

RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATIONS FOR TERRORISM

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Abstract: *Is there a religious ethos providing inspiration for terrorist acts? Has religious terrorism decisively imprinted the nature of new terrorism? The predominant not least controverted role of religion is one of the most important yet unanticipated phenomena of the new century. Religion is considered to be one of the central features and the predominant model for what has been labeled the 'new terrorism', although experts in terrorism advise that the other secular motivations, should not be completely eliminated from the picture. Religiously motivated terrorism also contains elements of secular terrorism and in some circumstances the borderlines between the two types are rather diffuse. While distancing from the general inconsistent claims that Islam is the exclusive exponent of religious terrorism one should not overlook a certain Muslim predominance of such terrorist acts. The predominance should not be analyzed strictly in terms of number of incidents and victims but to a deeper level in terms of sources and aims as they are likely to determine the future incidence of such actions. Clearly and correctly distinguishing the sources and aims is the sine qua non condition for efficient counterterrorist measures. In a millennium confronting a stringent, complex peril, that of the overwhelming phenomenon of terrorism, whose implications and consequences many times lead to insecurity and instability, and go beyond the immediate acts of terror to cause vulnerability or in some cases the relativism of civil liberties, more substantial efforts and energies are called to action.*

Keywords: *religion; terrorism; fundamentalism; Islam; violence*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. What is terrorism? In a millennium confronting a stringent, complex peril, that of the overwhelming phenomenon of terrorism, whose implications and consequences many times lead to insecurity and instability, and go beyond the immediate acts of terror to cause vulnerability or in some cases the infringement of civil liberties, more substantial efforts and energies are called to action.

Despite the large number of definitions formulated in connection to terrorism there is still no general consensus among scholars and most importantly not even at the level of the institutions involved in designing and supporting counter terrorist activities. The difficulty in providing an objective definition is most of the times related to the dynamism and the many facets of the phenomenon, from its association with the French Revolution and The Reign of Terror, through the turmoil of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with their various ideologies imprinting their political secular nature, to the new, surprising features of the twenty-first century. In this article we will relate to the condensed definition proposed by

Bruce Hoffman in his comprehensive study *Inside Terrorism*: "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence" (Hoffman, 2006:40).

In terms of motives for terrorist action, there have been five main ones identified and synthesized: (1) Ideological Terrorism (a desire for (revolutionary) changes in political or social structures); (2) Ethno-Political Terrorism (the longing of ethnic or political minorities in existing states for their own state or at least a certain political and cultural autonomy); (3) Religious Terrorism (a desire to impose religion-based norms of conduct, but also 'apocalyptic fanaticism' as is characterized the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan); (4) Single Issue Terrorism (defined as 'extremist militancy of groups or individuals protesting a perceived grievance or wrong usually attributed to governmental action or inaction' (salient issues under this definition are: the 'fight' for animal rights, environmentalism and the 'fight' against abortion); (5) The „Chosen Ones" (Mentally disturbed / deranged single persons with a certain mission or social philosophy who plan their terrorist attacks rationally, but without network or group support) (Hirschmann, 2000:299).

2. THE NEW vs. THE OLD TERRORISM

With the end of the Cold War and the contours of a new world order, the first steps into the third millennium have been characterized by complex paradigm shifts. The ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992) versus the ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1993, 1996), the religious resurgence, sometimes understood as ‘the revenge of God’ (Kepel, 1991), the new role religion is believed to play in the international relations, the significance of religious identities in this ‘age of the politics of identity’, the intensification and increasing impact of globalization, the transformation and many valences of the phenomenon of terrorism, the characteristics of a *new terrorism* are all dimensions of this problematic context.

Scholars (Laqueur, 1999; Neumann, 2009) have analyzed the shift from the ‘old terrorism’, secular (left wing, right wing, ethnic-separatist) in its sources and manifestation to the ‘new terrorism’, predominantly associated with a religious dimension. Peter Neumann claims that globalization played an important role in the relevant steps made into the *new terrorism*, while Walter Laqueur expresses the shift that has taken place in terms of a *radical transformation, if not a revolution* (Laqueur, 1999:4). According to Laqueur

The traditional, ‘nuisance’ terrorism will continue. But fanaticism inspired by all kinds of religious-sectarian-nationalist convictions is now taking on a millenarian and apocalyptic tone. We are confronting the emergence of new kinds of terrorist violence, some based on ecological and quasireligious concerns, others basically criminal in character, and still others mixtures of these and other influences. (Laqueur, 1999:4-5).

Reflecting on the new *meaning* of terrorism after September 11th, Habermas referred to it in terms of a *caesura* in world history and further identified the source of conflicts in the distortion in communication envisaging the spiral of violence beginning as a spiral of distorted communication that would eventually lead through *uncontrolled reciprocal mistrust*, to the breakdown of communication (Boradori, 2003). Habermas indicated a dangerous polarization between the “a-morality of the West and the supposed spirituality of the religious fundamentalism” (Boradori, 2003:19), calling for a rigorous self-examination on the part of Western culture. As long as democracy is unable to mirror but consumerism, Habermas claims that fundamentalism will go unchallenged.

3. RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED TERRORISM

The predominant, not least controverted, role of religion is one of the most important, yet, unanticipated phenomena of the new century. As the twenty first century unfolds and witnesses more terrorist incidents religious justifications remain in the spotlight. Reflecting both on the causes and the effects of this new reality Bruce Hoffman concludes that

it is perhaps not surprising also that religion should become a far more popular motivation for terrorism in the post-cold war era as old ideologies lie discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist ideology, while the promise of munificent benefits from the liberal-democratic, capitalist state, apparently triumphant at what Francis Fukuyama in his famous aphorism has termed the “end of history,” fails to materialize in many countries throughout the world (Hoffman, 2006: 86).

Religion is considered to be one of the central features and the predominant model for what has been labeled the ‘new terrorism’ (although experts in terrorism advise that the other secular motivations, should not be completely eliminated from the picture).

Previous manifestations of violence and acts of terrorism linked to religion could be traced far back in history, in fact, they represent the first manifestations of terrorist acts. David Rapoport (1984) consistently argued that until the nineteenth century the justifications for terrorism were provided by religion. The most cited examples are in connection to *the zealots, the thugs, the assassins*. Their actions, *modus operandi* and impact are similar to those we are witnessing in the twenty-first century; an analysis of the *Zealots-Sicarii’s* acts of violence indicates that

they were designed to have psychological repercussions far beyond the immediate victim(s) of the terrorist attack and thereby to send a powerful message to a wider, watching target audience—namely, the Roman occupation administration and Jews who collaborated with the invaders. (Hoffman, 2006:83).

For a better understanding of modern religious terrorism one needs to trace its roots, back to the Iranian revolution of 1979 with its message of resistance against the Western intervention in the Middle East, and appeal to the teaching of Quran;

its evolution was rapid and complex, spanning from the 1994 hijacking of an Air France passenger jet by Islamic terrorists belonging to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, the 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system by an apocalyptic Japanese religious cult, the 1993 bombing of New York City's World Trade Center by Islamic radicals, the 9/11 terrorist attack, to only name a few of the most exponent ones. An in-depth analysis of their causes, aims and manifestations would consequently lead to the conclusion that they embodied in various degrees religious elements.

3.1. Religion as an ideological force. For Mark Juergensmeyer religiously motivated terrorism is a combination of religion and other non-religious factors, an equation where religion is providing not only the *ideology* but also the *organizational structure* (Juergensmeyer, 2003). In his view religion, although not *innocent*, doesn't *ordinarily lead to violence*, instead

that happens only with the coalescence of a peculiar set of circumstances- political, social, and ideological- when religion becomes fused with violent expressions of social aspirations, personal pride, and movements for political change (Juergensmeyer, 2003:10).

Consequently, any subsequent interrogations on the historical moment for the occurrence of religious terrorism are to be *raised in context*, meaning "historical situations, social locations, and world views related to violent incidents" (Juergensmeyer, 2003: 10). One of the most important conclusions of Juergensmeyer's research is that

this historical moment of global transformation has provided an occasion for religion-with all its images and ideas-to be reasserted as a public force. Lurking in the background of much of religion's unrest and the occasion for its political revival, I believe, is the devaluation of secular authority and the need for alternative ideologies of public order. It may be one of the ironies of history, graphically displayed in incidents of terrorism, that the answers to the questions of why the contemporary world still needs religion and of why it has suffered such public acts of violence, are surprisingly the same (Juergensmeyer, 2003: 15).

Religiously motivated terrorism also contains elements of secular terrorism and in some circumstances the borderlines between the two types are rather diffuse.

Analyzing the phenomenon of religious terrorism Bruce Hoffman distinguishes the nature

of violence which is essentially transformed in a *sacramental act* or *divine duty* as a result of theological demands or imperatives. By assuming this *transcendental dimension* "its perpetrators are thereby unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists" (Hoffman 1995: 272). The element of indiscriminate killing is identified as one of the main distinctions between secular and religious terrorism, as well as the nature of their perspective on the perpetrated violence. As Hoffman explains:

whereas secular terrorists regard violence either as a way of instigating the correction of a flaw in a system that is basically good or as a means to foment the creation of a new system, religious terrorists see themselves not as components of a system worth preserving but as "outsiders" seeking fundamental changes in the existing order. This sense of alienation also enables the religious terrorist to contemplate far more destructive and deadly types of terrorist operations than secular terrorists, indeed to embrace a far more open-ended category of "enemies" for attack—that is, anyone who is not a member of the terrorists' religion or religious sect (Hoffman 1995:89).

Religion offers through its lenses a reading and interpretation of the reality while providing support and legitimization for violence through an appeal to divine authority, intermediated by the clerics. Their role is essential. The fatwa issued for the Sunni extremists who bombed New York City's World Trade Center in 1993 is but one example among a myriad of others. Their support for suicide acts despite the fact they are forbidden in Islamic law is yet another relevant indicator of their authority.

For most scholars, the phenomenon of religious terrorism remains intrinsically connected to Islam, despite all the counterarguments invoked by *defenders* of Islam, who sustain the thesis that manifestations of fundamentalist religions are encountered outside Islam as well, and that most believers in Islam are to be dissociated from the acts of Islamic terrorists, that "Islam is a highly moral religion, espousing love rather than hate, and is pluralist and democratic in inspiration" (Laqueur, 1999:128). While distancing from the general inconsistent claims that Islam is the exclusive exponent of religious terrorism one should not overlook a certain Muslim *predominance* of such terrorist acts. The predominance should not be analyzed strictly in terms of number of incidents and victims but to a deeper level in terms of sources and aims as they are likely to determine the future incidence of such actions. Lacqueur claims that

those emphasizing the essentially peaceful character of radical Islam find it difficult to account for the fact that in the contemporary world most of the violent conflicts, internal and external, happened and continue to happen in Muslim countries or in those with active Muslim minorities (Laqueur, 1999:128). He relates to *violence*, not strictly associated with terrorism, but also expressed “in full-scale war (as between Iran and Iraq) or in civil war (as in Afghanistan and Algeria),” and analyses a Freedom House survey indicating that forty-five of fifty-one states in the contemporary world defined as *unfree* are wholly or in part Muslim (Laqueur, 1999:128). While admitting this could be an *accident*, that

it may also have to do with social and cultural factors rather than religious, or with elements that are pre-Islamic, Laqueur holds that it is, however, difficult to ignore what is, at the very least, a compelling coincidence (Laqueur, 1999:128).

One distinctive feature must also be emphasized, a jihad not only *anti-Western*, but one directed against other Arabs or Muslims (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Algeria), a jihad that has “turned inward as the radicals have come to believe that the evil at home has to be eradicated before the infidels abroad can be destroyed” (Laqueur, 1999:128). In this context, the violence within Islam, most notably between the two main traditions, Sunni and Shias, has been widely researched.

For Olivier Roy the religious expression of terrorism has a twofold dimension: (1) The Muslim background of most of the radicals, which ‘makes them open to a process of re-Islamisation (almost none of them being pious before entering the process of radicalisation)’; (2) ‘if you kill in silence, it will be reported by the local newspaper; if you kill yelling “Allahuakbar”, you are sure to make the national headlines. The ultra-left or radical ecology is too “bourgeois” and intellectual for them’ (Roy 2015:11).

The vocabulary used by Bin Laden to express al Qaeda’s acts of terror is essentially theological. For Hoffman this is a clear indicator that

at a time when the impersonal forces of economic determinism and globalization were thought to have submerged the ability of a single man to affect the course of history, bin Laden has effectively melded the strands of religious fervor, Muslim piety, and a profound sense of grievance into a powerful ideological force (Hoffman, 2006:93).

The rethoric used by Bin Laden implied a religiously infused legitimization based on the struggle between the *believers* and the *infidels*, and the imperativeness of jihad for all Muslims.

Peter Berger, one of the most consistent voices in analyzing the complexities of the religious phenomenon holds that ‘radical Islam is a modern phenomenon in the sense that every fundamentalist religion is a modern phenomenon, even if you take the original meaning of “fundamentalism” in American Protestant history (Mathewes, 2006: 159). The German sociologists explains that in his perspective

‘fundamentalism’ used for Islam or Hinduism or Judaism is a little iffy, because it has a very distinctive American Protestant meaning, but if you’re going to use the term and we’re probably stuck with it I would define it rather narrowly as an attempt to restore the taken-for-grantedness of the position that has been challenged, or as we discussed earlier, an attempt to restore certainty. (Mathewes, 2006: 159).

Manifested as a reaction against modernity, radical Islam has its specificities, whereas Christian fundamentalism manifested in the religious fervor animating most of the right-wing groups in America or around the world are struggling with keeping the *right narrow path*, while opposing the secular humanism. Roy’s stance on this issues is sharp and advises against misinterpreting religious radicalism (Salafism) and political radicalism (Al Qaeda) as ‘mere imports of the cultures and conflicts of the Middle East’; in his perspective they are immediate ‘consequences of the globalization and Westernization of Islam’:

Today’s religious revival is first and foremost marked by the uncoupling of culture and religion, whatever the religion may be. This explains the affinities between American Protestant fundamentalism and Islamic Salafism: both reject culture, philosophy, and even theology in favour of a scriptural reading of the sacred texts and an immediate understanding of truth through individual faith, to the detriment of educational and religious institutions (Roy, 2006:131).

However not all fundamentalisms ultimately lead to terrorism, as some do not appeal to violence for imposing their religious values:

not all fundamentalists are terrorists or even potential terrorists. Similarly, not all terrorists fighting under a religious banner would need to be fundamentalists. (Lutz & Lutz, 2004: 70).

In their seminal work *Global Terrorism*, James and Brenda Lutz propose a distinction when analyzing *extremism* and *fundamentalism* in the sense that

extremist although a word with a negative connotation might be a more precise term to use with regard to religious terrorists instead of fundamentalist since they are the individuals willing to go to extremes for their beliefs, although violence in self-defense is not really extremism (Lutz & Lutz, 2004:70).

In this context, the authors also point to extremist violence within Judaism and in this particular context they relate to the Jewish groups in the British mandated territory of Palestine that have appealed to terrorism in their independence struggle, but “this struggle was much more of an effort at state creation (i.e., national liberation struggle) than religious terrorism’ (Lutz & Lutz, 2004:70).

Beyond these types of extremism there are the extremist attitudes are in the name of opposing the secular society and legitimized on the grounds of a divine mission held by the Chosen People of God and consequently appealing to any necessary means in order to impose their views. Such ideology is at the center of various incidents directed against the 1994 attack authored by Jewish extremist Baruch Goldstein on Muslim worshippers in Hebron, at the Cave of the Patriarchs, incident indicating a

volatile combination messianic visions of redemption, legitimated by clerical dispensation and achieved through direct action entailing indiscriminate mass murder (Hoffman, 2006:100)

as well as to the assassination of Yitzak Rabin in 1995 as an attempt to stop the peace process and concessions to the Palestinians, same

uncompromising blend of religious fervor coupled with intense enmity toward Israel’s secular government, its elected leaders, and the peace process that would return God-given lands to the Jews’ most implacable opponents (Hoffman, 2006: 100).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The religious justifications for terrorism are part of a complex scenario where other non-religious factors need to be analyzed for an accurate understanding of the phenomenon. While religion doesn’t *ordinarily lead to violence*, a cumulus of political, social, and ideological factors may lead to tensioned contexts in which religion

becomes associated with violence and becomes the vehicle for various social objectives, political agendas. Religious terrorism must not be exclusively relates to Islamic terrorist groups as many of their features have a correspondence in the American Christian white supremacists, or some radical Jewish messianic terrorist movements in Israel.

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