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Religious Terrorism as Performance Violence 🔓

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter describes religious terrorism as "performance violence," illustrating that performance violence is planned in order to obtain tangible goals, and also to theatrically enact and communicate an imagined reality. The scenario that underlies the performance of religious terrorism is often one of cosmic war. Some religious terrorism could also be motivated by scenarios other than cosmic war. The idea of warfare involves more than an attitude; it is ultimately a world view and an assertion of power. An act of violence sends two messages at the same time: a broad message aimed at the general public and a specific communication targeted at a narrower audience. Silent terrors are those in which the audience is not directly evident. It is noted that terrorism has been conducted for a television audience around the world.

Keywords: performance violence, religious terrorism, cosmic war, warfare, power, silent terror

Any incident of terrorism is a kind of performance violence—a dramatic act meant to achieve an impact on those who witness it—but the performative character is heightened when it is associated with religion. The spectacular assaults of September 11, 2001, are a case in point. They were not only tragic acts of violence but also spectacular theater. The dramatic nature of the acts was found to be even more disturbing when it was revealed that they were conducted in a ritualistic way. The "Last Instructions" found among the possessions of Mohammad Attah, one of the hijackers on those tragic planes, provides a guide to conduct that clearly links the act with religious discipline (Lincoln 2006).

The adjectives used to describe acts of religious terrorism—*symbolic, dramatic, theatrical*—suggest that we look at them not only as a tactic to achieve a tangible goal but also as a way of performing an element of an imagined reality. By using the term *performance,* I am suggesting that such acts are undertaken not only to draw attention to a cause but also to draw those who witness them, even those who witness them vicariously through

images projected by the news media, into an experience of reality that the perpetrators want to share. Like religious ritual or street theater, the acts are dramas designed to confront those who witness them with an alternative view of the world and to force them, for at least a few moments, to be drawn into the perpetrators' view of the world.

(p. 281) When I interviewed Mahmud Abouhalima, one of the activists convicted of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, he expressed frustration with the inability of the American, European, and Middle Eastern public to see, in his words, "what was really going on." Behind the calm of ordinary appearances, he thought, was a great contest between the forces of good and evil in the world.[1] In his view, the American government was the Satanic power that was leading the evil side. We were kept in the dark, he surmised, because our news media were complicit with these evil forces and we were under the illusion that all was well. He indicated to me that the public needed to be shaken awake (Abouhalima 1997). When I asked him whether this was the purpose of such terrorist acts as bombing the Oklahoma City Federal Building or his own efforts in attempting to bring down the World Trade Center, he simply smiled and said, "Now you know."

After September 11, 2001, we all knew. There was no need for a verbal message to be sent to the news media informing them that these buildings had been attacked because they were symbols of the economic and military power of the United States or that some people regarded their destruction as a scene in a great war. The images showed all of this; the medium was the message. Abouhalima's bombing attempt on the World Trade Center in 1993 and the more successful and spectacular one in 2001 that brought down the Twin Towers in a cloud of dust were more than attempts to seize the public's imagination. As Abouhalima implied, they were also attempts to bring those who witnessed the events into the worldview of those who planned them.

The Scenario of Cosmic War

Abouhalima's world was a world at war and not just an ordinary war but a cosmic war—the ultimate struggle between good and evil, truth and untruth, God and the devil. By thrusting us into a view of horrific violence, he attempted to make us experience that warfare and enter into his bellicose world. The image of cosmic war is not limited to his thinking or even to a particular kind of jihadi Islamic thought, of course; it is a part of the religious imagination of virtually every religious tradition (see Chapter 15 in this volume).

Warfare is a dominant theme of most religious histories. The Muslim theme of jihad and the admonishments to battle in the Qur'an are echoed in other religious traditions' texts

and ideas. Whole books of the Hebrew Bible are devoted to the military exploits of great kings, their contests related in gory detail. Though the New Testament does not take up the battle cry, the later history of the church does in a bloody series of crusades and religious wars. In India, warfare contributes to the grandeur of mythology. The great epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are tales of seemingly unending conflict and military intrigue, and, more than Vedic rituals, they define subsequent Hindu culture. The legendary name for India, (p. 282) Bharata, comes from the epics, as does the name *Sri Lanka.* The epics continue to live in contemporary South Asia—a serialized version of the epics produced in the mid-1980s was the most popular television series ever aired in India (and, considering that country's vast population, perhaps the most widely watched television series in history). Even cultures without a strong emphasis on sacrifice have persistent images of religious war. In Sri Lanka, for example, the legendary history recorded in the Pali Chronicles, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa,* has assumed canonical status. It relates the triumphs of battles waged by Buddhist kings.

This grand scenario of warfare is available to be employed in every religious tradition by those who imagine contemporary conflicts in the world to have more than worldly importance. Through an association with cosmic war, social and political encounters are lifted into the high proscenium of religious drama. Few modern terrorist acts are directly about religion, in the narrow sense of fighting for or against religious beliefs; but they are often informed by images of sacred struggle. In the case of Abouhalima, the timeless image of religious struggle identified with the concept of jihad was applied to the sociopolitical situation of Western influences in the Middle East. Thus a rejection of what was thought to be a kind of cultural colonialism was infused with the ferocity of godly war, and this confrontation justified the most evil of militant acts, including those perceived by victims and observers as acts of terrorism.

Thus, if terrorism is always a kind of performance, the scenario that underlies the performance of religious terrorism is often one of cosmic war, an enduring battle that may be cast in Manichaean moral terms as being between good and evil or in metaphysical terms as the clash between order and disorder. For other forms of terrorism, other scenarios may be operative—leftwing terrorism might be conducted with the sense of historical inevitability of the triumph of the working class versus the oppression of the bourgeoisie; and rightwing terrorism might be animated by a transformative vision of state power versus anarchism. Some religious terrorism could also be propelled by scenarios other than cosmic war—such as the notion that a particular religious community had divinely granted inalienable rights to a particular territory to which no other religious or ethnic group could be imagined to have valid claims. But even these religious justifications are often also colored by the persistent

images of great conflict, such as the contest between rightful ownership and the squatters' rights claimed by unblessed occupants of what is perceived to be sacred soil.

Images of warfare can be enormously powerful because they provide a template of order to a situation of confusion and an illusion of power. If a small band of dedicated activists can bring down the tallest buildings in the most important city of the most powerful nation in the world, that is an exhilarating expression of strength. It may be an illusory sensation, because the small band of activists cannot really control the affairs of the world's superpower; but for a few moments this grand terrorist act gives the perpetrators the giddy sense that they, not the US government, are in control.

(p. 283) It is the idea of cosmic war that gives a rationale and a moral justification to such acts of violence. Movements that use violence need cosmic war, because they need a frame of reference that will give justification to their acts. Ordinarily only the state can morally sanction violence—for defense, policing, and punishment—but if the group is an antiauthoritarian rebel band that is not approved by the state, it needs other ways to find moral legitimacy. This is where religious authority and religious images of cosmic warfare can be appropriated and provide a basis for moral legitimation.

One of the reasons why cosmic war is such a powerful scenario in the performing of terrorist incidents is that it enables the acts to be performative as well as performance. Acts of religious terrorism often do more than put on a display, they also perform changes by affecting the viewer and altering the viewers' perceptions of the world. The concept of performative acts is an idea developed by language philosophers such as J. L. Austin in regard to certain kinds of speech that are able to perform social functions: Their very utterance is a speech act that has a transformative impact (Austin 1962). Like vows recited during marriage rites, certain words not only represent reality but also shape it; they contain a certain power of their own. The same is true of some nonverbal symbolic actions, such as the gunshot that begins a race, the raising of a white flag to show defeat, or acts of terrorism.

Terrorist acts, then, can be both performance events, in that they make a symbolic statement, and performative acts, insofar as they try to change things. When Mohammad Attah piloted an American passenger plane directly into the World Trade Center towers; when Yigal Amir aimed his pistol at Israel's prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin; and when Sikh activists targeted Punjab's chief minister with a car bomb in front of the state's office buildings, the activists were aware that they were creating more than enormous spectacles. They probably also hoped that their actions would make a difference—if not in a direct, strategic sense, then in an indirect way as a dramatic show so powerful as to change people's perceptions of the world. In the case of 9/11 the perpetrators were successful beyond their wildest imaginations; their act of imagined war lured US policy

makers and many of the general public into a view of war, a "War on Terror" that dominated US foreign policy for eight years and supported the US invasion and occupation of two Muslim countries.

The Israeli and Sikh cases had somewhat different results. The fact that the assassins of Prime Minister Rabin and Chief Minister Beant Singh hoped that their acts would make such a statement does not mean that they did. Public symbols mean different things to different people, and a symbolic performance may not achieve its intended effect. The way the act is perceived—by both the perpetrators and those who are affected by it— makes all the difference. The same is true of performative speech. One of the leading language philosophers has qualified the notion that some speech acts are performative by observing that the power of the act is related to the perception of it. Children, for example, playing at marriage are not wedded by merely reciting the vows and going through the motions, nor is (p. 284) a ship christened by just anyone who breaks a bottle against it and gives it a name (Austin, 4).

Pierre Bourdieu, carrying further the idea that statements are given credibility by their social context, has insisted that the power of performative speech—vows and christenings —is rooted in social reality and is given currency by the laws and social customs that stand behind it (Bourdieu 1991: 117). Similarly, an act of terrorism usually implies an underlying power and legitimizing ideology. But whether the power and legitimacy implicit in acts of terrorism are like play-acted marriage vows or are the real thing depends, in part, on how the acts are seen and on whether their significance is believed.

This brings us back to the realm of faith. Public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion, one of the reasons that performance violence comes so naturally to activists from a religious background. In a collection of essays on the connection between religion and terrorism published some years ago, one of the editors, David C. Rapoport, observed —accurately, I think—that the two topics fit together not only because there is a violent streak in the history of religion but also because terrorist acts have a symbolic side and, in that sense, mimic religious rites. The victims of terrorism are targeted not because they are threatening to the perpetrators, he said, but because they are "symbols, tools, animals or corrupt beings" that tie into "a special picture of the world, a specific consciousness" that the activist possesses (Rapoport 1982: xii). The street theater of performance violence forces those who witness it directly or indirectly into that "consciousness"—that alternative view of the world.

The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a worldview and an assertion of power. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered. The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and

eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war, this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope.

Insofar as the scenario of cosmic war is a story, it carries a momentum toward its completion and contains the seeds of hope for its outcome. I use the term *hope* rather than *fear,* for no one wants to believe in a story that cannot produce a happy ending. Those who accept that their life struggles are part of a great struggle, a cosmic war, know that they are part of a grand tale that will ultimately end triumphantly, though not necessarily easily or quickly. The epic character of the story implies that the happy ending may be long delayed—perhaps until after one's lifetime or after the lifetimes of one's descendants. In the meantime, the story will involve sadness and travail—like the great passion narrative of Christianity in which Jesus triumphs over death only after being subjected to the gruesome and humiliating spectacle of public execution.

(p. 285) Playing the Roles

The scenario of cosmic war is one in which the heroes of the drama might have to suffer, even unto death. After all, overcoming defeat and humiliation is the point of war. The story of warfare explains why one feels for a time beaten and disgraced—that is part of the warrior's experience. In cases of cosmic war, however, the final battle has not been fought. Only when it has can one expect triumph and pride. Until that time, the warrior struggles on, often armed only with hope. Personal tales of woe gain meaning, then, when linked to these powerful stories. Their sagas of oppression and liberation lift the spirits of individuals and make their suffering explicable and noble. In some cases, suffering imparts the nobility of martyrdom, and the images of cosmic war forge failure—even death—into victory.

This notion of a heroic, transforming death is the message projected by the architecture of the shrine that, for a time, accompanied Dr. Baruch Goldstein's grave near Hebron—an elegant plaza surrounded by plaques set inside boxes accompanied by votive candles that looked not unlike the stations of the cross in a Catholic sanctuary. It was clearly a shrine, for someone the young man guarding it described as both a martyr and a "hero in war" (Ron 1995). A similar attitude attended the funeral celebrations for the young Muslim men who gave up their lives in acts of "self-martyrdom," as the Hamas leaders called them. These celebrations were remarkable events recorded on the videotapes of the men when they gave their ardent last statements the night before their deaths. The

tapes were then clandestinely circulated throughout Gaza and the West Bank as a sort of recruitment device for likeminded young men. These events were not really funerals, a fact symbolized by the drinking of sweetened rather than bitter coffee, the distribution of sweets, and the singing of wedding songs. A cross between a marriage and a religious festival, these affairs were a modern example of an ancient religious ritual: the sanctification of martyrs (see Oliver and Steinberg 2006).

Similar events have attended the memorials for martyrs in other religious movements. Activist Sikhs have proudly displayed pictures of the fallen leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who died as a result of the military operation ordered by India's prime minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. His image has been displayed as prominently as those of the founding gurus of the tradition, and he has been remembered on both his birthday and his martyrdom day. Years after the end of the Khalistani uprising, his revolutionary image achieved a kind of Che Guevara iconic status within some quarters of the Sikh community both in the Punjab and abroad.

This attribute of martyrdom has also been conveyed to violent activists within other religious traditions, including Protestant Christianity in the United States. Many right-wing Christians have applauded the vicious acts of killing medical staff involved in performing abortions. When a Presbyterian pastor, Paul Hill, was executed by the state of Florida for killing John Britton and his voluntary escort in front of a Florida clinic that proformed abortions, another right-wing clergyman, (p. 286) the Lutheran pastor Michael Bray, lashed out at the brutality of a government that would take such a noble person's life (Bray 1997: 1). In 2010, when another friend of Bray, Scott Roeder, killed George Tiller in the vestibule of the church where he was worshiping in Wichita, Kansas, Bray declared that he had acted in "righteousness and mercy" in his savage attack on Tiller. In an open letter to Roeder published in his newsletter, Bray went on to praise the assassin as following the commandments of God as he "sought to deliver the innocents from the knife of a baby murderer."

Absent from Bray's sense of outrage was any respect for the lives of Britton and Tiller, which the assassins Hill and Roeder terminated—or "aborted," as Bray put it—in brutal acts of murder. In a curious twist of logic, Bray had imagined the killers to be the victims rather than the murderers that most of the American public regarded them to be. In this way, Bray was like those who mourned the deaths of Baruch Goldstein, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and the Hamas suicide bombers—each of whom sent scores of innocent people to early graves. Billy Wright, who had been convicted for his role in the terrorist acts conducted by the Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force paramilitary group, said that "there's no doubt" that within "every terrorist" there is the conviction that "he is the victim." According to Wright, this allows the terrorist to justify his action "morally within his own mind" (Dillon 1998: 65).

In the scenario of cosmic war—a scenario in which the activists see themselves on the righteous side—the enemies are, by definition, evil. Their deaths mean nothing. The only killing worth being concerned about is the slaughter of the innocents, which by definition are the ones on the righteous side, even if they were the ones who initiated the violence. If they were killed in the process they were martyrs. If they were not, they were heroes, content in the smug satisfaction that they were doing the will of God. The perpetrators of terrorism have thus achieved a kind of celebrity status and their actions an illusion of importance among their supporters. The novelist Don DeLillo goes so far as to say that "only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith," is taken seriously in modern society (DeLillo 1991: 157). When those who observe these acts take them seriously—either to applaud them or to be disgusted and repelled by them—their roles have been fulfilled.

The Stage for Violence

In most instances of religious terrorism in recent years, the place where the assault occurred has had symbolic significance. In some cases, the symbolism of the locale was specific to places that demonstrated the forces of evil as defined by the opponents who attacted them: clinics in the United States where abortions were performed, hotels in Bali occupied by foreigners with loose morals, military bases, boats, and diplomatic embassies in the Middle East, and of course the towers of (p. 287) the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. By revealing the vulnerability of a nation's most stable and powerful entities, movements that have undertaken these acts of sabotage have touched everyone in the nation's society. Any person in the United States could have been riding the elevator in the World Trade Center, for instance, and everyone in the United States will look differently at the stability of public buildings, transportation networks, and communication systems as a result of these violent incidents.

Why is the location of terrorist events—of performance violence—so important? David Rapoport has observed that the control of territory defines public authority, and ethnic-religious groups have historically gained their identity through association with control over particular places (Rapoport 1982). Ronald Hassner has argued that some of the most vicious of inter-religious warfare is over sacred ground (Hassner 2009). One of the most famous of these contested locations is on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, site of the ancient Jewish temple and also the location of the third-most-important shrine in Islam. Another example is the Indian town of Ayodhya, which is the site of an old mosque important to Muslims and a similarly ancient temple that is revered by Hindus. Roger Friedland and

Richard Hecht point out that such religious conflicts are often not only about space but about the centrality of religious histories (Friedland and Hecht 1998).

Such central places—even if they exist only in cyberspace—are symbols of power, and acts of terrorism claim them in a symbolic way. They express for a moment the power of terrorist groups to control central locations—by damaging, terrorizing, and assaulting them—even when most of the time they do not control them at all. Days after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in 2001, most businesses headquartered in the buildings were back to work, operating from backup information systems located elsewhere. In Oklahoma City, soon after the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was destroyed the governmental functions that had been conducted there continued unabated. Yet during those brief dramatic moments after a terrorist act levels a building or damages some entity that a society regards as central to its existence, the perpetrators of the act have asserted that they—and not the secular government—have had ultimate control over that entity and its centrality.

The act, however, is sometimes more than symbolic: By demonstrating the vulnerability of governmental power, to some degree it weakens that power, and the prophecy is fulfilled. Because power is largely a matter of perception, symbolic statements can lead to real results. On the whole, however, the small degree to which a government's authority is discredited by a terrorist act does not warrant its massive destructiveness. More significant is the impression—mostly an illusion—that the movements that perpetrate the acts have enormous power and that the ideologies behind them have cosmic importance. In the imagined war between religious and secular authority, the loss of a secular government's ability to control and secure public spaces, even for a terrible moment, is ground gained for religion's side.

(p. 288) Dramatic Timing

Much the same can be said about the dramatic time—the date, season, or hour of day that a terrorist act takes place. There are, after all, centralities in time as well as in space. Anniversaries and birthdays mark such special days for individuals; public holidays demarcate hallowed dates for societies as a whole. To capture the public's attention through an act of performance violence on a date deemed important to the group perpetrating the act, therefore, is to force the group's sense of what is temporally important on everyone else.

On July 22, 2011, when Norwegian Anders Breivik allegedly ignited a truck bomb of explosives in downtown Oslo and took a boat to an island camp where he coldly

slaughtered scores of young political activists, he also posted a collection of his writings on the Internet. The manifesto was titled "2083: A European Declaration of Independence." The dates of the attack and the title of his manifesto were significant clues to Breivik's ideology. July 22 was the day in 1099 that the Kingdom of Jerusalem was established during the First Crusade. The year 2083 would be the four hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Vienna, which occurred in the year 1683. On that date, the armies of the Ottoman Empire were defeated in a protracted struggle, thereby insuring that most of Europe would not become part of the Muslim Empire. In Breivik's mind, he was not a terrorist but a soldier who was part of that great struggle that he saw continuing into the present day. Behind Breivik's imagined earthly conflict was a cosmic war, a battle for Christendom. As the title of his manifesto indicates, he thought he was re-creating that historical moment when Christianity was defended against the hordes, and Islam was purged from what he imagined to be the purity of European society.

Breivik's vision of a purified Christendom in Europe was strikingly similar to Timothy McVeigh's notions of saving the United States for Christianity, an idea that was behind his attack on the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. As in Breivik's case, the dates were significant. When Timothy McVeigh and his colleagues chose the date of their explosion at the Oklahoma City federal building, they were essentially imposing a public holiday—a dramatic public recognition—as a memorial to several events. April 19, 1995, was a special day for McVeigh and other Christian Identity activists for a number of reasons. It was Patriot's Day in New England, the day the American Revolution had begun in 1775; it was the day in 1943 that the Nazis moved on the Warsaw ghetto to destroy the Jewish population on what in that year was the Day of Passover; and it was the day in 1993 when the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, burned to the ground. It was also the day in 1995 when a Christian Identity activist, Richard Wayne Snell, was due to be executed in prison for murder charges.

In some cases, the days that are held sacred by an activist group are known only to that group or to a certain segment of society. With regard to the April 19 date of the Oklahoma City bombing, it was widely known in Christian Identity circles that this was Snell's execution date. In other instances, public religious holidays (p. 289) have created times of heightened sensitivities and have held the potential for violent reprisals. One of the most notorious incidents in recent Jewish history—Goldstein's massacre of Muslims praying at the shrine of the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron—occurred during a religious holiday. Goldstein chose Purim as the time for his assault, a day that is revered by Jews as the celebration of vengeance against Amalek. The scroll of Esther notes that Haman was a direct descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, and it is likely that Goldstein associated his own killing with the biblical act of sanctifying God's name by avenging the killing of Amalek. In a sense, Goldstein was calling on Jews everywhere to reclaim their

tradition, redress the humiliation of Jews, and give an immediate political meaning to the ideas they professed to honor on their sacred days.

In all of these cases, a certain time or timing was critical to the terrorist act. It provided a proscenium for the event. A special aura was imparted to the day or moment in history in which the act occurred. By locating themselves within a transcendent temporal dimension, the perpetrators declared their missions to be of sacred importance as well. Ultimately they were attempting to capture and reshape what society regarded as central in time as well as in space. What was significant about such symbolically central times and places—and for that matter, central things, including subways and airplanes—is that they represented power. They were *centers,* in Clifford Geertz's use of the term: "concentrated loci of serious acts" (Geertz 1983: 121). Such places and times constituted the "arenas" of society "where its leading ideas come together with its leading institutions" and where "momentous events" were thought to occur. When activists attacked such a place, during one of those momentous times, they challenged the power and legitimacy of society.

The Audience for Performance Violence

As the novelist Don DeLillo once said, terrorism is "the language of being noticed" (DeLillo 1991: 157). If terrorism was not noticed, it would not exist. The sheer act of killing does not create a terrorist act: Murders and willful assaults occur with such frequency in most societies that they are scarcely reported in the news media. What makes an act terrorism is that large numbers of people are terrified by it. The acts to which we assign that label are deliberate events, bombings and attacks performed at such places and times that they are calculated to be observed. Terrorism without its horrified witnesses would be as pointless as a play without an audience.

For many who have been involved in plotting terrorist attacks, the largest audience is the one that witnesses the acts indirectly as media events. It is their way of seizing control of the news media that they think misrepresents the reality of the world as they see it. Mahmud Abouhalima told me that the greatest threat to Islam was media misrepresentation (Abouhalima). He told me that secularism held (p. 290) a virtual lock on media control and that Islam did not have news sources to present its side of contemporary history. By implication, acts of terrorism, such as the one for which he was convicted, laid claim to the images and headlines of the world's media and portrayed his view of the world at war.

In a collection of essays on contemporary culture, Jean Baudrillard described the terrorism of the late twentieth century as "a peculiarly modern form" because of the impact that it has on public consciousness through electronic media. According to Baudrillard, terrorist acts have emerged "less from passion than from the screen: a violence in the nature of the image" (Baudrillard 1993: 75). Baudrillard went so far as to advise his readers "not to be in a public place where television is operating, considering the high probability that its very presence will precipitate a violent event." His advice was hyperbolic, of course, but it points to the reality that terrorist events are aimed at attracting news media exposure and perhaps would not happen as frequently, or in the same way, if the enormous resources of the news media were not readily at hand to promote them.

The worldwide media coverage of Breivik's massacre in Norway, the attacks on the World Trade Center, the London subway and Madrid train bombings, and the explosions in Bali and at the Oklahoma City federal building illustrates a new development in terrorism: the extraordinary widening of terror's audience. Throughout most of history the audiences for acts of terrorism have been limited largely to government officials and their supporters, or members of rival groups. What makes the terrorism of recent years significant is the breadth of its audience, a scope that is in many cases virtually global.

When television does not adequately report the ideas and motivations behind the actions of many activist groups, they have found the Internet and the World Wide Web to be effective alternatives. Others use social networks such as Facebook and cell phone texting and Twitter. Movements such as Hamas and Aryan Nations have well-established websites. An antiabortion site, "The Nuremberg Files," which advocated the killing of abortion clinic doctors and maintained a list of potential targets, was removed by its Internet service provider in February 1999 after a red line was drawn through the name of Barnett Slepian on the day after he was killed by an assassin. But sites like it returned, many of them including George Tiller as a target; Tiller was killed in Wichita, Kansas, in 2010. Other groups, including many Muslim jihadi groups and Christian militia activists, have protected their sites with passwords that allow only their members to gain access. Thus, even when the audience is selective, the message has been projected through a public medium.

In some cases, an act of violence sends two messages at the same time: a broad message aimed at the general public and a specific communication targeted at a narrower audience. In cases of Islamic violence in Palestine and Sikh terrorism in India, for instance, one of the purposes of the assaults was to prove to movement members that the leadership was still strong enough to engender the life-and-death dedication of their commandos. In other cases, the point was to intimidate followers of the movement and to force them to follow a hardline position rather than a conciliatory one.

(p. 291) Motives such as these help to explain one of the most puzzling forms of contemporary violence: silent terror. These intriguing acts of terrorism are ones in which the audience is not immediately apparent. The public is often mystified by an explosion accompanied only by an eerie silence, with no group claiming responsibility or explaining the purpose of its act. As days passed after bombs ripped through the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998, and no person or group took credit for the actions, questions arose as to why no group had owned up to the attacks in order to publicize its cause. Similarly, no one, including members of Osama bin Ladin's al Qaeda network, claimed responsibility for the spectacular assault on September 11, 2001. If one assumes that the attack was conducted, in part, to advertise the group's cause, why would members of the group not take credit for it?

In a world in which information is a form of power, public demonstrations of violence are the messages, and they are potent messages. When groups are able to demonstrate their capacity for destruction simultaneously in different parts of the world, as in the case of the US embassy bombings in 1998, this is an even more impressive display than single-target events. It is no less so if the only audiences who know who did it, who can appreciate the perpetrators' accomplishment and who can admire their command over life and death, are within the group. The act demonstrates their ability to perform a powerful event with virtually global impact.

The forms of religious terrorism that have emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century have been global in at least two senses. Both the choices of their targets and the character of their conspiratorial networks have often been transnational. The very name of the World Trade Center indicated its role in transnational global commerce. The attack on the building complex in such a spectacular fashion was terrorism meant not just for television but for CNN, a global English-speaking audience, and for al Jezeera, the global network based in Qatar whose Arabic channel broadcasts throughout the Middle East.

Increasingly, terrorism has been performed for a television audience around the world. In that sense, it has been as real a global event as the transnational events of the global economy. Ironically, terrorism has become a more potent global political force than the organized political efforts to control and contain it. The United Nations lacks the military capability and intelligence-gathering capacity to deal with worldwide terrorism. Instead, consortia of nations have been forced to come together to handle the information sharing and joint operations required to deal with forces of violence on an international scale.

This global dimension of terrorism's organization and audience and the transnational responses to it gives special significance to the understanding of terrorism as a public performance of violence—as a social event with both real and symbolic aspects. As Bourdieu has observed, our public life is shaped as much by symbols as by institutions.

For this reason, symbolic acts—the "rites of institution"—help to demarcate public space and indicate what is meaningful in the social world (Bourdieu 1991: 117). In a striking imitation of such rites, terrorism has provided its (p. 292) own dramatic events. These rites of violence have brought an alternative view of public reality—not just of a single society in transition but a world challenged by strident religious visions of transforming change.

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Notes:

(1.) Parts of this chapter are based on sections of my book, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

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