In Response - Does religion cause terrorism? The problem of *religion* and the need for a better question

by Justin J. Meggitt

It would be hard not to agree with most of what Professor Juergensmeyer has said in his contribution, not least because, unlike many who write on the subject of religion and terrorism, he has spent much of his professional life talking *to* religious terrorists, rather than solely talking *about* them. And his nuanced conclusion, that religion is neither the cause nor the victim of terrorism, is a difficult one from which to dissent. Many critics of religion, and its apologists, have added little to our understanding by treating the question as though it can only be answered by "yes" or "no". It is also extremely helpful to be reminded by Juergensmeyer of the variety of ways that religion and violence may be related, and the mixed motivations of religious terrorists, but above all, of his own definitive contribution to the subject, his notion of 'cosmic war', something that has, over the years, proven its explanatory value.

There are some elements of what Juergensmeyer has said, however, that need further reflection, and the question itself, 'Does religion cause terrorism?' needs to be amended for it to deliver any useful answers.

Definitions and their consequences

One of the first questions anyone studying religion is faced with is also possibly the hardest one to answer adequately: what is a religion? Although this might strike many of those who study terrorism as obvious, and not requiring further comment (and it is unsurprising Professor Juergensmeyer does not feel the need to provide a definition on this occasion), for many of those involved in the study of religion professionally, it has proven an enormously difficult one to answer (Harrison, 2006; Bruce, 2011). There are a number of reasons for this. It is, for example, hard to determine what characteristics unequivocally identify something as a religion, and many cases where the classification is disputed: it is unclear, for example, whether Confucianism is a religion (Rosker, 2017) or the *Juche* ideology of North Korea (Armstrong, 2005), or the traditions of indigenous peoples like the Dené of North America (Walsh, 2017). It is also notoriously difficult to find terms in other languages that closely equate with what is currently meant by the English word *religion*: the Arabic term *dīn* does not mean the same thing as religion for Muslims nor the Sanskrit term *dharma* for adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism (Nongbri, 2013, pp. 39–44; Tareen, 2017; Juergensmeyer, 2019, p. 61)

One of the things, however, that has emerged, perhaps most acutely, in the definitional debates surrounding the term is the extent to which religion, as it is currently conceived, is a relatively recent creation that reflects the circumstances of its birth. More specifically, it is often claimed that the idea that religions are things that are primarily concerned with matters of belief and doctrine, reflects the discursive origins of the concept in Christian, and more specifically Protestant, culture, where such things are paramount in a way that they are not elsewhere (Harvey, 2013, pp. 43–57). Further, the idea that such things as science, politics, law, economics and medicine are self-evidently distinguishable from religion, and constitute separate domains of secular human activity, reflects the European Reformation and Enlightenment contexts that shaped the genesis and subsequent

development of the idea (e.g. Asad, 1993; King, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2003). Indeed, for many scholars, "religion" and "secularism" are mutually constitutive (Sambrooke, 2017).

Although such definitional debates might look like the kind of inconsequential navel-gazing beloved of many disciplines, Juergensmeyer's essay reminds us that they are of relevance when we examine the question of whether religion causes terrorism. When he says that most terrorists experience 'real grievances' but also asserts that these are not 'religious' because they are social and economic in character, and not concerned with 'religious differences or issues of doctrine and belief', he inadvertently reflects, in this essay (though not in his wider scholarship), a rather narrow notion of what constitutes religion, and one common to many commentators on religion and terrorism. Such a view is unlikely to be shared by religious perpetrators of terrorist acts. Indeed, this tension over what exactly constitutes religion might well play a part in explaining some acts of violence, as terrorists seek to assert or reassert the totalising claims of their religion (or, better, the totalising claims of their understanding of their particular religion) against those whom they see, not necessarily inaccurately, as eviscerating their faith by limiting it to matters of private belief and worship. While etic or outsider accounts of religion are clearly legitimate, though far from unproblematic (Chryssides and Gregg, 2019; McCutcheon, 1999), it is important not to underestimate the interpretative chasm that needs to be bridged between religious terrorists and those who seek to understand them.

One possible strategy that may be of help in doing this, for those who study terrorism professionally rather than religion, is to approach religion through the lens of Ninian Smart's 'dimensions of religion' (Smart, 1996, pp. 10–11, 20–21) or something comparable. Smart sought to give 'a kind of functional delineation of religions in lieu of a strict definition' (1996, p. 9) and identified religions as containing nine dimensions: (1) ritual or practical, (2) doctrinal or philosophical, (3) mythic or narrative, (4) experiential or emotional, (5) ethical or legal, (6) organisational or social, (7) material or artistic, (8) political, and (9) economic. Each one, for Smart, was to some extent, affected by the others, and different traditions put different weights on different dimensions (1996, pp. 8, 10). Despite the problems that have been identified in Smart's proposal (e.g. Rennie, 1999), and his failure to make much of many factors that now preoccupy those who study the relationship of religion to terrorism, such as identity (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2009), his approach is, at the very least, of pedagogical and heuristic value for those who do not regularly think about religion in a critical manner. It may now be over two decades old, but it continues to demonstrate its utility (e.g. Bain-Slebo and Sapp, 2016). For our purposes, it reminds us that a range of aspects of a religion may be implicated in an act of terrorism, not just its beliefs and doctrines. Explanations of terrorism that absolve religion, or specific religions, because they see things other than religious *ideas* as carrying the primary explanatory burden in making sense of an act of terror, therefore, need to be queried as they may overlook other factors that may legitimately be identified as religious (e.g. Goodwin, 2018; cf. Gregg, 2018).

It should also be added that when examining the content of these dimensions in order to uncover data that might explain a terrorist act, it is useful to be aware that what might be salient may well be counter-intuitive. For example, while Juergensmeyer is surely right to draw attention to the significance of 'cosmic war' in religiously inspired acts of terrorism, something that can be present in a number of Smart's dimensions, from the mythic and emotional to the ethical and political, 'cosmic love' could be just as significant a factor and just as widely discernible. As Glucklich has suggested, terrorism may come from a hedonistic desire for divine love and the need to do whatever is necessary to obtain or maintain it (Glucklich, 2009).

Violence and terrorism

Before turning to the problem of the question that Juergensmeyer sought to answer, one further observation about his response is necessary. Juergensmeyer's contribution identifies a number of ways in which religion and violence are related, from the former's role in buttressing political ambitions to providing the reader with an introduction to his notion of 'cosmic war'. Whilst not wishing to deny the value of any of his insights, claims about the causal relationship between religion and violence *in general* are not necessarily relevant for our purposes. Although virtually all definitions of terrorism involve a violent act, or the threat of a violent act, terrorism is distinguished from other kinds of violence, even if commentators are not always in agreement about how this is the case, whether, for example, it is the perpetrators, the victims, or the intended effects, that set it apart (Easson and Schmid, 2011). It is therefore reasonable to question whether claims about the causal relationship between religion and violence, however attractive and legion these are (Rowley, 2014), tell us anything helpful. What any explanation of terrorism requires is why this *particular* form of violence is chosen by the perpetrators.

The specificity of religions

Perhaps even more significantly, however, Juergensmeyer's contribution also invites reflection on another matter, one that reveals a fundamental problem with the question itself: the specificity of religions. Whilst the question he sought to answer invites us to advance suggestions about the causal relationship of *religion,* in the abstract, to terrorism, the variegated character of *religions*, may limit the explanatory value of any theories proffered. Even Juergensmeyer's notion of 'cosmic war' is, for example, not easy to map onto religious traditions from South Asia (King, 2007, p. 225) despite working well for the example of ISIS given in his paper.

Thus, rather than ask 'Does religion cause terrorism?', if we want to say something that has any real-world utility, it is more helpful to ask 'Does religion *x* cause terrorism?'. Or, to be more accurate, given that the number of terrorists who can be identified as adherents of any specific religion is never more than a miniscule fraction of the total number of adherents of that religion (e.g. Kurzman, 2011), we should ask 'Does religion *x sometimes* cause terrorism?'.

Many scholars are, however, very wary of talking about the potential relationship of specific religions to terrorism and are far happier dealing with abstractions. This is, in part, because many claims made today about the relationship between specific religions, such as Islam, and terrorism, are often 'self-servingly selective and implicitly racist' (Dawson, 2018, p. 143) and probably reflect 'Orientalist' discourses in which the 'East' and the religions primarily associated with it, are constructed as barbarous, irrational and inherently violent (Masuzawa, 2005, p. 200). Exploring the relationship between a specific religion and terrorism also runs the risk of appearing to accept uncritically the religious claims and justifications of terrorists. This is often not only objectionable to many adherents of the religion with which the terrorists identify, but may have damaging consequences for them, leading to their stigmatisation and victimisation by association (Tellidis, 2016, p. 134). Indeed, partly to prevent this, and put clear water between terrorists and other members of a religion, it has become increasingly common to hear the claim, and not just from adherents themselves, that terrorists are perverting or abusing a religion or the 'true' form of it (e.g. UNDP, 2016, p. 5). It is also not unusual to hear it being said that terrorism is common to *all* religions, not just the one to which terrorists say that they belong, an argument that is intended, once again, to protect a religion and its adherents from unwelcome, hostile attention. Nonetheless, despite its potential risks, it is not, *per se*, unreasonable to ask whether a specific religion might *sometimes* cause terrorism. Just as we should 'challenge the curious erasure of religion from the study of religious terrorism' (Dawson,

2018, p. 141), we should challenge the erasure of any named religion from the study of any act of terror carried out by those identifying as its adherents.

Some, however, might object that the revised question – 'Does religion *x sometimes* cause terrorism?' – is still too general to be useful. After all, it is common in terrorism literature to identify a specific form of a religion as more likely to be associated with terrorism, whether a generic subtype of the religion in question, such as 'extremist', 'radical' or 'fundamentalist', or an identifiable, named movement within it, such as Salafism within Islam or Christian Identity within Christianity.

Whilst there are numerous problems with the utility of such labels – for example, terms such as 'fundamentalist' are often evaluative and pejorative rather than descriptive (e.g. Marranci, 2009, pp. 26–50; Toscano, 2010), and Salafism encompasses a range of positions on questions of violence, many inimical to terrorism (e.g. Meijer, 2009; Wehrey and Boukhars, 2019) – it is not unreasonable to accept this narrower focus. Therefore, we should amend the question further, so that it reads 'Does *some form of* religion *x sometimes* cause terrorism?'.

Causation

There is a further way in which the question needs to be qualified if it is to have any utility. Is it asking us to determine whether religion can be *the* or *a* cause of an act of terror? And, if so, what kind of cause? *The* or *a* long-term, underlying, root cause, or one that is more immediate, triggering, precipitant or proximate? Or, is it legitimate to think of it as a cause that lies somewhere between the two extremes? Can we talk about degrees of causation when we think about terrorism, just as in law they are practically accepted for the purposes of distributing responsibility and proportionality in sentencing (Braham and van Hees, 2009)? Does the question, as originally worded, exclude the possibility that religion might be a factor in terrorism only in the presence of something else that facilitates its activation? For example, Benjamin Barber suggests that 'fundamentalist' terrorism has a dialectical tension with secularism (Barber, 2010, p. xv), raising the possibility that without secularism, fundamentalist terrorism would not exist. There is more that could be said but clearly it would be useful if any questions asked about the relationship between religion and terrorism recognised that causation is far from straightforward. The question should be revised yet further to take this into account: 'Does *some form of* religion *x sometimes* cause, *in some manner,* terrorism?'.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, if we wish to answer the question 'Does religion cause terrorism?', we should begin by reflecting critically on what we understand by *religion*, and the extent of its domain, and also what it is about *terrorism* that requires an answer that is not identical to the question 'Does religion cause violence?'. Then, given that religion has no transhistorical and transcultural essence, and the lack of clarity as to what kind of relationship between religion and terrorism can be legitimately considered *causal*, if we wish to say anything potentially useful, we should rewrite the question in the inelegant way that I have just suggested: 'Does *some form of* religion *x sometimes* cause, *in some manner,* terrorism?'.

The answer to this revised question may well be obvious. It is hard to find a religion whose adherents have not included terrorists of some kind – even pacifist faiths, like the Doukhobors, beloved of Leo Tolstoy, have had their fair share (Androsoff, 2013). And any cursory examination of terrorism databases reveals that there is, at the very least, a clear correlation between individuals and groups who identify as religious and many acts of terrorism (see, for example, Romano et al., 2019). *Why,*

however, this might be the case is a different question. Although there may be sufficient resemblances between different religious terrorists that some general theories, like Juergensmeyer's concept of 'cosmic war', may have some explanatory power, when it comes to religious terrorism, the devil is almost certainly in the detail.

About the author

Justin Meggitt is University Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Wolfson College, as well as Visiting Researcher at the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender studies, Stockholm University. He holds degrees in the study of religion from Newcastle University, Conrad Grebel College (University of Waterloo), and the University of Cambridge, where he undertook his doctoral work and where he subsequently held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, before taking up his current post in 2004. Justin teaches and publishes widely within the study of religion, across a range of epochs and religious cultures, and has a number of research interests including, but not limited to, the relationship between religion and poverty; religious radicalism and interreligious encounter; anarchism and religion; slavery; magic and miracle; apocalyptic and violence. In 2016, he co-founded the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (censamm.org), which, amongst other things, hosts an annual, multidisciplinary conference on all things apocalyptic. Justin has a long-standing interest in the (critical) public understanding of religion and has spent much of his academic life working in various public engagement contexts and advocating for wider access to scholarship. He is allergic to theology.

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