Reconsidering Religion, Reconsidering Terrorism

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Abstract
This article suggests that a new definition of religion is necessary to properly conceptualize and develop policy in response to violent religious behaviors. It is argued that religion is frequently, even if indirectly, presumed to be peaceful theological window dressing that can be ignored in addressing religious violence. Military and political leaders, for example, forbid troops from entering religious building for fear of offense with little regard for missed opportunities for engagement. Such a perspective leads commanders and analysts to be stuck describing terrorists as evil monsters with no real mechanism of understanding how religion can be alluring because of its advocacy of violence. There is a frequent discussion, for example, about whether Islam is fundamentally violent. In what follows, a new perspective on religion is offered that recognizes and prioritizes the fact that religions like Islam can sanction violence in ways that are ultimately local and intoxicating. Rather than relying on terms of convenience like terrorist and evil, this new perspective on defining religion offers a more nuanced approach to responding to religious violence.

Introduction
In 2008 while deployed to Fallujah, Iraq, I found that Imams were frequently described as the primary fuel for violence in al-Anbar province. Accordingly, military and diplomatic leaders tended to avoid and isolate religious leaders from important discussions about rebuilding stable Iraqi communities. Religious leaders were understood to be forces of discontent who needed to be marginalized if Iraqis were to ever realize a thriving society. Given the important historical role that religious leaders have played in Iraqi history, I designed a data collection plan to test whether religious leaders were preaching violence and stoking the flames of insurgency. With the help of my teammates and various military units, we were able to gather reports from tens of thousands of Friday sermons.

We discovered that over 80% of the sermons we analyzed were neutral to the Iraqi government and the United States; approximately 10% were positively disposed towards the Iraqi government and the United States, and less than 5% were openly hostile to the United States and the Iraqi government. Rather than finding a preponderance of violent sermons, we found those sermons to be primarily concerned with religious and social justice issues. For example, we were able to find an imam who was preaching against the disruption of the food supply chain by terrorist elements. By engaging that religious leader, we were able to make substantial changes to development priorities, security procedures, and contract awards with
the effect of increasing local Iraqi involvement in rebuilding their own society. What follows are three erroneous principles that guided our analyses and two principles that were gleaned from our study of those religious sermons.

Religion is Not Peaceful

When analysts face improbable situations like religiously motivated beheadings or rape, they default to name calling because religion is so frequently avoided and misunderstood. Muslim terrorists are described as evil monsters because there is little understanding of their religious motivations. Appeals to 99 virgins for those who martyr themselves, for example, is scoffed at as opportunistic, juvenile, and unconvincing: window dressing for deeper, more important social issues. The intersection of religion and violence tests the limits of analysis because there has been little explanation of how religion can be alluring because of violence. When young men and women speak enthusiastically about their desire to kill themselves in the name of God, it is significantly easier to investigate their economic status and declare that they are too poor to understand the implications of their behavior then to trace the religious justifications for such decisions. Analysis of these types of events gets stuck describing how bad the perpetrators are and how they are poor representations of their religious tradition. Accordingly, policy recommendations are most frequently focused on how to acquire more guns and more money to dissuade and, if necessary, eliminate those who make such decisions.

Defaulting to terms like monster and evil or ignoring religious is based on a predilection to understand religion as constructive and peaceful. Terrorists are monsters because they bastardize religious traditions that would otherwise build communities and strengthen social bonds. Terrorists, like werewolves and vampires, are perversions of the visage and aims of the societies from which they emerge and which they terrorize. It is helpful to recognize that religion neither is peaceful nor violent and terrorists are not monsters, but products of their religious environments. Terrorists, for example, are drawn to religion because it affords an opportunity to exact religious justice and institute a more perfect world. So long as those terrorists are explained away as miscreants who violate the principle of peaceful religion it will be much easier to avoid and misunderstand religiously motivated violence than engage it. Religious leaders in Fallujah, while I was there, were ignored not only because they were erroneously understood to be fomenting an insurgency, but because they were seen as unable to use their religion to bring about peace. If religion was the cause of violence and could not be leveraged to build peaceful communities, religion was ineffectual.

Religion is Not Window Dressing

Religion is one of the most difficult topics from which to collect data because of cultural sensitivities. The adage discouraging the discussion of politics or religion in polite conversation is well attested notwithstanding the fact that political science has a long history of sophisticated theories. It remains possible to speak in fairly abstract and specific terms about political realism and political economics, for example. Religion tends to lack such a rich syntax for theoretical, public discourse. This is true in spite of the fact that religion continues to influence human behavior at every level.

Individuals who commit acts of violence in the name of religion are frequently analyzed as psychologically unstable, socially deviant, and economically disadvantaged. Religion, as an actual cause for violence, is frequently left ignored and unanalyzed. When religion is identified as the cause of religious behavior, the arguments are usually simplistic accusations against “them” by “us”. Those who put effort into analyzing violent events frequently preserve a type of privileged status for religion, writ large, even if individual religions are labeled as violent. The contact point between religion and violence for sophisticated analysis is frequently one of confusion. Analysts are understandably disgusted and angry
when they observe violence perpetrated in the name of a particular religion and seek to explain away the religious aspects of the actors and apply deeper, more important motivations for such behavior such as sociological factors. There are frequent calls for moderate religious leaders to admonish their violent counterparts with the expectation that the truth of that religion supports moderation and peace-building. In effect, religion is treated as mere window dressing for an explanation of violence; those who perpetrate such violence do not understand their true religion. Policy implications of this perspective tend to encourage nation-building, inter-religious dialogue, and psychoanalysis. It frequently happens that even when perpetrators of violence point to religious texts as the motivation for their behavior, analysts default to psychological and sociological explanations. Religious explanations for violence become untouchable, inexplicable, and beyond the pail of productive policy discussions.

But religion cannot be ignored when analyzing religious violence. While in Iraq, my military and political commanders avoided local religious leaders because they did not have the knowledge to attack what those commanders understood as the key cause of violence in the region. They treated religious language and religious leaders as critical variables that ought not be engaged. For example, representatives of the US-led coalition were forbidden from entering any religious buildings. Religious buildings in the communities where I worked were social buildings where problems were solved, resources were distributed, and relationships were solidified. Our commanders were motivated by a sense that Iraqi problems were tribal, economic, and political even though our enemies and our partners understood religion to be the keystone issue. Islam, in that case, was not window dressing that could be avoided. This does not mean, however, that Islam is violent, but that serious analysts must be able to frame violence in particularly Islamic terms without ascribing that violence to every Muslim everywhere.

Religion is Not Theology

Another reason religious leaders were ignored while I was in Iraq was that religion is often mistaken for theology and few people understand theology of their or other religious traditions. Theology, as the study of God, is concerned with how human communities theorize a divine being. When confronted with claims of purported divine authority, it can be tempting to find competing texts that reject violence in Islam and preach tolerance and moderation. When that happens, however, the discussion devolves into a contest about who has the proper interpretation of divine will. At the conclusion of our study of religious leaders in Fallujah, I sat one day with a group of people who emerged from our studies as key communicators and partners in spreading stability. As we discussed ways of undermining the influence of violent actors, the discussion turned to whether the Qur’an can be used to justify killing innocent Muslims. One Imam mentioned a Qur’anic passage that requires special accommodations for Christians and Jews. Other Imams chimed in with other Qur’anic passages that advocated violence that gave the terrorists what they needed to justify their actions. We came to agree that theology—the study of texts—could not resolve the fundamental issue at stake. Our research team, as a result of that encounter, came to understand that another prevailing misunderstanding of religion is that it is synonymous with theology. Theological awareness is important, but on both sides of any disagreement, the validity of an argument is not the ink on a piece of paper, but the traditions that authorize the use of one type of verse over another. Those who perpetrate religious violence have their own theological systems that does not need to accord with other religions or even with others within their religious tradition.

Theological engagements can lead to greater understandings of various theological perspectives, but they do not usually lead to the cessation of religious violence. Terrorists are unlikely to be persuaded that they misunderstand their theological tradition because one or another outside observer is able to quote the Qur’an. If the study of religion is understood to be the study of theology, observers rightly back away
from direct engagement with religious leaders and resort to emotional descriptions of terrorists and their violent actions. When understood correctly, religious justifications for violence are not primarily found within religious texts, but in the complex lived experiences of those who choose to commit those violent acts.

**Religion is an Analytical Category**

Stripped of its frequent assessment as window dressing that is focused on peace-building and theology, religion takes on a very different image. Religion, from this perspective, can be understood as a theoretical term that requires more careful definition if religious violence is to be conceptualized and handled correctly. Religion, let us say, describes a class of human behaviors that are similar only because they have been defined as similar. “Religion” is a term of convenience created by analysts to make it easier to describe vastly different phenomena. Religion is an analytical term—a heuristic device—that attempts to lump together human behaviors that appeal to the divine for their justification.

Jonathan “J.Z.” Smith, a pioneer in the study of religion, wrote: “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.” Smith’s point was that analysts—academics in his estimation—ought not conduct their work as if all religious events can be analyzed by the same criteria. When writing an academic paper or presenting to a similarly theoretically-minded audience it might be useful to compare “religion” across cultures, but that comparison is for some purpose. Most frequently, that purpose is to explain how religious events should be conducted.

Terrorists are frequently compared to their non-violent counterparts to justify why the terrorists’ theology is incorrect. Analysts and commanders tend to create an empirical equivalency between religious phenomena rather than recognizing that equivalency as analytical. This is to say that one’s ability to compare a Muslim terrorist with a moderate Muslim is only possible because outsiders want to be able to lump “Muslims” into one category and construct that category as peaceful. But those two groups are Muslim only insofar as the term Muslim helps outsiders figure out how to stop terrorists. It is useful to talk about Islam and Muslims as theoretical categories, but those theories have done little to thwart the appeal of terrorist ideologies. It is time, then, to refashion one’s understanding of religion.

**Religion is Self-Authorizing**

Given these observations, let us suggest that religion is a closed system of language that authorizes itself. Rather than ignoring religious components of religious violence or defaulting to peace and theology, it might be useful to understand religion as primarily a system of language that defines its own reality. Violent religious groups rely on themselves to legitimize their behavior. It is not necessary to defer to interpretations of religious texts offered by other groups or bend to legislation. This allows violent religious groups to interpret well-known passages in radically new ways. Traditional methods of interpreting texts become irrelevant because new religious movements assume the right to interpret texts in ways that they authorize. They may be called heretics by outsiders, but they refer to themselves as reformers and visionaries.

In other language systems, there is a necessary dialogue with external groups. Theorists of political science and economics, for example, are still bound by academic history and social customs. What makes religion different as an analytical category is that it requires no external authorization to assert its theories. Religious groups can justify their violent behavior by pointing to other texts and individuals, but they can also exclusively authorize their behavior internally. Religious groups certainly can engage their wider communities, but they are organized to eschew social trends in favor of religious principles.
Religious groups are frequently, at their foundation, utopian groups whose purpose is to change society even when that society does not want to be changed. Religion need not accord with social norms if its stated aims are in jeopardy. This aspect of religion, more than its appeal to the divine can drive a reformulation of one’s understanding of religion. Rather than simply referring to terrorists as monsters, for example, it might be useful to describe them in their own terminology. Monsters are otherworldly and lend themselves to fantastical descriptions. Terrorists, when reimagined as part of the continuum of human behavior, expose themselves to sustained analysis.

Analyzing Religious Violence

The recent rise in popularity of ISIS in Iraq and their supposed inspiration for the most recent attacks in Paris are a fitting example. Labeling ISIS as Islamic, Salafist, extremist, violent, barbaric, backwards, and evil may have descriptive and cathartic value, but those terms offer little insight from which to build effective policy. If one analyzes ISIS as a utopian group, however, the calculation changes. That is, if analysts take a break from demonizing terrorists and consider them in their own terms, it is more likely that the effects of ISIS can more clearly be understood and, hopefully, mitigated.

ISIS is a utopian movement that has come together as champions of a just society. Their violent behaviors are authorized through compelling language that refers to a golden era of Islamic rule. If one takes seriously the actions and words of those who support ISIS, one hears traces of a historic call for a better society, a more just society, one in which individuals are able to achieve their highest potential. Terrorists of this sort become a group that metes out the most extreme and awful punishment only on those who deviate from the utopian ideal. Their message is appealing because it uses violence to instill the most desirable form of human community. The fact that we find them abhorrent is irrelevant.

Those who perpetrated the beheading in August 2014 and the attack on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 are not unique because they appeal to the divine nor because their actions are “religious.” Terrorist organizations in general achieve their impact on communities because they create compelling linguistic frameworks that cannot be dismantled by external factors. ISIS, like Al-Qaeda, is not simply a military force that can be bombed into submission or a social movement that will be replaced by a new fad. There are certainly military, diplomatic, and economic aspects of their success, but its distinctive feature, the reason it has caused such a policy problem, is that it is a closed system of language that cannot be bombed, talked, or bought out of existence. Members of ISIS that arrive from the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom are not simply disaffected, uneducated, poor young males; the utopian society described by ISIS is, let it be said plainly, alluring.

The number of deaths and the amount of destruction in places like New York, Fallujah, and Paris have frequently been quantified to justify military action and moral disgust, but it has done little to explain the ability of terrorist language systems to persuade individuals around the world to join their cause. The goal of a new analytical perspective, however, would not be for us to create a utopian society for them, but to support competing narratives for a stable society.

Conclusion

When I deployed to Iraq, many analysts were persuaded that religious leaders were the primary cause of insurgency because so much of the violence was being perpetrated in the name of religion. The commanders and analysts with whom I worked spent a great amount of energy ignoring and perpetuating misunderstandings of religion in general and Islam in particular. Through detailed study we discovered that indigenous religious leaders were not a determinative cause of religious violence, but that they could be helpful in building stable communities. Once we were able to redefine our understanding of religion, integrate religious leaders, and focus our attention on the narratives promulgated by violent religious
groups, our efforts were significantly more effective.

Rather than countering theological arguments, for example, we directed our attention to specific people, locations, and issues that drove narratives of religious violence. Our interactions with local religious leaders were focused on understanding the local arguments of terrorists in their communities and we abandoned a broad, theoretical understanding of terrorists and terrorism. We began to understand that our use of the terms insurgent and terrorists were primarily to help us talk to one another, but that those terms did not adequately describe the communities in which we were working. Iraq in 2008 may not be the Iraq or Paris of 2015, but theoretical considerations about the confluence of religion and violence remain important.

About the Author

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Alexs Thompson received his Ph.D. from the Divinity School at the University of Chicago where he focused on the Qur’an and Islamic theology. He has backpacked through much of the Middle East and subsequently supported U.S. troops throughout Africa and the Middle East.

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