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STRA

NGE

DAYS

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT  
IN A TIME OF UPHEAVAL

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE OF EVERY SOCIETY

No secular society exists or has ever existed. However religion is defined, all institutions, structures, and patterns of behavior have religious features. All cultures are infused with values and actions that have religious dimensions and overtones. Whether they name the name of a known god or not, societies and cultures are always patterned by some ultimate inspiration and aspiration.”<sup>1</sup> So writes Peter Leithart in *Elements of the World*. What he says here introduces a fundamental principle for moving ahead. Humans are not just social creatures, but religious ones, too. The root of the word “culture” is *cultus*, a Latin word meaning “to care, or tend a sacred site of worship.” Culture is an expression of worship. For contemporary Westerners attuned to the idea that faith is a private belief in a supernatural being, this can be a new and jarring thought. We may see ourselves as thoroughly secular, but our lives and societies are contoured to religion. The complexities of the world, so

often seemingly random, become clearer when we understand the religious impulses behind our social architecture.

Leithart notes that behind all social architecture, be it ancient or modern, Western or non-Western, are “practices concerning holiness, purity, and sacrifice.”<sup>2</sup> These are the rules, rituals, relationships, and social structures that organize life. They are arranged around concepts of who is in and who is out (borders); what makes a person, place, or thing pure and safe (purity); and what practices defend the purity of a border against what is dangerous, unclean, and unholy (sacrifice).

We see the elements of borders, purity, and sacrifice throughout the story of Omar Mateen’s attack on the Pulse nightclub in Florida.

In a painfully awkward interview following the shooting, CNN host Anderson Cooper confronted conservative Attorney General of Florida Pam Bondi with the fact that he had searched through her history of tweets, and that she had not shown enough historical support of the LGBT community. This accusation seemed to capture a mood among many progressives, born of the belief that Omar Mateen’s actions were not primarily an act of ISIS-inspired terrorism but due rather to a broader atmosphere of homophobia. A protest in the wake of the shootings was fronted by a banner proclaiming that fault for the shooting lay with Republicans. We can see in the progressive response to radical Islam a desire to find the real source of evil, locating it not in radical Islam but rather the looming pollution of homegrown bigotry. Another manifestation of the religious elements, a desire to see borders of the West purified from the pollutant of discrimination.

Additionally, after the attack calls came in for tighter controls on Muslim immigration or even a total ban. In response to Islamic migration and terrorist attacks in the West, especially following the migrant crisis, government officials have been pressured to give greater acknowledgment to the threat of Islamic radicalism. Others have lobbied governments that the Judeo-Christian roots of Western society be preserved in the face of growing Islamic minorities. That concrete action beyond simple law enforcement be taken to contain the threat, which had taken on the form of a cultural battle between the Christian West and Islam. Ignoring the fact that most ISIS-inspired attacks in the West were committed by lone wolves born in the West, seduced by online propaganda, the belief was that this contagion could be kept at bay by strengthening borders and boundaries, by keeping the infection out. The enemy was “out there,” not inside. *The danger was conveyed as an existential threat to the West itself.* The West, in such a response, is imagined as a kind of sacred space. In this response we see the elemental building blocks at play, the concept of a pure space, of purification, of sacrifice.

But it's not just Western Christians who seek to defend their space. Undoubtedly, the Pulse nightclub was attacked because it was a gay nightclub, and ISIS, alongside radical jihadists, sees homosexuality as a capital offense. But read ISIS and jihadi statements, justifications and press releases, and you see that Islamic terrorists have an incredibly broad definition of immorality. They are offended by homosexual acts, but also by intermingling of the sexes, dancing, photographs of humans, alcohol, cigarettes, and trouser cuffs that touch the ground.

Mateen's original target was Disney World, abandoned because of its tight security. ISIS's justification for targeting its Paris attacks at The Eagles of Death Metal concert at the Bataclan theater was not that it wanted to attack people having fun, but rather that it was a den of prostitution in need of purification. In Turkey, radical Islamists attacked a gathering of bookish hipsters enjoying a listening party for the new Radiohead album because they say it is immoral. Ironically, many fans interpreted the lyrics of the lead single, "Burn the Witch," as a commentary against the growing groupthink and authoritarianism in the world, the desire to protect communities from the threat of the "outsider."

The idea that progressives, vehemently opposed to those who hold to a traditional view of sexuality and family life, would appear to offer apology for radical Islam would be too much for some. This mood would intersect with the sentiment established by the New Atheism of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—that the truest threat to the West's liberal tolerant society was the intolerance of religions, most notably in the form of Islam. In other words, religion is the culprit.

In Europe this mood has been fermenting for some time. European far-right figures such as Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen publicize themselves as defenders of women and the LGBT community against the dangers of immigration and Islam. Some European countries, opposed to physical walls on their borders, instead proposed erecting cultural boundaries, showing potential migrants images and videos of men kissing, or women bathing topless, to communicate they'd feel out of place in Europe.

In this configuration of the religious elements, the most important line between insider and outsider falls not between Muslim and Christian, or theist and atheist, but adherence to the dogma of Western sexual freedom.

So you see that not just the West but indeed the world is becoming a construction site where walls—physical, cultural, and spiritual—are being simultaneously erected and torn down. All in an effort to keep the chaos at bay, to reach for the purity of a utopia, to find a sense of home, and security. A map is emerging, a compass with which to navigate the complexities of our world. “Locate the sacred center of a group; its boundaries of tolerable and intolerable persons, objects and behavior; its rituals of sacrifice—discover all this and you have got down to the elementary particles.”<sup>3</sup>

**SACRED BOUNDARIES**



**SACRIFICES**

Humans are God-centered creatures; even when we run from Him we still create religious systems and structures. The world, our cultures, is crisscrossed with religious lines.

## GLOBALIZATION

Because of our flesh, our mortality, and our human condition, our boundaries are important. They are imbued with deep, transcendent meaning, guiding beyond the individual to a greater truth. They offer means of understanding the world and processing our experiences. They are beacons of guidance.

So when boundaries are moved, reimaged, made porous, or disappear, confusion and conflict are introduced, and anxiety arises. "All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins,"<sup>4</sup> writes anthropologist Mary Douglas. For example South Africa, during white rule, was isolated from the world, cut off by sanctions and international condemnation. However, in post-apartheid South Africa, connected again to the global economy, a recent spate of racist attacks against migrants has been perpetrated by those who only a few decades ago suffered under the racist apartheid policy. Those who felt a sense of solidarity in suffering now respond to the porousness of their own borders with anxiety, prejudice, and fear of the outsider. The victims of racism, becoming perpetrators.

Globalization feels like a threat because it disrupts our boundaries. It upsets our equilibrium. This is the tension the world is feeling. Benjamin Barber, in *Jihad vs. McWorld*, says globalization makes the world seem as if it is "falling precipitously apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment."<sup>5</sup> It makes everywhere seem like everywhere else. Thomas Friedman, in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, similarly defines globalization as "the inexorable integration of markets,



nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, cheaper than ever before.”<sup>6</sup> Globalization integrates cultures, expanding our ability to reach around the world and move across boundaries. For traditional societies, meaning is found in the correct and sacred ordering of space and time. Globalization radically rearranges both.<sup>7</sup>

Consider the effects of globalization on our familiar places, for example. Increasingly we find the same stores, food, fashions, and lifestyles in the world’s major cities. So it can seem like cultures are losing their cohesion and uniqueness. Our familiar markers, rituals, and traditions are changing, bringing anxiety. A letter to the editor in my local paper today is a prime example. An older resident of my neighborhood, lamenting the incredible changes in the area of the last year. The streets that were once quiet and community minded, now punctured with growing skyscrapers, built for short-term leasers and foreign students, funded by overseas investment. The demolishment of vintage homes and local landmarks by foreign investors. The lightning-quick demographic shift, from a family area to a predominantly mainland Chinese population, of short term renters, and overseas students. The letter filled with a mourning, a culture shock, a lament at a lost sense of community, of “home” disappearing. Such senses of loss and displacement drive some to religion, but they also fuel and are exploited by populist parties on the far reaches of the right and left. Because they involve a deep sense of home, a spiritual hole, they create in us religious responses. Through



globalization, the world—both good and bad—is brought close, and boundaries lose their integrity. The trajectory of globalism crosses borders, reconfiguring or even eliminating them. Our sense of having a place—be it home, motherland, tribe, or people—is weakened or even destroyed.

Even the socioeconomic dynamics of globalization—specifically global capitalism and the Internet—work against the maintenance of place, boundaries, and borders. For some, globalization brings not wealth but the displacement of poverty. Farmers flee to the city to find work. The economic forces of globalization create a new class of jet-setters but also economic refugees. Globalization creates winners and losers, and the losers often lose their sense of home. Friedman notes that the effects of globalization are “producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by this new system.”<sup>8</sup> Whole industries can be moved to foreign locales, in order to benefit from cheaper overheads and a lower wages. Entire towns, cities, and regions, built around certain industries, in particular manufacturing, can be devastated overnight.

There is even a spiritual application to Friedman’s observation. The boundary-eliminating momentum of globalization can push us into spiritual poverty, as the markers that illuminated and protected great meanings disappear. This process leaves many disoriented and directionless, looking for ways of remarking the borders and boundaries. They become spiritually *placeless* because the *boundaries of locations sacred and pure to them are punctured, crossed, or abused*. Western secularism likes to imagine that religion can be relegated to the private sphere, an internalized personal faith that is easily transported,

and malleable. However, as we have discovered, faith, culture, and society are deeply connected. Religion is not as flexible as those who do not really believe in it imagine.

And so, whether it affects spatial, cultural, economic, or spiritual familiarity, globalization can feel like one big disruption, rattling the core of who we are. You can imagine it like this:



As globalization stretches our borders, erases meanings and traditions, and our concepts of place are renegotiated, possibilities and problems emerge. Migrants can, in a new land or city, seek out religious communities, often initially for practical purposes. Faith can be found or deepened. Religious community strengthened. Belief revived and passed through an international chain of relationships. At the same time however, as frustrations grow, religion and culture can retreat, violently lashing out at dominant cultures, seeing them as enemies intent on overrunning everything that is sacred. As one migrant character in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* notes, the fear that locals sometimes have of their culture being erased by migrants is nothing compared to the fear the migrant has that their own

culture will be decimated by the new culture they find themselves in. Culturally and religiously disoriented, more radical and dangerous forms of religion, ideology, and nationalism can take hold; for example, more terrorist attacks per capita are committed by Belgian Muslims from Brussels, than most Muslim nations.<sup>9</sup>

Rapid cultural dislocation can create a powder keg. However, it is important to note that the proponents of globalization are not just advocates for an economic order, which connects the world through trade and migration, but also of the belief that globalization's erasing of borders, place, and local meanings is essential for humankind's development. This belief runs deep in the Western imagination, still driving much of the ideological force of globalization. It is to this history we must turn next.

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