Violence in the Name of God: The Militant Jihadist Response to Modernity


Towards the end of his life, the French theorist and philosopher René Girard (1923–2015) published a series of conversations titled Battling to the End in which he attempted to connect his theories of violence, sacrality, and mimetic violence to the post-2001 moment.1 Observing that contemporary jihadist and Islamist movements are an expression of a revolutionary politic, while acknowledging the limits of his own analysis, Girard called upon scholars to ‘radically change the way [they] think, and try to understand the situation without any presuppositions and using all the resources available from the study of Islam’.2 Noting that the ‘engine of violence’ of contemporary Islamist and jihadist movements may be a particular form of imitation—which he calls ‘mimesis’—Girard opens the possibility that militant jihadist terrorism is an extension of projects of total and totalitarian warfare.

Joel Hodge’s Violence in the Name of God is an ambitious and comprehensive attempt to answer the challenge advanced by Girard. Among the first sustained applications of Girard’s theories to Jihadi-Salafism, the volume builds from Hodge’s work with the Austrian Girard Seminar (AGS) and the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), as well as his chapter ‘Why is God part of human violence? The idolatrous nature of modern religious extremism’ in a co-edited volume with Scott Codwell, Chris Fleming, and Carly Osborn, Does Religion Cause Violence? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World (Bloomsbury, 2018). Elements of the work also appeared in Joel Hodge, ‘Terrorism’s answer to modernity’s cultural crisis: resacralising violence in the name of jihadist totalitarianism’, Modern Theology, 32/2 (2016): 231–58.

At the core of Hodge’s study is the claim that ‘militant jihadism, as the most prominent protagonist of sacred violence done in the name of God, is a particular response to modernity that purposefully seeks to resuscitate the power of sacred violence to provide order and power’ (p. 3). Militant jihadist movements, Hodge contends, are not anti-modern but rather contest and reject what he refers to, variously, as the crises instituted by ‘Western forms’ of contemporary social, political, and economic dominance (e.g., p. 54, ‘Western forms such as the

1 See René Girard, Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009).
2 Ibid, 214.
nation-state, capitalism, and new technologies’). In rejecting these forms, militant jihadists betray—through their public statements, propaganda, strategies, and tactics—that they are desirous of similar forms of total control over all political, social, cultural, and economic affairs.

In this framing, a close study of the appropriations of Islamic law and theology by militant jihadists reveals a misinterpretation and misalignment of their desires for self-defence and resistance to oppression that Hodge labels, following Girard, an ‘idolatrous, sacralized violence that rivalrously mirrors aspects of modernity within a “victim identity”’ (p. 13). In seeking to reject ‘the West’, broadly conceived, militant jihadists claim that they engage in legitimate acts of self-defence on behalf of those whom they consider as the greatest victims of the oppressive effects of Western hegemony. Hodge concludes that such a move wilfully ignores the core ethical demands of self-sacrificial love of each Abrahamic faith and signals a descent into an idolatrous worship and elevation of violence.

The book unfolds in three parts. Part I, ‘The context for militant jihadism’, provides an introductory background to Girard’s theories of mimesis, the scapegoat, and sacred violence. At the core of Girard’s mimetic theory is the question of the violence that arises when two parties both desire the same object and are unable to negotiate peacefully how to share the benefits of the object. Space does not permit a full unfolding of Girard’s theory here. Thankfully, Hodge complements this with the inclusion of an additional appendix (‘René Girard at a glance’) and a glossary of key Girardean terms co-authored with Scott Codwell and Chris Fleming, which will be welcomed by scholars engaged in Islamic studies who might be unfamiliar with Girard’s theories.

Chapters 1 and 2, ‘René Girard’s mimetic theory’ and ‘Violence in modernity’, lay out Hodge’s framing of how jihadist militants respond to the ‘breakdown in the religious and cultural structures that have traditionally restrained violence’ in modernity (p. 35). In a sense, jihadist turns to total warfare and violence are an attempt to mimic the techniques of warfare, dominance, and governance of the nation-state, but with a violence that has been re-consecrated to God. Absent the once-controlling authorities that guided interpretations and applications of Islamic politics, jihadists, Hodge contends, engage in terrorism not just as a tactic but as an expression of an ‘underlying theology’ whose ritualistic worship includes the utter annihilation or total conversion of the enemy (p. 36).

It is this pursuit of totalitarian politics and violence that dominates Hodge’s arguments in Part II, ‘The sacred violence of militant jihadism’. In this part’s six chapters, Hodge relies heavily on the works of Shiraz Maher, Farhan Khosrokhavar, Asma Afsaruddin, Scott Atran, Laurent Murawiec, David Kilcullen, Gilles Kepel, and Olivier Roy to establish a broader diagnostic narrative of the ‘Islamist-jihadist vision for an Islamic modernity’ (p. 119), which he considers an attempted response to the imagined crisis countered, in turn, by militant jihadists. It is the unfolding of this crisis that characterizes the first half of the second part.

Following narratives familiar to readers of Maher and Kepel, in ch. 3, ‘The Islamic modernity’, Hodge explains how Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) and Abul A’la
Mawdudi (1903–79), among other mid-twentieth-century Islamists, represent a growing sense of alienation and disillusionment with Western projects of modernity. Their response, Hodge notes, was not to call for imitation and modernization but rather the formation of vanguards who would resist and restore prior Islamic political projects—such as a caliphate—to their rightful supremacy. As these vanguards were frustrated in their attempts to challenge or overthrow the state (e.g., following the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981), Hodge contends in ch. 4, ‘The militant jihadist response to modernity’, that jihadists adopted a ‘radical attitude of “righteous violence” undergirded by a “victim identity”’ (p. 69). Chapter 5, ‘The globalization of violent jihad’, traces both calls for violence and martyrdom within militant jihadist and Shi’i thought in comparative perspective. As the calls for ‘defence’ of Islam begin to globalize, Hodge argues, citing Girard, so too do the calls for revolutionary total violence.

Chapters 6, ‘Jihadism and violence’, 7, ‘Violence and identity’, and 8, ‘Sacred jihadist totalitarianism’, apply Hodge’s Girardian framing to the robust secondary literature with which he engages. The rationalization of violence—against combatants and civilians alike—by jihadist fighters acts ‘according to a mimetic mentality that reciprocates and escalates violence perceived to be done to them’ (p. 134). For example, notes Hodges, when ISIS attempted its self-proclaimed caliphal project, it ‘claim[ed] to be “Islamic” and in the service of Allah but [was] fundamentally statist in its outlook and aims’ (p. 125). Here, Hodge’s framing is reasonable, but he misses an opportunity to explore the aesthetics and techniques of torture that ISIS fighters adopted which, at times, seemed to closely parallel the treatment of detainees at the US detention facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

By ‘sacralizing’ the secularized violence of the nation-state, ISIS and similar movements justify—if not in a sense, deify—their violence by placing the responsibility for their actions on God. Such is the case, for example, with the logic for self-abnegating martyrdom (e.g., in the form of suicide bombings), which is not merely a total destruction of the enemy but an act of worship whereby violent struggle in God’s cause (i.e., jihad) is framed by militant jihadists as the highest form of piety. Here, Hodge would have been well served to engage in the ideas of the Jihadi-Salafi ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki (1971–2011), whose lectures in defence of violent struggle and apologetics for the tactics utilized by al-Qa’ida often extolled the unending and essential act of jihad in God’s cause as a form of worship.

Jihadi-Salafi usage of asymmetrical and indiscriminate violence is, Hodge writes, not an act of differentiation from their declared enemies but an imitation of the ‘perceived violence of their rivals’ meant to improve upon it ‘and so acquire the rival’s being and identity’ (p. 149). If the collateral damage of innocent bystanders resulting from an airstrike is considered a justified and humane tactic—given the calculability of the usage of force—then, the jihadist argument follows, their usage of martyrdom-seeking operations against enemy populations must be considered the more authentic and appropriate use of force as, unlike their disbelieving enemies, their self-sacrifices (and the sacrifice of innocent civilians) are undertaken in the service of God. Thus, Hodge concludes, ‘jihadism
challenges the “growing futility of violence” by seeking to re-mythologize and re-sacralize violence in the name of God’ (p. 167).

In Part III, ‘The idolatry and future of militant jihadism’, consisting of two chapters (‘Why is God part of human violence? The idolatrous nature of militant jihadism’ and ‘The sacred and the holy: alternatives to escalating violence’), Hodge understands jihadism as ‘a form of idolatry that distorts the nonviolent trajectory of the Abrahamic traditions’ (p. 15). In this sense, the third part appears to engage in a normative form of comparative theology. Following the theories of Girard, Hodge suggests that at the heart of the monotheistic traditions is an individually realized relationship with God that demands an awareness and defence of innocent victims through a self-sacrificial self-denial. Jihadism as a totalitarian ideology misuses Islamic traditions in an idolatrous fashion on precisely this point, argues Hodge. Jihadis redefine God’s demand to side with the oppressed by ‘reinterpreting God as perpetrating and commissioning violence’ thereby elevating their mobilization of violence to ‘the center of culture, order, and power’—a location that rightfully belongs to God, not humanity, in Hodge’s understanding of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (p. 189).

What is to be done? Hodge focuses on the possibility of theological and legal reform in a move that suggests Christianity is a norm and solution to which Islam should be compared. ‘Any tradition’, Hodge writes, ‘that cannot marry the absolute transcendence of divine love (untainted by human sin) with the immanent embodiment and practice of self-giving love—risks becoming distorted ... into sacred violence’ (p. 197). Such language seems Christological—a perception that is magnified when Hodge, citing Cowdell, writes that ‘the problem in Islam’ is that it is “‘a more amenable host nowadays than Christianity’ to the violent sacred which Islam has not “offloaded” to the same degree as other Abrahamic traditions’ (p. 197). In short, Hodge concludes, if jihadi militancy is to be overcome by Muslims—there must be an elevation of theological and hermeneutical projects of non-violence and spiritual renovation by Muslim interlocutors (p. 202).

Hodge’s analysis and re-theorization of his secondary materials is complex in its breadth and depth, but for researchers, policymakers, and analysts engaged in the study of contemporary Jihadi-Salafi movements, Hodge’s evidence may seem under-developed. The bibliography engages no primary source materials in Arabic, limiting our ability to understand how Girard’s theorizations might apply to Jihadi-Salafi usages of terms such as ‘martyrdom’ and ‘sacrifice’ beyond those used by the secondary sources from which Hodge draws. Equally, outside of translated passages directly quoted from other studies, the bibliography lists three primary sources from jihadist and Islamist interlocutors: a 1998 interview with Osama bin Laden with John Miller, a 2002 letter from Osama bin Laden, and an English translation of Sayyid Qutb’s 1964 work Ma‘ālim fi al-tariq (translated here as ‘Milestones’, sometimes as ‘Signposts’). Beyond jihadist perspectives, Hodge does not engage with wider Muslim debates on contemporary jihadist movements such as those found in the ideas of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad Tahir al-Qadri, and Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti. For such perspectives, Hodge leans heavily on the work of Asma Afsaruddin to provide
commentary on how varying communities of Muslims have dealt with the question of jihad and textual abrogation (*naskh*).

This abbreviated engagement with Jihadi-Salafi primary texts is unfortunate as it limits Hodge’s ability to demonstrate how Girard’s theory might be confirmed, or challenged, by the varieties of Jihadi-Salafi experience. For example, how might Hodge’s observation that ‘divine renunciation and withdrawal’, as found in the theory of Girard, is ‘crucial for both creation and for its “redemption”, that is for its saving from violence and destruction’ (p. 206), handle themes of renunciation and asceticism (*zuhd*) located by jihadi authors in the example of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 781) as they discuss martyrdom-seeking (*istiḥād*) and its differentiation from suicide (*intihār, qatl al-nafs*)?

Further, while in his proclamation of militant narratives of ‘victimization’ Hodge cites the experiences of Qutb and Bin Laden, broader projects such as Western colonialism, Anwar Sadat’s proto-neoliberalization of the Egyptian economy, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in response to domestic Afghan policy shifts, and other matters of political economy are mentioned briefly and left largely unanalysed. As Daryl Li observes elsewhere, while we may recognize that ‘jihadi groups may invoke an authority above this formal legal system [i.e., of the nation-state] (and they are hardly alone in doing so) . . . such universalist messages must always contend with and often work through actual institutions such as states’.\(^3\) It is unclear whether the theoretical framing of jihadist mimetic violence offered to us by Hodge would permit us to see how these movements work within and through such nation-state frameworks. Instead, we are left with a consideration that jihadist movements are departures from a normative Islam and a mimetic rival of the nation-state enterprise—an approach that often closely takes the tone of Christian apologetics.

The limited engagement with jihadist and Islamic literature restricts the recommended audiences for *Violence in the Name of God*. Scholars with working interests in critical theorizations of Jihadi-Salafism, contemporary philosophy of religion, and applications of Girard’s theories of sacred violence will find themselves rewarded by Hodge’s close reading and analysis. Equally, scholars looking to build a Girardean contribution to the academic study of Islam will do well to wrestle with Hodge’s attempt in the years ahead. For those using the work in an undergraduate classroom, its single chapters are best paired with a short essay, chapter, or commentary from Girard and his interlocutors alongside other Jihadi-Salafi primary sources.

*Nathan S. French*

*Miami University*

E-mail: frenchns@miamioh.edu

https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etad026