Frances L. Flannery
Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset.
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Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset by Frances Flannery is a must-read for scholars of apocalypticism, both ancient and contemporary; given the commonalities (and interconnectedness) of gnosticism and apocalypticism, as noted by scholars such as G. Scholem and G. Stroumsa, Flannery’s work is valuable also for those who study Gnosticism, mysticism and esotericism.

Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism is published within Routledge’s Political Violence series, which contains other valuable resources on apocalypticism, and Flannery’s contribution to the series is significant on many fronts. As Flannery points out, too often intelligence experts and political scientists have not taken seriously enough the religious worldview which motivates various international actors—nor have they valued or taken advantage of the knowledge brought to the table by scholars of religion. Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism provides readers with a significant resource to assist them in making sense of complex groups cross-culturally united by a shared commitment to actualizing the end of the world.

The book is aptly named as Flannery gives readers a window into how an apocalyptically-minded community, anticipating a change in the age or world at hand, can morph from one waiting for the divine to initiate change to one intent on bringing about a new age through violent means. Readers can see how apocalypticism as a theological proposition can lend itself to violent extremism and can ultimately be transformed into an entity which no longer reflects well its parent religion. Moreover, readers of Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism can get a glimpse into the motivations and perspectives of the various apocalyptic groups discussed in the book. While never excusing
the violence or justifying injurious points of view, Flannery does try to help her audience apprehend the worldview held by apocalypticists.

Though some readers today might associate apocalyptic terrorism with a limited repertoire of persons or groups, Flannery uses form criticism to identify structural characteristics shared cross-culturally across numerous traditions, one of many strengths of the book. The variety of religious movements surveyed challenges those who might only locate apocalypticism within the Abrahamic traditions. In terms of contemporary high-profile actors, Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism takes up the self-declared “Islamic State,” ISIS/ISIL and Al Qaeda but these sections of the book are amid other in-depth chapters on groups like the Christian Identity movement, eco-terrorists, and Aum Shinrikyo. The result is that readers will not mistake outliers (that is, extremists) as normative for a community they do not know well, for they can see, via Flannery’s book, how easily outliers can emerge from any tradition and distort the host tradition’s teaching and aims.

The book covers an impressive scope even while its design aims to be selective. Flannery focuses on discrete case studies to make various points about apocalyptic terrorists, acknowledging that there are other extremist movements that could be explored. For example, had space permitted, she would have liked to have considered radical Jewish apocalypticism as exhibited by the Kach party or the assassin Yigal Amir, UFO groups such as Heaven’s Gate, and non-white racist radical apocalyptic groups like the united Nuwaubian Nation of Moors. Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism does not intend to be comprehensive, but rather serves “as a starting point of exploration that others may continue” (11).

For readers steeped in Jewish and Christian traditions, the opening chapters on the Book of Revelation provide a helpful starting point. Flannery demonstrates how an apocalyptic book which urges its audience to wait for God and Jesus and to embrace the role of nonviolent martyrdom comes to be interpreted by late antique and medieval readers so as to prompt holy wars and terror against others. Readers who have some familiarity with John’s apocalypse will have the occasion on this journey to see a biblical book used for violent ends, despite John’s intended message. Late antique and medieval imperialists and demagogues promoted their misdeeds with the rich language and images of Revelation, often in a surprising manner. For example, The Tiburtina envisages the emperor Constans as the Word of God taking on Gog and Magog with the eschatological visions of Revelation transposed to the mid-fourth century. Rhetoric to encourage Latin Christians to participate in the Crusades—that is, Christian holy wars—appealed to the topos of the eschatological New