

MOTIVATION AND TERRORISM: HOW RELIGION MAKES MATTERS WORSE

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Psychological studies of religious motivation reveal several ways that religious motivation is different from more secular motivations that are important for understanding many contemporary terrorist movements. The research on the psychology of sacred values, spiritual strivings, and sanctification 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. This research suggests that different, sacred, motivations make a big difference, when a goal or striving or movement takes on the patina of the sacred, that changes it in significant ways. Much research is 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 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.

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. They are not just politics cloaked in religious dress, they have entered the realm of ultimate concerns. Ultimate commitments to sacred goals take precedence over other commitments. Love of and duty to family must not stand in the way of duty to God or to the sacred land. 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. Once values, goals and projects become sanctified, any attack on them becomes a matter of life and death. Desecration of sacred ideas, objects, values inevitably evokes a virtually boundless fury that leaps over all rational, strategic and even common moral limits. The apocalyptic destruction of the world becomes a wish, and maybe even a plan. The goal of transforming the world and the society is replaced by the drive to purify the world through violence and bloodshed. Sanctified violence is potentially limitless, unconstrained, ultimate violence. Any means are justified for an ultimate end: any means are justified to end abortion, defend and purify the umma or the land of Biblical Israel or the Hindu Nation or the Aryan Race.