Killer ‘saints’

reviewed by Daniel Born in the October 18, 2003 issue

The history of the American heartland sometimes appears as little more than a bloody farrago of killing which, in the God-soaked vocabulary of the perpetrators, must be understood not as murder, but as something inevitable and even holy. This tradition persists long after the Native American resistance to European settlers was put down by settlers and soldiers certain of providential favor.

The panoply of characters in this historical picture comes from a wide spectrum of fundamentalist movements with different kinds of world-transforming visions. Among the most famous is abolitionist John Brown, who, while freeing slaves, also managed to butcher farmers and their families in Kansas before eventually going back East and helping to precipitate the Civil War. More recently, Timothy McVeigh's potent brand of apocalyptic nationalism spurred the massacre of almost 200 people in the Oklahoma City bombing. Like McVeigh, cult leader David Koresh found in his religious zealotry a mandate for violence carried out in the name of God, ending in the tragic confrontation between his followers and trigger-happy federal agents in Waco.

In *Under the Banner of Heaven* Jon Krakauer explores religiously motivated murder in the context of Mormonism and Mormon fundamentalism. His account of the Lafferty murders committed in Utah nearly 20 years ago has raised the ire of officials of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Early on, Krakauer takes us through the sickening central details of his story. On July 24, 1984, Dan Lafferty and his older brother Ron, two breakaway Mormon fundamentalists who claim to have received direct revelations and instructions from God (which Ron wrote down on yellow legal paper), drove to their youngest brother's duplex townhouse in American Fork.

According to Krakauer, when the brothers entered Allen Lafferty's apartment, Dan Lafferty "found his fifteen-month-old niece, Erica, standing in her crib, smiling up at him. 'I spoke to her for about a minute,' Lafferty recalls. 'I told her, "I'm not sure what this is all about, but apparently it's God's will that you leave this world; perhaps

we can talk about it later."' And then he ended her life with a ten-inch boning knife."

Shortly after this, Lafferty went into the kitchen and with the same knife slashed the throat of the baby's mother, 24-year-old Brenda Lafferty, nearly severing her head from her body. Thus the brothers dispatched the woman who had explicitly challenged both their authority and their polygamist practice. Amazingly, when Ron and Dan earlier had told Allen that God had called for the ritual murder of his wife and child, Allen, himself a believer in the direct revelations, asked in sadness and protest why his daughter would have to be taken. The oldest brother's reply was succinct: "Because she would grow up to be a bitch, just like her mother." Dan Lafferty has never expressed any sign of remorse. He is secure in his belief that he was carrying out God's will to rid the world of evil.

Krakauer is a master of literary shock and awe. His book about the disastrous Everest expeditions of 1996, *Into Thin Air*, is distinguished by harrowing suspense and thoughtful ethical reflection. The new book delivers verbal hammerblows, but its form separates it from the kind of true-crime stories lining the Wal-Mart racks. The stomach-churning account of the Lafferty crime is interlaced with an expansive overview of the Mormon church, including detailed accounts of polygamy as practiced by its founding fathers, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, as well as of several 19th-century murders and massacres that some historians, contradicting official church accounts, now attribute to Mormon settlers.

Were Krakauer content with the conventional wisdom that every major religion seems to grow a wayward fundamentalist edge (Islam has spawned al-Queda, Christianity the Christian Identity movement) and that, in a spirit of benign ecumenism, we should not allow the parent religions to be tainted by the reputations of their mutant offspring, there would be less of a brouhaha over this book. The Lafferty episode could be chalked up as another aberrant fundamentalist act, out of touch with the moral teachings of mainline Mormonism. Such, of course, is the position of Mormon church leaders.

It is also their position in regard to the numerous offshoots of the faith that thrive in isolated pockets throughout the western U.S., where the revelation of mandated polygamy—"spiritual wifery"—as it came to Joseph Smith in the early 1830s can still be practiced without much fear of federal interference. (This is beginning to change, Krakauer indicates, citing several recent criminal charges brought against self-appointed prophets who regularly rape 13- and 14-year-olds under the auspices of

spiritual wifery.) Krakauer's narrative shows the deep links between the practices of the so-called spiritually aberrant and their founding fathers, thus complicating neat distinctions usually made between legitimate religions and cultish splinter groups.

But the book does not quite satisfy on a theological level. Krakauer, a self-professed agnostic, is not content simply to attribute the motive of these killers to individual pathology or family dysfunction, the way, for instance, Truman Capote does with the two killers of the Clutter family in his nonfiction crime masterpiece, *In Cold Blood* (1966). The structure of this book suggests that Krakauer found the conventional form of the true-crime story insufficient. When confronted by the specter of the Lafferty killers, he was forced to grapple with the deeper structure of their religious thinking.

One wishes that in making this effort, Krakauer had consulted theological and philosophical thinkers other than Harold Bloom on the question of sacred violence. This is not a strike against Bloom, who is a protean and authoritative figure in our culture's intellectual life. But any number of other scholars have devoted more time and energy to the specific problem of sacred violence than Bloom has. Krakauer could have benefited from reading Georges Batailles, whose central insight about religion is that its primary revelatory moments almost invariably transgress the ethical system with which it is associated. And Krakauer could have benefited even more from reading the works of René Girard, who has gone further than any other thinker in delineating the ways religious communities use violence to defuse and control violence:

"Religion invariably strives to subdue violence, to keep it from running wild. Paradoxically, the religious and moral authorities in a community attempt to instill nonviolence, as an active force into daily life and as a mediating force into ritual life, through the application of violence. . . . Moreover, it must be kept in mind that the efficacy of the rites depends on their being performed in the spirit of pietas, which marks all aspects of religious life. We are beginning to understand why the sacrificial act appears as both sinful and saintly, an illegal as well as a legitimate exercise of violence" (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1972).

It's a troubling insight on more than one count, conveying in broad terms what the Laffertys thought they were doing, but also going to the heart of central biblical revelations whereby unspeakable violence is transmuted into sacred history. This might well include the voice of God calling upon Abraham to kill his son Isaac (in

which, as Kierkegaard reminds us, Abraham passed the test of faith not because he understood it to be a test but because he was willing to kill his son), or even more centrally the Passion itself, in which, according to the thinking of perhaps most of the world's Christians, the Father required the death of the Son in order that the world might be redeemed.

When Brenda Lafferty and her infant daughter died, their killers thought of themselves as saints—and as the true heirs to the Latter-day Saints. Krakauer's book will be read for years to come because it opens up terrifying vistas about the nature of the sacred. Whenever murder is called by any other name, Krakauer understands, we begin to inhabit sacred space. Though he doesn't bring sophisticated theological tools to attempt to understand this metaphysical abyss, it frightens him far more than any mile-deep crevasse in the Himalayas.