Bloodguilt of a Nation
John Brown, Operation Rescue, and the Fanatical Approach to Politics

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Americans are fundamentally pragmatic and moderate. This is a truism of American political thought. Pragmatism is a "genuine American way of thinking," as Andreas Hess (2000) argues, because it is directed at practical concerns, in contrast to the sort of abstract theorizing that defines European political philosophy. In his classic 1955 book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz (1955) argues that the American political tradition is unanimously liberal because it never had a feudal stage of history. As a result, the United States developed neither a revolutionary tradition aimed at overthrowing the hierarchical social order nor a reactionary one trying to preserve it. Instead, Americans embraced the liberal principles of individual liberty, political equality, free markets, and a limited state almost by nature. The consequence has been a political tradition that eschews abstract, absolute, and extravagant ideas for practical ones that encourage compromise, moderation, and pragmatism.

When it comes to explaining sharp domestic political conflict this perspective tends to blame it on a relatively small group of "extremists" who divide public opinion by refusing to moderate their principles and by silencing the moderate majority. For example, Morris Fiorina asserts in his bestselling *Culture War?* (2006) that the vast majority of Americans are "moderate, centrist, nuanced, [and] ambivalent …rather than extreme, polarized, unconditional, dogmatic." Yet extremists on the right and the left try to polarize the electorate and thus are responsible for "the hijacking of American democracy." According to these voices of moderation, sharp political conflict is often the fault of a relatively small group of extremists who divide public

opinion by refusing to moderate their principles and thereby intimidate the moderate majority.

The paradox of scholarship on American political discourse, then, is that it defines American

political discourse as overwhelmingly moderate while lamenting that extremists control it.

Moderation predominates but fanaticism rules, and the will of the majority is thereby thwarted.

       The paradox is all the more curious in that this fanatical strain in the American political

tradition has scarcely been studied. The pragmatist orthodoxy holds that American thought since

the Puritan era has been overwhelmingly concerned with the solving of practical problems. As

such, it encourages compromise, moderation, and pragmatism, and eschews abstract or radical

ideas. For this reason, existing scholarship on American political thought tends to dismiss

fanaticism as a marginal phenomenon. Meanwhile, studies of extremism have mushroomed

since the events of September 11, 2001, but virtually none of it examines the role of fanaticism

in American political thought, instead focusing on foreign and particularly Islamic forms of

extremism (e.g. Berman 2003, Breton et al 2002). Those studies that do exist on American

extremism tend to view it as a manifestation of deep-seated hatreds held by a marginal portion of

the population (such as white supremacists) whose ideas violently contradict American

democracy (e.g. Dees 1997). None of these approaches examines fanaticism's influence on the

American democratic tradition itself. In other words, the philosophy and function of fanaticism

within the American political tradition goes unexamined even though fanaticism has a long

pedigree within American politics and its impact has sometimes been quite central to American

political development.

       There are two primary sources of fanaticism in American history. The first is white

supremacy and resistance to it. With a few notable exceptions (Shklar 1991, Smith 1997, West

1982), studies of American political thought have tended to underestimate the impact of slavery

and other forms of racial oppression on the United States. Yet the struggle against slavery has been central to the American experience. Further, it often took fanatical forms. The paradigmatic abolitionist fanatic is John Brown (1800-1859). Brown's unwavering opposition to slavery and racism led him to pledge blood feud against slavery. His zealous commitment to the slave led him to kill proslavery forces in Kansas and incite an insurrection at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, which many historians credit for starting the Civil War.

The second source is apocalyptic Protestantism, whose fanatical expression is particularly evident in the anti-abortion movement, which depicts America as in the midst of an epic struggle between a "culture of death" and a "culture of life" (Mason 2002). As the founder of Operation Rescue, a militant organization that engaged in civil disobedience in the 1980s and '90s to shut down health care facilities that provide abortions, Randall Terry (1959-) made full use of an apocalyptic narrative to organize anti-abortion "soldiers" against "the enemies of life" (Terry 1988, 1990). His goal was to end abortion and thereby atone for America's "bloodguilt." In so doing, he helped politicize evangelical Christians, inaugurate the culture wars, and shift the nation's politics rightward (Blanchard 1994).

Brown and Terry fought for very different things in different times, yet both exhibit certain common characteristics in their political thinking and acting. Specifically, both men were fanatics.   The terms fanatic, zealot, and extremist (which I use interchangeably here) are contentious ones, and typically not used in a complimentary or even critical manner, so it is important to define them. There are two ways to view fanaticism. One is as a psychological temperament. In this view, the zealot is a mentally unstable person who is so committed to an idea or cause that she has become irrational and intolerant and dogmatic. She is also ripe to engage in terrorism, since her "narcissistic rage" can easily justify the use of violence to serve

her cause (Juergensmeyer 2000). In this invariably pejorative view, fanaticism is a "disease" that needs to be "cured" (e.g. Newman 1986, Oz 2002). No doubt many fanatics fit this profile. Yet this understanding of fanaticism is too limited because it ignores the *collective* nature of most zealotry. Most fanatics are not isolated psychotics but leaders or members of social movements who are considered "extremist" because they disseminate ideas and engage in actions that go well beyond "mainstream" thought. This second view of fanaticism, then, emphasizes its political nature. Rather than viewing fanaticism as an individual psychological or moral disease, it views it as a particular way of engaging in politics. I adopt this second view in this paper. Extremism is less a psychological temperament and more of an approach to politics. Specifically, fanaticism is *the political mobilization of the refusal to compromise*. It is political activity, driven by an ardent devotion to a cause, which seeks to draw clear lines along a friends/enemies dichotomy in order to mobilize friends and moderates in the service of that cause.[1]

The purpose of this paper is to examine fanaticism as a category of political thought through a comparison of two of the most famous American fanatics, the abolitionist Brown and the pro-lifer Terry. A close reading of the words and deeds of Brown and Terry, I argue, illuminates the features and function of fanaticism in the American political tradition. In addition, it also suggests a critique of political moderation, one that challenges the pragmatist orthodoxy of American political thought.

The key elements of fanaticism include a Manichean worldview of friends versus enemies, a stubborn refusal to compromise on core principles, a desire to mobilize others in the service of these principles by attacking enemies and pressuring moderates, a willingness to

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[1] I explain my critique of the view of fanaticism as a "temperament" and develop my specifically political theory of fanaticism in greater detail in Olson, forthcoming.

engage in (often illegal) direct action on behalf of the principles, a willingness to sacrifice

oneself or others in the struggle, and a desire to implant these principles as "common sense" in

the public consciousness. These elements mark fanaticism as a distinct approach to politics. The

function of the fanatical approach to politics, I argue, is precisely to puncture the pragmatism of

American politics at those moments when moderation seems to be an obstacle to moral or

political reform by suggesting new forms of political imagination and alternative political

arrangements. Such was the situation in the 1850s, in which Brown's fanaticism punctured a

strange silence on slavery caused by a pragmatic desire to preserve the Union and ease North-

South tensions and countered it with a vision of a world without slavery and racial distinctions.

Similarly, Terry argued in the 1980s that extreme action was necessary to overcome the church's

pragmatic approach to abortion, which was to decry it as "murder" but to refuse to act as if it *was*

murder so as not to undermine the church's reputation. He proposed an alternative vision of a

Christian nation that outlaws abortion and other sins against God, placing His law before those of

humans.

　　　Brown and Terry attacked political moderation because they saw it as a form of

complicity with evil. How can one compromise over man-stealing or baby killing? Their

disgust for "moderate" positions on slavery and abortion, respectively, had a significant impact

on the politics and political thought of their time, but it also suggests a contemporary critique of

political moderation. A reading of Brown and Terry reveals that moderation is not a political

virtue, as many commentators today assume. Rather, like fanaticism it is simply an approach to

politics, one that serves democracy and justice at certain times and can undermine them at others.

By challenging the pragmatist orthodoxy, fanaticism reveals moderation's situated nature, and

thus enables a more critical and less hagiographic analysis of the category than it has so far

received in contemporary scholarship.

My argument begins by describing the words and deeds of Brown and Terry and

explaining their significance for American politics. I then use these analyses to set out the basic

elements of the fanatical approach to politics. I conclude by using Brown and Terry to suggest a

critique of moderation as a political virtue. To compare these men and their movements, I

acknowledge, is immediately contentious. Opponents of abortion like to compare themselves to

the abolitionists, arguing that the struggle to protect unborn life is the contemporary counterpart

to the struggle to end human enslavement in the nineteenth century. Supporters of women's

reproductive freedom, however, strongly reject such comparisons, arguing that the abolitionists

sought to expand human rights while the anti-abortion movement tramples on women's rights.

My purpose here is not to evaluate these competing claims. Rather, it is to examine the extremist

wings of the abolitionist and pro-life movements and compare their rationales for fanatical

action. My goal is to understand the significance of rejecting the politics of compromise and

negotiation for fanaticism and unyielding principle.

The fanaticism of John Brown

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1800 (the same year, as Du Bois

notes, of the slave rebellion in Virginia led by Gabriel).[2] He worked numerous jobs in his life,

particularly as a tanner and wool trader, and generally struggled as a businessman. In 1839 he

swore blood feud with slavery, a commitment that would define his life for the next twenty

years. In the battle for Kansas between pro- and antislavery forces he was a leader of the latter

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[2] The information in this paragraph is from Du Bois 1972 and Reynolds 2005.

and involved in numerous battles as well as a revenge killing. During that campaign he also

freed eleven slaves and took them to Canada. In October 1859 he led an armed attack on the

town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and its federal arsenal with the aim of instigating a slave

rebellion that would start in Virginia and rapidly spread south. He failed and was captured by

federal troops led by General Robert E. Lee. He was quickly tried for treason and executed on

December 2, 1859.

Brown's deep opposition to slavery was rooted in his devout Puritanism. He believed

that slavery contradicted God's law. He accepted the Bible as literal truth and had memorized

large portions of it. In his household there were prayers every morning and evening and before

meals (Ruchames 1969, 90, 47, 192). Frederick Douglass once said of Brown, "Certainly I never

felt myself in the presence of a stronger religious influence than while in this man's house"

(quoted in Du Bois 1972, 38). Yet however fervent, faith alone did not make Brown a zealot, for

many people of both his time and ours live deeply in faith without being socially or politically

extremist. Rather, the crux of his fanaticism lay in his profound hatred of racial prejudice.

Simply, John Brown was a race traitor. He believed, as the journal of the same phrase puts it,

that whites in the United States enjoy social, political, and economic privileges over African

Americans and that no justice is possible until they are abolished (Garvey and Ignatiev 1995).

Justice required, in Brown's mind, rejecting the privileges of whiteness, even if it required

setting oneself against white rules and norms. Brown openly flouted such norms by deciding to

live and work among African Americans in North Elba, New York. He also directly challenged

racial privilege, such as the time in Franklin, Ohio, in 1837, when he surrendered his family's

church pew to a group of free Black and fugitive slave worshipers to protest the church's

informal practice of segregating the pews (Ruchames 1969, 186, 189-190; Du Bois 1972, 69-70). And, of course, armed abolitionism constituted the ultimate form of racial treason.

Brown's treason to whiteness was exemplified in his total identification with Black people. As historians such as Du Bois, John Stauffer, and David Reynolds have all noted, John Brown believed in and practiced racial equality to a degree almost unheard of in the United States at the time and achieved by perhaps no other white person besides a handful of Garrisonians such as Wendell Phillips and Abby Kelley (Du Bois 1972, Stauffer 2002, Reynolds 2005). Brown lived, worked, sympathized with, fought alongside of, and understood Black people. He believed that they were human, simply human, capable of the same foibles and courage, folly and wisdom of any other people. When a white associate told him that slaves would not fight because "negroes were a peaceful, domestic, inoffensive race," Brown replied, "You have not studied them right and you have not studied them long enough. Human nature is the same everywhere" (Ruchames 1969, 226).

Brown also saw African Americans as the key to victory over slavery and racial prejudice. He got his ideas for slave rebellion and derived much of his fanatical approach to slavery from the history and practice of Black resistance. In devising and carrying out his antislavery plans he regularly consulted with Black people. This identification with African Americans was so complete, Du Bois provocatively suggests, that Brown was for all practical purposes Black.[3] It is this total identification with Blackness and rejection of whiteness, much

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[3] In introducing his biography of Brown, Du Bois writes, "This book is at once a record of and a tribute to the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk" (Du Bois 1972, 10). He presents Brown, along with Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Douglass, Charles Sumner, and Abraham Lincoln, as gifts from Africa to America to which America owes thanks (15). In presenting Brown as a gift from Africa, he essentially makes Brown Black. As William Cain (1990) argues, Du Bois portrays Brown as a symbol of Black rather than white achievement by showing how the values, experiences, sufferings, and

more than his religious zeal, that made Brown an insane fanatic in the eyes of most whites—and

a hero to most African Americans.

Brown's fanaticism had a profound impact on American history and political thought, for

it reflected and enabled a new political imagination that moderates of his time could not

countenance: a world without slavery or racial distinctions. This new imagination ultimately

would create new political arrangements, such as full citizenship and voting rights for African

Americans, which moderates in the 1850s could scarcely contemplate yet would themselves

enact in the 1860s.

This new political imagination is most apparent in Brown's "Provisional Constitution and

Ordinances for the people of the United States," which was written in 1856 and passed at a

constitutional convention of Black and white abolitionists in Chatham, Ontario, in May 1859.

(Brown was elected commander-in-chief of the army at the convention, a position provided for

in the Constitution.) The constitution was important for Brown; it was read aloud to his men just

before the raid on Harpers Ferry and Brown kept a copy of it in his pocket during the raid, which

was recovered by his captors. In an interview with Virginia Senator J.M. Mason, which took

place almost immediately after Brown's capture, Brown urges, "I wish you would give that paper

[the Constitution] close attention" (Ruchames 1969, 128). During Brown's trial his lawyers

offered the constitution as evidence of Brown's insanity, again suggesting that race treason and

identification with Blackness is fanatical and insane to whites.

To the contemporary reader the Provisional Constitution appears as a curious mix of

radical abolitionism and moral rectitude, though both were perfectly consistent and even

inseparable for Puritan Brown. The preamble begins by stating, "Whereas slavery, throughout

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struggles of Black folk profoundly shaped Brown. Stauffer 2002 and Reynolds 2005 make
essentially the same argument.

its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion … we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people … together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions." The constitution grants equal rights to all persons, including "enslaved citizens" and those "of the proscribed and oppressed races of the United States," including women and children (Art. I). This is much more democratic than the U.S. Constitution, which according to the 1857 Supreme Court decision *Dred Scott v. Sandford* granted Black people no rights at all that the white man was bound to respect. At the same time, the same document prohibits "immoral conduct" (Art. XII) and limits civil servants to people of "first-rate moral and religious character" (Art. XVI). Article XL, "Irregularities," is downright prude: "Profane swearing, filthy conversation, indecent behavior, or indecent exposure of the person, or intoxication or quarreling, shall not be allowed or tolerated, neither unlawful intercourse of the sexes."[4]

Whatever its peculiarities, the Provisional Constitution was written as part of the preparations for Harpers Ferry. Its purpose was to provide for an interim authority during a period of slave rebellion in the South. Essentially, it is a military constitution written for a maroon society, an association of escaped slaves and their allies hidden within U.S. territory and periodically engaging in battle with proslavery forces to liberate more slaves and territory. The

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[4] This combination of justice and strict morality no doubt suggests comparisons with various religious fundamentalisms today, but the context of slavery must always be kept in mind. For example, Brown strongly protects the family: "The marriage relation shall be at all times respected, and families kept together, as far as possible; and broken families encouraged to reunite…" (Art. XLII). This clause fits with his Puritanism but it is also a rejection of slavery, which broke up families by separating spouses and parents from children, as well as scattering extended families. To maintain the family is in essence to reject the power of the master.

constitution was intended to provide for a republican government amidst guerrilla warfare. John

Brown's fanaticism, in other words, was distinctly republican.

The Provisional Constitution demonstrates that Brown's intention was to create a dual

power in the South, one that challenged the legitimacy of the Virginia and other state

governments by showing the possibility of a new way of governing in the South. Radical

abolitionist Wendell Phillips recognized this. In a speech he gave shortly after Harpers Ferry he

said, "Harpers Ferry was the only government in that vicinity. Look at the trial [in which Brown

was tried and sentenced to death just two weeks after his capture]. Virginia, true to herself, has

shown exactly the same haste that the pirate does when he tries a man on deck, and runs him up

to the yardarm. Unconsciously she is consistent" (Phillips 1863, 273). Virginia, in other words,

is a government of thieves and man stealers; only Brown's party represented true republican

government in the state. The maroon society to be created by the raid and governed according to

the Provisional Constitution would be a legitimate government, while the current Southern states

are the real insurrectionaries. Perhaps this is why Brown curiously denied that the intention of

his raid was to foment slave rebellion (e.g. Ruchames 1969, 131). Du Bois suggests this is

because Brown's intention was to supplement and make efficient slave uprisings, not substitute

for them (Du Bois 1972, 152). It's also possible, however, that Brown was redefining the very

meaning of "insurrection." Virginia was the real insurrectionary, for it rebelled against God's

principle of human equality. Brown and his organization merely intended to end this

insurrection. With Brown, the fanatic becomes legitimate and the voice of truth and liberty,

while the official state becomes illegitimate and the mark of hypocrisy and evil.

Brown understood the connection between slavery, republicanism, and freedom in the

U.S. He explained this relationship to in a series of interviews in 1856 and 1857. Brown

believed that the Founders were opposed to slavery and that the spirit of the Constitution opposed it, too, but that as slavery became more profitable by the 1800s it became entrenched in the republic, turning Southern politicians into "propagandists" and Northern politicians into "trimmers" who accommodated slavery to save the Union (Ruchames 1969, 224). "Then began an era of political compromise," the interviewer reports Brown saying, "and men full of professions of love of country were willing, for peace, to sacrifice everything for which the republic was founded" (224). Slavery corrupted American freedom, "And now we have reached a point where nothing but war can settle the question." He then went on to predict a war if a Republican were elected president and that the South would seek an alliance with European nations, "until American republicanism and freedom are overthrown" (225).

Brown believed that political moderation could not prevent this outcome because it was responsible for it. Moderates such as Abraham Lincoln and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky were personally opposed to slavery but believed that preserving the Union should take priority over emancipation. Yet keeping the Union together as it currently exists requires making compromises with the slave masters. Thus, the American political system objectively preserves slavery, Brown argues. Politics have come to trump principle. Northern politicians will not pursue abolition for fear of upsetting the South and threatening the Union. The only option, Brown believed, is armed struggle against the masters. Moderates, whatever their personal feelings regarding slavery, objectively perpetuate the power of the masters. The only way to counter Southern fanatics who refuse to retreat a single inch on slavery, such as the border ruffians from Missouri that Brown had battled in Kansas, is with an abolitionist fanaticism that likewise refuses to back down. As Phillips once proclaimed, "We should be, like the South, penetrated with an idea, and ready with fortitude and courage to sacrifice everything to that ideal.

No man can fight Stonewall Jackson, a sincere fanatic on the side of slavery, but John Brown, an equally honest fanatic on the other. [Applause.] They are the only chemical equals, and will neutralize each other. You cannot neutralize nitric acid with cologne-water. You cannot hurl [U.S. Secretary of State] William H. Seward at Jeff Davis. [Great applause and laughter.] You must have a man of ideas on both sides" (Phillips 1863, 540). Moderation, according to Brown, perpetuates America's bloodguilt. Only fanatical action can atone for the shedding of slaves' blood.

The political imagination of moderates at the time was stunted by the compromises with slave masters. When moderates imagined an American nation without slavery, they typically imagined a nation without Black people as well. Lincoln, for example, resuscitated the long-dead notion of colonization, in which slaves would be emancipated and then sent "back" to Africa. Others imagined a Black population that continued to remain subordinate, if free. Yet Brown imagined a completely nonracial society. This new political imagination was evident in the thoroughly nonracial atmosphere he created among those who surrounded him. Oswald Perry Anderson, who accompanied Brown on his raid at Harpers Ferry and escaped capture, later described life on the Kennedy farm in Maryland, where Brown's party lived while they prepared for the raid. At the farm:

> There was no milk and water sentimentality—no offensive contempt for the
> negro, while working in his cause; the pulsations of each and every heart beat in
> harmony for the suffering and pleading slave. I thank God that I have been
> permitted to realize to its furthest, fullest extent, the moral, mental, physical,
> social harmony of an Anti-Slavery family, carrying out to the letter the principles
> of its antetype, the Anti-Slavery cause. In John Brown's house, and in John

Brown's presence, men from widely different parts of the continent met and

united into one company, wherein no hateful prejudice dared intrude its ugly

self—no ghost of a distinction to enter. (Ruchames 1969, 249)

Brown's fanatical hatred of slavery produced a vision of racial equality and the prospect of a

society without racial distinctions, privileges, or oppressions.

Brown's vision of a new society based on full equality among Black and white

Americans was seen as crazy by all but African Americans and a tiny band of whites within the

abolitionist movement in 1859 (most white abolitionists opposed slavery but still believe in

white supremacy). Yet by 1870 it would be the law of the land. To be sure, it would be a law

never quite fully enacted. And its cost was a horrific civil war, a war inaugurated by a zealot

whose final words on December 2, 1859, were, "I John Brown am now quite certain that the

crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood" (Ruchames 1969, 167). Yet

Brown's imagination was enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, which with the passage of the

Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments finally came to approximate the democracy

of the Provisional Constitution. These amendments and the new Constitution it created, one can

fairly say, were borne of fanaticism.

The fanaticism of Randall Terry

Randall Terry was born in upstate New York in 1958 to two public school teachers.[5]

After spending much of his teenage years doing drugs and listening to heavy metal, he had a

conversion experience in 1976 and gave his life to Christ. He immediately became active in

numerous fundamentalist projects and preached his newfound Evangelical faith to anyone who

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[5] The following biography is taken largely from Risen and Thomas 1998, chaps. 9 and 10.

would listen. He committed himself to fighting abortion in 1983. Terry started Operation

Rescue in 1986; his goal was to make it an organization that would fight abortion by engaging in

nationwide nonviolent direct action campaigns to shut down abortion clinics. Operation

Rescue's first major action, in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in November 1987, brought out 400

demonstrators who engaged in civil disobedience to shut down the Cherry Hill Women's Center.

At the time it was the largest anti-abortion demonstration in the United States. The action

catapulted Terry to fame and by 1988, at the age of 28, he had wrested the anti-abortion

movement from the Catholic activists who previously controlled it and turned it into an engine

powered by Protestant fundamentalism. From 1987 to 1994 Operation Rescue was the largest

nonviolent civil disobedience organization in the country, holding "rescues" in New Jersey, New

York City, Atlanta, Wichita, and numerous other cities. Some 70,000 people were arrested

under the banner of Operation Rescue in that time. Terry was eventually ousted from Operation

Rescue in an internal dispute, after which he turned to mainstream politics. Recently he was the

spokesperson for Terry Schiavo's parents in their tumultuous battle with her husband to remove

her from life support in 2005 and he ran for the Florida state Senate in 2006, but was defeated in

the Republican primary.

In her important book *Killing for Life*, Carol Mason argues that pro-life politics, from the

mainstream to the radical fringes, is not driven by an ideology of "rights" like the pro-choice

movement is. Rights are a liberal notion that rest on the concept of individual sovereignty;

however, pro-life ideology is not as concerned with the individual or individual fetus as it is with

the collective unborn and America's sin as a nation for permitting abortion. Nor is pro-life

politics driven by a concern for "life," Mason insists, because some pro-life activists justify

killing in order to protect the unborn. Rather than rights or life, she argues, the pro-life

movement is driven by an "apocalyptic narrative" which views abortion as a key battle in a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil. Legalized abortion is a sign of the imminent end of the world, as foretold by the book of Revelations in the Bible. It is a crime against God and humanity that is the ultimate example of how immoral the United States has become. It is this apocalyptic narrative, Mason argues, that "gives ideological coherence to the vast variety of individuals and institutions that describe themselves as pro-life" (Mason 2002, 2).

This apocalyptic narrative drives Randall Terry's fanaticism. As he writes in his book *Operation Rescue*:

> America is racing toward God's judgment. … The paramount life or death battle before the church is to end the abortion holocaust against children. If we righted every wrong, rectified every evil, solved every problem … and yet did not end this slaughter of the innocents, America and the church would still bear the guilt for their deaths. The blood of the children would still cry to God for vengeance. According to the promises, declarations, and warnings in God's Word, He would avenge their blood. The number one social priority facing the church in America must be to end this slaughter of children. No other sin … can match the level of shedding innocent blood. The fate of America, and the future existence of the church, is bound up in the fate of the children." (Terry 1988, 181-82)

Terry argues that abortion is not just a sin committed by doctors who perform abortions or by people who are pro-choice. It is a sin that imputes "bloodguiltiness" on the entire nation, by which he means guilt caused by the refusal to avenge for the shedding of blood of innocent babies.

Satan receives the blood of these little ones [aborted fetuses] as human sacrifice,

and he is not going to give up this stronghold and demonic altar without a fight.

We must not be deceived, and we must not compromise. Abortion is nothing less

than murdering babies. Because nearly five thousand children *per day* are being

killed in America, our country is bearing the guilt of innocent blood. … The cry

of their blood must ascend as a deafening chorus in the courts of heaven. (Terry

1988, 142)

Even pro-life people are bloodguilty, Terry argues, because they know that babies are being

killed yet they do not put their lives on the line to stop it. "The church, by her *inactivity* for the

children, shares in the guilt of their blood. I am guilty, you are guilty, the whole church in

America is guilty," he writes (145). In fact, "the church," by which Terry means the Evangelical

community in particular, is in some ways even guiltier than the "abortionists" because the church

has the mandate and the resources to end this crime but lacks the will to do it. It is thus an

"accessory to murder" (Terry 1990). The battle against abortion for Terry is part of a

Manichean, apocalyptic battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness; the

consequences of defeat are God's wrath and judgment.

To wage this battle, Terry devised a strategy to recruit pastors of fundamentalist churches

into Operation Rescue, who would then turn out their flock. As Risen and Thomas (1998) point

out, unlike the Catholic Church or mainline Protestant denominations, fundamentalist churches

lack a formal hierarchy that can block controversial activism. As long as the flock agrees,

fundamentalist pastors are free to develop their own political priorities and to engage in political

activities without fear of pressure from leaders above them.[6] Terry knew this and made these independent fundamentalist churches the backbone of his movement. To do so he focused Operation Rescue's message on Evangelicals rather than the secular world. "The church" needs to repent, Terry argued, for allowing the sin of abortion to continue for fifteen years in the United States. The church has the blood of unborn babies on its hands, and must atone for its sin. The means of that atonement, Terry argued, is the rescue, and his organization Operation Rescue is its vehicle.

The purpose of a "rescue mission" is to block clinics that perform abortions in order to prevent staff and patients from coming or going. Terry sets out three parts to the philosophy of rescuing. First, the church needs to repent for allowing abortion to continue in this country and for not doing enough to stop it. Through repentance it must realize the massive crime that is abortion (which is even worse than the Nazi genocide of the Jews, he argues) and pledge to stop being passive about it (Terry 1988, 22, 148, 183). Second, Christians need to declare war on abortion. This means they must not just refer to abortion as murder but also actually *act* like it is murder. The cry "abortion is murder" is empty rhetoric until Christians are as fully committed to saving the lives of the unborn as they are other humans (194). Finally, once one has repented and is filled with resolve, one needs to create "positive social tension" (22). The phrase is from Martin Luther King Jr., who argues in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that sometimes only a crisis brought on by social tensions can bring about dialogue and negotiation (King 1964). In fact, King argues, it is often the only way to get two sides in a conflict to start talking, since the privileged rarely surrender their privileges voluntarily. Similarly, Terry argues that change

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[6] The importance of the institutional autonomy of fundamentalist churches for the growth of the pro-life movement is reminiscent of the role of Black churches and beauty parlors in the civil rights movement, which were independent of white control and thus able to play important roles in the struggle against segregation. See Morris 1984.

comes when concerned people dedicated to a cause put pressure on public opinion and politicians until unjust laws are changed, for "what politicians fear most is social unrest and upheaval" (Terry 1988, 195, 198). Social change, in other words, only comes about when pressure is put to bear on public opinion and the powers that be. The objective is not to soothe disagreements but to unsettle society, for when society is shaken up people are often willing to reevaluate the status quo.

The goal of rescuing is also threefold. First, it seeks to end abortion by making it a crime, enshrined in a constitutional amendment outlawing it. Second, it restores Judeo-Christian morality to the nation and pushes vice and filth "back into the closet." Finally, it demonstrates obedience and faithfulness and thus pleases an angry God (178, 217-18).

> Victory over abortion is possible. All we need is for a remnant of the church to
> repent and rise up and say, "No more dead children! We are not going to let you
> kill innocent babies anymore!" With the prayers and blessing of others in the
> church, in harmony with the other avenues of pro-life action, we should see the
> tide begin to turn. (198)

Like Brown and the abolitionists, Terry and the radical wing of the pro-life movement had a profound effect on American public opinion. Ironically, however, his effect was not on public attitudes toward abortion. While Terry made civil disobedience against abortion a nationwide phenomenon, it did not much affect public opinion, which has remained remarkably stable in its support for legalized abortion since 1973 (Gallup 2007). The real significance of Terry and Operation Rescue is that, along with other leaders of the Religious Right, they reshaped the American political imagination regarding the relation between religion and politics. Through Operation Rescue Terry helped destroy the notion of "dispensationalism" among

Evangelicals, the belief that there is no need to be involved in worldly affairs because the Second

Coming of Christ is coming soon. "Although Randall Terry failed to end abortion, he did play a

role in killing off the escapist traditions of American fundamentalists" (Risen and Thomas 1998,

219). By convincing his followers to reject dispensationalism he enabled a new fundamentalist

vision in which politics is central rather than irrelevant to Christian life. This new vision

challenges many of the core tenets of liberalism such as religious toleration, secularism, and a

focus on the individual. The pro-life movement proposes an alternative political vision that puts

Christianity at the center of politics and public life, that rejects the separation of religion and

politics, that makes God rather than reason the arbiter of truth, that calls on the individual to

submit completely to God, that rejects "tolerance" of wrong or unchristian ideas, and that

presents American culture as a cesspool of moral decay rather than the product of individual

choice and initiative. (See, e.g. Terry 1990).

In so doing the pro-life movement led by Terry also helped transform American party

politics. It ended fifty years of Protestant Evangelicals' political quiescence and brought them

roaring into American politics. Further, unlike early twentieth century Protestant

fundamentalism, it permanently attached Christian fundamentalism to the Republican Party.

After Terry and the pro-life movement, "Christian," "conservative," and "Republican" would all

be wedded together in the public imagination.

Brown and Terry both deny they are rebels (Ruchames 1969, 134; Risen and Thomas

1998, 223). Rather, each claims to be following a higher law than that of the state, one that

forbids slavery and abortion, respectively. The American government is the real insurrectionary

for violating God's law and permitting these crimes against humanity. Phillips defends Brown in

such terms when he accuses Virginia of being a "chronic insurrection" against truth and right

because she does not render justice equally in her state, while Brown admirably sought to create

equal justice. Virginia "is a pirate ship, and John Brown sails the sea a Lord High Admiral of the

Almighty." Hence, "John Brown has twice as much right to hang [Virginia] Governor Wise, as

Governor Wise has to hang him" (Phillips 1863, 272). Abolitionist and pro-life zealots sought to

uphold this higher law against the insurrectionary state. In doing so, they found themselves in

conflict with the state; that they did not shirk from such conflict and even welcomed it is part of

what distinguishes Brown and Terry from antislavery and anti-abortion moderates, as well as

from the general political center of their times. From their words and deeds it is possible to

delineate the essential elements of fanaticism and distinguish it as a particular approach to

politics.

Elements of fanaticism

There are six essential elements of the fanatical approach to politics, each of which are

evident in John Brown and Randall Terry.

1. The refusal to compromise

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of fanaticism is that fanatical movements

refuse to compromise on their founding principles and then seek to mobilize others based on this

refusal. Moderates are willing to engage in the political process and cut deals in order to get a

part of what they want, but fanatics like Brown and Terry always put principle before

expediency. It is this refusal that results in shocking statements such as Brown's declaration, "It

is better that a whole generation of men, women, children should be swept away than that this

crime of slavery should exist one day longer" (Du Bois 1972, 157). Brown did not trust

politicians because he saw that even ones with convictions were willing to sacrifice them if it

gave them political advantage (129). Terry actively sought the support of "mainstream" political

and religious leaders but was constantly disappointed that they rebuffed him for practical

considerations (see Risen and Thomas 1998, 279-80, 296-97). Fanatics seek to mobilize

supporters according to this commitment to principle, even if it means eschewing practical

compromise and recruiting fewer members. As Brown once told a reporter in Kansas, "I would

rather have the smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera all together in my camp, than a man without

principles. … Give me men of good principles; God-fearing men; men who respect themselves;

and, with a dozen of them, I will oppose any hundred such men as these [proslavery] ruffians"

(quoted in Du Bois 1972, 123).

    2. Friends and enemies

    Fanaticism divides the world into friends—those who support their cause—and

enemies—those who oppose it. It does not seek a common ground among contending parties as

liberalism does but rather draws lines between them. Terry constantly refers to abortion as a war

and as anti-abortion activists as warriors, using anti-abortion organizations and propaganda as

"ammunition" (Terry 1988, 171, 176, 185, and passim). He describes pro-choice people in the

language of the enemy: they are abortion propagandists, abortionists who work in abortuaries,

killers wrongly called doctors, etc. (e.g. Terry 1988, 21). Brown similarly drew sharp lines

between right and wrong, anti- and pro-slavery. According to Du Bois, he divided the world into

"a light and a darkness—a right and a wrong" (Du Bois 1972, 255). His raid on Harpers Ferry

prompted Phillips to comment, "If in a world of sinners you were to put American Christianity, it

would be calm as oil. But put one Christian, like John Brown of Osawatomie, and he makes the

whole crystallize into right and wrong, and marshal themselves on one side or the other"

(Phillips 1863, 276).

whether they would otherwise live up to their profession or not. This would leave them no choice in the matter" (85). Brown's strategy is to use a friends/enemies dichotomy (one is either for the fugitive or against her) to push prominent white people to publicly support defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act. In so doing, he makes attitudes toward slavery and Black people the fulcrum on which the political realm balances. Brown wipes away the possibility of moderation on the issue; if you try to occupy a "middle ground," there's no place to stand.

Fanaticism, as Brown reveals, does not just differ from moderation; it targets it. Drawing sharp lines between friends and enemies requires attacking the political middle because the middle is willing to compromise with and thus sustain the enemy. The zealot seeks to wipe out the moderate position by recasting political struggles in a dichotomous manner that makes a "middle" option irrelevant or impossible. (The moderate, meanwhile, counters by denying the necessity for such dichotomies and appealing to the possibility that everyone can ultimately become "friends.") The zealot's target, then, is not just her enemy but also moderates who present themselves as a "common sense" choice between the two extremist positions. This strategy is evident when Terry argues that the "whole church in America is guilty" for the crime of abortion (Terry 1988, 145). He insists that "moderate" pro-life people are actually responsible for abortion because they have the power to stop it yet they do not because they want to avoid the unpleasantries of conflict that might result.

> War is in our gates today! Demons and wicked men have been pushing back the
> church. What have leader and layperson alike been doing? Most of us are doing
> *nothing*. Not "a shield or spear" is seen among millions of Christians. … Most
> have been playing religious games, pampering and shielding themselves from all
> pain or discomfort. The church is already paying for this offense and will pay for

it far more severely. But thank God for the *exceptions*—the courageous men and

women who have taken a public and sometimes costly stand for righteousness.

(Terry 1988, 171)

Terry is explicitly trying to put pressure on the moderate pro-life forces to join him. Simply

being personally opposed to abortion is not enough. Unless one takes action in defense of life,

one is still complicit in this crime. And God sees this.

For those who view fanaticism as a psychological temperament, the opposite of zealotry

is tolerance and reason. When viewed as an approach to politics, however, it is clear that the true

antithesis of zealotry is moderation. Moderates seek to avoid conflict; extremists encourage it.

Moderates seek to reduce social tensions; fanatics try to ratchet them up. Essentially, Brown and

Terry use a friends/enemies framework to make slavery and abortion a three-cornered fight:

abolitionists vs. masters or pro-lifers vs. pro-choicers vs. the moderate middle between them.

The task of a fanatic, as they see it, is to push the moderate off the fence. By antagonizing the

middle, they raise social tensions; by raising social tensions they make it possible to challenge

the "common sense" of slavery and abortion.

4. Building a constituency

The purpose of attacking moderates is not to isolate a movement by limiting it to a small

handful of "purists." Instead, the goal of radical abolitionists and pro-lifers was to mobilize a

small but dedicated core of supporters who are willing to fight for their cause, using radical

tactics if necessary, and who refuse to compromise on the movements' core principles. For the

fanatic, a small company of hardened zealots is more effective in bringing about sweeping social

change than an army of moderates. Like any other political leader, Brown and Terry sought to

build a constituency. But unlike, say, building a political party, their aim was to form a

committed minority, not a self-interested (and often disinterested) majority. Terry states that he

is not concerned to immediately win over everyone to his cause. In fact, he says, one can't

expect the majority of the church to join in the battle and one shouldn't be upset that they don't.

What he instead seeks is to build a "remnant of His people," a dedicated minority of zealots who

are completely committed to the cause. When this small group repents for the sin of abortion

and then acts against it, it effectively repents and acts for *all* Americans, and can thereby save all

of us from God's anger (Terry 1988, 174-75). The zealot would rather have two comrades who

are totally committed to the cause than 1,000 people whose "support" consists of signing a

petition.

   5. Direct action

   Fanaticism implies a willingness to engage in direct action—activities that defy the laws

or disrupt the social order. Rather than go through "indirect" channels to seek change via

political representatives, interest groups, trade unions, or civic associations, one takes the

initiative oneself, working alone or in a group. Direct action tactics include protests, strikes,

boycotts, sit-ins, blockades, sabotage, assassinations, suicide bombings, and armed revolt. By

taking political action directly, one acknowledges that the "normal" channels of political activity

are rigged on behalf of the powers that be but asserts that one does not accept this situation. As

such, direct action aims to empower the individual. As the famous twentieth-century anarchist

Emma Goldman explains, direction action is "the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws

and restrictions, economic, social, and moral. But defiance and resistance are illegal. Therein lies

the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage. In

short, it calls for free, independent spirits, for 'men who are men, and who have a bone in their

backs which you cannot pass your hand through'" (Goldman 1969, 65).

Brown and Terry's lives embody the principle of direct action. Both believe that conventional methods to achieve social and political change are inadequate or even counterproductive when it comes to slavery and abortion, respectively and that direct action is therefore necessary. Further, Terry recognizes the symbolic power of direction action in attracting media attention and raising public awareness of an issue (Risen and Thomas 1988).

Accompanying a commitment to direct action is a willingness to sacrifice—oneself or others—for the cause. Terry solemnly declares that the anti-abortion activist is a warrior who must be "disciplined, willing to sacrifice, and ready to die" (Terry 1988, 176). "Warriors are prepared to sacrifice. They are willing to give up what is rightfully theirs in a time of peace in order to gain the victory in a time of war" (216). This includes a commitment to "die to yourself," i.e. to totally set aside one's one desires or interests for the cause. Specifically, the Operation Rescue warrior must be willing to endure jail time and other penalties, possibly even death.[7] Subsequent pro-life fanatics, such as Michael Griffin, Paul Hill, and John Salvi, will shift the object of sacrifice. By murdering abortion providers, these men show that they are willing to sacrifice others as well as themselves.

The willingness to engage in direct action reflects the zealot's total identification with the oppressed. Brown, for example, completely identified with the slave. Stauffer argues that Brown and other radical abolitionists' willingness to sacrifice their lives "stemmed from their ability to empathize with blacks, to see themselves as black, and to face the world as though they were black" (Stauffer, 2002 249). Brown's total identification with the oppressed extended to

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[7] Although Terry is at pains to point out that in all likelihood, the sacrifice won't be too great. He assures would-be rescuers, "As long as you keep your charges to violations or misdemeanors, your career plans will probably not be jeopardized. … In the past, other social movements with mass arrests indicate that these types of arrests have no effect on a person's career" (Terry 1988, 202).

his funeral rites, in which he requested that "my only religious attendants be poor little, dirty, ragged, bare headed, & barefooted Slave boys; & Girls; led by some old grey headed Slave Mother" (163). This identification with blackness explains Brown's willingness to engage in direct action against slavery. He "remembered them that are in bonds, as bound with them" and thus acted as any slave would do, given the opportunity: he rebelled. Brown's total identification with the slave led him to direct action, and fanaticism (Reynolds 2005, 505).

In the pro-life movement, because the "oppressed" is unborn, total identification tends to lead to fantasy rather than solidarity. As Mason argues, millennialist pro-lifers transform total identification with the fetus into *becoming* the unborn. When this happens, "The abortion warrior is not so much acting on behalf of the unborn as he is saying, 'I am the unborn'" (Mason 2002, 87). Once you consider yourself one of the unborn, you are no longer just talking about protecting "defenseless babies." Rather, you can effectively believe yourself to be acting in self-defense when you kill an abortion doctor. This was the case with Paul Hill, who was murdered and put to death for killing an abortion doctor. Hill believed that his actions and martyrdom would be the Harpers Ferry of the pro-life movement, bringing about the end of abortion and the start of a civil war that will end with the fusing of the church and the state (Mason 2002, 77-80).

6. Seeking hegemony

The goal of fanaticism is the same as any social movement: hegemony, or the power to redefine the "common sense" of a society (Gramsci 1971). The fanatic does not seek to carve out a small space where she can grovel in her own beliefs, unbothered by others. Rather, she seeks to make her "extreme" views the ruling ideas of the day. Brown and the radical abolitionist sought to make abolitionism and racial equality "common sense" in an era in which whites viewed both suspiciously or even violently. Terry and Operation Rescue likewise sought

to make the notion that abortion is murder and that human law should reflect God's law common wisdom. Fanaticism is an approach to politics whose goal is to put itself out of business; there is no need to be a zealot when one's "extremist" ideas become commonplace and everyone is "fanatical." "Wait awhile, and you'll all agree with me," Phillips once quipped while speaking of Brown. "What is fanaticism today is the fashionable creed tomorrow, and trite as the multiplication table a week after" (Phillips 1863, 287).

Virtue, moderation, fanaticism

Brown and Terry exemplify the fanatical approach to politics. In so doing, they also articulate a critique of moderation that offers useful lessons for politics in the post-9/11 era. Perhaps the most important contemporary lesson of reading Brown and Terry is that moderation is not a political virtue. Rather, like fanaticism, it is an approach to politics and should be treated as such by political theorists. An approach to politics is never universally applicable; it is appropriate in some circumstances and not in others, according to historical and structural conditions, and should be evaluated accordingly. A virtue, however, is something that is universally good and righteous. Virtues are immune to criticism; they are only to be emulated. By assuming that moderation is a virtue, as so many political commentators have in the wake of 9/11, the Iraq War, and the increased the polarization of American politics, one places it on a pedestal above critique. It is a golden ideal to be achieved rather than a product of the rough-and-tumble political process to be examined and evaluated. Further, when moderation is automatically virtue fanaticism automatically becomes vice. Zealotry becomes a universally immoral behavior that must be purged rather than critically evaluated.

Brown and Terry give us reason to be suspicious of these assumptions. They suggest

fresh ways to examine these key political categories, whose meaning and significance will only

become more important as the twenty-first century continues. They suggest two important points

about the "virtue" of moderation in particular. First, there is no moral requirement to be

moderate. As Simon May persuasively argues, while people may moderate their desires for the

sake of compromise and stability, it is not necessary for them to *change* their intrinsic moral

beliefs to achieve this. There are good pragmatic reasons to moderate one's views, May argues;

there are no principled reasons to do so. "The existence of pragmatic reasons to speak well of

principled compromise does not imply the existence of any principled reason for moral

compromise itself" (May 2005, 348).[8] For example, people who support gay marriage may

accept civil unions as a compromise, but there is no reason for them to abandon their moral

support for full gay marriage. Given that there are only practical but not intrinsic reasons for

modifying one's beliefs, there is no reason to make moderation a virtue. Rather, it should be

understood as an approach to politics that is necessary and appropriate in some circumstances but

perhaps not others. Unfortunately, the political science literature often seeks to turn the

pragmatic necessity of moderation into a moral virtue and conversely treats extremism as an

inherently undemocratic vice without inquiring why.

The second point that Brown and Terry's fanaticism suggests regarding moderation is

that neither it nor fanaticism is inherently democratic. Indeed, sometimes moderation

perpetuates injustice and undermines democracy while fanaticism serves justice and democracy.

What distinguishes fanaticism from moderation is not democracy but a friends/enemies

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[8] As May points out, even theorists who encourage compromise in politics such as Gutmann and Thompson 1996 are not asking persons to *change* their moral views but only to *respect* the views of others and to be willing to moderate one's views for pragmatic reasons.

conception of politics and a refusal to compromise on one's position. This framework leads the fanatic to try to wipe away the middle ground on an issue rather than consolidate it. This is frequently construed as undemocratic, yet as Brown shows, sometimes attacking the political center is necessary for democratic development.[9] By constantly calling for a respectable, cautious, reasonable approach to slavery, moderates did not advance democracy but effectively did the slaveholders' bidding, since any compromise with them left slavery intact. Attacking the moderate position is what defined the radical abolitionists as fanatics and therefore outside the boundaries of "respectable" politics. (The slaveholders, ironically, were considered legitimate political actors in a democratic republic despite holding human beings as chattel.) Yet their determination to distinguish friends and enemies and sweep away the middle ground, so evident in the League of Gileadites, Brown's battles against border ruffians in Kansas, and his raid on Harpers Ferry, was the real democratic force of antebellum politics.

A better understanding of American political thought, then, requires breaking with the assumption that moderation is a virtue while fanaticism is a vice. Moderation and fanaticism are approaches to politics that can be evaluated according to various normative criteria (Are they effective? Do they promote democratic participation? Are they just?) but moderation cannot be automatically assumed to be the standard of political behavior.

Albion Tourgee, a novelist and contemporary of Brown's, once wrote, "John Brown! Monster and Martyr; Conspirator and Saint; Murderer and Liberator; Cause and Consequence! Alerting one-half the land to emulate his example; stimulating the other to meet aggression; inciting both to shedding of blood!" (quoted in Peterson 2002, 73). Brown was a saint to some

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[9] I hesitate to say that Terry shows this as well, partly due to my own political biases, no doubt, but also partly because Terry's commitment to democracy is not as clear as Brown's. Yet this still supports my point that moderation and fanaticism can undermine or advance democracy, according to context—and according to normative judgments regarding what is "democratic."

and the devil incarnate for others. Such a human being is controversial, no doubt. He can also

be dangerous. But he is not necessarily undemocratic. And he may play a vital role in politics at

certain historical moments. After all, a moderate can be or do none of these things Tourgee

attributes to Brown. By definition moderation has no room for martyrs and liberators and saints.

Yet history—and democracy—sometimes needs such persons, for they present new visions of

the future that moderates are too busy in their trimming to even imagine. When a social crisis

erupts, it is as likely that the zealot's "extremist" ideas will be the new common sense as it will

be the moderate's "reasonable" ones. Many times this is an outcome that is to be feared and

resisted, but at other times it is not. A hagiography of moderation and a demonology of

fanaticism cannot see this. A critical understanding of these categories is necessary instead. In

order to engage in such as task, however, one must take the time to understand the words and

deeds of fanatics such as John Brown and Randall Terry, as well as the "remnants of His people"

who follow them.

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