

1 Introduction

On July 1, 2013, *Time* released an issue of its magazine with the picture of a Buddhist monk on its cover and the caption “the face of Buddhist terror.” The monk, Ashin Wirathu, had helped form several Buddhist organizations designed to aggressively confront what he claimed to be efforts by Myanmar’s Muslim minority to “Islamize” the country. Wirathu insisted that, despite making up about six percent of the population, Muslims in Myanmar “get money from Muslim countries, and they want to conquer us and destroy Buddhism” (Bookbinder 2013). Through the proliferation of cell phones, the Internet, and social media, these Buddhist organizations spread sermons propagating conspiracies of Muslim designs to “deracinate” the country of its Buddhist population through forced conversions, high rates of childbirth, and marriage to Buddhist women. These narratives sparked several anti-Muslim riots and terrorist acts throughout the country that cost thousands of lives and, at its worst, helped justify a wave of forced migration in 2017, which produced “more than 655,000 [Muslim] refugees” (Amnesty International 2018, 270). How could a Buddhist monk, who adheres to the principle of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, help foment indiscriminate violence against a minority group within its own country?

Similar examples of religious justifications for acts of terrorism against innocent people can be found elsewhere. For example, white supremacists in the United States, Canada, and Europe draw on a fringe interpretation of Christianity, known as Identity Christianity, to argue that white Anglo-Saxons are the true Israelites, Jews are the anti-Christ, and people of color are the offspring of Satan. Several white supremacist movements and groups have sprung up under the influence of Christian Identity to call for a racial holy war – “RAHOWA” – with the hope that “wars between and among the races will lead to an Aryan victory and restructuring of society that will reinstate the White man to his dominant place on earth and thereby restore ‘order’” (Sharpe 2000, 608).

Another example of religion’s involvement in indiscriminate acts of violence comes from Japan. On March 20, 1995, a self-proclaimed religious group, Aum Shinrikyo, attempted to release sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing twelve and injuring thousands. This attack against innocent civilians

was part of a wider strategy to hasten the end of times and bring salvation to its faithful members. Paradoxically, Aum Shinrikyo claimed that it needed to “destroy the world to save it” (Lifton 2000).

More recently, a group calling itself *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ‘l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām*, more commonly known as ISIL or ISIS in the West, began slaughtering Shia Muslims, Yazidis, Christians, and secular Sunni Muslims by the thousands in Syria and Iraq. Its call for mass bloodshed quickly spread around the globe, and in 2014, its spokesperson, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, ordered:

If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way, however it may be. . . . Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. (Bayoumy 2014)

How could the world’s religions, which propagate peace and love, become entangled in terrorist acts designed to terrify and kill innocent civilians? Academics and policy makers have struggled to answer this question and make sense of groups carrying out these incidents, their motives, and how religion has shaped their behavior, if at all. A surge of literature has produced a wide array of explanations for the emergence of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL, ranging from those who consider both the definition of religion and its involvement in violence a Western construct and a “myth” (Cavanaugh 2009) to those that claim that certain religions, Islam in particular, are inherently violent and at the root of these acts of terrorism, what is known as “essentialist terrorism” (Ali Khan 2006).

Still other scholars have pointed out that terrorism done in the name of faith is not new; it stretches far back in history and is not confined to just one religious tradition. David Rapoport (1983) and Walter Laqueur (1987), for

example, note that religiously motivated terrorism can be found as far back as Second Temple Era Judaism, when Zealots – a radical group within Judaism – assassinated Roman officials, with the aim of compelling their withdrawal from the region. In India, Hindu Thuggs strangled unsuspecting sojourners as a sacrifice to the goddess Kali. And Shia Muslim “assassins” killed innocent civilians as part of a secret religious fraternity. In Christianity, the rise and fall of Crusading, which spanned several centuries beginning in the eleventh century CE, included both church-sanctioned efforts to push back Muslim advances as well as groups that formed outside the jurisdiction of the church and that perpetrated indiscriminate acts of violence against civilians, including Muslim, Jewish communities and eastern Christians (Gregg 2014b).

These wide-ranging debates over what defines religiously motivated terrorism, or if it exists at all, are further challenged by rigorous debates over what terrorism is, in and of itself, and whether or not it should be considered a distinct form of violence. This perennial debate has produced at least 109 definitions of terrorism by one count, confounding what terrorism is and how to counter it (Hoffman 1998). Religiously motivated violence and extremism suffer from the same lack of consensus. Terrorism scholar Peter Neumann (2013, 873) argues that debates over the term radicalization, which many assert leads to religious terrorism, not only have failed to produce a consensus on its meaning but have led some scholars to “claim that radicalization is a ‘myth’ promoted by the media and security agencies for the purpose of [anchoring] news agendas . . . [and legitimizing] policy responses.” These debates, in other words, are still trying to produce a consensus on what religious terrorism is, what causes it, and how is it countered.

This volume aims to offer some clarity on these debates. It begins by providing a very brief introduction to literature on terrorism in Section 2. Drawing from key scholars across academic disciplines, it includes debates surrounding terrorism’s targets, methods, actors, and intended effects, focusing specifically on terrorism as threats or acts of violence that intentionally target civilians, as opposed to military or government targets.

Section 3 begins to unravel the seemingly contradictory possibility that the world’s religions could be a source of violence and terrorism

against civilians. It proposes that religions are about much more than propagating peace, love, and ethical conduct. Instead, they are complex systems of resources, including scriptures, stories, doctrine, networks of practitioners, seasoned leaders, and even material resources like money, buildings, printing presses, and so on that, under certain conditions, can be useful tools for justifying, motivating, and perpetrating acts of terrorism. Religion's unique contribution to groups wanting to challenge the status quo is that it has this array of readymade tools that can be used to facilitate terrorism.

Section 4 builds on this discussion to consider the conditions under which groups use religious resources to justify and perpetrate acts of violence against civilians. It presents four broad causes of religious terrorism in particular: fundamentalist calls for purity both within the faith and within territory believed to be essential to the religion, religious nationalists' aim to seize the state and impose religious rule, efforts to hasten the apocalypse, and the conditions under which individuals are radicalized and take up these calls for violence. These causes of religious terrorism underscore the contexts in which groups call for terrorist acts in the name of faith and the religious resources they use to justify and perpetrate these acts.

Section 5 provides examples of groups that have engaged in acts of terrorism on behalf of their faith. Specifically, it describes the rise of Salafi Jihadism, the birth of ISIL, and the conditions under which it has justified brutal acts of violence against civilians, including fellow Muslims. It then provides a brief overview of the rise of Identity Christianity, the white supremacist movement in the United States, and its use of Christian scriptures and resources to justify violence against civilians. This section also describes the rise of militant strains of Buddhism in Myanmar and the creation of the 969 Movement and Ma-Ba-Tha, organizations of Buddhist monks using faith to justify cleansing the country of Muslims. It then considers the conditions under which American Rabbi Meir Kahane founded the Jewish Defense League in 1968 and its call for violence against what it believed to be enemies of Judaism in the United States and Israel, culminating with the 1994 murder of twenty-nine Muslims in prayer at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Finally, the section looks at an example of a "New Religious Movement" – Aum Shinrikyo – and its use of several

faith traditions to justify attacking Japanese civilians with a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) in 1995.

Section 6 concludes with a discussion of efforts aimed at countering religious violence and terrorism, including deradicalization programs that target individuals incarcerated for acts of religious terrorism, counter-radical efforts aimed at addressing vulnerable populations, and anti-radicalization – community-based approaches designed to prevent radicalization from taking hold in wider populations.

This discussion aims to show that religiously motivated terrorism is not a new phenomenon, nor is it confined to one faith tradition. Moreover, religious terrorism may be on the rise, given the problematic combination of factors that make it more likely, including war and other forms of trauma, perceived moral corruption of society and government, and the foreign policies of other countries believed to be unjust. These factors, when combined with key resources from within the faith, including charismatic leaders, their interpretation of scriptures and beliefs, the use of key religious resources, and the camaraderie, purpose, and a sense of identity that radical groups provide may increase the likelihood of religious terrorism. Finally, access to more lethal weapons, including WMD, could make religiously terrorism more deadly.

Ultimately, countering religious terrorism requires governments to do more than bolster homeland security or execute counterterrorism missions aimed at disabling terrorist organizations; these actions do not address root causes. Rather, governments and communities need to work at the local level to address the factors that make certain individuals and groups vulnerable to embracing violence and terrorism in the name of faith and to address and undermine the interpretations of faith systems calling for violence. Communities around the world have begun to tackle these problems through various deradicalization, counter-radicalization, and anti-radicalization programs, and provide clues for how best to counter religious terrorism.

2 What Is – and Is Not – Terrorism

Any investigation of religious terrorism needs to begin with defining what terrorism is and what it is not. However, this is not an easy task,

and most discussions on terrorism tend to struggle with providing a basic, agreed-upon definition of the phenomenon. Walter Laqueur (1987, 11), for example, notes that the term “has been used in so many different senses as to become almost meaningless, covering almost any, and not necessarily political, acts of violence.” Bruce Hoffman (1998, 37–39) identifies 109 different definitions of terrorism and specific words used to describe the phenomenon. Hoffman further points out that the US government cannot even agree on a common understanding of terrorism, and the State Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Defense all have different definitions. Despite the lack of consensus, reviewing debates on terrorism will help inform a discussion on how religion may affect this type of violence.

Many definitions of terrorism focus specifically on the target of terrorist acts, namely civilians. For example, Walter Laqueur (1987, 72) defines terrorism as “the illegitimate use of force to achieve a political objective by targeting innocent people.” This definition notes the deliberate targeting of civilians or “innocents,” through either the use or threat of violence, to affect their attitudes and behavior. Louise Richardson (2006, 4) offers a similar definition: “Terrorism simply means deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes.” She goes on to assert that “if the primary tactic of an organization is deliberately to target civilians, it deserves to be called a terrorist group, irrespective of the political context in which it operates or the legitimacy of the goals it seeks to achieve” (2006, 6). However, focusing specifically on the targeting of civilians when defining terrorism throws into question groups that target militaries as a means of advancing their goals. For example, Hezbollah’s 1993 suicide bombing of the US Marine Corps Barracks in Beirut – which killed 306 people, including 241 military personnel – may not fall within the parameters of targeting just civilians. Similarly, the 1996 al-Qaeda attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed nineteen US service members, was not an attack on civilians, nor was the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen. Therefore, defining terrorism exclusively as targeting civilians leaves out important examples of violence that many would identify as terrorism.

Other definitions focus on the act to define terrorism, as opposed to the goals. As such, terrorism is a tactic – a means to greater ends. Tore Bjørge (2005, 2), for example, defines terrorism as “a set of methods or strategies of combat rather than an identifiable ideology or movement, and involves premeditated use of violence against (primarily) non-combatants in order to achieve a psychological effect of fear on others than the immediate targets.” Similarly, Richardson (2006, 6) asserts, “It is the means employed and not the ends pursued, nor the political context in which a group operates, that determines whether or not a group is a terrorist group.” However, focusing only on the act of violence would include the many examples of mass shootings in the United States, such as the October 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting, which killed fifty-eight people and was the single largest mass shooting in US history. The gunman had no known motive for the act. Within this definition, attacks like this and the many other school shootings in recent US history would be no different from acts driven by greater political motives, such as the 2014 San Bernardino shooting, which killed fourteen, and the 2016 Pulse Nightclub massacre, which killed forty-nine. Both of these attacks were carried out by individuals claiming allegiance to the ISIL.

Other definitions of terrorism focus on identifying the type of actors engaging in terrorist actions. Several scholars of modern terrorism, for example, tend to focus on nonstate actors as the perpetrators of terrorist acts, distinguishing these individuals and groups from governments (Richardson 2006; Hoffman 1998). For example, Kydd and Walter (2006, 52) define terrorism as “the use of violence against civilians by nonstate actors to attain political goals.” However, groups that use terrorism often also receive support from governments, what is typically called “state sponsorship of terrorism.” Still other states use nonstate actors as “proxies” or a deniable foreign-policy arm of a country’s government to pursue various goals. Hoffman (1998, 27) describes this as “warfare whereby weaker states could confront larger, more powerful rivals without the risk of retribution.” For example, the Lebanese-based Shia group Hezbollah has received considerable training and support from the state of Iran (Ranstorp 1997). More recently, Hezbollah fighters have appeared in conflicts backed by Iran, such as the fight against ISIL in Syria and Iraq, and in the civil war

in Yemen (Ali 2019). Therefore, the line between nonstate actors that use terrorism and government support of these groups is difficult to discern.

Still others focus on the goal of terrorism. Hoffman (1998, 14), for example, notes that terrorism is “fundamentally and inherently political . . . and ineluctably about power: the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power and the use of power to achieve political change.” He thus defines terrorism as “violence – or, equally important, the threat of violence – used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of a political aim” (1998, 15). Similarly, Martha Crenshaw (Sick 1990, 53) defines terrorism as “the deliberate and systematic use or threat of violence to coerce changes in political behavior. It involves symbolic acts of violence, intended to communicate a political message to watching audiences.”

Considerable scholarship has focused also on the ideological motivations of terrorism. For example, Gregg (2014a) differentiates terrorism of the “left” (anarchist and Marxist inspired), terrorism of the “right” (racist, nationalist, and fascist motivations), and “ethnic separatist” terrorism, which aims to achieve autonomy from a country or military occupation. David Rapoport (2004) argues that terrorism has gone through four distinct “waves” in the modern era, beginning with anarchism, then “anti-colonial,” followed by the “new left” (communist-inspired terrorism), and the current wave, which is religious terrorism. Rapoport notes that each of these waves lasted around forty years (or about a generation). Similarly, Walter Laqueur (1999) argues that terrorism has had different motivations and that the rise of fanaticism, which he defines as an ideology of mass destruction, could combine with new technology, notably WMD, to cause catastrophic terrorism. Laqueur identifies extreme interpretations of religion, and particularly the concept of the apocalypse, as a potential driver of catastrophic terrorism.

Furthermore, several different academic disciplines investigate terrorism, producing distinct results based on these intellectual approaches. Political scientists, for example, tend to focus on the ways in which terrorism challenges governments or other sources of political power (Hoffman 1998), how terrorism is used as a strategy that “signals” commitment to governments and populations about certain intended goals (Kydd and Walter 2006), and how rational actor models can explain the conditions

under which groups employ terrorism (Anderton and Carter 2005). Sociologists and anthropologists look at the ways in which certain social and cultural circumstances produce and support terrorism or reject it (Killcullen 2009; Atran 2010). Psychologists consider the conditions under which individuals join and engage in terrorist acts, and whether or not they have mental pathologies (Crenshaw 2006, Horgan 2009, McCauly and Moskalenko 2017). And religious scholars look at the ways in which religious resources, such as sacred texts, symbols, and networks of adherents, are used to motivate and justify acts of violence (Juergensmeyer 2000; Gregg 2018). Each of these approaches produces a slightly different focus on the definition and causes of terrorism.

The government and international agencies responsible for fighting terrorism have also produced differing definitions of terrorism that echo debates about the actors, targets, means, and purpose of terrorism. Reuven Young (2006) notes that differing legal definitions of terrorism hamper both international and domestic efforts to counter this threat. For example, as the agency responsible for investigating and prosecuting criminal acts in the United States, the FBI (2018) distinguishes between international terrorism, which it defines as “perpetrated by individuals and/or groups inspired by or associated with designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored),” and domestic terrorism, which is “perpetrated by individuals and/or groups inspired by or associated with primarily U.S.-based movements that espouse extremist ideologies of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature.” The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2017, 114) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.” These definitions do not suggest a consensus on the definition but rather include a mixture of actors (individuals, groups, countries), motives (ideological, racial), targets (individuals, property), and goals (coerce governments or societies).

Finally, several scholars note that terrorism is an inherently negative term. Hoffman (1998, 30), for example, observes that “the terrorist . . . will never acknowledge that he is a terrorist and moreover will go to great

lengths to evade and obscure any such inference or connection.” Hoffman cites Jenkins, who notes that “use of the term implies a moral judgement; and if one party can successfully attach the label *terrorist* to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint” (1998, 31). Richardson (2006) cites Osama Bin Laden and Abimael Guzman of the Shining Path, who both point to state actions as the true terrorism and their own actions as justified in the name of political liberation. Therefore, terrorists will rarely, if ever, self-identify as such, which complicates an understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

From this broad debate on terrorism, the following discussion will pay particular attention to acts or threats of violence that deliberately target civilians. It will aim to shed light on how groups, usually nonstate actors, claim to act on behalf of a faith tradition and use religious resources to justify, motivate, and execute terrorist acts against civilians. It will consider the wider social and political circumstances that give rise to these groups and the various goals for which they are fighting. And, finally, it will offer thoughts on how to counter this threat.

3 Religion and Terrorism

How can the world’s religions, which propagate peace and love, promote violence and the killing of innocent civilians through terrorist acts? Answering this question requires, first, discussing what religion is. As will be described, religions are about much more than propagating peace, love, and ethical conduct. Rather, religions are complex systems of scriptures, stories, doctrines, and laws, along with social and material resources that, under certain conditions, can be useful tools for justifying, motivating, and perpetrating violence, including terrorism. Religion’s unique contribution to groups wanting to challenge the status quo is that it has this unique array of readymade tools that can be used to facilitate terrorism. This section outlines three broad sets of religious resources in particular: scriptures, stories, and beliefs, which leaders can interpret to justify and motivate