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More on FM 23-4 and Religion

By *SWJ Editors*

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SWJ received the following via e-mail from G. Hale Laughlin, who is currently serving in Afghanistan.....

Neither does **Dr. Kilcullen**, nor **mil doctrine**, state that religion is a 'trivial actor in the struggle', as implied by **Herschel Smith** in his **response** to **Dr. Kilcullen's Small Wars Journal Blog piece** from 12 May 2007, "Religion and Insurgencies". In fact, Dr. Kilcullen succinctly provides guidance that,

"The bottom line is that no handbook relieves a professional counterinsurgent from the personal obligation to study, internalize and interpret the physical, human, informational and ideological setting in which the conflict takes place. Conflict ethnography is key; to borrow a literary term, there is no substitute for a "close reading" of the environment."

While I am not prepared with empirical evidence to support this hypothesis, I believe that the positions between the non-religious insurgency and religious insurgency schools of thought lies in the deeper theory of what religion means to the human condition. The discussion between the two schools really centers on the purpose of religion and the basic theological and ontological questions that can not be answered through empirical science at the present time. Given that no epistemological basis exists to unify the issue of religion across all of humanity, seeking to define a form of social conflict on those terms creates a condition where there will be as many definitions of conflict as there are religions in the world. On the other hand, if in an attempt to find a common ground that allows near unity of purpose, if not perfect unity of purpose, one believes that religion serves primarily a 'political' role in human society then the two schools can find common terms to help unify understanding to guide designs for counter insurgent strategies.

Religion as political structure of the human culture is well accepted in the vast majority of schools spanning all sides of the human condition. Even before Aristotle defined politics as a structure in modern human society, religion as spiritual belief structures that unified and provided organizational structure to distinct cultural segments of human societies, is well accepted. The emergence of the 'state' correlates roughly with the introduction of 'politics' by Aristotle, as the art and science of government or 'affairs of the state'. The history of mankind since the emergence of the state, and arguably likewise before, has been most definitively marked as a struggle between the faith based spiritual belief structures of human culture and political organizational structures, both vying for the ultimate unifying quest for power over people and resources. In this sense the issue becomes not one of religion or politics, but for power.

Viewed in this way, it is not critical to accept that insurgencies are 'religious insurgencies' or not, but that all insurgencies are an expression of political struggle for power. Religion may or may not be an element requiring strong consideration in the 'conflict ethnography' that Dr. Kilcullen speaks of, this being determined by the nature of the humans involved in the conflict, and determined after the 'close read' on

the ground that Dr. Kilcullen prescribes. Albeit, ignoring religion as an important component of the dynamics operating in the structures of the insurgent quest for power, when such a component exists would be ill advised. Interestingly, Dr. Kilcullen's 'close read' reference runs akin to the 'thick description' prescribed by Clifford Gertz, an Anthropologist / Social Scientist whose ethnographic methods prescribed deep study of culture to define not just the behaviour but the context of the behaviour as well. The context of the extremist Islamist insurgent is the important matter here. Islam in a moderate context does not condone suicide bombing, killing of innocent victims and destruction of other societies.

The Islamic belief structures specifically mark the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan distinctively, with some similarities and some specific differences between them as well. Without getting into irresolvable discussions involving some notion concerning the 'sui generis' nature of religion as satisfying a spiritual requirement of the human condition, current social science recognizes the role that religion serves in political organization of a society. Accepting this, Islam is marked as a faith based belief structure that includes rules and concepts for political organization, rule making and civil governance. As such, Islam can be viewed as a political structure with ready made sets of solutions for political organization that extremists exploit by appealing to the religious structures that resonate with members of the broader faith, while seeking to obtain the broader objectives of power over people and their resources. The insurgents use Islam not so much as a religious structure but as a political structure in their quest for power. In this vein, the religion of Islam is employed by the extremists, much to the chagrin of more moderate followers of the faith, as a tool just as they use acts of terror, intimidation of individuals and segments of societies, torture and all the other litany of tools used by insurgents.

Categorizing fundamentalist Islamist structures, as actualized by extremist insurgent elements, as a political structure that seeks to organize people and resources toward objectives of centralized power, makes discussion and categorization of 'religious insurgencies' less amplifying and not terribly meaningful. There is a possibility that deeper study and exploration of the phenomenon may yield that there could be a psychological component operating within the individual extremist Islamist insurgent's psyche that allows him to distance himself from the more moderate and unifying aspects of 'Religious Islam' that he violates through his actions, by viewing the faith through a more 'Political Islam' lens that insulates him from the more enlightened spiritual religious edicts of the faith. In other words, by viewing Islam through the pragmatic though extreme political filter, the individual extremist may have less trouble justifying the means versus ends dilemma that a more moderate religious interpretation could never justify. The political component that Islam serves is central to the issues of insurgency, especially in the current forms experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan, though by viewing those cases as 'religious insurgencies' does little to illuminate resolution. In this light, the current military doctrine correctly approaches the subject by refraining from getting tangled in the issue of 'religious insurgencies', focusing instead on the more important components concerning how insurgents organize to influence the people in their quest for power.

Speaking from inside the AO and as one who has been immersed in the theory and application of counter-insurgent and insurgent conflict for several years, my observations and experience converge in a strong urge to simplify the counter-insurgent/insurgent dynamic as defined by the simple notion that, whoever best cares for the basic subsistence and security needs of the people first and most enduringly, wins. I am resisting this urge to simplify, but the needs of the people are great and our solutions have become very complex. Conditions such as this most often require the simplicity of the elegant solution, and I am cognizant of the counter-insurgent dynamic defined by the concept that one often fortifies the resistance in proportion to the power that one wields in the peoples defense. The needs of the people, and counter-insurgent strategic endstates, may best be met by the power that one yields to their service.

About the Author



SWJ Editors

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