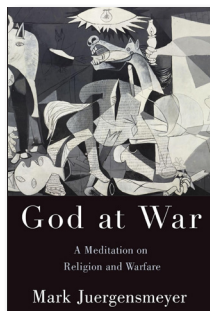
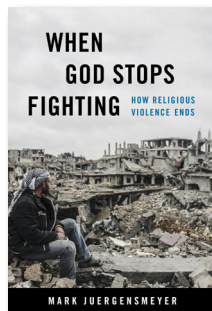


## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

### Reviewing and Reflecting on Juergensmeyer’s “God at War” and “When God Stops Fighting”

***When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends.*** By Mark Juergensmeyer. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. xiv + 179 pages. Paper. ISBN 978-0-520-38473-6.

***God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare.*** By Mark Juergensmeyer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. vii + 107 pages. Hardbound. ISBN 978-0-19007917-9.



Mark Juergensmeyer (b. 1940), Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and William F. Podlich Distinguished Fellow and Professor of Religious Studies at Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California, is, perhaps, the leading scholar

today writing in English regarding the intersection of religion, violence, and peace. His most well-known text, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) is currently in its fourth edition. Other important texts include: *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993); *Fighting with Gandhi* (1984); *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda* (2008); and *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society* (2015; with Dinah Grieco and John Soboslai).

Central to his understanding of this nexus of war/violence and religion are the concepts of war as both an “imagined” or “alternative reality” to the point of its becoming a “cosmic reality”—good vs. evil on a cosmic plane; “an absolute conflict with a moral valence, a do-or-die struggle between

good and evil” (*When God Stops Fighting*, 5). Thus, religion itself becomes an “alternative reality”—that is, a succinctly different perspective on the human condition—and all susceptible to past historical events, texts of extraordinary value, and leaders manipulating their populations to their own ends or self-centered visions, needs, and desires. Further, the various understandings of what constitutes a religion or community of so-called practicing and committed “religionists” (still a source of contention and dispute among scholars) thus helps to undergird and frame the conflicts which have been and continue to be labelled by governments, journalists, scholars, and ordinary persons as “religious wars” and those who engage in these conflicts as “religious extremists.” What then constitutes the *religious* dimension of physical conflict which ultimately results in the deaths of both military combatants and non-combatants—especially children, women, and the aged—becomes the ever-present and haunting questions: Do religions cause wars? Is religion too easy a tool wrongfully used to legitimate wars and violence? Is there something inherent in the very creation and construction of religions—not only the monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, Islam (for example, superiority vs. inferiority)—that leads people to justify engaging in horrific acts of violence?

And, to flip the coin somewhat, can religious commitment be used to end such conflicts and rehabilitate, re-educate, and transform former soldiers into productive members of their own societies and communities? Is the not-so-secret secret to “success” the very cessation of hostilities coupled with the recognition by both leaders and followers on both sides that, ultimately, neither can win? As Juergensmeyer notes, “negotiation is not possible until both sides have lost the will to fight...At the heart of the transformation from militancy to the cessation of hostilities is *the abandonment of the idea of war*, at least as it relates to the conduct of war” (*When God Stops Fighting*, 4; emphasis added).

For Juergensmeyer, “the idea of war gives conceptual clarity to humiliating and destructive events and situations. And it provides a solution—military engagement and the expectation of victory...It provides a conceptual template of understanding in which one can understand the role of an enemy—either real or fabricated—and what the appropriate response should be...The concept of war magnifies a community’s fear into a worldview of opposition” (*When God Stops Fighting*, 8–9).

How, then, do the religions of the world enter these seemingly secular conflicts between nation-states for territorial expansion? Increased accumulation of resources and populations? Expansion of governmental and military authority?

Religious culture can be of service to the idea of war by helping to create an enemy... Religious ideas and images can also be of service in helping to legitimize the fight, to imply that this is not just a contest between two equally moral sides, but a battle where one side is favored by God (*When God Stops Fighting*, 7–8).

Thus, both war and religion use (manipulate?) each other to justify their claims and actions in the minds of their fully-committed (or less-than-committed) adherents as well as those on the home fronts who support their efforts and further supply the necessary resources to continue the contest (and it *is* a contest of winners versus losers—good guys versus bad guys, God’s anointed versus God’s despised!).

To further support his theses in *When God Stops Fighting*, Juergensmeyer has chosen three case-studies: the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq (Chapter 2), the Sikh Khalistan movement in India’s Punjab (Chapter 3), and the Moro movement for a Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines (Chapter 4). In addition to providing appropriate historical contexts for each, he also provides brief snippets of interviews and biographical data of important players in each of these situations *on both sides of these conflicts*. The brevity of the book, however—five chapters; 193 pages total—unfortunately, provides the committed reader with only a somewhat limited understanding of how Juergensmeyer’s important concepts apply to real world scenarios. Thus, one would have to further engage with his other texts to more fully understand and appreciate his insights.

Finally, if Chapter 1, “The Trajectory of Imagined Wars,” provides the aforementioned baseline of concepts critical to his understanding the nexus between war/violence and religion, Chapter 5, “How Imagined Wars End,” provides a good summary of everything that has preceded, with an additional insight worth noting as well:

These additional factors [of ending such violence] can be clustered into three categories: a loss of faith in the movement’s vision, fractures in the communal consensus of the organization, and the awareness of alternative opportunities that provide new hope (*When God Stops Fighting*, 120).

Overall, *When God Stops Fighting* is an important and welcome addition to the growing literature on war/violence and religion, not so much as a stand-alone text but as one embedded in the entire oeuvre of Juergensmeyer’s contributions.

**A Further Note**

In his earlier text, *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and War* (2020), to which, in many ways, *When God Stops Fighting* is a companion text, Juergensmeyer sharpened his insight vis-à-vis the idea of war and its obvious parallel to the idea of religion and how both could draw upon each other to further their own agendas, writing:

In the face of a hideous and deeply threatening reality, the idea of war is comforting. It comes as a moment of insight and a kind of mental relief. The image of war is the solution to a conceptual problem. It explains why terrible things are happening in the world (*God at War*, 23).

War is a way of thinking about this chaos, giving it a dichotomous structured order, and imagining a way in which the confusion can be made clear, and the demons of danger conquered...war is a way of dealing with something that profoundly changes the foundation of our rational existence. This why war, whether as a fantasy of as an actual military engagement, is an exercise of imagination. It is a way of thinking through chaos in order to break free from the fear that it will become an all-consuming fire (*God at War*, 24).

When the word “religion” is substituted for “war,” the same applies. Given the present moment in the American political landscape where public advocates of so-called “Christian nationalism” appear to view the world with such polarity, Juergensmeyer’s insights appear disturbingly and frighteningly prophetic.

Steven Leonard Jacobs



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