

Holy War, Martyrdom and Terror: Christianity, Violence and the West

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This book is concerned with the paradoxes and oxymora (p. 80) inherent in a *longue-durée* of Western thought, rooted in Christian theology, about political and religious violence: liberty and coercion; violence and peace; cruelty and mercy; shedding blood to achieve peace; violence and martyrdom, election and universalism, old and new, and even, in a sense, the state and the church. It argues that Christianity has shaped cultures of violence throughout its Western history, including self-described secularist and modernist violence. It examines the power and importance of ideas – in this case, exegetical and theological ideas rooted in eschatology – as engines of history, of power, of practice, and of violence. ‘To take religion seriously’ Buc writes, ‘allows us to understand better the contours of violence in the West’ (p. 12). Christianity shaped ideas about political violence, an assumption of election, a consciousness of place in historical time, and an Apocalyptic or millenarian referent that together builds a ‘radical eschatology’ (p. 30). Violence – especially purgative and history-moving violence – follows, from the ancient to the very modern world, an internal and consistent logic, that gives that violence its own meaning, form, and inevitability.

Although his sweep is large, Buc’s analysis is punctuated by particular ‘nodes’ (his word, pp. 278, 284) in sacral history: The Jewish War, the development of Christian Apocalypticism, Early Christian Martyrdom, the First Crusade, the Peasants revolt of 1525 and the Wars of Religion generally, the French Revolution, Early America, and the German Red Army Faction (*Rote Armee Fraktion*, or RAF) of the 1970s (all outlined pp. 19–44). But his examples range farther still, dipping into anything from the Bolshevik purges of the 1930s, to the Hussite rebellions of the 1420s, to the early Christian persecutions, and more. That he has also in mind current reigns of terror and religiously-fought warfare is first made clear in his evocation (pp. 11–12) of George Bush, and his call, during his inauguration of the War on Terror, to being on one side or the other of an eternal battle between good and evil. This is a topic he returns to properly in chapter one.

A dense introduction (‘The object of this history’) lays out the assumptions of Buc’s analysis. He engages deep historiographies about religion and secularism, the role of ideas in history, historical sociology, and the question of just violence. He also weighs in on the limits of the historian’s brief. A historian cannot adjudicate ethics (p. 13), he argues, but Buc does lapse knowingly into ethics at times, musing on what his

analysis might tell us about a 'morality of involvement' (for example, p. 66). Buc will return to this in his postface.

Chapter one unpacks the American rhetoric and ideology of war by tracing its tropes back to late antique and medieval ideas about history, liberty and tyranny, universality, rebirth and regeneration, martyrdom, and eschatology. He takes George W. Bush's military campaigns 'against terror' as his touch point, and argues that the language deployed represents a 'particularly Western' constellation of ideas which owes a great deal to 'the imprint of deep-seated Christian notions of freedom, purity, universalism, martyrdom and History dominant in Western Europe until fairly recently' (p. 45). He identifies six primary threads running through American ideals of violence and war from the Puritans through to the 21st century. These are: (1) war is fought for the moral self, (2) warfare encompasses the world because these values are universal, (3) the aim of violence is freedom (from both political tyranny and non-belief, which are themselves linked), (4) sacrifice and martyrdom are necessary for a greater cause, and (5) this greater cause will be judged by history, which (6) is always ongoing and in which, *qua* an inherited eschatological framework engrained in the grammar of Western culture, is always moving toward an end of judgment and universal peace (the End Times). This scheme provides for a rhetoric of secular action in a putatively secular and modern world that, engrained in complex and sophisticated exegetical theology, links: purificatory war and social, political, and personal reform; tyranny, persecution, heretics and pagans; political liberty and religious freedom; vengeance and purification.

Chapter two, 'Christian exegesis and violence', has as its goal to explain the interlocking idea of war and peace in Christian exegesis, going back to the Macchabees and to Christ. Spiritual and material warfare are interlinked. Battle is done with both invisible and visible enemies. Exterior warfare is paired with internal reform and renewal. Buc takes us back to the Bible, and to the Church Fathers, and then dwells for a while with the medieval exegetes he knows so well, particularly Haymo of Auxerre (ninth century). And then he applies these constructs to the interpretation of the First Crusade – an interpretation that lies very well next to Jay Rubenstein's recent Apocalyptic interpretation of the First Crusade. The point here is to show how Christian warfare and violence sits always at the juncture of peace and war within a teleology which assumes the purifying violence of End Times. He then traces these tropes into the purportedly secularized, specifically and explicitly non-Christian violence of the French Revolution. Taking gentle aim at a modernist periodization of violence, in the French Revolution Buc sees precisely the language of inner and outer warring inherited from the *longue durée* of Christian exegetical ideology.

The third chapter, 'Madness, martyrdom, and terror', treats the issue of whether suicidal violence, terroristic martyrdom, or fanaticism are inherently forms of insanity. Buc's answer is no. The propensity to attribute social violence to forms of madness or psychosis has taken different historical forms. In the medieval world, saints were inhabited by a divine force and heretics by demonic ones. Pagan persecutors were inhabited by the devil. The zeal exhibited by crusaders and holy warriors was understood also as a form of possession. The slow medicalization of explanations for deviancy replaced supernatural explanations with physiological ones. Martyrdom and terroristic violence were, thus, forms of hysteria or psychopathology rather than possession. This historiographical turn influenced attempts to understand mass movements, like the children's crusades of 1212, as collective psychopathology (p. 141). In Buc's final discussion of the RAF, he shows how contemporary interpretations offered medical explanations for members' behavior, and yet, if taken at their word, demonstrate an internal consistency that belies the claim of madness. 'It has long been a commonplace that Western atheist utopias [such as that propounded by the RAF] are positioned on a genealogical continuum with Christian ones. If – in a maneuver that may seem artificial but is heuristically fruitful – one reinscribes the RAF's godless ideology within the figures of thought of Christianity, these deeds become 'thinkable' again' (p. 147). Modern and secular violence is etiologically linked to the ideology worked out by the long history of the Christian exegesis of violence and salvation.

'Martyrdom in the West: vengeance, purge, salvation, and history' (chapter four), explores the logic of how martyrdom demanded purge (purification of self, community, and leadership), and in turn God's retribution. The chapter's claim is that 'martyrdom moves history forward' (pp. 154, 161). Retribution might occur in

history, but would be fully effected only at the end of time. As with other chapters, Buc does not follow a chronological strategy, offering close readings of John Brown's death at the gallows (1859), Nicolai Bukharin's execution at Stalin's show trials (1938), and Raymond of Aguilers' portrayal of the 'martyrs' of the First Crusade (1099). The point is to trace similarities in the logic of a martyr's sacrifice and its consequence. 'History was shaped by God's vengeance, including vengeance for the blood shed by His very own – the martyrs' (p. 153). As throughout the book (put especially at p. 158), Buc's point is to demonstrate how 'medieval conceptions can shed light on the place of violence on American political culture' (pp. 158–9). After his capture, John Brown imagined that his martyrdom would bring on the purifying violence of holy war. In a secularized example, Bukharin, in his Testament, imagined his death to be the catalyst for a purification of a regime that had drifted from Bolshevik principles. And the crusaders, of course, necessitated internal purification, if God was to avenge their losses in the eschatologically tinged violence of holy war. (Here, I admit surprise that Buc didn't exploit the fact that after the conquest of Jerusalem the crusaders purged the holy city of all Muslims and Jews and ceremonially cleansed city's holy places.)

The fifth chapter moves to violence by and within kingdoms or states. The stage is more secular, perhaps, but the roots, Buc argues, are found in the inherent paradoxes provided by the Christian eschatological imagination which lies at the heart of animating ideologies. How does the legitimate use of violence get transferred to non-state actors, sectarian groups, or 'terrorists'? Here's how: Christianized political thought maintained that the king's chief duty is to fight for the good of the kingdom as a part of Christendom. He can and should use the sword to effect reform and purity, which constitutes the internal fight against heresy and sin. The power of that sword can be devolved to his agents, either corporately or individually. Devolution of this sort means that violence is being done on behalf of the king. On the other hand, should the sin and impurity sully the elect community reside first in the person of the king, an elect minority within the community (that is, terrorists) can well take on the mantle of God's purifying sword, either through spiritual warfare or actual warfare, or both, whence the transference of justified violence to non-state actors (sectarian groups or terrorists). That minority might even claim, although a minority, to represent the will and interests of the majority which requires defense against the sovereign. And herein we find how the ideology of an elect people (or the nation state) might in turn birth the violence espoused by minority or sectarian groups within the state; that is, terrorism. Put another way, what Buc traces here is the consistency of thinking that linked, historically and epistemologically, the crusades (the 'holy war' of the chapter's title) and early modern and modern terrorism. Buc brings us forward in three detailed case studies – the Shepherd's Crusade of 1251, the short career of Joan of Arc, and the transition from pacifism to bellicism among the Hussite revolutionaries. And then he extends these observations more rapidly in a romp through the Reformation, English Civil War, and the French Revolution, only to end with a stunning discussion of a series of addresses made by Lieutenant-General William Boykin after 2001. 'The framework was still an equation between America and Christendom' (p. 212).

Chapter six, 'Liberty and coercion', treats yet another paradox. Apparently at odds, liberty in fact can depend on coercion. Throughout its history, liberty was not primarily a freedom from intrusion (or government), as modern American libertarians would think of it. Liberty – and especially a particular strand of thought relating to the liberty of the church – is about a freedom from sin, and its many instantiations, including and in particular, heresy. '*Libertas* meant the disappearance of those constraints that blocked the road to the Good' (p. 215). And if one ought to be free from the influences of sin and heresy, sin and heresy must be eradicated. And here is where coercion comes in. Augustine early on offered a developed defense of coercion (particularly in the Donatist context), where coercion was necessary on a variety of levels, not least of which included that sake of the Donatists' souls. The long history of this idea – that coercion was necessary for true freedom – leads to the discussion of 'free will, good will, and coerced will'. Did the person or people being coerced to new behavior or belief need to actually be convinced of the truth of the new way? Did forced behavior in fact lead to new belief through the routine of doing the correct thing? Many said yes. Indeed, in some cases 'religious conversion, hence, led to liberty and was therefore not antithetical to it' (p. 228). The Enlightenment, and then the French Revolution, injected reason into this debate. For reason would lead, in theory at least, for individuals to choose the course of freedom – that is,

the course of 'the good' (as defined, in the 1790s, as Republicanism). And later, this idea was of course 'transported by colonialism and anticolonialism to the so-called Third World' (p. 240). I was surprised not to see here a discussion of the modern American rhetoric of 'freedom' ('freedom fries,' and those Islamicists who 'hate freedom') around the waging of the second Iraq War, which seems to have touched off the research for the book in the first place.

Chapter seven, 'The subject of history and the making of history', brings the threads of the earlier chapters together. It begins with a section entitled 'modernity' and asks the question whether the violence of modernity is different than pre-modern violence. Buc takes issue with the argument that pre-modern violence was primarily religious whereas modern violence seeks to change the social order. In fact, the violence of both periods contain both aims. Indeed, the issue really is: what (or who) is the subject of history, and what (or who) is history's agent? Marx said it was man (both agent and object). Medieval men believed it was God (agent and object). But, no, Buc argues. History need not choose. Men can be made the agents of God's history, and, so incorporated in the universal plan, can be part of its object. So violence itself, when violence (and in particular Apocalyptic violence) moves history forward, is the promise of and a move toward Providence. These are moments – during the First Crusade, during the French Revolution (and, one assumes, at many other moments) – where man participates in the sublime, thus explaining the gruesome, exulting chronicle descriptions of the massacres of 1099 which expose the sublime, not because they are drawing from the biblical scrips of Isaiah and Revelation, but rather because the events themselves had taken their cues from those texts, as the effected divine justice and retribution according to God's divine scheme. There are 'numinous times in which God's hand shows itself' (p. 275). And thus, in a tour de force ending, Buc argues that certain historical episodes have been, through numinous violence, elevated to moments of eschatological providence, to Events (with a capital E) of Providential History on the way to the Apocalypse. 'Violent episodes were the examples and types, which propelled history forward' (p. 287). They are purificatory and renewing, not only on the model of the Apocalypse but also as a mechanism of moving towards it. Buc's example here is the First Crusade, understood in its time as Apocalyptic and then, by the exegetes, as one of the 'Small Apocalypses.' Intermediary examples are given: the Anabaptists of Munster, the Protestants of the new world. The discourse of renewal and purification inherent in the historical notion of productive violence operates right through the modern period.

'Postface: no future to that past'. Jerusalems are moveable. So are Babylons, the city of the Antichrist. Time can move forward slowly or very swiftly. Suddenly, moments of evolutionary change can transform overnight to the 'Event' – the cusp of, or a part of, the End Times. Buc allows himself a shift from historian to seer: 'In the future of this Western past, therefore, martyrdom, terror, and holy war are likely to occur and likely to surprise both observers and agents. As long as the West in culturally post-Christian, fights to the death and deaths for the cause will suddenly erupt, at unexpected times and in unexpected places' (p. 295). To limit these, predicts the historian, it is essential to understand the 'dialectic between war and peace' that engenders them.

This is an enormously ambitious book, one that seeks to say something fundamental about the deep-rooted set of ideas and priorities that have fueled violent action over two millennia. It does not seek to be a genealogy, but rather to demonstrate the force of its subject through episodic analyses. For some, this – the episodic nature, the jumping around – will be something of a frustration. It is rare that a historian will be equally versed in the history and historiography of, say, the early Jewish wars, the First Crusade, the French Revolution, the abolitionist movement, and the RAF. Of these, I, for one, am most familiar with, and very much compelled by, the discussion of the First Crusade (fought over and in Jerusalem itself, which may make it *sui generis* and perhaps not representative). The episodic nature of the various 'nodes' – discussion of Bukharin here; of James Brown there, and of the Hussites yet elsewhere – was enlightening. But at times it was unnerving to be dropped into the 18th century, or the 15th, or the 21st, for a limited discussion of a single, although deeply developed, aspect of the larger, and argued coherent, discursive logic of purificatory holy war. The canvas – the claim – is *so* big that one inevitably wonders about what and how much is *not* illustrated, which might undercut the global nature of the thesis, and thus put in doubt how universally explicable the thesis actually is. A post pre-modern case study that brought all six of the various threads that

Buc identified in the introduction together would have made the argument entirely convincing. But this is a criticism of all such ambitious books. And this said – make no mistake – I *love* this book. It is deeply imagined, enormously learned, and brings into conversation, with elegance and coherence, a series of analytical threads about the ideology of violence in the Western trajectory, that, now pointed out in this way, I see everywhere.

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