

Attitudes Toward Political Violence: Religion and Terrorism

When we take a look at the role of religion to terrorism, it's fair to say that all of the world's major religious traditions, to one extent or another, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism have in their sacred text or their history examples of the interrelationship of religion with violence and terrorism. But the question often is, in what context did that occur? And is that use of violence legitimate or illegitimate?

Think historically, for example, when we look at the Bible. The prophets like Joshua and David who in effect engaged in conquest in the name of God. Think of the Crusades and Pope Urban who said God wills it. But even if we look at today or in recent times we see in particular Judaism, Christianity, and Islam showing us examples of modern uses of religion to legitimate what some people regard as violence, legitimate violence and what others regard as illegitimate violence and/or terrorism.

Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants. Bosnia, you had Serbian Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims attempting to mobilize support, legitimating it in the name of Islam. Palestine and Israel. And it goes on and on.

So, what is important to remember when we're talking about this issue? Number one, all religions have a transcendent and a dark side. That is, all religions talk about a transcendent reality, an absolute reality. They may call it God, personalizing it. They may talk about the experience of nirvana.

But the other side of it is that all religions have that dark side and have indeed been engaged in acts of violence and/or terrorism historically. A very important issue here is, what are the primary catalysts and drivers? Is it religion specifically? Or is the overriding factor political, economic, or social circumstances?

Many major studies of both terrorism and certainly of suicide bombing and suicide bombers across religions and across the world, if you will, have found that the primary drivers are often the political, economic, and social circumstances. But religion becomes important as a legitimator, a motivator to pull people in.

We see this with Al-Qaeda. If you look at the early interviews with bin Laden, for example, on CNN much of his initial talk had to do with grievances, grievances against other Arab countries, grievances with regard to the West. But then when he wanted to legitimate his agenda of engaging in violence what he would have regarded as resistance, and what the world would have seen as terrorism, he then attempted to legitimate that in the name of Islam. And particularly, to pull people in by doing that.

Why? Because religion adds that incredible dimension of a sense of ultimate authority. It's not just that this particular individual is saying we need to do this, but rather this particular individual says God wants us to do this. And if God wants us to do it, it has to be done now. This is God's will.

And that allows you to redefine the whole ballgame as it were. If God wants this done, then people like bin Laden can say the normal rules of the game are off. The notion of just war, the notion of proportional warfare, the idea of not killing civilians, but rather the notion is this needs to be done. This is a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil, between God and Satan. And we need to do what we need to do.

Now, this is not unique to bin Laden and/or to Islam, because we see, for example, in modern times those who feel themselves driven to attack abortion doctors, to blow up abortion clinics, don't see themselves as terrorists. They see themselves as attempting to prevent an evil that God would want them to prevent.

Now, let me be clear. There are instances where you have religion being the primary driver in violence and acts of terrorism. But in the majority of instances the issues tend to be political and economic.

For example, if we look at Syria today, the attempt of opposition to the ruler of Syria, Bashar al-Assad to engage in a legitimate form of violence against a regime that is using overwhelming violence in order to gain its freedom. But at the same time, you have outside jihadists coming in who will fight against anybody, whether it's Assad or the opposition in order to impose their will and to get their foothold in Syria and engage in blatant acts of violence.