Fighting words

by Stephen Healey in the May 31, 2003 issue

Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11.
By Bruce Lincoln. University of Chicago Press, 142 pp., $25.00.

Modernity has ended twice: in its Marxist form in 1989 Berlin, and in its liberal form on September 11, 2001. In order to understand such major historical changes we need both large-scale and focused analyses--a combination seldom to be found in one volume. But in his brief new book, Bruce Lincoln, Caroline E. Haskell Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, has given us just such a mix of discrete and large-picture analysis. In addition to the six essays collected here, the appendices of relevant primary texts and the ample and learned endnotes merit careful attention.

Lincoln's first three essays were written in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Each advances his general theory of religion--a theory that follows from and is supported by a close, analytical reading of "primary texts": the chilling "Final Instructions to the Hijackers of September 11" found in Mohamed Atta's luggage, George Bush's equally chilling national address immediately after the attack, Osama bin Laden's carefully scripted October 7 reply, and the transcript of Pat Robertson's notorious interview with Jerry Falwell on September 13. (All are included in the book's appendices.)

Working against the current tide of scholarship, Lincoln theorizes that "religion" denotes something real that can be defined. It consists of four domains: discourse (talk and texts about transcendence), practice (what human beings are enjoined to do religiously), community (with whom they do it) and institution (the structure within which they do it). All religions can be expressed in either a maximalist or minimalist fashion. In the former, religion reorders all dimensions of life and culture, often in absolutist terms. In the latter, any given religion is but one dimension of a culture that allows a wide berth to both secular achievement and other religions.

The most interesting aspect of these first three chapters, however, is Lincoln's close textual analysis of Bush, bin Laden, Falwell and Robertson in light of his theory.

Though Lincoln's language can be overwrought, his linguistic and textual analyses always deliver. He demonstrates that Bush and bin Laden have structurally similar arguments, and vested interests that lead them to unexpected positions. Bush, for example, uses minimalist rhetoric in his statecraft, while sending subtle, maximalist clues to his evangelical supporters. Bin Laden's demonic rant against the West is fully religious and self-consistent. Falwell articulates an us/them dualism that rivals bin Laden's. Robertson, on the other hand, is equivocal under the heat of public outrage with Falwell.

In these analyses Lincoln brings to light nuances and shades of meaning that have eluded most other analysts. For this reason alone all teachers and students of religion should read the book and use its method as a guide for interpreting contemporary events and texts. It is as difficult and important to exegete contemporary societies as it is to exegete ancient texts.

The final three essays return to the larger picture. They seek to show the relationship between religion and culture, paying special attention to politics. The deeper trajectory of liberalism (the fissure between religion on the one side, and the autonomous secular realm on the other) is set forth in broad strokes, illustrated by focusing on the history of postcolonial states and the Iranian revolution. Again, students of religion and theology stand to learn by example.

Unfortunately, those who most need to read the book--maximalists like bin Laden, Bush, Falwell and Robertson--are least likely to be convinced by its findings. The reasons for this rejection are not trivial but religious, as Lincoln's large-scale analysis makes clear. Lincoln's critical approach to religious studies is made possible by the modern university's dedication to secular inquiry. That is, minimalism (synonyms: liberalism, Kantianism, secularism, fideism, scientism) is an assumption of the social, political and intellectual context in which religious studies is conducted. To believers of the maximalist stripe, this assumption taints the whole enterprise. Without aiming to, the final three chapters of *Holy Terrors* lay bare the intellectual foundation of religious studies--the university's secular creed, a creed the mujahideen of September 11 understood and rejected. Religious studies can analyze such problems, but it cannot solve them.

The resolution of events like the September 11 attack resides in the dangerous domain of theology or the fatal realm of war. Theology--the normative analysis of religion conducted by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others--alone can deconstruct the foundations of holy terror because theology alone can construe

terror as a holy act. Theology's task is to turn the poisonous hate of believers into a healing balm from which even infidels can benefit. In their time, the Enlightenment liberals accomplished this and brought an intra-Christian bloodbath to an end. Whether theology will be similarly successful in our time has yet to be seen. If it does not succeed, Karl von Clausewitz will emerge as the most pertinent theologian of our time: "War is nothing but a continuation of [theological discourse] with the admixture of different means."