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# RELIGION, SUICIDE, TERRORISM, AND THE MORAL FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD

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### 1. Introduction: The Religious Basis of Moral Commitment

Every society has:

- (1) widespread counterfactual and counterintuitive belief in supernatural agents (gods, ghosts, goblins);
- (2) hard-to-fake public expressions of costly material commitments to supernatural agents: offering and sacrifice (goods, property, time, life);
- (3) mastering by supernatural agents of people's existential anxieties (death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, loss); and
- (4) ritualized, rhythmic sensory coordination of bodies (1), (2) and (3): communion (congregation, intimate fellowship), which almost always involves dance or sway and chant or music,<sup>1</sup> and displays of social hierarchy and submission typical of primates and other social mammals (outstretched limbs baring throat and chest or genitals, genuflection, bowing, prostration).

In this work, I make no conceptual distinction between “culture” and “society” or between “mind” and “brain.”

All societies evince an evolutionary canalization and convergence of (1), (2), (3), and (4) that tends towards what I call “religion.” For the purpose of this discussion, by religion, I mean passionate communal displays of costly commitments to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents.<sup>2</sup> Although these facets of religion emerge in all known cultures and animate the majority of individual human beings in the world, considerable individual and cultural differences exist in the degree of religious commitment.

Religion is not defective science. As American anthropologist Roy Rappaport pointed out, the constant danger of replacement by other possible moral worlds does not primarily concern the everyday physical world of substances and species, locomotion and lakes, hawks and handsaws.<sup>3</sup> We can point to

independent commonsense grounds for discovery and validation of knowledge about natural kinds and relations in the everyday physical world. This occurs through routine processes of perceptual verification conceptually allied to inference programs (sometimes rigidly via mental modules). These verification and inferential processes do not (and often cannot) appreciably change the nature of the entity or relation scrutinized. ('I am obviously not talking about the phenomena of quantum physics). No such grounds exist for independent discovery and evaluation of the truth about socially constituted relationships and human kinds, such as reciprocity and responsibility, honor and humility, good and evil, or who should be beggar and who should be king.

Supernatural agents contribute to maintaining the cooperative trust of actors and the trustworthiness of communication by sanctifying the actual order of mutual understandings and social relations as the only morally and cosmically possible one. The causal scope of supernatural agents subsumes both the physical and social elements of the environment under a sanctified moral order. Whatever certainty, coherence, or verifiability attached to physical understanding becomes solid inductive evidence for corresponding certainty, coherence, and verifiability with respect to the social and cosmic order governed by supernatural agents.

Unlike (but not necessarily in opposition to) science, religion does not have factual knowledge as its principal occupation. In religion, factual knowledge plays only a supporting role. Only in the last decade has the Roman Catholic Church reluctantly come to acknowledge the factual plausibility of theories described by Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, and Charles Darwin. Earlier rejection of their theories stemmed from the challenges posed to a cosmic order unifying the moral and material worlds. Separating out the core of the material world would be like draining the pond where a water lily grows. A long lag time was necessary to refurbish and remake the moral and material connections in such a way that would permit faith in a unified cosmology to survive. Religion survives science as it does secular ideology not for its being prior to, or more primitive than, science or secular reasoning, but because of what it affectively and collectively secures for people. According to French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, science cannot tell us what we *ought* to do, only what we *can* do.

Religious sacrifice generally runs counter to calculations of immediate utility, such that future promises are not discounted in favor of present rewards.<sup>4</sup> As the world's richest man, Microsoft founder Bill Gates noted, "Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."<sup>5</sup> In some cases, sacrifice is extreme. Although such cases tend to be rare, society often views them as religiously ideal, for example, sacrificing one's life or nearest kin. As the Danish religious philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, insisted, the greater the sacrifice for the factually absurd—as in Abraham offering to slit the throat of his beloved son on the orders of a God only he could hear—the more others trust the reli-

gious commitment of the person willing to make the sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> The more others trust a person's religious commitment, noted German economist Max Weber, the more others trust that person generally.<sup>7</sup> Even atheists in the United States are more likely to vote for a religious presidential candidate than for a nonbeliever.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers sometimes take extreme religious sacrifice as *prima facie* evidence of "true" (nonkin) social altruism,<sup>9</sup> or group selection, wherein individual fitness decreases so that overall group fitness can increase (relative to the overall fitness of other, competing groups).<sup>10</sup> But this may be an illusion. A telling example is contemporary suicide terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Consider the "Oath to Jihad" taken by recruits to Harkat ul-Mujahedeen, a Pakistani affiliate of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, the umbrella organization formed by Osama Bin Laden in 1998. The oath affirms that by their sacrifice, members help secure the future of their family of fictive kin: "Each [martyr] has a special place —among them are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear."<sup>12</sup> In the case of religiously-inspired suicide terrorism, these sentiments are purposely manipulated by organizational leaders, recruiters, and trainers to the advantage of the manipulating elites instead of the individual (much as the fast food or pornography industries manipulate innate desires for naturally scarce commodities like fatty foods, sugar, and sex to ends that reduce personal fitness but benefit the manipulating institution). No "group selection" is involved, only cognitive and emotional manipulation of the genetic kin altruism of some individuals by the persuasive utility-maximizing powers of others.

Previous neuro-biological studies of religion have focused on tracking participant's neuro-physiological responses during episodes of religious experience and recording individual patterns of trance, vision, revelation and the like. This has favored comparison of religious experience with temporal-lobe brain-wave patterns during epileptic seizures and acute schizophrenic episodes.<sup>13</sup> Cognitive structures of the human mind/brain in general, and cognitions of agency in particular, are usually represented in these studies (often under the trendy banner of "neuro-theology") in simple-minded terms (binary oppositions, holistic vs. analytical tensions, and hierarchical organization). Such conceptualizations have little input from, or pertinence to, recent findings of cognitive and developmental psychology.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, as Adolf Tobeña suggests, more telling is recent work on the role of the prefrontal cortices in processing concepts of agency and self and in cognitive mediation of relevant emotions originating in (what was once called) "the limbic system."<sup>15</sup>

For the most part, relatively few individuals in our society have intensely arousing mystical experiences, although the overwhelming majority of individuals consider themselves to be religious believers (polls over the last thirty years consistently show that well over 90 percent of Americans profess religious convictions). Neither do we find any evidence that more mundane religious experiences have a characteristic temporal-lobe signature, or any other

specific type of brain-activity pattern. The neurophysiological bases that commit the bulk of humanity into the care of supernatural agents remain a complete mystery.

The same appears to be the case even among suicide bombers who cite religious devotion as their most important incitement to action, insofar as I can tell from debriefings of captured and would-be suicide bombers and their recruiters. Suicide bombers appear to be quite normal individuals, with no discernible pattern of psychopathology, economic or educational disadvantage, or social estrangement. They are not “morally deficient,” but morally hypersensitized to the apparent grievances and needs of their own group. True, they utterly disregard and dehumanize the different yearnings of their enemies. Yet as Darwin rightly noted, such wanton disregard and hatred of competing out-groups may well be the default condition of our species.<sup>16</sup>

“Humanity,” after all, is the relatively recent invention of monotheism. Earlier societies considered killing, violating, or otherwise harming members of other groups by denying them the status of members of the same moral category, similar to —with only some constraints— how they treated animals. Only since the Enlightenment has the modern world’s major movements—the big “isms” of recent history—given themselves the moral mission of saving “all of humanity” by making it the moral equivalent of their humanity. Modernism is the industrial legacy of monotheism (however atheist in appearance), secularized and scientifically applied. No non-monotheistic society (except perhaps Buddhism) ever considered that all people are, or should be, essentially of a kind or morally equal to one’s own kind. The trouble with missionary modernism —colonialism, anarchism, fascism, socialism, communism, democratic liberalism, or jihadism— is that those people not viewed as falling into one’s own camp —say, “The House of Islam” or “The House of Democracy”— automatically belong to “The House of War” and “Evil.” That means that a great chunk of residual humanity remains destined to have dominant groups despise and war upon them.

Even after 11 September 2001, many people have scant recognition that unforeseen events of history perpetually transform or destroy the best-laid plans for historical engineering. The catastrophic wars and revolutions of the modern era teach us that the more uncompromising the design and the more self-assured the designer, the harder both will fall.

## **2. Misconceiving Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism**

A common notion held by the President George W. Bush administration and evinced by media spin on the war against terrorism is that suicide attackers are evil, deluded, or homicidal misfits who thrive in poverty, ignorance, and anarchy. “These killers don’t have values,” Bush declared in response to the spreading insurgency in Iraq. He continued “these people hate freedom. And we love freedom. And that’s where the clash is.” Secretary of State Colin

Powell previously told a World Economic Forum that “Terrorism really flourishes in areas of poverty, despair, and hopelessness.”<sup>17</sup>

This portrayal lends a sense of hopelessness to any attempt to address root causes because some individuals will always be desperate or deranged enough to conduct suicide attacks. But as logical as the poverty-breeds-terrorism argument may seem, study after study shows that suicide attackers and their supporters are rarely ignorant or impoverished. Nor are they crazed, cowardly, apathetic or asocial. The common misconception underestimates the central role that organizational factors play in the appeal of terrorist networks. A better understanding of such causes reveals that the challenge is actually manageable: the key is not to profile and target the most despairing or deranged individual but to understand and undermine the organizational and institutional appeal of terrorists’ motivations and networks.

The United States *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* highlights the “War of Ideas” and “War on Poverty” as adjunct programs to reduce terrorism’s pool of support and recruitment.<sup>18</sup> The war of ideas is based on the premise that terrorists and their supporters “hate our freedoms,” a sentiment Bush has expressed both with regard to al-Qaeda and to the Iraqi resistance.<sup>19</sup> Yet survey data reliably show that most Muslims who support suicide terrorism and trust bin Laden favor elected government, personal liberty, educational opportunity, and economic choice.<sup>20</sup>

Mark Tessler, who coordinates long-term surveys of Muslim societies from the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, finds that Arab attitudes toward American culture are most favorable among young adults. This is the same demographic that terrorist recruiters single out. Regardless, Khalil Shikaki, Director of the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, consistently finds that a majority of Palestinians has a favorable impression of United States (and Israeli) forms of government, education, economy, and even literature and art, even though nearly three-fourths of the population supports suicide attack.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, we find no evidence that most people who support suicide actions hate Americans’ internal cultural freedoms. Instead, we have every indication that they oppose United States foreign policies, especially regarding the Middle East. After the 1996 suicide attack against United States military housing at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, a Defense Department Science Board report stated, “Historical data show a strong correlation between United States involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States.”<sup>23</sup> United States intervention in Iraq is but the most recent example. A United Nations report indicated that as soon as the United States began building up for the Iraq invasion, al Qaeda recruitment picked up in thirty to forty countries.<sup>24</sup> Recruiters for groups sponsoring terrorist acts were telling researchers that volunteers were beating down the doors to join.

Similarly, the war on poverty is based on the premise that impoverishment, lack of education, and social estrangement spawn terrorism. Economist

Gary Becker advances the theory that the greater the amount of human capital (including income and education) a person accumulates, the less likely that person is to commit a crime.<sup>25</sup> He reasons that the greater a person's human capital, the more that person is aware of losing out on substantial future gains if captured or killed. Similar thinking applies to suicide terror: the less promising individuals' futures are, the greater the probability that they might choose to end their lives. Almost all current United States foreign aid programs related to terrorism pivot on such assumptions, now generally accepted by the mainstream of both United States political parties, but although the theory has proven useful in combating blue-collar crime, no evidence indicates its bearing on terror.

Studies by Princeton economist Alan Krueger and others find no correlation between a nation's per capita income and terrorism,<sup>26</sup> but do find a correlation between a lack of civil liberties, defined by Freedom House,<sup>27</sup> and terrorism. A recent National Research Council report, *Discouraging Terrorism*, finds:

Terrorism and its supporting audiences appear to be fostered by policies of extreme political repression and discouraged by policies of incorporating both dissident and moderate groups responsibly into civil society and the political process.<sup>28</sup>

United States backing of weak, failed, and corrupt states generates animosity and terrorism against the United States. There appears to be a direct correlation between United States military aid to politically corroded or ethnically divided states,<sup>29</sup> human rights abuses by those regimes,<sup>30</sup> and rise in terrorism,<sup>31</sup> as initially moderate opposition is pushed into common cause with more radical elements.

Despite these realities, the meager United States monies available for non-military foreign aid are far too concentrated in poverty reduction and literacy enhancement. In Pakistan, literacy and dislike for the United States have increased while the number of Islamist *madrassa* schools grew from 3,000 to nearly 40,000 since 1978. According to the United States' Department of State report, "Hope is an Answer to Terror," development aid is based "on the belief that poverty provides a breeding ground for terrorism. The terrorist attacks of September 11 reaffirmed this conviction."<sup>32</sup> In 2002, Bush declared at a United Nations conference on poor nations, International Conference on Financing for Development, in Monterrey, Mexico: "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror."<sup>33</sup> Yet study after study demonstrates that suicide terrorists and their supporters are not abjectly poor, illiterate, or socially estranged.<sup>34</sup>

Another misconception that implicitly drives current national security policy is that suicide terrorists have no rational political agenda and that terrorists are not sane. According to General Wesley Clark, unlike nineteenth-century Russian terrorists who wanted to depose the czar, current Islamic terrorists are

simply retrograde and nihilist: “They want the destruction of Western civilization and the return to seventh-century Islam.”<sup>35</sup> In 2002, Senator John Warner testified that a new security doctrine of preemption was necessary because “those who would commit suicide in their assaults on the free world are not rational.”<sup>36</sup> According to Vice President Richard Bruce “Dick” Cheney, the 11 September 2001 plotters and other like-minded terrorists “have no sense of morality.”<sup>37</sup>

In truth, suicide terrorists generally have no appreciable psychopathology and are often wholly committed to what they believe to be devout moral principles. The report, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism*, used by the Central and Defense Intelligence Agencies (CIA and DIA) finds “no psychological attribute or personality distinctive of terrorists.”<sup>38</sup> Recruits are generally well adjusted in their families and liked by peers, and often more educated and economically better off than their surrounding population. Researchers Basel Saleh and Claude Berrebi independently find that the majority of Palestinian suicide bombers have a college education (versus 15 percent of the population of comparable age) and that less than 15 percent come from poor families (although about one-third of the population lives in poverty). DIA sources who have interrogated al Qaeda detainees at Guantanamo note that Saudi-born operatives, especially those in leadership positions, are often “educated above reasonable employment level, a surprising number have graduate degrees and come from high-status families.”<sup>39</sup> The general pattern was captured in a Singapore Parliamentary report on prisoners from Jemaah Islamiyah, an ally of al-Qaeda:

These men were not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised. Like many of their counterparts in militant Islamic organizations in the region, they held normal, respectable jobs. Most detainees regarded religion as their most important personal value.<sup>40</sup>

Except for being mostly young unattached males, suicide attackers differ from members of violent racist organizations to whom they are often compared, such as American white supremacist groups.<sup>41</sup> Overall, suicide terrorists exhibit no socially dysfunctional attributes (fatherless, friendless, jobless) or suicidal symptoms. Inconsistent with economic theories of criminal behavior, they do not kill themselves simply out of hopelessness or a sense of having nothing to lose. Muslim clerics countenance killing oneself for martyrdom in the name of God but curse personal suicide. “He who commits suicide kills himself for his own benefit,” warned Sheikh Yussuf Al-Qaradhawi (a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood), but “he who commits martyrdom sacrifices himself for the sake of his religion and his nation . . . the Mujahed[een] is full of hope.”<sup>42</sup>

Another reason that personal despair or derangement may not be a significant factor in suicide terrorism is that the cultures of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where suicide terrorism thrives, tend to be less individualistic

than our Western culture more attuned to the environmental and organizational relationships that shape behavior, and less tolerant of individuals acting independently from a group context.<sup>43</sup> Terrorists in these societies also would be more likely to be seeking group, or collective, sense of belonging and justification for their actions.

A group struggling to gain power and resources against materially better-endowed enemies must attract able and committed recruits —not loaners—willing to give up their lives for a cause. At the same time, the group must prevent uncommitted elements in the population from simply free-riding on the backs of committed fighters, sharing in the fighters' rewards and successes without taking the risks or paying the costs of fighting. Insurgent groups manage this by offering potential recruits the promise of great future rewards as opposed to immediate gain, such as freedom for future generations or eternal bliss in Paradise. Only individuals committed to delayed gratification are then liable to volunteer. Insurgent groups also tend to seek individuals with better education and economic prospects, because they view a persons' investment of resources in education and training for a better economic future as indication of willingness to sacrifice today's satisfactions for tomorrow's rewards and as ability to make commitments. For this reason, relative level of education and economic status is often higher among insurgent groups that recruit primarily on the basis of promises for the future than among traditional armies that rely more on short-term incentives.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Relative Deprivation and Religious Redemption

The connection between suicide, terrorists, and religion might be explained by the role that religious ethnic groups can play. Ethnic groups offer a good foundation for sustaining resource-deficient insurgencies because they provide a social structure that can underpin the maintenance of reputations and the efficient gathering of information about recruits. But ethnicity alone may not be enough; religion may also be needed to cement commitment. A comparison of ethnic Palestinians with ethnic Bosnian Muslims (matched for age, income, education, and exposure to violence) shows the Palestinians are much more liable to use religious sentiments to confidently express hope for the future by being willingness to die for the group, whereas the Bosnians do not express religious sentiments, hope, or willingness to die.<sup>45</sup> Martyrdom, which involves "pure" commitment to promise over payoff, and unconditional sacrifice for fictive "brothers," will more likely endure in religious ethnic groups.

None of this denies that popular support for terrorism is sustained, in part, by economic factors, such as explosive population growth and underemployment, coupled with the failure of rigidly authoritarian governments to provide youth outlets for political and economic advancement. Middle Eastern and more broadly most Muslim societies, whose populations double within one generation or less, have age pyramids with broad bases: each younger age

group has substantially more people than the next older generation. Even within states that allow for a modicum of political expression or economic employment, society's structure of opportunities can have trouble keeping pace with population.

Regional governments are increasingly unable to provide these opportunities, enhancing the attractiveness of religious organizations able to recruit tomorrow's suicide terrorists. Weak and increasingly corrupt and corroded nationalist regimes in Muslim countries have sought to eliminate all secular opposition. To subdue popular discontent in the post-colonial era, the Ba'athist socialist dictators of Syria and Iraq, the authoritarian prime ministers of Pakistan and Malaysia, the monarchs of Morocco and Jordan, and the imperial presidents of Egypt, Algeria, the Philippines, and Indonesia all initially supported militant Islamic groups. To maintain their bloated bureaucracies and armies, these "failed states" —all poor imitations of Western models with no organic history in the Arab and Muslim world— readily delegated responsibility for the social welfare of their peoples to activist Islamic groups eager to take charge. These groups provided schooling and health services more efficiently and extensively than governments were able to, offering a "desecularized" path to fulfill modernity's universal mission to improve humanity. Radical Islam finally vented political aspirations beginning with the 1965 "Islamic Manifesto," *Milestones*, written in prison by the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb just before he was hanged for sedition by Egyptian leader Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser. Once begun, popular support proved too deep and widespread to extinguish.

Although we can identify the process of rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations that generates terror, disentangling the relative significance of political and economic factors in the Muslim world is difficult and perhaps even impossible. During the 1990s, momentous political developments in Algeria (multiparty elections, including Islamic groups in 1992), Palestine (Oslo Peace Accords in 1993), Chechnya (dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of communist control), Indonesia (Haji Mohammad Suharto's resignation in 1998 and the end of dictatorship), and elsewhere fanned rising aspirations among Muslim peoples for political freedom and economic advancement. In each case, economic stagnation or decline followed as political aspirations were thwarted (the Algerian Army cancelled elections, the Israel-Palestine Camp David negotiations broke down, Russia cracked down on Chechnya's bid for autonomy, and Suharto army loyalists and paramilitary groups fomented interethnic strife and political disaccord).

Support and recruitment for suicide terrorism occur not under conditions of political repression, poverty, and unemployment or illiteracy as such, but when converging political, economic, and social trends produce diminishing opportunities relative to expectations, thus generating frustrations that radical organizations can exploit. For this purpose, relative deprivation is more significant than absolute deprivation. Unlike poorer, less educated elements of

their societies—or equally educated, well-off members of our society—many educated, middle-class Muslims increasingly experience frustration with life as their potential opportunities are less attractive than their prior expectations. Frustrated with their future, the appeal of routine national life declines and suicide terrorism gives some perceived purpose to act altruistically, in the potential terrorist's mind, for the welfare of a future generation.

Revolutionary terror imprints itself into history when corrupt and corroded societies choke rising aspirations into explosive frustration.

#### 4. Organization and the Banality of Evil

This frustrating confluence of circumstances helps to account for terrorism's popular support and endurance but not the original spark that ignites people's passions and minds. Most people in the world who suffer stifling, even murderous, oppression do not become terrorists. As with nearly all creators and leaders of history's terrorist movements, those who conceive of using suicide terrorism in the first place belong mostly to an intellectual elite possessing sufficient material means for personal advancement but who choose a life of struggle and sacrifice for themselves and who often require even greater commitment from their followers. Their motivations are not personal comfort or immediate material gain. Instead, their motivation is religious or ideological conviction and zeal, whose founding assumptions, like those of *any* religion, we cannot rationally scrutinize, and for which they inspire others to believe in and die. But arational motivations don't preclude rational actions.

Sponsors of martyrdom are not irrational. Using religious sentiments for political or economic purposes can be eminently rational, as when martyrdom or missionary actions gain recognition, recruits, and power in order to increase political "market share"<sup>46</sup> (to gain in the competition for political influence in a regional context, within the larger Muslim community, or with the rest of the world). Dwindling returns on individuals' future prospects in life translate into higher levels of recruitment and prompt returns for terrorist groups and leaders. But his degree of manipulation usually works only if the manipulators themselves make costly, hard-to-fake commitments. Through indoctrination of recruits into relatively small and closeted cells—emotionally tight knit brotherhoods—terror organizations create a family of cellmates who are just as willing to sacrifice for one another as a parent for a child. These culturally contrived cell loyalties mimic and (temporarily) override genetically based fidelities to kin and secure belief in sacrifice to a larger group cause. The mechanism of manipulation resembles that of the United States army (probably most armies), which trains soldiers in small groups of committed buddies who then grow willing to sacrifice for one another, only derivatively for glory or country.

Key to intercepting that commitment before it solidifies is grasping how, like the best commercial advertisers but to ghastlier effect, charismatic leaders of

terrorist groups turn ordinary desires for kinship and religion into cravings for the mission they are pitching, to the benefit of the manipulating organization instead of the manipulated individual. Understanding and parrying suicide terrorism requires concentrating more on the organizational structure, indoctrination methods, and ideological appeal of recruiting organizations than on personality attributes of the individuals recruited. No doubt, individual predispositions render some more susceptible to social factors that leaders use to persuade recruits to die for their cause. But months—sometimes years—of intense indoctrination can lead to blind obedience no matter who the individual—as indicated in studies of people who become torturers for their governments.<sup>47</sup>

Part of the answer to what leads a normal person to suicide terror may lie in philosopher Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil," which she used to describe the recruitment of mostly ordinary Germans, not sadistic lunatics, to man Nazi extermination camps.<sup>48</sup> In the early 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram tested Arendt's thesis. He recruited Yale students and other American adults to supposedly help others learn better. When the learner, hidden by a screen, failed to memorize arbitrary word pairs fast enough, the helper was instructed to administer an electric shock, and to increase voltage with each erroneous answer (which the learner, actually an actor, deliberately got wrong). Most helpers complied with instructions to give potentially lethal shocks (labeled, 450 volts, but in fact, 0 volts) despite victims' screams and pleas. This experiment showed how situations can be staged to elicit blind obedience to authority, and more generally that manipulation of context can trump individual personality and psychology to generate apparently extreme behaviors in ordinary people.<sup>49</sup>

Social psychologists have long documented what they call "the fundamental attribution error," the tendency for people to explain human behavior in terms of individual personality traits, even when significant situational factors in the larger society are at work. This attribution error leads many in the West to focus on the individual suicide terrorists instead of the organizational environment which produces them. If told that someone has been ordered to give a speech supporting a particular political candidate, for example, most people in Western society will still think that the speaker believes what he is saying. This interpretation bias seems to be especially prevalent in individualistic cultures, such as those of the United States and Western Europe, as opposed to collectivist cultures, such as Africa and Asia. Portrayals by the United States government and media of suicide bombers as deranged cutthroats may also suffer from a fundamental attribution error: no instance has yet occurred of religious or political suicide terrorism resulting from the lone action of a mentally unstable bomber (a suicidal Unabomber) or someone acting entirely under his own authority and responsibility (for example, a suicidal Timothy McVeigh). The key is the organization, not the individual.

For organizations that sponsor suicide attacks to thrive—or even survive—against much stronger military foes, they need strong community sup-

port. Yet the reasons for that communal support can differ among people. Among Palestinians, perceptions of historical injustice combine with personal loss and humiliation at the hands of their Israeli occupiers to nurture individual martyrs and general popular support for martyr actions. Palestinian economist Basel Saleh observes that a majority of Palestinian suicide bombers had prior histories of arrest or injury by Israel's army, and many of the youngest suicide shooters had family members or close friends with such a history.<sup>50</sup> Shikaki has preliminary survey data suggesting that popular support for suicide actions may be positively correlated with the number of Israeli checkpoints through which Palestinians must regularly pass to go about their daily business and the time needed to pass through them (this can involve spending hours at each of several checkpoints, any of which can be arbitrarily closed down any time to prevent through passage). Humiliation and revenge are the most consistent sentiments expressed by not just recruits but also their supporters, though expressed more as community grievances than as personal ones.<sup>51</sup>

Although grievances generate support for terrorists and motivate some people to become recruits, debriefings with captured al-Qaeda operatives at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and with Jemaah Islamiyah prisoners in Singapore, suggest that recruitment to these organizations is more ideologically driven than grievance driven. Detainees evince little history of personal hardship but frequently cite relatives or respected community members who participated in earlier jihads, or close peers presently engaged, as influencing decisions to join the fight.<sup>52</sup> Ideology and grievance are not mutually exclusive. Jessica Stern's interviews with jihadists and their supporters in Kashmir reveal that both abound.<sup>53</sup>

Despite numerous studies of individual behavior that show situation to be a much better predictor than personality in group contexts, Americans overwhelmingly believe that personal decision, success, and failure depend on individual choice, responsibility, and personality. This perception is plausibly one reason many Americans tend to think of terrorists as homicidal maniacs. "If we have to, we just mow the whole place down," said Senator Trent Lott, exasperated with the situation in Iraq. "You're dealing with insane suicide bombers who are killing our people, and we need to be very aggressive in taking them out."<sup>54</sup> As Timothy Spangler, chairman of Republicans Abroad (a group of Americans living overseas that helps the Republican Party develop policy) recently put it, "We know what the causes of terrorism are —terrorists. . . . It's ultimately about individuals taking individual decisions to kill people."<sup>55</sup> According to last year's Pew Survey, most of the world disagrees.<sup>56</sup> Although we cannot do much about personality traits, whether biologically influenced or not, we presumably can think of nonmilitary ways to make terrorist groups less attractive to the community that supports them and undermine their effectiveness with recruits. That holds the key to defeating terrorism.

None of this necessitates negotiating with terrorist groups that sponsor martyrs in the pursuit of goals such as al-Qaeda's quest to replace the Western-inspired system of nation-states with a global caliphate. Osama bin Laden and

others affiliated with the mission of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders seek no compromise, and will probably fight with hard power to the death. For these groups and already committed individuals, using hard power is necessary. The tens of millions of people who sympathize with bin Laden, though, are likely open to the promise of soft-power alternatives that most Muslims appear to favor—participatory government, freedom of expression, educational opportunity, economic choice.<sup>57</sup> The historical precondition for such opening of society, and for the popular legitimacy of any form of governance to be effective, is to ensure that potential recruits in the Arab and Muslim world feel secure about their personal safety and cultural heritage. Such soft-power efforts may demand more patience than governments under attack or pressure to reform politically may tolerate in times of crisis. Forbearance is necessary to avoid increasingly catastrophic devastation to the Western democracies and to the future hopes of peoples who aspire to soft empowerment from a free world.

### **5. Conclusion: Can Humanity Renounce Planetary Rights of Interference and Control?**

In the competition for moral allegiance, secular ideologies are at a disadvantage in the long run (no avowedly atheistic society has ever endured more than a few generations). For, if people learn that all apparent commitment is self-interested convenience or worse, manipulation for the self-interest of others, then their commitment is debased and withers. Especially in times of vulnerability and stress, social deception and defection in the pursuit of self-preservation is more likely to occur, as the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldûn<sup>58</sup> recognized centuries ago. Religion passionately rouses hearts and minds to break out of this viciously rational cycle of self-interest, to adopt group interests that may benefit individuals in the long run. Commitment to the supernatural underpins what French sociologist Emile Durkheim called the “organic solidarity” that makes social life more than simply a contract among calculating individuals.<sup>59</sup>

In breaking one vicious cycle, religions almost invariably set in motion another. The more strongly individuals hold to group interests, the more they risk excluding or fighting the interests of other groups. The absolute moral value that religions attach to in-group interests practically guarantees that the ensuing conflict and competition between groups will be costly and interminable, and only resolved in specific cases by banishment, annihilation, or assimilation of out-groups and their ideas. Principles of evolution do not discourage, and may in fact encourage, this sort of creatively destructive spiral.

Within this spiral, the secular democracies of North America and Europe have arguably lessened the compulsion of religious exclusion. They have done this not so much by dampening religious passion (more true anyway of Europe than America), as by channeling religious conviction into more or less *volun-*

tary association and action. The political and economic ideology of the nation-state system and globalization has taken on transcendental value that leaves little room for opposing or different conceptions of human social order.

Human minds —essentially unchanged in evolutionary structure since the Stone Age— have developed spiraling Space-Age arsenals for their ambitions. Jihadist suicide terrorism is not a psychological aberration, an exercise in social nihilism, or even a retrograde expression of traditionalism or fundamentalism, any more than Nazism was, despite the significance of certain atavistic cultural elements. Jihadist martyrdom is a thoroughly modern, institutionalized counter-movement to recent dominant trends towards a New World Order. Defend against Jihadism we must, and help it to burn itself out. But let us not add life to its forlorn mission by unrelentingly muscling others with our mission?

### Notes

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