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MOTIVATION AND TERRORISM:
HOW RELIGION MAKES MATTERS WORSE

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I want to discuss research on two psychological motivations that has important implications for understanding contemporary terrorism. These motivations are found in the writings of and interviews with religiously motivated terrorists across all religious traditions.

<u>Religious Politics or Political Religion</u>

First is the drive to restore religion to the position it once held in all pre-modern societies as the center and governor of the common life. The psychology here is the appeal of a seamless, wholistic life. In contrast to the pluralism of post-modern existence, where we are pulled in different directions by the demands of multiple roles, many people long for a more unified form of life. One result is that in the world of religiously motivated terrorism, politics and religion are mixed together: a political religion or a religious politics. This mingling of religion and politics in religiously motivated terrorism, underscores an issue with which policy makers in the West have hardly begun to come to terms. Such political religiosity, violent or simply politically militant, reveals that large numbers of people around the world (and within American society) are convinced that God has given them *the* single master-plan for how societies should be organized and governed. Since these blueprints come from God, it is the true believers' sacred duty to follow them to the letter and even to impose them on the societies in which they live. And since they are a divine mandate, these master-plans cannot be compromised. This is why religious terrorists reject the separation of church, synagogue,

or mosque and the state. Their religion requires of them that all aspects of life — from laws governing capital crimes to those involving women's clothing and children's discipline — be subject to religious control. Its very striking that the prominent issues in this divine mandate are also similar across traditions: the "proper" roles of men and women, the regulation of sex, ending abortion and homosexuality. This understanding of the divine mandate is shared by Christian Reconstructionists in America, Muslim jihadi around the world, ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, and groups like the Japanese Buddhist group Aum Shinrikyo and the Hindu nationalist party as well.

Liberal democracies, based on the value of individual rights and government by negotiation and compromise, have not yet to even begun to find a way to respond to these citizens and their convictions. Whether such a divine mission can co-exist with liberal democracy may be the major religious and political debate of the twenty-first century to which policy makers best start paying attention.

The Psychology of Religious Conversion

Second, recent research suggests that most current jihadists are living in the Muslim diaspora and were not raised in strongly traditional Islamic families but rather are converts to this militant brand of Islam, "born again" in one researcher's words. This is obviously also true of the members of Aum Shinrikyo and many of the extreme right-wing Christians in the United States.

What motivates these conversions? Interviews with religiously motivated fanatical groups around the world, reveal (what one researcher calls) a "yearning for a sense of community and a deeper meaning in life". These are the same desires that motivate religious converts around the world. The lure of violent religion is not simply

the lure of revenge or rage but rather the lure of spiritual renewal, moral seriousness, and a meaningful life.

Research suggests that religious conversions are an attempt to recreate oneself and to connect oneself to something greater than one's own ego and give one a sense of meaning and purpose and a source of values to live by. Most conversions — including to the jihad or militant Christianity—are self-initiated and the end result of a spiritual search or struggle that the individual voluntarily undertakes on their own as part of a gradual process of an active search for self-realization. This appears true of those Muslims living in the diaspora who find their own way to radical mosques or to jihadist websites on the Internet. Many converts to the jihad in Europe spent time reading jihadi literature, visiting jihadi websites, and attending discussion groups in the mosque. For example this was true of Fritz Gelowicz in Germany and the two men who turned out to be leaders of the Madrid cell. As much as those outside their movements may regard them as evil and criminal, in their eyes through violence and killing these converts are seeking the highest moral and spiritual goods—the sacred community, the purification of the human race, the kingdom of justice and righteousness, immortality, and union with God.

An important contemporary question is, Is this possible over the internet?

Online Conversions?

Given the importance of the Internet to contemporary terrorism, it is interesting that I could not find any studies of online conversions *per se*. But there is a large body of research that demonstrates that online interaction generates a full "social world" complete with passion, commitment, dependency, trust, a shared vision, and mutual responsibility. Which can result in the formation of a new identity. Research demonstrates that participation in

Internet groups can powerfully influence one's self and identity. And that when people disengage from online groups, they go through much the same processes as when disengaging from face to face communities. Like conversions in general, joining a new social world online is usually the result of individual curiosity, interest, and a self-directed search. People are not simply, passively drawn in or seduced (or "brainwashed") by online groups. Seekers take the initiative, explore, and consider online communities just as much as face-to-face communities. Joining is a choice.

However there is an additional element as well. Research suggests that the anonymity of the internet impacts the dynamics of group formation there. Such anonymity may be disinhibiting and allow people to express more extreme and unpopular sentiments and experiment with more radical identities. So we must take seriously the reality that people convert to the jihad or militant Christian groups wholly online and receive encouragement and advice there to translate violent belief into violent action.

Psychological research adds to our understanding of the effects of such spiritual conversions. Denoting something as sacred appears to have significant emotional, motivational, and behavioral consequences.

1. Spiritual Strivings Evoke more commitment

Studies of motivations concerned with an ultimate purpose or with a commitment to a "higher power" suggest that those who denote a facet of life as sacred place a higher priority on that aspect of life, invest more energy in it, and derive more meaning from it than happens with things not denoted as sacred. So denoting something as sacred appears to have significant emotional and behavioral consequences, Research shows that people rate such spiritual strivings as more important and that they evoke more commitment and

effort than nonspiritual, secular strivings and goals, calling forth greater dedication and energy, even if that something is the jihad, ending abortion and turning America into a Biblical theocracy, restoring the boundaries of Biblical Israel, purifying the Hindu homeland, or converting the Tamils to Buddhism.

2. Spiritual Strivings Take Precedence

Studies also find that sacred values and ultimate concerns take precedence over more finite concerns.

The leader of Jamaah Islamiyah in Indonesia said "Jihad is more important than making the hajj... There is no better deed than jihad. None. The highest deed in Islam is jihad. If we commit to jihad, we can neglect other deeds" (Atran, The Emir, nd, 6)

The Rev. Paul Hill, a Presbyterian minister who killed a physician and his body guard in front of a women's health clinic in Florida, told his followers, "we must use all the means necessary …this duty comes directly from God and cannot be removed by any human government…It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of maintaining the eternal and immutable principles of the Moral Law…"

A young Somali man who was part of a cohort who left the United States to join El Shabaab in Somalia, at least one of whom died in a suicide bombing, said of his colleagues, "if it was just nationalism, they could give money. But religion convinced them to sacrifice their whole life" (NY Times, 7/11/09, p. 1).

For the religiously motivated terrorist, acts of violence in the name of God become "ultimate concerns," that is they take precedence over any more mundane commitments. As ultimate, sacred concerns, these acts take on an over-powering,

transcendental necessity for the believer. In the eyes of their proponents such "acts of terror" become a spiritual necessity.

3. Spiritual Strivings Evoke Greater Rage

A recent study found the desecration of something held sacred leads to overwhelming rage. The main characteristic of such rage is that it shows a total lack of empathy toward the offender. Such a total lack of empathy is one of the most striking traits seen in those who bomb innocent non-combatants, assassinate reproductive health care providers, and imagine (and sometimes plot) apocalyptic genocidal violence in the name of their deity. While some religiously motivated terrorists may employ violence purely tactically in the pursuit of limited and achievable political goals, others dream of complete purification and the apocalyptic eradication of all unholy people. Such totalistic schemes of divine vengeance reek of the rage born of threats to cherished beliefs and institutions.

Now the very act of killing is seen as sacred in itself. Violence is not simply a means to an end but violence becomes itself sacred, transcendental, almost divine. When violence becomes sanctified, it is changed in ways that go beyond simply justifying its use. Violence becomes a religious imperatives, carrying a cosmic or spiritual meaning beyond that provided by any purely political or legal authority. This inevitably leads to a significant reduction in the usual restrictions on the deployment of violence, opening up the possibility of full-scale, unrestricted genocidal campaigns including weapons of mass destruction. For Al Quaeda Jihad means total, all-out, unrestricted warfare. Exactly the same position modeled in the writings of American apocalyptic Christians, especially the *Left Behind s*eries of novels.

The Rand Corporation observes that,

> For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators therefore often disregard the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists…religious terrorists regard such large-scale violence not only as morally justified but as necessary expedients for the attainment of their goals. (Hoffman, 2006: 88)

When asked about using nuclear weapons the leader of Jamaah Isalamiyah replied "Yes, if necessary …Allah has said…that we should equip ourselves with weapon power—that is an order." (Atran, The Emir, nd., 8) Along this line, Zarqawi proclaimed

> Allah commanded us to strike the Kuffar (unbelievers), kill them, and fight them by any means necessary to achieve the goal. The servants of Allah who perform jihad to elevate the word (laws) of Allah, are permitted to use any and all means necessary to strike the active unbeliever combatants for the purpose of killing them, snatch their souls from their body, cleanse the earth from their abomination, and lift their trial and persecution of the servants of Allah. The goal must be pursued even if the means to accomplish it affect both the intended active fighters and unintended passive ones such as women, children…This permissibility extends to situations in which Muslims may get killed if they happen to be with or near the intended enemy…Although spilling Muslim blood is a grave offense, it is not only permissible but it is mandated in order to prevent more serious adversity from happening, stalling or abandoning jihad that is. (Hoffman, 2006: 240)

On his website, The Reverend Michael Bray who wrote the Bible of the violent anti-choice movement—entitled tellingly *A Time to Kill*—in which he uses scripture to justify such murder, in an essay entitled "Rejoicing in the Death of the Wicked," compares the killing of Dr. George Tiller in Kansas to the story in the Book of Judges of the killing of a Canaanite leader by a Jewish woman who drove a tent-peg through the Canaanite's skull. Bray says that God inspired both this act of premeditated murder and a Biblical song of rejoicing over it. The Army of God website has in bold letters the quote from Psalm 144, "Blessed be the Lord my strength which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight." On its current (June 2009) website the Jewish Defense League offers firearms training to its members, continuing its history of vigilante justice in the name of Judaism. Ironically the Jewish Defense League website is a virtual parallel to the website of the Neo-Nazi Aryan Nations who call on their members to conduct themselves with "guns, knives, bullets and bombs."

On its website, Joel's Army (a Canadian-American apocalyptic Christian group) declares, "An end-time army has one common purpose—to aggressively take ground for the kingdom of God under the authority of Jesus Christ, the Dread Champion…The trumpet is sounding, calling on-fire, revolutionary believers to enlist …Many are now ready to be mobilized to establish and advance God's kingdom on earth."

Implications

Three practical implications of this research on spiritual motivation.

First, since the jihadi human bombers (as well as the members of Aum Shinrikyo and those willing to die for a vision of a new Aryan nation or ending abortion) are offering a religious sacrifice, their actions are not primarily motivated by utilitarian or

pragmatic calculations. Thus it is a mistake to seek to understand religiously motivated

terrorists using the game theoretic or rational choice models so prominent in the social

sciences these days. Rational choice models cannot really comprehend sacred values that

are deeply held for non-instrumental reasons. Such values are not open to the

instrumental calculus of statistically based social sciences. Social scientists trained only

in these methodologies, and the policy makers they advise, may have only a limited

understanding of religiously motivated terrorism.

Second, Ultimate commitments to sacred goals take precedence over other

commitments. No secondary commitments must be allowed to interfere with commitment

to Jihad, to the "unborn," to Greater Israel, to Hindutva. Thus sacred terror is non-

negotiable terror. It is no wonder that research finds that counterterrorism interventions

that threaten or seek to bargain with religiously motivated terrorists only evoke greater

scorn and rage: asking someone to trade their ultimate values for financial gain or greater

political power is universally understood as the voice of the devil. Given the sacred

nature of these acts, counter-terrorism policies based on either appealing to the

religiously motivated terrorists' self-interest or frightening them into surrendering by an

overwhelming show of force will probably have little success. The religious drive to

sacrifice and make holy one's life and one's cause transcends and subsumes any

pragmatic or purely self-interested motivations. Threatening to kill someone who wants

to martyr themselves is not an effective counter-terrorism strategy.

Third, if we do not understand the spirituality that motivates religiously motivated

terrorists and the power of religious conversions to reorient and give meaning to people's

lives, we will never counter them effectively. If part of the attraction of violent religion is

the attraction of personal transformation and spiritual renewal, then a crucial part of our response must be the articulation of an equally powerful alternative religious and moral vision. Community organizations, churches, and mosques who seek to counter terrorism must provide groups and programs that channel the seeker's drive for meaning, service, and perhaps adventure in constructive ways.

Conclusion

As all psychologists know, the question of human motivation is always multi-dimensional, multi-determined. My point is not that sacred terror, or any religious behavior, is only motivated by sacred strivings and goals. Clearly political and economic conditions and personal histories enter into the making of a religious terrorist or any religious person. My point is rather that research suggests that when a goal or movement takes on the patina of the sacred, it changes in significant ways. There is much research being done now on how people are recruited into terrorist movements through naturally occurring groups: neighborhood and family connections, sports teams, internet chat rooms. But once the cause gets sanctified, once it moves from the family gathering or the soccer league or the online discussion into the realm of sacred values and ultimate concerns it changes. Even if terrorists are recruited primarily through natural groups, once their cause gets sanctified, it is transformed.

Likewise with the classic motivations for terrorist action like politics, ethnicity and nationalism. Once the nation, the land, the race takes on an ultimate status, it is no longer simple politics or group pride. Actions done in the name of the nation, the land, the race become absolute, ultimate, sanctified as the examples of the Hindu Nationalist Party (the BJP), or the Settler Movement in Israel or the Aryan Nations or the Nazis all

show. They are not just politics cloaked in religious dress, they have entered the realm of ultimate concerns.

The research on the psychology of sacred values and spiritual strivings underscores some of the crucial ways that contemporary religious terrorism differs from previous ethno-nationalistic and politically revolutionary terrorism. It is not simply the same old terrorism with a different motivation or rhetoric. Research suggests that sacred motivations make a big difference. We must recognize that in the case of jihadis, Christian Identity Soldiers, Hindu nationalists and Israeli settlers seeking the ethno-religious purification of their country, apocalyptic Christians awaiting the rapture and hungering for Armageddon, Sri Lankan and South Asian Buddhists seeking to forcefully convert or suppress their non-Buddhist minorities, evoking and invoking the sacred transforms these movements in potentially dangerous ways.

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