

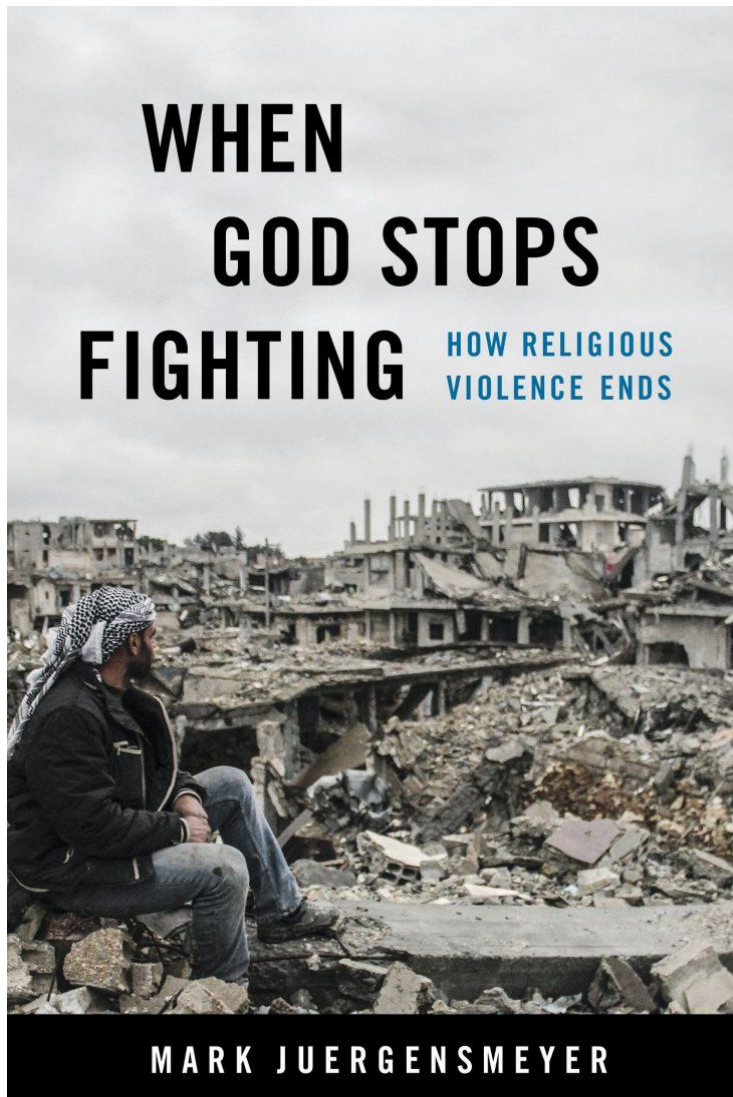
Australian Outlook

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Book Review: *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends*

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***When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends* is the culmination of three decades of research from one of the world's leading analysts of religion and violence.**

During the false dawn of the early 1990s, which saw some proclaim the arrival of a “new world order” and others the “end of history”, Mark Juergensmeyer published *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993). The work was subsequently rewritten and given a new title in 2008 – *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* – in response to the rapid mutation of violent religious movements in the intervening years. In this earlier edition, Juergensmeyer had identified some of the growing forces that portended the fragmentation of future world politics.

Juergensmeyer has since become recognised as one of the leading authorities on religious violence with a corpus that includes some of the most influential works in the field such as *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, first published in 2000 and now into its fourth edition. Where these earlier works were concerned with the forces that gave rise to religious violence, the current work, as the title makes clear, examines those factors that bring it to an end.

A hallmark of Juergensmeyer's research has been understanding religious violence from the perspective of the participants themselves. *When God Stops Fighting* continues this research agenda through three case studies: the Islamic State movement in Iraq, the Muslim separatist movement in Mindanao, and the struggle to establish a Sikh territory, Khalistan, in the Punjab region of North West India. The dynamics of each case is assessed through interviews with various actors, from young Sunni Arab men disillusioned by the post-Saddam Iraqi regime lured into ISIS through better economic prospects, to an activist lawyer who worked for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao, to a leading figure in the most militant wing of the Khalistan movement, Wassan Singh Zaffarwal.

By tracing the biographical trajectory of these and other figures, Juergensmeyer provides insights into the dynamics of particular conflicts, and the internal and external factors that bring an end to the fighting. This may or may not mean that the war itself is finished — it can mean that it is transferred to a non-physical or "spiritual" realm rather than completely abandoned. In each of the cases under consideration the conflict ends for different reasons, but the common thread is a collapse in the will to fight.

This loss of will, while it might be brought on by material losses or by a splintering in the movement, follows from a dissolution of the imagination to wage religious or "cosmic" war. Imagination is indeed central to Juergensmeyer's account of both war and religion and their interaction. Among other things, war is a particular response to a world of injustice, oppression, and social dislocation; it "gives conceptual clarity to humiliating and destructive events and situations. And it provides a solution – military engagement and the expectation of victory." Religion likewise is built on an imaginative vision, "an alternative reality" which when fused with war intensifies the conflict by taking it to a cosmic level. So, the enemies one is fighting are not merely flesh and blood human beings, but representatives of ultimate forces of good and evil. This linkage of war and religion is the worst of possible worlds and is a "fusion of alternative realities."

This approach draws on Juergensmeyer's earlier works where this conceptual mapping is covered in greater detail and in doing so repeats its weaknesses. In particular, it sidesteps the insights of what is now a large body of critical literature that points to the constructed and ideological nature of the modern category 'religion'. Juergensmeyer is confident that there is some realm of human experience that can be delimited and described as "religion" which offers an "alternative reality." The question arises, alternative to what? Presumably he means something like the secular or the mundane. In other words, he is naturalising or reifying the secular, which by implication suggests that religion is the anomaly that needs to be explained. He needs to be able to isolate the category of religion to make the case that there exists a special relation between it and violence. In doing so however, he overlooks the way that the binary division between the secular (the rational/real) and religion (non-rational/constructed) is a historically contingent and normatively loaded configuration that privileges the claim that religion and violence are linked. In other words, it perpetuates what William Cavanaugh has described as the "myth of religious violence." It is true that in *Global Rebellion* Juergensmeyer did engage some of the critical historical scholarship on religion, but from the evidence of *When God Stops Fighting* it is not clear that he has fully absorbed its implications.

It could be argued that this criticism misses the mark since these conceptual questions are not the central focus of this short book which is principally concerned with the analysis of three cases to draw some general conclusions about how religious violence comes to an end. In this sense the book succeeds, containing as it does many valuable insights into the dissolution of violent religious movements. However, given that Juergensmeyer sees the work as part of a larger body of writing about the relationship between religion and violence, these questions cannot be ignored. It remains an open question whether many of the lessons of the book could not also be applied to those violent, mundane or "non-religious" movements that have been with us for the past century or more, from the Bolsheviks, to the radical leftist "Weather Underground" of the 1970s, the "Shining Path" Marxists in Peru in the 1980s, or "Antifa" today. "Religion" has no monopoly on violent extremism.

This is a review of Mark Juergensmeyer, *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends* (University of California Press, 2022), ISBN: 9780520384736

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