Notes on a Maya Apocalypse: Eschatology in the Guatemalan Civil War, By Eric Hoenes del Pinal

Abstract

The second half of the 20th Century saw much of Latin America undergoing intense periods of political instability and violence resulting in major social and political changes. Responding both to this uncertain political climate and the call to openness initiated by the Second Vatican Council, several theological movements began to take shape within Latin American Catholicism that sought to re-imagine the present and future of the Catholic Church. Critical to these projects was a re-figuration of salvation history that could better account for the social and political inequalities faced by many Latin American Catholics and that could respond to the immediate needs of marginalized peoples. This paper examines how Liberation Theology can be said to have proposed an eschatology that was responsive to social and cultural experiences of marginalized groups in Latin America and explores the legacy of this movement in the light of the extreme violence of the Guatemalan Civil War.

Apocalypse

Mention the words "Maya" and "apocalypse" together and you are likely to spur a conversation about 2012, the end of the Mayan long count calendar, planetary alignments and ancient prophesies about the end times. This paper is not about that. Rather, the topic that I want to take up here, in a very preliminary and incomplete fashion, is how the eschatological imaginary of a late 20th Century Catholic theological movement— Liberation Theology— articulates with the catastrophic political violence experienced by Mayas during the Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted from 1960 and 1996, but saw its most intense period in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although neither Liberation Theology nor the Maya population I deal with here are explicitly or actively millenarian, I think that scholarship on millenarian movements can help us understand the former's motivations and the latter's experiences and shed some light on the topic of how Christian apocalypticism and especially millenarianism can serve as a tool for people to think through the moral ills and ontological hazards of their times and the promise of an eventual cure for them. To see how millenarianism might play a role in this context we need to take an intellectual detour to set the stage for the relationship between eschatology, social mobilization, and political violence.

I start from Norman Cohn's well-known thesis that millenarian movements are always both religious and social movements, and that they tend to flourish under specific social conditions: namely when social instability is exacerbated to an unbearable degree[1]. Under these conditions, a millenarian prophet's promises of the end of the world and subsequent establishment of a new order may be highly attractive and prompt people to abandon whatever attachments to the here-and-now they may hold in hopes of a better existence after the apocalypse. Cohn argues that millenarian thinking hinges on believers' expectation of an event that will bring about salvation that is a) miraculous, b) collective, c) terrestrial, d) imminent, and e) total. Cohn argues that taken together these five characteristics mark this mode of Christian soteriology as distinct from non-millenarian formulations[2]. This mode of thinking, he continues, only becomes an attractive option to people who have become radically socially "disoriented," that is, when their minimal expectations of what the social order ought to be like are completely subverted and they are left either unsure of their place in the world or certain that they constitute the extreme margins of society. To support his argument, Cohn offers up case studies of millenarian movements that took shape in medieval Europe as society shifted

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from a manorial to a commercial system. This shift entailed economic changes that required people to alter their expectations about how to subsist and survive, and also subverted the expected social relations of dependence between peasants and the nobility. Thus a major change in the mode of production coincided with the dissolution of central social and political institutions. Among those who were left anchorless, who found the social institutions they were used to gone or altered beyond recognition, the discourse of millenarianism found fertile ground. It's not hard to see why in the worst of social conditions the promise of a new, just social order becomes attractive, but what's really important for this model is that it is in some sense that initial experience of social disorientation—that dissolution of the normal order of things—which opens up the possibility of the apocalypse's total miraculous transformation. That is to say, the experience of radical social change makes the idea of transcendent spiritual change plausible.[3]

Though Maya had been marginalized by the state, subject to frequent and sustained indignities and injustices, and had lived in economically precarious conditions for centuries, traditionally there were also local village-level institutions that counterbalanced their oppression. Writing at mid-century before the Civil War, Eric Wolf described rural Maya as living in "closed corporate communities"[4], that, though they might depend on non-Mayas (*Ladinos*) for access to agricultural land and capital, nonetheless operated more or less independently and were self-sustaining social and political units.[5] However, the Guatemalan Civil War devastated rural Maya life and placed these social institutions in serious peril, especially during the "hot period" of political violence in the 1970s and 1980s. Going by Cohn's model, then, Guatemalan Mayas might have been a population among whom millenarian movements abounded during this period.

According to the documents produced by the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH, *Comisión para el esclarecimiento histórico*) over 200,000 people were killed and 45,000 were "disappeared" during the conflict. Ninety-three percent of these acts of violence happened at the hands of the military, and eighty-three percent of those who suffered them were ethnically Maya. Between 1962 and 1996 there were over 620 massacres in the country, half of which occurred during a three-year period in the early 1980s. 430 villages were destroyed. 1.5 million people were internally displaced and 150,000 sought refuge in Mexico. Untold numbers were raped and tortured, to say nothing of the millions who suffered the insecurity of living in such conditions. This all happening in country with a population of around 8 million[6]. Add to this an earthquake that struck the country in 1976, killing over 20,000 people and leaving over a million temporarily homeless, and Guatemalan Mayas' world must have seemed dangerously close to collapse.

Yet in the face of this world-shattering violence, no major millenarian movements emerged, at least not any that would fit Cohn's model.[7] But we do find important religious changes occurring among the Maya that, though they might not be apocalyptic or millenarian *per se*, implied (if not outright depended on) new configurations of Christian eschatological thinking. What we see are, on the one hand, critical reinterpretations of the role of salvation in Catholicism—ones that take into account the world-shattering effects of state-sponsored violence and attempts to make good on the promise of a kingdom of God on Earth— and, on the other hand, the rapid growth of pneumatic religious denominations (Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity in both their Catholic and Protestant forms) that promised experience-near proof of salvation. Though I will treat only the former in this paper, I think that both of these developments can in part be analyzed in terms of our discussion of apocalypticism.

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To return briefly to medieval Europe, Randolph E. Daniel has suggested that not all medieval apocalyptic movements can properly be characterized as revolutionary in Cohn's sense[8]. Rather, many of these movements are better understood as "reformist" movements that, even though they explicitly mobilize the rhetoric and imagery of the Christian "End Times," aren't so much motivated by a narrative of the complete destruction of extant social institutions and their replacement by a new order in the kingdom of God as they are by reshaping ("enhancing," he says)[9] the world via reform and correction of people's practices. Their eschatological model, it would seem, is one of continuity rather than absolute rupture, and their primary concern is to purify the Church (and by extension perhaps the political order, as well) as a means of enabling the fulfillment of prophecy. This sort of movement remains apocalyptic, however, in the sense that it proposes that some critical event has to happen in order to transform this world into the kingdom of God. That is, an apocalyptic event is needed to spur the purification necessary for the fulfillment of the millennium.

This reformist apocalypticism, Daniel argues, tends to be more of a feature of clerical thinking and writing than of charismatic preaching and is likely to take root among people who have a vested interest in the continuation of at least some established institutions. It is important to note that several of his exemplary cases fit into a tradition that envisions a messianic sacral ruler, suggesting that adherents to such movements aren't seeking a complete rupture with the present social order, but rather change within it. It is following out this strand that I think we can see apocalyptic thinking among Latin American Catholics in the 20th Century.

A Latin American Theology

There was nothing particularly millenarian or apocalyptic about the Second Vatican Council; however, the broad-based reforms it introduced set the stage for the principles of Liberation Theology, which I will argue can be understood as apocalyptic in a limited sense. Though certainly it had an impact elsewhere, Liberation Theology is often thought of as an originally Latin American response to the challenge set forth by Vatican II to find new ways of engaging the laity[10]. Its roots can be traced to the combined experiences of Latin American Catholics and a generation of European and North American-born clergy who arrived in the region at mid-century as part of an effort by local dioceses to spread orthodox Catholicism. Though much of Latin America had exhibited a streak of anticlericalism from the late 19th Century through early 20th Century, by mid-century many states, Guatemala included, had begun to ease restrictions on the Catholic Church and incorporate it into modernization projects (through schools, programs to promote cash-crop production, etc.). While local oligarchs were sometimes suspicious of the Church's involvement, seeing it as a potential pole of oppositional political power, they also saw that it could serve as an instrument for solidifying the extant social order. [11]

To make up for the deficit of personnel that had resulted from earlier restrictions placed on the Church,[12] many dioceses sought to bring in young clergy from abroad to work in rural areas. The recruits tended to be political conservatives, committed to an anti-communist ideal as much as to missionary work. Many had been trained in or at least exposed to the "new political theology" that emerged in Europe following World War II, which posited that faith, far from being a solely private affair, should be cultivated as a feature of public life, and that the Catholic Church ought to be an instrument for social action as well as spiritual development.[13] Although this formulation might suggest the beginnings of a progressive religious movement, proponents of this brand of political theology tended to side with established authorities. They had as their main goal finding ways to justify the power of nation-states via theological means and in

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doing so to provide a counterargument to the ideal of the secular state which had uncomfortable resonances as a defining feature of Communism. However, these political commitments would be tested by the social reality that many of these missionaries encountered in Latin America.

The case of Father Luis Gurriarán as documented by Beatriz Manz is illustrative of what happened on the ground.[14] In 1958 Fr. Luis, a Galician member of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, was recruited to lead a mission in the highland Department of El Quiche. Fr. Luis had been recruited because of his youth, commitment to missionary work, and, importantly his political affiliations: he was at the time a vocal anti-communist and a supporter of the Franco regime in Spain. However, the stark reality he encountered in his mission work— the levels of abject poverty, the institutionalized inequality, and the general exploitation of K'iche'-Maya people— led him to revise his political commitments. The ideal that he, as a representative of the Church, was morally and ethically bound to not only minister to the souls of his congregation but also to take some interest and responsibility for their worldly needs remained, however. Fr. Luis, and others like him who had come with the expectation that their primary task was to preach religious orthodoxy, came to recognize the futility of doing only that and decided to use their position to help local people find the means to organize themselves and improve their lots in life.

This sort of secondary "conversion" experience and interest in social work as a part of missionary work dovetailed with a series of extant local programs (such as Catholic Action in Guatemala) that had set up structures of increased lay participation and leadership independently of Vatican II. While these earlier programs had originated from a desire to spread orthodox Catholicism and oversee the practices of local populations (seen as necessary to correct the spiritually dangerous "syncretic" faith practiced by indigenous communities), the institutional changes that they introduced placed a great deal of authority in the hands of parishioners, at least in so far at the day-to-day workings of the congregation were concerned. Importantly, too, they created a structure of institutional authority that favored younger members of the Church who might have more of a vested interest in changing the status quo, even if just at the level of their own villages and hamlets. Moreover, it opened up the possibility of more broad-based mobilization by placing young leaders in dialogue with their peers in other municipalities, creating for the first time a shared sense of ethnic and class identity that extended beyond the local community.[15] By the time priests started officiating Masses in the vernacular (Spanish at first and later Mayan languages, which have since become standard), the idea that parishioners ought to play a greater role in guiding the Church's work was well-established in a number of congregations.

This conjunction of foreign-born priests influenced by a socially-conscious political theology and the activities of local populations organizing new structures of authority would promulgate ideals of popular participation and social critique in an attempt to correct a social system rife with inequalities based on class and ethnicity. Of course these local efforts required some level of institutional support and ratification to become effective, and they found them in the theology that emerged from the Second General meeting of the Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) held in Medellín, Colombia in 1968.

The goal of CELAM, first convened in 1955, was to try to create some basis for a unified institutional identity and an agenda for the dioceses in the region. The conference's meeting in Medellín, however, was the watershed moment for establishing the tenor of Latin American Catholicism with its formal adoption of the "preferential option for the poor."[16] This doctrine posited that a critical component of Christianity is that its adherents show compassion for and look after the spiritual as well as material

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wellbeing of the poor. One of the ideas proposed at Medellín was that the social reality of Latin America was marked by two evils— "external dominance" and "internal colonialism" — which made it impossible to lead a good life, and thus made salvation onerously difficult (if not altogether impossible) to achieve.[17] The Church, they argued, had a duty to call attention to and help fight these twin problems. It was held that the Church could no longer tolerate the misery of its faithful in the here-and-now and only promise an end to suffering in the next world. Instead, the Church would take an active role in aiding them to improve their lives, which would in turn help them practice their faith with full human dignity. Thus, from a theological perspective, salvation came to be intimately tied to social development projects that would both drive and be driven by lay participation in Ecclesial Base Communities or CEBs by the Spanish initials.[18]

A full examination of how this was justified theologically is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to briefly set out four of its key points here.[19] 1) Like the political theology that preceded it, Liberation Theology proposes that there is a single "plane" of human history, rather than separate temporalities for the here and now and the spiritual realm. This in part justifies the political engagement of the church. 2) This vision of world history implies that the Church's work is always already engaged in social and political matters and one cannot separate spiritual work from that fact. As a corollary it calls for a close examination and critique of the historical effects of Church (non-)involvement in worldly matters. 3) The notion of a singular plane of existence suggests the kingdom of God can be at least partially realized in this world, and the Catholic Church, as the direct line of spiritual authority (i.e. from Jesus to Peter and on down through the papal lineage) has a privileged role in bringing this about. 4) In order to do so it must combat sin, which in this reading is fundamentally understood as being a condition of alienation.[20] There are spiritual, psychological, and, critically, political dimensions to sin, and thus liberation must be cultivated across all of these domains to ensure humankind's salvation. Because these domains are interdependent, too, part of the project of salvation *has to* occur in this world, that is to say, in the material economic and political conditions of the living and in their subjective experiences of being in the world, as much as it does in their spiritual development.

Recognizing that social conditions in Latin America are such that they produce major impediments to its people's ability to express their proper humanity, and that systems of inequality exacerbate and compound them, Liberation Theologians argued that working towards social justice through advocacy and protest was a tangible means of working towards the fulfillment of salvation. And indeed Gutierrez says that, "the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom [of God] and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not all of salvation. It is the historical realization of the Kingdom and, therefore, proclaims its fullness."[21] Thus, though Liberation Theology does not go so far as to claim that political liberation is the *sine qua non* of bringing about the end times, it does give politics an important role in the fulfillment of Christian prophecy. Importantly, too, in re-imagining the conditions of the coming of the kingdom of God, it broke with contemporary orthodox understandings of the apocalypse and millennium.

Liberation Theology's understanding of the Catholic Church's role in political life placed it in direct conflict with the Guatemalan state's increasingly reactionary stance against any form of social organizing that might have a hint of socialism. Catechists and priests, seen as community leaders and thus potential political opponents of the state, became suspected agents of the guerilla forces and were placed under surveillance by the military and in many cases became the direct targets of violence.[22] Under these circumstances,[23] Liberation Theology became quite dangerous to adhere to in principle, and more so to put into practice.[24] The Commission for Historical Clarification report,

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"1,169 victims of disappearance, torture and death [were] members of the church" which includes 921 catechists, 17 priests, 27 male religious workers, 5 female religious workers, and 193 parishioners."[25] In the end the state's coercive physical force overcame Liberation Theology's moral force. Monsignor Juan José Gerardi's assassination in 1998, two years after the signing of the peace accords that ended the war and on the eve of the presentation of the final report of the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) project, violently signaled that Liberation Theology's promise had not been fulfilled.[26] Likewise, Liberation Theology's importance to Catholicism more broadly waned during the Papacy of John Paul II, whose vision of the Church placed emphasis not on collective action, but personal communion with the divine.

Eschaton/Conclusions

Among the Q'eqchi'-Maya with whom I worked between 2003 and 2005 in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala, Liberation Theology has little ideological import. Its traces remain, though. In the parish center's library old works by Marx, Althusser, and Gustavo Gutiérrez lay gathering dust and mildew. On the other hand, there has been a lot of work done by deeply committed people to make sense of the catastrophic violence of the war, to ensure that the suffering of its victims not be forgotten and that some measure of justice be enacted. Some of the dead are remembered as martyrs, occasionally memorials are held for entire villages, and an attempt has been made to rebuild what was destroyed. Sometimes, too, individual traumas are just barely covered up by a return to normalcy. And there is still a great deal of inequality, violence and social insecurity, though this is now primarily at the hands of street gangs and organized crime, and not the military.

However, the CEBs remain in place and Liberation Theology's main legacy— its promise of social justice left unfulfilled— might be how the very existence of these groups transformed the institutional organization of the parish. The Q'eqchi'-Maya in the parish, accompanied and supported by a new generation of foreign priests (many of whom are from Africa, Asia, elsewhere in Latin America), have continued to look for ways to express their faith in a manner that reflects their social reality. For some, this has meant a cultural turn. Drawing on a newer theological tradition known as Inculturation, they have sought to find ways in which autochthonous Maya culture might become the basis for a new vision of Catholicism— a project that intersects with the interests of ethnic political mobilization under the rubric of the Pan-Maya Movement.[27] Others have sought out the experience-near "pneumatic" spirituality[28] of Charismatic Catholicism as a means of more deeply engaging with their God. Both of these forms of Catholic participation seek to purify and reform their Church in their own way. Their projects are aimed at transforming the ways that their adherents inhabit and make sense of the world. If this legacy is not properly millenarian it is still in some sense concerned with the unfolding of Christian history and the roles that people may play as they approach that heralded, but ever delay horizon of a kingdom of God.

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1 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

2 Ibid., 15. Cohn's implication, of course, is that the inverse of these five points characterize non-millenarian thinking about salvation. A salvation that is individual, deferred to another time and place, and that depends on a person's actions (even if it is just a holding a deep and abiding faith) in this world, would be characteristic of mainline Christianity, and would suggest a very different soteriological imaginary than that of the millenarian.

3 This model may also help to explain why extremely materially poor, but otherwise socially stable populations tend to be resistant to apocalyptic thinking. It is worth noting that a similar argument is presented by Marshall Sahlins' work on the colonization of Hawaii and Joel Robbins' work on conversion to Pentecostalism in contemporary Papua New Guinea. In both of these cases an initial event that lays bare the fissures in what is emically considered a whole and total social system sets the conditions for the possibility of radical social change following the introduction of foreign ideologies and institutions. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Marshall Sahlins, "The Economics of Develop-Man in the Pacific," *Res* 21(1992). Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

4 Eric Wolf, "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1957).

5 Of course, this is true only in very broad terms, as the country has historically relied on the extraction of Maya labor, and contact between Mayas and Ladinos in urban centers is more frequent, but the general point stands.

6 Diane M. Nelson, "Reckoning the After/math of War in Guatemala," *Anthropological Theory* 10, no. 1 (2010).

7 This is not to say that there were none, see Felicitas Goodman's account of one in Chiapas. Felicitas D. Goodman, *Maya Apocalypse: Seventeen Years with the Women of a Yucatan Village* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

8 Randolph E. Daniel, "Medieval Apocalypticism, Millennialism and Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14, no. 1 (2002).

9 Ibid., 276.

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[10] Daniel H. Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[11] Kay B. Warren, *The Symbolism of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). This would have also coincided with the time when Protestantism was starting to get a foothold in the region.

[12] One estimate says that there was one priest for every 30,000 people in Guatemala in 1950. Richard N. Adams, *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1970).

[13] Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), 30-31.

[14] Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[15] Richard Wilson, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

[16] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988)., xxv; Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, *Poverty of the Church (Medellín Document)* (Medellín, Colombia: CELAM, 1968).

[17] Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 42.

[18] Ricardo Bendaña Perdomo, *La iglesia en Guatemala: Síntesis histórica del catolicismo* (Guatemala: Artemis-Edinter, 1996); Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

[19] For a full discussion of these points see Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions*, 28-29.

[20] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*.

[21] Gutiérrez, 104. Emphasis in original.

[22] Ricardo Bendaña Perdomo, *Ella es lo que Nosotros Somos y Mucho Mas: Síntesis Histórica del Catolicismo Guatemalteco, II Parte: 1951 - 2000* (Guatemala: Librerías Artemis Edinter 2001); Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions*; Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001); Wilson, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences*.

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[23] The same was true in El Salvador, Nicaragua and elsewhere in the region. Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

[24] Liberation Theology had few supporters in the Vatican. Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical in 1975 that cautioned Latin American bishops against allowing their CEBs from becoming too politicized, see David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996), 75. John Paul II was sharply critical of the political aspects of Liberation Theology, and, though it is beyond the scope of my expertise, it would be worth thinking considering the role of his own experience with the rhetoric of Marxism in Poland might have influenced his response to the movement in Latin America. Likewise, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's (now Pope Benedictine XVI) wrote several works denouncing Liberation Theology as head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

[25] Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio: Tomo IV. Consequencias y efectos de la violencia*, vol. IV (Guatemala: United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), 1999), 112.

[26] I realize I haven't discussed the state's perspective on the conflict here and I certainly don't feel compelled to offer a justification for it, but it's worth noting that in some sense the state apparatus might have also been working under an apocalyptic schema—that of the Cold War which pitted capitalism and communism against each other in final battle of political/economic ideologies.

[27] Edward F. Fischer, "The Pan-Maya Movement in Global and Local Context" (1996); Kay B. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[28] Diane J. Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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