

10. RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES TO GLOBAL SECURITY

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The spectacular aerial assault that brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and punctured the walls of Washington's Pentagon on September 11, 2001, prompted the American public to realize what most of the rest of the world has known for some time: religion has returned to public life with a vengeance. This attack, in the words of U.S. President George W. Bush, "marked the beginning of the first war of the 21st century."¹ Mr. Bush may be accurate in his statement but virulent religious activism has been a feature of contemporary international politics since the Iranian revolution in 1978–1979, increasing at a seemingly exponential rate in the last decade of the 20th century. For many, the ethnic and nationalist struggles in Eurasia and around the world religion have replaced Marxism as the ideology of protest and revolution.

With the exception of the al Qaeda's transnational Islamic movement, most religious rebels in recent years have served ethnic and ideological struggles with a markedly national flavor. The perpetrators of the terrorist attacks on Moscow apartment buildings, for instance, are widely believed to be Chechen rebels pursuing a separatist political agenda somewhat related to the Muslim culture of the region and only marginally related to Islamic theology and beliefs. In other political separatism movements, religion is more central to ideologies of protest. "Palestine is not completely free," a leader of Hamas' policy wing remarked, "until it is an Islamic state."²

This opinion was voiced just a few months before the 1996 elections that brought Yasir Arafat triumphantly into power and fulfilled the Palestinian dream of an independent nation. Yet it was not the kind of nation for which the Islamic activists and Hamas leaders had hoped. The activists refused to run candidates for public office urging their followers to boycott the polls and threatened to continue to carry out *political actions* (as the Hamas leader called them). *Political actions*, a series of terrorist attacks including suicide bombings, conducted by a militant faction, have rocked Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and other parts of Israel ever

since, threatening to destroy the peace process and undermine Arafat's fragile alliance.

On the Israeli side of the border, Jewish activists attacked the secular leadership of their nation. This potent mixture of religion and politics again led to bloodshed. Yigal Amir, accused of assassinating Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv on November 4, 1995, claimed that he had religious reasons for his actions saying, "everything I did, I did for the glory of God."³ Amir has adamantly rejected attempts by his lawyers to assert that he was not guilty by reason of insanity. "I am at peace," he explained, insisting he was "totally normal." By murdering Rabin, he argued, he committed a deliberate, even praiseworthy act that under a certain reading of religious law, would be considered a commendable defense against those who destroy the Jewish nation.

A few weeks before the assassination, Jewish activists near Hebron indicated that they shared many of Amir's views. They were still grieving over the killing of Dr. Baruch Goldstein by an angry Muslim crowd in February 1995. Dr. Goldstein had slaughtered thirty-five Muslims as they prayed in the mosque at the Cave of the Patriarchs, revered as the burial place of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Goldstein's grave has now been made into a shrine. Militant Jews at the site explained that acts like those of Dr. Goldstein were necessary not only to protect the land but also to defend the very notion of a Jewish nation, which for reasons of redemption and history had to be established on biblical terrain. Religious duty required them to become involved politically and even militarily. "Jews," one of them said, "have to learn to worship in a national way."⁴

This potentially explosive mixture of activism and religion comprises elements of incidents that, on the surface, seem to be isolated terrorist events. Examples of these incidents include the bombing of the United States federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 and the nerve gas attack on a Tokyo subway station on March 20, 1995. In the Oklahoma City case, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were associated with the Christian militia movements, an association that holds a conspiratorial view of American politics. They believe that America is not free, because of a vast international conspiracy involving Jews and Freemasons. They believe that America needs to be liberated through an armed struggle that will establish it as an independent and Christian nation.⁵

Strangely, the same conspiracy logic was articulated by members of Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth), the eclectic Buddhist-Hindu religious movement in Japan accused of unleashing canisters of nerve gas in a Tokyo subway station, killing twelve people and injuring thousands. A young man, who was public affairs officer for the main Tokyo headquarters of the movement at the time of incident, said that the first thing that came to his mind when he heard about the attack was that the *weird time had come*, the Third World War was about to begin. His

spiritual master, Shoko Asahara, had taught him that Armageddon was imminent. He had also been taught that the Japanese government, in collusion with America and an international network of Freemasons and Jews had triggered the January 1995 Kobe earthquake and then planned the nerve gas attack. He was surprised when Asahara himself was implicated in the plot – after as the spiritual leader had portrayed himself as the protector of Japanese society, and had begun to create an alternative government that would control the country after the Armageddon had ended.⁶

In each case, the alleged perpetrators possessed worldviews that justified the brutality of terrorist acts. They each perceived a need to defend their faiths and each maintained a heady expectation that their actions would lead to radically new social and political orders. The events they staged were therefore religious as much as they were political. Clearly, religion is deeply woven into political change even though, at first glance, such a statement seems to be curiously out of step with the 21st century.

Religious rebels who wage against modernity are becoming increasingly vocal. From Algeria to Idaho, small but potent groups of violent activists represent growing masses of supporters, and exemplify a trend in thinking that runs counter to the prevailing modernism. These insurgents symbolize the ideology of individualism and skepticism that, over the past three centuries, has emerged in post-Enlightenment Europe and spread throughout the world. For that reason, because of the rising tide of violence associated with movements of religious activism in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere, it is important to try to understand what religious activists want. Why do they hate secular governments with an almost transcendent passion? How do they expect to implement revolutionary changes? Of what social and political order do they dream of establishing once they make rubble of our modern, egalitarian democracies?

THREE KINDS OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM

All religious activists appear to look alike, and indeed are treated by the news media as one in the same. However, many variations exist. On one level, different activists choose different tactics. Terrorism is only the most extreme (and the rarest) form of public action. Other activists utilize media campaigns, public intimidation and democratic choice (by putting forward candidates in elections). On a more basic level, great differences exist in the desired outcome of the struggle itself and in the degree to which religion is central to the conflict.

When religion is a part of a national struggle, for instance, there is a dividing line between ethnic and ideological movements. Religion is an aspect of ethnic identity

for some (the sort of religious nationalism one finds in Ireland, for example) and it is part of an ideological critique and an alternative vision of political order for others. The latter is the sort of religious nationalism found in the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet a third kind of religious activism occurs when ideological religious struggles are waged onboard a transnational plane. The distinctions among these three kinds of religious activism are significant, especially in an era of globalization when the first two may be seen as a resistance to global forces, and the third as a protest against a Western, capitalist notion of global order.

Ethnic Religious Nationalism

This kind of activism is linked to people and land. *Ethnic* is used in this context to refer to communities bound by race, history or culture who feel oppressed or limited within an old social order and who wish to establish a political identity of their own, usually in a geographical region native to them. Often the religious identities of these activists are different from those of the dominant culture, and thus religion becomes fused with a slogan of liberation for oppressed people. The struggle of the Irish (both Protestant and Catholic) to claim political authority over the land in which they live is a paradigmatic case.

Recent attempts in Chechnya under Muslim slogans to assert independence from the rule of Russia, as well as attempts by the Muslims in Tajikistan to assert a cultural/religious element into Tajikistan's resurgent activism are examples that have emerged following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. In what used to be Yugoslavia, three groups of ethnic religious activists are pitted against one another: Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosnians. In South Asia, the independence movements of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, Kashmiri Muslims, and to some extent Khalistan supporters in the Punjab, are also movements of ethnic religious nationalism. In each case, religion provides the identity that makes a community cohere and linked with a particular land.

Ideological Religious Nationalism

This second kind of activism is attached to ideas and beliefs. Term *ideology* is used here not in a Marxist or a Mannheimian sense, but in the original meaning of the term as it was created by the ideologues, a group of revolutionary Frenchmen in the eighteenth century. They consciously created a framework of values and

moral positions that would play the same role in supporting the new secular social order as had traditional religion in supporting the old. In a curious way, history has come full circle. Today, religious activists reject the ideological underpinnings of Western secular activism because they have no faith in the social contract suggested by ideologues and theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Lock. Instead, they choose to replace it with a new ideological framework, one that incorporates traditional religious beliefs in divine law and religious authority. In some cases, such as the Islamic revolution in Iran, activists have adopted the modern notion of the nation-state.⁷

If the ethnic approach to religious activism politicizes religion by employing religious identities for political means, an ideological approach to religious activism does the opposite. Religious activism with ideological perspective tries to make politics religious. It puts political issues and struggles within a sacred context. Compatibility with religious goals becomes the criterion for an acceptable political platform. The Islamic revolution in Iran, for instance, was a classic example of ideological religious activism that turned ordinary politics upside down. Instead of a non-religious political order providing space for religious activities, which in the West we regard as the *normal* arrangement, in Iran, a religious authority defined the context for politics. In fact, the Iranian constitution provides for a *just ruler*, a cleric such as the Ayatollah Khomeini, who is the ultimate arbiter and who guides the moral basis of politics. For that reason the Iranian experience occurred as a genuine revolution. It changed extraordinarily from a semi-modern, semi-Westernized order to a religious society. Because ideological religious activism embraces religious ideas as the basis for politics, national aspirations become fused with religious quests for purity and redemption. Religious *justice* then replaces secular law as the pillar of governmental authority.

Although the enemy of ethnic religious activists is a rival ethnicity (usually the dominant group controlling them), ideological religious activists need not to look beyond their own ethnic community to find an ideological foe as they often loathe their own kind. As Yigal Amir dramatically illustrated when he shot Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, religious activists may target as enemies the secular leaders of their own nations. For that reason, tensions have been growing in nominally Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey, where militant Islamic revolutionaries have identified their own moderate Muslim leaders as obstacles to progress. In the United States, it appears that this passionate hatred of secular government led to the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. In India, a widespread disdain for secular politics has propelled the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into becoming the movement for religious activism. Buddhist movements in Sri Lanka, Mongolia and Tibet have characterized their secular

political opponents as being not just immoral and unprincipled but also as being enemies of dhammic (righteous) order.

Transnational Religious Struggles

Global revolutionaries like Osama bin Laden and the members of his far-flung al Qaeda network see secular leaders, even those in the Muslim world, as part of a wider, virtually cosmic conspiracy, one that is controlled by vast political and economic networks sponsored by European and American powers. For that reason they hate not only the politicians in their home countries of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East, but also those who support them, the secular politicians around the world.

The September 11, 2001 attack on New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon building in Washington, DC is the most spectacular example of the transnational guerilla struggle. It was a *global* terrorist act not only in its operation but also in its target. The buildings in the terrorists' bull's-eye were more than symbols of American military and economic power; they also represented the world-wide forces of globalization. Citizens of eighty-six nations were listed among the thousands killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

Al Qaeda aggression has long been directed at American symbols and institutions. In the early 1990s, al Qaeda chose as targets two American embassies in Africa. Islamic militants associated with Egypt's radical Gamaa al-Islamiya (*Islamic Group*), and reportedly allied with bin Laden, also aimed at Americans as well as at local foes. They attacked not only Egyptian politicians but also foreigners in tourist spots along the Nile. Later, the movement literally moved its war against secular powers abroad when its leader, Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman, moved to New Jersey and became involved in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. The trial that convicted him of conspiracy also implicated him in an elaborate plot to blow up a variety of sites in the New York City area, including the United Nations buildings and the Lincoln Tunnel. Algerian Muslim activists have brought their war against secular Algerian leaders to Paris, where they were implicated in mid-1990s in a series of subway bombings.

Hassan Turabi, of Sudan, has been accused of orchestrating Islamic rebellions in a variety of countries and of linking Islamic activists in common cause against what they see as the great satanic power of the secular West. In some cases this vision of conspiracy has taken bizarre twists. As mentioned, both the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo and certain American Christian militia movements share the view that Jews and Freemasons are collaborating to control the world.

Interaction of Ethnic/Ideological, National/Transnational

The three categories of religious activism described here are fluid constructs. Many movements of religious activism comprise elements from more than one category, and many change over time. For instance, some religious activists are *ethno-ideological*. These groups have double sets of enemies in both their ethnic rivals and the secular leaders of their own people.

Members of the Hamas movement in Palestine, for example, waged a war of independence against Israel while simultaneously sparring with Yasir Arafat. Often the attacks leveled at Israelis were also intended to wound the credibility of Arafat's fledgling Palestinian Authority. It is not a coincidence that the Hamas suicide bombings aimed at Israelis increased in the months immediately before and after the 1996 elections, a poll that Hamas wished to discredit. Violence also increased in 2001 after Israel's hawkish Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, came to power. Sharon had his own reasons for wanting to undercut Arafat's support. For a time it seemed almost as if the Hamas and Sharon were united in an effort to discredit Arafat. In the case of Hamas, however, their purposes were ultimately not against Arafat but against any kind of secular Palestinian leadership. The movement was supposed to simultaneously wage war against both Israel and secular Palestinian leaders such as Arafat.

Like the militant Muslims in Hamas, the Sikh separatists that flourished in Northern India until 1993 were both ethnic and ideological, and like their Palestinian counterparts also had a double set of enemies. In the Sikh case, the Khalistani side of the movement intended to create a separate nation of Sikhs and in an effort to achieve this goal tried to purge the rural Punjab of Hindus. There was also a more religious side to the movement, led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and aimed at establishing the Sikh religious tradition as authoritative in both secular and political spheres. The ideological movement targeted moderate Sikh leaders and secular politicians as their foes. Followers of this wing succeeded in assassinating several important secular politicians including Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. A spectacular explosion that killed Punjab's Chief Minister, Beant Singh, on August 31, 1995, shows that some aspects of the movement were still alive.

Other movements of religious activism, though they may appear to be primarily ethnic, may also have an ideological component. This is so because religion, the repository of traditions, symbols and beliefs, always stands ready to be tapped by those who wish to develop a new framework for ideas regarding social order. In the case of Bosnia, for example, the anger of Bosnian Serbs, frequently described in the media as the residual form of ancient ethnic rivalries, is also fueled by an imaginative religious myth. The Serb leaders are Orthodox Christians who

see themselves as surrogate Christ-protecting figures in a contemporary political understanding of the passion narrative. A drama and an epic poem has been invented to retell the New Testament's account of Christ's death in a way that portrays historical Serbian leaders as Christ figures, and the Muslims as Judases. This mythologized dehumanization of the Muslims allows the Serbs to regard the Muslims as a sub-human species that deserve the genocide that killed so many in the darkest hours of the Bosnian civil war.⁸ As the Bosnian case shows, there is often a too fine line between ethnic and ideological forms of religious activism.

In general, Americans and Europeans find ethnic religious activism easier to understand than ideological nationalism or transnational religious activism, even though ethnic religious activism may be just as violent. The Irish Republican Army bombings in London after the ceasefire broke down in February 1996 and the Sri Lankan Tamils' suicide attacks that demolished downtown Colombo in January 1996, are examples. What makes these acts of violence readily understandable to Western minds is that they are aimed at oppressors, the authorities and the society that the terrorists regard as exerting direct military or political control over them.

The violence of ideological religious nationalist or transnationalist movements is focused on those who are ideologically different (secularists) and whose control is cultural and economic and is therefore less obvious than direct oppression. The enemies of these movements appear to observers to be both benign and banal. Modern secular leaders like Yitzhak Rabin or Anwar Sadat and symbols of American prosperity/authority like the World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City federal building do not seem to fit to the label *enemy*. Religious nationalistic violence against this type of target is therefore more difficult to comprehend, and its fundamental critique of the West's post-Enlightenment culture and politics seems more profound.

NOTES

1. September 16, 2001. Online. President G. W. Bush, remarks on the White House Lawn. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916.html>. [March 18, 2004].

2. From my interview with Yochay Ron, a volunteer guard at the grave of Dr. Baruch Goldstein at the Kirya Arbat settlement near Hebron in Israel, August 18, 1995.

3. For the ideology of the Christian Identity Movement and other forms of right-wing Christian militancy in the United States see James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990, 83–104.

4. From my interview with "Takeshi Nakamura" (a pseudonym), former official in the Aum Shinrikyo movement, January 12, 1996, in Tokyo with the translation assistance of Prof. Susumu Shimazono and his graduate students.

5. I expand on this idea further in my book, *The New Cold War? Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 26–41. The term “religious nationalism” in that book refers to what I call here “ideological religious nationalism.”

6. See Michael Sells (1996).

REFERENCE

Sells, M. (1996). *The bridge betrayed: Religion and genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.