The Religious Foundations of Political Violence

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Building on a longstanding academic partnership, TRENDS Research & Advisory and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), based in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, have launched a major new project to examine the religious foundations of political violence. This short paper is one of the projects outcomes.

Western thinking about the interplay between religion and violence has traditionally been influenced by the secularisation thesis of the 20th century. Most notably, the works of Marx and Weber posited that in the wake of progress and modernisation (however understood) human beings are more like to base their beliefs, identity and actions on rational scientific thought, rather than the supposedly mysticism of religion. Yet, it is clear that development and modernisation have not lead to a retreat in either the appeal – or indeed zeal – of religious conviction in the 21st century. If anything, the current rise of global disorder and insecurity could even be said to have led to an increase, in some parts of the world at least, in religious observance.

Some discussions about contemporary political violence consequently overlook or neglect the role of religious narratives – particularly in discussion about terrorist actors. This comes despite the fact groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State clearly invoke and refer to a jurisprudential framework of obligation and necessity to explain their actions.
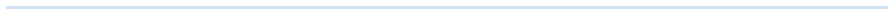
Although it is on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq that the destructive capacity of political violence driven by religious dogma is most apparent, the impact of soteriological narratives have become apparent across the world. The contours of power continue to be recast across the Arab world, which has convulsed under a febrile climate ever since the uprisings of 2011. Libya remains deeply fractured, whilst lingering resentments persist in Bahrain, and war envelopes Yemen. But it is not just the Middle East where religious narratives are driving conflict.

This phenomenon has experienced an upwards trend over the last decade. Empirical research produced by the Pew Research Centre found that "the share of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012."[1] That assessment is based across a number of metrics including the use, or threat, of violence to create a climate of coercive religious adherence. "Religion-related terrorist violence occurred in about a fifth of countries in 2012 (20%)," the report found, "roughly the same share as in 2011 (19%) but up markedly from 2007 (9%)." Of course, terrorist violence is just one metric which has – along with others such as sectarian and ethnic violence – revealed an increasing worrying trajectory.

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1   Pew Research Center, January 2014, "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High"

At the inaugural event, hosted by Lord Alderdice in the House of Lords, a range of stakeholders from across government, community groups, the media, academia, and thinktanks came together to help us better define the scope of our investigation. That event set in motion a year-long collaboration between our institutions to gain a better understanding of this critical aspect of global security.

Of course, the nexus between religion and violence is not new. Indeed, religion has often been constructed in militaristic terms throughout history to both incite and seduce advancing forces; or to soothe the wounds of the oppressed and overrun. It is not our intention to portray any, or all, religion as inherently violent. We believe that constructions of religion are the product of the grey space that sits between scripture and interpretation. By illuminating the religious foundations of political violence, our study will aim to provide better structured efforts for post-conflict resolution whilst also helping mitigate the causes of future violence. Over the next twelve months, this project will examine how religious beliefs are articulated in support of violent ends.

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It is a tired truism to observe that there is no single pathway towards radicalisation or the embrace of violent means for political ends. Indeed, studies which examine the trajectories of violent actors almost always reveal how a multiplicity of contributing factors shaped their behaviour. Religious narratives are one part of that picture and have a strong role to play in the overall consideration. Quite often, they help justify individual actions, provide structural frames of reference, reinforce notions of identity and belonging, and drive ideas of vengeance or retribution.

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of religion. Yet, it is clear that development and modernisation have not lead to a retreat in either the appeal – or indeed zeal – of religious conviction in the 21st century. If anything, the current rise of global disorder and insecurity could even be said to have led to an increase, in some parts of the world at least, in religious observance. On this, however, we recognise a divergence of views and debate within the academic literature. Those believing in the secularisation thesis insist that the role of religion is fading, whilst those who articulate the influence of religion claim that faith continues to constitute a major influence on understandings of the world.[2]

Some discussions about contemporary political violence consequently overlook or neglect the role of religious narratives – particularly in discussion about terrorist actors. This comes despite the fact groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State clearly invoke and refer to a jurisprudential framework of obligation and necessity to explain their actions. No value judgement is being made about the veracity or authenticity of those claims, other than to merely acknowledge their existence. Yet, value judgements are irrelevant to this discussion. What matters is that these groups reference scripture and construct it in ways that seek to validate their recourse to political violence.

Constructions of identity and politics often have greater resonance when they are grounded in religious authority. Terrorists may speak of nationalist causes or other, more secular objectives, but the foundations of their cause are found in political religion. To their minds, this gives them the upper hand over their opponents – those who do not hold the same understanding of religion. For adherents of millenarian and reactionary religious movements, this doctrine also

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2   See Nomi Stolzenberg, "The Profanity of Law" in A. Sarat, L Douglas, and M. Merrill Umphrey, eds, *Law and the Sacred Palo Alto*, Stanford University Press 2007, pp. 31-32

helps mould both individual and group identity. This creates powerful bonds, not just of in-group harmony and fraternity, but also of enmity and hatred towards others; a supposed out-group of 'others'.

In forwarding the view that religion plays a component in political violence today, we are speaking about how some religious beliefs are constructed and politicised. We are not talking about an individual's adherence to a particular belief system. It is clear that in the current wave of terrorism, the construction of religious tenets in support of violence relies upon individuals not knowing very much about their chosen faith. Indeed, there are well documented cases of jihadists who have gone to Syria whilst carrying copies of rudimentary book on Islamic belief, such as *Islam for Dummies*. Such observations led commentators to argue that the ensuing violence was not necessarily religiously motivated. This argument confuses two different things – conviction and understanding. An individual can, for example, hold entirely esoteric views, but can also do so with deep conviction and passion. This accounts for the manner in which groups like Islamic State have offered highly seductive and persuasive constructions of religious belief to often quite gullible audiences. "It [Islamic State] promised glory and virtue, and the honor of participating in nothing less than the grand finale of the universe itself," argued Graeme Wood.[3]

Religion has featured heavily in the works of those seeking to create a "sacred cause" that mobilises others. In Burma/Myanmar the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people has sometimes become framed in religious terms. Even though Muslims constitute less than 5% of the overall population, some justifications for violence are offered in the language of national security, to ensure the country

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3   Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* New York: Random House, 2017, p. xxi.

"does not become Muslim." Recent violence in India has also taken place along ethnic and political lines, but is often coupled with a strong religious element.[4]

The connections between religion and violence are iridescent. This study consequently starts from the premise that, for large parts of the world, religion continues to play a significant role in the lived experiences of both groups and individuals. This means we need to better understand how religion is constructed in these communities and how it influences their lived experiences. After all, as Mark Juergensmeyer has argued, millenarian religious constructions are "capable of providing the ideological resources for an alternative view of public order."[5]

This project will focus on that sphere of "alternative public order." Although religion is far from being the only cause of political violence today, it nonetheless plays a significant role in numerous ongoing conflicts. Through this project we will be examining the different ways in which religion has been constructed in support of political violence. We will be using theoretical approaches and case studies to illustrate how religion plays a role in violence in the hope that a better understanding of this phenomena can be obtained. We hope to stimulate a broad conversation which examines the complexities and interplay of religion and violence through multidisciplinary efforts that take into account the political, sociological, historical, and psychological factors of religious constructions.

4   See M. Jerryson, M. Jurgensmeyer and M. Kitts, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
5   M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Political Violence*, 4th ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, p. xv.

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