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# Religion, Violence, and Self-Respect

PETER UVIN

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REVIEW OF MARC GOPIN

*Between Eden and Armageddon:*

*The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) U.S. \$29.95 cloth

and

REVIEW OF MARK JUERGENSMEYER

*Terror in the Mind of God:*

*The Global Rise of Religious Violence*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)

U.S. \$27.50 cloth, U.S. \$16.95 paper

I come to these books as a person interested in conflict and identity, and conflict resolution—not as a specialist of religion or terrorism. Therefore, the two books are new territory to me: I have not read most of their references, and am unfamiliar with the previous debates in the field. In addition, I am not a deeply religious person myself, although I like to believe that we humans are not the sole measure of things. Recently, however, as a result of my work on the boundaries of development aid and conflict resolution, I have become impressed by the centrality of religion in both these domains, and saddened by the surprising lack of attention devoted to them by both scholars and practitioners. In these two fields, it seems as if almost everyone wishes to stay away from the “hot potato” of religion, and act as if the aims and dynamics of the quests for social change and peace can be defined for all concerned without reference to religious values. In the quest for neutrality and universality and apolitical technicality—all values highly desired by

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development and conflict resolution experts—the deep importance and great potential of religion is denied, both for the experts themselves and for those they work with. Hence, I decided to start reading some more work on this subject, and where better to start than with two recent books by eminent scholars?

These works by Juergensmeyer and Gopin are both very interesting to anyone who seeks to understand the spiritual dynamics of conflict and peace. Juergensmeyer knows how to write and keep the reader's attention. Parts of the first chapters, in which he traces the lives and actions of famous terrorists, and visits most of them or their close confidants himself, could have been published in *The New Yorker* or *Harper's*. Additionally, the second part of the book, where he draws general comparative insights from the "primary data" presented in the first part, is very well written. This is helped by the fact that the author speaks in the first person through much of the book: we are following him on a discovery tour, taking both geographical and theoretical excursions through the scary but human world of religious terrorism. A quote from his conclusion illustrates his central argument:

Religious ideas have given a profundity and ideological clarity to what in many cases have been real cases of economic destitution, social oppression, and political corruption, and a desperate need for the hope of rising above the limitations of modern life. The image of cosmic struggle has given these bitter experiences meaning, and the involvement in a grand conflict has been for some participants exhilarating. It has even been empowering. Persons and movements engaged in such conflicts have gained a sense of their own destinies. In such cases, acts of violence, even what appear to those of us outside the movements as vicious acts of terrorism, have been viewed by insiders in cultures of violence as both appropriate and justified. Why, in a few extreme instances, violence has accompanied religion's renewed political presence is something this book has tried to explore. My conclusion is that it has much to do with the nature of the religious imagination, which always has 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 they perceive as lost in the wake of virtually global social and political shifts.

The key argument, then, is that religious terrorism is about empowerment of its perpetrators, the restoration of dignity, a sense of being major players in the world, with messages of renewal that counter dominant cultures. This is an interesting point, which I personally believe to be by and large correct (and not only because I have made a similar argument regarding radical ethnicity).

The problems with this argument are many, of course. At first sight, it does not appear as if many of the leaders and lieutenants of these organizations—be they

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Osama Bin Laden, Mike Bray (the anti-abortion activist who killed a doctor who performed abortions), or Baruch Goldstein (who killed 27 Palestinians in a Hebron mosque in February 1994)—come from the most disempowered segments of their societies. Are they simply the “vanguards” for the excluded masses? In addition, it goes without saying that most of the people who are truly disempowered have not chosen religious terrorism as their path towards the restoration of dignity. Thus, other factors still must help explain why some seeds of religious extremism blossom in certain soils, while others do not. Finally, the approach treats alike social phenomena that seem at first glance to be very different from each other: it treats the self-deluded visions of grandeur of a handful of Japanese social outcasts (I am referring here to Japanese cult leader Aum Shinrikyu, of Tokyo subway nerve gas infamy) similarly to the Hamas movement, which is deeply anchored in the lives of tens of thousands of people and their communities.

All of this produces a number of insights, such as the observation that acts of religious terrorism are rarely directed against other religions, or against foreigners. They are instead almost always aimed against terrorists’ own secular leaders, or against the one power that is considered the central impetus in the world’s drive towards westernization and consumerism, the United States. Juergensmeyer makes this point even about Hamas and the Jewish extreme right: they are in opposition not so much to each other as to their own secular leaders. He also observes that, although they invoke religious authority and are often led by religious authorities, these terrorist movements are typically marginal within their own religious communities and have encountered strong resistance within their own traditions. Once again, though, this observation seems to insufficiently differentiate between, say, Aum Shinrikyu and Hamas.

Still, there is good news to be found here: although religion provides, according to Juergensmeyer (and Gopin for that matter), texts that can be read as supportive of major violence against infidels, it provides more than that. This is where Gopin starts his fascinating book. Gopin’s key starting point is this insight:

Universal commitments, such as human rights, may play a crucial role in achieving international consensus on basic civic values, even among many religious liberals around the world. But this may not be a sufficient common denominator for people who are defining their religiosity in opposition to universalist, secular values. Good conflict resolution strategy requires a method of reaching out to even the most intractable and parochial religious adherents by engaging in a serious examination of their values and culture.

He proceeds to analyze what he calls the “pro-social potentials” in the major monotheist religions, and to discuss how outsiders can work with religious leaders to strengthen these from the inside, while respecting their religious views.

Conflict resolution processes “cannot take the form of a weaning from religious identity as such, which a formulaic intervention would be perceived to be, but rather must take the form of a shift to a hermeneutically reworked sense of religious identity.” He also argues that everywhere, including in the Middle East, rabbis, priests, and sheikhs are already engaging in such pro-social dynamics, both in their teaching and in their practice. However, as they do not speak the language of human rights and universalist values, they are overlooked by almost all peacemaking interventions.

From this emerge some important insights. Among others, “methods of peacemaking that continue to focus only on political and intellectual elites or that fail to address the broadest possible range of religious believers” will fail. By only dealing with the liberal, universalist, moderately religious, if not agnostic elites, they neglect large segments of the people, and in so doing marginalize them and render them more militant. This observation adds one more nail to the coffin of the peace process in the Middle East as practiced both by the U.S. Department of State and the many American conflict resolution NGOs.

The main weakness of the Gopin book is its exclusive focus on religion. It goes without saying—and I am sure the author would not deny it—that religious violence, whether in India, Northern Ireland, or the Middle East, is inseparable from longstanding social divisions and conflicts along political and economic lines. His at most a cursory treatment of this matter, while understandable within the context of the book’s aims, may limit the relevance of his insights. At the very least, I wish he had addressed this matter more explicitly.

Juergensmeyer and Gopin have more in common than their first names. They both employ a fundamentally psychosocial approach to the study of the relationship between religion and violence (or peace), and they both ultimately reflect their deep liberal sympathies. As a result, they are sometimes remarkably alike. When Gopin writes, for example, that “much of the attractiveness of rejectionist and militarist religion is its look and feel of authenticity, its easy fulfillment of identity needs at a deep level, especially by use of the enemy Other to define one’s uniqueness,” he sounds much like Juergensmeyer. Both clearly draw implicitly on the human needs school of thought pioneered by Erich Fromm and Richard Burton. However, Gopin goes much further in pushing us to question our practice and ourselves when he adds in the very next phrase that, “One of the weaknesses of the liberal expressions of many contemporary religions is their lack of fulfillment of the same needs. Liberal religion has tended to be a party to the global materialist trend of the homogenization of peoples and cultures.”

Both authors also acknowledge the dual nature of religion, namely religion’s capacity to promote visions and behaviors of great violence and exclusion as well as great humility and sharing. Juergensmeyer seeks to understand the violence side of the equation, while Gopin focuses on the peace potential. Still, com-

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paring this treatment of religion with the usual treatment of ethnicity, I find their acknowledgment of the dual potential of religion—best represented by Gopin, who spends more time discussing this dual nature throughout—refreshing. In the literature on ethnic conflict, I have found very few such nuanced treatments of the dual nature of ethnicity.

To conclude, these are two very interesting books. Juergensmeyer's emphatic treatment of religious terrorism and his use of unique primary sources make this a valuable insight into the psychosocial dynamics of violence. His conclusions—that religious extremism provides for people who feel excluded from and humiliated by the ideologies and practices of their states—mirror my own insights. The Gopin book shares Juergensmeyer's vision of the psychosocial function of religious violence and the potential of religion in offering a violent answer to those whose self-respect is under systematic attack, but goes further. It offers dynamic insight into the potential for change, and it does so grounded in a deep understanding of different religious traditions, especially Judaism (the author is a Rabbi himself), but also Islam, Catholicism, and Mennonite traditions. It is a deeply humanistic book, which touched me as a person and as a scholar (the distinction between these two being, hopefully, conceptual rather than empirical). I highly recommend it to all those interested in understanding the spiritual dynamics of conflict and peace. ■



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# U.S.-Korean Complexities

VICTOR FIG

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REVIEW OF WILLIAM H. GLEYSTEN JR.

*Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence:  
Carter and Korea in Crisis*

(Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999)

U.S. \$29.95 cloth, U.S. \$17.95 paper

In mid-1978, William H. Gleysteen Jr. became the United States ambassador to a country known by several labels: the Republic of Korea, the economic miracle on the Han River, and the Hermit Kingdom. The first referred to a modernizing nation-state that the U.S. was obligated by treaty to defend. The second described a country with a booming economy and uneven, yet real, pressures for social and political liberalization. The final expression pointed to a traditional culture wracked by intense nationalism on the right and left, power politics, and the cynical manipulation of truth all around. In this memoir of his tenure, Gleysteen reviews the ways in which he was ambassador to all three Koreas. Few representatives have experienced such a complex country, or been tasked with upholding American interests in the face of such enormous challenges, making for an interesting read.

To be sure, memoirs are often self-serving, and any American emissary involved with Korea during the late 1970s and early 1980s has much to explain, even defend. However, Gleysteen skillfully employs narrative and analytic text—backed by declassified cables—to demonstrate the sound judgment he used to promote stability and democratization in the face of enormous challenges, including Washington's rejection of the alliance, an assassination, a coup, and a massacre. This achievement will confound Gleysteen's several critics in both Korea and the U.S.

Yet, Gleysteen's work must be criticized for providing more explanation than scrutiny. This emphasis leaves lacunae in the reader's understanding, which might confuse or simply under inform non-experts on Korea. The first major issue Gleysteen addresses is President Jimmy Carter's decision to remove U.S. combat forces from the South to punish President Park Chung-hee for his human

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rights violations. Gleysteen is livid that Carter ignored the strategic context, which included a North Korean arms buildup and near paranoia in Seoul, precipitated by the fall of Saigon just before Carter assumed office. The Korean public sided with American strategists in calling for the U.S. president to reverse course. Carter was isolated, and Gleysteen, breaking with his usually moderate tone, berates the White House for its "...ignorance and insensitivity about East Asia" and its "dangerous disregard" for professional advice.

The day was saved when Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon, and most Koreans—including dissidents—rallied to rescind Carter's decision. Gleysteen makes the interesting point that the surge on the American side showed that "safety valves" could regulate national security decisions. One sees a facsimile of this presently, with many experts trying to reverse President Bush's imprudent decision to freeze negotiations with North Korea.

A James Bond element entered the picture with the assassination of Park in 1979. Though praised for overseeing skyrocketing economic growth, ex-general Park was also resented for remaining in power since his 1961 coup d'état. On October 26, 1979, during dinner, Park's own intelligence agency chief shot and killed him, leaving his reign to crumble. One pertinent question the author fields is how Park's eighteen-year administration should be judged. The ambassador is circumspect when he judges that, "For all his sins [he] empathized with the common man, but his economic populism gave way to political extremism." He adds, "I suspect that [historians] will rate Park as the most important Korean leader of modern times."

Most Koreans, it seems, would go farther than Gleysteen, something that must upset the Korean and U.S. left, which like to pillory Washington for supporting Park. From 1996 to 1997, Park nostalgia swept the nation as Koreans, now taking elections for granted, turned against the civilian Kim Young-sam administration for its corruption and economic mismanagement. At that time, Park polled first as the country's best politician; ex-dissident Kim won single-digit support. While Park inexcusably persecuted innocent people and democrats to keep himself in power, the reasonable conclusion is Gleysteen's: Park was a man for his times.

With Park's demise, Gleysteen hoped that a "Seoul spring" of democratization would blossom. Unfortunately, the jackboots of military strongman Chun Doo-hwan trampled on the shoots. On December 12, 1979, Chun seized power in a lightning coup, becoming the new martial law commander. As the ambassador notes, critics of U.S. policy accuse the embassy of abetting the immoral power grab. One might add that the rationale of these critics is often that the U.S. "knows everything" about Korea, so Chun must have had American support. However, Gleysteen tells the disappointing story of how he spent the night of the coup in an underground bunker, unaware and uninvolved in the proceedings. At the time, Chun refused all contact and communication with Gleysteen—hardly a sign of collaboration.

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With Chun easing himself into additional top posts, the U.S. embassy found itself deeply involved in Korea, but with little actual power. Its detailed calculations were sophisticated. No one wanted another struggle over troop withdrawals, which would re-ignite broad nationalistic resentment. Economic sanctions would hurt ordinary Koreans. An early attempt at partial sanctions against Chun caused the military to rally around him, leading the U.S. to conclude that tougher measures could damage the security relationship or trigger another coup, turning Korea into the Guatemala of Asia. Koreans wanted freedom, but few in Seoul were willing to mount organized public protests. Enmeshed in the complexities of Korea, Washington still lacked decisive influence. Therefore, the U.S. reluctantly settled for a cold but proper relationship with Chun, pressing for moderation over time.

Then came Kwangju. Arguably no other issue divides Koreans and American Koreanists more than the question of whether the U.S. acted as an imperial or benign power during the Kwangju massacre. The capital of South Cholla province, Kwangju had long been a center of resistance to the right-wing power brokers in Seoul—as well as a hotbed of pro-North Korean sentiment. Put very simply, in May 1980, students understandably infuriated by Chun's illegal power grab demonstrated with vigor.

On May 18, 1980, the intolerant Chun dispatched special warfare commandoes to launch an unprovoked attack on the students. The soldiers brutally clubbed and bayoneted civilians, causing much of the city to rise up in defense; their strategy included breaking into armories to arm themselves. By May 22, the soldiers were driven out, and negotiations ensued between moderate civilians and the regime. But radicals gained control and steered petrified, younger protesters towards an apocalyptic outcome: they would clash with the army today, striking the spark for a wider rebellion tomorrow. The bloodthirsty Chun obliged when he re-attacked on May 27 with the 20th Division, killing more people. About 250 people died in the two clashes combined.

Many Koreans insist that the U.S. is a “murderer” because the commandoes were part of a joint Korean-American command. Gleysteen's effective response is that the commandoes were outside the command structure. As for why General John Wickham sanctioned the release of the 20th Division from frontline duty, Gleysteen argues that the rationale was that if negotiations failed, as they did, then regular army troops would be more moderate than the hardened commandoes. Gleysteen also quotes Chun as saying before Kwangju that he could not fully trust the U.S.; Chun had witnessed the American collapse in Vietnam. This makes it unlikely that Chun would have involved the embassy in a civilian massacre.

However, Gleysteen's argument is incomplete. In a 1996 *Journal of Commerce* article entitled, “U.S. Knew of South Korea Crackdown,” journalist Tim Shorrock alleged that the U.S. and Chun were co-aggressors. Gleysteen buries

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his too short rebuttal in a footnote, and fails to show how Shorrock's piece twisted the facts. Reading Shorrock, one senses that he whacked at the tree of calm analysis with the hatchet of radicalism. Regrettably, his article is widely cited by a Korean left that often refuses to engage the evidence.

Other aspects of Kwangju demand more attention than the book provides. The ambassador properly blames Chun for gangster tactics, yet he also wishes that the moderates in Kwangju had triumphed; they sought a negotiated settlement based on an apology from Seoul and disarmament of the protestors. Gleysteen does not directly address the moral responsibility of the pro-confrontation radicals who outmaneuvered the moderates. One possible view is that their obstinacy destroyed a struggling peace. A second interpretation, however, which is also plausible, is that a head-on clash between Chun and his detractors was necessary to galvanize the mass protests that eventually drove the quasi-fascist Chun from power. One wonders how Gleysteen sees this crucial question. He also states that the radical leaders seemed to be revolutionaries, not reformers, but fails to develop this important theme.

A second topic that requires more comment is the illogic of both the right and the left on Kwangju. Chun clumsily attempted to blame the uprising on Kim Dae-jung, who hails from Cholla. However, Kim was under arrest when the melee erupted: how could he mastermind it from jail? Gleysteen's treatment of this is cursory. The left is no better, a point the author excludes altogether. Knowing that the regime dishonestly censored and controlled the press, leftist parties smartly rejected all pro-government propaganda. Yet when Chun broadcast that the U.S. supported his crackdown, the rebels insisted this must have been true. Neither side can account for its embarrassing contradictions.

After all this doom and gloom, the memoir turns to a major success of American policy, namely Washington's effort to save the life of Kim Dae-jung, a man born into poverty who rose to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Chun tried Kim for sedition after Kwangju and sentenced him to death. His life was saved on political and humanitarian grounds when the new Reagan administration bartered with Chun: release Kim to exile in America and President Chun would get a visit to the White House. Gleysteen winces when he recounts how the ebullient Cold War warrior Reagan threw away his carefully prepared text that called for democratization and vigilance, and showered Chun with praise. To be sure, Reagan erred badly. But Gleysteen could add that the U.S.'s critics have misinterpreted the visit. They continue to insist that it was a state visit, that Chun was honored as the first official White House visitor, and that the new administration endorsed Chun's every action. In fact, Chun was invited after other leaders and he was denied a state reception. The good host and cold warrior Reagan was warmly welcoming an ally, not giving Chun a blanket endorsement.

Gleysteen ends his memoirs with several reflections. His key point is to caution America against human rights crusades of the Carter variety. Gleysteen wants

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human rights concerns to be balanced with other objectives, to take context into account, and to have broad support. Allies should be praised for advances, as well as criticized for shortcomings. He correctly insists that the U.S. could err by attacking China emotionally in the same way Carter upbraided Korea. The risk of a backlash means that America must show "restraint." This is true enough.

Here, one must tack on additional points about Korea. First, Kim Dae-jung's unstinting praise for the U.S. undermines arguments made by both the right and the left. The former claimed to have a special relationship with Washington to justify its power when it is clear a bond also exists between Kim and the U.S. In addition, the left can hardly convict the U.S. for supporting Chun when Kim, the leading dissident, attests that he and the U.S. stood, and still stand, together.

Second, one would like to ask Gleysteen if he did enough to inform Koreans of his policies. Chun dominated the media, often preventing Gleysteen from communicating how he clashed repeatedly with a man he calls dishonest, cunning, and a liar. During and after Kwangju, Chun lied and claimed he had American support. Therefore, Gleysteen started to mail statements of American policy to thousands of prominent Koreans, but eventually he stopped. Why didn't he broaden the list and maintain the effort as some Koreans started to swallow Chun's deceit? Also, when Chun refused to permit the embassy to drop leaflets during the Kwangju affair outlining American policy, perhaps Gleysteen could have sent thousands of leaflets to college leaders. Yet another option would have seen the State Department explain the American side to the thousands of Korean students in the U.S. with the request that they honestly transmit the message back to Korea. It is likely that some would have complied. Could Gleysteen organize a lecture in Kwangju even today?

Overall, Gleysteen provides the reader with a detailed review and justification of how he helped to reverse President Carter's ill-conceived attempt to destroy the Korean-American alliance, how Chun Doo-hwan blindsided the embassy with his coup and attack on Kwangju, and the U.S. effort, both humanitarian and strategic, to save Kim Dae-jung. With his adroit use of cables, and his polished, lawyerly prose, Gleysteen has presented a credible defense against his critics, and has left analysts with an important document on a tumultuous phase in Korean-American relations. ■

