

Does religion cause terrorism? It's complicated

by [David Gibson](#)

September 1, 2011

(RNS) The shock of the 9/11 attacks was so great, and the personal losses so deep, that many people understandably sought simple answers for such overwhelming malevolence.

What, they asked, would cause someone to hijack a plane of innocent civilians and fly it into a building?

Since Osama bin Laden's holy warriors carried out the attacks, some decided that Islam was clearly to blame, case closed. Others -- especially the New Atheists who found a wide audience after 9/11 -- didn't stop at Islam and instead said that all religions are bad because they all inspire senseless violence.

In the decade since 9/11, however, experts in religion and terrorism have elaborated more complex theories for the role religion plays in global violence.

'Religion is not THE problem'

In general, scholars have concluded that religion -- be it Islam or any other faith -- is neither the chicken nor the egg when it comes to creating terrorists. Rather, religion is one of many factors in the explosive brew of politics, culture and psychology that leads fanatics to target innocents -- and take their own lives in the process.

"Religious violence has to stand in line with all sorts of other violence in the modern world," said Charles Kurzman, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of "The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists."

"Religion is not THE problem," agrees Mark Juergensmeyer, author of "Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence."

"But it then becomes problematic because religion brings a whole host of absolutistic symbols and images and justifications" that act as an accelerant to terrorism.

`Sacred values'

Yet even within that consensus view there is a surprisingly wide range of scholarly opinion about the connection between faith and violence -- and how to combat such tendencies.

On one side of the spectrum there are those who argue that religion is being unfairly tarred as part of the terrorism dynamic. A leading proponent here is William T. Cavanaugh, a theologian at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., and author of "The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict."

On the other pole are those like James W. Jones of Rutgers University, author of "Blood That Cries Out From the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism," who argues that much of contemporary terrorism has a uniquely "religious nature" because it is motivated by "sacred values."

"It is not simply the same old terrorism with a different motivation or rhetoric," Jones told a forum on religion and violence last April at New York's Fordham University. "Research suggests that sacred motivations make a big difference."

As a result, Jones said, religiously motivated terrorist groups are more dangerous and harder to subdue.

Still, some researchers have found that the most religious Muslims can also be the most resistant to radicalization. David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security in Durham, N.C., studied 188 cases of Muslim Americans who have been connected to terrorism activities, and found that none were raised with "traditional, intensive religious training." Instead, they "adopted

fundamentalist views as they radicalized."

`The Prozac effect'

One of the more intriguing theories about religious motivations for terrorism is set out by Georgetown University theologian Ariel Glucklich in his book, "Dying for Heaven: Holy Pleasure and Suicide Bombers -- Why the Best Qualities of Religion Are Also Its Most Dangerous."

"The biggest myth about religion and violence, I believe, is that religion teaches hatred," Glucklich said. "I think the violence comes from a kind of love or desire for love for one's own group and a willingness to do whatever it takes to obtain it."

Glucklich calls it "the Prozac effect." While he readily concedes that some religions do, in fact, cause hatred, often "the roots of religious violence (are) buried somewhere in the positive aspects of religion," he said.

Glucklich says he's not blaming religion per se, but rather religion's "socialization" effect. In other words, when societies break down, individuals are susceptible to charismatic leaders who preach a perverted kind of religion.

"The reason we are seeing this with Muslims today is the social one," Glucklich said, "not doctrinal."

`Making war, not love'

Jessica Stern, author of "Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill," has come at it a different way. Stern argues that for many Muslim youths, the idea of terrorism under the guise of "jihad" became a "global fad" akin to gangsta rap. In short, it's less a religious phenomenon than "a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite."

"Jihad has become a millenarian movement with mass appeal, similar, in many ways, to earlier global movements such as the anarchists of the 19th century or even the peace movement of the 1960s and '70s," Stern wrote in 2006. "But today's radical youth are expressing their

dissatisfaction with the status quo by making war, not love."

Viewing terrorists as a kind of inverted hippie or as a victim of "Prozac piety" might seem to some to be a distraction, but the research is less an intellectual exercise than an attempt to better understand the roots of faith-based terrorism in hopes of preventing it.

Juergensmeyer, who advises the Obama administration on fighting terrorism, echoes the prevailing consensus when he says that a military-only approach to counterterrorism only gives religious fanatics the martyrdom and affirmation they seek. More effective, he says, are "counter-radicalization" tactics that engage and thwart extremism before it metastasizes.

`It isn't going away'

Still, the task of understanding and combating religiously fueled violence promises to be a long and difficult one. Because religions do not provide blank checks for using violence, terrorists are constantly forced to improvise their justifications by picking and choosing among scriptures and doctrines and traditions, says Charles Kimball, author of a new book, "When Religion Becomes Lethal."

And that requires greater understanding of the phenomenon and sophisticated solutions -- whether we like it or not. "Even if you think religion is nonsense, it isn't going to go away," Kimball adds. "So how do we negotiate that?"