

Bin Laden's strategy: War and the religious imagination

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

When the U.S. declared war on global terrorism after September 11, Osama bin Laden "must have had a sense of relief when America came attacking" in Afghanistan a month later, says the author of a suddenly popular book on the rise of religious violence. For a long time, bin Laden and his al-Qaeda followers had been trying "to take the Muslim world by the shoulders and say, 'This is war,'" but it took U.S. high-tech airstrikes to bring home the image of war for multitudes of Muslims, said Mark Juergensmeyer, speaking to a national meeting of sociologists of religion in Columbus, Ohio.

Disputing those who deny or downplay the religious nature of the conflict, Juergensmeyer said flatly, "Religion has everything to do with it." While he agreed that Americans need to say repeatedly that terrorism is not a true reflection of Islam, especially "for the sake of Muslims in this country," the scholar said, "Fighting and struggling with the enemy is profoundly part of the religious imagination that each tradition has to offer."

Author of *Terror in the Mind of God*, published last year, and professor of sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, Juergensmeyer addressed more than 300 people on October 20 at the joint meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association. Outgoing SSSR president Helen Rose Ebaugh relinquished her lecture time to schedule Juergensmeyer, now a busy analyst who the day before gave two talks in Oslo, Norway.

Bin Laden has appealed to the religious imagination of men in the Muslim world who feel estranged and disaffected either by poverty or lack of political power, said Juergensmeyer. The target of U.S.-led military forces has given some men a "conversion experience" akin to that of converts to the Christian Identity movement, said Juergensmeyer. "They see a world going awry and they are fighting for pride and honor . . . with a sense of vocation."

Not only the “idea of war” but also the “image of war” motivates people within a religious tradition, Juergensmeyer said. As such, he added, religious reactions can give rise also to hope and peace—echoing his book’s assertion that “religion does not ordinarily lead to violence” and that “the object of faith has always been peace.”

Two days after hijacked planes were flown into the World Trade Center towers, leading to their collapse, Juergensmeyer was near the New York City site. He said he was struck by the images of chaos and war at the scene—not only by gray dust that shrouded all buildings for blocks but also by signs posted by those searching for missing relatives and a proliferation of votive candles and flowers on street corners. “All of lower Manhattan was turned into a sacred place . . . saying that we can hope and live,” he said.

Responding to audience questions, Juergensmeyer said he does not use the words “fundamentalist” and “terrorist” to describe protagonists in religious-political struggles. “No doubt there is a family resemblance” with the Protestant fundamentalists of the past, he said. But Juergensmeyer said the word fundamentalist “is not helpful and also appears to imply that something is wrong with religion.”

As for “terrorist,” he said he speaks of “acts of terrorism” instead. In researching his book he interviewed, among others, an antiabortion opponent and a man convicted of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. “No one considered himself a terrorist,” he said. “They felt they were soldiers in a war.”

In private comments after the lecture, R. Stephen Warner of the University of Illinois, Chicago, praised Juergensmeyer for countering assertions of some commentators who imply that acts of religious extremists demonstrate that all religions possess a pathological core. The horrific killings of civilians “do not show the sickness of religion but the sickness of politics to allow in a sick [version of] religion,” Warner said. Another sociologist, Nancy Ammerman of Hartford Seminary, said she appreciated how Juergensmeyer indicated that acts of terror “can be both political and religious” at the same time.

Princeton University’s Robert Wuthnow, new president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, also said privately that Juergensmeyer’s assessment of how things might turn out was interesting but “more optimistic” than he could envision.

Speaking of bin Laden's goals, Juergensmeyer declared that "the only thing [bin Laden] has to offer is the 'world at war' for which he is a leader, and 'war' gives him more credibility than he deserves." Nevertheless, the California scholar added, "If the U.S. continues to feel it can use its power whenever it wants, then Osama bin Laden has won."

On the other hand, if America continues to "criminalize the acts of bin Laden" in the name of justice and fairness, and engage in humanitarian efforts, Juergensmeyer saw a chance for better relations overseas. "We've been seen so long as a bully whereas lately we've been seen in a more positive light—as vulnerable and willing to reach out to the rest of the world," he said. If the U.S. sought more diplomatic roles, such as getting involved in India's and Pakistan's standoff over Kashmir, "we would use our power in positive ways."