CENS Distinguished Visitor Programme

Seminar Series by Professor Mark Juergensmeyer

Is Religion Inherently Violent?
(20 January 2014)

Moving Beyond Interfaith Tolerance to the Harmony of Global Religion
(22 January 2014)

How to Counter Religious Terrorism?
(24 January 2014)

About Professor Mark Juergensmeyer

Professor Mark Juergensmeyer is director of the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies, professor of sociology and global studies, and affiliate professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a pioneer in the field of global studies and writes on global religion, religious violence, conflict resolution and South Asian religion and politics. He has published more than three hundred articles and twenty books, including the recent Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State (University of California Press, 2008). An earlier version of this book was named by the New York Times as a notable book of the year.

Is Religion Inherently Violent?
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Mark Juergensmeyer began his presentation by noting that historically violence has had a significant place in religion. He highlighted two opposing views on religion and violence: the first frames religion as the problem since religion helps provide the leadership, ideology and motivation for violent movements; accordingly, if religion were to be removed from the equation, the world would be more peaceful. The second view frames religion as peaceful by nature, but it has been exploited for devious purposes; from such a perspective, issues related to social or political conflicts could become 'religionised'.

To illustrate, Juergensmeyer gave various examples of war, sacrifice and struggle linked to religion, demonstrating the recurrence of violence in every religious tradition. In particular, he noted two Hindu epics that revolved around war. The tale of Arjuna, for example, is about a great war between two cousins. Juergensmeyer explained that the ultimate moral of the story is that life is an infinite struggle and that it is less about whether one fights, but more about how one fights with dignity.

Juergensmeyer also highlighted that every religious tradition has images not only of war but also of sacrifice. The story of Abraham and Isaac, for example, tells of how Abraham was instructed by the Angel Gabriel to sacrifice Isaac, his first and only son. Only moments before the act took place was Isaac replaced by a goat. The notion of 'taking of a life' appears in Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious texts. Today, Muslims continue the practice of sacrifice during Eid Adha. In Christianity, Jesus himself was sacrificed and his crucifixion has been symbolically incorporated in church services today through the practice of the Eucharist, with bread and red wine representing the body and blood of Christ.

Beyond such symbolisms that mark more violent instances, real acts of religious violence continue. Juergensmeyer gave the example of Sikh violence in India in the Khalistan movement led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Based on his own fieldwork in India, Juergensmeyer came to the conclusion that the Khalistan movement was a case of politics crouched in religious terminologies instead of religion being used for political purposes. For framing aspects of politics as a cosmic war between good and evil, Bhindranwale was "religionising politics", not "politicising religion".

The cases of Timothy McVeigh, Anders Breivik, and Mahmud the Red, Juergensmeyer highlighted the similarities in the way each person believed their respective religious traditions were under attack and that it was only through violence could the situation be resolved. He noted how in each of the case, the notion of biblical wars was evident.

In conclusion, Juergensmeyer reiterated the importance of trying to deflate the religionisation of political and social conflicts. He said it was important to find the moderate voices that can similarly take the image of cosmic war and reconceive the nature of war as a moral battle or spiritual struggle, not an actual conflict.

Discussion

During the discussion, a question concerning the current interreligious violence in Myanmar was raised and what role the international or regional communities could play in reconciliation. Juergensmeyer responded that the current crisis in Myanmar is a result of national insecurity causing ethnic fear. He stated that while the transition of Myanmar to a democracy has been positive on one hand, it has on the other hand unleashed longstanding fears of its Muslim minority. He noted that this has subsequently stoked primal fears of identity in a transitional period. He stated that it is difficult to know whether the international or regional community could play a role in mitigating the current violence within Myanmar.

The issue of whether religious-based violence is a post-modern phenomenon was also raised. Juergensmeyer responded that in the postmodern context, and with ongoing demographic shifts, the nation state is at times perceived to be under siege. Gaining a sense of national unity is a challenge. He added that after the Cold War, when the idea of a secular nation state was challenged, religion has been used for social unity and security where people cluster around religious identity.

Moving Beyond Interfaith Tolerance to the Harmony of Global Religion
22 January 2014

Professor Juergensmeyer began by remarking on the cosmopolitan state of the world. At present, technology and social structures have led to the emergence of a multicultural global age. The challenge for societies today is not just to tolerate other systems of belief, or simply learning to live with other faiths. Rather, it is the forging of a global society.

Religion, and its place in the public sphere, is an important part of fostering this conception of multiculturalism. Contrary to assumptions, the concept of "religion" is a modern concept that can be traced to the Age of Enlightenment in Europe. Juergensmeyer sketched out the development of the concept, stressing its roots to the West. Religion was used to refer to the old "communities of faith" and systems of rituals and practice outside of the state. Secularism was a response to the power of the Church in the realm of politics and property rights in Europe. What resulted was the bifurcation between the 'West and secularism' and religions like Islam. The etymology of the word of religion reflects this tension between the state and Church with the word's root in Latin *religare*—to be bound to a faith-based organisation.

In short, the struggle between secularism and religion is not an inherent feature of humanity, but one that is deliberately created. Religion's modern roots lead to peculiar circumstances wherein the concept is affixed to a broad array of phenomena. Juergensmeyer shared how the label "Chinese religions" was used to refer to a swathe of philosophies, cultural practices, folk beliefs, and superstitions practiced in ethnic Chinese communities and locales. Homogenised reference to various religions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism under the "Chinese religions" was deemed as an oversimplification of the diversity of thought. In another example, Juergensmeyer talked about a previous research project in India, wherein the straightforward survey question "What is your religion" fielded to respondents led to a multitude of responses — with religion being defined as a "fellowship", a community, or as a "moral order" (*dharma*).

The end of the Cold War provided the impetus for a renewed effort to redefine the role of religion in public life. Juergensmeyer and his colleagues led a project that arrived at the concept of "epistemic worldview" that encompassed the various conceptions of religion, free from any ideological and ritualistic markers. Analysis of these epistemic worldviews was envisioned as the future replacement for "religious studies" through the discipline of "social theology". Juergensmeyer then alluded to how the precursors of a global religion are already there. Noted personalities such as Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela can be considered "global saints" — individuals who could find resonance with adherents of other faiths beyond their own.

A key criterion was to be able to come from a specific religious tradition yet relate to everyone. To sum up, Juergensmeyer reiterated the need go beyond understanding other religions to a more inclusive paradigm that emphasises seeking commonalities with other faiths. Individuals and communities should be guided by the desire to seek the good in oneself in others. While traditions and rituals of various societies will persist, this new interfaith paradigm will create the conditions for the emergence of a new global society.

Discussion

Discussions began with a question on how religious mobilisation is often associated with anti-establishment activities by states. Juergensmeyer pointed out that it is quite easy for states to label terrorism and fundamentalism as primarily religious phenomena. However, labelling was often a result of a dynamic response and counter-response interaction between the state and non-state actors. Using the example of World War II, Juergensmeyer reminded the audience that religion had no monopoly in triggering violence; secular ideologies such as fascism had been used to mobilise entire populations for war as well.

A following question challenged the viability of a "global religion" by pointing out how religions involved exceptionalism and that followers of the various faiths believe they have unique access to the "Truth". Juergensmeyer argued that exceptionalism – and subsequent proselytization – was only two ways of religious expressions among many others. Religion, like language, should be viewed in an instrumental manner. Juergensmeyer underscored how the Enlightenment roots of religion lent the concept with a degree of agency. What was overlooked was that religion does not exist outside of human society and should therefore not be conceived as having innate good or bad intent.

Discussion then swung from religion to the issue of secularism. It was argued that there was no singular model of secularism, but rather a diversity of forms. Juergensmeyer even shared the possibility of a post-secular age prevailing at present, which is reflected in the "new tribalism" that both fractures and brings together like-minded individuals from different parts of the world.

On a more policy-oriented front, a question was asked about the trajectory of movements such as Al Qaeda and whether they would persist. Juergensmeyer forecast that violent movements like Al Qaeda would likely disappear. Groups like Al Qaeda rely heavily on imagined narratives of protracted conflicts—or cosmic war. In reality, such movements can only hold the attention of most of its adherents for a limited period of time before individuals either become disillusioned or tire of conflict.

The succeeding series of questions probed at the issues of sacred values and ethics in relation to the concept of a 'global religion'. Juergensmeyer reiterated that sacred rituals linked to cultural and/or social behaviours are not just exclusive to religion (and the supernatural). Atheists, for instance, can find sacredness by pursuing a naturalist paradigm, like respecting aspects of the physical world as espoused in ecology. Ethical considerations can also be drawn from the values ingrained in this global religion, for example, when crafting international laws.

How to Counter Religious Terrorism?
24 January 2014

Mark Juergensmeyer presented some case studies of how previous terrorist movements came to an end in order to draw lessons on what would be effective and what would not be in countering religious extremism. He compared the outcomes of government responses to three different terrorist movements: the Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan, Christian extremist Timothy McVeigh, and Al-Qaeda. In the first case, the Japanese government managed to control the situation simply by disbanding the group. The response to the Oklahoma bombing was also quite focused, that is by bringing Timothy McVeigh to trial. While the movement did not entirely die away, the acts of terrorism associated with Christian extremism largely diminished after the event. On the other hand, the War on Terror that came as a response to 9/11 produced even greater terrorist movement around the world. This raises a question: whether the way states respond to terrorism could make things worse. The answer is in the affirmative in the following cases:

Sikh Insurgency in Punjab, India

In the 1980s, the movement led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindarwale posed a serious threat to national and regional security. In response, PM Indira Gandhi employed a heavily militaristic approach to counter the movement. Many innocent pilgrims were killed in the violent clash between the military force and Bhindarwale who was hiding inside the Golden Temple. Rather than diminishing the violence, the operation increased the hostility among ordinary Sikhs who had never been involved in politics before, hence radicalising more individuals. The violence not only continued but also accelerated in the following years. In the end, moderation of police force in Punjab improved the local community's perception of the government and decreased their hostility towards the government. In addition to decreasing community support, the movement suffered from internal quarrels that further weakened the group.

Al-Qaeda and the War on Terror

The Bush administration framed the 9/11 attacks as an act of war, thereby justifying a response that was also militaristic. Rather than focusing on a specific terrorist event or movement, the US perceived the War on Terror within a larger geopolitical framework that allowed it to act pre-emptively and militarily. The geopolitical conception of the War on Terror legitimised US attack on Afghanistan and Iraq, which were essentially countries that had nothing to do with 9/11. The countries were nevertheless regarded a threat as their internal instabilities were conceived as a cause of religious extremism.

Instead of bringing peace, the War on Terror increased hostility as it incited an imagined cosmic war between both sides. To many Americans, every terrorist attack is perceived as part of such a war. Many Muslims on the other hand have the impression that the US wanted to destroy Islam and its adherents. The result can be seen in the new forms of terrorism not only in Middle East but also other parts of the world.

US President Barack Obama has tried to correct the misperception through dialogues with Muslim communities to convince them that the US is not at war with them. Despite his infamous drone strategy, his efforts to change the rhetoric of American foreign policy in the Muslim world have helped to diffuse some of the expansion of militant Islam.

Internal Reform

The US has not been able to transform the Middle East. However, the Arab uprisings have. Political protest and civil rights movement from within the Arab world has transformed Egypt. The revolution has also brought about remarkable collaborations between people from different religious groups together.

Two lessons can be drawn from the case studies. A disproportionate use of force tends to be counterproductive as it could encourage greater hostility and radicalisation. Softer approaches such as dialogues and community initiatives have a better chance at countering religious extremism. Another way to counter extremism from within the religious community is by bringing religion and spirituality back into the public sphere in order to counter the more violent face of religion.

Discussion

A participant asked whether too much focus on the social milieu of a particular extremist movement could distract focus on the 'action pathways' of an individual who chooses to engage in violence. Juergensmeyer said that a sense of community support is important even to lone actor terrorists. Individuals are moved to engage in acts of terror because they hold the sentiment that there was some level of support from within their respective communities about the nobility of killing themselves in the name of religion. That said, one could not detach individual level analysis from the wider social factors at play.

Another participant asked what role the government could play in promoting moderate religious views in light of the fact that there was no single version of "moderate" that could represent an entire religious community. Juergensmeyer cited the example of the Sri Lankan religious affairs ministry of bringing representatives from all religions into conversation with the government instead of always being the outsiders. He added that the challenge for governments remain how to support the moderate groups without being seen as supporting. One way to do this is through cultural exchanges, giving opportunities for religious leaders and youth to study abroad and exposing them to different views.