

Review - Treading on Hallowed Ground

Written by Jeffrey Haynes

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JEFFREY HAYNES, AUG 30 2013

Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency in Sacred Spaces
Edited By: C. Christine Fair and Summit Ganguly
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

This book has its origins in a panel at the 2007 annual conference of the (US-based) International Studies Association. Published the following year, the premise of the book is that there is something unusual and specific about counterinsurgency operations when what the editors call 'hallowed ground' is involved. Following a brief introductory chapter from the editors and a separate theoretical contribution from Ron. E. Hassner, the core of the book comprises six case studies. The book is completed with a concluding chapter which summarises the theoretical, conceptual and empirical findings of the earlier chapters.

A counterinsurgency (COIN) operation involves actions taken by a country's recognised government to contain or suppress an insurgency directed against that government. An insurgency is not a war; rather it is an armed rebellion against the recognised government, with those taking part in the rebellion not formally recognised as belligerents.

In recent years, there has been a much-commented on 'return' of religion to International Relations (IR). While there

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was no one single event which marked religion's reappearance, many scholars, commentators, and policy makers note the significance of Iran's 1979 revolution in this context. Two decades later, the events of September 11, 2001, were another important marker for the perception of religion's reintroduction in IR. As every scholar of IR knows, what we identify as 'modern' international relations dates back to the mid-17th century and the Peace of Westphalia, which had the effect over the next two centuries of effectively removing religion from international affairs. By the mid-19th century, a decidedly secular ideology—nationalism—was internationally significant and the two world wars of the 20th century emphatically reflected the impact of clashing nationalisms in pursuit of power, authority and legitimacy in international affairs.

After World War II, nationalism did not decline in importance to be replaced by religion as the key international ideology. Rather, religion returned to political prominence in ways that were not anticipated either by scholars of IR or those of comparative politics. What, then does the return of religion to IR (and more generally to domestic politics) signify for COIN operations? The first thing to note is that the six case studies in the book focus on five countries: India (two separate case studies), Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Thailand. The second thing to note is that all but one of the case study chapters are concerned with 'Muslim extremists' and/or 'Islamist terrorists' (the outlier is Chapter 2 by far, which focuses on Sikh 'terrorists'. The remaining case studies—Chapters 3-7—all focus on 'extremist'/'terrorist' Islamists). The third thing is that what tends to animate the 'Islamist terrorists' in the case studies is a kind of transnational jihadist ideology that reached its apogee in the brief flowering of the al Qaeda 'brand' around the time of 9/11. Fourth, there is no attempt to 'balance' the coverage of anti-Islamist COIN operations with examples from other religions. The final thing to note is that what I regard as Islamist overkill does not even rate a mention in the book. That is, one might even be left with the impression that when one contemplates 'religious terrorism' in the context of COIN, then one is almost inevitably left *only* with a rich array of extant examples featuring Islamists. The important point about the two Sikh extremist incidents recounted in the book is that each involves discrete issues from the mid-1980s, which were effectively curtailed and ended nearly 30 years ago; Sikh extremism is no longer a threat; job done, terrorists dispelled, killed or imprisoned.

The case studies in the book are interesting. In each case, the 'terrorists' and/or 'extremists' are people who have political grievances against those in power which encourage them to take up arms against the government and/or state. In other words, the insurgencies described in the book are carried out by people who feel they have a burning political grievance against the government and/or state and are convinced that there are no legitimate ways to express their opinions which might be expected to lead to their redress. Of the case studies, only one of the countries focused upon (India) is a long-term, widely recognised democracy. And even here, the quality of democracy is poor, with many continuing ethnic, sub-national or national struggles against the central government, some of which are 'religious' but most of which are secular, stemming from (and here's an old-fashioned word), 'leftist' ideological thinking. No such examples are included in the book.

My critique of the book is not meant to imply dissatisfaction with the quality of the chapters. They are uniformly well-written and informative. They are also quite different in their approach, length and focus (For example, Ganguly's chapter on Kashmir is just over 20 pages, while Patel's on Iraq clocks in at nearly twice this length: 36 pages.). Given that the chapters – or at least most of them – started life as conference papers, then this is not unexpected. But I would have anticipated that the editors would have sought to construct at least basic analytical uniformity, for example, suggesting a list of common questions which each contributor was expected to address in their own chapter. This is not done, or even, as far as I can see, attempted and what we are left with is a set of competently written but rather disparate chapters which fail to tell us very much about the involvement of 'religion' in COIN operations.

What the case study chapters do have in common is a single-minded focus on COIN operations, written from the point of view of those in power, never from the perspective of those challenging that power. Ron E. Hassner's chapter is instructive in this regard: COIN operations are technically best designed and operationalised in certain ways, which he competently describes. Bringing in the religion dimension, that is, the 'hallowed ground' of the title, complicates things in this regard, providing more difficulty for the powerful in their attempt to dispel the threat from the powerless: how can we remove those pesky terrorists without upsetting the locals, who might not be very happy to see government troops or police attacking a holy place, physically damaging it, in pursuit of the 'religious

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terrorists'? The book overall does not take us very far beyond the obvious: to be successful in their operations police or government troops need to be aware of religious sensibilities when contemplating blasting chunks off holy places in their attempts to deal with religious terrorists/extremists.

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Jeffrey Haynes is Associate Dean of the Faculty of Law, Governance and International Relations, Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion, Conflict and Cooperation, and Professor of Politics, at London Metropolitan University. His expertise spans the areas of religion and international relations; religion and politics; democracy and democratisation; development studies; and comparative politics and globalisation. He is the author of **numerous books** including **Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power** (Ashgate, 2012).

About the author:

Jeff Haynes is Emeritus Professor of Politics at London Metropolitan University. He recently completed a book on the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and is now writing another on *Twenty-Five Years of the 'Clash of Civilizations'*. He is book series editor of 'Routledge Studies in Religion & Politics'. He is also co-editor of the journal, *Democratization*, and its book series 'Special Issues and Virtual Special Issues'.