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Cosmic War

“We are at war and I am a soldier,” said a young British man, Mohamad Sidique Khan, on a videotape made some hours before he and three other dedicated young activists detonated a series of suicide bombs in the London tube train and a double-decker bus on July 7, 2005.¹ In his rambling statement, he admitted that the media would likely portray him as a monster, a terrorist out to harm innocent civilians. But he saw himself differently, as a defender of his community and his faith in a battle that he felt had been going on for some time. Most people in Britain, he said, were unaware of this warfare, though he felt it acutely, and as a result of his actions on that terrible day in 2005, he said, addressing his fellow citizens in England, “now you too will taste the reality of this situation.”

A similar motive was behind the San Bernardino, California, shooting in December 2015 that killed fourteen and wounded many more, which was regarded at the time—by most Americans, the news media, and government officials—as a terrorist attack. But on the pages of the slick online magazine *Dabiq* the perpetrators of the attack, Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, were lauded as heroes. They were not terrorists but soldiers in an ongoing war. Moreover, it was a war that was not initiated by ISIS but by its western enemies. According to *Dabiq*, the actions of the San Bernardino couple was a response to the attempts of the “American-led crusaders” in their efforts of “waging war against the Khalifah [the ISIS self-proclaimed caliphate].” Hence

they should be revered as warriors, “defiantly terrorizing the crusaders in their very strongholds.”²

Osama bin Laden said as much in a proclamation delivered long before the catastrophic attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and months before the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—bombings he was accused of masterminding and financing. The world is at war, he said in his 1998 fatwa, making clear that it was not he who started the war, but Americans, through their actions in the Middle East. These had constituted, in bin Laden’s words, “a clear declaration of war on God, His messenger and Muslims.”³ Just as the leaders of ISIS did, he insisted that his own acts of violence were merely responses to a great ongoing struggle. It was a proclamation that he repeated in his public statements following the September 11, 2001, assaults. The assaults themselves were described by the American media, not as a criminal act by a small rogue band, but precisely as bin Laden wanted them to be perceived: as an act of war. In words that echoed bin Laden’s, American newspapers after September 11 proclaimed the world to be at war, a war that President George W. Bush soon defined as a “war on terrorism.”

The imagined wars of ISIS and Al-Qaeda are not the only ones recognized by religious activists around the world, nor were they the only ones employing terrorism as a tactic or targeting Europe and America. Anders Breivik, pictured in military costume, imagined himself to be the commander of a revived version of the Knights Templar, the soldiers of the medieval Christian Crusades; his act of terrorism in Norway was intended as a response to the war that he imagined was being waged on northern Europeans in order to impose a multicultural society, a war that Breivik feared that Christendom was losing. When Bo Gritz, the leader of the American Patriot movement, led a posse into the woods of South Carolina to hunt for the Atlanta Olympic Park bomber, Eric Robert Rudolph, he explained that Rudolph considered himself “a soldier at war”—one whose enemy was the American government. Gritz could be confident of that assessment, since many of his militia colleagues viewed themselves in exactly the same way. The acronym RAHOWA, which stands for “racial holy war,” is in fact a greeting and a rallying cry in the World Church of the Creator, the group associated with Benjamin Nathaniel Smith’s racially targeted killings in Illinois and Indiana.

“The Lord God is a man of War,” Christian Identity leader Kerry Noble reminded his followers in the Arkansas compound of the Covenant, the

Sword, and the Arm of the Lord.⁴ After he had served prison time and left the movement, Noble regretted his radical stance but explained that he then felt it necessary, since his group “needed to know that it was time to cross the line into violence,” and that these actions would be “acceptable to the Lord.”⁵ When one of Noble’s former colleagues, Bob Matthews, took seriously this mandate for violence and was implicated in killing a Jewish radio talk show host, he secluded himself in a hideout on Whidbey Island, north of Seattle, where he issued a statement declaring that he and his comrades were in “a full and unrelenting state of war” against the U.S. government.⁶ The Bible is “a book of war, a book of hate,” another Christian Identity activist remarked.⁷

These images of divine warfare are persistent features of religious activism. They provide the content and the themes that are played out in the grand scenarios that lie behind contemporary acts of performance violence. In many cases these images are not new but are a part of the heritage of religious traditions that stretch back to antiquity, and abundant examples of warfare may be found in sacred texts. In a booklet entitled *Prepare War!* for instance, Kerry Noble provided a scriptural rationale for his martial stance and for his involvement in the Christian Army of God. Because God was “a man of war” (Exod. 15:3) and took vengeance on his enemies, Noble argued, it behooved his followers to do the same. Like many activists who have turned to terror, he has been driven by an image of cosmic war.

I call such images “cosmic” because they are larger than life. They evoke great battles of the legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflicts between good and evil. Notions of cosmic war are intimately personal but can also be translated to the social plane. Ultimately, though, they transcend human experience. What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation.

The script of cosmic war is central to virtually all of the incidents of performance violence described in the first part of this book. In Christian movements, the literature of the militia and the Christian patriots—including the manifesto of Anders Beivik and Timothy McVeigh’s favorite book, *The Turner Diaries*—is rife with images of warfare.⁸ A brochure published by the Christian Identity-affiliated group Aryan Nations included this statement in their creed of faith: “We BELIEVE

there is a battle being fought this day between the children of darkness (today known as Jews) and the children of Light (God), the Aryan race, the true Israel of the Bible.”⁹

The Christian Reconstruction preacher Rev. Michael Bray described his violent abortion clinic protests as part of a “culture war” being waged in the United States that includes, among other issues, conflicts between “big and little government, high and low taxation, gun control and no gun control, abortion rights and no abortion rights, rights to sodomy and no sodomy rights.”¹⁰ In Northern Ireland Rev. Ian Paisley, who has frequently spoken in military terms about faith and politics, launched a magazine named the *Battle Standard*.¹¹ A follower of Paisley who was convicted of terrorist acts assented to the notion that his assaults on Irish Catholics were part of a “religious war.”¹²

Jewish activists such as Meir Ettinger and his grandfather, Rabbi Meir Kahane, have also been convinced that their violent acts have been authorized as weapons in a divine warfare sanctioned by God. Dr. Baruch Goldstein’s massacre at the shrine of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron was described as a military act. “All Jews,” one of his supporters told me—implying that it was common knowledge—are “at war with the Arabs.”¹³

In an odd echo of this Jewish activist’s statement, Hamas supporters claim that they too are “at war”—with Israel.¹⁴ It is this great conflict that has created the need for Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin told me.¹⁵ Mahmud Abouhalima warned me that Americans are unaware that there is “a war going on.”¹⁶ Shortly before the first attack on the World Trade Center, when Abouhalima was driving a taxicab in New York City, an ABC journalist recalls riding with the Muslim activist and being lectured that America would lose the war against Islam without even knowing that it was in it, or when the moment of defeat had arrived.¹⁷

The Muslim concept of struggle—jihad—has been employed for centuries in Islamic theories of both personal salvation and political redemption. “Life is faith and struggle,” said Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, indicating that the notion of fighting is basic to human existence and on a par with religious commitment.¹⁸ As noted earlier, Abd al-Salam Faraj and others have exploited the idea of jihad to call for physical force, if necessary, in the struggle against all ideas, ideologies, and political institutions that they regard as alien to Islam. But the concept of jihad is not a *carte blanche* for violence. The use of the idea to justify nondefensive attacks—such as acts of terrorism—has been highly controversial within Muslim theological circles. An American scholar of

Islam, Bruce Lawrence, has argued that the term changes in meaning depending on its historical context and has always had social and economic, as well as military and political, dimensions.¹⁹

Regardless of the nuances of its usage, however, jihad is fundamentally a concept of struggle, an image of battle that ordinarily is peaceful, a testimony to the eternal struggle of good and evil within each person's soul, but that also abounds in the rhetoric of violent religious activists in both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths. When the militant Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale exhorted his followers to action, he called for "a struggle . . . for our faith, for the Sikh nation, for the oppressed."²⁰ On the personal level it is a conflict between faith and the lack of faith; on the social level it is a battle between truth and evil. Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India have evoked images of the great wars of the Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Ashin Wirathu in Myanmar imagined himself in a battle to defend Burmese Buddhism; and the leader of the Buddhist syncretist movement Aum Shinrikyo imagined warfare in the grandest of terms: a global war that would surpass World Wars I and II in its savage intensity and powers of destruction.²¹

These nearly ubiquitous images of warfare evoked by militant religious groups at the turn of the twenty-first century are significant for the understanding of violence and religion that will be explored in the remainder of this book. In this chapter and the next, we will see how the notion of cosmic war provides the script being played out in the violent performances of militant religious activists and is linked to notions of conquest and failure, martyrdom and sacrifice. In chapter 10, we will see how violence can be part of a broader justificatory scheme that is empowering on both the personal and social levels. In the final chapter we will explore ways that images of struggle have helped to make religion an agent of honor and legitimization, thereby raising the importance of religion as an ideology of order that sustains public life.

GRAND SCENARIOS

Looking closely at the notion of war, one is confronted with the idea of dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. It is not just a matter of differing opinions or an even contest with an opponent. After all, the articulation and adjudication of differences are not advanced by warfare. War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy whom one assumes to be determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed

possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is either crushed or contained, one's own existence cannot be secure. What is striking about a martial attitude is the certainty of one's position and the willingness to defend it, or impose it on others, to the end.

Such certitude on the part of one side may be regarded as noble by those whose sympathies lie with it and dangerous by those who do not. But either way it is not rational. One of the first rules of conflict resolution is willingness to accept the notion that there are flaws on one's own side as well as on the opponent's side. This is the sensible stand if one's goal is to get along with others and avoid violence.²²

But what if that is not one's goal? A bellicose stance fundamentally contradicts the purpose of compromise and understanding, and adopting an inflexible position of militancy early in a dispute calls into question the motive for doing so. A warring attitude implies that its holder no longer thinks compromise is possible or—just as likely—did not want an accommodating solution to the conflict in the first place. In fact, if one's goal is not harmony but the empowerment that comes with using violence, it is in one's interest to be in a state of war. In such cases, war is not only the context for violence but also the excuse for it. War provides a reason to be violent. This is true even if the worldly issues at heart in the dispute do not seem to warrant such a ferocious position.

This may explain why acts of terrorism seem so puzzling to people outside the movements that perpetrate them and entirely understandable to those within them. Quite a few Europeans have been concerned about the rising tide of non-European immigrants to their countries; even in Scandinavia, where the citizenry has often been welcoming to refugees, there has been a mounting right-wing backlash against newcomers, especially those from the Middle East. The new immigrants do not share language, religion, or culture with Caucasian Christian Europeans, and for that reason they are sometimes disliked, even feared. But few Europeans would consider them satanic and evil, or think of killing liberal politicians who welcomed the newcomers as part of their vision of a multicultural society.

This, however, was the position of Anders Breivik. When he posted his manifesto online on the same day that he went on a murderous rampage against a youth camp outside Oslo that was hosted by a liberal political party, his view of the world was fully on display. And it was a shocking view, even to those who had little use for immigrants, for it portrayed a society at war between the forces of Christendom and the

Muslim hordes and their liberal political apologists, whom Breivik considered to be sycophants who would dilute the purity of northern European society. Breivik saw the world at war. He viewed his own role as that of a soldier valiantly defending the forces of right, and he dressed the part, costumed in the military garb of an imagined militia of modern-day Knights Templar. To most people his actions were those of a deranged madman; but he regarded himself as a hero in war.

The response to abortion clinic bombings and the killing of abortion doctors is another case in point. To many people in the United States the issue of abortion is a serious moral concern, a matter of public policy worth discussing, debating, protesting, and fighting over. But as heated as the subject may be, few on either side would regard this issue as one for which they are prepared to die or to kill. Yet activists such as Rev. Michael Bray have taken a different position. They have defended the need to kill and, if necessary, to die over the issue of abortion, not because they have seen it as a matter of public policy, but as a call to arms. Bray explained to me that attacks on clinics and attempts to kill doctors who provide abortion was not just about the allowance of laws accepting abortion, but also about a much greater conflict and a more devious form of social control. From his perspective American society has been in the grip of a demonic force for some time, and the great struggle to liberate it has only begun. There has been a great war going on, he alleged, one that goes unseen largely because the enemy has imposed its control gradually and subtly. As a result, the masses are unaware of the enemy's power and are unconcerned over its effects.

From Bray's point of view the world is already at war, one that he regarded as similar to World War II. "The issues are comparable," Bray told me, adding that "the issues that would justify violence now are the same."²³ Bray was impressed by the enormous sense of guilt that saddled many Christians as they recalled the gradual imposition of Nazi power and their indifference and inactivity during those awful years. The Nuremberg trials brought to public awareness much of what had transpired and implicated otherwise sensitive Christians in a silent complicity with the Nazis. Now, Bray reflected, Christians say to themselves, "would that we had moved earlier" to stop the killing. This situation Bray compared with the killing involved in abortions.

What disturbed Bray was not just the slaughter of what he described as the "unborn," but also what he felt was a Nazi-like attitude—a disregard for human life and a penchant for indiscriminate killing—that characterized the ruling powers of contemporary American society. He

despaired that overt rebellion or revolution against this power would occur only with an economic collapse or social chaos sufficiently catastrophic to make people aware of the situation, “to give people the strength or the zeal to take up arms.”²⁴ In the meantime, what he called “defensive acts,” and what most Americans call terrorism, can provide public reminders of the silent war that is going on and perhaps serve as a wakeup call for Americans to join the rebellion.

Anders Breivik’s and Michael Bray’s visions of a world caught in an imminent and almost eschatological confrontation between the forces of good and evil arrayed on the battlefield of politics is not idiosyncratic: it is remarkably similar to the view promoted by the ISIS and Al-Qaeda ideologues, militant Sikhs and Hindus in India, the Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, Rabbi Kahane’s Kach party in Israel, Ashin Wirathu’s militant Buddhists in Myanmar, and other groups associated with recent acts of terrorism. Theirs have been acts of desperation in response to what they perceive as a desperate situation: a world gone terribly awry. What is strikingly similar about the cultures of which they are a part is their view of the contemporary world at war.

In Japan, for instance, the members of Aum Shinrikyo posited that the world is on the brink of a conflagration similar to World War II. What the Japanese remember most about that war were the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is this reign of terror that is returning, the spiritual master of Aum Shinrikyo prophesied, in an Armageddon, a war that will be even more catastrophic than World War II. “The weapons used in World War III,” Asahara told his followers, “will make the atomic and hydrogen bombs look like toys.”²⁵ Its goal, he said, would be “to completely annihilate the cities, produce a state of anarchy, and then establish a worldwide, unified political power.”²⁶ As far as its followers knew, the creation of nerve gas in Aum chemical laboratories was solely for the purpose of developing preventive medicines and devices to protect those in the movement against poisonous gases once Armageddon arrived and the evil forces began to use chemical weapons against the populace. Only the most loyal were willing to believe these prophecies without any evidence that World War III was in fact beginning. The release of nerve gas in the Tokyo subways provided dramatic proof of the prophecies—at least to Asahara’s followers, and to them only until it became clear that Asahara himself was implicated in the attack.

The Christian Identity scenario of cosmic war was also something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Identity teaching, contemporary

social struggles could be traced back to a conflict as old as the creation of the universe, when Lucifer, the satanic anti-God of the underworld, became jealous of God's order, conspired to seize the world, and yearned to establish his own kingdom of evil.²⁷ Christianity was a major effort by God to counteract Lucifer, but it was plagued from the start by Lucifer's forces. Some of Lucifer's agents came in the guise of people who claimed to be Jews but in fact were not; the true Jews were Aryans, according to Identity doctrine. Those who called themselves Jews were in fact Lucifer's henchmen out to confound Christians. Even the apostle Paul was suspect. The emergence of Roman Catholicism as the dominant form of European Christianity was a "fraud." Freemasons were also implicated in this conspiracy. In recent years the "Jewish-Catholic-Freemason agents of Satan" were thought to have received powerful allies in the form of communists and liberal democrats.

Followers of Christian Identity have offered a book as proof that all of these forces are allied against the relatively small band of pure white Protestant Christians. This spurious manual, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, was alleged to be the handiwork of a Zionist congress held at Basel, Switzerland, in 1897 under the leadership of Theodor Herzl. According to James Aho, a sociologist who was shown a copy of the document, it contains twenty-four specific steps necessary for the Jewish-communist conspiracy to take over the world. They itemize trends in global society that presumably were occurring when the fictional document was written but are presented as prophetic, as if they had been written at the time alleged, at the end of the nineteenth century. These trends include the establishment of corporate monopolies, arms races, the promotion of civil rights for minorities, the advocacy of free speech, the encouragement of pornography, progressive income taxes, and the establishment of a national bank (such as the Federal Reserve Corporation, widely thought by Christian Identity followers to be an instrument of sinister economic control).²⁸ Credit cards that could be electronically traced and the use of social security numbers for identification purposes were cited as further indications of governmental control. The fact that all of these items are part of modern society and are promoted or protected by the government constitutes simple proof to Identity activists that such a conspiracy exists and is succeeding.

Christian militias, therefore, have been defensive responses to an ancient and ongoing war that Identity activists believed were threatening their lives and their way of living. The Michigan Militia, for example, the twelve thousand-member paramilitary survivalist organization

to which Timothy McVeigh has been linked, has promoted the idea that the U.S. government has already initiated a program to completely control the life of every American. Accordingly, through training in guerrilla warfare and survivalist techniques, the militia has prepared itself to resist what it maintains are plans by the federal administration to deploy UN forces utilizing cast-off Soviet military equipment or hordes of communist Chinese troops, backed by Latino and black inner-city American street gangs, to crush any opposition.

The Christian Identity–influenced novel *The Turner Diaries* imagines a scenario that begins with a liberal-dominated Congress enacting a law abolishing private ownership of firearms. To enforce the act, legions of “jackbooted” federal agents stalk the countryside, seizing weapons wherever they find them. Seeing this as a move toward federal dictatorship, a group of white Christian patriots form an underground cell to resist. They adopt guerrilla tactics, creating a homemade bomb from ammonium nitrate and fuel oil, which they load on a delivery truck parked outside FBI headquarters in Washington DC. According to the novel, the subsequent explosion kills seven hundred people. The *Washington Post* supposedly receives a telephone call with the message “White America shall live.” It is a scenario that was played out in chilling detail in real life by Timothy McVeigh and his colleagues in demolishing the Oklahoma City federal building.

Religious struggles in other parts of the world—even those that seem more rational, in that they relate to contentions over the control of land to which both sides have legitimate claims—nonetheless have employed images of warfare on a grand scale. Ezri Tubi, a leader in the Israeli settlement movement, told me that the settlers’ claims to the West Bank were part of an ancient struggle.²⁹ This was the same sentiment expressed by Yochay Ron, a young Jewish activist in the Beit Hadassah settlement in the West Bank city of Hebron, who told me that the war with the Arabs went back “to biblical times,” explaining that the present-day Arabs are simply the modern descendants of the enemies of Israel described in the Bible for whom God has unleashed wars of revenge.³⁰ Ultimately, he thought that the warfare could end, but only when Arabs leave the land and Israel is, in his view, complete. Rabbi Yisrael Rosen, director of the Orthodox Jewish Tzomet Institute in Israel, claimed that today’s enemies of the Jews, such as Palestinians, are embodiment of the Amelek people described in the Hebrew Bible as battlefield enemies deserving to be obliterated.³¹ Sarah Nachshon, another member of the embattled Beit Hadassah, also understood the violence of the present

day to be explained as warfare: "It's written in the Bible," she said, "that until the Messiah comes there will be a big war, and the war will be in Jerusalem."³²

The Palestinian conflict is conceived as something larger than a contest between Arabs and Jews: it is a cosmic struggle of Manichaean proportions. This view is shared by religious activists on both sides. Sheikh Yassin, for example, described the conflict in virtually eschatological terms as "the combat between good and evil." A communiqué issued by Hamas when Americans sent troops to the Saudi Arabian desert following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait declared it to be "another episode in the fight between good and evil" and "a hateful Christian plot against our religion, our civilization and our land."³³ At times, the response to terrorism has also been seen in military terms. The day after the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington DC, for example, President George W. Bush proclaimed that these were not just "acts of terror," but that they were "acts of war."³⁴ From that moment on the campaign against the jihadi insurgents responsible for terrorist acts against the United States was projected in the American news media as "the war on terror."

Perhaps no Muslim group in recent years has used the metaphor of war more consistently to characterize its perception of global struggle than ISIS. The apocalyptic images propagated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his inner circle portray a grand encounter at the end of days, which in the reckoning of ISIS leaders would be very soon. The ISIS leaders subscribed to a group of prophetic writings allegedly attributed to the Prophet Mohammad that described the end-times, the final moments of world history in which a cataclysmic war would erupt that would end with the conquering of Islam's enemies and the emergence of the Mahdi, a messianic figure who would usher in a reign of global caliphate that would bring peace and harmony to the whole world. The warfare preceding the Mahdi's appearance, however, would be gruesome. According to many of the prophecies, the main battlefield would be the plains of Al-Sham, the Arab region called the Levant by the French that includes modern-day Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. The main battles would be in the area between Damascus and Baghdad, with the critical battle that ushers in the Mahdi taking place in Dabiq, a small town in northern Syrian. Appropriately, *Dabiq* was the name given to the online magazine sponsored by ISIS, and the town was one of the first captured by ISIS in 2014. When the town was liberated from ISIS control in a fierce battle in 2016, the movement assured its followers that this was not the cosmic war at the end of time, and that the promise

of Mahdi coming after a battle at Dabiq would still be fulfilled in the future. But the name of the magazine was changed to *Rumiyah*, the Arabic term for Rome, a city that also had prophetic significance.

“Black banners will come from the east and they will kill in a manner no people have been killed before,” one of the prophetic writings proclaimed.³⁵ This prophecy regarded the main enemies as Romans, people from the West, and Jews, both of whom are to be utterly annihilated. Though the righteous Muslims would ultimately survive victoriously in this cosmic encounter, it would not be without significant casualties and desertions. Some of the prophecies proclaimed that it would be essential that an Islamic state be established in the region of Al-Sham in order to lay the groundwork for the golden rule. The ISIS narrative about history, therefore, was one in which the present age was characterized by a cataclysmic battle that would usher in the appearance of the Mahdi. All of the details about this cosmic war—the battlefield between Damascus and Baghdad, the black flags, the Islamic State, the importance of the town of Dabiq in the final battle, and the absence of empathy for the enemies—were enacted in ISIS’s practices and customs.

The ISIS notion of apocalyptic struggle is ultimately not one of political and economic issues but between transcendent and worldly goals, a struggle between religion and antireligion. Insofar as this grand polarity suggests a metaphysical duality between the spiritual and material order, it is theologically out of line with traditional Islamic teachings, which argue for a strict monotheism that encompasses everything ultimately within the sphere of God. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini’s one-time associate Abolhassan Banisadr wrote at some length about the notion of struggle, explaining how, although the monotheism of Islam does not allow for a division between the world and the spirit—for it does not recognize that duality—it does allow for a struggle against duality itself.³⁶ Thus it is possible, Banisadr argued, for grand conflict to occur even within the theological borders of Islam. It is precisely this kind of struggle against the duality of the secular notion of separation of religion and state that the revolutionary movement in Iran targeted, and that ISIS and Al-Qaeda have opposed as well.

The absolutism of cosmic war makes compromise unlikely, and those who suggest a negotiated settlement are as excoriated as the enemy. In the ISIS prophecies some of the harshest words are reserved for those Muslims who would run away from battle. Jewish activists have been similarly critical of the liberals in their own camp. “There is no such thing as coexistence,” the Israeli activist Yoel Lerner told me, explaining

that there is a biblical requirement for Jews to possess and live on biblical land. This is why he despised the peace accords, and regarded Israeli leaders as treasonous for signing them.³⁷ Later on the same day in which I had this conversation with Lerner, I met with Hamas leaders in Gaza and heard Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi say essentially the same thing about the necessity for Arab Muslims to occupy what he regarded as their homeland, Palestine. Like Lerner, Rantisi expressed anger toward secular leaders—in his case, Yasir Arafat—for having entered into a dangerous and futile path toward an accommodation deemed to be impossible.³⁸ The extremists on both sides preferred war over peace.

One of the reasons a state of war is preferable to peace is that it gives moral justification to acts of violence. Violence, in turn, offers the illusion of power. Both ISIS theoreticians and Christian Reconstruction theologians have argued that public executions are appropriate in a time of warfare, implying that religious figures, rather than the state, can mete out punitive judgments. In a similar vein, followers of Christian Identity claim that in a time of war the ends justify the means, thereby rationalizing their attempts to confound the everyday workings of secular society. When asked if he would consider the use of poison to contaminate the water supply of a major American city, a member of the Christian extremist movement, the Phineas Priesthood, said, “When one is at war, one has to consider such things, unfortunately.”³⁹ Rev. Michael Bray made an ethical distinction between what is legal in a peaceful society and what is morally justified in a situation of warfare: the latter includes transgressing property rights and laws against murder. In an interesting way, Bray’s argument is similar to that of the assassin of Mohandas Gandhi, Nathuram Godse, who in his court trial eloquently justified what he called his “moral” though “illegal” act of killing the mahatma.⁴⁰

The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a worldview and an assertion of power. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered. The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself.

SYMBOLIC WAR

Many of the young volunteers from around the world who have joined ISIS described their involvement in the army of the movement as exhilarating, the most meaningful moments in their lives. The ISIS image of an apocalyptic cosmic war gave them a sense of clarity about the world and their role in it. A similar excitement was also experienced by those who joined Jewish, Christian, and other movements.

“That was the most marvellous experience of my life,” explained Richard Butler, a Christian activist, describing his first reaction to the Christian Identity theory of cosmic war. “The lights started turning on, bang-bang-bang.”⁴¹ Butler went on to say that the knowledge that “war had been going on for over six thousand years between the sons of Cain and the sons of God” was a cathartic experience for him, “opening up who we were, where we came from, and why we were there.” He added that this epiphany was “the greatest thrill” he ever had, and from this moment on he knew “what my mission was.”

“Wow, this is it,” Denver Parmenter exclaimed in similar terms as he related how he discovered Christian Identity teachings. He claimed that this view of ancient and continuing warfare led to a sudden stroke of awareness that provided him “the reason things are going wrong.”⁴² This grand scenario gave him a view of the world that he could participate in, thus helping him not only to understand his destiny but to control it. Like the rituals provided by religious traditions, warfare is a participatory drama that exemplifies—and thus explains—the most profound aspects of life. It has great appeal, then, for people such as Parmenter and the ISIS volunteers who feel not only confused about what is going on in their lives but also buffeted by unseen forces. Parmenter was able to directly participate in this struggle by taking part in the plot to kill a Jewish radio talk show host whom Parmenter and his Identity colleagues thought was an agent of Satan.

The idea of warfare has long had an eerie and intimate relationship with religion. History is studded with overtly religious conflicts such as the Crusades, the Muslim conquests, and the Wars of Religion that dominated the politics of France in the sixteenth century. Although these have usually been characterized as wars in the name of religion rather than wars conducted in a religious way, historian Natalie Zemon Davis has uncovered what she calls “rites of violence” in her study of religious riots in sixteenth-century France. These constituted “a repertory of actions, derived from the Bible, from the liturgy, from the action

of political authority, or from the traditions of popular folk practices, intended to purify the religious community and humiliate the enemy and thus make him less harmful.” Davis observed that the violence was “aimed at defined targets and selected from a repertory of traditional punishments and forms of destruction.”⁴³ According to Davis, “even the extreme ways of defiling corpses—dragging bodies through the streets and throwing them to the dogs, dismembering genitalia and selling them in mock commerce—and desecrating religious objects” had what she called “perverse connections” with religious concepts of pollution and purification, heresy, and blasphemy.⁴⁴

Anthropologist Stanley Tambiah showed how the same “rites of violence” were present in the religious riots of South Asia.⁴⁵ In some instances innocent bystanders would be snatched up by a crowd and burned alive. According to Tambiah, these horrifying murders of defenseless and terrified victims were done in a ritual manner, in “mock imitation of both the self-immolation of conscientious objectors and the terminal rite of cremation.”⁴⁶

In a macabre way, the riotous battles described by Davis and Tambiah were religious events. But given the prominence of the rhetoric of warfare in religious vocabulary, both traditional and modern, one can turn this point around and say that religious events often require the participants to invoke images of battle. One can argue that the task of creating a vicarious experience of warfare—albeit one usually imagined as residing on a spiritual plane—is one of the main businesses of religion.

Virtually all cultural traditions have contained martial metaphors.⁴⁷ The ideas of a Salvation Army in Christianity and a Dal Khalsa (“army of the faithful”) in Sikhism characterize disciplined religious organizations. Images of spiritual warfare are even more common. The Muslim notion of jihad is the most notable example, but even in Buddhist legends great wars are to be found. In Sri Lankan culture, for instance, virtually canonical status is accorded to the legendary history recorded in the Pali Chronicles, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, which relate the triumphs of battles waged by Buddhist kings. In India, warfare has contributed to the grandeur of the great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which are tales of seemingly unending conflict and military intrigue. More than the Vedic rituals, these martial epics defined subsequent Hindu culture. Whole books of the Hebrew Bible are devoted to the military exploits of great kings, their contests related in gory detail. Though the New Testament did not take up the battle cry,

the later history of the Church did, supplying Christianity with a bloody record of crusades and religious wars.

Warfare has not just been relegated to religion's legendary histories, however; it is also intricately related to its contemporary symbols.⁴⁸ Protestant Christianity is an example. Though the reformed tradition is strongly pacifist, martial images abound in the rhetoric and symbolism of the faith. Protestant preachers everywhere have encouraged their flocks to wage war against the forces of evil, and their homilies are followed with hymns about "Christian soldiers," fighting "the good fight," and struggling "manfully onward."⁴⁹ One scholar of popular Protestantism, Harriet Crabtree, 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 found the "model of warfare" to be one of the most enduring.⁵⁰

What is significant about the popular Protestant talk about war, Crabtree stated, is that the image was meant to be taken more than metaphorically. When the writers of hymns urged "soldiers of the Cross" to "stand up, stand up for Jesus," this was interpreted as a requirement for real, albeit spiritual, combat. Protestant writers such as Arthur Wallis have claimed that "Christian living *is* war." Wallis explained that the warfare is not "a metaphor or a figure of speech" but a "literal fact"; the character of the war, however—"the sphere, the weapons, and the foe"—are spiritual rather than material.⁵¹ Crabtree asserted that the image of warfare is attractive because it "situates the listener or reader in the religious cosmos."⁵²

The images of warfare in Protestant Christianity situated the faithful in a religious cosmos that inevitably had a moral valence, but this has not been the case in all traditions. The battles of the *Mahavamsa*, the Hebrew Bible, and the Hindu epics, for example, testify to a different sort of ultimate encounter. The motif that runs through these mythic scenes of warfare is the theme of us versus them, the known versus the unknown. In the battles described in the Hebrew Bible and in such epics as the *Ramayana*, the enemies were often foreigners from the shady edges of known civilization—places such as Canaan, Philistine, and Lanka. These foes often embodied the conceptual murkiness of their origins; that is, they represented what was chaotic and uncertain about the world, including those things that defied categorization altogether. In cases where the enemy possessed a familiar face—as in the *Mahabharata*, where war was waged between sets of cousins—chaos is embodied by the battle itself. It is the wickedness of warfare itself that the

battle depicts, as the mythic figure Arjuna observed at the outset of his encounter with Lord Krishna on the battlefield.⁵³ To fight in such a circumstance was to assent to the disorder of this world, although the contestants knew that in a grander sense this disorder is corrected by a cosmic order that is beyond killing and being killed. Such was the message of Lord Krishna in his address to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita.⁵⁴

Ultimately, such struggles are battles against the most chaotic aspect of reality: death. Among scholars, there is a persistent recognition that much of the religious imagination has been built around notions of the afterlife and the overcoming of human frailty and corruption—often symbolized by rituals involving the avoidance of pollution. The Jewish notion of raising the dead, the Christian and Muslim notions of heaven and hell, the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory, the Buddhist idea of levels of consciousness (and, in the Mahayana tradition, heavenly mansions), and the Hindu theory of karmic cycles of reincarnation—all of these offer ways of avoiding what humans know to be a fact: eventually they will die. Even bodily decay and corruption can supposedly be postponed by Jewish, Hindu, and other rituals of pollution avoidance. All of this adds up to what Ernest Becker has called religion's "denial of death."⁵⁵

I agree with Becker, but what strikes me is the way that religion has employed symbols of violence not only to deny death but to control all that is intimately related to death: disorder, destruction, and decay. By evoking and then bridling images of warfare, religion has symbolically controlled not only violence but all of the messiness of life. It is interesting in this regard that the etymology of the modern English term *war* is the Old English word *werre* (or *guerre* in Old French), which means "confusion," "discord," or "strife," and in verb form implies the bringing into a state of confusion or discord. In this sense war is the ultimate state of confusion, as many soldiers who have been in battle can confirm.

When religious cultures portray warfare as something that is acknowledged and ultimately controlled, therefore, they are presenting an almost cosmological reenactment of the primacy of order over chaos. In the stained glass windows of the great European cathedrals portraying Christ as king, emerging from his grave like a general victorious in battle, the designers were stating something fundamental about Christianity and every other religious tradition: religion reaffirms the primacy of order, which requires that death and violence and other forms of disorder be conquered.

The irony of these bloody images is that the object of faith has always been peace. But in order to portray a state of harmony convincingly, reli-

gion has had to emphasize disharmony and its ability to contain it. 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, must always assert the primacy of meaning in the face of chaos. For that reason, religion has been restorative of order and affirmative of life even though it has justified the taking of life in particular instances. Jesus' heroic and sacrificial act in allowing himself to be painfully put to death, for instance, has been seen by the faithful as a monumental act of redemption for humankind, tipping the balance of power between good and evil and allowing a struggle for order to succeed.

Religious images have been mechanisms through which peace and order can conquer violence and chaos, so it is understandable that the violence portrayed in religion has been in some way controlled—in the air of normalcy with which the “body of Christ” is eaten in the Christian ritual of Eucharist, for instance, and the lack of self-consciousness with which Christians sing hymns filled with talk of blood and battle. In ritual, violence is symbolically transformed. The blood of the Eucharistic wine is ingested by the supplicant and becomes part of living tissue; it brings new life. In song a similarly calming transformation occurs as the images are absorbed aurally. As Christian theology explains, in Christ violence has been bridled. Christ died in order for death to be defeated, and his blood was sacrificed so that his faithful followers could be rescued from a punishment as gruesome as that which he suffered.

Other religious traditions have dealt with violence in much the same way. In the Sikh tradition, for instance, the two-edged sword provides an image of the domestication of violence. This familiar symbol has been worn on locketts and proudly emblazoned on shops and garden gates, and it stands in front of Sikh *gurdwaras*, where it is treated as reverently as Christians treat their own emblem of destruction and triumph, the cross. Other images of violence in Sikhism also have functioned like their counterparts in Christianity: the gory wounds of Sikh martyrs, like those of Christian saints, bleed on in calendar art as a reminder that because their blood was shed, the faithful need fear no harm. Sikh theologians and writers, like those in the Christian faith, have been eager to explain the meaning of such symbols and stories 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 being conducted on a divine plane as aspects of God's vengeance. The Qur'an

regards the greater jihad as the personal struggle for purity and the lesser jihad as military warfare. Hence some Islamic mystics have spoken of the true jihad as the one within each person's soul.

Thus violent images have been given religious meaning and domesticized. The acts of violence in religious history and legend, although terribly physical, have been sanitized by becoming symbols; they have been stripped of their horror by being invested with religious meaning. They have been justified and thereby exonerated as part of a religious template that is even larger than myth and history. They are elements of a ritual scenario that makes it possible for the people involved to experience safely the drama of cosmic war.

WHEN SYMBOLS BECOME DEADLY

But if religious images are meant to conquer violence, one must ask the obvious but difficult question: why and how are these symbolic presentations of violence occasionally linked to real acts of violence? They should prevent violent acts by allowing the human urges to conquer and control to be channeled into the harmless dramas of ritual. Yet we know that the opposite is often the case. The riotous rites of violence described by Natalie Davis and Stanley Tambiah in the texts cited earlier in this chapter and the abundant examples of religious terrorism referred to throughout this book have demonstrated that the violence related to religion has, at times, been savagely real.

The question of why images of cosmic struggle are translated into real acts of violence is complicated, since the line between symbolic and actual violence is thin. Symbols are sometimes more than just fictional representations of the real thing. Rites of sacrifice, for instance, often involve ritual killing, and feats of martyrdom lead to real deaths. This symbiosis between symbolic and real violence is profound and goes to the very heart of the religious imagination. It is a relationship that we will explore more fully in the next chapter.

For now, however, we can speculate on the conditions that make it likely for cosmic war to be located on a worldly stage. One way of doing this is to identify the aspects of religious thinking that link spiritual struggle with worldly conflict. It was this approach that I attempted several years ago when I was studying the rhetoric of religious violence in Sikhism. I came up with a list of several conditions, including the following, indicating when Sikhism—or any religious tradition—is susceptible

to becoming associated with actual acts of violence: the cosmic struggle is understood to be occurring in this world rather than in a mythical setting; believers identify personally with the struggle; and the struggle is at a point of crisis in which individual action can make all the difference.⁵⁶

In most of the cases discussed in this book, however, it is not religion that has led spiritual persons into violence but the other way around: violent situations have reached out for religious justification. The two approaches are not contradictory: extremism in religion can lead to violence at the same time that violent conflicts can cry out for religious validation. But it is the latter approach on which I wish to focus here.

Rather than beginning with religious images, then, this approach starts with real-life situations; rather than why religion leads to violence, the question is why real-world struggles involve religion. The following characteristics, based on the case studies in this book, indicate when a confrontation in the world is likely to take on the trappings of cosmic war:

WHEN CONFRONTATION IS LIKELY TO BE
CHARACTERIZED AS COSMIC WAR

I. *The struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity.*

If the struggle is thought to be of ultimate significance—a defense not only of lives but of entire cultures, such as Sikhism or Islam—the possibility is greater that it will be seen as a cultural war with spiritual implications. Monks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar told me that their tirades against Muslim minorities were motivated by a defense of Theravada Buddhism, cultures that they feared were in danger of becoming extinct. Similarly, the Irish confrontation became spiritualized when Rev. Ian Paisley interpreted it as an attack on Irish Protestantism, and the Palestinian struggle took on a religious aura after a significant number of sheikhs and mullahs interpreted it as a defense of Muslim culture in Palestine. In other cases, the very nature of the issues—such as abortion or the sanctity of life—can attract religious activists, such as the followers of Christian Identity and Christian Reconstruction, whose involvement has spiritualized the anti-abortion struggle. A sense of personal humiliation, such as Dr. Goldstein's belief that Jews were being humiliated by the Israeli government's protection of Arab Muslims, can lead to desperate attempts to recover both personal dignity and cultural pride.

2. *Losing the struggle would be unthinkable.* If a negative outcome to the struggle is perceived as beyond human conception, the struggle may be viewed as taking place on a transhistorical plane. Some Palestinian Muslims, for instance, have refused to even consider the idea of a Jewish state in what they regard as Arab territory. Similarly, some radical Jews have regarded the Israeli government's return of biblical lands to Arabs as unthinkable. The more that goals are reified and made inflexible, the greater the possibility that they will be deified and seen as the fulfillment of holy writ.
3. *The struggle is blocked and cannot be won in real time or in real terms.* Perhaps most important, if the struggle is seen as hopeless in human terms, it is likely that it may be reconceived on a sacred plane, where the possibilities of victory are in God's hands. When Sunni Muslims in Iraq felt that the political deck was stacked against them in a post-Saddam Shi'a regime, they were receptive to ideas of cosmic warfare described by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and later to the apocalyptic battle imagined by ISIS. When Shoko Asahara felt trapped by the Japanese police, he created an act that he thought would elevate the struggle to the level of cosmic war, just as Rev. Jim Jones did in Guyana when he chose a suicidal act of violence to escape what he feared would be capture and defeat. According to an anthropologist, Weston LaBarre, these moments of desperation precipitate religion. He described a poignant historical moment in 1870 when a group of Plains Indians from the Paiute tribe were trapped by the U.S. cavalry and responded by spontaneously creating a ritual of dancing and hypnotic trances known as the Ghost Dance religion.⁵⁷ LaBarre's study indicates when religion and its grand scenarios of cosmic war are needed most: in hopeless moments, when mythical strength provides the only resources at hand.

The presence of any of these three characteristics increases the likelihood that a real-world struggle may be conceived in cosmic terms as a sacred war. The occurrence of all three simultaneously strongly suggests it. A struggle that begins on worldly terms may gradually take on the characteristics of cosmic war as solutions become unlikely and awareness grows of how devastating it would be to lose. The Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, was not widely regarded as a sacred battle from the perspective of either side until the late 1980s. Then the process of sacralization overtook the conflict and transformed it, in the eyes of religious activists on both sides, into cosmic war.

When a struggle becomes sacralized, incidents that might previously have been considered minor skirmishes or slight differences of understanding are elevated to monumental proportions. The use of violence becomes legitimized, and the slightest provocation or insult can lead to terrorist assaults. What had been simple opponents become cosmic foes. As the next chapter shows, the process of satanization can transform a worldly struggle into a contest between martyrs and demons. Alas, this inescapable scenario of hostility does not end until the mythology is redirected, or until one side or the other has been destroyed.