

DONNIE FEATHERSTON
University of Denver

CRUSADERS WITHOUT A CROSS: BIOPOLITICAL AND SECULAR
RECONFIGURATION OF COSMIC WAR

Mark Juergensmeyer's work provides an invaluable resource for understanding contemporary terrorism and the resurgence of religious identity attached to these acts of violence. The motif of cosmic war grants unique insight into the nature and logic of religious violence, a type of violence that the secular West seeks to eliminate. In an extension of this research, Reza Aslan utilizes the cosmic war framework to give strategic suggestions for international engagement via foreign policy that undermines that logic, rather than mere reliance on direct combative engagement with enemy groups. He provides a simple but provoking strategy to win the war on terror. In a war supported through images of cosmic violence, one wins by simply not participating in the cosmic war.¹ However, both of these authors along with other thinkers who have extended their arguments rely on assumptions regarding the secular West and its motivations and aims in the struggle against terrorism. It assumes a qualitative difference in the notions, symbols, and narratives of war employed in the West. They imagine the war on terror as a war against cosmic war rather than a continuation of it. I propose that the secular West equally envisions itself involved in a cosmic war to the same extent as any Jihadist, Sikh, or Evangelical Christian terrorist cell. The secular West, while not relying on religion in any traditional sense, still finds its roots in that Christian narrative, and borrows extensively from theological sources to construct its framework for international relations. By incorporating the work of Michel Foucault on biopolitics and security, I seek to articulate the contours and angles of a secular cosmic war, arising not in response to, but in conjunctive partnership with fundamentalist religious enactments of cosmic war. As a consequence, as long as the secular west continually performs the rituals of cosmic war there will be no end to this ongoing conflict between the religious and secular spheres.

One must begin with the concept of cosmic war. Neither Mark Juergensmeyer nor Reza Aslan give explicit criteria for labeling a war cosmic or not, though they do provide a series of helpful characteristics. I should also note that Reza Aslan contrasts cosmic war from Holy War, but does not provide substantive qualifications for distinguishing the two from each other.² By carefully

¹ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Random House, 2010), 12.

² Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 5.

examining their work one can deduce three primary characteristics, though not necessarily criteria, for cosmic war.

First, a cosmic war generates a feeling of urgency, giving a sense of immediacy and necessity.³ The world around us is genuinely and completely at risk, and cosmic war represents the ultimate moment of chaos that provides an eventual condition of pure security. Theologically speaking, a strange tension exists between providence and risk. The adherents certainly believe that the eventual outcome will be one of ultimate and complete victory. There could not be anything other than victory because God ultimately sides with their cause. However, while God guarantees this ultimate victory, there remains a tumultuous and difficult process in the journey to that victory. Genuine risk inhabits the world in this historical moment, and the victory's nearness and farness depends on the actions of those right here and right now. It is possible that the victory be put off exponentially if the cosmic warrior does not take immediate action.⁴ Likewise, the failure of those before provides a contemporary condition where the victory has not yet happened, or conversely the actions of past generations have brought contemporary warriors so close to the victory that it excites and motivates contemporary action.⁵ Past battles pave the way for contemporary proximity to victory. Failing to act appropriately now eliminates the importance of the battles in past generations. Therefore the pressure towards action extends both into the future, bringing victory closer, and into the past, ensuring that the actions of those that came before were not in vain.

The risk entailed in the immediate cosmic war is not just for one's life, but for one's very identity, or more specifically the conditions of possibility of that identity.⁶ Reza Aslan asserts that globalized conditions and secular nationalism undergird identity conflicts around the world.⁷ The failure of secular nationalism to provide coherence for identity, along with the erosion of local identities through the processes of globalization presents an identity crisis within the folds of cosmic war.⁸ One does not fight to win territory or economic gain, rather one fights for the ability to distinguish and define oneself as something and conjoined with others through this identity. The immediacy is profound when one considers the wages on which cosmic war is fought.

The second characteristic of cosmic war is a focus beyond the material world.⁹ One does not fight and risk their very existence for material gain, but for something far greater. Focusing beyond the material comes in the form of strategy, consequences, and reward. First, the cosmic warrior envisions the adversary against which they fight as incalculably massive either through sheer

³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 148-149.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 6; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 161.

⁷ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 162.

numbers or through the diversity of forms potentially taken.¹⁰ The Satanic narrative in contemporary Evangelical thought emphasizes a roaming enemy that takes many forms.¹¹ The enemy which one fights is nefarious precisely because it hides itself within amorphous masses and can manifest at unexpected times. Enemies derive power from their scale and the distinct possibility that anyone can be in collusion with demonic forces. The cosmic warrior strategizes around an idea of eliminating the enemy with help from some other-worldly force. Something beyond and outside the material realm provides necessary assistance to the cosmic warriors in confronting such a massive and clandestine enemy.¹²

In addition, the consequences of the cosmic war do not reverberate in this world alone, but affect a world beyond this one.¹³ While an act may require ultimate sacrifice from an individual, the participant willingly does so precisely because the consequences of those actions are far greater than the individual alone. This can occur in either negative or positive forms. On the negative side one can be driven to act because of the apocalyptic consequences if they do not intervene. On the positive, the consequences can be a reward for the active individual in a world to come. Either way, consequences of the cosmic war, and the actions within it, are felt not merely on this plane but another, transcendent level.

The third characteristic of cosmic war, and the most complex, is the binary partitioning of the world into good and evil.¹⁴ A line divides everyone on earth into one of two camps: you are either on the good side, which in the logic of Cosmic War is the side that will ultimately win; or, conversely, you are on the bad side and within the narrative will ultimately lose. No one can reside in the middle, and this inability to be in the middle has dramatic consequences. Most notably for Mark Juergensmeyer and Reza Aslan equally, the most horrific element of this cosmic war is its ability to justify violence against anyone, even children.¹⁵ Children are not thought to be innocent, but part of a larger system of evil, and ultimately viable targets in a cosmic war. The ability to distinguish between combatant and civilian erodes within a logic that forces everyone to participate regardless of their will or desire on the matter.

This binary division of the world also prohibits any sort of peaceful negotiations as a means of ending a cosmic war.¹⁶ The enemy is the ultimate display of evil and therefore can never be trusted in such negotiations. Besides, there can be no compromising in a cosmic war or one runs the risk of finding themselves outside divine favor and therefore on the losing side. Negotiations are entirely

¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

¹¹ See 1 Peter 5:8

¹² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 185.

¹³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 5; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 148.

¹⁵ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 5; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 175.

¹⁶ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 5-6; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 177-178.

impossible endeavors, as they are tools of the enemy and carry a risk far too great.

Finally, this binary distinction provides a way of making sense of suffering.¹⁷ One need only look at some basic structures of classic Christian theodicy to see such logic. The enemy ultimately causes suffering. They do not merely participate in suffering, or use it, but are the very reason suffering exists at all. Suffering and the enemy eternally coexist as partners and pollute God's intended order for the world. Therefore, suffering felt at the hands of an enemy provides reasoning for conflict. Suffering is their fault, and only by eliminating the enemy entirely will suffering cease to exist. Further, on the other side, any suffering one undergoes transforms into a glorified maneuver of turning enemy weapons back against them. Enemies bring about suffering, but the cosmic warrior converts it into a self-glorifying strategy.¹⁸

These are the primary characteristics of cosmic war according to Mark Juergensmeyer and Reza Aslan, capturing the contours and different elements that combine together in the imagination of the cosmic warrior. In addition, I contend that these features can easily be applied to, and are at the heart of the logic, in the secular West's Global War on Terror. I am not speaking here of overt Christian language used by George W. Bush, though such language may betray the true motivations for this war in the heart of many.¹⁹ Instead, I am focusing on the more broadly accepted parameters by which the GWOT has been perpetuated even in the most liberal and secular language.

One may quickly assert that a qualitative difference remains between terrorism and Western secular ideas of war, a difference substantiated through recourse to just war theory. This type of argumentation heavily influences the work of thinkers like Michael Walzer who argues for a fundamental distinction in Western style of war after the Vietnam War.²⁰ Rather than directly approach Walzer's argument (and others like him), it may be helpful to establish a basic outline of just war, as there have been different forms of this theory throughout history. Obviously, the works of both Cicero and Augustine provide the earliest historic moments of this theory, but I will focus on the secularized evolution of just war found in Hugo Grotius.

Grotius, working in the 17th century, insists on the worldly and immanent justification for war within international relations, as opposed to the Augustinian and later medieval variants that argue for the participation of Christians in certain wars. Grotius, in his constant insistence upon immanent political realities, provides six key fundamental conditions for just war along with a few comments on constraint within the brutal realities of battle.

¹⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For a helpful examination of this language see Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 19-32.

²⁰ Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 6.

First, a just cause must motivate any action.²¹ Substantial and real injury endured by one nation at the hands of another must provide the bases for war. This injury could take the form of territorial infringement or an act of direct aggression and violence on the citizenry of another nation. Additionally, it may also be the case that a sovereign visits such injustice upon his or her own people that it requires intervention from another sovereign country as a form of punishment or intervention.²² In any case, harm must be actual, as fear of possible harm alone, that may or may not happen, does not justify the intervention of war.

Second, the intervention must be proportional to the injury experienced.²³ If expansion into sovereign territory by another sovereign provides for the conditions of injury the responsive actions must only be to the extent that it reclaims that territory and does not encroach further into the territory of the aggressive sovereign. Further, the violence inflicted upon the victim nation provides context for the appropriate level on the violence of the response. Likewise, this condition insists that the war have a specific and available resolution to the conflict with measurable and obtainable political, territorial, or justice oriented goals.

Third, there must be a reasonable prospect of a successful intervention.²⁴ It is better to forego a direct warlike intervention than enter into one where the death toll would be too great, or the resources necessary for a successful campaign are not willingly available from the citizenry. Wars are expensive in both material and ideological measures, and the appropriate resources must be available for the war to not cause a further injustice to the already victimized citizenry.

Fourth, a legal sovereignty must sanction the war.²⁵ In state relations the sovereignty of the state enacts war against the sovereignty of another state. It cannot be the case that some lesser state authority, or group of private citizens, enact the war and it remain just.

Fifth, prior to intervening in any direct or violent way the victimized sovereign nation must make an official declaration of the intent to go to war with the offending nation.²⁶ The reason for this is a meta-insistence, outside the theory of what makes for a just war, that war be the last and most extreme possibility for remedying international conflict. By making an official declaration it gives the offending nation the opportunity to cease incursions, actions, or other maneuvers that offend the victimized nation. Diplomacy is always better than armed conflict, and if it has not been fully sought after then armed conflict is not

²¹ Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, trans. Francis W. Kelsey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), Book II, ch.22, V. 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hugo Grotius, Book III, Ch. 11.

²⁴ Hugo Grotius, Book II, Ch. 24.

²⁵ Hugo Grotius, Book III, Ch. 3.

²⁶ Hugo Grotius, Book II, Ch. 24.

legitimate. In addition, war, as a final and most extreme situation is the sixth of the conditions for legitimate and just war.²⁷

In the case a nation arrives at all the conditions for a just war the actions within the war must be restrained and bound to certain ethical parameters as well. Basically, one must do all that one can to eliminate civilian casualties or injury during the process of armed conflict.²⁸ Of course, this does not eliminate the possibility for civilian death or injury, it merely presupposes an intentional strategic attempt at eliminating attacks on civilians. One must be both discriminating in their ability to produce a taxonomy of guilt and innocence (civilian and combatant) and always keep proportionality as a guiding ethic in the conflict. An attack that does not properly discriminate the guilty from the innocent, or one that disproportionately affects citizens and not combatants can lead to an increase in activity from the offending nation and an unnecessary continuation of the conflict.

While Talal Asad makes the argument the categories of war and terrorism are hard at some points to distinguish, the act of killing is ultimately still an act of killing.²⁹ Though, war derives meaning through legal categories while terrorism concerns itself with a more immediate feeling of vulnerability. The two can become difficult to distinguish on some points because the two categories are not mutually exclusive. I want to extend this a bit further and argue that when one looks at terrorism through the lens of cosmic war one soon uncovers the inner workings of logic of just war, the very philosophical groundwork for legal categories of war. Looking back at the concepts extracted from the work of Mark Juergensmeyer and Reza Aslan there are a few key markers in connection with just war on which I wish to comment.

Within cosmic war the territory does not exist in a traditional sense, but the shared identity remains strong. The enemy within the cosmic narrative does not attack a territory, rather it is attacking an identity.³⁰ People feel an immediate and intense existential threat of actual eradication. Religious identity is itself the victim, and requires some sort of defensive response from those who share that identity. Defense of an identity becomes a just cause, and simultaneously produces an amorphous enemy whereby anyone, whether citizen or military, equally become caught up in an existential conflict.

Second, terrorism produces a defense that envisions the only possible outcome as complete elimination of the existential enemy. The battle lines reside at such a deep level in the mind of the terrorist that the only complete elimination of that existential threat ensures protection. It is truly kill or be killed, on a cosmic level.

A transcendent omnipotent deity promises the eventual victory, making any questions regarding the viability of success void. Of course, success may take on a radically different meaning or involve a much larger trajectory than the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hugo Grotius, Book III, Ch. 11.

²⁹ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 39-41.

³⁰ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 20.

discourse of immanent just war. One merely works on a different quantitative calendar within cosmic war, but a calendar and timeline nonetheless.

The sovereign required to sanction the war and announce it to the offending party also exists on a quantitatively different level, but not qualitative, as there are no qualitative differences between political sovereignty and theological sovereignty. Carl Schmitt argues the theological ideas of sovereignty thoroughly imbue meaning to the secularized constructions of sovereignty through contract.³¹ In theology God's omnipotence displays itself most forcibly in the miraculous.³² God ordains certain laws of nature yet his omnipotent power can violate and suspend the laws he himself created. Schmitt argues that in the contract theory of political sovereignty the sovereign is that which has the right to declare the exception to the very contract that establishes sovereignty.³³ The work of Giorgio Agamben picks up on this theme as a means of investigating the current Global War on Terror along with issues such as the Patriot Act and instances of constitutional suspension.³⁴ The two types of sovereignty are only different in scope and not in any fundamental way. Likewise, in the mind of one engaged in cosmic war, the sovereign is announcing the war continuously through what they view as a morally destitute society. It is precisely the extreme immorality that requires cosmic war, and announces the war.³⁵

Those who engage in religious violence follow a very closely related logical process in the act of producing violence. In the mind of a cosmic warrior they are participating in a just and noble war, founded on similar philosophical and theoretical soil as modern constitutional and legal ideas of war. The two types of war assuredly contain differences, but those differences are quantitative rather than qualitative.

While looking at just war allows one to get hints of connections between secular war and cosmic war, it does not answer my more ambitious claim that secular war is in fact a variant of cosmic war. To do this we must look at the underlying political discourse that would allow for something as abstract as a war on terror to make sense in modern political language. This requires a shift in how we understand enemies. In modern history wars have been largely understood through the matrix of the state, this is precisely what Grotius has in mind when detailing just war. However, the movement of understanding enemies as states to abstract ideas announces a larger transition to biopolitics.

Michel Foucault introduces the notion of biopolitics in the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*.³⁶ The ideas surrounding biopolitics found in

³¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.

³⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 198.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 133-161.

this work are further augmented and defined in a series of lectures recently translated into English.³⁷ According to Foucault biopolitics focuses on normalization and containment of certain inefficient elements within a population.³⁸ It views the human not as an individual, but as a unique part that makes up a larger whole (the population). The mechanisms of power within that whole seek to establish and maximize certain desired outcomes. The issue of birthrate serves as a helpful example. Within a biopolitical structure institutions of governance transform birth into a political issue, most obviously through the implementation of practices to maximize conditions that allow for the highest birthrate possible without pushing too far practices such that they would result in diminishing returns. As the population becomes the principle domain of political activity (as opposed to the individual body or a geospatial terrain) the political emphasis is not on punishment, but instead normalization, or producing acceptable average conditions within the population.³⁹

Within biopolitics productivity serves as the primary function of power, contrasted with restriction.⁴⁰ The historical process of modern political formations follows a path of sovereignty focusing on territory to the current focus on populations. Globalization has expanded the notion of population beyond the state, with concern and care for producing flourishing, economically developed, and democratic territories all over the globe. Because a drive towards flourishing, efficiency, and productivity encapsulates the entirety of the population, any threat against sovereignty is a threat against humanity itself.⁴¹

In so much as biopolitics seeks to protect humanity it simultaneously defines the criteria for being counted among humanity.⁴² Or, more precisely, biopolitics defines what constitutes human life. Some humans promote life and others seek to disrupt life. In an almost scientific way biopolitics insists that some life fundamentally threatens the ability to live and therefore cannot be allowed to continue living.⁴³

This adjustment in the understanding of the aim of politics as the protection of life conditions an enemy that threatens the totality of life. Foucault speaks of the discourse around the enemy as similar to the discourse around a life-threatening virus.⁴⁴ One cannot have any sort of compromise with an attacking virus if they intend to go on living; they must immediately and for the sake of the health of

³⁷ See in particular Michel Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003); and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, and Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 142-143.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, and Population*, 9-11.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 136.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴² Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴³ Michael Dillon and Andrew W. Neal, eds., *Foucault on Politics, Security and War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7-9.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society must be Defended*, 248-252.

the entire body destroy the virus. Likewise, any sort of human life that threatens the body of the population must be removed entirely for the sake of that population.

By establishing the limits and conditions of life itself biopolitics produces a new ontology of radical insecurity for humanity.⁴⁵ The medicalized and biological body is constantly under threat and unfathomably insecure against a host of viruses, bacteria, disease, and injury. Biologically speaking, the body exists under constant threat. The body of the living population is no different, constantly under internal threat. One does not have to look hard to find numerous mentions of those engaged in religious violence through the medicalized language of disease, cancer, and virus.⁴⁶

The Global War on Terror is a biopolitical war. Its goal, logic, criteria, and strategies all circulate around a discourse of protecting the planet, protecting humanity, protecting the population and people beyond any territorial borders. Biopolitical-type strategies include the use of demographic and statistical information to produce lists of names that fit criteria for likelihood to have propensity to religious violence along with collecting data on enormous segments of the population to monitor the flows of information for statistical likelihoods of violent activities. These types of strategies follow directly from lessons learned in population management central to biopolitical regimes.

One can begin to see glimmers of cosmic war in the logic of population protection. First, let's begin with feelings of vulnerability. Those who would participate in religious violence and terrorism with an idea of cosmic war fueling this violence have a profound sense of vulnerability. Talal Asad, Juergensmeyer and Aslan I have shown all have similar ideas on this front. Those who engage in religious violence do so out of a defensive stance vis-à-vis their identity in a world caught up in rapid globalization. They feel vulnerable and under attack by the larger secular culture and are fighting a defensive war to protect themselves. In a very similar way, biopolitics produces a human with a fundamental sense of insecurity. Managing a population properly and to the most efficient ends requires a pervasive and constant awareness of potential threats. The population is an insecure amorphous object requiring constant monitoring and management. Insecurity within the population has crept into the collective political discourse and narrative. The terrorist could be anyone, anywhere, anytime. We must all be vigilant and aware of our surroundings, and of course, report anything suspicious. We are collectively fighting a war against our vulnerabilities, and because of the constant vigilance we feel vulnerable. These constant threats put humanity itself at stake. For those engaged in cosmic war what is at stake is identity, for those engaged in the secular biopolitical war what is at stake is humanity – these are not dissimilar objectives.

⁴⁵ Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror*, 9.

⁴⁶ Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 18-20.

Because the threat contains such grand consequences in both cosmic and biopolitical war, the enemy requires extreme action. One cannot compromise with something or someone generating such a profoundly existential threat. Direct confrontation and elimination is the only option in such a drastic and vulnerable situation.

Juergensmeyer goes to a great extent to show how those caught up in ideas of cosmic war satanize their enemies.⁴⁷ In such a worldview the threat is so great that Satan, or the grand cosmic enemy, manipulates real world events and people. This often comes in the form of harsher treatment for those in the religion who in their eyes are compromising religious truths.⁴⁸ This they see as a direct attack by a cosmic force to mislead and confuse those within the religious group. Biopolitics concerns itself entirely with life, and privatizes death to an extreme degree.⁴⁹ Life becomes a kind of transcendental object within biopolitics and death the extreme transcendental other. The process of satanization in the cosmic war narrative is analogous to the medicalized language of virus and cancer within biopolitical secular regimes. Both represent something entirely other to the intended order. Both the biopolitical and cosmic war share the strategy of the removal of humanity from the identity of their enemies. A cosmic force of evil replaces that now vacant humanity, for the other an infectious and contaminating nature replaces what was once human.

Cosmic war unashamedly divides the world along the lines of good and evil. There is no middle ground between the two: they are fundamentally different. The human who sides with evil loses their humanity, they are fundamentally and ontologically distinct from those participating on the righteous side in a cosmic war narrative. Further, anyone can be a potential threat; there is no distinct class of citizen that somehow maintains a middle position between good and evil. You are either good, a part of the righteous group within the cosmic struggle, or you are evil and aligned on the side of Satan. Anything else that attests to your humanity does not matter. Biopolitics constructs a similar divide between life and death. You are either for humanity and life, and a participant in all of those things that make life better and more efficient, or you are fundamentally for death and a threat to the entire population. There is no middle ground you either participate or you threaten. The biopolitical and cosmic war share in this fundamentally dichotomized view of the world.

For cosmic warriors the war is much larger than their individual life. They are fighting for something much greater than themselves, something that extends far back in history and continues far in front of them. Their actions have a kind of ultimate determination and possess excessive meaning on the immanent plane. They may not see the final outcome in this existence, but have faith whatever sacrifices they make will be worth it. Biopolitical discourse around war takes on a similar logic through hopeful ideas about a better tomorrow. The common language around historical wars, particularly in the United States, is their

⁴⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 184.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Society must be Defended*, 248.

providing for contemporary freedom. The continuation of this sees current wars as providing something positive for generations to come. Politicians do not shy away from this style of language, and it follows a similar logic of seeing struggles extending beyond our individual self. Production and reproduction are central concepts to the biopolitical struggle for security. War in either a cosmic or biopolitical motif does not find its primary meaning in the immediate, rather they both share meaning in the potential and extensions far beyond the individual.

Ethical decisions the cosmic warrior must make regarding violence and action take place in an extreme and special condition. Warfare necessarily requires certain things the religion would otherwise not preach or tolerate. The arrangement between the religious people and the ideal religious way of being on earth finds entanglement within the reality of the world not being as the divine figure intended it to be. When things are corrected through the cosmic war then those ethical requirements can take effect and become normative. Turning again to Agamben one sees something logically similar. The constitution, which binds and legalizes the war, can be overridden if the war creates an emergency situation.⁵⁰ The ethical guidelines given in the constitution can be ignored if the world imagined in the constitution somehow falters. Those rules and regulations will make sense and be implemented the moment this threat to order itself is taken care of. In the presence of such an emergency, the rules must be ignored so that they may one day be implemented again. The trouble is, both cosmic war and biopolitical war contain goals but those goals are perpetually unobtainable. For the cosmic warrior God may not intervene today but it is continually hoped for and postponed. For the biopolitical regime, death and insecurity may not be eliminated today, but life and a restoration of the rule of law in a completely democratic and perfect world can happen eventually.

War, whether it takes the form of cosmic or a biopolitical entails loss and tragedy. Suffering remains an inevitable result. But both secular and religious notions of war generate a profound sense of commitment from their respective soldiers. Both the cosmic warrior and the secular soldier see themselves as part of a larger narrative, one for the reign of God and the other for the sovereignty of the democratic rule of law. The participation in something larger than the self provides a sense of meaning and explanation to the traumas and suffering endured. One would not willingly sacrifice for something that did not have a profound and existential grasp upon them. One would not willingly fight on behalf of something they did not believe had meaning beyond their own existence. For the secular soldier, life, or more precisely the flourishing and free ability to reproduce life, becomes this object. For the cosmic warrior, religious identity and the divine object take on this motivating element. But both provide a context and way of confronting the inevitable suffering that will take place in war.

While providing context and meaning for loss it also gives meaning to and provides definition for victories. The death of Osama Bin Laden provided an

⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 2-3.

interesting occasion in the United States to see patriotism connected to the celebration of one man's demise. Some of course questioned the appropriateness of the response, while others enthusiastically demanded to see photo evidence of his killing. My point is not to question the ethical or patriotic nature of his death, but rather to point out the evolving nature of victory. In a war on terror one cannot celebrate unavailable diplomatic peace treaties that put an end to the conflict, rather one celebrates the elimination of a threat. Bin Laden came to represent the most profound threat and insecurity in the American imagination, he was the face of an action that proved to make the American population and other parts of the world feel distinctly vulnerable. In much the same way Bin Laden and other members of various religious organizations viewed the events of 9/11 as a great victory. Again, no one admitted defeat and formally sat down to sign a treaty so that things could return to normal. Both represent a victory for a certain group of people, yet both are incredibly different from previous historical instances of victory. Both sides in this struggle have come to define victory in a very unique way.

The themes developed by Juergensmeyer and further expressed by Aslan give shape and structure to a series of violent acts in contemporary history. Violence expressed in conjunction with religion is not new; history provides ample evidence to the contrary. In fact, cosmic war seems to be the relative norm rather than some exuberant exception. Rather, secular violence completely devoid of cosmic meaning conversely appears to be the exception, and potentially provides new forms of violence making with new meaning and new ethical limitations. However, to be as clear as possible, the current biopolitical form of secular violence making has not yet reached or fulfilled this charter of a new form of violence. Instead, it relies precisely on the same models of cosmic war with which it charges its terrorist detractors. I will not pretend to offer up an entirely new logic of political violence in this paper, rather I want to offer appropriate groundwork to confront the illusions that the logic of violence available to secular nation states actually maintains anything qualitatively different from the violence exercised by religious extremists.

This critique of the illusions surrounding secular violence fulfills Aslan's call to disengage from cosmic violence as a means of combat.⁵¹ While he focuses on alarming rhetoric in the West, and its subsequent suspension as a political strategy, I desire to take this a step further and directly confront the logic inherent in violent secular enterprises. First, and most simply, the removal of the word "war" from the vocabulary of counter-terrorism seems the most profitable step in the right direction. The rhetorical and linguistic strategy of religious extremists feeds off and finds further legitimation in the language of war.⁵² In addition, war generates a certain logical force for those secular states, which results in a lack of critical engagement. War is a time of an exceptional situation demanding instantaneous action against constant, persistent, and immediate

⁵¹ This call is also reverberated in a more precise way in Heather S. Gregg, "Fighting Cosmic Warriors: Lessons from the First Seven Years of the Global War on Terror," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* Volume 32, Issue 3, 2009.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 203.

threats. In an environment of demands for instantaneous security, critical engagements, thoughtful dialogue, and genuine policy vetting does not take place. Removing the idea of war from the vocabulary tremendously alters the logic at work in the conversation, and provides space for necessary critical self-reflection.

Further, the removal of war from the vocabulary, while a simple step, provides the means for engaging in genuine dialogue over actual, material, and real grievances felt by those who would otherwise engage in violent acts. The ability to maintain appropriate negotiations and compromises certainly does not exist with those motivated by cosmic images of war. However, it may be possible for the secularized west to engage in a battle over the rhetoric employed by those religious extremists. Addressing actual problems will subsequently result in the weakening of the rhetorical strategies available to extremist groups. As long as the secular nation states continue to engage in war, compromise from either side, not to mention the eventual dismantling of the rhetoric employed by violent religious leaders, will never occur. Secular states are just as unwilling to compromise with terrorist organizations, as terrorist organizations are with those secular states.

In its current form the Global War on Terror is an unending cycle of violence that can only see victory on the level of ontological change, when the human moves from fundamentally insecure to fundamentally secure. To provide for this type of situation the only option is the complete removal of threat, and that threat takes the form of other living human beings. Juergensmeyer and Aslan provide a helpful way of framing violence in the contemporary political situation, but they do not provide a way of understanding the qualitative difference between secular violence and religious violence. This lack of division results from the lack of an authentic logical difference between the two, each equally relying on a cosmic vision that necessitates violence making in the name of some coming, messianic kingdom. For the religious devotee God ushers in the magnificent kingdom, while the secular nationalist has ultimate realization in the transition of human from secure to insecure. The end consequence of the ongoing and legally/ethically sanctioned struggle are radically different, the starting logic of each relies on the same source material. Cosmic war has not exited from the minds of those secular nationalists, it has intensified by taking on new meanings, metaphors, and symbols. A cosmic war, either secular or religious, has only one vision in site the removal of anyone that refuses to participate in those symbols, meanings, and metaphors. Therefore, I truly do side with Aslan that to win a cosmic war we must cease our engagement. Ceasing our engagement, though, will take as much self-reflection and critical assessment of our own policies, as it does military might, diplomatic strategy, and economic sanctions.

DONNIE FEATHERSTON is a doctoral candidate in the Joint Doctoral Program at the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology. His teaching and research interests focus on terrorism, religious violence, and contemporary political theory.

© Donnie Featherston

Featherston, Donnie. "Crusaders Without a Cross Biopolitical and Secular Reconfiguration of Cosmic War," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 14 no. 1 (Fall 2014): 70-83.