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# Religious Aspects of International Terrorism

## Abstract

The paper discusses interconnections between terrorism and religion. In its first part, a working definition of terrorism is given, differentiating it from the other types of political violence. The second part is focused on religiously motivated terrorism. The paper questions some popular opinions, such as anti-modernity of religious violence; specific proneness of Muslims to terrorism; incompatibility of religion and terrorism. The article states that terrorists are sincerely motivated by religion and not simply using religion to conceal their selfish ends. This part also dwells on specific rationality of religious terrorism. The third part deals with terrorism of millenarian religious groups, such as Aum Shinrikyo, "Order of the Solar Temple", and others. The paper concludes that terrorist activities of such groups are driven by their theology dating back to Gnosticism.

Key words: terrorism; religion; terror; political violence; fundamentalism; amateur terrorism; millenarianism; eschatology.

## Definition of Terrorism

Analysis of international terrorism is difficult due to the complexity of this phenomenon. Primarily, no terrorist in the world would accept to be labelled as one. A greatest Anglo-American terrorism researcher Bruce Hoffman (former director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence in Scotland) writes that "terrorists perceive themselves as reluctant warriors driven by desperation.... A communist or a revolutionary, for example, would likely readily accept and admit that he is in fact a communist or a revolutionary... The terrorist,

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by contrast, will never acknowledge that he is a terrorist..." (Hoffman 1998: 30). Therefore, on the determination of the notion of terrorism there was formed an atmosphere of double standards and mutual accusations. There are definitions of terrorism that involve six or more different characteristics. From the scientific point of view such definitions are unproductive because they do not reflect the necessary and essential features of the phenomenon.

American scholar Alex Schmid analysed these definitions and clarified that they had the following determinants (Ibid: 40):

"Violence, application of force" – in 83,5% of cases.

"Political" – in 65% of cases.

"Cause fear, terror" – in 51% of cases.

These elements are the ones that should be taken into account in order to create the most compact definition of terrorism that reflects its necessary and essential characteristics.

By analysing different definitions of terrorism and known terrorist acts, we can separate the characteristic features of a terrorist act. A terrorist act is accomplished:

- By an organization, not an individual person. Bruce Hoffman makes a distinction between the terrorists and "fanatic killers" – even when the latter declare political goals. In his opinion, "to be qualified as terrorism, violence must be perpetrated by some organizational entity with at least some conspiratorial structure and identifiable chain of command beyond a single individual acting on his or her own" (Ibid: 42-43). Due to this, Hoffman does not enlist the murder of Robert Kennedy by Sirhan Sirhan in 1968 as a terrorist act, for Sirhan did not belong to any terrorist group, although he acted alerted by political motives.

- Against civilians (i.e. those who are not public officials or soldiers). If an act is done against a public official or the regular army, then it should be seen as an episode of guerilla war (that is why terrorists often call themselves "urban guerrillas").

- Non-governmental groups. Terrorism should be distinguished from terror. Terror is implemented by the state against its own citizens through various agents of "force". Sometimes the state seeks to mask its involvement in terror, creating the so-called "death squads". This term, which grew out of the political practice in Latin America, is now applied worldwide to indicate the characteristics of groups, made with the secret support of the state, and often of the agents

of state bodies, which are activated in their "free time" (Sluka 2000: 1-45).

- With the wider objective than act of violence itself. A terrorist act is often understood in the context of the "message", and some (e.g., the greatest U.S. expert on the topic Mark Juergensmeyer) use the term "theatre of terror", underlining that a terrorist act is a statement which is submitted to a wider audience than its immediate target. "By calling acts of religious terrorism 'symbolic', I mean that they are intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate target", writes Juergensmeyer (Juergensmeyer 1999: 123).

This brings us to the working definition of terrorism as a system of violent actions committed by non-governmental organizations based on political or ideological objectives. Terrorism is one of the many forms of politically motivated violence. In addition to killings and kidnappings of civilians, there are forms of political violence such as guerilla warfare, sabotage (destruction of buildings and property), politically motivated robbery ("expropriation").

Terrorists should be distinguished, on the one hand, from the guerrillas (insurgents), and on the other – from common criminals. The main difference between terrorists and guerrillas is that the latter carry out armed attacks against the regular army, not the civilian population. Also, traits of guerilla fighters (which are not present with terrorists) include their desire to conquer and hold territory. From common criminals terrorists differ in their ideological motivation. As Mark Juergensmeyer writes, "what puzzles me is not why bad things are done by bad people, but rather why bad things are done by people who otherwise appear to be good" (Ibid: 7). Numerous attempts to "criminalize" terrorism in scientific terms should be denounced, just as murders of public servants committed for lucrative reasons should not be equated with terrorist acts (See Витюк, Данилевич 2003: 18). At the same time, there is no sharp boundary between terrorism and a criminal offence. Terrorists can take advantage of criminals or their structures, and criminals are not strange to attach to themselves the halo of martyrs for the idea (e.g., sometimes murderers proclaim themselves as "cleansers of society").

There are no solid boundaries between state terror and terrorism either. On the one hand, terrorism can take on a colossal scale, thus equating itself with state repression (e.g. terrorist acts of Islamists in Algeria in the early 1990s, when entire villages were razed to the ground). On the other hand, seemingly non-state terrorist groups may be secret creations of the state. For example, recently it became clear that many

well-known Protestant terrorists in Northern Ireland were actually agents of the British secret services. Be that as it may, the widely used term "state terrorism" is not accurate from the scientific point of view. One can speak of state-sponsored terrorism, but not of state terrorism.

In the operation of one and the same organization terrorist acts may be intertwined with guerilla war or a peaceful social activity. Then it would be more appropriate not to speak of "terrorist organizations", but rather of "organizations engaged in terrorism".

## Phenomenon of Religious Violence

For a long time terrorist motivation was of ideological type (ideological terrorists were populists, Socialist-Revolutionaries, European leftists, Colombian rebels, etc.). Significantly smaller scale of terrorist activity was acted out by various national liberation movements (e.g. Irish Republican Army). Even as late as 1968, among terrorist groups there were none which operated on religious grounds. But already during the 1990s, about one-quarter of active groups had religious motives (Ranstorp 1996). This change of mindset among the terrorists has occurred because of the massive disappointment in the secular ideologies (including communism), which had affected developing countries in 1970s, and by the end of the 1990s, the entire world.

Disappointment in the secular ideologies has led to the situation that the main beneficiaries of these ideologies (students, intellectuals) turned to religion, after which religions increasingly began to resemble ideologies – i.e. there was a politicization of religion. Researchers of political processes in the Muslim world assess, for example, that the Islamic revolution in Iran was carried out by no means by the clergy (if it is at all possible to talk about "clergy" in Islam), but by the religiously oriented secular intellectuals (Esposito 1992: 108). This is no surprise since it is exactly intellectuals who have the knowledge on how to govern states, lead revolutions, attract the masses to their side, and so on. Moreover, Iran, where the clergy (i.e., "*ulemas*", spiritual leaders), if not carried out the revolution, then at least headed it, is a unique case in the Islamic world. In all other countries (e.g. Algeria), Islamic movements were led purely by intellectuals, who have received Western or Westernised education (Keddie 1998: 715). John Esposito believes that the majority of Islamic political movements are now absolutely state-of-the-art in terms of management structure, ideology, and organizational principles, and that therefore it would be more correct not to tag them

as "fundamentalist", as it has become ubiquitous in the press, but rather as "neo-fundamentalist" (Esposito 1992: 120).

Politicization of religion and the explosion of religious violence occur, thus, not in the traditional, archaic societies, where the majority of the population actively practice religion (participate in rites, cherish customs, and know the theological basics), but on the contrary, in societies that are highly modernised and secularized. The point is that the goal of politicization is by no means the return to the past times, or conservation of archaic elements of the present, but quite the opposite – an attempt to implement a successful modernization in its broadest sense (from economic to social and political modernization). If the modernization based on ideas of socialism and Western liberalism failed – to replace it comes modernization based on religion. As a result, modern terrorists rarely come from the ranks of uneducated peasants. Usually they are students or intellectuals, at that from well-off and well-known families (a typical example: Osama bin Laden, an engineer by training and a successful businessman). Religious terrorism literally "hijacks" cadres from the ideologically motivated, primarily leftist, radical movements – as Oliver Roy writes. "the same people who in the 1960s were the followers of Nasser or Marx, have now become Islamists" (Roy 1994: 4).

The very thought of religious terrorism can seem absurd to non-religious people (it is posited that religion is supposed to teach pacifism and compassion). However, in the religious justification of violence there is nothing that would be principally different from the ideological justification. Indeed, the ethics of most major religions includes the prohibition of murder, and calls for doing good, although any religion *per se* is a doctrine of salvation, not of ethics. It is exactly in the reference to the necessity of salvation of the soul that abstract ethical norms receive their concrete meaning. Due to this, as the great researcher of politicized religions Mark Juergensmeyer highlights, although almost all religions preach the virtue of non-violence, they always find room for sanctioning violence (Juergensmeyer 1993: 164). It is important to point out that political violence can occur within the framework of any religion. Nowadays, one hears and reads much about "Islamic terrorism", but in Islam there are no specific dogmas which would make members of this faith more prone to violence than any others.

It would seem that religious traditions of Buddhism forbid all acts of violence – even annihilation of animals. However, Buddhists, including monks, do not reject religious violence, arguing that it is impossible to avoid in our amoral times (Ibid: 166-167). By designating their political

enemies as the enemies of religion, Buddhists thus gain moral justification for murder. A good example is the 1959 assassination of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka by the hands of a Buddhist monk – a terrorist. In other religions, which in principle allow for violence, a similar step is even easier to make.

Christians also perform acts of religious terrorism. For example, in the United States each year several murders of gynaecologists occur as well as explosions at birth clinics, perpetrated by Protestant fundamentalists – opponents to abortion. Even as early as the work of the classic German political scientist Karl Schmidt shows that the well-known verse from the Bible, "love your enemies" (Matthew 5: 44, Luke 6: 27) should in no way be understood in terms of prohibition of religiously motivated violence. According to Schmidt, the true meaning of that quote is that we ought to love our own *personal* enemies (Schmidt 1992: 41). As for *political* enemies, the Christian ethic warrants no love for them, but prescribes fighting them. The fight may also be in the form of individual acts of terrorism. Therefore, Islam breeds no more or less political violence than other religions.

In terrorism in general, and in religious terrorism specifically, the main principle is motivation. It is not that terrorists use religion for justification of violent actions for lucrative reasons (this is particularly evident in cases of suicide terrorists). A true religious motivation can be discussed when an act of political violence is carried out for religious purposes exclusively. Juergensmeyer writes the following about religious wars: "These religious activities are not just political exercises justified by religion, they are perceived by the faithful as facets of a more fundamental confrontation. Conflicts of the real world are linked to an invisible, cosmic war: the spiritual struggle between order and disorder, light and darkness, faith and doubt" (Juergensmeyer 1992: 112).

In this cosmic, ecumenical war, the enemy is not a "political opponent", but rather something so horrible that no sacrifice in the name of its destruction is excessive. From there derives irrationality of religious violence when victims are random people, but only at first glance, since in reality what unites them is belonging to a group that possesses the properties of the cosmic enemy. For example, in 1994 a Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein machine-gunned Muslims, who have gathered to pray in one of the mosques in Hebron, (29 killed, 150 injured), and was then killed by the angry mob. Sikh terrorists used a bomb to bring down an "Air India" airliner in 1985, (328 killed), and in 1983 suicide terrorists of the Hezbollah blew up a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, (241 killed) (Ranstorp 1996). In all three examples there are two traits that almost always accompany religious terrorism: the victims had done

nothing *personally* wrong to their murderers, and the perpetrators of the acts were willing to die in various manners, literally emphasizing their lack of lucrative motives.

Yet again, the religious consciousness refuses to accept the motivations of terrorists. Acts of violence are held to be absurd, irrational conduct. "How is it possible to kill people just because they belong to another religion?". Whereas for a religious fanatic that reason is probably the only justification of murder. In terms of religious motivated violence, Juergensmeyer writes that "any individual who belongs to a group that is considered a foe can rightfully become the object of violence, even if he or she is – a completely innocent passer-by. In such a cosmic war there is no such thing, here everyone is – a potential soldier" (Juergensmeyer 1993: 165). Notice that in the examples above and generally in the practice of religious terrorism, the victims are extremely rarely (if ever) truly random. They usually belong to a group against which (and not against concrete human beings) the terrorist act is directed. They may be Muslims, Hindus, Jews or American soldiers – but certainly not random victims. The impression of irrational acting occurs only because the victims were not *personal* enemies of the terrorists. However, we hope that what is written above clarifies the misunderstanding.

Moreover, in order to destroy the representative of "Universal Evil" (it does not matter whether it is one person or several), a fanatic terrorist commits suicide without thinking twice. From his, or her, point of view there is nothing absurd or irrational about it, and he or she is not any more irrational than a soldier who throws himself under an enemy tank with a bundle of grenades. Those who are in the tank are only guilty because they were born at the wrong time (and fell under military conscription), their death will not solve the course of the war, and the soldier will inevitably die. Yet, the soldier's conduct is entirely rational, even to non-religious people – since the tank was indeed destroyed, from an absurd action there is an actual result. For the religious consciousness, hell, heaven, the struggle between good and evil are as real as the tank. Religious terrorism is, thus, irrational only to a non-religious mind. The fact that terrorists go to certain death is completely reasonable from their point of view, as in most religious traditions it is believed that those who die for the faith go directly to heaven (even though they had not previously led a holy life in the generally accepted sense). Thus, in his actios, Islambouli (Anwar Sadat's assassin) started from a point of view that the grand prize for a believer is salvation for the sake of which one may kill, or be killed in the name of God (Alianak 2000: 289). Such views were expressed or could have been expressed by all known suicide terrorists.

## "Amateur terrorism" and Millenarian Sects

Everything mentioned above refers to a form of professional or organized terrorism. Long it was the only known form of terrorism, except for certain, extreme examples of violence. Terrorist organizations were firmly structured with a fixed membership – a classic example might be the operation of Social-Democratic underground in Tsarist Russia. High level of organization and professionalism abundantly facilitated the work of the police after such groups were detected and arrested. Even during the 1990s, according to experts, in addition to a general strengthening of religious terrorism in the world, there was another significant change: what appeared is the so-called "amateur terrorism" (Chalk 2000: 23). Now terrorist acts are carried out often by people who either do not belong to any organization, or belong to a loosely structured community. Sometimes these are simply virtual communities, i.e. members of the organization never meet in person, rather only maintain electronic links. Sometimes there is no need for links – a lone person performs an action in his or her own fear and risk. In the case of an amateur terrorist act, "an act of terrorism is the result of personal initiative, even though in accordance with the political doctrine", writes RAND Corporation expert Peter Chalk (Ibid: 24). Amateur terrorism is still dangerous, since in our times an individual can cause severe damage, even and when he or she possess no specific knowledge (all terrorist methods can be easily found out on the Internet).

It is obvious that no Islamic (usually a rigid structure), or "old" left-wing terrorist groups fall in the fold of amateur terrorism. This concept includes primarily various ultra right-wing organizations or movements that are concerned with one specific problem (e.g. the movement against abortion) and the so-called millenarian (apocalyptic) sects. The classic example of amateur terrorism is the explosion of a bomb at the U.S. federal building in Oklahoma City (on April 19, 1995, 168 killed, 500 wounded), planted by Timothy McWeigh and Terry Nichols, who held ultra right-wing views, but "officially", did not appear to belong to any organization. Organizers of the the act were not professional terrorists and used home-made plastic explosives.

This article will primarily refer to millenarian sects, because their methods of religious violence deviate most profoundly from the ruling notions of rationality. Advocates of political Islam, ultra right-wingers, and opponents of abortion alike, in carrying out acts of political violence all aspire to one achievable result (even after several attempts).[2] It

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2   Among other things, there are proofs that members of different sects do feel certain closeness among themselves. F.e. the Oklahoma City explosion happened on the day of

may be argued that it is a cruel thing to kill a doctor, but it may not be denied that the doctor will no longer perform abortions, and in this aspect the deed of the amateur terrorist – is entirely rational. It is precisely such motives that led the Jewish extremist YIgal Amir, the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, in trying to stop the implementation of Rabin's peace plans (Alianak 2000: 287). We will once again stress that most religious terrorists do, at least to some degree, measure the extent of the violence they inflict with the desired goal.

Quite the opposite case is with the millenarian sects (the term comes from the notion of "millennial kingdom"). They are also called apocalyptic, as they oriented to the approaching end of the world and the annihilation of the mankind. These sects, experts say, "demonstrate proneness to unlimited, unrestrained violence, when a murder is often presented as a means to achieve spiritual enlightenment" (Chalk 2000: 27). From the sidelines, it seems that millenarian groups do not follow any rational goals, but that they only strive to the destruction of as many people as possible. Yet, as in the case of suicide terrorists, irrationality of these sects is only ostensible. Similar to violent actions of the Irish Republican Army, American abortion opponents and members of the organization "Army of God", violent actions of the millenarian sects have perfectly defined conceptual foundations. Analysing their dogmatism and the way of life, we can conclude that all these sects, without exception, belong to Gnosticism, or "Gnostic religion" as some experts call it (Йонас 1998; Николаев 1913; Поснов 1917). As it is known, the Gnostics held the material world for the quintessence of evil, and the human body as a "prison of the soul". In accordance with the views of the Gnostics, a man appeared as a result of a terrible error, when a part of the spiritual energy found itself locked in a material dungeon. The goal of the Gnostics, throughout the history of existence of this religious and mystical tradition was, on the one hand, the liberation of one's own soul from the bondage of the body (that is why they have practised mass suicide), and on the other hand – the destruction of the material world. Only in this way, in their view, could the fullness (Pleroma) of creation be restored.

Even now it is possible to clearly delineate among the Gnostic (or rather neo-Gnostic) sects  those that are more oriented to their own destruction, and those which tend more to destroy others. In the former

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second anniversary of the „Branch Davidians" sect's suffering by the police (Ranstorp, M. 1996). It is possible also to underline the fact that this particular explosion should not be considered as a rationally justified one, as it was not directed toward some certain group (f.e. Afro-Americans) that is considered to be the enemy of the ultra-right wing supporters.

group are some well-known sects[3] such as "People's Temple" (1978, mass suicide in Guyana, more than 900 dead), the Branch Davidians (1993, USA – cult members killed by FBI, more than 80 dead), "Order of the Solar Temple" (a series of murders and suicides from 1994 to 1997, Europe, more than 70 dead). As pointed out by Italian researcher Maria Luisa Maniscalco, all these apocalyptic sects had been considered benign until the tragic events (Maniscalco 1997: 485).

The members of these sects, as well as the Gnostics of the past, had absolutely no appreciation of their life and attempted to separate themselves from it rapidly. Members of the "Order of the Solar Temple" (the teaching of this sect directly derives from Gnosticism, since its leaders considered themselves heirs of the Knights Templar) were convinced that death is only an illusion and that by abandoning their bodies they are to go to the star Sirius. Members of the American sect "Heaven's Gate" also performed mass suicide believing that, having left their bodies, they would go aboard a spacecraft. Anyone familiar with the Gnostic tradition will recognize in these Gnostic beliefs without difficulty an echo of Gnostic representations of journeys through celestial spheres for the purpose of uniting with the initial world.

When it comes to other type of groups, i.e. those that are more inclined to destroying the material world, it is, for now, sufficient to mention only the "Cult of Supreme Truth Aum Shinrikyo", created in 1984 in Japan. Aum is the only apocalyptic sect which has been proved to have carried out a terrorist act (releasing sarin gas in Tokyo's underground transport system, in March 1995, 12 deaths) against random people who did not belong to any group. Beliefs of Aum carry a syncretic character and incorporate elements of both Eastern (Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism) as well as Western religions, especially that of Gnosticism. The central idea of eschatology of Aum consists of the idea that a nuclear war will break out in the near future, in which the majority of the population would be killed, while a new, clean world would be populated by only members of the sect. Aum had managed to gain a relative international popularity, and an especially large number of supporters, more than in Japan, the sect gained in Russia.

After the commission of a terrorist act in the Tokyo subway by the sect, it had become clear that during the entire period of its existence (fore more than 10 previous years) Aum worked on making chemical and biological weapons with the aim of provoking a war between Japan and the United States, which should spread into a global catastrophe.

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3  More precisely, the sects which became famous only after the atrocities had been commited.

The ministers of Aum had especially targeted recruits among students who study physics, medicine, biochemistry, biology and engineering sciences – we should remember that in the Islamic world exactly these categories of young people were eager to join Islamic movements. At the same time, legal and illegal purchases of components to make weapons were taking place. Specifically, in 1997. the head of Aum's "intelligence service" said that the technology for making sarin gas was purchased in Russia by a high state official (Chalk 2000: 18-19). Between 1990 and 1995, Aum performed occasional acts of terrorism using different toxins (botulinum, anthrax), which remained completely unsolved by the police. Only in 1995, the not entirely successful (from the sect's point of view, of course) sarin attack put an end to the unpunished, unlawful activity of "Aum Shinrikyo".

It is obvious that the apocalyptic ideas of Aum Shinrikyo do not contain anything original. Many existing sects share with Aum the intense expectation of the forthcoming end of the world, which will occur as a grand and generally non-metaphysical (often nuclear) war, after which the mankind will be destroyed, and only the members of the sect will stay alive to create a new and better world. However, it is considered that no other sect is carrying out active measures to accelerate the end of mankind. States and international organizations have no grounds to ban their activities, which are within the bounds of the principle of freedom of conscience, just because their cathechism resembles ideas of Aum, Branch Davidians, or "Order of the Solar Temple".[4] In addition, similar ideas are not openly advertised in some sects, rather it is necessary to pass several stages of initiation to be fully informed of them.

It should be noted that the originally Aum Shinrikyo was perceived as a "normal" millenarian sect, both in Japan and beyond, and that it had freedom to operate and propagate its ideas. In January 1994, an international conference entitled "Ecology and Religion" was taking place in Moscow, at which the representative of a Aum talked about how mindful the sect was regarding the protection of the environment (by the way, the millenarian sects are generally characterized by "environmental awareness" – some of them believe that the catastrophe that will obliterate the world would be an environmental one). In Japan, the organization has not been banned, it exists and propagates its ideas, having renounced all of its "destructive elements".

In all the millenarian sects (those mentioned or not), what is observed is a significant overlap of their dogmas and *modus operandi*.

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4　Due to this reason the author of the text is not prone to mention the names of these particular sects.

First of all, as the researchers note, this is a clear separation ("cut off") of members of the sect from the entire rest of the world, which is understood as something that has no meaning or value, or simply as the embodiment of evil. Therefore millenarian sects make absolutely no proportion between their goals and the number of victims. By the way, vehement conflicts between the sect and the surrounding communities is the basic trademark of the so-called "destructive sects". For comparison, we mention that Christianity does not assume that the saved will be Christians and Christians only. Only God knows who is worthy of salvation. Sects, on the contrary, state that all members of the sect will be saved and only them. It is exactly from there that, in our opinion, the main danger of the millenarian sects comes, and not in their "totalitarity" or "destructivity", since similar accusations can be made of any religion. Separation of members of the sect from the world, coupled with the reflected effort to initiate or cause global disasters – are a threat to global security, and are embodied by this type of sects.

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