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Why the "Sacred" Is a Better Resource Than "Religion" for Understanding Terrorism

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The popular media and many in academia often overstate the role that religion, and its supposedly unique qualities, has played in recent acts of terror. In this article, I argue that the notion of religious violence is unhelpful and that there is a more useful concept that we can utilize to draw out the values and ideas that play a role in the move to violence in both religious and secular groups. From a series of case studies on religious and non-religious groups, I have drawn out an alternative framework for investigating and learning from the role that beliefs play in motivations and justifications for terrorism. This framework uses the concept of non-negotiable (or "sacred") beliefs. It is as applicable to secular as it is to religious groups, and can show us much more about how such beliefs can contribute to violence.

Keywords beliefs, ideology, religion, sacred, terrorism, violence

Introduction

Religion is an inadequate concept to use when trying to understand the motivations of terrorist groups. The European bias and lack of clarity in its definition[1] and normative loading with negative connotations through a politics of secularism and secularity[2] have meant it has little purchase in analyses of violent actions. Despite this, using religious explanations is a popular way to frame the "why" questions that follow terrorist attacks perpetrated by religious people. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Qur'an became a bestseller in the U.S. as people sought to understand the religious motivations of the Hamburg Cell in particular and Al Qaeda in general. However, the Qur'an was not only the holy book of the nineteen hijackers involved in 9/11, but also of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, most of them peaceful; clearly more interpretation than just reading the relevant holy text is necessary.

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Religion as a cause or explanation for some acts of terrorism has been used by academics and policy-makers alike. In the latter case, while governments have been keen to differentiate between "good" and "bad" Islam, religion has nevertheless been used as the main headline in explanations. Critics have argued that anti-terror policies, such as the UK's Prevent Strategy,[3] and foreign policy, such as the *War on Terror*, have unfairly focused on Muslims and Muslim communities, further alienating and stigmatising communities already blamed by sections of the mainstream media.

Academics who have focused on the role of religion in terrorist events have done so with varying results.[4] I look at some of the problems with these later, but arguments against using religion as the main frame for understanding certain kinds of terrorism can also be found.[5]

In this article I focus on beliefs and values that are non-negotiable as an alternative means to understand the ideological motivations and justifications which play a role in violence and terrorism. I shall argue that concentrating on non-negotiable beliefs and values helps bridge the apparent division between religious and secular groups and relies less on problematic issues of religious identity and on beliefs and values shared with non-violent co-religionists. It can be helpful to think of these non-negotiable beliefs and values as those which we hold sacred. Indeed, in addition to the term being used in popular contemporary discourse there is also a formal apparatus for utilizing the concept of the sacred in sociological enquiry back to Emile Durkheim, which I have drawn on here. Within this tradition some have argued that the term "sacred" itself should be jettisoned in favour of something which carries less baggage and others have used it to refer to something very different.[6] I continue to use the term "sacred" because the literature (and definition) I draw on has, as I shall show, clear explanatory value, but will use "non-negotiable beliefs and values" interchangeably with "sacred" throughout this article where the latter's use may be more likely to obfuscate the point at hand.

Perhaps the most obvious source of resistance in using the "sacred" is that it does have religious connotations in much popular usage that draws on a tradition from Rudolph Otto onwards which sees the "sacred" as numinous and sui generis.[7] However, I will show how non-negotiable beliefs and values are as applicable to secularist ideologies (and I use "secularist" in the sense of "not-religious," so in this case Marxism, nationalism, or any ideology not seen as primarily invoking a religion) as they are to those commonly understood to be religious. Whilst this may seem counter-intuitive, it is possible to go even further as Kim Knott has, for example, not least where she highlights the humanist philosopher Ben Rogers' assertion that even anti-religious philosophers need to use the "sacred" as a means to distinguish between things of higher importance from those of lower value. Indeed, she highlights that in Rogers' edited collection all bar two of the atheist and agnostic contributors feel that the "sacred" has a place in non-religious ethics and can be freed from its religious associations.[8]

Building on previous work on the sacred,[9] I define the sacred as a thing, place, time, or concept that is special and non-negotiable, and that is separated or protected from everyday ideas. It is directly and indirectly expressed in ideas and values that are seen to be core or essential to identities and beliefs. Using this operational definition, I focus on how employing this concept helps us deal with the definitional problems of "religion" and how it is applied to terrorism. I show how the sacred is based on the values of the groups themselves, rather than on externally applied

labels, and indeed is applicable to secularist as well as religious ideologies. I demonstrate how it can show us both what is unique about a group's ideology as well as what that group shares in ideas and practices with others. I suggest the analytical model that arises can lead to greater predictive potential in understanding their move to violence.

The Myth of Religious Violence

The term "sacred" has been used previously in relation to studies of terrorism, for example in Juergensmeyer's edited collection of essays on violence and the sacred.[10] But in general these refer to the sacred interchangeably with religion.[11] In this article, I eschew this un-theorized and ill-defined usage, and offer another that situates the sacred in social life in general rather than the religious sphere in particular.

The idea of the sacred used here has its genesis in Emile Durkheim's concept of something special and set apart from everyday life. This could equally well be associated with the flag of a country as it could a crucifix. This idea is developed in the work of Veikko Anttonen, who defines the sacred as:

> a special quality in individual and collective systems of meaning.... Sacrality is employed as a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions.... People participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological.[12]

A key point here is that the sacred is found equally in national and ideological belief systems, and not just religions. Also important is the notion of non-negotiability, to which I will return later.

Kim Knott has further developed the idea of the "secular sacred," highlighting how both religious and secular exponents employ discourses located within a common epistemological field.[13] The notion of the sacred operates across and between these two camps. Francis and Knott demonstrate this in practice in a case study on *The Satanic Verses* controversy, where they show how references to the sacred were located in discourses on both religious and secular sides of the debate.[14]

The common understanding of "religion," as something separate from a public secular reality, is also questioned by Timothy Fitzgerald who points to its European origins.[15] In this context, the role played by the development of early Christianity,[16] and of a burgeoning civil society separate from the religious realm,[17] contributed to the hardening of the boundary between the religious and the secular. A practical example of how this distinction has a peculiarly European flavour is found in the fact that a religious/secular distinction is a non sequitur in many, for example Islamic, countries.[18]

So, whilst "religion" might be a useful label to use as shorthand in everyday conversation, its definition as a real and essential quality distinct from the secular is problematic. This has damaging consequences in analyses of certain kinds of terrorism which use religion as an independent variable. Juergensmeyer, for example, bases his analysis of several groups' violent actions on an understanding that religious violence has special qualities—it is particularly vicious, symbolic, and

absolutist, he says.[19] However, without an unambiguous definition of what he means by "religion," his account fails to substantiate the cause or existence of these special qualities. It is hard to see why such qualities might not also underpin ethno-nationalist causes, amongst others.

This is not to doubt the value of much of Juergensmeyer's data, nor that of other projects with similar approaches, for example Martin Marty and Scott Appleby's Fundamentalism Project,[20] which also focused on the particular role of religion in political extremism and violence.

Put simply, focusing on "religion" is problematic because, whilst it is used uncritically in common parlance as if its meaning were transparent, shared, and incontrovertible, in academic circles both the concept and that to which it refers are highly contested. This need not be read as a critique of potential transcendent realities, but rather as an acceptance that, where "religion" is seen to refer to systems of belief that encapsulate a full range of theist, atheist, and polytheist positions (as well as spiritual, magical, and immanent ideas), it cannot do so coherently and, where narrower definitions are used, it is not always clear how consistently the boundaries are or should be applied. With this fundamental limitation, "religion" is always going to be a slippery frame of analysis for terrorism studies, as William Cavanaugh's *Myth of Religious Violence* has so aptly shown.[21] Cavanaugh (and to a lesser extent Gunning and Jackson[22]) focuses on the inoperability of "religion" in explanations of violence, demonstrating how, from the great "religion wars" of mediaeval Europe to present-day conflicts, "religion" misleadingly covers up a host of other causes of conflict.

In contrast to the notion of "religion," the conception of the "sacred" that I suggested earlier is explicit and more narrowly defined, and can be operationalized in the analysis of any belief system. Unlike common usages of religion, often used unquestioningly as an essential quality of people or things, it is the process of setting things apart that makes actions, beliefs, or values sacred, not the things in and of themselves. So, a piece of bread might be deemed to be sacred because of the belief that it is the transubstantiated body of Christ and therefore has symbolic (and for some people actual) properties which mark it out as separate from normal bread. It is the beliefs of the social network that make communion bread sacred, nothing else. Likewise, whilst for some freedom of speech is a sacred right, for others it is just another ideal, no less subject to criticism than others, much like the right of one person one vote. It is the belief system of a society that makes particular ideas sacred–non-negotiable for its way of life.

Particular groups' notions of the sacred are frequently contested and challenged, and while some might be held to be applicable at a national level (values around protecting children from sexual activity, for example) others are disputed and transgressed. Gordon Lynch draws attention to this inter and intra societal difference in sacred value systems when he challenges Durkheim's assumption that such beliefs are valorized at a national level.[23] Atheist (and even Christian) challenges to the sacred nature of communion bread (intra societal), and non-Western challenges to freedom of speech (inter societal) are good examples of such challenges. In addition it is good to note that agreement on a sacred symbol does not ensure that it is treated in a similar way; for example, flag burning in protests within the United States would have little value if those burning the flags did not also recognize its sacred status. Furthermore, what is considered sacred by one group may be abhorrent to another; non-negotiable tenets of Communism, National Socialism, and even capitalism have

all been considered evil or wrong by some, the significance of these examples being that although the sacred is created by groups it is a contested category.

Values, Not Labels

As these examples make clear, it is the beliefs and values of a group of people, from small cells to nation-states, which make certain things (flags, leaders, state-borders, ideological principles) sacred. One merit of operationalizing the sacred in order to explore the role beliefs play in any move to violence is that the research can then focus on what is deemed important to the group in question, as opposed to what is assumed by outsiders to be important.

An example of how this justifies analyses based on the sacred rather than religion is found in the case of Islam. Although Islam has long been viewed with suspicion in Europe and other Western countries, this noticeably increased post-9/11. Whilst working on the assumption that religion provided the answers to understanding terrorists' motivations, governments were keen to make clear that their response was not a war on Islam.[24] So Islam was seen both as the problem and not the problem. In order to resolve this contradiction a distinction was made between "moderate" (good) and "extreme" (bad) Islam. Muslims were classified under one label or the other.[25]

The media utilized the same distinction with such fervour that writing in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, Sohaib Saeed pointed out that "moderate" became "one of a set of labels without which the word 'Muslim' looks almost naked."[26] Saeed understood the definition of "moderate Muslim" to mean broadly speaking not supportive of Al Qaeda. However, in practice the definition went beyond that for policy purposes, as governments sought to define Islam in an image of their own making. This acceptable face of Islam was to be constructed in such a way that Muslims would share European values, and not a loyalty to their assumed "native" lands.[27] Whilst supposedly "representative" Islamic bodies were institutionalized, extremist Islamic organisations were proscribed. A key problem in this was that the distinctions were not drawn up by the Muslim communities themselves, but by governments.[28]

These constructions of good/bad Islam are also part of wider problematic discussions over how religion (and religion in relation to violence) is defined. For some people religion is inherently good, and any violence can only come from a distortion of (or false) religion.[29] This particularly myopic view of religion clearly requires a complex juggling act in order to maintain a distinction between good/just-violent religious behaviour and bad/illegitimate-violent and therefore false religious behaviour.

As well as the clear definitional problems of this distinction, the policy approach of sanctioning an official "moderate" form of Islam as part of a moderate/extremist dichotomy also risks legitimising an "extreme" form as a sole alternative.[30] This risk arises through suggesting that the binary represents the only possible option, and that those who do not agree with the government-sanctioned approach have only one alternative.

The policy of focusing on a religious explanation for recent terrorist attacks in the U.S., UK, and elsewhere also led to the stigmatising of the Muslim community. Islamic identity and practice became seen as potential indicators of risk (due to their association with the identity and practice of the terrorists) and this led to Muslims being seen as a "suspect community."[31] This has had deleterious effects on many

Muslims' views of government policy, policing practice, and relations with other communities.[32] The language of suspicion has also been repeated and embedded in many media accounts where Muslims are often linked with negative associations.[33]

The problems arising from these externally applied labels ("extremism," "moderate Muslim," etc.) point to the benefit of using the sacred as a central concept as opposed to religion. In the 2011 review of the UK Government's Prevent agenda, the Conservative-led coalition government extended the policy of excluding violent extremists from any formal initiatives to excluding even non-violent extremists from local and national government programmes. Some groups, without their values changing, found themselves on the outside of a government-defined standard of acceptability. This highlights the problem with using "extremist" as a normative label applied to groups based on broadly understood categories, rather than focusing on the specific values which might suggest a group was dangerous or undesirable. As with the good/bad religion binary and indeed often the religion/secular binary, these normative labels are open to abuse due to the difficulty of defining them in the first place. Where the sacred can be clearly defined and operationalized it allows for both negative and positive instances to be found, but the definition itself does not leave itself so open to abuse.

Whilst a definition of the sacred can be fixed, it does not require that the values to which it draws attention must also be static. That a belief or value is non-negotiable does not mean that it is unchanging, and non-negotiable values of groups do often change. In the case of political ideology it is easy to see how beliefs and values have changed over time, for example in Western attitudes to slavery and the varying U.S. commitment to isolationism. It is also possible to see this in the case of many religious ideologies; for example, Christian discussions on female ordination are a very public demonstration of the shift of ideas among many people (and also of how they remain sacred and non-negotiable to others). State borders, religious rites, and national identities have all changed over time. Some groups have changed their values to the extent that they move back and forth between non-violent and violent acts, for example the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Focusing on these non-negotiable beliefs and values allows us to see how a group has changed over time, and to assess these changes in relation to a move to violence—where these could be seen to motivate members towards violence or be used as justification for it. But focusing on such beliefs and values themselves also allows us to see what it is that may be problematic about a group. For example, many non-negotiable sacred beliefs and values are shared by Muslims in general, but only a very small minority express these in a language that justifies violent responses. Examining the construction of these values and beliefs, and the language used in their definition and defence is, I would argue, a better indicator of a move to violence than assuming that all people who identify with the same tradition are suspicious.

The Secular Sacred: Beyond Religion

Whilst many of the above examples focus on the sacred in a religious context, and Islam in particular, I have been clear that the sacred is equally applicable to non-religious ideologies. As well as answering some of the criticisms that Cavanaugh, for example, makes of many accounts of religious violence,[34] this

application of the "sacred" makes it a particularly useful concept for comparisons across different ideologies.

The "sacred" and "religion" have often been used interchangeably with the result that, with the decline of organized religion in many Western countries, it has been assumed that the sacred has also declined.[35] However, focusing on the sacred rather than religion, it is possible to argue that, whilst religion may have declined, the sacred never left[36] and indeed the "secular sacred"[37] has been present, if unreported, throughout. Maintaining a secular/religious distinction in an analysis of the sacred can be a useful strategy to aid this comparative approach, but doesn't detract from the fact that the sacred is freely found on both sides of this discursive distinction.[38] This approach also allows us to understand how sacred beliefs and values can be seen to change over time in light of shifts in the place and role of religion in contemporary society.

These changes, in the case of Islam, are alluded to by groups such as Al Qaeda, who have seen themselves as returning to a purer practice of Islam, unsullied by any of the innovations allowed by many modern Muslims.[39] A similar argument for ideological purity is found in the work of the Red Army Faction, who in the 1970s saw themselves as the vanguard of the leftist protest movement in West Germany, providing a leadership role in stark contrast to less committed and ideologically vaguer colleagues.[40]

The certainty with which both groups saw their particular ideological positions as the truth is a sign of their non-negotiability. Non-negotiability is an essential aspect of the sacred as it is understood here. Whilst the earlier quotation from Anttonen defined the sacred as those non-negotiable ideas and values separated from everyday transactions, the process of separation is found back in Durkheim's account in his discussion of taboo and transgression.[41] Durkheim suggested that the sacred is protected by taboos. Although in modern society taboos may be enshrined in law (for example, laws preventing child pornography), this is not necessarily the case (for example, common prohibitions about speaking ill of the dead). Some taboos seem almost primordial, for example conventions around the treatment and disposal of dead bodies—piacular rites—whereas others are much more modern, such as state borders and the rules about how they may be crossed.

The last example points to an important aspect of the taboo—it does not necessarily prohibit all contact or engagement with a sacred value, but it does control that engagement. This control is equally part of how that value is made sacred. So a state border may not be seen as a sacred, non-negotiable boundary because it may never be crossed, but because the idea of crossing it must be regulated and performed in certain ways—the border is held to be special and different from the land around it.

So the sacred entails things which are non-negotiable, as well as suggesting rules that make the thing itself sacred through separating it from other things of continuous negotiation. It is important to note that these ideas can include abstract ideas such as in-group/out-group identification. For example, despite their Western location, the Red Army Faction in the 1970s understood the Vietnamese people to be within their wider "in-group," its cause and commitments, and justified some of their attacks on U.S. Army bases as retaliation for U.S. aggression in Vietnam.[42] This example of the positioning of a secular sacred boundary leads back to my key argument, that using the concept of the sacred helps explain some of the ideological motivations and justifications for violent action.

Significantly, it should also be remembered that, whilst many ideas and values are considered important, few are actually deemed sacred. So, whilst Ann Taves (who substitutes the term "special" for "sacred") allows for degrees of "specialness,"[43] it is still clear that there is a cut-off point where something crosses over from being very important to being sacred: to argue something is a "little bit" special or sacred abuses the meaning and application of these terms. For example, the right for gender equality was important to the Red Army Faction (or at least to Ulrike Meinhof[44]), but the right for "The People" to be free from molestation by the establishment was non-negotiable.[45] Whilst important values may have a significant influence on a group's identity and actions, non-negotiable values are of core importance and could be said to form part of the characterisation and identity of a group. Of course, the threatened transgression of a sacred value need not lead to violence: it is a sufficient rather than a necessary condition. An example of non-violent non-negotiability is found in the UK government's position with regard to dealing with extremist groups, wherein the 2011 Prevent strategy clearly states that its refusal to engage with such groups is non-negotiable.[46]

Benefits of the "Sacred": A Finer Analysis than "Religion"

Using religion as a broad-brush category by which to define groups can mask some of the distinctive features of each group. Identifying them by instances and characteristics of the sacred can provide a useful way of outlining these in a clear fashion. These characteristics will vary from group to group, but the following gives some examples from my own research.[47] Aum Shinrikyo believed that the world was divided into good and evil, subject to a global conflict. We can mark this element of their non-negotiable beliefs under the heading of "dichotomous world view" and an example of their discourse which displays this is found in the following quotation:

> And there will be confrontation between the gods and the ignorant, doubtful beings.[48]

Likewise, the Red Army Faction was driven by a strong sense of injustice, which for them was non-accidental and represented the core values at play in a clash of worlds; we can mark examples of discourse that fit this description under the heading "basic injustice." In such a way I looked through the discourses of a number of groups and coded them under headings which represented distinct themes amongst what was considered to be non-negotiable by these groups.

For the study of terrorism, this finer analysis can illuminate why some groups make this move to violence as a result of beliefs that are very similar to those of non-violent groups, as will be demonstrated here in relation to two Japanese religions: Aum Shinrikyo, responsible for many acts of violence until 1995 and Agonshu, who have not been associated with any violence.

To many people the beliefs of the Japanese group Agonshu may seem in many respects indistinguishable from those of Aum Shinrikyo (whose members were responsible for releasing sarin gas in the Tokyo underground in 1995), though the violent actions of the latter mark it out as exceptional in the canon of contemporary Japanese religion. Both are classed as "new-new religions," a categorization which broadly speaking covers religious groups which have come to prominence in Japan since the 1970s.[49] The leaders of both told rags-to-riches stories which included

brushes with the law, tales common with other new-new religions.[50] Like other such religious leaders, both also made much of meeting the Dalai Lama, and the leader of Agonshu also met Pope John Paul II.[51] The latter was amongst the first (amongst such groups) to pay serious attention to the teachings of Nostradamus, but the leader of Aum Shinrikyo, Asahara Shoko, also dedicated considerable resources to translating Nostradamus's teachings and referred to them at length in Aum publications. Both groups also published books warning of considerable catastrophes due to take place in 1999 (both having previously "successfully" predicted major events such as the Great Hanshin or "Kobe" Earthquake in 1995).

I draw these examples out as they help to show how similar many of the beliefs and practices of the two groups were, and indeed this is not accidental as Asahara Shoko, guru and former leader of Aum Shinrikyo, was previously a member of Agonshu. Of course there are many differences too: differences in attention paid to rites, relics, and texts could all be easily found to separate the two groups. But it is the values overlaying these beliefs and practices which are most instructive. Aum's approach to religious beliefs was eclectic and in the highly competitive Japanese religious market it was not unheard of for a group to adapt beliefs according to popular trends even where this was very similar to a rival group's beliefs.[52] Ideas drawn from Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism all had a visible impact on Aum's beliefs, but it is how these were amalgamated to form the sacred boundaries of the group and how the group saw fit to defend these boundaries against transgressions which are informative.

For example, both Agonshu and Aum believed that a disaster was due to befall the human race. Agonshu held that through its special practices it could prevent the destruction of the earth.[53] Aum Shinrikyo had a similar view about the destruction of the world, but this dovetailed with other views about the greed and depravity of the general public. These people were not worth saving and, according to Aum's later teachings, their spiritual confrontation with evil in the world (represented by such greedy people) spilled over into a physical confrontation.[54] This contrasted sharply with Agonshu, who believed that only through engaging with other faiths (with non-members) could the world be saved. This principle of engagement was as clearly expressed as a sacred virtue by their guru, Kiriyama, as violent conflict was by Aum's guru, Asahara.

The responses of the two groups to similar beliefs about the destruction of the world are important. Often it is in the detail of how a group views potential transgressions of those things it holds to be sacred that is informative for its potential to act violently.

A similar point, how one group turns to violence as a result of what it holds sacred despite having similar beliefs to non-violent groups, can be found when comparing Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Qaeda. The following quotation is from Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan:[55]

> While Russia is slaughtering Muslims in Chechnya, China is murdering Muslims in Eastern Turkestan. . . . This is because all of the world's Jews strongly fear the fact that Muslims are returning Islam, which they love, into daily life.

The basic injustice raised here, that of international persecution of Muslims, is a common trope amongst many groups, and the blame is laid at the doors of a global

Jewish conspiracy. These themes are also found in the following statement by Al Qaeda:[56]

> Know that we are counting our dead, especially in Palestine, where your allies the Jews murder them. We are going to take revenge for them from your blood, as we did on the day of New York [9/11]. Remember what I said to you about that day regarding our security and your security. Baghdad—the seat of the Caliphate—will never fall to you, by Allah's grace, and we will fight you as long as we carry our guns. If we fall, our sons will replace us. May our mothers become barren if we leave any of you alive on our soil.

The theme of Jewish responsibility for the murder of Muslims is equally strong in this quotation. Where it differs is that a violent response is a quick and ready solution. In my analysis of statements by Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan, only three times was violence suggested as a potential response whereas in Al Qaeda's statements this was a frequent occurrence. This suggests that while both held a non-negotiable idea of a conflict between good and evil, represented here (and elsewhere, but also with other villains) as between Jews and Muslims, they have different reactions to this conflict: Al Qaeda chose violence, Hizb ut-Tahrir did not. Both believed that Jews were their sacred enemy, but Al Qaeda saw violent global conflict as the only option, whereas Hizb ut-Tahrir (at least at the time) did not. This discrepancy occurs despite their beliefs and complaints being very similar—so an analysis of their non-negotiable values, the language they use to describe them, and the way in which they react to threatened or actual transgression has the potential to be informative.

The case of Hizb ut-Tahrir is particularly illuminating on this point as their three mentions of violent responses, coming from an avowedly non-violent organisation, are instructive of their ambiguous commitment to non-violence. Whilst they have stated they are against violence, there is a threatened "yet" in respect of their only being at the second stage of their plan to achieve the caliphate. Were a Caliph to be appointed he could in theory legitimate violent action.[57] This point further highlights that what is held to be sacred and how it is enacted are not fixed in stone, but change as a group's context and its needs and demands change around it. Justifications and motivations for violence are as fluid as the beliefs and practices that support them: beliefs and practices, even in orthodox religions, are the product of living people, not dusty tomes divorced from their surroundings.

Benefits of Analysing Sacred Markers: Predictive Potential

While focusing on the sacred shows some shared characteristics between groups, for example between violent and non-violent groups, it also shows some interesting differences. Whilst I maintain that there is no substantive distinction between the concepts "religious" and "secular"—they being merely discursive labels—my analysis of groups did show some differences between religious and secular groups.

For example, in my research on those values that marked violent groups out from non-violent ones I looked for the influence of external legitimating authorities on the values of the groups. My definition of this was deliberately broad, so that it could capture references to the influence from non-religious sources (for example ideologues like Marx or Rosa Luxemburg). I looked for worldviews that were

"justified by an appeal to legitimating authority external to/transcending the situation (God, religious scriptures, traditions, fundamental human rights or values)."[58] However, despite this I found little reference by the non-religious groups to any form of external legitimating authority. More data from other non-religious groups is needed to see if this finding is replicated outside of these groups. For example, whilst I expected there to be references to Marx, Luxemburg, and other leftist thinkers by the Red Army Faction, there were surprisingly few and what mention was made was mostly fairly trivial. This may be because many members had a superficial grasp of the ideology they claimed to be defending, for example Andreas Baader only read some of the theoretical justifications for his actions when he was serving sentences for committing them.[59]

In comparison, the religious groups made frequent reference to external authorities. Allah, the Qur'an, and key thinkers like Ibn Taymmiyah were all frequently invoked by Al Qaeda and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Aum Shinrikyo cited instructions given by Hindu gods, such as Shiva, as well as relying heavily on the Book of Revelations and the prophecies of Nostradamus (the second most quoted source after Asahara himself).

Aum also had an interesting source of authority through its leader and guru, Asahara Shoko. Asahara, as the movement's founder and leader, could be seen by both believers and outsiders as internal to the group. However, for believers his power and authority transcended the group and indeed the human plane of existence, and so for them he was also an external source of authority. Even after he was imprisoned for ordering the sarin attacks in Tokyo, his teachings and authority were still of central importance to many members, though Aum then split and one of its factions sought to downplay the influence of his teachings.

Another interesting difference between religious and non-religious groups surrounds the benefits of membership. The sacred beliefs of some religious groups about the afterlife and the potential benefits awaiting believers are common knowledge. Rewards for people fighting in the cause of jihad have also been claimed by some, with very clear spiritual benefits for those who lose their life in the struggle.

Whilst the spiritual gains for members of Al Qaeda were found in the afterlife, for members of Aum Shinrikyo and Agonshu they were promised in the present. Benefits of increased intelligence (to pass exams), the power of levitation, protection from illness, and other health assets were all claimed in the teachings of Aum Shinrikyo. The focus on "here and now relief" can be seen to be representative of a broader trend within Japanese religions.[60]

However, for the non-religious groups there were no perceived personal benefits. Whilst societal change, justice, and/or revenge could all be seen as positive outcomes to their actions, they were all positioned on a more abstract, less personal level than was the case with the religious groups (who often wanted these societal benefits as well).

These two examples suggest that it can still be strategically useful to use religious/non-religious distinctions when discussing violent (and non-violent) groups. But these differences alone, whilst interesting, are not sufficient to support some of the claims made about how religious violence is fundamentally different from other forms of violence. Moreover, these examples came to the fore because I focused on the distinctive sacred boundaries of groups, not whether or not they were religious.

As shown above, by focusing on what is held to be sacred by these groups, I uncovered similarities between those that crossed the religious/non-religious divide as well as differences between groups that belonged to the same religion and had similar roots or teachings. It is likely that such findings would be disclosed through any detailed study of these groups, regardless of whether or not the sacred was used as an interpretive frame. However, what the sacred framework adds is a strong theoretical explanation for why these differences occur, which a focus on religion does not offer.

This finer analysis of the values that make a difference in the move to violence, and a comparison of them across groups, can lead to a greater predictive potential of this move than focusing on concepts like religion or salafism, or externally applied labels like "extremism." This is not a claim to some miracle understanding of a process like radicalisation (which itself is poorly defined, frequently applied inconsistently and often pejoratively). The sacred, used in this context, is an investigative tool, to be used alongside others, but one that can play an informative role nevertheless.

With that caveat in mind another important one must be raised. Patterns of sacred (or non-negotiable) references appearing in inter-group analyses are useful, but their limitations must be acknowledged. With any small-scale qualitative analysis generalisations are either problematic or limited. This is a key issue for most research on terrorism as the data sample tends to come from the extremes of a society which by its nature limits its representativeness. However, this does not mean that lessons cannot be learned from the data; furthermore, if the methodology is sufficiently robust then it is entirely appropriate to draw *moderatum* generalisations from the findings.[61]

In the case of understanding the move to violence, it is possible to use the concept of the sacred to highlight discourses which shed a light on what is non-negotiable to a group and both how it feels threatened and what likely responses it will take to counter those threats. Moreover, it can aid this to a greater degree than assumptions made about groups merely because they apparently share a common heritage with others. For example, as shown above in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Qaeda, there are important distinctions which could easily be missed even when texts are authored in similar contexts and based on beliefs with a shared heritage. Other patterns can then be identified that relate to the way a dichotomous world view is expressed, how people are either unwittingly co-opted to the in-group, or stigmatized as an out-group. For example, whilst it is not uncommon for people to make normative judgements about people in another group, there is a categorical difference between making disparaging remarks, and making statements that all outsiders are legitimate targets for violent action, as is evidenced by the differences in the comments made by Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Qaeda.[62]

Conclusion

"Religion," whilst commonly used in public discourse and everyday conversation, is an unhelpful and misleading concept when applied unthinkingly to the study of terrorism. Even among scholars of religion its definition is problematic, and so using it as an independent variable in studies of violent conflict is bound to cause problems. This does not mean, however, that focusing on the beliefs and value-systems of groups is not instructive. As I have argued, the concept of the "sacred" provides a

better lens (than "religion") through which to analyse the move to violence. As shown above the concept is well-defined, in a way that "religion" is not. Conceptual clarity makes it easier to apply the term to the study of terrorism and political violence, and enhances its use and replicability in case studies.

The use of the sacred as a methodological tool is based on the values of groups themselves, rather than externally applied (and understood) labels. Rather than calling a group "extremist" and therefore bad, or "salafist" and therefore evil, working from the values of the groups themselves and assessing them in a consistent manner helps avoid the worst of normative excesses in judgements about the group. This does not mean that the values themselves are not open to normative judgement, but it provides a firm and more robust starting point than labels which vary in meaning from speaker to speaker.

When we work from the values of groups, and their expression in discourse, we have a better idea about what is unique about them and therefore also what motivates them. Motivations may still vary from member to member, and indeed there is no reason why an individual's values cannot be mapped with reference to the sacred as well. Using the conceptual framework I have outlined also allows the researcher to map out how these values have changed over time, giving an indication (where comparison is possible) of a potential trajectory towards violent action.

The application of the sacred as a tool to study the move to violence also avoids the problem that studies of religion and violence have had: their somewhat arbitrary focus on certain ideologies, at the expense of others. The sacred can be applied to non-religious ideologies as easily and with as much confidence as it may to religious ones. It is therefore a useful concept to bridge the perceived gap between religious and non-religious values that might have utility for analysing the similarities between groups, and allowing patterns to emerge. As part of a broader toolkit, the use of the sacred to analyse the impact of ideologies in the move to violence will make a valuable contribution.

Notes

1. Timothy Fitzgerald, "Religious Studies as Cultural Studies: A Philosophical and Anthropological Critique of the Concept of Religion," *Diskus* 3, no. 1 (1995): 35–47.

2. S. Gutkowski, "Secularism and the Politics of Risk: Britain's Prevent Agenda, 2005–2009," *International Relations* 25 (September 5, 2011): 346–362, doi:10.1177/0047117811416288.

3. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy* (London: HM Government, June 2011). For examples of criticism see Mary J. Hickman et al., *"Suspect Communities"? Counter-Terrorism Policy, the Press, and the Impact on Irish and Muslim Communities in Britain* (London: London Metropolitan University, July 2011); Arun Kundnani, *Spooked! How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 2009).

4. Examples include: Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed., Comparative Studies in Religion and Society (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003); Bruce Hoffman, "Holy Terror: An Act of Divine Duty," *World Today* 52, no. 3 (1996): 79–81; Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000); Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil, eds., *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1, 1984): 658–677, doi:10.2307/1961835; R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

5. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence [electronic resource]: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, "What's so 'Religious' About 'Religious Terrorism'?," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 3 (2011): 369–388, doi:10.1080/17539153.2011.623405.

6. Ann Taves suggests using "special" instead of "sacred," but still utilizes a broadly similar Durkheimian framework similar to that which I outline here. It isn't entirely clear that these terms are interchangeable in popular usage though—something being special or sacred is not the same. See Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

7. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923). Otto is one example amongst many who use the sacred as at best a form of description, not explanation, of social mechanisms. See Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) for challenges to these and other less functional accounts of the sacred.

8. Kim Knott, "The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?," in Abby Day, Chris Cotter, and Giselle Vincett, eds., *Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 145–160; Ben Rogers, ed., *Is Nothing Sacred?* (London: Routledge, 2004).

9. Including but not limited to: Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Philip A. Mellor, "Religion as an Elementary Aspect of Society: Durkheim's Legacy for Social Theory," in James A. Beckford and John Walliss, eds., *Theorising Religion: Classical and Contemporary Debates* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 3–18; Veikko Anttonen, "Sacred," in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), 271–282.

10. Mark Juergensmeyer, ed., *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).

11. One notable exception is Scott Atran who, with various colleagues has used the sacred in several interesting studies e.g., Scott Atran and Jeremy Ginges, "Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict," *Science* 336, no. 6083 (May 17, 2012): 855–857, doi:10.1126/science.1216902; Hammad Sheikh et al., "Religion, Group Threat and Sacred Values," *Judgment and Decision Making* 7, no. 2 (2012): 110–118. However, whilst they are clear that religion and the sacred are not synonymous, they do not demonstrate how the sacred might be found in secular ideologies, something which I set out here.

12. Anttonen, "Sacred" (see note 9 above), 280–281.

13. Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (London: Equinox, 2005); Knott, "The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?" (see note 8 above).

14. Matthew D. Francis and Kim Knott, "Return? It Never Left. Exploring the 'Sacred' as a Resource for Bridging the Gap Between the Religious and the Secular" (presented at the Islam and Religious Norms in the Public Sphere, Berkeley, California, 2011), http://igovberkeley.com/content/return-it-never-left-exploring-%E2%80%98sacred%E2%80%99-resource-bridging-gap-between-religious-and-secular; Kim Knott, "Theoretical and Methodological Resources for Breaking Open the Secular and Exploring the Boundary between Religion and Non-religion," *Historia Religionum*, no. 2 (2010): 115–133.

15. Fitzgerald, "Religious Studies as Cultural Studies" (see note 1 above); Timothy Fitzgerald, "Problematising Discourses on Religion," *Culture and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2001): 103–111.

16. Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (see note 13 above), 64.

17. Philip A. Mellor, *Religion, Realism and Social Theory: Making Sense of Society*, Theory, Culture & Society (London: Sage, 2004), 116–120.

18. Ibid., 20.

19. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (see note 4 above). The idea that religious violence is particularly vicious is tested by Peter Henne, "The Ancient Fire: Religion and Suicide Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 1 (2011): 38–60. The findings are interesting although the distinction between "religion" and "ideology" is not always clear and the definition of "religion" as being oriented towards the sacred or supernatural does little to show how exactly it might account for heightened violence.

20. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed: A Study Conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 1, 5 vols., The Fundamentalism

Project (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*, vol. 2, 5 vols., The Fundamentalism Project (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Polities, Economies, and Militance*, vol. 3, 5 vols., The Fundamentalism Project (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, vol. 4, 5 vols., The Fundamentalism Project (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, vol. 5, 5 vols., The Fundamentalism Project (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

21. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (see note 5 above).

22. Gunning and Jackson, "What's so 'Religious' About 'Religious Terrorism'?" (see note 5 above).

23. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World* (see note 7 above).

24. Tony Blair, "Leader's Speech, Brighton 2001" (presented at the 2001 Labour Annual Conference, Brighton, 2001), http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=186.

25. Ron Geaves, "Who Defines Moderate Islam 'Post'-September 11?," in Ron Geaves et al., eds., *Islam and the West Post 9/11* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 62–74; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Tyler Golson, "Overhauling Islam: Representation, Construction, and Cooption of Moderate Islam in Western Europe," *Journal of Church and State* 49 (2007): 487–516.

26. Sohaib Saeed, "If Qaradawi Is an Extremist, Who Is Left?," *The Guardian*, July 9, 2004, sec. World News, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jul/09/religion.politics?INTCMP=SRCH.

27. Haddad and Golson, "Overhauling Islam" (see note 25 above).

28. Geaves, "Who Defines Moderate Islam 'Post'-September 11?" (see note 25 above); but see Hermansen and also Haddad's chapters in the same book which raise similar questions based on data from the U.S.: Ron Geaves et al., eds., *Islam and the West Post 9/11* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

29. See the following for examples: Gerrie ter Haar, "Religion: Source of Conflict or Resource for Peace?," in Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil, eds., *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

30. Syed Farid Alatas, "Is Objective Reporting on Islam Possible? Contextualizing the 'Demon,'" in Syed Farid Alatas, ed., *Covering Islam: Challenges & Opportunities for Media in the Global Village* (Singapore: Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs [RIMA], 2005), 43–44; Basia Spalek and Robert Lambert, "Muslim Communities, Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Radicalisation: A Critically Reflective Approach to Engagement," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 36, no. 4 (December 2008): 265–266, doi:10.1016/j.ijlcj.2008.08.004.

31. Hickman et al., "*Suspect Communities*"? (see note 3 above). For a fuller discussion of the impact of Prevent on British Muslim communities see http://www.publicspirit.org.uk/themes/the-legacy-and-the-future-of-prevent/.

32. Basia Spalek et al., *Police-Muslim Engagement and Partnerships for the Purposes of Counter-Terrorism: An Examination* (University of Birmingham, 2009).

33. Two recent books discussing this include Paul Baker, Gabrielatos Costas, and Tony McEnery, *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), which includes an up-to-date listing of work on media and Islamophobia on p. 28, and in the chapter on the reporting of Islam.

34. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (see note 5 above).

35. Knott, "The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?" (see note 8 above).

36. Francis and Knott, "Return? It Never Left. Exploring the 'Sacred' as a Resource for Bridging the Gap Between the Religious and the Secular" (see note 14 above).

37. Knott, "The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?" (see note 8 above).

38. Ibid.

39. Al Qaeda, *Al Qaeda Propaganda* (Assahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication, 2001).

40. Red Army Faction, "The Black September Action in Munich: Regarding the Strategy for Anti-imperialist Struggle," in J. Smith and Andre Moncourt, eds., *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History*, trans. Andre Moncourt and J. Smith, vol. 1 (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 205–236.

41. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (see note 9 above).

42. Red Army Faction, "For the Victory of the People of Vietnam," in J. Smith and Andre Moncourt, eds., *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History*, trans. Andre Moncourt and J. Smith, vol. 1 (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 174.

43. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (see note 6 above).

44. Ulrike Meinhof, "Women in the SDS," in Karin Bauer, ed., *Everybody Talks About the Weather—We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*, trans. Luise von Flotow (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 209–213.

45. Red Army Faction, *Attack on General Haig*, 1979, http://labourhistory.net/raf/, http://labourhistory.net/raf/documents/en/0019790625%20EN.pdf.

46. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy* (London: HM Government, June 2011).

47. Matthew D. Francis, "Mapping the Sacred: Understanding the Move to Violence in Religious and Non Religious Groups" (PhD Dissertation, University of Leeds, 2011).

48. Shōkō Asahara, *Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun: Shoko Asahara's Apocalyptic Predictions* (Shizuoka: AUM Publishing, 1995), 292.

49. Susumu Shimazono, "In the Wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, nos. 3–4 (1995): 383–384.

50. Ian Reader, "The Rise of a Japanese 'New New Religion': Themes in the Development of Agonshu," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15, no. 4 (1988): 246.

51. Ibid., 251.

52. For example, Kiriyama, the founder and guru of Agonshu, was very sensitive to shifts in popular culture and adapted his teachings accordingly. Robert J. Kisala, "1999 and Beyond: The Use of Nostradamus' Prophecies by Japanese Religions," *Japanese Religions* 23, no. 1 (1998): 149.

53. Agonshu, "Agon Shu Honzan," *Agon Shu Honzan*, 2002, http://www.agon.org/us/.

54. Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* (see note 4 above), 194–195.

55. Allen J. Frank and Jahangir Mamatov, *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Springfield, VA: Dunwoody Press, 2006), 268.

56. Osama Bin Laden, "Israel, Oil and Iraq," in Raymond Ibrahim, ed., *The Al Qaeda Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 212.

57. Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group that Remains Nonviolent," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 315–334.

58. Francis, "Mapping the Sacred" (see note 47 above), 35.

59. Paige Whaley Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 65.

60. Ian Reader, "Social Action and Personal Benefits in Contemporary Japanese Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995): 8.

61. Malcolm Williams, "Interpretivism and Generalisation," *Sociology* 34, no. 2 (May 1, 2000): 209–224, doi:10.1177/S0038038500000146.

62. Osama Bin Laden, "Terror for Terror," in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World* (London: Verso, 2005), 118–119.