

Critical Essay Review - Terror in the Name of God

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Throughout time, religion has been a big factor in many individuals' lives and has affected how communities digest information or act in the world. People have turned to religion as a sense of purpose and belief in order to change their actions and bring them closer to God. This higher power has caused many people to aspire to lives that they think are right in order to be part of God's attribution. Many religions share similarities, but what happens when certain doctrines actually collide with other religion doctrines or yet, their overall belief system? This correlation of a higher being and what can deem to be moral might in effect cause complications on a rather complex proportion, and truth be told it has. If one examines history and its implications regarding religious welfare, there is evidence that strong religious systems can cause individuals to make rather serious decisions based on their interpretation of what is "right". Although religion has brought hope and faith, it has also had negative effects such as religious discrimination, or prejudice against people of different backgrounds. On the historical timeline, one can see that most wars and terrorism arose from people of different religions due to clashing religious ideologies. But at what point does religion entice individuals to go to such lengths to commit acts of violence?

Jessica Stern, author of *"Terror in the Name of God"* interviews many present and former terrorist to find the reasoning behind their belief systems. She gets to know them well in order to understand the deep-rooted psychology of their actions and perspectives. Stern interviews Christians, Jews, Muslims, and goes to many countries in order to gather research first hand for the research novel. She explains how terrorist organizations are formed by leaders who use religion as justification for their attention seeking and extreme behavior. This book provides extensive insight first hand of how these organizations think and allows the reader to get a

perspective of their thought process. Throughout the second part of the book, she looks at themes and patterns in these specific cultures that have done these acts from part one. She goes into depth of how these violent acts are strategized and organized in a way to target and evoke symbolism. This book dives deep into violent theologies and ideologies of the individuals who believe in terrorism in itself.

In part two of the book, Stern takes a look at how these leaders run successful organizations and some of the methods they employ. The one form of terrorism that I explored was chapter 6 about the anti-abortion movement. This movement is unique in the way that some organizations are able to utilize “leaderless resistance” networks. The idea of using leaderless networks “inspires operatives to take action on their own, without communicating their plans to others” (141, Stern). While speaking to people in this anti-abortion movement, she is able to hear first-hand how this decentralized network of communication serves a valuable purpose in preventing the feds gaining knowledge of operations. In this chapter, she explores the right-wing extremists that act on anti-abortion idealism and acts of violence. She attends an anti-abortion event that is also a place to raise money to help support the families of martyrs. While in this event, Stern is able to talk to a few people that are in the organization and interview why they believe in what they do, and why they believe it is justifiable. She talks to several people, one named Lokey, whom had first-degree murder. Stern then goes on to interview Lokey and he explains that he uses his violence on those who go against “God's will”. By speaking to him and others, she concludes that their main justification for their organization was to protect the unborn babies who are just as important as anyone else. They believed that the doctors and clinics promoting these abortions were “Satan himself” and thereby must protect in the name of God.

These people mainly justified homicide as “defensive actions” for violence against the clinics (159, Stern). In this chapter, they right-wing extremists compared killing fetuses as the moral equivalent of Hitler killing Jews in gas chambers. The man explaining this also mentions that the church leaders in Germany at the time of the Nazi’s didn’t act and were bystanders. He goes on to compare how “doing nothing” against the abortion clinics is just as dishonorable as the bystanders in Germany. She also visits Paul Hill, who considers himself a martyr for the anti-abortion extremist groups and “would be willing to die to promote the truth” (170, Stern). Paul Hill murdered physician John Britton and his bodyguard in 1994. He had done such acts in order to “inspire” others in the anti-abortion groups. This is an example of a leaderless network because one man’s action can inspire others to carry out similar actions without any form of direct communication or connection. This form of leaderless networking is to inspire followers to take violent action on behalf of the group and Paul Hill is an example of a martyr in the anti-abortion movement. The anti-abortion movement has still been around for the past 20 years and the extremists have made themselves relevant for the American government. Between 1977 and 2015, there has been 7,200 reported acts of violence at abortion clinics. “This included 42 bombings, 185 arson attacks, and thousands of death threats, bioterrorism threats and assaults” (Naral, 2022). A more recent murder case was back in May 31, 2009 on an abortion provider, Dr. George Tiller in Kansas. He was shot down out near his church service by Scott Roeder after frequently being targeted with protest and violence by anti-abortion groups. His clinic was bombed in 1986, and he even got shot in both arms in 1993 by Shelly Shannon as a warning before 2009 (Wikipedia, 2022).

Getting a perspective on the minds within terrorist groups was very interesting and very deep in this book. Stern is able to identify the history and reasoning for what drives these groups

in terrorism. The second attribute she dives into is the types of organizations that exist, why they exist, and how they operate based off her interviews. When I first picked up this book, I had thought that this would be typical stories of terrorism and that these people were somewhat crazy or without moral. I thought that maybe terrorism could come from a place of hatred or unjustness in their own life; but I was wrong after reading this. Jessica is able to get first hand encounters with these terrorists in efforts to get the thoughts that go in their head and get the psychological reasoning behind everything. In my opinion, I find her very brave as an author to go out and interview these people, not knowing what could happen. My initial thoughts of the book were wrong because these people aren't doing acts of violence out of nowhere and she realized that. After reading this book, one can understand that most acts of violence are on behalf of religion and what they think is moral or right in God's eyes. One can understand the reasoning behind these organizations and what drives them to participate in such acts. I think her aim was to get the reader to understand that terrorists don't believe what they are doing is wrong and is justifiable under God's eyes. This is evident in chapter 6 with the anti-abortion movement that believe they are protecting the unborn babies from the hands of evil. This book was very interesting to see how the minds of terrorists work and what they see as right and wrong. This can easily be related to history as a whole and the wars that have started as well. Back in the crusades, there were many "holy wars" carried out in God's will and wars based on what people interpreted as right. Usually those wars were between nations where each nation had its own religion and values that differed from another. Now in day, I believe that there is so much division of ideologies and religion, particularly in America which can be attributed to such war or acts of terrorism. After reading this book, I believe terrorism comes from an ideology and belief that they are doing what is right based on their religion for example. Structural and cultural

violence can take attribution since there are people on both sides of a spectrum. In a place with so many ideologies and religions, some people are bound to be affected by the state's laws or else it would be a state of totalitarianism. So when you have a state that allows abortion by law for example, and people with a different set of ideologies believe it is morally wrong and are extreme with those values; that can cause structural violence. Now there are multiple parties with different norms and values; and it's usually the parties that consider themselves disadvantaged that perform acts of anocracy. These groups tend to get rather aggressive towards other parties as their power imbalances and in result can lead into direct violence. So, this book is very interesting, because it allows the reader to see into the mind of extremists that believe they are doing the right thing in order to have their values recognized.

To conclude, Jessica Stern's "Terror in the Name of God" illustrates that terrorists believe they are doing the right thing when they carry out acts of terror. By studying historical context in regards to religion and violence, one can also see that terrorism isn't exactly a new subject and has been around from the dawn of time. Terrorist believe they are doing God's work and are helping people by sharing their standards and values. Stern is effective in helping the reader understand the psychology and reasoning behind terrorist groups.

Citations

Anti-Abortion Violence. (2022). NARAL Pro-Choice America. Retrieved December 5, 2022, from <https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/issue/anti-abortion-violence/>

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