure is imagined to be a redemptive bodhisattva. This idea in turn influenced their Muslim neighbors at the time. So the idea of a savior figure at the end of days is not new in religious history. But it is not necessarily the occasion for earthly war.

Most believers in the end-times, and most readers of the *Left Behind* novels, are not violent. They are willing to accept the notion that this cosmic war, if it ever occurs in real time and the real world, will be sometime in the future, most likely after their own lifetimes. Or if they expect it to happen sooner, it will be like an act of God, a sudden event over which they have no control. In any event, it is not something that they will actively engage in by plotting to attack secularists or to create acts of terror against secular authorities.

Some end-time activists, however, do see themselves as currently part of the struggle. They think that the end-times are already upon them and that the time has come for them to take up arms to defend the righteous and sow fear in the hearts of the secular enemy. In some cases, such as the Christian Identity compounds in Arizona and in Idaho, they constitute survivor communities where they are hunkered down, heavily armed and self-sufficient, preparing to battle with the secular authorities if necessary. At Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 white separatist and end-times believer Randy Weaver engaged in an eleven-day standoff and a shoot-out with the FBI that resulted in the deaths of one of the federal marshals, Weaver's wife, and one of Weaver's sons.

Some Islamic activists also see their struggle as part of a cosmic war. They may, like the leaders of the Islamic State, imagine that they are entering into an apocalyptic struggle at the end of history, or they may accept that although ultimately the cosmic war will be waged on a transcendent plane, the earthly skirmishes of the present are but the harbingers of a more glorious confrontation to come. The ninth section of the Qur'an urges the faithful to stand up in righteous defense against "people who have violated their oaths and intended to expel the Messenger" and those who "attack you first" (Surah 9:13). Though the historical context is one in which a fledgling Muslim community on the Arabian Peninsula was attempting to survive in a hostile environment in the seventh century CE, some Muslims take this passage from the Qur'an as a clue that a cosmic war is being waged in transcendent time, and that the faithful are being called to struggle



against any of those in the present day who would try to destroy them and their religion. Like the battles in the Christians' New Testament and in the Hebrew Bible, it is ultimately not a human battle but God's war: "fight against them so that Allah will punish them by your hands and disgrace them and give you victory over them and heal the breasts of a believing people" (Surah 9:14).

Curiously, this idea of ultimate apocalyptic war has emerged in a quite different part of the world, in Japan. Seizing on the name given to the battlefield in the final confrontation described in the Christian Bible in Revelation 16, the Buddhist Aum Shinrikyo master, Shoko Asahara, described his own version of Armageddon. The Aum master prophesized that this new apocalypse would rival World War II in its destructiveness. Most Japanese would take this to mean something even more horrific than the incidents of nuclear annihilation that destroyed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Asahara prophesized that nuclear tactics such as these would be multiplied and compounded with biological and chemical nerve gas attacks. The movement's imagined enemies were a paranoid cornucopia of political powers and social groups, from the Japanese government and the US military to the Freemasons. The Aum Shinrikyo imagined itself to be the lone defender of all that was good in civilization. The terrorist attack in 1995 was meant to illustrate this imagined view of religion and war, and by illustrating it bring it into reality. If the sarin gas that the attack unleashed in the Tokyo subways had been a more pure strain rather than an adulterated form, tens or even hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese commuters would have been killed. As it turned out, twelve innocent subway riders perished in an agonizing way, and six thousand were injured. Shoko Asahara was tried and convicted for his part in this incident of terrorism, and in 2018 he was finally executed along with six of his co-conspirators in the terror plot.

These ideas of spiritual battle that are found in scripture are employed by activists in such disparate movements as the Aum Shinrikyo, the Christian right, and militant Islam. They are shadows of the war image that rebounds within the worldviews of many religious traditions on a symbolic level. In the legends and stories of most traditions, the image of cosmic war is that of a grand encounter between the forces of good and evil, religion and irreligion, order and chaos, played out on an epic scale.

Ordinarily, images of cosmic war are confined to myth and symbol, but if they are implanted in real-world social and political confrontations, those who believe in them can be swept up into a grand scenario of warfare. Conflicts over territory and political control are lifted onto the high proscenium of sacred drama. Such extraordinary images of cosmic war are metajustifications for religious violence. They not

only explain why religious violence happens—why religious persons feel victimized by violence and why they need to take revenge for this violence—but also provide a large worldview, a template of meaning in which religious violence makes sense. In the context of cosmic war, righteous people are impressed into service as soldiers, and great confrontations occur in which noncombatants are killed. But ultimately the righteous will prevail, for cosmic war is, after all, God's war. And God cannot lose.

The idea of "cosmic war" has much in common with the notion of the great nineteenth-century German theorist Carl von Clausewitz that the ideal type of war, war in its purest form, is "absolute war." In Clausewitz's thinking, a duel is the perfect image of "ideal war" or "absolute war"—a grand encounter between two sides gripped in an all-or-nothing struggle, a confrontation so grand and complete that it almost always is confined to the imagination or to representations in myth and legend (Clausewitz 1832). For this reason, Clausewitz averred, war as we know it is usually politics by other means. But forms of this apocalyptic narrative of Clausewitz's notion of absolute war are found in religious legend and in fantasy in popular culture—in the *Left Behind* novels, for example, and in such computer games as *Fortnite* and *Counter-Strike*. What makes the idea of cosmic war different from absolute war, however, is the nature of the struggle. Here is where elements from cultural traditions enhance the notion by providing aspects of the ideas of *Chaoskampf* and divine war. Cosmic war is an all-or-nothing struggle not just between two earthly combatants but between essential forces of reality. It has an existential valence to it—a fight between good and evil, right and wrong, and order versus chaos.

I have not used the term "holy war" to describe this union of religion and war for several reasons. One is that the use of the term "holy war" is often limited to Islamic ideas, and the notion of cosmic war exists in virtually every religious tradition; it is not solely Muslim. Moreover, distinctions are sometimes made by scholars and activists between holy war and divine war—one is war undertaken on behalf of God, the other is war imagined to be carried out by God. Holy war is not quite cosmic war since it is somewhat limited by moral and social constraints, in the way that Clausewitz speaks of the political and social limitations placed on absolute war in a historical context; and "just war" is even more explicitly limited by the moral rules that it places on military engagement. Cosmic war, however, has no such limitations. It is absolute war on an existential level.

When cosmic war bursts from its confinement in myth and legend and is implanted in real earthly confrontations—such as the territorial raids of the Islamic State—it can change the nature of the conflict. For one thing, it expands the horizons of the

confrontation. It expands them spatially, in that cosmic war is thought to be larger than one region or location on earth and a manifestation of a global tension between forces of good and forces of evil. It is also expansive in a temporal sense, for cosmic war can endure beyond one's lifetime and still ultimately reign victorious.

When I challenged Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, political head of Hamas, regarding the efficacy of Hamas's military methods—especially suicide attacks—against the powerful Israeli army, he initially acknowledged that it would be difficult for Hamas to win in his own lifetime, or even in his children's lifetime (interview with Rantisi, in Khan Yunis, Gaza, March 1, 1998). But in his children's children's lifetime, Dr. Rantisi said, his face brightening, "we may succeed." He added that they could not possibly lose since this was not their own battle but "God's war." In a cosmic war, the defeat in a skirmish or the deaths of warriors are temporary setbacks in a struggle that could persist for decades, even eons, since it is in God's time. But since it is "God's war," as Dr. Rantisi put it, the ultimate outcome has been preordained, and the virtuous side will triumph.

The notion of cosmic war is also valuable in a real-life conflict in that it helps to recruit warriors. It promises them personal redemption and heavenly rewards. Although cosmic war is a social construct that is usually shared by a group of people who collectively are defensive or disturbed about the world and see the idea of cosmic war as giving clarity to their confusion and direction to their anger, it is also intensely personal. It challenges individuals to accept this worldview as a conversion experience, and it provides personal rewards—including spiritual transformation and redemption. In the last instructions to the 9/11 hijackers that were found in the parked car of one of those who died in that mission, the hijackers were expected to perform rites of purification before they undertook the final act, indicating that participation in the suicide act of martyrdom would redeem them in the afterlife.

It can also promise heavenly rewards, but the importance of this has often been exaggerated. For example, much is made of the promise stated in the Qur'an that all pious Muslim men will receive sensual rewards in heaven, consorting with virgins. Some of the stories about the prophet (in the Hadith), which were written after the revelations of the Qur'an, specify that the number of virgins is seventy-two and that they have almond-shaped eyes and large breasts. The videotaped last testament of the young Palestinian men who have volunteered to ignite explosive belts in acts of suicide terrorism do not dwell on this aspect of heavenly rewards, however, but they do make much of how they will be remembered in the community's history and how they expect that this act

will make something positive out of their lives. They also expect to be exalted in heaven as part of their spiritual rewards.

Others who have joined the jihadi mission have hoped for more earthly rewards. Their spiritual quests might be fused with hopes for earthly power, privilege, and acceptance in the jihadi community. Many have seen in ISIS a glimmer of hope for their own sense of self-worth, and the hope that the caliphate will transform not only Syria and Iraq but also their own lives, and right a world gone askew. A teenage follower of the ISIS cybernetwork living in Canada whom the Canadian scholar Amarnath Amarasingam contacted online told him that his parents were trying to take away his computer to keep him from being in contact with the ISIS network, but they wouldn't be successful, he said, since he had other ways to get online. He needed this connection, he said, since he felt more true to himself when he was online with the jihadi network than in any other aspect of his teenage Canadian existence. Besides, he added, "I never felt like I've belonged anywhere until I met the brothers and sisters online" (Amarasingam 2015).

Was this what animated the German twins, Kevin and Mark, in joining the movement? Were they only seeking meaning in life and a profound sense of mission and community, or were they also seeking transcendent rewards? We will never know what aspect of these promises of cosmic war appealed to them or why they so willingly gave their lives to the Islamic State's cause. We do not even know for certain whether their motivations were primarily to seek religious fulfillment, the thrill of war, or both, in a fusion of religion and war that I have called cosmic war. My guess—and it is only a guess—was that it was some combination of these and that cosmic war was likely in their imaginations. My guess is strengthened by the fact that this is the template of religious war that the ISIS propaganda has displayed in its online magazine *Dabiq* and that is echoed in the chatter on social media among the global jihadi cybercommunity. If Kevin and Mark entered into that world, it was both thrilling and redemptive, engaging and ennobling. They likely fell into its black hole, a dark alternative world of cosmic war, from which they would not return.

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