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Christian Identity Theology: Religious Motivation & Violence

By Jae Bates

Written for Greta Austin's class

Religions of the Book, fall 2015

Introduction

From the Oklahoma City Bombing to the recent mass shooting of a Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood, conversations on Christian motivations of terror are becoming more prevalent. In his book, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer proposes five characteristics for explaining religious violence: (1) violence as performative and symbolic¹, (2) violence as part of a cosmic war², (3) violence is sacrificial³, (4) enemies are 'satanized' or dehumanized⁴, and (5) violence is committed to empower the marginalized⁵. The Christian Identity movement is characterized by performative violence, cosmic war, satanized enemies, and violence to empower the marginalized. Yet, the Christian Identity movement does not fit the characteristic of sacrificial violence because they are trying to preserve the white race and thus do not want to kill their members. This paper will expand on Juergensmeyer's model of five characteristics in *Terror in the Mind of God* by examining the Aryan Nations' worldview under the Christian Identity movement and how it fits into the framework that Mark Juergensmeyer has created. This finding suggests that Mark Juergensmeyer's explanatory devices cannot be applied to every militant religious group.

Historiography

¹ Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Introduction." In *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000). 119.

² Ibid., 145.

³ Ibid., 164.

⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁵ Ibid., 187.

Many theories have been offered as to why religious violence occurs. While the literature on religious violence ranges from geopolitical theory to psychological analysis, this section will focus on William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* and Mark Juergensmeyer's book *Terror in the Mind of God*.

Cavanaugh asserts that rhetorical concepts of 'religious violence' are actually fabricated as a secular way to discredit religion and to justify transcultural hegemony. This is most aptly applied to the way the 'secular' American government justifies drone strikes and war in Muslim-majority nations. He argues that the secular nation-state uses this rhetoric of 'religious violence' to equate secular to rational and religion to fanaticism. By focusing on the idea that religions are violent, secular society is able to other religious practitioners, subsequently dehumanize them. Cavanaugh asserts the flaw in discourses are the separation of politics and religion. He claims this is distinctly a Western construct⁶.

The second piece of crucial literature is *Terror in the Mind of God*, a series of case studies from a sociological perspective. Juergensmeyer notes a few basic commonalities amongst the perpetrators of religious violence whom he interviews. First he notes those interviewed rarely view what they've done as 'terrorism.' Secondly, he notes that those interviewed perceive that their communities are under attack and the world is already violent. Next, he observes that their ultimate goal, through violence, was actually peace. Lastly, he remarks upon the belief that the world is in a cosmic war between secular non-believers and the righteous. Juergensmeyer also asserts that genuine and deeply held beliefs are key to the belief of many of these 'activists' that they were fulfilling a righteous act⁷.

⁶ Cavanaugh, William T. "Introduction." In *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. 4,5

⁷ Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Introduction." In *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000. pp. 5-14, 242

Juergensmeyer concludes that creating neutral spaces between religion and secularism can promote peace. Juergensmeyer shares an anecdote about an imprisoned member of Hamas who both deeply hated Jewish people for taking his land, but also highly respected the Israeli soccer team. Juergensmeyer expands that art, education, and sports provide positive neutral ground between nonbelievers and the righteous. However, this reasoning is shattered by more recent acts of terror. ISIS⁸ massacred hundreds in Paris in the very places that Juergensmeyer suggests are neutral: a concert hall and a soccer stadium, killing over one hundred people.⁹

While both frameworks are helpful in studying the discourse of religious violence, Juergensmeyer's model is most helpful when understanding U.S. domestic terrorism, because Cavanaugh's model focuses heavily on the dynamic of transnational and transcultural terrorism rather than domestic. While assessing the Aryan Nations from Juergensmeyer's lens of religious violence, it is important to remember that from Christian Identity theology, members of the Aryan Nations are motivated by and act under genuinely held beliefs. It is important to not label Aryan Nations members as fanatical, defunct, or irrational in nature simply because their worldview is reprehensible to theirs.

The Worldview: Definitions of Christian Identity & The Aryan Nations

⁸ Islamic State in Syria

⁹ Nossiter, Adam, Aurelien Breeden, and Katrin Bennhold. "Three Teams of Coordinated Attackers Carried Out Assault on Paris, Officials Say; Hollande Blames ISIS." *The New York Times*. November 14, 2015. Accessed December 12, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/world/europe/paris-terrorist-attacks.html?_r=0.

Like other movements, the Christian Identity movement is not monolithic. There are several groups that fall under, are related to, or inspired by, the Christian Identity movement.¹⁰ However, their three essential tenets are: (1) there is a white-aryan race and they are the true descendants of the tribes of Israel, (2) Jews are the offspring of Eve and the Devil, and (3) the world is quickly approaching a racial holy war, an apocalyptic struggle between White-Aryans and Jews. Christian Identity is explicitly anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic, believing non-white people, while God's creation, are animals, 'beasts of the earth,' not fully human¹¹.

Many evangelical churches are very opposed to the Christian Identity movement and have sought to distance 'Christian Identity' from Christianity in general. However, this paper will look at Christian Identity as falling strictly within a Christian framework because they identify themselves as such, using Biblical theology to justify many of their actions. It is also important to note that, because this is a particular theological view, there are many white-nationalists who have either been inspired by or connected to Christian Identity theology without being explicitly followers of the movement. For example, the Aryan Nations is one neo-Nazi organization that is based in the worldview of Christian Identity theology. On the White-Nationalist forum *Stormfront*, an Aryan Nations member posted the missions of the movement and stated an introduction to Christian Identity similar to the one used in this paper. Essentially, the mission statement lists white survival and supremacy as their primary goals. The forum goes on to also state their core beliefs about the current state of society and government¹². The Aryan

¹⁰ includes but is not limited to: the Aryan Nations, the Aryan Nations Revival, The Army of God, the Order, Volksfront, and The Phineas Priesthood

¹¹ Dobratz, Betty A. "The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racist Movement." *J Sci Stud Rel Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*: pp. 289

¹² "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2004. Accessed December 12, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t123653/>.

Nations holds the core belief that the United States Government is “Zionist occupied” and “Jews control the government¹³.”

Symbolic and Performative Violence

There have been several large scale violent attacks made by Christian Identity neo-Nazis in the United States and Christian Identity Nazi sympathizers. In the wake of this performative violence, perpetrators often leave manifestos to outline specifically what message the violence is supposed to give to the public. The Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh is an infamous example of Christian Identity influencing performative violence. Based out of the Christian Identity worldview, Timothy McVeigh believed that the government was conspiring against its people and his bomb was meant to serve as a symbol of resistance¹⁴. In his manifesto he states that the bombing was supposed to be symbolic of the U.S. government committing violence abroad and domestically, citing the FBI’s violence during the Waco siege of the Branch Davidians as an example of a military state¹⁵. Ultimately, Timothy McVeigh holds the belief that the government is embroiled in a violent conspiracy and in order to make a statement about the violence being carried out by the United States government, he essentially ‘performs’ a symbolic act that is supposed reflect on the violence that is being perpetrated by the U.S. government.

The Existential Threat & Cosmic War

Creating an existential threat is key in identifying the justification of religious violence by a given group. This is to say, a group identifies an enemy that poses a threat to the survival of their identity group. The Aryan Nations and its related organizations ultimately view the current state of the American government as a threat to the survival of the white race. The Aryan Nations

¹³ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009.

¹⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Introduction." In *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000. pp. 120-121

¹⁵ McVeigh, Timothy. "Letter of Confession." Accessed December 15, 2015.
<http://www.truthinourtime.com/2010/02/19/timothy-McVeighs-manifesto/>

forum states: “The United non-White races of the and under the guidance and leadership of Jewry, an international mongrelized mixture, are in the process of culminating their ancient war for the total extinction of our racial seedline¹⁶.” An Aryan Nations follower also stated that the government is Zionist occupied referring to Zionists as “militant Jews whose whole philosophy is to destroy the white race.¹⁷” This exemplifies Aryan Nations members seeing the Jewish people as an existential threat because they believe that Jewish people are there to annihilate the white race. Both the stated goals of the Aryan Nations and the subsequent quotes by neo-Nazis exemplify that followers of this ideology see a clear threat to their identity race. As Juergensmeyer outlined, the genuine worldview is driven by the perception of an existential, almost apocalyptic, threat¹⁸. Several of the lines in the Aryan Nations forum post reference a “White Civil war,” and the “ancient war” being waged between the White race and the Jews¹⁹. This relates back to the Christian Identity theological view that the world is coming to a situation where Aryans will have to fight a holy war against the Jewish and non-white people.

Many members of Aryan Nations’ related organizations have been interviewed about their actions. ‘Big Red,’ a neo-Nazi, was interviewed and described himself as “a very violent person” when it comes to defending himself, his brothers, and his race²⁰. He proclaims this positively because he genuinely wants to defend against what he perceives as a threat to something greater than himself. Driven by the worldview that there is a Jewish conspiracy to

¹⁶ "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2004. Accessed December 12, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t123653/>.

¹⁷ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009.

¹⁸ Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Introduction." In *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000. pp. 5-14, 242

¹⁹ "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2004. Accessed December 12, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t123653/>.

²⁰ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009. 24:00-24:10

eliminate the white race, neo-Nazis like Big Red see violent hate crimes and terror as a way of defending the white race from extinction.

This worldview and the perceived existential threat result in the understanding and justification of violence as part of carrying out the “cosmic” or “racial war,” and fighting for a religious purpose greater than themselves. John C. Sigler III, a Christian Identity Hammerskin, states, “When men fight in the name of God, nothing on earth scares or weakens them.²¹” This quote implies that because Christian Identity neo-Nazis are reinforced by their genuinely held belief in God and because of their conviction they are the true descendants of the Ancient Israelites, they feel that they are fighting a violent struggle that is for God and that is greater than them. The Aryan Nations state: “We believe that there is a battle being fought this day between the children of darkness (today known as Jews) and the children of light (Yahweh, The Ever living God), the Aryan Race.²²” This also establishes that the violence is ongoing and a struggle that is to be carried out by current followers. The violence committed today is part of the cosmic war and existential battle.

Satanization of the Enemy

The Aryan Nations is characterized by ‘satanization of the enemy,’ putting the enemy on a cosmic plane where they are unholy and therefore subhuman. The othering of the enemy is embedded into Christian Identity theology. Simply the idea that Aryans are truly “God’s people,” and that Jews are the descendants of the Devil puts the ‘enemy’ inherently under Satan. It creates a dichotomy of light and dark in the very theology of the group.

²¹ Dobratz, Betty A. "The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racist Movement." *J Sci Stud Rel Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*: pp. 293

²² "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives

Many of the references to non-white and Jewish people are dehumanizing. Posts and mission statements use words like “mongrel” equating non-white and Jewish people to animals. ‘Spider,’ a neo-Nazi, says he “likens [his] hatred of most minorities to the hatred that a cancer patient has of his cancer cells²³.” Several posts on an Aryan Nations message board read, “Jews aren't just the #1 enemy of the white race, they are the #1 enemy of all mankind...the rest are simply symptoms of the primary illness. Eliminate the jew from the equation, and mankind would right the sinking ship.” And in response another member posts, “No question, it's undeniable. The seed of evil and oppression²⁴.” All of these beliefs put forward by followers further relates to the dehumanization of the Aryan Nations ‘enemy’ in that it equates Jewish people and non-white people to a disease in need of extinction or eradication. The worldview that the root of all evil stems from Jewish people is a strong tool that creates the enemy and demonizes them in order to justify ethnic and religious violence

Empowering the Marginalized

Due to the perception of a Jewish occupied government, Aryan Nations’ violence is also characterized by empowering a marginalized people. Aryan Nations members see themselves as oppressed and marginalized by the existential enemy (Jewish people) who supposedly control the government and all of its agencies. Ultimately, the Aryan Nations sees the United States as a homeland for white Aryan people that was taken over and occupied by Israel. A forum member distinguishes between “the former U.S. territories that were a White European country,” and the

²³ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009. 24:37-24:45

²⁴ "Jews Are Enemy #1, Period. - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2013. Accessed December 15, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1104452/>.

“current U.S. [Zionist occupied].²⁵” This establishes that they believe that the United States was once a place for white Europeans but that the existential threat of non-white people and Jewish people has moved in and is encroaching on white Aryan people. The core belief that the government is occupied by Zionists also characterizes a feeling of marginalization for Aryan Nations’ followers. This is to say that because they feel the government is militant and wants to destroy the white Aryan race, followers must use violence to defend themselves. Ultimately, violence results from this belief of marginalization because they feel that it is the only way to defend the white race and ensure its survival²⁶.

Survival is Crucial: Aryan Nations as anti-Martyrdom

The Aryan Nations, above all else, is about the survival of the white race. This is to say that although there is debate in the neo-Nazi movement, all members absolutely must believe in the survival of the white race. If a person disagreed with the idea of continuing a pure, white Aryan race, then they would not be welcome in the Aryan Nations’ world. This central goal of survival results in a general condemnation of anything that may kill members or leaders of the white Aryan race. For example, the Aryan Nations and its subgroups are highly anti-drug because those who deal drugs are “dealing death to people of the white race.”²⁷ The Aryan Nations’ goals and mission statement also state that the group is anti-military and does not support the United States foreign policy regarding war. They state that the Aryan Nations “feels no obligation to send thousands of White military personnel...to be killed for the purpose of

²⁵ "Jews Are Enemy #1, Period. - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2013. Accessed December 15, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1104452/>.

²⁶ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009.

²⁷ Schmiedeler, Mark, prod. "Skinhead Assault." In *Gangland*. History Channel. December 10, 2009.

enforcing the corporation's greedy desires for cheap-labor.²⁸ The dogma of an anti-drug and anti-military rhetoric is on the basis of preserving the white race. The Aryan Nations condemns any activity or body that seeks to send white people to their deaths.

The dogmatic worldview that white survival is a priority results in the Aryan Nations lacking the idea of sacrificial violence. While some neo-Nazi sympathizers and followers have either been killed by police, executed by the state, or have killed themselves during standoffs, this is not a practice that is set forth in the Aryan Nations methodology. Many followers will refer to Aryan Nations leaders who have died as “martyrs,” but there is no active rhetoric on Aryan Nations forums regarding ideas of sacrifice or martyrdom. Although the Aryan Nations mission statement does not specifically mention martyrdom, it states that white people need to stop “suicidal, anti-white insanity” in order to grow a white Aryan Nation and build support and allyship amongst all white people²⁹. This lack of information about Aryan martyrs would indicate that rhetoric about sacrificial violence and martyrdom is not a central characteristic of Aryan Nations’ violence. Therefore, Aryan Nations does not have all five characteristics that Juergensmeyer sets forth as central to religious violence. Ultimately, this exemplifies that Juergensmeyer’s framework can not be used as a blanket across all religious militant organizations equally.

Conclusion

Mark Juergensmeyer’s five characteristics of religious violence are crucial when analyzing the motivations and justifications of militants religious groups. These five characteristics cannot be applied to every organization as to what is or is not religious violence

²⁸ "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2004. Accessed December 12, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t123653/>

²⁹ "What the Aryan Nations/Church Of Jesus Christ Stands For: Our Belives - Stormfront." Stormfront RSS. February 1, 2004. Accessed December 12, 2015. <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t123653/>

because not every group fits each characteristic exactly, such as the Aryan Nations fits into four out of five of these characteristics. The Aryan Nations is characterized by symbolic and performative violence, existential cosmic war, demonized subhuman enemies, and violence to empower the marginalized. However, it is evident through research that the Christian Identity movement does not fit the characteristic of sacrificial violence and do not actively seek forms of martyrdom. This finding suggests that Mark Juergensmeyer's explanatory devices cannot be applied to every aspect of a militant religious group but rather are helpful in better understanding the motivations of militant religious groups.

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