

RELIGION AND TERRORISM

Violence and the Sacred in the 21st Century

Copyright © 1997 & 2006 Daniel J. Jahn. NOTE: Portions of this article first appeared in *Terrorism: A Global Survey*, A Special Report by Jane's Information Group. ISBN: 0 7106 1662 7. I have since rewritten and expanded the article to reflect upon current issues in the world.

In our world of rapidly changing borders, cross-cultural business dealings and globalization, security issues between nation-states remain a priority, but terrorism is perhaps the first truly global security concern. Acts of violence by terrorists are difficult by their very nature to track, predict and counter, and as events of the past few years have shown, terrorism can strike literally anywhere. At least with political - secular - terrorism, the global community may foresee the conflict and realize that a political action of violence may be forthcoming (for example, in response to new legislation, perhaps a change in the legal status of a group defined by the nation-state in which they reside). In the case of religious terrorism, the possibility of a small group of fanatics perceiving a theological mandate to commit violence is far more difficult to predict and to prepare for and counter. In religiously motivated violence, because the mandate is from the highest power, the perpetrators are in their own minds immune from the normal laws governing us, and can commit acts of atrocity that would normally be reviled. Yet we must find a way of approaching religious terrorism systematically, in order to construct a means of confronting it as a global society, and develop strategies to combat it. In essence, we must explore the attempts of an emerging global society to account for the phenomena of disparate faiths and value-systems as technology brings those disparate cultures into ever closer proximity, with often explosive results.

As the 21st Century marches forward into an increasingly religiously-charged society of violence, beginning with the attacks on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001 and continuing through the Iraq War, we need to ask ourselves some questions about religious terrorism, in order to prepare for the increase in acts of religious terrorism around the world. From a security standpoint, we have several starting points for a discussion about religious terrorism: What is the nature of religious terrorism? What is the current status of the world with regards to religious terrorism? How is religious terrorism changing at the end of the millennium? Who should be concerning themselves with religious terrorism? What, if any, is the role of the military and other governmental structures in combating religious terrorism?

What is the nature of religious terrorism?

Religious terrorism is usually defined as acts of violence perpetrated by members of a certain religious belief structure, against those whose different belief structures are in conflict with the terrorists. (This definition serves as a good starting point, but we shall see that is not as hard and fast a definition as it once was). Such conflicts are often deemed intractable by many, causing the interested parties (such as the United Nations, conflict resolution theorists, negotiators and other NGOs) to focus on peripheral issues, stating that religious terrorism is the hardest form of terrorism to approach - in fact, nothing could be further than the truth. Although humans vary im-

mensely in their beliefs, the similarity is that almost everyone has beliefs, and different groups have gone through similar processes to arrive at their current belief structure; given time and opportunity, one can apply similar processes to arrive at an understanding of different religions and of religious terrorism. Such an approach must begin with the question of why violence is the usual recourse of these fanatics.

If we take as a given that violence is inherent in life on this earth and has been since throughout human history, then we must realize that organized religions, mythologies and belief structures must account for violence. Although arguments can certainly be made on both sides of the question “Is violence inherent in humanity?”, it cannot be denied that violent acts occur in nature, and must be dealt with by humanity as witnesses to creation. As people are confronted with violence, they must find a way of coping with violence and its chaotic effects, and ways of restoring order to the world. French historian René Girard has discussed the idea that sacrifice restores order to society, and it is here that we must look for the means by which religious organizations justify acts of terrorism. Religion imposes order on violence, yet ironically it frequently uses violence to restore order in “extreme” situations. It is important to realize that the acts of terrorism in recent years are not random, nor are they temporary - the fact is that these events are reactions against a perceived disorder, and as such are permanent fixtures in the cycle of religious belief - it is unlikely that there will be a sudden downturn in the number of religious terrorist attacks.

To understand religious terrorism, we must seek to make explicit the dynamics involved in religiously justified violence, in order to clarify and categorize theoretical issues which will then lead to a greater understanding of religious terrorism, and a greater awareness of the characteristics of religious terrorists. At the same time, we must reach a point where we move beyond irrational fears, and cease equating certain groups with terrorism as the media has often done by pounding such rhetorical formulas as “Islam=Jihad=Muslim Terrorism” into the popular consciousness. There is no doubt that acts of terrorism are perpetrated by Muslims, but it is not an ingrained aspect of the Islamic faith - at least not any more than the precepts of violence which are embedded in Christianity - and acts of violence easily classified as terrorism are perpetrated by people with various religious affiliations, including Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, and Aum Shinrikyo (the cult which unleashed chemical weaponry on subway commuters in Japan).

Most acts of terrorism are considered political in nature, but many are religiously based, and even those acts which are explicitly political often have religious underpinnings. We can see a difference between “pure political” terrorism and “pure religious” terrorism by understanding the different targets for each. Politically motivated acts of terrorism are usually directed towards a clear target, either an entity or structure representing the state, with the goal being an act of destruction which will cause the state to respond in a manner conducive to the internal goals of the terrorists. In such cases the use of terrorism is often a coercive move, although not always. In an act of religious terrorism, the target is more loosely defined - it is simply some representation of those who disagree with the terrorists belief system. This began changing in the final years of the last millennium however; targets simultaneously became more diffuse on a smaller scale and more targeted on a larger scale. The predictability of possible targets for religious terrorists began decreasing as they unleashed violence on seemingly randomly chosen victims, such as the subway commuters in Japan’s Sarin attack of 1995, or the fact that Al-Qaeda’s goals are simply to “strike at the West”, meaning essentially all people and places are targets at all times. The goal of acts of religious terrorism is also less clear. Often the goal is simply to lash out at the “unbelievers” in a way which is harmful enough to be noticed throughout the community. It is rare that such acts of “pure” terrorism occur however, which is what makes religion and terrorism such a crucial topic in today’s

global society. Despite the acute need for broad discussion and investigation of religious terrorism, the discourse has yet to reach useful levels. We must create and place this discourse in the context of an emerging global society reacting to the telecommunications revolution both by becoming smaller and more integrated, but also by social/cultural boundaries coming into closer proximity, and chafing, in what Dr. Samuel Huntington has called “the clash of civilizations” in his book of the same name.

What is the current status of the world with regards to religious terrorism?

We have myriad examples of religious terrorism in the recent past - both out-of-context single events and ongoing situations; the original bombing of the World Trade Center and its final reckoning on 9/11, the explosion in Oklahoma City, and ongoing conflicts in Ireland, Sudan and Bosnia are just a few of the most widely discussed. Here we see that acts of terrorism are often both political and religiously motivated. The explosion in Oklahoma City is a prime example of a terrorist event with primarily political motivation, but with roots in religious doctrine, both explicit and surmised. We have events of violence which are as yet completely unexplained - at least in public at the time of this article - such as the Olympic pipe bomb in Atlanta in 1996, and the explosion of TWA flight 800, in which terrorism is still being discussed as a possible reason, despite final NTSB findings as to the cause of the accident. This raises a disturbing question: Have acts of religious terrorism become so diffuse, so random in the recent past that we cannot successfully hypothesize as to their motivation and probable perpetrators after the fact much less before? If so, the security forces of the world are in a difficult situation. Even in situations where the perpetrator is caught, as in the Oklahoma bombing, we are at a loss to explain how we might have adequately been prepared for such an event, even given the widespread discussion of politically motivated splinter groups.

The Oklahoma case is particularly illuminating to an examination of the role of religion and terrorism as it was immediately and incorrectly viewed as a religious terrorist attack by the most likely culprits: Muslims. It is interesting to reflect here that when terrorist events of almost unbelievable atrocity occur, victims and witnesses are most likely to suspect religious motivation; the worldwide fear of religious fanaticism is universal in its response to acts of violence, and lack of understanding of other religions. A perfect example of this lack of understanding can be seen in U.S. President Bill Clinton’s remarks immediately following the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal building in 1995: “Make no mistake, this is an attack against America and the way we live!” This was followed with additional statements regarding the status of Muslims undergoing a trial for the New York City bombing incident a year and half earlier, implying quite obviously that the assumed attackers were of Middle-Eastern origin. Continued rhetoric from The White House and other organizations including Oklahoma University’s professor of terrorism speculated on the perpetrators and attempted to whip up fear towards Muslims. Clinton, the professor and other media personalities pointed a finger of blame towards unknown Islamic radical terrorists, and media reports of searches for Middle Eastern men mounted, as average citizens began to react.

The effect on the populace of such rhetoric cannot be dismissed, as it furthers religiously motivated distrust and enters into the cycle of culture-clash that perpetuates radical responses to differences in religious belief. When journalist Mark Steyn was visiting Oklahoma City soon after the bomb he heard a woman working at a restaurant say that she swore if an “Islam person” were to come in she would refuse to serve him. On the internet, discussion groups and websites sprung up to track Muslim actions and suspected Islamic groups, and the electronic rooms of the world of cyberspace were ringing with hate-email.

An American self-styled patriot ultimately was found to be responsible, but the implications of the early statements and whispers in America underscore the fact that 'Islam' still strikes a chord of fear in many western hearts and minds. Clearly there is a need for greater understanding of Islamic ideals in many areas. More importantly, this event and its surrounding media coverage explicate causes of escalating religious terrorism; misunderstanding and fear fanned by an increasingly electronic media-interconnected world which responds to media coverage so rapidly that it creates an immediate complex discourse often based on false premises.

The media refuses to learn its lesson though, and now broadcasts all sorts of opinions on why suspect Timothy McVeigh parked his fertilizer-bomb laden truck outside the Oklahoma City Federal building. Most often discussed is the date of April 19 which is extrapolated to attribute the bombing to a reaction to the situation in Waco, Texas, when the Branch Davidians eventually set their compound and themselves aflame rather than submit to federal authorities. The implication is that McVeigh was objecting to what he perceived as restrictions of freedom of religion, as well as overzealous federal power, but these are mere speculations, possibly as fatuous as those made about Islamic suspects earlier in the year.

How did religious terrorism begin changing at the end of the last millennium?

The changing of the millennium was felt as a threatening rather than encouraging event by many people as the discourse surrounding the event had somber undertones. This helped shape a global response of fear about random acts of violence, a fear which became increasingly obvious as splinter groups began to voice concerns about the end of the millennium and those voices penetrated mainstream society. Discussion of millenarian mythology passed beyond the academic and into the mainstream; even in popular culture, on television, one of the most talked about shows of the 1996/97 season was *Millennium*, a gothic U.S. show about a group of men and women dedicated to fighting the random acts of violence perpetrated by society's darker, usually fanatically religious side in reaction to the approaching millennium. Those people were terrorists in the ultimate sense of the word as it used in popular parlance: striking out with violent acts in seemingly random events, inculcating terror in those people affected. Yet this is not the actual definition of terrorism, which in fact implies a systematic use of terror, planned events of violence for a specific purpose, although the target of the violence may in fact be random.

Recent religious terrorism has changed the nature of violence as it embraces less conservative weaponry. Terrorism has long brought to mind visions of bombs and hostage-taking, and although these continue to be weapons of the religious terrorist, new forms of violence are being unleashed on unsuspecting citizens. Perhaps the most shocking of these new terrorist weapons at the end of the millennium was used in Japan, by an obscure cult led by blind religious recluse Shoko Asahara. The group Aum Shinrikyo was founded in 1987 by Asahara, and rapidly began stockpiling dangerous chemicals. Eventually the cult combined these chemicals in so-called binary bombs, releasing the deadly nerve gas Sarin into the subway. Justification for the act was in the groups' Doomsday ideas - as the year 2000 began to approach, the belief was that the world would end in cataclysmic events, after which adherents to the faith would find themselves in paradise. A millennial group such as Aum Shinrikyo feels the need to become an active player in these events by hastening the demise of the unbelievers. The use of chemical and biological weapons began increasing in groups like Aum Shinrikyo, as they began to prepare for the end of the millennium. According to the judge who presided over the case of the bomb at the World Trade Center, the bomb itself was also packed with cyanide to poison the surrounding area; the plan failed because the cyanide burned during the explosion. U.S. based white supremacist groups also began stockpiling cyanide in the early 1980s, and in 1986, members of Bhagwan Shree

Rajneesh's cult deliberately caused a salmonella epidemic. These types of weapons are the latest in attacking people directly, but other kinds of attacks are also on the rise: the events of 9/11 showed the world that planes with no bombs or chemicals aboard could still serve as weapons of enormous destruction; information warfare which hadn't even been considered much of a threat as recently as ten years ago is now taking on prominence in security discussions.

One of the wonders of the age is the internet, and the global society being created through the interlinking of computer systems worldwide, stimulating the flow of information. As this system makes inroads into all levels of human interaction, the potential for a whole new kind of terrorist attack emerges: information warfare. The incidents of "hacking" are on the rise worldwide, and often the perpetrator is invisible. There is no doubt that religious groups are computer-savvy, and are using the internet as a meeting and planning place, as well as a place to broadcast their beliefs and calls for action. There is ample reason to believe that they will - if they are not already doing so - use the internet and related technologies to engage in acts of destruction to further their goals. The apocalyptic aspects of some of these groups are showing up in manifestos they are publishing electronically, giving a clear indication that they will take action in the near future.

One final horror also needs to be addressed in discussing the changing face of religious terrorism. Since the downfall of the Soviet Union, a remarkable amount of dangerous radioactive material such as is used in nuclear warheads is "missing". The possibility of this material falling into the hand of a terrorist organization is not one to be ignored. It is known that Saddam Hussein had scientists working on giving Iraq nuclear capability, and although it seems that he never succeeded in actually building a WMD (weapon of mass destruction), given the state support of a variety of terrorist groups in the Middle-East, there is the chance of a nuclear weapon being deliberately used in an act of religious terrorism. The normal restraints against using nuclear weaponry which have held its use in check by nation-states are not recognized by religious terrorists, and for that reason this is perhaps the greatest concern of any security minded global organization.

Another aspect of religious terrorism which is changing most noticeably is locale, particularly in the United States. Until relatively recently religious terrorist attacks have been primarily events which occurred outside the nation's boundaries - it was something that happened in troubled areas such as Northern Ireland or in Israel. Most of the events of terrorism in Europe can be deemed political actions rather than religiously based; if religious terrorism did happen in someplace like Madrid or Paris, it was because the terrorists were making a point of striking against another government. But in recent years the spate of events inside the United States' borders has increased, and perhaps most disheartening for Americans is the fact that many of these events are perpetrated by other Americans. The 9/11 planes striking the Trade Center of course stands out as the largest of these events, but abortion center bombings, assassination of abortion doctors, and the fact that militia movements are gaining adherents contributes to a feeling of impending doom. Aum Shinrikyo and other cults also have members in the U.S., and the goals of these groups and their members' willingness to carry out bizarre attacks are suspect at best.

What is particularly interesting is the larger role that apocalyptic dialogue is having on the internal goals of these groups. Biblical ideals of Armageddon are becoming the central force in the decision making processes of many terrorist groups, and there is an increasing likelihood of previously relatively quiescent groups suddenly turning violent. Any movement which anticipates imminent, total supernatural salvation view themselves as having a divine imperative to have a participatory role in the 'last days'. Given the impetus to hasten salvation, these groups may feel that their particular role is to assist in 'judgment day', thus the predilection towards destruction. As

judgment against unbelievers would clearly result in their chance at salvation being slim at best, the death resulting from a religiously motivated act of violence is not one which is inherently evil in the eyes of the deity of the terrorist group.

Who should be concerning themselves with religious terrorism?

For years a distinction has been drawn between foreign and domestic terrorism, and that division has resulted in a weak response to religious terrorism which crosses boundaries of all sorts, political, geographical and cultural. Domestic terrorism is assigned to a nation-state's internal peace-keeping forces, often with the result that any intelligence gathering on the organization's ties to groups outside the state is somewhat lacking, and thus a response is incomplete. Foreign religious terrorism is almost deemed to be "understandable", and perhaps unavoidable in Huntington's 'clash of civilizations'. If any attempt to respond is made on a global basis, it is usually to reframe the event as political, and then pass it on to the military. This has the result of legitimizing the terrorist event, as the media picks up the story and it becomes a mini-war, played out on the television screens of the masses.

Religious terrorism can be bound up in political dissent, but the global aspects of religious terrorism outside of nation-state disputes calls for a global response outside of any nation-state's military, and outside of the United Nation's peace-keeping forces. In 1986, then ambassador Benjamin Netanyahu wrote of his theories about winning the war against terrorism in his book *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*; missing the crucial point that the West cannot win this war, although it can contribute a great deal to a global community response to religious terrorism. The title seems regrettable from a cultural standpoint, seeming to assert that the West stands together and disregards the East, implying that the East is either not involved (after the Aum Shinrikyo event, this would be a particularly disturbing standpoint), that the East is the origin of terrorism (after the Oklahoma bombing, also a vapid viewpoint), or perhaps worse, that the West does not need the East to successfully combat religious terrorism. Netanyahu also strives to make clear the fact that underlying all responses to terrorism - political, economic, military - there must be a moral basis upon which to build a successful strategy to combat terrorism. It would seem that for a moral response to religious terrorism to have any validity in the global community, such a basis must be worked towards by the West and the East, giving at least a moderately universal sense to the foundation of a global war against terrorism. Given Netanyahu's current position in the political arena, it will be interesting to observe his actions and see whether they dovetail with earlier assertions.

Regardless, the point must be made here that Netanyahu and other contributors to his book accept as a given that everyone in the West can reach a moral understanding of universal truths. It can probably however be agreed already that acts of terrorism are found to be abhorrent by the majority, and this is a strong enough basis upon which to form a front against religious terrorism. To entangle counter-terrorism in discussions of morality would merely prolong the time to reach a useful response. So we are left with the attempt to frame an international response to religious terrorism, with the obvious understanding that the response must be universal in its agreement that religious terrorism is inherently counter-productive to the global community, and that a response must be unified at the political, military and economic layers of the world society. A task immense in scope, and unprecedented, but not impossible.

Should an international organization be formed with full funding from a variety of nations? Without a doubt, the answer must be an emphatic 'Yes'. Should such an organization be organ-

ized under the United Nations as many have suggested? The answer here must be just as emphatic, but must be ‘No’. Regrettably, the UN has lost a great deal of credibility, and its top-heavy bureaucracy and entangling web of missions would be at best detrimental to a focused global response to religious terrorism. As Netanyahu pointed out, it is doubtful that many would disagree with Churchill’s dictum that protection of its citizens is a government’s first obligation, but we must now extrapolate Churchill’s idea and state that a civilized world’s first obligation is to protect its law-abiding citizens against the acts of those who would endanger those citizens and as a result would hinder the creation of a just, participatory and sustainable society-where sustainability is at least partially measured by stable, relatively permanent peace.

It is possible that even the existence of an organization proven to be taking into account the phenomena of disparate faiths in as part and parcel of an ongoing, determined struggle against terrorism would be useful in curbing the need of religious terrorists to make themselves heard through violence, as long as it was clear what the response to that violence would be. More importantly, it must be understood that the response would not vary from event to event depending on locale, victims, and supposed motivation. Herein lies perhaps the most critical aspect of any organization devoted to fighting terrorism: the response must be pre-determined, rugged, and it must be known to the terrorists of the world. The form of the response itself can of course be argued, but it would behoove the founders of such an organization to examine historical evidence, leading them to the realization that there are several keys to a relatively successful response to terrorism.

Netanyahu and others have pointed out that simple non-capitulation is the most important factor in dissuading terrorists, as terrorism sets out to make a point, after which demands will be made. This is not always the case in religiously motivated terrorism. An act of religious terrorism may simply be a ‘judgment’, as was discussed earlier. So refusal to deal with the terrorists is a moot point in many cases of ‘pure’ religious terrorism, where no ‘deal’ is envisioned. In fact, as has been discussed earlier, the diffusion of religious terrorism would indicate that the perpetrator may not even be known. We are left with the one relatively proven successful response to terrorism being somewhat useless with regards to religious terrorism. However, it does point to the immense need for intelligence-gathering on the part of all nations, and the immediate sharing of that intelligence. This in turn requires a forum, and necessitates the need for a single-minded organization to be formed. Once intelligence is placed in the hands of an international organization with some power to act internationally, the knowledge can be applied in a variety of counter-measures, including infiltration prior to an act of terrorism, or at the very least informed military response. Details of this remain to be studied and formulated, but to state the obvious, knowledge often is power.

Conclusions

It seems clear that the time for thorough investigation and discussion of religious terrorism has never been more clearly defined - if the world is to move into the 21st century safely, a discourse surrounding religious terrorism must become a part of the global consciousness. With the political paradigmatic shift from ‘realism’ (state independence) to ‘pluralism’ (inter-dependence) the world is faced with the necessity of creating a global ethic, upon which the members of a forthcoming ‘global village’ can base decisions, without compromising the unique identity of any particular tradition. Any world order must take into account the questions of transcendence and search for meaning beyond the mundane that arise in human nature, resulting in belief systems and conceptions of “rights”. As the forces of ‘modernity’ march inexorably forward, questions of meaning

become tantamount to survival in an increasingly cross-cultural world, and the flames of symbolic violence quickly escalate into the fires of terrorism.

Symbolic religious violence is being manifested as real, physical political violence in the contemporary world, in such events as the destruction of the World Trade Center, and recent and ongoing activities of Hizbollah, Hamas, religious belief structures in opposition resulting in terrorist acts in the ongoing Jerusalem issue, the war in Bosnia, and the cluster of conflicts in Africa. We will find that as the 21st Century progresses, such events will take on a deeper meaning for those groups religiously motivated to inculcate change by exercising violence. Exploration of the conjunction of religion and technology with respect to issues such as: religious resurgence; religious militancy or 'fundamentalism'; new religious movements; democratization and related ideas; and the importance of these issues in the discourse surrounding both domestic and international political conflicts can only lead to better preparedness on the part of states and international organizations. The form of such global organizations remains to be constructed, but the means, the idea, and certainly the need, is present.