Introduction

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It could be argued that the era of contemporary religious terrorism began (at least in terms of public awareness) on the morning of Tuesday, 11 September 2001, when four passenger airliners were hijacked by members of al-Qaeda. Two of the airliners were rammed into each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. Another was rammed into the Pentagon. Yet another was en route to Washington, DC, when passengers attacked the hijackers, who subsequently crashed the plane into a field in Pennsylvania. In total, almost 3,000 people died.

In the aftershock of any terrorist attack – especially an attack carried out in the name of religion – it is easy to understand reactive comments that dismiss attackers as mindless fanatics, driven by irrational religious hatred or even by diabolical motives – as if 'terrorists' were minions of the Devil himself. To cite a few of George W. Bush's quasi-theological statements regarding al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, spoken shortly after 9/11:

> I consider bin Laden an evil man ... This is a man who hates freedom. This is an evil man.

The President was then asked, "But does he have political goals?" to which Bush replied,

> He has got evil goals. And it's hard to think in conventional terms about a man so dominated by evil.[1]

Again, it is not difficult to understand the feelings underlying this rhetoric – as well as to understand the strong military response that followed. There is, however, a painfully obvious problem here, namely that this kind of emotional evaluation and its accompanying strategic response does not seem to have blunted the phenomenon we refer to as 'terrorism'. If anything, manifestations of this phenomenon only seem to have gotten worse – as if, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, efforts to destroy 'terrorism' only prompt it to expand and grow.

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Given the indecisive consequences of purely reactive military responses, it is clear that (at least to many researchers, including the present author) more time and energy needs to be invested into the less flashy approach of trying to *understand* the complexities that lie behind such attacks – including, when appropriate, the attackers' religious convictions. This is not to say, of course, that analyses have not already been carried out. Thus, for example, in a piece published in 2004, noted terrorism researcher Andrew Silke observed that, on average, a new book on terrorism was being published every six hours.[2] At that time, studies of terrorism were being conducted in the shadow of 9/11. As a consequence, many authors commented, in one way or another, on the religious convictions of the hijackers and on the perpetrators of other violent acts who seemed to be inspired by religious motives.

In the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks as well as in the present period, the great majority of commentators do not have religious studies backgrounds, and are not usually or primarily interested in religion. As a consequence, the religious dimension of terrorism has often been dealt with superficially. Secularist critics with axes to grind against religion have portrayed the imputed irrational fanaticism at the core of religion as the primary cause of terrorism, while analysts with political science backgrounds have tended to downplay if not dismiss the religion factor altogether. Academicians from criminology have examined terrorists as criminals; psychologists have postulated psychopathological mechanisms at work in the terrorist mind; and so forth. Voices from religious studies have been relatively few.

There is, however, no such thing as a single religious studies approach. Thus, an additional complexity that needs to be taken into account when discussing religion and terrorism is that, over the past several decades, there has been a revolution within religious studies. As discussed in their *Nytt Blikk på Religion* (*New Views on Religion*), Ingvild Saelid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson note that cultural studies is currently supplanting prior approaches to the study of religion.[3] In this emergent approach, religion is viewed as an aspect of culture, and stress is placed on the interaction between religion and other cultural phenomena. As part of this project, the very term 'religion' has been interrogated and critically analysed as an ideological category embodying specifically Western viewpoints and assumptions. Some have even argued that there is nothing essential about religious phenomena that set them apart from non-religious phenomena. From this point of view, assertions that 'religion' (in some abstract sense, distinct from specific traditions) causes anything should be rejected. This makes studies that

assign a special status to 'religious violence', such as, to take but one example, Charles Selengut's *Sacred Fury*,[4] problematic. For the most part, contributors to the current collection share the critical understanding that *religion* is a cultural construction rather than a trans-historical force, but without necessarily rejecting the role of understanding specific religious traditions for understanding specific acts of violence.

Additionally, the majority of contributors share – though in varying degrees – the viewpoint that there is an important sense in which terrorism is also a cultural construction. By this I mean that *terrorism* is not an objective phenomenon that we recognise in the same way that we recognise, let us say, conch shells on the beach. At a very basic level, like religion, there is so much variability among the different conflicts that give rise to the incidents of political violence which we label 'terrorism' that it might be better to talk in terms of terrorism**s**, in the plural.[5] Additionally, the very term carries with it a sense of condemnation, as 'something the bad guys do'.[6] In other words, the term is inherently subjective, as reflected in the familiar expression, 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'.[7] Many analysts have been especially guilty of confining the meaning of terrorism to the violent political acts of non-state actors against nation states, especially against Western nations and their allies. In recent years, the terrorist label has also been extended to individuals and military units fighting under the banner of the Islamic State, which has not been regarded as having the status of a legitimate nation state.

Beyond these shared understandings, for the present collection I have intentionally brought together a selection of researchers with widely varying – sometimes bordering on mutually exclusive – approaches and theoretical orientations. Thus, for example, Mark Juergensmeyer, who contributed the introductory chapter to the present collection, was one of the first religious studies specialists to focus on the religion-terrorism nexus. As a consequence, his influential scholarship, particularly his *Terror in the Mind of God* (originally published in 2000[8]), has been a point of reference – and critical reflection – in the works of subsequent researchers. In his *The Myth of Religious Violence*,[9] William T. Cavanaugh, author of the second chapter, takes the cultural approach to its logical conclusion. Explicitly contrasting his work with Juergensmeyer and with a selection of other earlier theorists, he asserts that there is no distinctly religious violence that places it in a separate category from non-religious violence. However, Cavanaugh's and related approaches that downplay the role of religion have, in turn,

been used as critical points of reference for subsequent researchers. Thus, for example, in his chapter in the present collection, Lorne Dawson argues against approaches that completely sideline religiosity as a causal factor in understanding terrorist acts.

A relatively recent approach to 'terrorism studies' is Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS). In a manner not unlike Cavanaugh's interrogation of 'religion' and – as the name suggests – CTS critically examines our assumptions about, and portrayals of, 'terrorism.' And while Tom Mills and David Miller would not necessarily place themselves firmly within that particular school, their chapter on religious terrorism in this anthology nevertheless adopts a 'critical' approach in the spirit of CTS, as well as adopting the historical sociological approach of Lisa Stampnitzky's important study, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism.'*[10]

I had originally conceptualised this collection as falling into two parts, with Part One containing chapters focused on different theoretical approaches. However, because theory and content are so often interwoven, I was forced to abandon that plan. Nevertheless, the collection contains five chapters which emphasise theoretical aspects: Scott Atran, whose work on cognitive-evolutionary approaches to terrorism has been so influential, concisely articulates his thinking about Devoted Actors and violence in his contribution. Espen Dahl examines the controversial but nevertheless resilient thought of René Girard, especially Girard's later thinking about terrorism. Stephen Nemeth discusses rational choice theory, and how this approach has been applied to religion and terrorism. Lorenz Graitl summarises how a variety of different researchers have attempted to apply Emile Durkheim's classic sociological ideas about suicide to contemporary suicide bombings. Finally, the present author offers a partial revamping of older approaches to myth and ritual in terms of studies of 'imitation', through which he interprets select aspects of certain radical subcultures.

The subsequent three chapters offer detailed discussions of the religion-terrorism relationship. Whereas Peter Schalk's essay deconstructs and critiques treatments that portray the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka as motivated by religious concerns, Pieter Nanninga's piece on al-Qaeda digs down into the culturally informed meanings of statements by Osama Bin Laden to produce a remarkably nuanced analysis that fundamentally calls into question what it means to say that al-Qaeda's attacks are motivated by 'religion' – or, for that matter, what it means to say that Bin Laden was *not* motivated by religious concerns. Nanninga's second chapter offers a similarly nuanced analysis of how

the Islamic State draws, in part, from Muslim traditions in its creation of spectacular acts of symbolic violence.

The collection's penultimate three chapters examine a range of different responses to contemporary non-state terrorism. Per-Erik Nilsson examines the French national response to the attack on the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, and the various cultural meanings encoded in that response. Meerim Aitkulova then looks at how the government of Kyrgyzstan utilised an incident that was portrayed as a response to Islamic State terrorism as a way of marshalling support for the government, as well as a pretext for requesting military aid from the United States and Russia. Lastly, Christopher Hartney explores the meanings of screen portrays of terrorism. Finally, James Lewis and Nicole D'Amico argue that the self-sacrifice of Falun Gong practitioners is being encouraged by the movement's leadership as part of a larger strategy to bring pressure to bear on China.

SURVEY OF CONTENTS

Violence in the name of religion, plentiful enough in our time, is an enduring feature of religious life. The history of every religious tradition leaves a trail of blood, though some would argue that the violent images in religion are greatly misunderstood. Yet the fact remains that religion is filled with the symbols and language of violence. Perhaps more to the point, in the modern world dramatic acts of terrorism have been undertaken in the name of religion. In 'Does Religion Cause Terrorism?' Mark Juergensmeyer situates the issue in a middle ground, giving religion some responsibility but not the exclusive role in understanding the terrorist acts associated with certain religious traditions. In the first chapter, he kicks off the collection by discussing the attraction between religion and terrorism in general terms.

In the present collection's second chapter, 'Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power', William T. Cavanaugh is particularly interested in examining discourse about 'religion' in Western approaches to terrorism. Religion is generally thought to be a peculiarly virulent source of – or an aggravating factor in – terrorist attacks. The categorisation of ideologies and practices as 'religious' and 'secular', however, is a Western way of dividing up the world. This chapter traces a genealogy of the concept of religion, and shows how the concept is not a neutral analytical tool but rather serves to draw attention to certain kinds of violence and away from other kinds of violence, those labeled 'secular'.

In 'Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terror-ism: A Critique', Lorne L. Dawson focuses on the genre of professional literature penned by scholars and certain 'terrorism experts' and finds, in sharp contrast to Cavanaugh, a pervasive pattern of denying that there are any direct causal relationships between Islam and terrorism, and more generally between being religious per se and being a terrorist. To demonstrate this point, he examines studies by a selection of three of the most prolific and influential scholars of terrorism. He concludes by pointing out that much of the primary data available about the motiv-ations of jihadi terrorists are *prima facie* religious, and that if we wish to be effective in countering this kind of terrorism then, at minimum, this self-understanding must be taken into account.

In 'Religion, Radicalization and the Causes of Terrorism', Tom Mills and David Miller offer a number of related perspectives on por-trayals of the connection between religion and terrorism. One import-ant contribution is that their chapter provides a concise history of 'terrorism studies', especially the emergence of this inchoate 'field' back when the Soviet Union was portrayed as the driving force behind terror-ism, and how this focus was eventually supplanted by a focus on reli-gion in the so-called New Terrorism. Mills and Miller also examine the political leanings of the various individuals and entities involved in terrorism studies (e.g., think tanks), and how such orientations play into the stigmatising of Islam as the source of terror.

Uncompromising wars, revolution, and today's global terrorism are driven, in part, by Devoted Actors who adhere to sacred or tran-scendent values that generate actions independently from, or out of proportion to, rationally expected outcomes, calculated costs and consequences, or likely risks and rewards. In 'The Role of the Devoted Actor in War, Revolution, and Terrorism', Scott Atran dem-onstrates how field-based observation, surveys and experimental studies in real-world political conflicts show ways in which Devoted Actors, who are unconditionally committed to sacred causes, and whose personal identities are fused within a unique collective iden-tity, willingly make costly sacrifices including fighting and dying, thus enabling low-power groups to endure and often prevail against materially much stronger foes

Decades ago, the French-American philosophical anthropologist, René Girard, put forward one of the few widely influential theories of violence and religion. Girard's approach has been highly contested, but it has nevertheless had a major impact on current theoretical discussions. From the 1960s and onward, Girard put forward and

continually developed his thought in different phases: from his theory of mimetic desire, to its consequences for archaic religion and sacrifice, to his Judeo-Christian deconstruction of sacrificial myths. In 'Girard on Apocalypse and Terrorism', Espen Dahl discusses what he describes as a fourth phase of Girard's thought, in which Girard links religious terrorism and Biblical apocalypse in order to shed light on the structure of violence in the contemporary world.

For social scientists, 'rational choice' refers to what are actually a range of models which posit that individuals are motivated by self-interest and a desire to maximise their sense of well-being or, in the language of economists, their utility. Rational choice theorists assert that their models have been able to impose an element of predictability on human behaviour, allowing for the scientific study of a range of economic, social and political processes – including 'religious' terrorism. In 'Rational Choice and Religious Terrorism: Its Bases, Applications, and Future Directions', Stephen Nemeth discusses the assumptions of the rational choice model, its use in terrorism research, and its applicability to the study of religious terrorism, objections to the model and its future applications.

Many studies on suicide bombing utilise Durkheim's category of altruistic suicide, but often do so in a superficial way, without establishing links to his larger theory of religion. In the field of media studies, Durkheim's theories on ritual and ceremony are frequently used. They are even applied to secular contexts, though not without critique. Acts of terror have also been described as media events; however, they perform a diametrically opposite function due to their disruptive and chaotic nature. Acknowledging the multi-dimensional character of events that are perceived in various ways by different audiences, in 'Terror as Sacrificial Ritual?' Lorenz Graitl asks if extreme violence like suicide bombings or beheadings can really be seen as Durkheimian ritual. Perhaps Durkheim's explanatory framework must instead be modified to adequately answer these questions.

Contemporary approaches to myth (and ritual) tend to emphasise both the differences among myths as well as the embedded character of religion, in part because of a more general revolt against universalising approaches, particularly as these earlier approaches were represented in the work of Mircea Eliade. In 'Imitations of Terror: Applying a Retro Style of Analysis to the Religion-Terrorism Nexus', James R. Lewis utilises a selection of these earlier understandings of myths as the basis for interpreting the mythic/ritualistic characteristics that many terrorist acts seem to exhibit. The later part of the chapter presents a rethinking of

this older approach in terms of more recent research and theorising, particularly as old and new overlap in the notion of 'imitation'.

Despite traditionally religious terms sometimes used to describe the movement, in 'The LTTE: A Non-religious, Political, Martial Movement for Establishing the Right of Self-Determination of Īlattamils', Peter Schalk argues that religion is and has been of no concern for the Tamil Tiger Movement in Sri Lanka. A conviction about a universal right of self-determination for a people like the Īlattamils was Vēluppiḷḷai Pirapākaraṉ's explanation for negotiating and fighting for secession. After failed negotiations to establish this right against the will of the Government of Sri Lanka, India and rest of the world, Vēluppiḷḷai Pirapākaraṉ guided his cadres in armed struggle by teaching a non-religious, political and martial martyrology.

The role of religion in al-Qaeda's violence has been strongly debated since the attacks of 11 September 2001. In 'The Role of Religion in al-Qaeda's Violence', Pieter Nanninga provides a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in al-Qaeda's violence by relating the topic to insights from religious studies. Based on the statements of the leaders of 'al-Qaeda Central' – the group around Bin Laden in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the period between 1996 and 2011 – he argues that it is not very fruitful to ask whether religion, as an abstract category, has played a role in al-Qaeda's violence. Instead, Nanninga claims that it is more interesting to examine why the question on the role of religion in jihadist violence has been so prevalent over the last one and a half decades.

In most literature on the topic, the Islamic State's violence has been perceived as a means of spreading terror. However, acts of violence are also expressive actions that embody cultural meanings for the participants and 'say' something to the audience. In 'Meanings of Savagery: Terror, Religion and the Islamic State', Pieter Nanninga examines the cultural meanings of the Islamic State's violence, paying particular attention to the role of religion, which, according to some authors, is especially relevant in cases of theatrical, symbolic violence. Focusing on the videotaped beheadings of journalists and aid workers in 2014 and the Paris attacks of 2015, Nanninga argues that Muslim traditions provide one of the sources that the Islamic State draws upon to create spectacular acts of symbolic violence that are not just a means of terror, but also performances in which the actors display for others the meanings of their social situation.

In the wake of the attacks in Paris on 7 and 8 January 2015 against the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher supermarket *Hyper*

Cacher, the hashtag 'I'm Charlie' (*Je suis Charlie*) quickly spread in the news and social media. It soon became a watchword for manifesting adherence to the French national body. In 'Where's Charlie? The Discourse of Religious Violence in France Post 7/1 2015', Per-Erik Nilsson attempts to answer this question by analysing what he refers to as the discourse of religious violence. This means understanding how certain statements at a given period, despite being potentially contradictory and paradoxical, share a common ontological and epistemological groundwork. It also implies stressing the creative, proscriptive, and disciplinary power of discourse: how discourse targets the production of subjects and the performative dissemination of power through them.

In 'Understanding the Threat of the Islamic State in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan', Meerim Aitkulova argues that the problem of religious radicalisation in general and the threat of the Islamic State in particular are exaggerated in Kyrgyzstan to suit the security interests of the government and certain international players. Expert forecasts parroting the same popular international discourses of radicalisation without a more detailed analysis of local realities and disregarding the voices of religious people evokes a *déjà vu* feeling of the Afghan threat that was based on the same narrative about the inevitability of the problem. Yet neither the Taliban's nor other terrorist traces could be identified in Kyrgyzstan's major conflicts in the post-Soviet era that thrice violated the peace and stability in the country, namely two revolutions and a bloody ethnic conflict. However, enhancing the militant secularism of current authorities and the ambitions of certain international powers to plant their own flag in the country may have far more negative consequences than the Afghan problem since the entire growing religious population is under suspicion.

In 'Terror and the Screen: Keeping the Relationship of Good and Bad Virtual', Christopher Hartney seeks to problematise how we approach religion and terror on the screen in light of the work of the recent methodologies developed by thinkers like Fitzgerald, Cavanaugh and Sloterdijk. The terror depicted in such narrative structures reinforces wider mythic understandings of our worldview and the processes by which we conceive of its defence and act to defend it. The 'crossover' point highlights some very dubious political agendas and demonstrates that the relationship between terror, politics and religion can never be clear cut within a modernistic milieu that seeks to confuse narratival and mythic conceptions of the other with 'our' reality – and then obfuscate further that confusion through extremely tight definitions of religion.

Finally, in 'Understanding Falun Gong's Martyrdom Strategy as Spiritual Terrorism', James R. Lewis and Nicole S. D'Amico examine the accusation of 'state terrorism' levelled against the People's Republic of China by members of the Falun Gong, the Qi Gong group banned in China in 1999. Most non-specialists think of Falun Gong as a peaceful spiritual exercise group unjustly persecuted by Chinese authorities. However, the founder-leader, Li Hongzhi, has encouraged his followers to conduct a vigorous public relations campaign against the Chinese government, and simultaneously discouraged them from sharing his apocalyptic teachings with non-practitioners. These inner teachings include an esoteric theory of karma which prompts practitioners of Falun Gong to actively seek persecution and martyrdom, and go a long way towards explaining their persecution in China.

Endnotes

1   Cited in Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 190.
2   Andrew Silke, 'Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research', in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Frank Case, 2004), pp 1–29.
3   Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson, *Nytt Blikk på Religion: Studiet av Religion i Dag* (Oslo: Pax, 2001).
4   Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2nd ed., 2008).
5   Silke, *Research on Terrorism*.
6   Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 19.
7   Gerald Seymour, *Harry's Game* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 62.
8   Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 3rd ed., 2003).
9   William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
10 Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.