Preface and Acknowledgments

I am sometimes asked why a nice guy like me would want to study religious terrorism. Those who ask this question usually brush the intellectual explanations aside—as if my interest in the global dimensions of religion and society weren't reason enough. They search for something more personal.

One answer I give is that my work on nationalism and global conflict has led to a concern about areas of the world where social transformations have not been easy, and where peaceful options have shredded into violence. I have seen the unraveling of social order close at hand, having lived for a time in India's Punjab, a region torn apart by spiraling violence between militant Sikhs and the Indian government. With the horrors of that era of terror in mind, I have gone to troubled places elsewhere to understand how civil order can collapse, and to search for patterns in the relationship of religion and violence around the world.

Yet another answer is more personal still. As someone who was raised in the religious milieu of Midwestern Protestantism, I know the power of religion to provide a transformative vision of the human potential. In my experience this transformative quality of religion has been a positive thing—it has been associated with images of personal wholeness and social redemption—and it has mostly been nonviolent. I say "mostly" because I can remember moments from my own religious involvement in civil rights and antiwar movements a generation ago that were dangerously confrontational and occasionally bloody. So

I feel a certain kinship with present-day religious activists who take religion seriously, and I wonder if one of their motivations might be a spiritual conviction so strong that they are willing to kill and to be killed for moral reasons.

Yet my own social activism never reached such extremes, nor could I imagine a situation where even the most worthy of causes could justify taking another person's life. Thus I have looked for other motivations for those who have perpetrated acts of religious terrorism rather than simply struggling for a worthy cause. I have wondered why their views of religion and social engagement have taken such a lethal turn and why they have felt so justified in undertaking actions that have led to destruction and death, often committed in brutal and dramatic ways.

In seeking answers to these questions, I found myself looking not only at particular people and case studies, but also at the larger social and political changes that affect the globe at this moment of history and provide the context for many violent encounters. It is this theme that also runs through the book that is the companion to this volume, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State,* though here I focus on violent events rather than on activist movements. I have found that a study of this striking phenomenon can tell us something about religion, about public violence, and about the character of contemporary society on virtually a global scale.

In this book I explore this dark alliance between religion and violence. I have examined a variety of acts of religious terrorism over thirty years to try to understand the cultures of violence from which they emerge. Through my interviews with perpetrators and supporters I have come to see these acts as forms of public performance rather than aspects of political strategy. These are symbolic statements aimed at providing a sense of empowerment to desperate communities. The collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, must have created a heady illusion of power to those who conspired to bring them down.

Religion is crucial for these acts, since it gives moral justifications for killing and provides images of cosmic war that allow activists to believe that they are waging spiritual scenarios. This does not mean that religion causes violence—political and social issues are usually at fault—but it does mean that religion can provide the mores and symbols that are associated with bloodshed, even catastrophic acts of terrorism. This is what I mean when I use the phrase "religious violence"—not violence caused by religion, but violence associated with it.

Violent ideas and images are not the monopoly of any single religion. Virtually every major religious tradition—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist—has served as a resource for violent actors. Perhaps it is not fair to label Osama bin Laden a Muslim terrorist or to characterize Anders Breivik a Christian one—as if they were violent because of their Islamic and Christian beliefs. But the fact that religion is in their backgrounds, and behind so many different perpetrators of public violence, indicates that all religions are inherently revolutionary. They are capable of providing the ideological resources for an alternative view of public order.

If this has always been so, why are such violent assaults on public order occurring now? I have looked for the answer to this question in our contemporary global milieu. The perception of an international political conspiracy and an oppressive economic "new world order" has been explicitly mentioned by such disparate activists as the leaders of ISIS, Buddhist activists in Southeast Asia, and Christian militia groups. The era of globalization and postmodernity creates a context in which authority is undercut and local forces have been unleashed. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that only globalization causes religious violence. But it may be one reason why so many instances of religious violence in such diverse places around the world are occurring at the present time.

A new edition of the book provides me with this opportunity to clarify what the book is about. I have also made some changes at various places in the text to incorporate recent events. Though I have attempted in this book to expose the way that public activists have appropriated religion in their dark view of the world, ultimately this book is not a judgment against religion. Rather, it is an appreciation of the power that the religious imagination still holds in public life, and the recognition that many will find in it a cure for violence instead of a cause.

In this attempt to understand the recent rise of religious violence I have traveled around the world on many occasions, and in each place I have a number of colleagues to thank. The case studies that are the heart of this project would not have been possible without the help of those who provided both insight and contacts. My interviews in Baghdad were arranged in collaboration with Mary Kaldor and Yahia Said of the Center for Global Governance, London School of Economics, and Hanaa Edwards and Shirouk al-Abayaji of the Al-Amal human rights organization in Baghdad, with the research assistance of Will Thomas. My interviews with refugees of ISIS in Kurdistan Iraq and Turkey were facilitated by Ibrahim Barlas of the Pacifica Institute, Ibrahim Anli of the Journalists and Writers

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helped to uphold the high standards of the Comparative Studies in Religion and Society series, and I am pleased that this book bears that series' imprimatur. A standard of a different sort has been set by Sucheng Chan, my colleague and spouse, who insists on the best and whose own writing is a model of elegance and conceptual clarity.

To those activists I interviewed and who are named in the list at the end of this book, I extend my appreciation. I know that many of them, especially those who have supported acts of violence for what they regard as personal and moral reasons, will feel that I have not fully understood or sufficiently explained their views. Perhaps they are right. An effort at understanding is just that, an attempt to enter other people's worlds and re-create the moral and strategic logic of the decisions they make. The effort is always, perhaps necessarily, imperfect, for I do not inhabit their lives nor, in these cases, do I concur with their choices. I hope, however, that the subjects of this book will agree that, not just for their sakes but also for the sake of a more peaceful world in which understanding replaces anger and hate, at least I have tried.

For some people, however, whatever contribution this and the many other efforts at understanding and alleviating violence may offer will come too late. I refer to those who have been victims of terrorist attacks. I dedicate this book to those who have died and the many wounded and displaced by acts of religious violence in recent years. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten. My conviction is that the same religion that is linked with such potent acts of destruction also carries an enormous capacity for healing, restoration, and hope.