

New Political Religions (review)

The Pneumopathology of Modern Terrorism

New Political Religions, Or an Analysis of Modern Terrorism, by Barry Cooper (University of Missouri Press; 242pp)

Reviewed by Charles Strohmer

Of the dozens of good books that have been released in recent years on the so-called war on terrorism, I've discovered many helpful analyses, ranging from technique to strategy to ideology to religion, each insightful in its own way. Paul Berman's *Terror and Liberalism*, for instance, explains the ideological dimension, while Irshad Manji, in her blunt and provocative *The Trouble with Islam*, gets personal. Essayist Berman builds a convincing case, from twentieth century literature and history, that the terror war is not an imperialist war or a clash of civilizations. Rather, he sees the militancy of Osama bin Laden and other frontline Islamist terrorists as leading a totalitarian rejection of Western liberalism that is in a class with Nazism and communism. Canadian journalist and TV personality Manji, for her part, slams fundamentalist Islam for its narrow-minded attitudes toward women, human rights, Jews, America, and even the Koran.

But none of the dozens of books I've read (to date) has provided the kind of insight found in Barry Cooper's *New Political Religions*. It should be a must read in the growing literature of modern terrorism. Cooper, a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, provides a remarkable look at 'the varieties of spiritual disorder' that motivates the modern terrorist who holds to what Berman would call the totalitarian ideology (Cooper acknowledges Berman's thesis). It should be a must read in the growing literature of modern terrorism

Essential to his paradigm, Cooper applies to modern terrorism insights of the late Eric Voegelin's cross-disciplinary studies, drawing especially from political science, sociology, and philosophy. Central to this approach is Cooper's development of Voegelin's use of the terms 'pneumopathology' and 'first' and 'second' reality. Pneumopathology, as distinct from psychopathology, is Cooper's shorthand for the disorder of spirit in which the terrorist, in his revolt against the world as it has been created by God, 'denies the reality of one or another aspect of the world in order to fantasize about an imaginary world,' and then live it out, however destructively.

This is carefully explicated by Cooper to show how, through misuse of the imagination, a human being may create and then live in its own reality, so to speak, which in the extreme sets up an imaginary, or 'second,' reality that screens 'first' (common; normal) reality from view. It is a process in which the imaginary reality finds itself at great variance with common reality and experience, and when that occurs, the individual permits 'this deformed, imaginary self to eclipse his human being,' even, perhaps, in most destructive of ways.

Cooper cites al Qaeda operatives and Aum Shinrikyo, the terrorist organization that poisoned Tokyo subway riders in 1995, to illustrate how this pneumopathological consciousness develops: not from any desire to achieve legitimate political ends but, significantly, from deeply held apocalyptic religious beliefs which, when they increasingly conflict with the stubborn fact of reality, may climax in events as heightened as 9/11, when the violent act is seen as love toward God, murder as sacrificial as martyrdom.

With scholarly care in two well-researched chapters running to nearly one hundred pages 'Genealogy of Salafism' and 'Genesis of a New Ideology' Cooper then explains terrorist spiritual experience as it is 'expressed in language symbols derived from, or affiliated with' what he calls Islamism, and how this religious ideology 'motivates [certain] individuals to commit terrorist acts.' Here he follows a historical thread of militant radicalism out of the seventh century from Muhammad's Companions (Salafs) to the rise of extremist Saudi Wahhabism. Cooper then traces that to the radical influences of Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood upon Osama bin Laden and like-minded others, who, Cooper concludes, are united historically and spiritually by their conviction that the answer to political decay in the Muslim world lies in 'a salafist restoration of the piety and virtue of the pristine early days.' or a 'jihadist salafism.'

Also included in the 242 page book is an Appendix discussing how a literalist Muslim mindset upon the Koran has played out historically, comparing it to the more symbolic reading that some Christian theologians have found helpful when dealing with

difficult passages in the Bible. This is an exceptional book. Highly recommended.

Charles Strohmer is the author of several books, the most recent co-authored with John Peck, *Uncommon Sense: God's Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World*. He is a Visiting Research Fellow of the Center for Public Justice (Wash., DC), heading up The Wisdom Project and writing a new book on international relations and US foreign policy in the Middle East (see *Wisdom Project Précis*).

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