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When Religion Kills: How Extremists Justify Violence Through Faith

Phil Gurski

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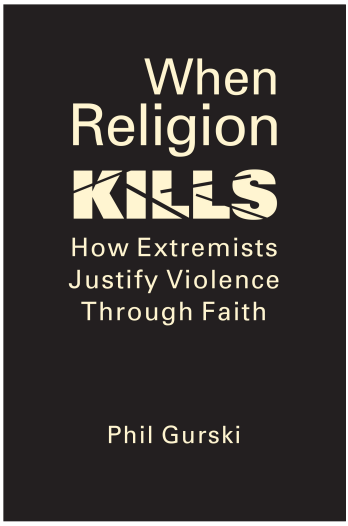

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1

Religion as a Springboard for Violence

I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.
—US Lieutenant-General William G. Boykin[1]

Religious extremism takes many forms around the world and no religion is immune from it. That is the lesson of history and, sadly, modern history as well.
—Australian prime minister Scott Morrison in the wake of the November 2018 Islamic extremist terrorist attack in Melbourne[2]

Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius. ("Kill them all. Let God sort them out.")
—attributed to the Cistercian monk Arnaud Amalric during the Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars in 1209

For more than twenty years I have been thinking and writing about terrorism, specifically Islamist extremism. I have studied veteran scholars and new ones, dead terrorists and those still carrying out violence, and a lot of the propaganda—there is far too much for any one person to wade through—to understand what drives terrorism. I worked as a strategic analyst for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service on investigations of citizens who planned acts of terrorism in my country,

or who traveled abroad to do so, or who chattered in language consistent with violent extremism. I used to ask myself: Do they really believe that Allah approves when they behead people or shoot them? Do they further believe that Allah not only likes these acts but demands them? When it comes down to it, are these terrorists really Muslims?

At the same time, I kept wondering: Is Islam the only faith that produces terrorists? Is there something intrinsic to Islam that does so? Is US conservative author Ann Coulter correct when she says that "not all Muslims may be terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims"?

I knew intuitively that Coulter was categorically wrong in her assertion, in part because we were seeing other forms of terrorism that clearly had nothing to do with Islam or Muslims. What I did not know was to what extent other faiths use religion to justify murder. Hence my journey to find out, the culmination of which is the book you are now reading.

A Religious "Wave" of Terrorism?

I have long admired the scholarly work of David Rapoport, a political scientist who specializes in studying terrorism. In fact, many consider him one of the founders of this field. I was honored to have met him when we each presented research at a conference in Colorado Springs several years ago.

Rapoport is perhaps best known for his definitive work on the "wave theory" of terrorism.[3] He hypothesized that if one looks at terrorist movements since the late nineteenth century—terrorism that existed before then was seldom called terrorism—one is struck by four large trends. These trends can be generalized to motivations behind terrorist activity across groups and nations. Rapoport categorized these waves as *anarchist, anticolonialist, New Left,* and *religious.* Although a deep discussion of each wave is well beyond the scope of this book, it is worth becoming familiar with this work. In Rapoport's analysis, each wave endured for at least a generation or two, after which it ceded primacy to the next wave. It did not disappear, however. For example, despite their waning after World War I, anarchist groups exist today—the Black Bloc is a good current example.

For the purposes of this book, Rapoport's comments on the religious wave are of interest. This wave is also the most recent from a historical perspective. Here are his main points in this regard:

- "No one knows if the current campaign will be more successful than its predecessors."
- "Islam is at the heart of the wave."
- "Suicide bombing . . . was the most deadly tactical innovation."
- "The fourth wave may last longer than its predecessors."[4]

Although this current wave is widely seen as having begun with Islamist extremism in 1979, it is far from limited to one faith and is in fact distributed, albeit perhaps not evenly, across many religions. Rapoport was prescient when he asked whether religious terrorism would outlast earlier waves of violent extremism. At the time I wrote this book, there was no end in sight to groups and individuals using religion as an excuse to kill. In other words, Rapo-port's supposed expiration date of religious terrorism has already been surpassed.

When You Are Convinced God Is on Your Side

Lieutenant-General William G. Boykin (retired) spent more than thirty-five years in the US military and served as undersecretary of the US Department of Defense for former president George W. Bush. During his military career, Boykin took part in operations such as the failed 1980 attempt to rescue US hostages in Iran and the disastrous 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident in Mogadishu, Somalia, in which eighteen US troops lost their lives.

Boykin is also an evangelical Christian who brought his faith into his time in uniform. He has been quoted as saying, for example:

- "The enemy is a spiritual enemy. He's called the principality of darkness. The enemy is a guy called Satan."[5]
- "They're after us because we're a Christian nation."[6]
- "George [W.] Bush was not elected by a majority of the voters in the United States, he was appointed by God."[7]

The general was clearly not reluctant to wear his religious convictions on his sleeve, even if they elicited criticism at times. In this he is not alone: many Americans, including those who occupy positions of high authority, regularly invoke God. US presidents often end their speeches with "God bless America," for example.

Canadians, in contrast, generally do not follow this practice. In fact, when former prime minister Stephen Harper began to say "God bless Canada" after he spoke, some citizens found it disconcerting, if not "un-Canadian."

To simultaneously believe God is on one's side and serve in a fighting force that kills others is common. As the old saying goes, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Many soldiers on all sides hold the conviction that God is watching over them as they engage in lethal actions. History reveals countless examples of warfare in which one party, if not both, invoked God for protection and victory. For example, in the late eleventh century CE, Pope Urban II, at the Council of Clermont in France, launched the first Crusade with the phrase *Deus le volt* ("God wills it," in vulgar Latin/proto French). As a result, masses of people were slaughtered by both Christians and Muslims in the service of God.

I want to set the stage for the rest of this book by returning to General Boykin. The US military leader expressed the belief, when facing an Islamist extremist in Somalia, that the God in whom the general had placed his trust was superior to the one in whom his enemy had. Going further, the general called his opponent's deity an "idol." In doing so, he made the claim that his foe was worshipping a God that could not therefore provide protection. The denigration of idols is not just a recent phenomenon. Many religious leaders of many faiths have emerged and claimed to rid the world of the "false gods" people had previously worshipped (e.g., Jesus' clearing of the temple, Muhammad's cleansing of the Kaaba, Hindu extremists' destruction of a mosque in India, etc.).

That day in Somalia, General Boykin's words were all too similar to those of violent religious extremists in the past and today. They tout their acts of violence as deeds performed out of duty to a deity. Some even say violence is mandated by their god. Even if terrorists do not always discriminate whom they target for killing, they often single out members of other faiths for destruction and resort to religious texts to justify their actions, implying their God is better than our God. Here, I draw a parallel between the language Boykin opted to use in Somalia with that employed by existing terrorist groups. I also show over the next six chapters many similarities across the world's six major religious systems when it comes to their justification of violence "in the name of God."

What Does Terrorism Mean?

Few terms are as contested as *terrorism*. Political scientist Alex Schmid has noted the difficulty in pinning down one accepted definition that fits a "universal legal" need.[8] To cite the example that has guided me over my professional career, the Canadian Criminal Code does not even attempt to delineate terrorism but settles on *terrorist activity* as follows:

> a *terrorist activity* is an act or omission that is committed in or outside Canada in whole or in part *for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause* [emphasis added], and in whole or in part with the intention of intimidating the public, or a segment of the public, with regard to its security, including its economic security, or compelling a person, a government or a domestic or an international organization to do or to refrain from doing any act, whether the public or the person, government or organization is inside or outside Canada, and that intentionally causes death or serious bodily harm to a person by the use of violence, endangers a person's life, causes a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or any segment of the public, causes substantial property damage, whether to public or private property, or causes serious interference with or serious disruption of an essential service, facility or system.

In the United States, the Code of Federal Regulations defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."

In the United Kingdom, the Terrorism Act of 2000 states that it is an act or threat of an act "designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause."

Finally, the United Nations defines terrorism as:

> criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, [with] the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to

> abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature.

It is thus clear that different nations and organizations have elected to highlight different aspects of terrorism. This lack of consensus complicates international cooperation and could even interfere in extradition requests. The large number of definitions also complicates academic work on this subject. Adding to the complexity, some believe that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

In this book, I conflate the terms terrorism and violent extremism. I do not limit the discussion to nonstate actors but use a broad brush to include any group or individual who engages in a serious act of violence motivated *primarily* by some kind of underlying ideology—be that political or religious. In many cases, the use of violence inspired at least in part by some form of religious conviction can have government sanction at the highest level. To underscore the thesis of this book, I focus on those groups and individuals who subscribe to an ideology with a significant religious overtone. I include groups and individuals who foster religious hatred and intolerance but do not necessarily participate in acts of physical violence. I fully recognize that not all hate and intolerance lead to acts of terrorism, but the phenomena are nevertheless related. Terrorism is simply, in some ways, the most extreme manifestation of hatred toward those others that a group or individual seeks to intimidate, frighten, injure, or kill. It is worth examining those who spread these messages because they are consistent with the messages spread by those whom most people would likely categorize as terrorists.

I am not interested in the debate surrounding free speech. The United States is an outlier in this regard, holding the first amendment of its Constitution sacrosanct when it comes to all modes of speech, no matter how objectionable. Of course when the government seeks to regulate some types of speech, accusations of censorship arise. (It boils down to who gets to decide what is hate and what is not, and on what criteria.) Nevertheless, most countries, including Canada, have hate speech laws and prosecute those who engage in it. This form of messaging is thus fair game in my quest to understand the scope of religious extremism.

Religion Versus Religiosity Versus Identity

This brings me to the next question: What is religion? I am not a scholar of religion. Hence, I claim no expertise in world religions. However, this is not a book on religion, and is not written from the perspectives of religious theory, history, or other angles. It is a book on terrorism, and I have more than three decades of experience in security intelligence for the Canadian government, working specifically on religious-based terrorism.[9] Any group that regularly expresses its "mission" in religious terms is subject to analysis in this book.

I am agnostic on the difference between "normative" and "aberrant" religious beliefs because these have been subject to change over the centuries and are, to some extent, dependent on individual interpretation. Many would argue that a pope, a council, a group of wise elders, an imam, a rabbi, or a spiritual leader of some kind determines what is normative and what is not. For many adherents, these people decide what is "gospel" (i.e., the one true interpretation of their faith). For the purposes of my book, I default to what particular individuals say is central to their belief system, and I do not get into an argument about whether what they maintain is true, normative, realistic, or otherwise. I avail myself of the words they utter or post online, attempting to use verified and validated statements by actual terrorists, not relying on the accuracy of everything posted on the internet, and take them at face value without overlaying my judgment.

When I speak of *normative* religion, what exactly do I mean? What is "normative Christianity": Catholicism, Protestantism, Evangelical? In Judaism, is ultra-Orthodox more normative than Reformed? Are the Sunni more normative Muslims than the Shia, the Sufi, or the Ahmadi? Furthermore, does normativism not change over time? I was raised Catholic, and I have memories of Latin masses, the priest turning his back to the congregation, and other practices that are no longer predominant. For example, in my church women had to wear head coverings, and all had to receive Holy Communion by having the priest place the host on their tongues. Was the Catholic faith of my youth more normative than that of today? Who decides? I will leave those debates to religious scholars and experts.

Readers should not draw the conclusion that, by emphasizing the use of religion to justify violence, I opine that this is a fundamental property of faith. History has clearly shown that religious belief can be used for good or evil. Many wonderful acts have been carried out

by those who sincerely believed they were motivated by, or consistent with, sacred scripture or tenets. At the same time, it is obvious others have perpetrated heinous acts of violence and cited that same scripture as justification.

I do not address whether a violent extremist actor is bent on destruction for predominantly religious reasons or otherwise, or whether that person's religious identity is primary, although in each chapter I have a section on whether the violence discussed is best seen as religious or motivated by another set of factors. When it comes to how people choose to identify themselves, I could argue that this is variable and changes with circumstances. People have multiple "identities," appropriate in certain instances; no one identity is sufficient. Most alter how to present themselves given those circumstances. If someone were to ask me, "Who is Phil Gurski?" I could answer—truthfully—along any and all of the following lines:

- I am a Canadian of Eastern European heritage (but seldom consider myself Polish and/or Ukrainian—no slight intended to my ancestors—because I am third-generation Canadian).
- I am a male heterosexual.
- I have been married for thirty-plus years, and I am a husband, a father, a grandfather, a brother, and a brother-in-law.
- I am a linguist, a former intelligence analyst, the owner of my own consulting company (Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting), the director of security at the SecDev Group, and a retired civil servant.
- I am an average goalie in pickup ice hockey, although many would say "average" is an exaggeration!

Which "identity" I choose to present at any given time is linked to my situation at that time. I would be quite surprised if most other people conducted themselves differently. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama noted, "Citizens of modern societies have multiple identities, ones that are shaped by social interactions. People have identities defined by their race, gender, workplace, education, affinities, and nation."[10]

When it comes to terrorist individuals and groups, I have read arguments that Islamist extremist groups, for example, are not really religious organizations but better described as "criminal," "ethnonational," "regional," or some such name. Again, I do not delve into

these arguments. The sole criterion for this discussion is the fact that a group of this nature regularly uses religious language and/or imagery to justify what it does and to call others to join it. Furthermore, some groups are on government terrorist lists used to justify official actions such as bringing criminal charges, extraditing them, not allowing them on public transportation, and the like. There is a process behind the decision to list a particular group (and I was part of that process in Canada at one time), but groups come and go.[11] In my book, I will not limit the discussion to terrorist groups listed by any one nation but rather examine any individual or organization that regularly uses religious terms to justify violence.

The question of the roles of religion and identity creation in terrorist activity is hard to resolve. In each chapter I attempt to determine how Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, or Sikh this form of terrorism is, as opposed to it being inspired by feelings of nationalism, ethnocentrism, patriotism, and so forth. In addition, some of the actors I describe in this book are not terrorists and do not belong to well-known violent extremist groups. Some are average citizens, and others are politicians. I do not make a real distinction between them; anyone calling for violence against another person or group and using religious language or symbols to do so is worthy of inclusion. This call to violent action can be implicit or explicit.

It is important to underscore again that this is a book on religious *extremism*. As a career terrorism analyst, I do feel qualified to contribute to the debate on the relevance of ideology, religious or not, to terrorism.

What About Blasphemy? Is It Tied to Terrorism?

Blasphemy has no doubt led to acts of extreme violence. After all, when an individual or a group calls for or carries out the murder of another individual or group because the former accuses the latter of speaking or acting counter to religious beliefs, the concept of blasphemy is in force.

Many religious systems punish those who contravene what designated authorities have decided is "universal truth." The Catholic Church once burned alleged blasphemers at the stake. Islamic scholars call for death for those who "slander" the prophet Muhammad. A recent case in Pakistan of a Christian woman accused of insulting Muhammad underscores that this continues in modern

Islamic societies (but in this instance the woman was acquitted after having spent eight years in prison).[12] In Jewish law, the penalty for blaspheming God is death. Blasphemy in Hinduism is one of the five great sins that lead the blasphemer to hell.

Those who level charges of blasphemy are convinced they are practicing the *normative* version of their faith. In other words, "mainstream" individuals and groups who supposedly act in concert with the fundamental tenets of their religion call for the punishment by death of those who challenge the norm. When it comes to blasphemy, violence is justified by the "normative" faction, but in general people tend to associate religious extremism with non-normative actors. Curious indeed!

Why Language Matters

The words people choose make a significant difference in the message they try to convey as well as the mind-set that underlies their feelings. For instance, Canada has lately faced a small immigration crisis because people seek to enter from the United States out of fear that the Trump administration will take steps to deport them to their home countries, many of which are in violent conflict. Despite the so-called Safe Third Country agreement between the United States and Canada, whereby a prospective refugee cannot make a claim of asylum if she or he currently lives in a "safe" country, the Canadian government is struggling with the tens of thousands seeking to cross the border. Because they are doing so at unofficial border spots, that is, without a Canada Border Services Agency presence, they are being treated differently.

Some Canadians have called these border interlopers *irregular;* others, *illegal*. There is a difference between the two terms. The first suggests that although potential immigrants are not abiding by the rules, they nevertheless have a right to have their cases heard. The second implies the opposite: because they are deemed outside the law, they should have no such right. Each term belies the nature of the politics of its users.

When people use words such as *vermin, cockroaches,* and *infestation* in referring to others, they not only dehumanize people but also incite violence against them. These were precisely the terms used to describe Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor attack.

Hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were subsequently stripped of their property and interned in concentration camps. In Rwanda in 1994, when these words were applied to Tutsis, up to 1 million of them were slaughtered by their Hutu neighbors.

In this book I examine the words violent extremists use to denigrate the people they perceive as undesirable, whom they attack. My aim is to detect commonalities across various religious extremists as well as to identify parallels with historical examples.

Structure of the Book

In this book, my chapters follow the same format. After a brief introduction to the faith in question, I look at which terrorist groups and actors use violence in the name of that faith, some of the major violent incidents in which they have participated, the specifically religious propaganda they have deployed, and the primary victims of their killing campaigns. In the last section of each chapter, if applicable, I narrow the focus to how terrorist groups identify members of other religions—whom they see as "unbelievers," naturally—as legitimate targets of their divinely inspired wrath. I also look at instances in which religiously inspired extremist groups target members of their own faith, albeit ones the extremists believe are not practicing it correctly. In each chapter I also feature efforts by religious actors to counter extremist ideology and terrorism promoted by the members of their faith (however, in some cases, I could find little information regarding such initiatives in readily accessible, open sources).

At the end of each chapter, I discuss how "religious" the violence just examined really is (i.e., is it more likely ethnonationalist or otherwise motivated?). I sometimes include religious actors who perpetrate violence against not necessarily religious targets. Terrorists do not always carefully plan their actions so that their victims are exclusively members of other religious faiths. Nevertheless, in light of all too many religiously motivated terrorist acts around the world, I focus on those in which members of the "wrong" religion are attacked. I discuss terrorists who belong to six of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. The fairest way to do so seemed to be to list them alphabetically.

I treat this subject as if I were still an intelligence analyst with the Canadian government. This means I hew to no theoretical background, I perform no literature review, I do not test a hypothesis, and I do not compare rival approaches. In intelligence, one gathers data, assesses the accuracy of the data, determines what those data indicate, and packages it so that readers can understand the issues. Think of this book as a long intelligence assessment (even though in the real world no one would ever write an intelligence assessment for busy officials longer than two pages. I am, however, a *former* intelligence analyst and, hence, not bound by the strictures of my former profession).

I also want to underscore that the phenomena discussed here are current. Enough books examine the "religious wars" of the past, and mine does not add to that literature. I consider only religious extremist groups active after 9/11 (with the exception of one group in Chapter 2, on Buddhist extremism). I discuss historical figures or anecdotes for illustrative or explanatory purposes only. The violent incidents I discuss happened quite recently, many within the previous few years.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am not a religious person, but I am not antireligion either. I am merely a curious person who asked a simple question: To what extent do some of the world's faithful employ their spiritual beliefs to bring violence down on the heads of others? Let us then begin, then, with an apparent contradiction—Buddhist terrorism.

Notes

1. *BBC News*, "U.S. Is 'Battling Satan' Says General."
2. David Wroe, "Bourke Street Attack: Scott Morrison Demands Muslim Leaders Call This Out for What It Is."
3. David Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism."
4. David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terror."
5. *Baptist Press,* "General Who Voiced His Faith Cleared on Major Accusations."
6. *Mother Jones*, "Christian Soldier."
7. Steven Waldman, "Heaven Sent: Did God Endorse George Bush?"
8. A. P. Schmid, ed., *Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 86–87.
9. For more on my research, see, for example, Phil Gurski, *The Threat from Within: Recognizing Al Qaeda–Inspired Terrorism and Radicalization in the West*; Gurski, *Western Foreign Fighters: The Threat to Western and Inter-*

national Security; Gurski, *The Lesser Jihads: Bringing the Islamist Extremist Fight to the World*; and Gurski, *An End to the "War on Terrorism."*

10. Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics."

11. The Marxist cult–like People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran (PMOI, or the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organization), is one such group. It was once listed by several countries as a terrorist organization after several attacks in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, but it has been "delisted" by some of those countries, probably for political reasons.

12. Sasha Ingber, "Pakistan Supreme Court Upholds Christian Woman's Blasphemy Acquittal."