Discussion 8 - The study of terrorism and the problem of "apocalyptic"

by Justin J. Meggitt

An apology

I am not a scholar of terrorism but rather someone who has spent most of his academic life engaged in the critical study of religion. This means that I come to the study of terrorism mostly ignorant of what those in the field do, and how they do it. As a result, I was, at least initially, at a loss to think how I could contribute to such an important symposium in a way that might be of benefit to other participants. Venturing some thoughts on the relationship between religion and terrorism seemed the most obvious way I could say something of interest, but I was very conscious that I was to share a panel with Mark Juergensmeyer, the leading expert on this question, and so anything I had to say would be of limited value in comparison.

So, after further thought, I decided to focus on something rather different. As I undertook a cursory survey of recent literature in the study of terrorism that touches upon religion, I was struck by the frequent use of the term "apocalyptic" or its close synonyms (end-time, doomsday etc.) to describe various contemporary forms of terrorism, in particular when describing the kind of terrorism that is often claimed to be dominant today. Especially following the attacks of Aum Shinrikyo in 1994–1995 and the events of 9/11 in 2001, it is increasingly common (notably amongst advocates of the "New Terrorism" thesis), to hear the claim that terrorism has become inexorably apocalyptic, and the recent publication of a number of influential works about ISIS have reinforced this perception in public and scholarly discourse (McCants, 2015; Wood, 2015, 2016; Stern and Berger, 2016).

It is hardly surprising that my attention was drawn to the appearance of the word "apocalyptic" as its study is one of my major intellectual interests. The term is, after all, in its origin, a religious term, and one that, even in its multitude of current uses, carries with it religious connotations. Even the paradigmatic film *Apocalypse now*, mentioned by Dr Peter Lehr in response to this paper, as an example of how "apocalyptic" language now has a life of its own, is not lacking in such religious resonances (Garcia-Escriva, 2018). Indeed, such is my fascination with this subject that a few years ago I helped establish the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CenSAMM), which specialises in the study of the many religious, historical and cultural manifestations of apocalypticism. Regardless of my predilection for all things apocalyptic, however, the use of this word in the study of terrorism warrants attention, not least because it has real-world implications, both intended and unintended. Some contributions have made substantial assertions about the analytical utility of employing the term "apocalyptic", not just in identifying and understanding a distinctive form of contemporary terrorism, but also in its potential for informing counterterrorism policy (e.g. Flannery, 2016, pp. 7, 214; Saiya, 2018, pp. 16–17).

What follows could be criticised for being impressionistic but, as this is an opinion piece, I hope that readers will be tolerant if it lacks the detailed evidential support for what I have to say. I have attempted to provide exactly that in a fuller analysis of the subject along the lines sketched here, in another publication (Meggitt, 2020). I nearly always feel a little unwell when I hear experts in other fields talk about my own, not least because they often seem to declaim with such certainty about subjects about which I have long since ceased to be so sure. Thus, I apologise in advance if what I

have to say strikes those who study terrorism professionally as another example of that unwelcome cocktail of ignorance and arrogance that is no doubt characteristic of many contributions by those outside their area of expertise.

It is my belief that there is a problem in the use of the term "apocalyptic" in the study of terrorism. Or, rather, there are a number of related problems. These are substantive and worth briefly surveying.

Definitional problems

Despite its popularity, there is a striking inconsistency across the scholarly literature in what is meant when the adjective "apocalyptic" is used in relation to "terrorism". Most employ it to describe one of three kinds of terrorism: (1) terrorism that is catastrophic, world-ending or existentially threatening (e.g. Hughes, 1998; Umbrasas, 2018); (2) terrorism that is catastrophic, world-ending or existentially threatening but also possesses a handful of additional features, such as the desire to usher in a new world on the part of its perpetrators (e.g. Berger, 2015; Gregg, 2014); (3) terrorism that stands in some kind of genealogical relationship with ancient apocalyptic literature and the ideas it allegedly contains (e.g. Flannery, 2016).

Clearly those in the field are not necessarily talking about the same thing. For example, uses of the term "apocalyptic" that fall into the first category, and which use it as little more than a synonym for "catastrophic" have little to do with those that fall into the third, where it may be assumed that "apocalyptic" implies a range of ideas concerning reality and such things as God, time and human agency.

We should be wary of the assumption of existential threat inherent in the first two uses of the term. Such claims are a common trope in popular and scholarly discourses about terrorism and are regularly made about terrorists who, by any reasonable criteria, clearly do not pose any such thing (Wilson, 2017). For example, few terrorist acts in recent decades have resulted in excess of 100 deaths and of the handful that have (Oklahoma City, 1995; New York, 2001; Beslan, 2004; Gamboru and Ngala, 2014; Paris, 2015; Baghdad, 2016, Sri Lanka, 2019), none, however appalling and traumatic, can reasonably be judged to be *existentially* threatening to anyone other than the victims themselves.

Definitions of the third kind also have substantial problems. They are dependent upon those currently used in biblical studies, which are themselves far from uncontested. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these definitional debates for those outside that field is the degree to which the relationship of apocalyptic to eschatology or the end-times is contested (e.g. Rowland, 1982), as are claims about its social context and function (Hellholm, 1986, p. 26). Such a way of thinking about "apocalyptic" runs the risk of encouraging an essentialist, immutable and reified conception of apocalyptic that is, at best, analytically problematic.

"Apocalyptic" as a synonym for "religious"

"Apocalyptic" terrorism is regularly treated as the equivalent of "religious" terrorism (e.g. Gunning and Jackson, 2011, p. 372) or claims are made that imply that the violence perpetrated by religious terrorists is, at some essential level, apocalyptic in character (e.g. Stern, 2003, p. 281).

For example, "religious" terrorism is regularly distinguished from other kinds of terrorism by the violence it employs; its perpetrators are seen as especially relentless, brutal and indiscriminate in comparison with other kinds of terrorists (Ranstorp, 1996, p. 54), not least in their willingness to use

weapons of mass destruction (e.g. Ackerman, 2009, p. 382). Of course, not all contributors take such an approach, and some are much more nuanced (e.g. Lewis, 2017; Juergensmeyer, 2017) but the treatment of "apocalyptic" and "religious" as more or less interchangeable is not unusual in terrorism studies. Whilst this could be explained as a consequence of the dearth of religious specialists within terrorism studies, it also appears to be a result of the influence of polemical, discursive representations of religion, especially those popularised by the so-called "New Atheists", where religiously motivated terrorism is often presented as emblematic of the irrationality and violence allegedly inherent in religion itself (Foster, Megoran and Dunn, 2017; Khalil, 2017).

Assumption that "apocalyptic" is always primary and totalising

Those who wish to invoke "apocalyptic" in their analysis of terrorism, often fail to view it as anything other than primary and totalising (e.g. Gregg, 2014, p. 36). That such ideas might be held superficially, sporadically or indifferently, seems to be rarely considered, yet there are good reasons for thinking this might be so for anyone who studies apocalypticism professionally. The failure to think about the potential fluctuation in the saliency of apocalyptic convictions amongst "apocalyptic" terrorist groups is especially problematic because such groups are often at their most violent precisely when apocalyptic beliefs are ebbing and members begin to defect (Mayer, 2001a, p. 366).

Homogenising claims about "apocalyptic" radicalism

Discussions of "apocalyptic" terrorism regularly assume that apocalypticism is self-evidently destructive and invariably threatening to the status quo. Both suppositions are wrong and fail to take account of its diversity.

"Apocalyptic" radicalism is often creative rather than destructive. It is regularly associated with innovations, as pre-existing relationships are often comprehensively reconfigured and reimagined. One need only look, for example, at the developments in design, technology and ideas of gender associated with the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (Shakers) (e.g. Miller, 2010). Apocalyptic can also be profoundly conservative, bolstering the status quo rather than challenging it (McGinn, 1998, p. 35). Indeed, a case could be made for apocalypticism as a prophylactic *against* terrorism, much as some have argued that "non-violent extremism" is inimical to "violent extremism" (Bartlett and Miller, 2012, p. 2) rather than a precondition for it. Evidence of its potential conservatism is evident in the longevity of some groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, for which apocalyptic ideas have consistently remained central (Chryssides, 2016). As a student once proudly declared in one of my classes on the Book of Revelation: 'I believe the world will end in my lifetime, my father believed it would in his, and his father before him'.

Assumptions about the causes and character of "apocalyptic" violence

Violence is often inadequately treated in scholarship concerned with "apocalyptic" terrorism. This is especially true in two respects. The first relates to assumptions about the causes of violence, and the second, its nature.

Discussions can betray a rather simplistic understanding of the causal relationship between apocalypticism and violence. In particular, they often ignore or treat superficially, the role of factors *other* than apocalyptic ideology that may account for violent actions. Given the enormous complexity of the relationship between *religion* and violence – a recent study found three hundred

different ways the former has been claimed to bring about the latter (Rowley, 2014) – we should be cautious of claims about how, or indeed, whether, *apocalyptic* causes violence.

Discussions of apocalyptic violence and terrorism are inadequate in other ways too. Focus upon the allegedly indiscriminate and lethal character of acts by "apocalyptic" terrorists is understandable but other aspects of the violence may be neglected as a result. Terrorist violence is often as much expressive and communicative as instrumental, and much more could be said about the performative character of such events, along the lines of Juergensmeyer (2013); nevertheless, their ritualised characteristics are regularly overlooked (Nanninga, 2017). Nor is enough attention paid to the "apocalyptic" violence generated by the opponents of terrorism, who may share with the terrorists an "apocalyptic" perception of the nature of the conflict, and behave accordingly, engaging in "apocalyptic mirroring" (Wessinger, 2006, p. 191) or "counterapocalyptic" (Falk, 2003, p. 205).

Cross-cultural and non-religious uses of the term "apocalyptic"

The cross-cultural utility of the term "apocalyptic" is far from clear. Globalisation has seen the spread of apocalyptic ideas, even its cross-fertilisation with previously distinct traditions, seen, for example, in the recent appropriation of evangelical Christian apocalyptic ideas in popular Islamic apocalyptic writing (Stowasser, 2000; Cook, 2005; Filiu, 2012; Nash, 2018). The term, however, is so ineluctably associated with a specifically *Christian* text, the Book of Revelation, that we run the risk of erasing important differences of content and context by employing it. Given that most definitions of apocalypticism are predicated on a clear end to earthly history can it really be helpful in understanding terrorism that emerges from a Hindu or Buddhist context, where, for example, rather than being linear, time is conceived of as, in some sense, cyclical? Or that which comes from secular fascist groups whose ideology is "palingenetic", concerned with rebirth rather than some kind of temporal climax to history? (Griffin, 1991, pp. 32–40).

Neglect of hermeneutics

Discussions of apocalyptic terrorism rarely address the question of hermeneutics. For example, despite claims about the role of the Book of Revelation that are found in discussions of "apocalyptic terrorism", Rowland rightly observes:

the Apocalypse has only rarely been directly linked with the prosecution of violence. In the cases where there is evidence that it has had a catalytic effect, it would appear that there is often a particular hermeneutical move in which actualizing the text takes place, which may be supported by resort to visions, dreams and direct divine communication. (Rowland, 2004, pp. 12–13).

Indeed, the desire to demonstrate the instrumental role that the Book of Revelation has allegedly played in motivating violence has meant that it is easy to find unwarranted claims about the text in the scholarly literature. Frances Flannery's recent study, for example, makes much of a quotation from the Apocalypse found in the manifesto published by Anders Breivik justifying his murderous actions – 'And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was death, and Hell followed with him' (Rev 6:8). This is sufficient for her to declare: 'Breivik's own words demonstrate how the Book of Revelation, which was used in the Middle Ages to justify killing Muslims, still spawns the same hatred today' (Flannery, 2016, p. 52). This, however, is the *only* quotation from Revelation found in the entire 1,518 pages of Breivik's work; the biblical book is quoted as often as the poems of Tennyson. Such simplistic claims obscure a far more complex range of discourses

evident in Breivik's text (Brömssen, 2013; Sandberg, 2015) and the multiple explanations for that act of terrorism (e.g. Ranstorp, 2013; Gardell, 2014; Hemmingby and Bjørgo, 2016).

Conclusion

Given the problems generated by qualifying the noun "terrorism" with the adjective "apocalyptic", there are good grounds for avoiding its use altogether. Although some of the difficulties we have identified could, theoretically, be rectified, it is unlikely that the term "apocalyptic" will have much analytical utility in the study of terrorism. To put the case succinctly: whenever apocalypticism is deployed, the cultural power of the idea seems so great that instead of shining a useful light on the object of study, it runs the risk of obliterating it completely. Indeed, it may well be time for a moratorium on the use of "apocalyptic" to label *any* form of terrorism. To continue to use this adjective to describe terrorism only encourages what could be called "pale horse syndrome" (Rev 6:8), an affliction in which the sufferer too readily believes that they are seeing something that is an existential threat. Colleagues were right, when I presented this idea at the symposium, to note that it is impossible to control the use of a term that is now so entrenched in popular culture, and that moratoriums, as a rule, do not work (see Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 138; Barton, 2007, p. viii). Nonetheless, my advice to those who work in the study of terrorism, where words have real-world consequences, is that just as one should never drop the f-bomb in polite company, never drop the a-bomb in terrorism scholarship.

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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