

## **IS there such a thing as RELIGIOUS TERRORISM?**

### **Lecture notes by Dr R-E Poulton**

Personally I doubt very much whether the concept of 'religious terrorism' has any validity. Jonathan White's excellent reader on TERRORISM strongly argues that religious terrorism is an important phenomenon (White, Jonathan : Terrorism, An Introduction, Wadsworth/Thomson 2003 - ISBN 0534578519). Before you accept any statement, argument or article at face value, however, try to ensure that you know 'where the writer is coming from'. There is no such thing as objectivity: only perception, interpretation, opinion.

White's first degree was in theology. He sees religion everywhere! He may be right, but I have a different perspective because I am looking through a different window. My own studies were in economics. I therefore declare this bias before insisting that I believe there is an economic and/ or political substructure to every case of terrorism.

So I argue there is no such thing as 'religious terrorism'. Even the Irish question, which is defined classically as Catholic versus Protestant has its origins in economics. During the time of Oliver Cromwell, the extreme protestant military dictator who ruled Britain from 1649-1658 under the title of Lord Protector, the Anglo-Saxons invaded Ireland and established themselves as landlords over the native Celtic population. Cromwell landed in Dublin in August 1649 and in a year the Celts were crushed. The invaders spoke a different language, they had different customs and manners and they followed a different version of the divided Christian religion. Later religious affiliation became the label. So as I see it, the Irish problem was a question of land ownership, serfdom, ethnic exclusion, and the right to political self-determination... not religion. Some of my best friends disagree with me. They are probably right – but they have not yet convinced me!

I doubt therefore whether it is really religion that motivates the terrorist, even if religion is the label they use to describe themselves. In many cases it is poverty, hopelessness. If you live in a refugee camp, your children are born in a refugee camp, they are raised without school, jobs or any prospect of a better life, they have nothing to lose and everything to fight for: politically and economically. Often the only thing they actually do possess is religion. The Muslim Palestinians, Catholic Croatian and Orthodox Serbs, the Hindu Tamils and the extremist Hindu parties of India have no need to fight for religion: they have their religion. What they are really fighting for is land, wealth, political power. They use violence against another group from fear that others will take their livelihoods from them, or because they have already done so). Often when terrorists adopt a religious label, they adopt it because it is all they have left.

It can be argued that people who call themselves (in effect) 'religious terrorists' should be considered as such, even if they are denying by their actions the precepts and rules of the religion from which they claim inspiration. I do not find that a convincing argument. Religions should be judged according to their own precepts and not by the actions of a small group using the name of the religion to justify their actions.

In the same way as Al Qaida may indeed be full of 'religious terrorists', the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh in the USA, and the guy who was put to death in Florida, USA in 2003 for Abortion Clinic murders<sup>1</sup> may be 'religious terrorists' because they were inspired by right-wing, nutty, extremist beliefs of Christian origin. As a baptized Christian, I would be horrified to be associated with any of them. My understanding of Christianity is based on love, and this excludes both terrorism and capital punishment on intellectual and spiritual grounds. On the other hand, there are plenty of Christians in the USA who disagree with me on both counts and – like the opinions of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa which tried to justify the doctrine of apartheid - I do not recognize their Christianity as being related to mine.

Although Osama bin Laden wishes to conquer and protect the Holy Places of Islam, his motivations seem to me to be entirely political and economic: setting up a Greater Islamic Umma is a political ambition, not a religious one. Replacing the al-Saud tribe because they are corrupt and alcoholic is a political ambition: ambition clothed in religion, but still entirely political in nature. Trying to become the President of the Islamic Arab Republic is an eminently political ambition with economic motives: to control the world's oil supplies. Naturally the USA and other countries are going to fight Osama ben Laden's ambitions, but neither side is fighting for 'religion'.

How about the foot soldiers ?

Did they take over the airplanes on 9/11 for 'religious reasons'? I really doubt it. Even if the individual is brain-washed into believing that God wants him to do something, the reason he does it is actually not his own stupid reason, but the subtler reason that motivates his machiavellian master.

There is a medical man called Hacker<sup>2</sup> who classified hijackers and people like them into three categories:

- criminals
- crazies
- crusaders

Osama is clearly a crusader. The suicide bomber may be a crusader too; but as the tool of the smarter crusader, (s)he may be classified as 'brainwashed' and therefore - for the purposes of our argument - a 'crazy' being used by a crusader. I am very resistant to the idea that there are true 'religious terrorists' but I remain open to persuasion (at least, I think I do!)

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<sup>1</sup> Wednesday, September 03, 2003 STARKE, Fla. — Paul Hill the former Presbyterian minister convicted of murdering an abortion doctor, died on Wednesday by lethal injection. He was the first person executed in the U.S. for anti-abortion violence. Hill, 49, was found guilty of the 1994 shotgun slayings of Dr. John Britton and his bodyguard, retired Air Force Lt. Col. James Herman Barrett, in Pensacola, Fla. Barrett's wife, June, was wounded. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,96286,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> Hacker, Frederick J., MD: Crusaders, Criminals, Crazies: Terror and Terrorism in Our Time, New York: WWNorton & Co, 1976. ISBN: [0393011275](https://www.isbn-international.org/number/0393011275)