Review Article: Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11

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Peer reviewed

The history of religions field was constructed in the wake of the European Enlightenment by scholars specializing in the study of “primitive”, “archaic” and “Oriental” religions. Comparative studies of myths, rituals, ancient scriptures and esoteric doctrines were usually what fell within the purview of its practitioners even well into the 1990s. So when a leading contemporary historian of religions turns his attention to the catastrophic attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, we stand up and take notice. Does this signal a shift in focus in the history of religions field of inquiry, one that embraces the political as well as the mythic? What might an analysis of the ideologies and practices of al-Qā'īdah members that is informed by comparison and the analytical categories of religious studies yield in terms of explanations or intelligibility? Does such an inquiry shed light on the phenomenon of religious violence and the relation between religion and politics?

With its flashy title and bold dust jacket declarations, Bruce Lincoln’s book promises much to its readers. The title suggests that an accounting of Islamic terrorism is at hand, a notion that is further supported by the publishers on the inside flap of the dust jacket, which declares “this will become one of the essential books on September 11”. According to the blurbs on the back cover, it is “destined to become a classic reflection on the phenomenon of religion” (Richard Hecht); it is a “daring and masterful work” (Bruce Lawrence); it is a study “that sheds invaluable light on the role of religion in these turbulent times” (Roxanne Euben). Lincoln, who has written on topics such as comparative Indo-European mythologies, sacrifice, and women’s initiation rituals, began to turn his attention to the political dimensions of religion in the wake of the Iranian revolution. This book marks a continuation of his reflections on the nature of religion in light of headline events involving Islam and Muslims. Aside from what he has to say about religion and politics in general, therefore, it is fair to inquire as to how he construes Islam and what does he have to say, if anything, to scholars of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies? Although the book scores some valid points on the subject of religion’s role in social and political conflict, readers expecting to learn more about the events of 9/11, radical Islam, and al-Qā'īdah will be disappointed. In these latter respects, it promises more than it can ever
hope to deliver in its meagre 92 pages (excluding four appendices, endnotes, and the index).

The book’s six chapter-essays, of which only the first three were written after 9/11, are concerned primarily with rethinking religion and its relation to culture and politics in the era of postcolonial states. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath constitute the starting point for these reflections. In the opening essay Lincoln links the instructions left behind by the 9/11 attackers to the radical ideology of Sayyid Qutb on the one hand and to a theoretical discussion the relation of religion to culture on the other. In doing so, he suggests that the attack exemplifies the clash of two religious “styles”, the maximalist, wherein religion is conceived as pervading all facets of society, and the minimalist, wherein it is conceived as relegated to a narrowly circumscribed place in society. By destroying the World Trade Center and causing damage to the Pentagon, therefore, al-Qa’idah was seeking to symbolically demonstrate the triumph of their maximalist Islamic ideology over the minimalist one of a secular superpower, the United States. In the next essay, Lincoln shifts his attention to the “symmetric dualisms” exchanged in the speeches that George W. Bush and Usama [Usâmah] bin Ladin [Lâdin] delivered on 7 October 2001, when the U.S. launched its retaliatory attack against the Taliban [Talibân] and al-Qa’idah in Afghanistan. He finds that although the speeches mirrored one another, Bush pitted a dualism of good versus evil (or civilization versus terror) against bin Ladin’s dualism of Islam versus unbelief. Lincoln observes that although Bush’s rhetoric was not overtly religious, it nonetheless incorporated subtle biblical tropes intended to appeal to the Christian right. The dualisms that dominate the Christian right’s interpretation of the events of 9/11 are taken up more fully after a cursory discussion of the binary features of the “conventional” Islamic concept of jihâd in the book’s third essay. Lincoln uses the controversial statements made by televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell to show how they deploy biblical rhetoric internally against American secular pluralism on behalf of what they claim to be its fundamental Christian values. According to Lincoln, though less militant than al-Qa’idah, “the televangelists’ religious ideal is equally maximalist” (p. 50).

The book’s second half consists of three essays composed in 1997 (chapters 4 and 5) and 1981 (chapter 6), albeit the 1997 pieces were revised slightly to render them more compatible with the book’s post-9/11 orientation. Here Lincoln leads us from micro- to macroanalysis, elaborating more fully on minimalist and maximalist constructions of the relation between religion and culture; accounting for the widespread emergence of religious insurgencies against, and reconstructions of, postcolonial nation-
states; and eliciting the characteristics of hegemonic, counterhegemonic, and revolutionary varieties of religion. What he is seeking to do in these chapters is to (1) challenge historians and social scientists who habitually minimize the role of religious ideologies and movements in bringing about radical political change, and (2) contest the adequacy of the widely accepted view among religious studies scholars that religion functions to affirm the social order and preserve the status quo for elites. Disputing the popular belief that religions promote peace, he states perceptively: “However well intentioned such sentiments may be, they manage to ignore the fact that all religions sanction, even enjoin the use of violence under certain circumstances” (p. 73).

It is significant that Lincoln does not essentialize Islam as a religion of violence, unlike many pundits and ideologically motivated scholars in the U.S. and Europe today. Rather he recognizes that Islam is a complex, multifaceted religion that should not be conceived in monolithic terms. He uses the occasion of a horrific act of violence committed by a radical Muslim group to engage in a broadly conceived set of inquiries into the nature of religious violence and the various cultural and political contexts within which it arises. His delineation of the maximalist and minimalist modalities of the religions is particularly illuminating, because it gives us a conceptually productive alternative to the theoretically bankrupt terms “fundamentalist” and “fundamentalism” — terms that Lincoln eschews. This having been said, however, it is precisely Lincoln’s use of the Islamic evidence, and lack thereof, that undermines this otherwise worthwhile effort. Indeed, he fails to adhere to two of the cardinal methodological tenets of historical scholarship: (1) the requirement to adequately establish the text, and (2) the requirement to explain and interpret the text in relation to context.

For example, the book’s first two essays are based on “close readings” of two Arabic texts in English translation: the letter of instructions left behind by the 9/11 hijackers and the Usama bin Ladin’s 7 October 2001 message, which was recorded on videotape. In introducing the first text, Lincoln tells us that it begins with two invocations, one orthodox (the basmala), the other “almost shockingly unconventional” (“In the name of God, of myself and of my family”, p. 8, cf. p. 93, para. 1). In actuality, this is a mistranslated excerpt from Muhammad Atta’s [Muḥammad ‘Āṭa‘] will, found together with the four-page letter of instructions for the hijackers among Atta’s personal effects. Although the FBI seems to have released all four pages of the hijackers’ instructions, it withheld Atta’s will from the American public (see p. 111f., n. 17). Nevertheless, the will was published in Der Spiegel and posted in English translation on the ABC News website on 4 October 2001. It is, in other words, a separate document, composed more than five years before Atta’s
participation in the 9/11 attacks. Unlike the instructions for the hijackers, it is delivered in the first person voice and contains detailed instructions for his burial. The “shockingly unconventional” invocation is most likely, therefore, a partial and erroneous reading of the will’s preamble, which is after all rather conventional in content:

In the name of God almighty . . . . I am Muhammad the son of Muhammad al-Amir Awad Al-Sayyid: I believe that prophet Muhammad is God’s messenger and time will come no doubt about that and God will resurrect people who are in their graves. I wanted my family and everyone who reads this will to fear the almighty God and don’t get deceived by what is in life and to fear God and to follow God and his prophets if they are real believers.¹

Lincoln therefore begins his “close reading” with a misreading, and in doing so, he not only exoticizes the text, but overlooks fundamental questions pertaining to the authorship of the hijackers’ instructions, and fails to problematize the substantive and thematic continuities and discontinuities between Atta’s will and the instructions. Also problematic are the Qur’ān citations he supplies for the translated document (p. 136) — they are not provided consistently through the text and they do not conform to the numbering of the standard Egyptian Arabic edition of the Qur’ān, nor to most recent translations, excepting that of Arberry.² The use of this numbering, combined with reliance upon a translation by a company contracted by the New York Times, makes it difficult, though not impossible, for scholars to trace the citations to their original context in most Arabic editions of the Qur’ān, as well as in most translations.

In the case of the second “close reading” — bin Ladin’s 7 October 2001 address — Lincoln relies on a defective translation published by the New York Times, and does not take into account other translations such as those of CNN, the BBC, the Associated Press, as well as Al-Jazira [al-Jazirah] (the best of the bunch). Although these translations have their defects too, we have come to expect that a highly competent textual scholar such as Lincoln would have taken more care to consider the differences between NYT’s version and the other English-language renderings to establish with greater certainty the original text’s contents and meanings, even if he is not proficient in Arabic. By not doing so, he misses important aspects of the text’s meaning and misleads the readers as to what bin Ladin actually said (the original video broadcast in Arabic is available on the web).

¹ (http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/WTC_atta_will.html)
Here are a few examples: (1) In a passage were bin Ladin refers to the devastation rendered by Israeli forces in Palestinian towns (p. 102, para. 4), Lincoln glosses the phrase “land of Islam” with the Arabic dār al-Īslām instead of ard al-Īslām, which is what bin Ladin actually says. The former, erroneous interpolation is political and juridical in meaning, closely linked with the Islamic jihād discourse, and implies a unified Islamic entity, which contradicts bin Ladin’s recognition of divisions among Muslims. The phrase bin Ladin actually uses rallies people’s sense of attachment to place and motivates them to avenge violations of the land’s sacrality. (2) The New York Times translation used by Lincoln completely omits bin Ladin’s charge that Bush and his Muslim allies “went out seeking to fight Islam and to attack the people in the name of terrorism (irbāb)” (cf. pp. 102f., para. 6). As a consequence, Lincoln misses bin Ladin’s assertion that the war against terrorism is really an assault on Islam and the Muslim people. (3) At the end of bin Ladin’s address, the New York Times translation (p. 103, para. 11) renders the Arabic word amn as “peace”, whereas a more accurate translation would have been “security”, “safety”, or “freedom from fear”. Thus, what he actually says is, “I swear to God, who has elevated the skies with pillars, that America and the people who live there will never even dream of security before we actually experience it in Palestine...” This statement, which significantly differs from that rendered in the New York Times translation, not only reveals how bin Ladin rhetorically counters Bush’s pronouncements about conducting a war against terror for the sake of peace and security in the world and the United States, but it does so by invoking God’s supreme power as creator and associating bin Ladin’s own cause with that of the Palestinians. (4) Lincoln goes to some trouble to enumerate how often bin Ladin refers to infidels and hypocrites in the speech (pp. 21, 28, 35) based the New York Times translation. In fact, bin Ladin never uses the terms “unbelievers” (kāfirin) or “hypocrites” (munāfiqin) in this speech. Rather, to be precise, he uses the verbal nouns: “infidelity” (kufr) and “hypocrisy” (nīfāq).

The problems evident in Lincoln’s handling of the texts, though they do not necessarily contradict his chief arguments, nevertheless signal more troubling shortcomings with regard to establishing the discursive, practical, communal and institutional milieux within which the texts were produced, disseminated, and interpreted. He provides very little information about the wider discursive formations from which each of the texts emerged. True, he does link the hijackers’ instructions to Sayyid Qutb’s writings and his disenchantment with America, but how does one account for the fact that nearly forty years separate them, and explain the significant differences in style, substance, and purpose that they evidence? What other forces shaped
Qutb’s thought, and affected the spread of his ideas to many corners of the Muslim world long after his execution in 1966? What forces were involved in recruiting nineteen young Saudis, Egyptians and others to conduct suicide attacks in the United States, and to what extent were they motivated by Qutb’s thought as opposed to other factors? With respect to bin Ladin’s speech, aside from mirroring Bush’s rhetoric, how is it related to prior and subsequent declarations he has made, or that have been attributed to him? Moreover, it is curious that a book that purports to be a reflection on religion after 9/11 does not deal in any substantive way with bin Ladin’s life story, al-Qa’idah and its formation, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, or more generally with the evolution of Islamic radicalism between 1950 and 2001. Though information relevant to some of these queries may be incomplete, and perhaps subject to security restrictions, there is enough documentation and scholarship available to sustain research if one takes the trouble.

Lincoln juxtaposes some radical Islamic discourses originating in the Middle East with American secular and religious discourses. In doing so, he does not discuss in any substantial way how these discourses were shaped in the context of the numerous American interventions, direct and indirect, in the Middle East region since World War II. No mention is made of the well-documented involvement of the US in overthrowing a democratically elected secular government in Iran in 1953, which set the stage for the Islamic revolution of 1978–1979. Coming back full circle to the 9/11 attacks, Lincoln does not mention how the US armed, financed, and helped to ideologize the Afghan resistance against the Soviets in the 1970s, which inadvertently resulted in the rise of the Taliban and the establishment of al-Qa’idah bases in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Thus, the contextual problems that appear in the book’s first chapters spill over into the second half. In another instance, the Palestinian intifada [intifādah] against Israel is classified as a religiously based movement against a pluralist nation-state dominated by a majority fraction (p. 69). Lincoln not only fails to specify to which intifada he is referring (there was more than one), but he also overlooks basic facts, like the fact that Palestinians participating in the intifada for the most part are not citizens of Israel, but subjects of Israeli occupation of contested territories in the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, the intifada cannot be essentialized as religious — many if not most participants are secular, and they include Christians as well as Muslims. The leadership in the Palestinian Authority is predominantly secular in outlook, as is their vision of a future Palestinian state. Indeed one of the most prominent supporters of the Palestinian cause is Edward Said, of Palestinian Christian heritage.
Holy Terrors, though not without its merits, is seriously flawed in terms of method and of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies scholarship. Moreover, it does not even problematize two of the basic concepts that it relies upon: terrorism and the postcolonialism. Therefore it is far from being the “classic”, “masterful”, or “powerful” study it is touted to be on its dust jacket. Finally, it is troubling that this book was published in its present form after having been vetted by a respected university press, by several specialists in Islamic or Middle Eastern studies, as well as respected scholars of religious studies, when its treatment of the Islamic texts does not even meet the standards of old fashioned Orientalist scholarship. So what went wrong?

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