

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Frances L. Flannery, 2016. *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism. Countering the Radical Mindset*, Routledge, USA, 272 pages, ISBN: 978-1-315-77116-8**

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Apocalypticism as a term has had a prolific career in the last few decades, emerging from its original, narrow use with regards to a certain genre of literature, normally associated with Biblical studies. Often building on Voegelin's famous idea of the immanentized eschaton, apocalypticism has come to be associated – rightly or wrongly – with secular movements as well, encompassing grand projects of totalistic rejuvenation, be they cast in the language of Bolshevism, Fascism, or National Fascism, to mention a few. Thus, various degrees of similarity have been found between eschatology and apocalypticism on one hand, and political utopianism on the other. Debates around the proper use of "apocalypticism", "millenarianism" and "eschatological" aside, the importance of apocalypticism in understanding terrorism has been approached time and again in specialist literature. One such perspective is found in the work of Frances L. Flannery, which is focused on providing an understanding of religious terrorism and contributing to policies of prevention which may assist general counterterrorism efforts in their task.

From the onset, Flannery points out that while terrorist groups vary greatly in cultural contexts, she argues that they exhibit the characteristics of a thought system that has been around for thousands of years, and that, when employed violently, may be called "radical apocalypticism" (p. 1). The author defines apocalypticism as "an orientation to reality that maintains that the divine (or "transcendent") realm has sent a revelation to a select few persons, the righteous,

disclosing the divine view through a transformative or meaningful experience. This revelation affirms that evil forces rule the mundane realm that the righteous now inhabit, but someday there will be divine intervention that will dramatically change the operation of the cosmos by overcoming this evil, allowing the righteous to partake more fully of the divine reality." (p. 2-3). Whereas the transformation discussed may or may not involve the end of the world, Flannery states, it typically involves a dramatic historical change, a profound shift that is interpretable and understandable to the chosen who are "special recipients of revelation, aligned with the divine or transcendent will." (p. 3). It is for this reason, the author believes, that the more the apocalyptic worldview commits to the utopia of a restored world to come, the less invested it feels in the "temporary world" of all the rest (p. 3).

Divided into three parts, and containing nine chapters, the book focuses on what it calls "radical apocalyptic terrorism", beginning by delving into the fundamental features of apocalypticism as encountered in the Book of Revelation. This is then followed by an analysis of a departure from the pacifist message of the early Christian community and, whether through the internal imposition of orthodoxy or the Christianisation of other lands, its transformation into a more martial, militant variant – or what Flannery, following Hodgson, calls the turning of Christianity into militant Christendom (p. 38). Chapter 3 details the author's vision on radical apocalypticism, and the long reach of apocalypticism in general. Flannery correctly identifies a fundamental feature of the movements she has studied in the totalistic nature of their supposed apocalypticism. Thus, for Flannery, apocalypticism is "totalistic in scope, ordering all societal relationships, providing key aspects of self-identity and informing an adherent's view of reality itself." (p. 63). One shall return to this important aspect later.

Chapters 4 and 5 trace the evolution of Al Qaeda and Islamic State, with the two movements being considered representative of Sunni apocalypticism. A lack of attention given to Shi'a perspectives and to Mahdism is noted and, given the limited space constraining the author, ultimately understandable. Chapters 6-8 then move towards cases which have had a far more limited impact in comparison to the former, yet which provide Flannery with an opportunity to

apply her radical apocalyptic formula to Christian Identity, eco-terrorism and the infamous Aum Shinrikyo movement. Lastly, chapter 9 details the author's attempt at offering a preventive strategy in the face of terrorism. Correctly identifying that the physical annihilation of terrorist groups and movements will not lead to their end, since their ideology will survive and gain new adherents, Flannery believes that a true prevention of terrorism can be achieved by what she calls a full conception of peace, a cultural form of counter-terrorism that may unite the entire community in ending radical apocalypticism. Such "counter-messaging" is based on two major approaches, namely, counter-messaging campaigns from the communities with which terrorists seek to identify and an informational approach that "publicizes the group's 'sins' within its own theological content." (p. 250). The use of a "comprehensive cultural counter-terrorism strategy", Flannery argues, would entail a broad-based network including governmental agencies and NGOs, as well as grass-roots organizations and faith-based humanitarian programs "working together with local partners to address the context of discontent in which terrorism finds its appeal." (p. 251). In her view, this would eliminate the appeal and explanatory power of terrorist ideology. The effectiveness of this seemingly perfect concord between varied interest groups and how exactly it could be achieved or sustained beyond funding support programs is less evident.

To be sure, one may identify a number of issues with Flannery's overall approach, either in her very use of the term apocalypticism when better alternatives are arguably available, or in her less than satisfactory concluding chapter. Moreover, the importance of totalistic perspectives is made evident both from the conceptual framework of radical apocalypticism and from many examples provided by Flannery throughout the book, so much so that one could argue that it might serve as a more efficient and neutral term overall in comparison to radical apocalypticism. This is the case since several essential traits identified by Flannery as typical of apocalypticism – the division of the world into a community of truth and a community of untruth, the evil and impure nature of the current world, the struggles of the movement as what Juergensmeyer calls a cosmic war, as well as the quietist or militant shades encountered in such movements, all of these tend to be complicated rather than

clarified through the use of such terminology in cases which are secular or far less influenced by relevant Abrahamic cultural traditions.

Nonetheless, despite some of its uneven features and occasionally jarring transitions, the book remains a worthy effort that rightly points to a series of similarities apparently uniting a wide variety of militant movements.