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Author evades the tough questions

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SHAKING HANDS WITH THE DEVIL: THE INTERSECTION OF TERRORISM AND THEOLOGY
By William J. Abraham
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In November 1987, members of the Irish Republican Army set off a bomb in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, killing 11 and injuring 63 people gathered for Remembrance Day. William J. Abraham, author of *Shaking Hands With the Devil: The Intersection of Terrorism and Theology*, grew up in Enniskillen. It is clear from the first chapter of his new book that this explosion has framed his view of terrorism and religion.

To say that Abraham's view of the role of religion in his native province is one-sided is an understatement. His narrative begins with Enniskillen in 1987, with no mention of any other dates in the bloody history of England's subjugation of Ireland. Catholicism is indicted for keeping "alive older elements of the Christian faith that can readily be turned inside out and used for political purposes," such as saints and icons that can be transformed into nationalist heroes. Protestantism, with its tradition of inward transformation, is absolved; the Orange Order possesses only "exotic inventions."

Matters in Ireland were more or less settled by the Good Friday accords of 1998, though one senses that Abraham harbors a sense of unresolved grievance to this day.

Religiously inspired terrorism came to the world's largest media market on Sept. 11 and for most Americans, most modern Christians perhaps, Islam was defined for the first time. So was terrorism.

Abraham, the Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, defines terrorism as "simply the use of violence against innocent people for political purposes," though he earlier adds the qualifier that it is "perpetrated by a sub-national or non-state entity." This is one of the many qualifiers he uses to avoid having to answer less comfortable questions. "Non-state entities" allows him to avoid considering how governments might use violence against innocent people, such as with drone attacks. In the same way, political purposes creates a broad no-blame zone, because potentially terrorist acts carried out by a government fighting a war are by his definition not for political purposes.

Abraham poses two questions regarding Islam and al-Qaeda: "Is the terrorism of al-Qaeda motivated and warranted by an authentic vision of Islam?" and "Is this vision of Islam representative of Islam or is it a fringe vision of Islam?" Abraham concludes that it is authentic and a "highly potent current" of Islam.

Abraham argues that in Islamic theology, religion and state are inseparable. Although there may be different approaches to achieving and maintaining this unity, he believes that the goal of Islam is world domination. While he concedes that there are many Muslims who do not believe that terrorist acts are the way to achieve the ultimate goal of a theocratic Muslim society, he doubts that they will be able to reform Islam. In any case, Abraham appears to believe that any such efforts on the part of moderate Muslims to condemn terrorism are suspect in themselves. We come to the heart of Abraham's concern. Call it "the Muslim agenda."

"Like all new minorities in the West, we can expect that Muslims will do all they can to find their place in the sun," Abraham writes. They begin by challenging the establishment, seeking "to privilege their interests above others," using the courts, demanding respect, using elections, as the more missionary among them seek a "platform for the ultimate conversion of the West."

Abraham fears they may succeed, not because of the truth of their theology but because the West will accommodate them. What's worse, he fears that the West will fail because it has lost its own faith, sapped by the sin of multiculturalism, which "has intimidated us from serious evaluation of minority opinions and ideologies."

Abraham is one of the founders of the Confessing Movement, a movement within mainline Protestantism devoted to the return to orthodox theological positions, particularly on matters such as homosexuality, the ordination of women, and evangelism. The movement has frequently been linked to the Institute on Religion and Democracy, an organization founded in 1981 in no small measure to counter Christians who opposed President Ronald Reagan's policies on Central America and nuclear arms.

In discussing terrorism, Abraham relies heavily on neoconservative writers and indeed his discussion of multiculturalism can be read as a chapter in the culture wars that rage over American history and English literature syllabi. His view of religion under siege, both here and in his native Northern Ireland, is breathtaking. He describes his Northern Irish Protestant brethren as feeling they were "part of a beleaguered minority who found no sympathy in the wider world," this despite having the power of the British state at their back and a complaisant Reagan signing an extraordinary extradition treaty, at Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's request, aimed principally at the IRA.

His description of religion in United States is astonishing. "Hence it is difficult for believers to get a foothold in the public debate at any level; they make profession of faith to gain votes, but they can operate as politicians only if they are functional atheists or agnostics." Not surprisingly, Abraham follows by discussing the role of the state in preserving traditional marriage.

Anyone looking for a serious discussion of theology, particularly Muslim theology as it applies to terrorism, will be disappointed, for what is there is sketchy and anecdotal, ranging from a conversation with a Muslim trader selling tourist goods in Nepal to a few books and articles, not all by Muslims.

The discussion of terrorism is similarly constrained by Abraham's evasion of tough questions. When it comes to the legitimacy of the war on Iraq, he glibly says, "My dog is currently taking a rest from this fight." Yet, his dog clearly is engaged when he writes, "What is critically at stake in responding to terrorism is that we be justified in what we do, rather than that we be just in what we do; it would be wonderful to be just, of course, but justice is not always possible." This is a course that takes us to Abu Ghraib, to Guantánamo, to unconstrained drone attacks with their collateral damage, to FISA courts and unaccountable surveillance. It is the theology of the

national security state.

[John Olinger lobbies in Washington and occasionally reviews books for the *National Catholic Reporter*.]

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