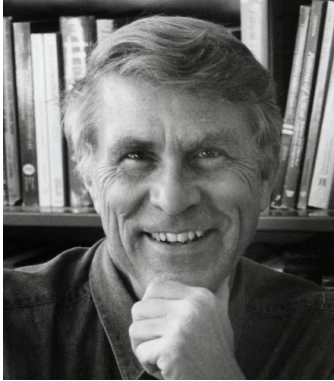


## Mark Juergensmeyer, University of California, Santa Barbara



*Mark Juergensmeyer is Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies and Director of Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of Terror in the Mind of God (California, 3rd ed. 2003) and Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution (California, 2002), and the editor of Global Religions: An Introduction (Oxford, 2003).*

One of the joys of teaching is countering students' stereotypes. In the case of religion this allows us not only the perverse pleasure of debunking myths but also the deep satisfaction of helping students to expand their thinking about religion in general. In the old days — oh, say, two years ago — it was religion's pastoral image that we had to challenge. We had to show that despite its bucolic, spineless image, religion could be tough, political, erotic, and sometimes violent.

How quickly all that has changed. Now with newspaper headlines screaming about jihad, suicide bombers, angry priests, and abortion clinic bombers, we are tempted to reverse course and aver that religion does, after all, have a more noble side. It is also about peace, personal redemption, tranquility, and social justice.

But this presents us with an interesting problem: how do we show the different sides of religion in ways that do not make it appear that religion is either totally innocent or totally bad? We want to avoid the kind of simplification that we sometimes find in the news media when they characterize religion's role in contemporary life. This characterization often runs toward two

different extremes. On the one hand, there is the image of an innocent religion that is exploited by nasty politicians. This is usually what is meant when reporters and other observers talk about religion being “used” for political purposes. On the other hand, there is the notion that religion itself can be bad — as if the whole of Islam, for instance, supported acts of terrorism. The frequent use of the term “Islamic terrorism” falls into this pattern of thinking, as does the exaggeration of the importance of jihad — as if all Muslims agreed with the militarized usage of the term by unauthorized extremist groups. The term “fundamentalism” — applied not just to Christianity but to a whole host of religious traditions — is another way of excusing “normal” religion and isolating religion’s problems to a deviant form of the species. It is used sometimes to suggest an almost viral spread of an odd and dangerous mutation of religion that if left on its own naturally leads to violence, autocracy, and things too horrible to mention. Fortunately, so this line of thinking goes, normal religion is exempt from such extremes.

We know, though, that this is not the case. The involvement of religion in contemporary public life is more complicated than simply a matter of peculiar religion gone bad or good religion being used by bad people. We know that there are strata of religious imagination that deal with all sides and moods of human existence — the peace and the perversity, the tranquility and the terror. In fact this is what we find so fascinating about religion: it cannot easily be pigeonholed or delimited. And this — our fascination with religion — is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer our students. If we can convey that, a sense of what we find so deeply interesting about all facets and moods of the religious life, then this is good teaching indeed.

In this regard the contemporary interest in religion’s seamier side is a godsend. As my late colleague Ninian Smart once remarked, the angry Ayatollahs of our generation are God’s gift to religious studies.

They pique our students’ interests. Our students want to know why these religious activists are the way they are, and what religion has to do with violence, rebellion, and social change. In helping our students understand these things, we can help them understand much about religion. We can take the current interest in the problems related to religion and turn them into an exploration of the complicated roles that religion plays in diverse societies.

How we go about doing this is necessarily idiosyncratic, since every teacher’s style is necessarily unique. Still, there are rules of thumb that apply in general to the way that we deal in the classroom with contemporary acts of religious violence. The following are my modest suggestions:

*Be analytical.* An analysis requires first of all an appreciation of the problem. For this reason I would not be too quick to explain things away until students have a sense of what needs to be explained — the paradox of religion in a problematic world. Case studies are often helpful in giving a sense of this dilemma: providing portraits of sensitive religious persons who have been overwhelmed with a sense of mission and then act them out in violent ways. Dr. Baruch Goldstein, for instance, was from all appearances a thoughtful Jewish doctor and supporter of the expansion of Israeli settlements before he took out an assault rifle and viciously attacked Muslims praying in a mosque at the shrine of the Cave of the Patriarchs in the West Bank city of Hebron. His story — and the stories of the al Qaeda hijackers on September 11, and the Presbyterian and Lutheran pastors who bomb abortion clinics on the East Coast of the United States — can be paradigmatic examples of the puzzling role that religion plays in the violence of contemporary life.

*Be contextual.* As the examples of Dr. Goldstein, Christian abortion clinic bombers, and Muslim activists demonstrate, their religious violence is not solely religious. That is, as devout as they may be, and as much as they may use religion to justify their actions and explain their view of the world, the world that they see is a violent one. In each of these cases they see themselves as responding to forces of violence and oppression in the world around them. Theirs are interesting examples of the interaction between religion and social life. Like all aspects of religion, their acts of religious violence have social contexts that defy our neat Enlightenment-informed notions of the separation of religious and secular realms. In most societies, including our own, significant moments in personal and public life are marked with spiritual depth, moral values, and religious meaning. Likewise the seemingly pure aspects of religion — rituals, roles, and theology — can be powerful agents of social change and political leverage. To understand this is to understand the complex social character of religion.

*Be historical.* This moment of history is part of larger historical forces, and understanding current religious activism — such as the hostility of some parts of the Muslim world to the secularism of the West — requires historical background. The rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the exploitive era of European colonialism, the intriguing patterns of secularism in a post-Westphalian Europe, and the lingering sense of international insecurity in a post-Cold War world are all aspects of the social context of some forms of Islamic activism and its militant American response. At the same time it is useful to remind students that religious violence has been a part of all religious histories. The great wars of the Hebrew Bible and the Hindu Ramayana and Mahabharata, for instance, are part of the bloody lineage of religion. Even religious terrorism was found in earlier periods of conflict. Guy Fawkes, for instance — whose first name has become synonymous with rogue males everywhere — was the “guy” who tried to blow up the British parliament in a seventeenth-century religious terrorist attack in protest against what he regarded as the state’s persecution of Catholics. Hence there is a history of religious terrorism, as well as a historical context for it.

*Be global.* In an earlier century — such as the twentieth — we might have used the term “comparative” in talking about an exploration of religion that takes into account the diversity with which it manifests itself on the planet. Today, just a few years later, we increasingly use the term “global.” We do so for good reasons. In discussing the various contexts for phenomena such as religious violence we want not only to insist on the fact that there are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim examples, but also that they occur in virtually all regions of the planet. In fact the very intensity of cultural interaction in an increasingly pluralized global society illustrates the problem. Today’s expressions of religious violence are seldom directed at other religions; more often they are directed at pluralism itself. They are signs of social frustration and desperate attempts at empowering traditional notions of cultural identities. Often these violent acts are reactions against the homogenous popular culture of global media that rely on images of the secular world of southern California and fashions these images into a global cultural template. With MTV and *Baywatch* as models of the values of the new globalized world, no wonder traditionalists everywhere rebel.

Hence to take seriously contemporary acts of religious violence around the world opens up the world of religion, and it also opens up issues about religion in the world. This is especially so in a globalized era when humanity has become a more intimate and often quarrelsome family. The interest in religious violence thus becomes an important resource for teaching religion in the classroom. The contemporary rebelliousness of religion is symptomatic of the searches for meaning and identity that characterize much of religious thought and action, throughout history and in all reaches of global public and private life.

For course syllabus, go to <http://www.global.ucsb.edu/> .