What Part Does Religion Play in Religious Violence?

Simon Dein*

University College London, Durham University, Durham, UK

Theories of religious violence have examined individual, social and religious factors which might be involved in religious acts. Jongman [1] points out there are many definitions and types of terrorism. He proposes a provisional definition in which terrorism targets random or symbolic victims from a target group and forces them into submission by creating a credible threat of violence. Second, terrorists may be perceived in different ways by insiders and outsiders. One man's terrorist is another man's martyr. Individuals who are willing to die for a group may be seen as fulfilling a sacred task and are martyrs. Those outside the group see them as fundamentalists. Here I examine the theoretical frameworks for understanding religious violence.

There have been attempts to explain terrorism in terms of psychopathology. This research has led to the conclusion that terrorists are often more psychologically healthier and more stable than the rest of the criminal population and do not in fact display signs of appreciable psychopathology [2]. This type of research is difficult to carry out because it is impossible to find large samples of terrorists to examine. The studies often show that while some members may display irrational and psychopathological characteristics the group overall promotes identity cohesion. However, there may be a degree of self or narcissistic pathology in some members.

The cognitive approach examines whether terrorism is irrational. Do terrorists in fact have a choice? The cognitive approach argues that terrorist's behaviour could be rationalised through

(1) Moral justification,

(2) Displacement of responsibility,

(3) Disregard for the consequences,

(4) De-humanisation and

(5) Attribution of blame [3].

Cognitive theories often argue that terrorism is a rational form of behaviour which involves beliefs about the righteousness, justice and sanctity of one cause.

Terrorists adopt absolutist rhetoric differentiating between us versus them. Insiders are good, outsiders represent the force of evil and, therefore, the only logical solution is to destroy them. This becomes a moral obligation. Overall the evidence suggests terrorists are rational psychologically healthy individuals. There is, however, no agreed definition of irrationality.

The social psychological approach focuses on understanding terrorism in terms of group processes. It is important to know, however, that no matter how successful a terrorist group is, even the larger more popular terrorist group represent a minority within their communities. There is no doubt that grievance and sense of threat lend a part in group terrorism. Belonging to a religious group may fulfil self-esteem needs of an individual and provides outlets for emotions caused by concrete grievances. However, why one group responds to this in one way and another in a violent way remains to be explored. It does

appear that potential bombers will always have had at least one friend or relative killed or abused by the perceived enemy. Silke [4] argues that the transition from being a member of a disaffected group to a violent extremist is usually facilitated by a catalyst. This may be loss of parents or loved ones, severe conflict, especially with parent's existence of a criminal record. Interestingly poverty per say does not appear to be a risk factor for terrorism. It appears that suicide bombers in 911 came from middle class backgrounds. Countries encountering suicide terrorist acts between 1980 and 2001 appear to be middle income societies.

The group dynamics itself may be important in terms of group future actions. Goals may be ethnocentric. The group is at the centre of everything; others are scaled or rated with reference to it. This can include a number of biases which can lead to inter-group conflict. Social identity theory argues that these groups create a positive identity by defining themselves in terms of their group membership enables them to assign value and emotional significance to the group membership and group goals.

The Role of Fundamentalist Ideology

While followers from religious groups more members of religious groups have been willing to die for their cause there is much work concluding that religion is rarely the root cause of suicide terrorism [5-7] suggest that the religious framework offers the excuse and that a terrorist framework offers a means to carry on the job. However I disagree with this view and instead argue that religious factors do play a significant part in religious violence. Fundamentalist ideology plays a central role in shaping this terrorists psychology.

There has been much research examining the relationships between fundamentalism and violence. Fundamentalism is a type of religious behaviour that embraces a central religious text and places it in such a holy sacred place it becomes considered infallible and from God rather from man. Counter- evidence cannot dissuade them from the religious views. For instance, in Islam the scribes who wrote down Mohammed's recitations wrote "it was not Mohammed who wrote the Qur'an. He merely recited a copy of it that Allah created in heaven".

Fundamentalists are often seen as violent, intolerant, stubbornly backwards and sometimes inhuman, godly and sectarian. However, terrorism and fundamentalism are not synonymous. There are many fundamentalist groups who are completely free from any sectarianism, for instance, the Amish Christians. In 1950 Adorno published the Authoritarian Personality [8], a book which explored the tendency of

*Corresponding author: Simon Dein, University College London, Durham University, UK, Tel: 077-7831-5964; E-mail: s.dein@ucl.ac.uk

fundamentalists towards fascist, un-humanitarian beliefs in a liberal democratic society. He also found a number of social attitudes tending to occur together – ethnocentrism, political and economic conservatism and anti-Semitism. Early research indicated weak or no empirical support in relationship between fundamentalists and authoritarianism and dogmatism. However, later research does indicate a relationship between fundamentalisms and prejudice [9].

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