

# **Holy Warriors and Armageddon: The Role of Religion in Terrorism**

By

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## **Introduction**

Religious terrorism is terrorism conducted by those whose motivations and aims have a predominant religious character or influence. This form of terrorism could have its roots in the misinterpretation of theological epithets, or it could be the result of extreme forms of delusion that may alter reality, and thus subject the individual to distorted versions of religious facts. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, religious terrorism consists of acts that terrify; the definition of which is provided by the witnesses - the ones terrified - and not by the party committing the act; accompanied by a religious motivation, justification, organisation, or world view.<sup>1</sup>

Religion is sometimes used in combination with other factors, and sometimes as the primary motivation. Religious terrorism is intimately connected to current forces of geopolitics. Bruce Hoffman has characterised modern religious terrorism as having three traits:

- The perpetrators must use religious scriptures to justify or explain their violent acts or to gain recruits.
- Clerical figures must be involved in leadership roles.<sup>2</sup>

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- Apocalyptic images of destruction are seen by the perpetrators as a necessity.<sup>3</sup>

The role of religion in terrorism, and the various justifications that are provided by those who nurture such forms of violence has its roots far back in history. The purpose of this paper is to understand the importance of this influence, to trace the evolution of this particular genre of convoluted thought, and to understand the reason behind the increase of the same. This paper explores three important religions of the world, their theological misinterpretations, and their rabid use to justify violence down the history of mankind.

### **Christianity and Terrorism**

Religious activism can be traced back to Christianity's origins. The tradition emerged in the context of revolutionary struggles against the Roman occupation of Israel. The New Testament indicates that at least two of Jesus' disciples were members of the rebellious Jewish party *The Zealots*. Scholars dispute whether or not the Jesus movement was considered antigovernment at that time, but the New Testament clearly records that the Roman colonial government charged Jesus with sedition, found him guilty, and executed him for the crime.<sup>4</sup>

Did Jesus in fact support the violent overthrow of the Roman occupation? The answer to that question is unclear, and the controversy over whether Christianity sanctions violence, has pursued the Church from its earliest days. It can be argued that Christians were expected to follow Jesus' example of selfless love, to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".<sup>5</sup> Evidence for the other side comes from such incidents as Jesus driving the moneychangers from the Temple with such enigmatic statements as Jesus' dark prophecy: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace but a sword".<sup>6</sup> The early Church fathers, including Tertullian and Origen, asserted that Christians were constrained from taking human life, a principle that prevented Christians from serving in the Roman army. Thus, the early Christians were essentially pacifists.<sup>7</sup>

When Christianity was exalted into the status of state religion in the fourth century, Church leaders began to reject pacifism and accept the doctrine of 'just war', an idea first stated by Cicero, and later developed by Ambrose and Augustine. This idea justified the use of military

force under certain conditions, including proportionality and legitimacy, the notion that undertaking must be approved by an established authority.<sup>8</sup> The abuse of the concept in justifying military adventures and violent persecutions of heretical and minority groups led St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century to reaffirm that war was always sinful, even if it was occasionally waged for a just cause. Remarkably, the just war theory still stands today as the centre piece of Christian understanding concerning the moral use of violence.<sup>9</sup>

Some modern Christian theologians have adapted the use of just war to liberation theology, arguing that the Church can embrace a ‘just revolution’.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the just war, however, there are other less legitimate examples of religious violence from Christianity’s heritage, including the Inquisitions and the Crusades. The thirteenth-century Inquisitions were the medieval Church’s attempt to root out heresy, involving torture of the accused and sentences that included burning at the stake. The Spanish Inquisitions in the fifteenth century were aimed largely at Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity but were investigated to see if the conversions were sincere; again, torture and death were standard features of these spurious trials.<sup>11</sup>

Christian Identity ideas were most likely part of the thinking of Timothy McVeigh<sup>12</sup>, the convicted bomber of the Oklahoma City federal building. McVeigh was exposed to Identity thinking through the militia culture with which he was associated and through his awareness of the Christian Identity encampment, Elohim City, on the Oklahoma – Arkansas border.<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s the largest concentration of Christian Identity groups was in Idaho and in southern Midwest near the Oklahoma – Arkansas – Missouri borders. In that location a Christian Identity group called the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSAL) established a 224 acre community and paramilitary school.<sup>14</sup>

### **Islam and Terrorism**

Muslim anti-Americanism stems from two principle causes: the manifestly unjust consequences of current and past US policies toward the Muslim world, and the use of America as the “designated other” in Islamist discourse that seeks to reconstruct an Islamic identity and create a global Islamic political power.<sup>15</sup> The policies that fuel anti-Americanism includes US support for Israel, for authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and for opposition to Islamic regimes in Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran and Algeria. They also include past sanctions against

Iraq and the recent 'preemptive war' against and occupation of Iraq. These actions are seen as a proof that the United States is determined to destroy Islam and Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

According to Samuel P. Huntington, the structure of political loyalty among Arabs and among Muslims, generally has been the opposite of that of modern West.<sup>17</sup> For the latter, the nation state has been the apex of political loyalty. In the Islamic world, the structure of loyalty has been exactly reverse. Throughout Islam, the small group and the great faith, the tribe and the *ummah*,<sup>18</sup> have been the principal foci of loyalty and commitment, and the nation state has been less significant. In addition, the idea of sovereign nation states is incompatible with belief in the sovereignty of Allah and the primacy of the *ummah*.

Some Western analysts, in an attempt to explain Islamic militancy also finds fault entirely with Islam or certain Islamic fundamentalists, have centred their focus on key Islamic thinkers, such as Sayyid Qutb. Qutb is easily one of the major architects and strategists of the contemporary Islamic revival. Along with Maulana Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, the revivalist movement in South Asia, and the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's Islamic revolution, Qutb gave shape to the ideas and the worldview that have mobilized and motivated millions of Muslim's worldwide.<sup>19</sup>

Islam is ambiguous about violence. Like all religions, Islam occasionally allows for force while stressing that the main spiritual goal is that of nonviolence and peace. The Koran contains a proscription very much like the biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill." The Koran commands the faithful to "slay not the life that God has made sacred."<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, Muslim activists have often reasserted their belief in Islamic nonviolence before defending their use of force. Even so, Islam has a history of military engagements almost from its beginning. Scarcely a dozen years after the Prophet Muhammad received the revelation of the Koran in 610 A.D., he left his home in Mecca and developed a military stronghold in the nearby town of Medina. By 630 A.D., Prophet Muhammad and his Muslims had conquered Mecca and much of western Arabia and had turned the ancient pilgrimage site of Kaaba into a centre of Muslim worship. The Caliphs who succeeded the prophet as the temporal leaders of the Muslim community after Muhammad's death in 632 A.D. expanded both the military control and spiritual influence of Islam, and over the years the extraordinary proliferation of the Islamic community throughout the world has been attributed in no small measure to the success of its military leaders

in battle. Perhaps no writer has had greater influence in extending the concept of *jihad* than the contemporary Egyptian writer Abd al-Salam Faraj. The author of a remarkably cogent argument for waging war against the political enemies of Islam is the pamphlet *Al Faridah al-Gha'ibah* (The Neglected Duty), Faraj stated more clearly than any other contemporary writer the religious justifications for radical Muslim acts. His booklet was published and first circulated in Cairo in the early 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

Faraj argued that the Koran and the Hadith<sup>22</sup> were fundamentally about warfare. The concept of *jihad*, struggle, was meant to be taken literally and not allegorically. Moreover, Faraj regarded anyone who deviates from the moral and social requirements of Islamic law to be the targets for *jihad*. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of Faraj's thought is his conclusion that peaceful and legal means for fighting the nonconformists are inadequate. The true soldier of Islam is allowed to use virtually any means available to achieve a just goal. Deceit, trickery and violence are specifically mentioned as options available to the desperate soldier. The reward for doing so is nothing less than a place in paradise.<sup>23</sup> These ideas of Qutb and Faraj have been circulated widely throughout the Muslim world through two significant networks: universities and the Muslim clergy. The two networks intersect in the Muslim educational system, especially in schools and colleges directly supervised by the clergy. It is not surprising, then, that many who have been attracted to groups such as the Al Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah, were former students.

Once again, according to Huntington, a comparable mix of factors has increased the conflict between Islam and the West during the course of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, the Muslim population growth has generated large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people, who become recruits to Islamic causes, exert pressure on neighbouring societies and migrate to the West.<sup>24</sup> Second, the Islamic Resurgence has given the Muslims renewed confidence in the distinctive characteristics and worth of their civilization and values compared to those of the West. Third, the West's simultaneous efforts to universalise its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority and to intervene in conflicts in the Muslim world generate intense resentment among Muslims. Fourth, the collapse of communism removed a common enemy of the West and Islam and left each the perceived major threat to the other. Finally, the increasing contact between and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners stimulate in each a new sense of their identity and how it differs from that of the other. Within both Muslim and Christian societies, tolerance for each other declined sharply in the 1980s and in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup>

## **Buddhism and Terrorism**

When Shoko Asahara, leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult<sup>26</sup>, decided to unleash Armageddon in Tokyo's subway using the dreaded poison gas Sarin as a weapon, he was violating each and every doctrine expounded by Gautama the Buddha.<sup>27</sup> Neither Christ, Buddha, nor any of Asahara's other spiritual heroes were murderers. What thus needed to be explained was how a community of intense spiritual devotion could be involved in such a savage act of violence. One might expect that the doctrine of ahimsa – nonviolence – would make any Buddhist organisation immune from religious justification for acts of terror. Yet the history of Buddhism is not spotless. The great military conquests of the Sinhalese kingdoms of Sri Lanka, for instance, have been conducted in the name of Buddhist tradition and often with the blessings of the Buddhist monks.

Some traditional Buddhist teachings have tried to identify exactly when the rule of nonviolence can be broken, accepting the notion that circumstances may allow some people to be absolved from the accusation that they killed or attempted to do so. The teachings require that five conditions be satisfied in order to certify that an act of violence indeed took place: something living must be killed; the killer must have known that it was alive; the killer must have intended to kill it; an actual act of killing must have taken place; and the person or animal attacked, in fact, must have died.<sup>28</sup> It is the absence of the third condition – the intention to kill – that typically allows for some mitigation of the rule of nonviolence. The killing of Sri Lanka's Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike, by a Buddhist monk in 1959 is evidence that Buddhists, like their counterparts in other religious traditions, have been able to justify violence on moral grounds. Precedent has thus been established for justification of acts of killing within the Buddhist tradition, though rarely in the forms of Buddhism found in Japan.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Asahara claimed to have found such an exemption. Rather than concentrating on the adverse effect that killing has on the killer's moral purity, this teaching focuses on the one who is killed and the merit that comes after death. The concept of *phowa* – that spiritual merit – was extended by Asahara that in some cases people are better off dead than alive.<sup>29</sup> According to Asahara's interpretation of this Tibetan principle, if the persons killed are enmeshed in social systems so evil that further existence in this life will result in greater negative

karmic debt, then those who kill are doing the victims a great favour by enabling them to die early. Scholars of Tibetan Buddhism however doubt the authenticity of such teachings. However, not even the infamy of Aum Shinrikyo dampened the public's interest in such movements, apparently including even Aum Shinrikyo itself. Since 1998 there was said to have been resurgence in Aum membership, not only in Japan, but also in Russia and other parts of the world where it had previously enjoyed a sizeable following.<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Religion's importance in contemporary terrorism is as a means of communication. It really shows how religion is being twisted. Bin Laden himself does not have any theological credentials, yet he issues *fatwas* because he knows people will listen to them, that it is an enormously helpful means to enhance his message to attract new support – and truly is a perversion of religion. Now there are clerical figures in Islam, in Judaism, in white supremacist Christian Churches in the United States, using liturgy to justify violence, including bin Laden citing the Koran, again a distorted interpretation of it.

Violence has often found recourse to twisted religious thought in order to justify its rampages. The popular belief in the Manichean concept of "us" and "them" may find its sympathisers in religion –based terrorist groups that wish to use it as a means of gaining political power or to wreck vengeance over innocent civilians, but it will never find justification in major world religions that essentially preach the doctrines of peace and non violence. The epiphany of Armageddon and Holy Warriors has been misplaced for centuries. It is time that both the policy makers as well as theologians realise that violence has no rationale, be it religious or otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, University of California Press, California, 2004, pp. 4 - 10.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, USA, 1999, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> John Arquilla, Bruce Hoffman, Brian Michael Jenkins, et al., eds. *Countering the New Terrorism*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1999, pp. 19 - 20.

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<sup>4</sup> For a somewhat controversial statement of the position that early Christianity was perceived during its own time as a political movement, S. F. G. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew, 5:44, in *The Holy Bible*, American Bible Society, New Jersey, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> *Matthew*, 10:34; *Luke*, 12:51 – 52, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Nonviolence" in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, Macmillan, New York, 1987, pp. 463 – 467.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Potter, *War and Moral Discourse*, John Knox Press, Richmond, VA, 1969; Paul Ramsay, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1968; Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1987, pp. 56 – 61. Nigel Biggar, "Christianity and Weapons of Mass Destruction," in Sohail H. Hasmi and Steven P. Lee (eds.), *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 168 – 199. Martin L. Cook, "Christian Apocalypticism and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *ibid.*, pp. 200 – 210.

<sup>11</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy James McVeigh was a United States Army veteran and security guard who was convicted of bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco Siege, as revenge or to inspire revolt against what he considered a tyrannical federal government. The bombing killed 168 people, and was the deadliest act of terrorism within the United States prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. He was convicted of 11 federal offenses, sentenced to death, and executed on June 11, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Morris Dees, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat*, HarperCollins, New York, 1996, p. 165. Reports of McVeigh visiting Elohim city are made in David Hoffman, *The Oklahoma City Bombing and the Politics of Terror*, Feral House, Venice, CA, 1998, pp. 83 – 84.

<sup>14</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Sohail H. Hasmi, "Islamic Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Argument for Nonproliferation," in



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Hashmi and Steven (eds.) *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, *op. cit.*, pp. 321 – 352.

<sup>15</sup> M.A. Muqtedar Khan, “Radical Islam, Liberal Islam,” *Current History*, Vol. 102, No. 668, December 2003, Philadelphia, p.417.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Viking, Penguin Books Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1996, p. 174. Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam*, Palgrave, Macmillan, New York, 2003, pp. 83 – 95.

<sup>18</sup> An *ummah* is a community or a people. It is used in reference to the community of Believers or Muslims.

<sup>19</sup> MA Muqtedar Khan, *Current History*, *op. cit.*, p. 418.

<sup>20</sup> *The Holy Koran*, accessed electronically at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/k/koran/>, on July 15, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Jeurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> The Hadith is a compilation of the direct sayings of the prophet Muhammad.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Jeurgensmeyer, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Aum Shinrikyo, now known as Aleph, is a Japanese new religious movement. The group was founded by Shoko Asahara in 1984. The group gained international notoriety in 1995, when it carried out the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subways.

<sup>27</sup> *Dhammapada*, Hindi trans. by S. N. Tandon, Vipassana Vishodhan Vinays, Dhammagiri, Igatpuri, 2001. Also various Buddhist scriptures of various schools, namely the Theravada, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana available electronically at <http://www.buddhanet.net> and <http://www.vri.dhamma.org>

<sup>28</sup> H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1970. David W. Chappell, “Buddhist Perspectives on Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in Hashmi and Steven (eds.), *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213 – 236.

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<sup>29</sup> In an erstwhile Aum website: <http://www.aum-shinrokkyo.com> , which is now non-operational. The present English website is at <http://english.aleph.to>. Under the leadership of Fumihiko Joyu, Aum Shinrikyo is now seeking to regroup and rebuild. In an effort to change its image, Aum, has changed its name to Aleph, which means to start anew. It is not clear just how much distance the renewed Aleph has placed between itself and Shoko Asahara. They have not renounced the founding leader Asahara. In an interview with the *New York Times* Joyu stated "Just like you wouldn't stop your connection with physical fathers and mothers who commit a crime, we will not sever our connection with our spiritual father." Still, Joyu says that profits from their business activities will be used to compensate victims for prior wrongdoings of the sect. Joyu also claims the reorganization will lead to a more democratic group and that the Japanese no longer have reason to fear the group. In the meantime, according to Sims, "Aum's every move is being monitored by authorities under a new law passed last year that allows the police and Justice Ministry officials to enter sect facilities at will to conduct inspections."

<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/aums.html>. For details, <http://english.aleph.to/pr/01.html>

<sup>30</sup> "Resurgence of Interest in Aum Shinrikyo," *New York Times*, New York, October 28, 1998, A3.

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