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## Sacred Violence: Religion and Terrorism

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**FOREWORD:**  
**SACRED VIOLENCE: RELIGION AND TERRORISM**

*Jessie Hill<sup>\*</sup> & Adam F. Kinney<sup>†</sup>*

Religiously-motivated terrorism is one of the most pressing problems facing America today,<sup>1</sup> as well as one of the most ancient phenomena the world has known. Perhaps as early as the seventh century, Hindu “Thugs” engaged in the killing of innocent persons motivated by a desire to please the god Kali.<sup>2</sup> And the medieval Islamic Assassins, or Ismailis-Nizari, whose purpose was to overthrow the existing impure religious and political order “through the spread of fear and terror,” engaged in high-profile killings of prominent individuals in public places at least as early as the eleventh century.<sup>3</sup>

Yet despite its long history, the phenomenon of religiously-motivated terrorism remains poorly understood. Is religion really the motivating factor in many terrorist acts, or is it merely a pretext that calculating terrorists use to attract collaborators? Is there something inherently violent about religion that motivates its most extreme adherents to commit terroristic acts? Or, on the other extreme, does it even make sense to speak of “religiously-based terrorism” as a separate and unique category?

It has been argued, for example, that religion itself is generally a minor motivator of suicide terrorism and that secular political goals, combined with the strategic advantages afforded by terrorist techniques, form

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., MARK JUERGENSMEYER, *TERROR IN THE MIND OF GOD: THE GLOBAL RISE OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE* 6 & n.3 (2000) (noting that Warren Christopher, among others, has characterized “terrorism in the name of religion and ethnicity” as “the most important security challenge we face in the wake of the Cold War”); BRUCE HOFFMAN, *INSIDE TERRORISM* 86–88 (2d ed. 2006) (documenting the recent rise in religiously motivated terrorism and suggesting that religious terrorism is often more intensely violent, with higher fatalities, than secular terrorism).

<sup>2</sup> OLIVER MCTERNAN, *VIOLENCE IN GOD’S NAME: RELIGION IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT* 46–47 (2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 73.

the primary impetus for such attacks.<sup>4</sup> Or indeed, purely psychological forces may play a major (if heretofore largely unacknowledged) role in motivating terrorists to commit violence.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, some have argued that the nature of religion itself tends to create particularly violent and intense—even cosmic—conflicts, as compared to those arising from purely secular origins.<sup>6</sup> And on the other end of the spectrum, René Girard has famously argued that violence comes from the very nature of human beings, and that religion is the traditional means by which a community channeled and purified itself of violence; in other words, that “far from being the cause of our violence, archaic religions are, or rather were, first a consequence of that violence and, secondly, our primary protection against it.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is possible that the very nature of religion itself, at least when taken to extremes, tends toward terrorism. Religion may be understood as competing with the civil authority; it is an alternate source of obligation and, for some, an alternate source of legitimacy for violence. God’s will, which some religious fanatics understand as requiring the death of certain classes of persons or the destruction of certain impure elements within society, threatens and supersedes the political state’s claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming that religiously-based terrorism is a unique category, requiring unique approaches to combat it, it should be clear that this problem cannot only, or perhaps even primarily, be addressed from a legal standpoint. Given the variety of forces potentially at work—religious, psychological, political, and philosophical—it seems that if policymakers wish to make serious inroads toward dealing with this extraordinarily knotty issue, they will have to look beyond the limited insights legal scholars might provide, whatever their expertise in suggesting approaches for deterring, pu-

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<sup>4</sup> ROBERT A. PAPE, *DYING TO WIN: THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF SUICIDE TERRORISM* (2005); cf. JESSICA STERN, *TERROR IN THE NAME OF GOD: WHY RELIGIOUS MILITANTS KILL* xiii–xix (2003) (arguing that religious obsessions of terrorists “often mask a deeper kind of angst and a deeper kind of fear”—namely that of “a godless universe, of chaos, of loose rules and of loneliness,” as well as masking a “greed for political power, land, or money” that terrorist “leaders deliberately intensify . . . to ignite holy wars”).

<sup>5</sup> Jerrold Post takes this position. See Jerrold M. Post, *Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces*, in *ORIGINS OF TERRORISM: PSYCHOLOGIES, IDEOLOGIES, THEOLOGIES, STATES OF MIND* (Walter Reich, ed. 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Is Religion the Problem?* 6 HEDGEHOG REV. 21 (2004); see also HOFFMAN, *supra* note 1, at 86–88.

<sup>7</sup> René Girard, *Violence and Religion: Cause or Effect?* 6 HEDGEHOG REV. 8, 13 (2004). That article summarizes some of the views presented in RENÉ GIRARD, *VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED* (Patrick Gregory trans., 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, *Sins of Omission: What “Religion and Violence” Arguments Ignore*, 6 HEDGEHOG REV. 34, 47–48 (2004) (describing the view that secular violence may be legitimate violence but that religious violence is always illegitimate).

nishing, and containing secular violence. It is therefore with a measure of openmindedness and humility that the Symposium on “Sacred Violence: Religion and Terrorism” was conceived.

This symposium evolved from a roundtable discussion on “Religion and Violence,” co-sponsored by the Case Western Reserve University School of Law’s Institute for Global Security Law and Policy and the Case Western Reserve University Department of Religious Studies in November 2005, with financial support from the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities. A handful of scholars and practitioners from a variety of fields gathered to read and discuss an interdisciplinary set of texts touching on the relationship between religion and violence, as well as to plan the conference. The goal was to put on a symposium with an innovative format and a unique purpose—namely, to gain insights about religiously-based terrorism from disciplines such as religious studies, philosophy, political science, and psychology that might be relevant for those working in the fields of law and policy. As such, the conference was broadly set against the backdrop of a mock White House Task Force meeting, convened to advise the President on policy measures to counter a terrorist threat from a fictitious religious group (not identifiable as any currently existing religious group, so as to keep the discourse as general as possible). The morning of the conference was devoted to “testimony” by experts from non-legal disciplines. The afternoon followed with responses and unstructured discussion by law and policy scholars who attempted to integrate and apply these insights, translating them into practical solutions for dealing with religiously-based terrorism.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible to do justice to the myriad of viewpoints presented at the conference, but the following commentaries and articles present an evocative sampling of viewpoints on the confluence of religion and terrorism. In *Religious Extremism and International Legal Norms: Perfidy, Preemption, and Irrationality*, Professor Louis René Beres presents a highly literary approach to the phenomenon of suicidal terrorism. Prof. Beres rejects the assertion that religion is the root cause of suicidal terrorism, instead positing that it is, paradoxically, the suicidal terrorist’s fear of death that is the root of his actions. Moreover, the West’s projection of its own conceptions of what is “logical” or “rational” onto suicidal terrorists continues to stymie efforts to understand and control this destructive and violent phenomenon. The suicidal terrorist, in Prof. Beres’ view, is not the product of the Westphalian school of what is and is not just—hence the West’s failure to understand the terrorist’s motivations and logic. Suicidal terrorism finds its origins in a violent impulse, developing from deeper psychological trauma,

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<sup>9</sup> A webcast of the conference may be accessed at <http://law.case.edu/centers/igs/pl/webcast.asp?dt=20070330>.

which the suicidal terrorist channels into his macabre, yet sacred, deed. From here, Prof. Beres draws connections between this "sacred violence" and perfidy, preemption, and irrationality as a prompt for deeper discussion.

Professor J.S. Piven picks up where Prof. Beres leaves off, embarking on a nuanced psychological discussion of suicidal terrorism in his article, *Psychological, Theological, and Thanatological Aspects of Suicidal Terrorism*. Prof. Piven seeks the unstated and disavowed motives of suicidal terrorism, looking beyond the rhetoric of the act to its origins in past trauma, group fantasy, and paranoia. After an analysis of current research in the field, Prof. Piven finds that the theological dimension of suicidal terrorism is paid scant attention by scholars in the field, who instead focus their analyses on the terrorist's secular strategic and political agendas. Moreover, Prof. Piven takes issue with those scholars' failure to consider seriously the possibility that suicidal terrorism is psychologically pathological behavior. Piven posits that conscious strategies with logically calculated results still retain a symbolic significance as heroic mythology. Yet, when evaluating the phenomenon of suicidal terrorism it is important to remember that the influences upon the actor are not confined solely to their strategic goal, political purpose, or even their religious objective. Instead, all of these elements, amongst a myriad of others, combine to achieve not only the practical strategic goal, but also, in the pathological mind of the suicidal terrorist, allow the actor to transform humiliating defeat into a victory over victimization and assumption of the divine. Only by examining all aspects of the suicidal terrorist's psychological makeup can we begin to understand the true role of religion in any specific instance and effectively respond to this destructive phenomenon in general.

Rounding out the discussion of religion and terrorism, Professor Parvez Ahmed, in *Terror in the Name of Islam—Unholy War, Not Jihad*, presents the argument that the link between terrorism and Islam is not as pervasive as it may first appear. In his article, Prof. Ahmed seeks out the true definition of "terrorism," examines the recent confluence of Islam and terrorism, posits causal links between United States' Cold War policies vis-à-vis the Middle East and the rise in terrorist activities, and ultimately presents suggestions for curbing terrorism. Prof. Ahmed deemphasizes the importance of religion in suicidal terrorism, focusing instead on the socio-political influences of the historic conflicts in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on the effects of Cold War policies in the region. This evaluation reminds the reader that, as with extreme interpretations of Christianity, extreme interpretations of Islam should not be imputed to the group generally, or even to the individual suicidal terrorist necessarily.

Finally, focusing on the practical aspects of countering religiously-motivated terrorism, Professor Gregory McNeal tackles the problem of terrorist reliance on the internet in his article, *Cyber Jihad: Countering the Internet Jihad*. Prof. McNeal explores terrorist groups' reliance on the in-

ternet, as a means of recruitment, organization, and training. After exposing the great value of the internet in carrying out terrorism, Prof. McNeal turns to existing law to find a basis upon which the United States may target terrorist activities on the internet. Finally, Prof. McNeal suggests amending the “material supporter statutes” to include telecommunications companies that provide services to terrorist organizations. In this article, Prof. McNeal presents a thought-provoking analysis of the current state of terrorist reliance on the internet, and offers an intriguing proposal to frustrate such reliance.

Understanding the confluence of religion and terrorism is no simple task. Fully comprehending the rationales, motivations, and psychoses that inform religion and terrorism individually is difficult enough without trying to understand the interplay of these various elements. Nevertheless, what can be stated definitively is that only through open interdisciplinary discussion may we begin to understand these complexities. The “Sacred Violence: Religion and Terrorism” Symposium sought to open the channels of discussion. This issue presents the ultimate results of that discussion, and will hopefully serve to spark discourse on these important issues within academe and beyond.

The conference was chaired and ably moderated by Amos Guiora, former Professor of Law and Director of the Institute for Global Security Law and Policy at Case Western Reserve University. Assistant Professor Jessie Hill co-chaired. But the entire undertaking would have been impossible without the assistance of numerous others, especially the other roundtable participants, including Prof. Timothy Beal, Prof. William Deal, Pastor John Lentz, Prof. Robert Lawry, Dr. Bob O’Neal, Dr. Louis Rice, and Ted Wasky. Law students and Institute Research Fellows Matthew Ezzo and Rebecca Slazinski worked tirelessly to provide extensive and invaluable research and logistical assistance throughout the conference planning process.

