



“Fight Against the Serpent”: Fundamentalist Terror from Nat Turner to Al Qaida in Fiction and Nonfiction

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Abstract

Religion is increasingly present in human relations worldwide. Generally acting as trigger of violence, and using propagandas like the one which inspired the rebellion conducted by Nat Turner, an African American slave in 1831, or that which stimulated the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 in the USA, religious rhetoric is what nurtures the diverse political, cultural and social conflicts. Through a critical survey of key fiction and non-fiction texts like *The Confession of Nat Turner* (1967) by William Styron, or *Beyond Fundamentalism* (2010) by Reza Aslan, a professor of Creative writing, or again the HRW's 2017 report on politico-religious unrest in Northern Mali, we show how the religious argument, turned in its violent expression, is used as instrument for identity restoration.

Keywords: Religion; Fundamentalism; Terrorism; Identity; Nat turner; Al Qaida.

1. Introduction

The question of religious insurgency has become a serious issue in inter-human relations in the past as well as in contemporary global context. In 1831, a moment when slavery was a legal institution in the United States of America, the rebellion conducted by Nat Turner, described as the bloodiest and most celebrated slave rebellion in the US history, was planned under religious inspiration. More recently at the dawn of the 21st century, the attack on the US World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 by the affiliate members of Al Qaida had also been meticulously elaborated under the influence of religious ideas.

And yet religion, as it is notorious, is not intrinsically violent. As Reza Aslan writes in *Beyond Fundamentalism* (2010), “no religion is inherently violent or peaceful; people are violent or peaceful” (p.9). If “people are violent or peaceful” as the professor of Creative Writing observes, then it becomes urgent to question man's use of religion as instrument in socio-political, cultural and economic arguments. At a moment of global spiritual liberalization, it is important for the researcher to question people's use of Islam, Christianity or any other spiritual principles in the struggle for affirmation worldwide.

In this work, it is of our interest to dig into religious-inspired insurgencies, starting from Nat Turner's rebellion against slavery in 1831 to contemporary fundamentalist attacks of which September 11, 2001 World Trade Center has been a significant trigger. Based on landmark texts from fiction and non-fiction books like *The Confession of Nat Turner* (1967), critical essays, articles, and reports by Non Governmental Organizations, our study probes into the question of violence in human experience in relation with religion, with the objective of showing how the latter is used as instrument of identity restoration.

2. The Disarticulation of Secular Identity

2.1. The Blow to One's Sense of Self

It always starts with prophetic phrases like the one Nat Turner used to appoint himself the destiny of a great figure: a person recognized by blacks and whites alike as “intended for some great purpose” [1]. Sometimes, it is also a religious slogan like the ones the hijackers of September 11 attack received: “Nothing will keep you from your task. ...this is a battle for the sake of God” [2]. The violence inferred by the actions of extremist and fundamentalist groups has become increasingly widespread, and it spares no one today in urban cities as well as in remote counties and villages everywhere in the world. As the blast of mine and car bombs causes injury and trauma on the innocent people in Africa, America, Europe, or in Asia, the religious arguments put forth by its initiators intrigue the world opinion. The questions which arise, thus, are the following: why is religion so preponderant in the relations between human communities in a time of spiritual liberalization? Are religious values really compatible with the violence which has captured the actions of fundamentalist movements in the past as well as in today's societies? To put it simply, was it necessary for Nat Turner, in the slave society of early 19th century America, or for religious militants who claim for membership in Islamic groups today to kill for religious motives?

It would be interesting, as we answer these questions, to dig into the real place that religion takes in the lives of people, and particularly its significance in the shaping of identity. For, although we may underestimate the influence of spirituality in the lives of people, religion seems to have a much stronger impact on human being today than it has ever had in the past. As Reza Aslan writes in *Beyond Fundamentalism* (2010), the number of world's population who identify themselves as Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, or Hindu has evolved from one half at the dawn of the 20th century to two third "over one hundred years of social progress, technological innovation, and scientific advancement" (p.14). When we take into account the progress achieved within this century time, the idea that the conservative or fundamentalist believers are the most numerous of these religious affiliates is really striking news.

One important aspect which shows the tight hold of religion on the lives of people in the world, and probably its most notable influence on the faithful worldwide is the fact that it always becomes the measure of one's identity; and this, whether or not it is with Muslims, Christians, or Hindus. The direct implication of this is that religion, in the end, takes the place of what traditionally serves to define this identity for people. Reza Aslan again accurately observes that in many parts of the world, religion is fast becoming the supreme identity, encompassing and even superseding ethnicity, culture, and nationality" (p.15)¹

In the time of slavery, this situation of religious hegemony was clearly manifested in the lives of slaves. As every slave whose existence was crucial for the survival of the slave system, Nathaniel Turner informally called Nat Turner was literally imbued with religious education. Born in the system of slavery in October 2, 1800, Nat Turner lived the ordinary life of slave with an instruction in the religious obedience. Recognized in an early age as singularly intelligent, Turner had not really caught the attention of the public until he conducted his rebellion in August 1831. Only at that time he became the focus of attention from the public; and at that same time the suspicion grew from legal authorities, notable about possible rebellious action from all the blacks in the slave society.

Just as it is important to know the trauma of this uprising in the slave society, it is also crucial to determine the link between its religious motivations and the question of identity. In all the sources consulted in the context of this study, Nat Turner is presented as a person formatted in the religious education by his parents, especially in compliance with the requirements of the slave institution. In *Slave Religion and the Bible* (2006), Hannele Kupianen provides rich materials about this religious education. Citing a social study undertaken by African American scholar W. E. B. Dubois, Kupianen writes that the contribution of Turner's father to his religious formatting was very important [3]. As a preacher, Hannele kupianen continued citing Dubois's work, the father of Nat Turner monitored him, "setting him apart for 'the gospel ministry' with the church and visiting preachers" [4]. The most relevant evidence of Turner's religious attachment is derived from the testimony that is produced in the form of fiction by William Styron in 1967, and which is a corpus of this study. According to this testimony, indeed, his devotion to piety was so singular and his intelligence so remarkable that he avoided "mixing in society, and [he wrapped himself] in mystery, devoting [his] time to fasting and prayer" (p.30)

Obviously with such an impregnation with the religious education, and given the notoriety this implies, Nat Turner was brought to believe that "[he] would never be of any service to anyone, as a slave" (p.29). With this statement, it becomes clear that Turner's engagement in the radical action is linked to the status he built of himself as religious leader. As a black who identified himself with the role of preacher and prophet, Turner thought that he deserved protection from working like the common black slaves. For example, he believed that this informal religious status and the principles of justice and equality he learned in the Bible would spare him the hardship of field work. This privilege, he apparently relished in the property of Joseph Travis, one of his masters as he testified in *The Confession* (1967):

[...] Travis gave into my keeping one of two sets of keys. I had plenty enough to do, but I cannot honestly say that my work here was toilsome; unlike Moore, Travis was no task-master, being by nature unable, I think, to drive his servants unreasonably ... my duties, compared to what I had been used to, were light and fairly free of strain: I kept the place clean and added my shoulder to a job when extra strength was needed ... (40-41)

It is important to consider this statement; for as long as Nat Turner benefited from relatively less "toilsome" chores, and his tasks did not affect his religious occupations, he could tolerate the situation. As he testified, "all things being equal, from the beginning of my stay with Travis, I was in as palmy and benign a state as I could remember in many years" (p.41). For Turner, thus, the slave system is to be blamed for not respecting the sacred mission that the Christian religion confers on the black religious leader. Making the principles of justice the principles of his life, Turner realized, to his disenchantment, that the system which constrained blacks to life slavery was intolerable in terms of human rights.

Central in shaping the identity of most confessional groups, religion has permitted most of such groups to face the aggressions of modernization in today's society, more than it has ever done in the past. Among the aspects of this modernization, globalization is the most precutting because of its potential to curbing the contours of culture, history, and politics not to speak of the economy. Norms everywhere are taking extra-territorial pattern, as the Western standards become the measures imposed to all the institutions everywhere, pushing off the standards of other communities.

Even if modern scholars have not paid notable attention to this, the impact of globalization on the benefits consolidated by religious values was cruelly manifest in the period of slavery. The opening of the Western world to global trade in the early capitalism of the 17th and 18th century, and the growing interest in the capital inherent to the new economic system brought a blow to the sacred values that spirituality had contributed to build in religious societies like the USA. In the face of patent violations of human rights and moral principles by the adepts of slavery,

¹ - For further details see Talal Asad (2007), *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 25-35.

who were also ironically the defenders of the American liberty and democracy, and in order to bring the appropriate response to the violence of institutionalized bondage, the community of faithful then is turned into warrior-protectors of these values.

2.2. Reaction to Human Bondage and Earthly Sins

For Nat Turner, the defense of human rights becomes possible within a three-phase ritual. Typical to the Revelations in the Bible, this ritual is: Prophecy, Vision, and Action. In figurative as well as in real allusions, Nat Turner's discourse in *The Confession* (1967) reflects the story of Jewish people kept in bondage in Egypt. It is true that *The Confession* (1967) is written by a white writer, and is controversial for its poor portrayal of Nat Turner. Even if it is considered as a second-hand document, written from the original record by Thomas R. Gray, who first interrogated Nat Turner before he was executed, it provides sufficient items for critical assessment. Our objective, as a researcher, is not to make any judgment of insurgent actions but to assess the link between these insurgencies and religion; a link which has become the principal marker of identity for the oppressed people which Nat Turner embodies in the American society.

To assess the impact of religion on Nat Turner's insurgent actions is to determine the extent to which these actions remain informed by the principles of spirituality. As a fervent adept of the Christian rituals and preacher of informal black church during slavery, Turner used the hardship of the Jewish enslaved in Egypt as instrument for interpreting the situation of African slavery in America. This instrumentalization of the slave experience was not only operated with the symbols and figures of the Bible as one can notice in *The Confession* (1967); it was also performed through sacred and prophetic rituals like the ones which urged to the uprising on August 21, 1831. The first of these rituals are prophetic proclamations, like the one which attributed to Turner the destiny of a person "intended for some great purpose" (p.29). The "great purpose" was for him the fact of assuming the responsibility of preacher, that's to say a person who plays at the same time the role of spiritual and political leader. In *The Soul of Black Folks* (1903), Dubois presents the scope of this black preacher's personality in the context of slave society. "The preacher", he writes, "is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss', an intriguer, an idealist, – all these he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number" (Quoted in [4]).

The prophetic proclamations were chiefly taken from the Book of Prophets in the Bible, used as a source of inspiration for Nat Turner in his project of insurrection. Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, are biblical figures cited by Nat Turner all along his life and religious activities. They serve as spiritual guides and energy in his venture of justice restoration. Of all the prophecies, the one drawn from Ezekiel's vision is the most decisive to Nat Turner. In this vision, one man is instructed to put marks of life on the foreheads of people who will be spared, while the others are doomed to death. On page 45, these inciting writings read as follows:

[...] go through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof [...] Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark [...] [1]

As a spiritual leader and defender of the oppressed, Nat Turner takes these words initially drawn from Ezekiel's vision, adapts them to his experience of slavery and the one of his fellow black men. He then uses the instructions within this prophecy as justification for his project of attack. In addition to helping liberate his people, oppressed by one hundred years and odds enslavement, these writings are also meant to cleanse the soul of America by wiping out the white slaveholders.

In the same way as prophetic proclamations are instrumental in implementing the slave revolt conducted by Nat Turner in 1831, a series of events one of which is a solar eclipse also play a great part to it. After a long period of fasting, indeed, Nat Turner is exhausted. Retreated in the bush, he senses a sudden change in the atmosphere in broad day light, as the "stark shadows of the barren wintry trees grow hazy and dull" (p.275). For Turner who sees in this cosmic event a divine sign, God has made a crucial call for his mission. The next day, he receives the visit of four of his followers and sets up the plan for the attack:

I told them the seal had been removed from my lips and that I had received the last sign. [...] the Spirit had informed me that the Serpent was loosened and the Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men. I went on patiently to explain that the Spirit had commanded that I should take on the yoke and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first' [1]

The solar eclipse convinces the self-proclaimed preacher about a divine mission, which is nothing but terminate the struggle that the Christ had started: "take on the yoke and fight against the Serpent". Here as Nat Turner identifies with the Christ, he assumes a much global mission, a messianic responsibility which is the acceptance of death expressed by the term "yoke". In accepting the ultimate sacrifice, Turner also accepts to heal the evil of slavery which is symbolized by "the Serpent". The rebellion in preparation is, thus, for Turner and his followers a sequence of acceptance of death as this death wipes slavery –"the Serpent"— out of the surface of American soil. Here again, the self-appointed preacher shows how the events of the Bible can be adapted to the dramatic situation of black slaves in America. By using the text of the Apocalypse, Nat Turner shows great talent in making white slaveholders suffer the wrath that God put on the world sinners in the Bible.

Religious fundamentalism in the Christian world, and particularly in the context of slavery in the United States of America, is thus based on the necessity to protect human dignity and the freedom that the system of bondage has denied to the profit of the growing capitalism and material accumulation of the late 18th and early 19th century. Ironically enough, this defense of Human Rights did not emanate from the centre of political power, which would have been logical given the traditional responsibility of legal authorities toward their populations. On the contrary in

America, this fight for the restoration of moral authority was held by the marginal people, whose identity and actions were shaped by the principles of Christian religion. As the liberal system grows and sets up global mechanisms of exchanges which develop to the expense of basic principles of human life, the defenders of religious identity become the soldiers of the national identity, and resort to different actions including violence. For the preacher and antislavery militant Nat Turner, the religious insurgency was not political conspiracy as the trial upon the rebellion concluded; it was heroic battle inspired by the holy scriptures of the Bible. From the stand point of the religious militant, it opened the way to everlasting bliss. Now what is of Islamic insurgencies in the world, and particularly in the USA?

3. In Between Political Militancy and Spirituality: Islamic Fundamentalism

3.1. The Paradigm of Global Spiritual Cohabitation

With Christian religion in general and Nat Turner in particular, we saw that spiritual fundamentalism is stimulated by the need to preserve self identity on the one hand—the one that religious education has contributed to shape—and to fight for freedom on the other hand. In the case of Islamic faith, the question of fundamentalism grows within the context of local political controversies as well as in the international competition of civilizations. To begin with, it is important to know that the general movement of globalization, which set values in interactions worldwide, has so far operated in the form of hegemonic confrontation. At the level of spirituality, this confrontation takes a particularly radical turn. This is due to the fact that two of the main monotheist religions, Christianity and Islam, share in values and principles which are to a large extent identical and mutually opposed. One of these values is faith, which in Islam is built according to Onyango and Elijah [5] on three key points: (1) the uniqueness of God, framed in the formula: “One God alone”; (2) the community of faithful called “Ummah” is God’s chosen people; (3) the Koran is the revelation of God’s will and his covenant with his creation.

These three rules found the Islamic faith and are not fundamentally different from the ones that shape the Christian faith; and like in Christianity, they remain the basic components that serve to configure the Muslim’s identity. But contrary to Christianity which makes a difference between the power of spiritual identity and the power of political structures in the social setting, in Islam faith is the focal point of political legitimacy. To paraphrase researcher Elijah Onyango, in Islam, faith and the community of the faithful—the ummah—have been “the principal foci of loyalty and commitment” (194). This is not to deny that the structure of political loyalty among the Christians has been different all the time. It means, on the contrary, that Christianity has reached a situation of separation from the core of the body politics at a significant stage, so that issues involving the competences of legal authority are rarely mingled into those of the clergy.

In contrast, for Muslims, there is no such distinction between the sovereign authority and the authority invested by Allah. Both are fused into a common structural power and nurtured in what [6] terms as “belief in the sovereignty of Allah and the primacy of the ummah”².

This allegiance in the sole sovereignty of Allah has brought the Muslims to a high sense of assimilation into the world designed by the Koran. As a result, they—the Muslims—have become reluctant to accept other world views and values, and especially the one deriving from the Western civilization. This is where the shoe pinches, for given the context of globalization, which is synonymous to competition and offensive expansion of cultures and diversity of values, not any social entity is spared from external influences. As the world de-territorializes everywhere and values capture the universal pattern imposed by globalization, the customs that define the contours of communities bound together by specific ideals like religion are put under pressure. At that point, the guardians of such groups become alert and ready to develop strategies for resistance. Referring to this resistance, Reza Aslan writes that “[...] when it comes to the power of transnational identities to challenge nationalist ones, no force exerts a greater pull than religion” (p.25).

In the face of the offensive surge of global values, and as long as these take the form of controlling forces, propelled in a way or another by Western domination ideologies, the development of religious organizations cannot but grow in power for retaliation and survival. This is what brought to the birth of Islamic groups like Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement), Boko Haram, and Al Qaida, each of which is committed to radical political as well as military militancy.

3.2. The Political Surge in Religious Fundamentalism: Islamist Terror today: a Resonance of Socio-political and Cultural Disputes

Islamist terror is the radical development that results from the collusion between religion and the different forms of socio-political and cultural developments. Based on the project of building a state which evolves upon distinctly Islamic moral values, Islamic terror has created the most threatening insurgency that we know today as terrorism. In terms of perception, the notion of terrorism varies significantly from one person to another. According to the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary* (2002), terrorism refers to “the use of violence, especially murder and bombing in order to achieve political aims or to force a government to do something”.

Using “violence, [...] murder and bombing in order to achieve political aims” is basically a political expression. This political perception of terrorism contrasts with the initial humanistic view developed in the Muslim circles,

²- T. Bjorgo is quoted by Elija Onyango in *Religious Fundamentalism and Terrorism* (2014), p.8. For further reading see T. Bjorgo ed. (2005), *Root Causes of Terrorism. Myths, reality and ways forward*. London, Routledge; Graham E. Fuller (2003), *The future of Political Islam*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p.86-89; [7].

where terrorism is perceived as a commitment closer to the Jihad and to the rule of justice and equality. According to the Islamists, indeed, terrorism is the expression of the boldest commitment from the Muslim to fight on the spiritual, social, personal and political spheres of life in order to restore “justice and a classless society in which the poor are treated with respect” [5].

Whether it is for political motives and related to the decision to exercise political power on the basis of religious principles as one can see with the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, or it is derived from humanistic impulse, the image of violence associated with Islamist insurgency rouses more than one question in the public opinion about Islam in particular, and more generally about religion. One of these questions is the following: Why do we have to resort to violence as a mode of claiming? This interrogation is all the more pertinent as Islam is not intrinsically considered as a violent religion, as it is recommended in the Koran in the following terms: “Thou shall not kill”; or the faithful shall “slay not the life that God has made sacred”. (Chap 5:V12).

In spite of the attachment to the creed of non-violence, Islam has achieved some of its bloodiest actions in the past twenty years. Undoubtedly the virulent militant actions of today’s Islamists or Christians are the boldest responses to past theological expansions conducted by historical spiritual leaders like the Prophet Muhammad, who is reported to have conquered Mecca and a large territory of Western Arabia, and turned the ancient pilgrimage site of Kaaba into a center of Muslim worship between 610 A.D. and 630 A. D. [8]. Even if the Islamists put forth humanitarian arguments in the assaults they perpetrate today, the political motives seem to take a significant impulse in these assaults. Not only are violence and the Jihad clear illustration that violence is not excluded from Islam, but both [violence and the Jihad] also indicate that religious expression is also embedded in the politic of terror, more than one can imagine.

One significant aspect of the political surge in the religious claiming is the argument put forth in the attack on the World Trade Centers in 2001. A careful reading of the statement that exposes Ben Laden’s inciting the Muslim to undertake the attack reveals the political as well as the cosmic motive:

In compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in a country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (Mecca), from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty God, and fight the pagans all together as they fight you altogether, and fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevails justice and faith in God³.

To exhort the Muslims to “kill the Americans and their allies” in order to chase them from the holy sites of Islam—Al-Aqsa mosque, lands of Islam, etc.—is clear political claiming just as it is a call for Jihad and to what Reza Alban refers to as “cosmic war”, that is “a war fought with earthly participants but in reality is assumed as actually taking place in the heavens” (2010: 9). For the adepts of Al-Qaida movement, as Ben Laden had summoned them to do, the killing of American soldiers and civilians as a response to their occupation of holy sites of Islam is an action of political and cosmic commitment.

The term Al-Qaida used to name the rebel movement, alone, attests to this otherworldly mission. Al-Quaida, as Elijah Onyango writes quoting K. Armstrong, is “the war name of God and means ‘he who dominates and breaks the back of his enemies’” [5]⁴. As such it plays the role of a movement of combat. In fighting Western armies from the holy sites of Islam, it is not only the sites that the movement is protecting; it is also and more importantly protecting the whole religion of Islam. In the end, Al-Qaida or the late Ben Laden and its later followers becomes as Reza Aslan calls: “the last line of defense against the forces that seek to annihilate Islam” [2].

The political and cosmic insurgency which is known to Al-Qaida is also perceptible in the religious insurgency which is going on in Africa, precisely in the North and Sub-Saharan region. In the Republic of Mali, it was initially a political claiming of auto-determination, raised by a northern local group of Touareg—National Movement of Liberation of Azawad (NMLA)—which launched a movement of rebellion. Started in January 2012, this politico-ethnic upheaval became rapidly caught up in the Islamist interests, which were already lurking in the region. Active in these Islamist organizations are one local Arab militia located in Tumbuctu, the West African Jihad Unification Movement (MUJAO), the Ansar Dine, and Al-Qaida. Each of these constellations of fundamentalist groups used the opposition to the systemic corruption and the exclusion of northern populations from political governance as pretext for claiming for an alternative system of ruling based on Islam.

Growing in power as a result of the chaos created by a military overthrow of the government of the republic of Mali led by the late Amani Toumani Toure in March 2012, these fundamentalist groups were determined to impose the Islamic ruling—the “Sharia”—in the northern region: GAO, Kidal and Tumbuctu. Surprisingly enough, this Islamic ruling resulted in different forms of abuses. According to a report produced by international organization [9] (HRW), Islamic fundamentalist ruling brought about innumerable crimes including raping, pillage, forced enrolment of children in their organizations, and destruction of historic sites of memory. HRW reports that in 2012, Islamists in northern Mali killed at least seventy (70) members of governmental soldiers in the local city of Aguelhoc [9].

Whether it is in Africa, Asia, or in the United States of America, the islamist insurgency, reputed as terrorism, is motivated by the need to preserve the identity of the religious community, “the ummah” as Onyango terms it. But the political argument is also significant and sometimes predominant in the violent assault. As one can see with the

³ - A. Rashid (2002), quoted by Elija Onyango in *Religious Fundamentalism and Terrorism* (2014); For further details see A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 2002.

⁴ - K. Armstrong quoted by Elijah Onyango in “Religious Fundamentalism and Terrorism”, *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict*, Vol2, N°1, 2014, p.197. For further details see K. Armstrong, *A History of God*, London, Heinemann, 1993.

rebellion in Mali or with the attack on the World Trade Center in the USA, some nationalist considerations and local controversies in relation to governance are motives for conflict today more than one can imagine.

4. Conclusion

It is not an exaggeration to assert after Aslan Reza [2] that religion is fast becoming the supreme identity, encompassing and even superseding ethnicity, culture, and nationality". A careful retrospective look to all human communities where religion has been predominant, spiritual values take such an important place in the lives of people that they become the principal marker of their identity.

In the slave society of 19th century America, it is this role of identity marker that the Christian religion assumed over the two hundred and fifty years time of bondage. Serving as instrument for controlling the deported African community into keeping the economic apparatus to work perfectly for the benefit of white planters, religion has ended up to shape for slaves a status of saints, which means a type of elected people, who must be kept away from the moral depletion of slavery. Nat Turner, the leader of the most spectacular rebellion against the slave system is described in Styron's *The Confession* (1967) as a man who had devoted all his life to worship, and as such he considered himself as a saint. On behalf of the status of preacher, he considered that he should be spared from hard work and other debased tasks of slavery. The uprising he conducted in 1831 can be considered as a direct response to the blow to the sense of religious identity shaped into him and the community of the faithful he represented. Turner's rebellious action was thus the expression of religious militant, who is set to fight against the system of slavery perceived as the devil—the serpent.

In the same way, the numerous violent actions of islam-inspired fundamentalist organizations worldwide are most of them centered on this idea of serpent. The serpent is embodied in the harm caused by the abuse in moral/sacred principles like the presence of U.S. military troops in the Arabic world. It is this situation perceived as unjust and unacceptable in terms of sacredness which was used as motive for terrorist attacks on the World trade Center by the members of Al Qaida, on September 11, 2001.

The serpent has also a political connotation when it takes the sense of default in the social and political ruling, as it is the case with the rebellion which is underway in Northern Mali. Throughout this critical survey of records of different forms, we have shown how some basic principles of religion are used as instruments in the violent agenda of extremist organizations.

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