

FROM BHINDRANWALE TO BIN LADEN

A search for understanding religious violence

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My involvement in the study of religious terrorism began with the Sikhs. I had lived in Punjab for several years during the early part of my academic career when my focus was on the relationship between religion and politics in India in general and Punjab in particular. During the 1980s, therefore, I watched with mounting horror as a spiral of violence developed between Sikh militants and the government. How could such affable, intelligent people be swept up in an encounter that was so vicious, so unforgiving?

I embarked on a project to try to understand why – to try to enter into the mindset of people whom I knew well and whom I had come to respect. I wanted to understand how some of the best and brightest of their generation of youth could be engaged in a confrontation that was so suicidal, so horrendous, so beyond rationality, a situation where the demands and the interests of the movement seemed to be beyond ordinary calculation. It is relatively easy to understand a movement that is motivated towards a strategic purpose – that is, one created to gain ground, perhaps even literally ground in the sense of land and property to be taken. But when the war in which a movement is engaged seems so religiously ideological – as the Khalistani movement seemed to be – it is beyond simple comprehension. It appears to be so irrational, so mythological, that it is difficult to imagine how intelligent people could enter into it with such passion and with such risk to themselves. I wanted to know why.

I also wanted to know whether this situation was idiosyncratic to the Sikhs, or, for that matter, to India. In the 1980s violent movements of religious activism were relatively infrequent phenomena. This was prior to the rise of Hamas in the intifada of the Palestinian movement, and only the Islamic revolution in Iran bore witness to a new kind of virulent anti-modern religious politics that in time would cast its shadow over much of the globe. At that time, in the 1980s, I wanted to know whether the characteristics of the Punjab situation were unique to India,

or whether there were patterns that were replicated in other forms of religious politics emerging around the world.

So I took a year off in 1986 to study the speeches of the symbolic leader of the Khalistan movement, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and spend some time again in that area of India that I knew well and in which I was reasonably trusted. What I discovered at that time continues to resonate through my work even today, some twenty years later.¹

Let me give an example. On one occasion I was able to talk with a group of Sikh militants who were members of a martyr brigade. They were Sikh versions of what would later be thought of as Islamic martyrs, the suicide bombers associated with Hamas and Al Qaeda. Late at night in the back room of a Gurdwara, a Sikh house of worship, in Delhi, six young men entered the room. They were disguised when they came in – they had scarves over their faces so that initially I could not see them. They came in armed with guns and there was tension as they entered the room. Then they sat down and took off their scarves and I felt a wave of astonishment. They were just teenagers, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. They reminded me of the undergraduates I had taught at Punjab University. I did not know them personally, but I felt I could have known any of them. There was nothing savage about their demeanor or their intensity. They exuded compassion towards their people and towards their religious tradition. They were in some ways the best of the younger generation of Jat Sikhs, the privileged community within Punjab. These were bright and promising young men who would ordinarily have been playing soccer and receiving prizes for their competition. But there they were, engaged in what was for them an extraordinary struggle.

I could ask anything I wanted, I was told. Their English was not bad, and I knew enough Hindi and Punjabi to supplement it. I wanted to know why, just – why? They knew what I meant, but it was a question that was as perplexing to them as it was to me. To them it was so obvious. There was a great and historical conflict, a war in which they felt totally enmeshed. To them this war was so palpable.

“We’re at a time of crisis,” they said. “We’re in a great moment of history and it’s a time of conflict between good and evil, and truth and untruth, and religion and untruth. And we have a chance to make the difference.”

For them to be soldiers in a great struggle was not only intensely ennobling, it was a religious experience that was almost redemptive in its quality. That is, they felt that they could take part in this movement, in this struggle, and not only change their society but be transformed in some way. I had a sense that whatever rewards they might have obtained in a material sense were unimportant. In the case of these Sikh martyrs, since they were not Muslims, there were no heavenly rewards and no virgins waiting. The reward for these young men was the religious experience in the struggle itself: the sense that they were participating in something greater than themselves. Like any kind of religious transformation, it would not only bring great honor to their families but also redeem them personally.

What the young Sikh warriors taught me was that the religious activism of their movement was not simply a struggle over land or politics. It was an ideological struggle. Their social involvement had an intensely personal commitment, and it

was motivated by the heady sense of spiritual fulfillment and the passion of holy war. Their enemy was not, however, another religion: it was the a-religion, or irreligion as they imagined it, of modernity.

This observation led me to other parts of South Asia – Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and elsewhere in India – and to other parts of the world, especially the Middle East, to see if the emerging religious activism in these regions in the 1990s was similar in character to the anti-modern religious activism of the Sikhs. Though in many places, from Kashmir to Palestine, practical issues of sovereignty and political control were touted as their goals, the passion and rhetoric of their activism was religious. In this sense it was not just that religion was politicized, the opposite was also true: politics were religionized. Social differences were cast into religious terms, and political struggle became personal and spiritual.²

The Khalistani paradigm of religious struggle persists in movements of religious activism around the world. The Khalistani paradigm is one where religion provides both the critique and the antidote to the secular life-style associated with modernity. The condemnation of the corruption of modern secular life – and in particular modern secular politics – is couched in religious terms. And the act of struggling against the secular state in a sacred war is itself redemptive. Fighting becomes an almost ritual act.

Years later I thought of the Sikh militants I met in a side room of a Delhi Gurdwara when I interviewed another activist, one from a different religious tradition. The young Sikhs' language of religious conviction and transformative warfare was echoed by this activist, Mahmud Abouhalima, one of the men convicted in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. I interviewed Abouhalima on two occasions in the Federal Penitentiary at Lompoc in California. Mahmud is an affable, friendly, pleasant guy, a tall Egyptian with freckles and red hair – they called him Mahmud the Red. He was an easy conversationalist. He liked Western women. I was going to Denmark for a conference soon after the interview and he warned me about those Scandinavian women – “they are beautiful and treacherous,” he said. He himself had had two European wives, one after the other. Mahmud swore on occasion – he was not a pious person – he would say “damn this,” “shit this,” in casual conversation.³

But when the subject came around to the role of religion in public life his eyes would begin to glaze and you would see an almost transformative change in his face. He would look at me with a sense of deep frustration and say, “Mr Mark, you just don't get it.”

“You people are like sheep,” Abouhalima said. “You don't see what's going on, what's really going on. Your media just won't let you see it. There's a war going on, there's a war between truth and evil, and good and bad, of religion and unreligion, and your government is the enemy.”

I tried to understand why bombing buildings would make a difference in this struggle. Abouhalima didn't want to talk about the World Trade Center bombing because he was still hoping to appeal his conviction for conspiracy in the attack. But he would talk about the Oklahoma City federal building. After all nobody had

accused him of that crime, and the trial of Timothy McVeigh was being conducted at the time.

“Mr Mark, if you want to understand why these people bomb buildings, I’ll tell you,” Abouhalima said. “Don’t think it’s for no reason. They have a reason.”

And what reason is that? I asked him.

“They said they want to send a message,” he said.

A message to whom?

“To you, Mr Mark,” Abouhalima answered, explaining, “they want to send a message that the government is the enemy.”

And then he sat back and looked at me and smiled. With a look of satisfaction he said, “And now you know.”

And after September 11, we all knew.

In a curious kind of way what Abouhalima was telling me was how he defined terrorism. What he said was that one should not think of these recent acts of religious terrorism as simply matters of tactics or strategy in a war that can be won through other means, but as performances of very important symbolic acts. After all, what was the point of bombing the World Trade Center? What was the next thing to come? Were there going to be waves of submarines of Islamic fighters washing up on the shores of California and beginning to attack the Golden Gate? No. There hasn’t been any attack by Al Qaeda on American soil in the several years since September 11. For that matter, they hadn’t attacked in the nine years before – that is, the nine years after the 1993 attack. There was a great gap between the 1993 and 2001 attacks on the very same building.

Yet what a building to choose for a symbolic attack, the World Trade Center. If you were going to look for a symbol of America’s economic power throughout the world in an era of globalization, the World Trade Center would be it. Its height, its domination of New York’s skyline, its very name says it all. If one were also looking for a similar symbolic target to exemplify America’s military power throughout the world, one might also want to choose the Pentagon. So in one day to get both was quite a feat. The event captured the enormous symbolic significance of those two sets of buildings. The choice of the buildings told us a lot about their message, a message that didn’t need to be conveyed in any other way. There was no need for some sort of terrorist public relations man from Al Qaeda to come running out and say, “Well now, we bombed these two buildings for this reason or that ...” There was no need for that. The medium was the message. In this particular case the symbolic power of the buildings was enormous – not only throughout American society but I suspect even more importantly throughout the Islamic world. They were trying to impress their own people, their own potential supporters, by showing not only that the United States was the enemy but also that it was vulnerable. It could be wounded, and it could be angered into fighting back.

So it seems to me that in the post-modern era we have a post-verbal, image-driven kind of radical political message. It is conveyed by a kind of terrorism that is wholly different from traditional terrorism. These terrorist acts are less tactical than symbolic. They are less engaged in a real struggle, one that has immediate

goals and gains, than one that is transcendent. I began to think of it in the terms that were presented to me by the people I was interviewing, as forms of war. I called it “cosmic war,” by which I mean a war beyond human imagination, a war touched with religious weight. These are the great wars of good and bad, of truth and evil that are part of every religious tradition.⁴

Christianity also contains such images of cosmic war. When I was a boy growing up in the American Midwest in a pious Protestant family, I used to go out and see revival preachers who would come around during the summer. They would set up tents almost like a traveling carnival or a road show, and put on a great performance. The music was electrifying and the preaching terrific, and often at the end there would be an altar call. We were supposed to make a decision for Christ.

I remember one preacher who used to dress up in camouflage battle costume. He would look out at us, midwestern innocents, and growl, “There’s a war going on.” He went on to explain that what he had in mind was not just a metaphor. “It’s a real war,” he said. “It’s a war between truth and evil, and good and bad. Within your own soul you’ve got to make a decision now – are you going to be one of the victims or are you going to be one of the victors? Are you going to make a decision for Jesus?”

He told us we had to decide on the spot and come to the Lord, and some of us did. The moment was so great, and the pressure so intense, how could anybody not want to be on the side of good? How could anybody not want to be on the side of the Lord?

Years later, when I talked with people like Abouhalima and the young Sikh men in the Delhi Gurdwara, I found myself thinking that it is only a bit of a stretch to connect my revival preachers in southern Illinois to the ideologies of Osama bin Laden or Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale looked out over his sea of young Sikh men and he saw those who had shaved their beards and those who were wearing slick pants and shiny shoes and he said, “You’ve strayed, you’ve strayed, you’ve gone against the guru and the teachings of the book and you’ve strayed. It’s time now to make a decision. Are you going to get right with the Lord?”

Bhindranwale, like my revival preacher, challenged his followers to straighten up, to make something out of their messy lives. And, of course, each of us has a messy life, which is why the message of religion speaks so quickly and sharply to the heart of one’s private experience. Are we going to make something out of our messy lives, he wanted to know, and decide to be on the side of the right, to be soldiers for God?

The only difference between the revival preachers and bin Laden and Bhindranwale is that the followers of Al Qaeda and Khalistan were real soldiers. They had real targets, so the evil was not just the shadowy sin that is within the heart of every person but it was also externalized. In the case of bin Laden it was America; in the case of Bhindranwale it was that evil woman who was “born in the house of Brahmans,” as he put it, which was his way of talking about Indira Gandhi, India’s Prime Minister.⁵ In some ways their struggle was a more satisfying

kind of religious war than the revival preacher's. Since the enemy was not only within but also outside, the enemy could be more easily attacked. If you were a soldier in their cosmic war, you could actually do something. You really could put on your armament, you really could get weapons, and you really could do something about destroying evil.

In some ways, bin Laden and Bhindranwale preached a gloriously simplified version of the message of religion that has been a part of every tradition, the battle – that almost Manichaeic battle – between oppositions, and the way in which one's own life can be purified by taking on the stand of the good. In every case of religious militancy that I have studied I have found echoes of this cosmic war. I discovered what one Christian militia member who is a supporter of Timothy McVeigh, called “an aha experience.”

This “aha experience” that the Christian militia member described – this realization that there was a great war going on and the US government was the enemy – was remarkably similar to what Mahmud Abouhalima told me about his own awareness of a great war in which the US was the enemy. The two could have been the same person, though one was a Christian militia supporter of Timothy McVeigh and the other was an Al Qaeda supporter of Osama bin Laden. Both said that it changed their lives, this “aha experience.” It suddenly gave clarity when they were confused, angry, frustrated, and humiliated.

The sense of humiliation was a remarkably common emotion, one described by almost everyone with whom I talked who was a supporter of, or involved in, religious violence. I have no way of knowing whether they felt a greater sense of humiliation than those who did not turn to violence, and yet it seemed to me that the frequency with which they characterized their struggle in this way indicated that this may have been the case. They said that they felt an enormous sense of frustration and humiliation over not being able to know what was going on or knowing what to do about it when the world appeared to be going out of control.

Then in the midst of their frustration many of them said that they experienced a clarifying insight, an “aha experience.” The ideology of great warfare that they accepted suddenly made everything click into focus. It was in the midst of a blurry image of the world around them that the moral contours of life suddenly sharpened into view. “Aha,” they seemed to say, “now I know why I've been made to feel so humiliated and frustrated, it's because there's this evil enemy and it's out to control the world.” For members of the Christian militia at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, the evil enemies were Bill Clinton and Janet Reno. The enemy list also included the forces of globalization and the new world order. They saw these forces taking away their firearms and centralizing the government and doing other things to deprive them of individual rights. But now they could do something about it, they could fight back. But more importantly than even fighting back in any kind of strategic and tactical way was to fight for the sake of fighting – in order to overcome the frustration, the utter frustration, that they felt about the world.

It was this frustration that Mahmud Abouhalima expressed to me when he said, “Mr Mark, you people are like sheep.”

I usually try not to argue with the people whom I interview. It is not so much that I want to be nice, but I want to keep myself out of the picture in order to understand their point of view. In the case of Abouhalima, however, I couldn't take it any more.

"I'm not a sheep," I told him. I said that I was a Christian and I feel strongly about issues of morality in public life.

He said, "Oh no, Mr Mark, you're a sheep. You're a sheep, I know." And then he said, "I know you. I've lived your life, but you haven't lived mine. I know how you people think. You are fooled. You read what you read, you see what you see on television, and you are fooled. You don't know what is really going on."

Abouhalima had this enormous frustration about us. He thought that we really didn't get it. Not just we Americans, but most people in the Muslim world. I want to stress this because I think especially for jihadi militants associated with Al Qaeda, the Muslim audience is very important. They have the sense that the rest of the Muslim world doesn't get it. So the point of attacks such as the one on the World Trade Center is to show the Muslim world as well as us that there is a war going on. And now, as Abouhalima says, now they get it. We, Americans and Middle Easterners, now know that there are people who feel that the world is at war, that there is a great battle going on, and that the United States can be taunted into seeing the world the same way. So these acts of terror are meant to be a kind of performance, a kind of demonstration. These are acts of theater meant for television – and not just for CNN, but for Al Jazeera, television within the wider Muslim world.

So the conclusion to my search for understanding these acts of religious violence perpetrated by activists around the world, from Bhindranwale to bin Laden, is that these are religious responses to a political problem. They are responses to the perception that the world has gone awry. Let me indicate some of the implications about this way of thinking about these acts.

Religious violence is very religious

Though every situation of religious activism has a social context in which economic and political issues have been important, these issues have never been the whole story – an ideologically religious perspective was grafted onto them. In the case of Punjab, I knew that young rural Sikhs had perfectly good reasons for being unhappy. Economically, they saw their agricultural products receiving what they thought to be less than fair market; politically, they felt their own authority was being undercut by the ruling Congress party; and socially, they regarded their status and influence waning in comparison with the urban castes. None of these things, however, explained the vitriol and religious passion with which their opposition to the government was expressed.

In the Sikh case, as in cases of religious activism around the world, the religious ingredient changes the picture dramatically. For one thing it personalizes the conflict. It provides personal reward – religious merit, redemption, and the promise of heavenly luxuries – to those who struggle in conflicts that otherwise

MARK JUERGENSMEYER

have only social benefits. It also provides vehicles of social mobilization that embrace vast numbers of supporters who otherwise would not be mobilized around social or political issues. In many cases, it provides an organizational network of local churches, mosques, temples, and religious associations into which patterns of leadership and support may be tapped. It gives the legitimacy of moral justification for political encounter. Even more important, it provides justification for violence that challenges the state's monopoly on morally-sanctioned killing. Using Max Weber's dictum that the state's authority is always rooted in the social approval of the state to enforce its power through the use of bloodshed – in police authority, punishment, and armed defense – religion is the only other entity that can give moral sanction for violence and is therefore inherently at least potentially revolutionary.

Religious activists critique the secular world and the secular nation-state

Movements such as the Sikh rebellion in Punjab are religious critiques of the deficiencies of the secular nation-state. In a paradoxical way, it seemed to me, the European Enlightenment's primary political creation, the modern nation-state, is both criticized and propped up by the Enlightenment's old enemy, religion. In some cases religion has become the ideological glue that holds together a sense of nationhood and supports a new kind of religious nation-state. This was the religious agenda of the revolution in Iran and also of the Hamas movement within the Palestinian liberation struggle. Nationhood became a defining part of the Sikh rebellion in Punjab – the "Khalistan" movement, as it came to be called – even though Bhindranwale said that he neither favored nor disfavored the idea. For many who lost faith in the idea of secular nationalism, religion has become the vehicle of collective identity, expressing what John Lie describes in a recent book as "peoplehood," the essential ingredient for the Enlightenment idea of the nation-state.⁶

Religious activists sometimes have a global agenda

The remarkable mobility of the world's population in an era of mass transportation and easy communication means that most religious communities are now dispersed across the planet. Hence religious activism is often transnational in its networks of operation and its bases of support. The far-flung operations of Al Qaeda provide one case in point. The support for the Khalistani movement is another. The concept of Khalistan was coined among expatriate Punjabis in London, and the first currency for the cause was printed in Canada.

The ideology of these movements is, sometimes, transnational as well. In one of his videotaped statements after September 11, Osama bin Laden spoke about the oppression that the Islamic world has experienced in the last eighty years – evoking the image of the Ottoman Empire as the goal of his new form of transnational Islamic politics. In other instances bin Laden has been explicitly opposed to the

Western style of globalization and its efforts to impose the values and power of one culture over the others. In this sense, bin Laden may be regarded as a kind of religiously-motivated guerilla anti-globalist. And yet as his Ottoman Empire reference and his transnational network indicate, he is something of a globalist himself, albeit one dedicated to an alternate Islamic vision of globalization.

The religious passions of activists can vanish as quickly as they appear

Like summer storms, the passion of religious war can seize the consciousness of a people and allow for the most vicious acts of violence. Then just as rapidly the mood can change, the spiritual charge can dissipate, and the political differences return to a more worldly and civil form of interaction. The cultures of violence in which these activists are caught are ephemeral things. Although they dip into their cultural traditions for images and examples that will support their efforts, these battles can be fleeting fantasies. They are not wars between cultures; certainly not a “clash of civilizations.”

Although war is a part of every religious tradition, no tradition teaches its followers to permanently hate other people. This idea is not traditionally Sikh or Hindu or Islamic. It is also not traditionally Christian or Jewish or anything else. It is an image of desperation that comes in response to deep frustration. In some cases, of course, there are real issues involved – such as the Palestinian movement for sovereignty to which Hamas is related. But Hamas does not express the whole of the Palestinian cause. The percentage of popular Palestinian support for Hamas has dropped dramatically in particular moments when it seemed that there would be peaceful solutions resulting from the negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. The terrorism of Hamas, like most terrorism, is not a permanent condition. It can change, and it can dissipate almost as rapidly as it appeared.

Why am I so confident in saying that? Because I have seen it happen in many cases. I remember the troubled days of Berkeley in the 1960s, and how the revolutionary spirit of that era that spawned the terrorism of the Weathermen movement became, in time, domesticated. The recent trial of a woman who in her youth was a member of that terrorist movement provided a poignant picture of a middle-aged woman baking brownies in a suburban home, harboring hidden and terrible memories of a violent past.

All of Northern Ireland is, in a sense, recovering from a violent past. In the case of Northern Ireland, where there were real issues of territoriality at stake, there was ability in the Good Friday agreement to move beyond the aura of ultimate confrontation. The way this happened was, I think, in part due to an astute political leadership that did not over-respond. In the Northern Ireland case, the spiral of violence began to wind down rather than to wind up.

A similar pattern happened in Punjab. I remember traveling through Punjab villages soon after the decade-long era of violence came to an end in the early 1990s. The villages had a war-ravaged look to them, an air of fatigue as if they had been swept by a hurricane, and now they were left to gather up the pieces.

“The movement is over,” one of the former militants told me. What he meant by that was not only that many of his colleagues were killed or in hiding, but also that the mood of public support that had sustained the movement over the years had dissipated and was gone.⁷ The powerful image of warfare now seemed distant, no longer related to the struggles in the world around it. The young militants who had been called “the boys” by most Punjabis, these overly-mature youngsters thrust into guerrilla war, had indeed become boys once again.

How quickly these moods of warfare can shatter and break. The lesson to be learned, I think, is that authorities have to find ways to respond to acts of terror without adopting the religious dissidents’ own rhetoric of cosmic war. In an eerie kind of way the language of a “war on terrorism” buttresses the reality of those who espouse acts of terror. We need to move beyond images of ultimate confrontation. The more we can resist appearing like the evil enemy that the Bhindranwales and bin Ladens of this world say we are, the better off we are in diffusing the vicious spiral of violence and dissipating images of cosmic war.

Notes

- 1 My first article on Sikh violence was published as “The Logic of Religious Violence,” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, reprinted in David Rapoport, ed., *Inside Terrorist Organizations* (London: Frank Cass, 1988), 172–93.
- 2 This comparative study of movements of religious nationalism was published as *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
- 3 Interview with Mahmud Abouhalima, convicted co-conspirator in the World Trade Center bombing case, federal penitentiary, Lompoc, California, September 30, 1997.
- 4 See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
- 5 Jarnail S. Bhindranwale, “Address to the Sikh Congregation” (sermon given in the Golden Temple, November 1983, trans. Ranbir S. Sandhu, April 1985, distributed by Sikh Religious and Educational Trust, Dublin, OH); and Jarnail S. Bhindranwale, “Two Lectures” (lecture given on July 19, 1983, trans. Ranbir S. Sandhu, September 20, 1983, distributed by Sikh Religious and Educational Trust, Dublin, OH).
- 6 John Lie, *Modern Peoplehood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 7 I appreciate the assistance of Prof. Harish Puri, Dept of Political Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, in facilitating this visit to Sultanwind village in Amritsar district.