Focusing on recent events, part one of _Terror in the Mind of God_ explores the use of violence by marginal groups within five major religious traditions: Christianity (reconstruction theology and the Christian Identity movement, abortion clinic attacks, the Oklahoma City bombing, and Northern Ireland); Judaism (Baruch Goldstein, the assassination of Rabin, and Kahane); Islam (the World Trade Center bombing and Hamas suicide missions); Sikhism (the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Beant Singh); and Buddhism (Aum Shinrikyo and the Tokyo subway gas attack). Juergensmeyer interviews participants in and advocates of violence (notably Mike Bray, Yoel Lerner, Mahmud Abouhalima, Simranjit Singh Mann, and an anonymous ex-member of Aum Shinrikyo), but he is less interested in individual psychology than in "cultures of violence", broadly construed. A particular focus is on the theological justifications for violence and the bases for its authorisation. Overall the treatment is not, except perhaps in the area of theology, much deeper than that of (quality) newspaper reporting, but it is insightful have the different religious traditions treated side by side.

The second part of _Terror in the Mind of God_ looks at common themes and patterns in the cultures of violence described in part one. One is the idea of violence as performance, with symbolism often taking precedence over more strategic considerations in such matters as choice of targets and dates; there are obvious connections with religious ritual. Another theme is the placing of violence within the context of a cosmic war, a symbolic and transcendent conflict; accompanying this, the movement's casualties become martyrs and their opponents are demonised.

“[Religious violence] has much to do with the nature of the religious imagination, which has always had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war. It also has much to do with the social tensions of this moment of history that cry out for absolute solutions, and the sense of personal humiliation experienced by men who long to restore an integrity that they perceive as lost in the wake of virtually global social and political shifts.”
Related to this is the valorisation of the warrior (religious violence often involves ex-military personnel), coupled with male bonding and an appeal to men "on the margins". (Juergensmeyer comments in passing that only in terrorist groups motivated by secular political ideologies have women taken an active part. Apart from this there is no attempt at a comparison between religious and secular terrorism, something which might have made the common features of religious terrorism clearer.)

Juergensmeyer concludes _Terror in the Mind of God_ with suggestions for the future of religious violence that are certain to be controversial, arguing that "the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself" and in acknowledgement of religion in public life.

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