

Mark Juergensmeyer

Book review

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„GOD AT WAR: A MEDITATION ON RELIGION AND WARFARE“

Oxford University Press, New York, 2020

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Mark Juergensmeyer is one of world's leading experts on religious violence, and an author of over thirty books and three hundred articles. In 2003 he received the "Grawmeyer" award for his contribution to religious studies. His most recent book, namely "God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare", published in 2020 both in English and German, is a subject of this review.

In the very beginning it is important to emphasize that Juergensmeyer's viewpoint towards the topic of war and religion is quite specific. He is more interested in psychological phenomena and ideas behind them, not on the warfare *per se*. More precisely, author wants to understand war from the human imagination standpoint and "(...) why war and religion seem so oddly compatible with one another"¹. He is well aware that religious convictions powerfully shape human motivations and actions, so his desire is to understand the worldviews of those who turn to violence in the name of faith. With his unique writing style, author leads readers through the chapters very smooth and easy, combining political science, theology, sociology and psychology expertise in an interdisciplinary approach in this summary of his decades of research and teaching. Author argues that war and religion provide alternative realities, lenses through which people observe the world and which provide them comfort and explanation of everyday life. These realities can overlap and as product of that a specific view of the world emerges, which author explains through the idea of cosmic war as a kind of absolute struggle between good and evil. This book is about the idea of war, why that idea is attractive and why it is religion related.

In the technical sense, this book consists of acknowledgements, bibliography, and index. Main content of the book is made of Introduction: "Why Do We Think about War?" and five chapters: 1. The Odd Appeal of War; 2. War as an Alternative Reality; 3. Religion as Alternative Reality; 4. The Marriage of War and Religion; and 5. Can Religion Cure War?

¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. vii.

Juergensmeyer is very interested in idea of “war in the mind” and points out that both history and religion are full of war. That permeation, he explains, is a product of emotional passion, not rational thinking. This is why the very idea of war does not necessarily mean military action (which is often rationally calculated). The example of the US president’s articulation following 9/11 shows that war is often justified by religious rhetoric – “God bless America” – and that God is often “employed” by both sides to justify their goals. Adhering to this topic, in the first chapter author examines why war is so attractive and argues that the chaos that followed the demolition of the Twin Towers and great sense of vulnerability and humiliation shared by Americans could only be explained through something as fundamental and dreadful as war. From that, he draws the presumption that the idea of war is based on emotion, on the fear of insecurity and public instability. That is how the event itself was interpreted and shaped, for the nation, by the president.

Author brilliantly remarks that, paradoxically, the idea of war gives people a sense of security, because it provides a means of explaining such a confusing situation. Al-Qaeda fighters and American volunteers represented two sides of the same coin: the call to action was rationalized in their minds as a way of revenge for the American, i.e. Middle Eastern, threat and ache of their own people. Juergensmeyer claims that cultural images of war are ubiquitous: from art, through myths, all the way to sports and video games where social order is being presented as chaotic and the need to overcome such tension is emphasized. That chaos is shrewdly illustrated by famous painting (which can be seen on the book cover), Picasso’s *Guernica*, which reveals that “War is the very antithesis of civilization”² where the enemy is absolutized and the dichotomies “we-they” and “either-or” are created. Etymologically, war means courage and aspiration, but also confusion. For Juergensmeyer, “war is first and foremost an idea”³. It can be used to understand chaos by extracting meaning from a meaningless, existentially threatening situation. War is emotion of societal anomaly, but it offers comfort by explaining why horrifying deeds are happening.

Second chapter is devoted for explaining images of war as an alternative reality. Idea comes from book *On War* by Clausewitz who presents the notion of “absolute war” while describing more imagined than waged war. He writes of war as a product of a specific worldview, as an alternative understanding of the public order from which the antonyms death-life, chaos-order, etc. are derived. The crucial element of war is an enemy. When enemy is not obvious, it must be invented, but it is difficult to

² Ibidem, p. 20.

³ Ibidem, p. 21.

dehumanize those we know as friends or neighbors, because the enemies in an absolute war are subhuman who seek to destroy our world. At the end of this chapter, author offers his definition of war as “the moral absolutism of social conflict”.⁴ The world of war is a comprehensive view of the world that identifies good and evil and morally justifies the conflicting parties.

Alternative reality of religion is the third chapter theme, where the author claims that people are attracted to a hidden truth that declares conflict between temporal and the true (transcendental order of religion) world. Referring to Robert Bellah, he argues that language of religion is language of imagination and that ideas, customs and rituals derived from them are “products of the human imagination”.⁵ Reality as we know it is socially mediated, constructed, and what we see as everyday life is a mere construct of what things are and what they mean. Thus, religion only interprets and constructs reality: “It provides a way of thinking about the world – an alternative vision of reality – that takes the disturbing uncertainties of life, the anomalies, the dangers, and the nagging sense of chaos, and gives them meaning”.⁶ Religion, therefore, supply symbolically the same as war – an alternative order for overcoming tensions, while changing the arena of action to the form of transcendence.

The fourth chapter is central to the topic of the book. Within it author deals with the relationship between two views of the world – war and religion. First of all, he points out that it’s not necessary religion that pushes people into violence in militant organizations that identify themselves as religious, such as ISIS. Religion may be one of the factors, but for some it can be desire for social acceptance, one can see organization as a means of liberation or one can be drawn in simply out of excitement and a desire to be a part of a great conflict. The motives are certainly mixed and context in which ideas are born is very important. Juergensmeyer then analyzes three forms of the relationship between religion and war. One in which war embraces religion, he explains on ISIS example, shows how religious language can be used to approve war and gain legitimacy by the Holy Scriptures. Throughout that religious ideas play an important role, as formative elements of worldview. They can be a good ally, hence “Warfare often unites nationalism with religious purpose – fighting for “God and country””.⁷ Religion has the capacity to demonize opponents, morally justify killing and secure eternal glory for martyrdom.

In second case where religion embraces war, images of war are sterilized through religious views of the world and fit the purpose of religion through sym-

4 Ibidem, p. 40.

5 Ibidem, p. 49.

6 Ibidem, p. 53.

7 Ibidem, p. 68.

bols and analogies. That is why Juergensmeyer claims that “(...) religious ideas themselves seldom lead to actual war”⁸ since they allegorically tame violent images by relocating to the level of internal struggle of individuals. He believes that vicious images of the scriptures are unlikely to force believers to realize those images in their lives. Violence in which religion is involved most often occurs in areas of great social and political tensions, so it can't be attributed only to religion.

Third form covers enthralling concept of cosmic war as a fusion of war and religion in a powerful construct of human imagination in creating alternative religious and belligerent reality, that “refers to the idea of radical divine intervention in human history”⁹ and existential struggle of good and evil, order and chaos. Even if this idea is accepted, it doesn't mean that an actual war would come after – worshipers accept that it will be in the future, as an act of God which they can't control. War occurs when individuals are convinced that the fight is on them to carry out, that they must act against secular foes. Cosmic war is then an absolute war on an existential magnitude.¹⁰ Juergensmeyer argues that it is not possible to completely discover whether earthly or heavenly rewards are the ones that attract people, but it is sure that cosmic war is in their imagination, it's certainly psychologically rooted.

The final question is can religion cure war? The state of war is not necessarily permanent and it is possible to abandon the absolute war worldview as a pattern of behavior, without abandoning the belief of the cosmic battle, but only moving it from the present and retreating it into the realm of symbolism and mythology.¹¹ War restrained in the mind cannot kill. If someone plays war theme games or sings anthems about the war, it doesn't endanger our existence as long as it does not force us to change our concepts of the good and righteous life. Images of war, says the author, rest deeply in human psyche. One of the ways to potentially curb war is seen in “theories of just war” that exist in almost all religions. Idea is that there is a certain form of military action that can be approved with respect to *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. After all, the idea of war is just that – *an idea* – and it can occur on a symbolic level (in games, literature and religion).¹² These are mechanisms for displacing violence on a personal and social level, when, for example through religion, a cultural institution is designed that prevents the outbreak of violence. Religion undoubtedly has the capacity to reduce the likelihood of real violence outbreak through the symbolic alleviation of violence. Depicting (cosmic) war in myths is a way of shifting

8 Ibidem, p. 70.

9 Ibidem, p. 76.

10 Ibidem, p. 79.

11 Ibidem, p. 86.

12 Ibidem, p. 89.

the tendency towards war to a safe sphere – the human mind. It is possible to live in several parallel realities that can overlap, so there can mentally be a war, without it destroying us. Humans can't do without war or without religion. Fortunately, most people don't raise religion or belligerence to extremes. They are aware (or maybe they are not) that we can live in multiple realities and we can control these ideas or let them control us, we choose. As long as images of war remain in the imagination, the cure for war can be religion.

This book fulfills the high expectations that Juergensmeyer certainly set and deserved for his many years of work. While not everyone would agree with the theses presented in this publication, they provide an alternative view of the role of war and religion in the human imagination, which would probably bother both hardline secularists and religion fundamentalist. Contribution to the field of politology of religion is significant and scholars interested in the field must not miss out this source. Moreover, those interested in the psychological aspect of creating alternative worldviews in this book, also can find comprehensive information and ideas about the phenomena of war, religion and their connection.

Čedomir Božić¹³

13 Masters student in Political Studies of Religion, offered by the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Political Science. Contact E-Mail: boziccedomir@gmail.com