UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT:

Manifestation of terrorism in the name of religion is a common phenomenon now. In simple words, it can be understood to be opposing one's own beliefs, values and ideologies on others. The modus operandi here can be force or indoctrination and usually sprouts from the feeling of "us versus them" and being intolerant of others' perspectives. The religious extremists are seen to pick and choose religious texts to suit their own motives and justify their act. They interpret, re interpret and mis-interpret religious scripture to fulfil their own needs. They also are seen referring to historical conflicts and the failures of others to reason out their current use of violence.

KEYWORDS: *Manifestation of terrorism , historical conflicts.*

PROBLEMS IN DEFINING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

In the backdrop of 9/11 attack violent extremism is widely discussed topic and high in the list of international agenda. Violent extremism is capable of manifesting itself in political as well as religiously motivated violence. However, one major problem that we face in understanding the various connotations of violent extremism is an inclusive framework (Borum, R 2011). The available framework merely gives report of risk and protective factors and is highly fragmented and poorly integrated (Bouhana, N and P, H Wikstrom 2008). There is failure to provide a deep understanding of the pertinent causes of the whole mechanism or integration of different explanations posed (Wikstrom, P-O H. 2007). The research of violent extremism need to emphaise on the reflection and reconsideration of theories explaining the important risk factors. A simple way to move ahead with understanding should be by asking questions about which risk factors have explanatory value and why. We need to focus that why certain factors related to the mechanism lead to certain outcome and what are also the effects of other intervening mechanism in the overall outcome (Mathieu, D 2004).

Violent extremism can be defined as a position which opposes the dominant political stance and the socio-religious core. It negates any sort of pluralism and retorts to violent means to achieve one's goal. This resonates in violent attitude and actions or both (Schmid, Alex P 2010). The morality and self-control of an individual determines the general orientation of an individual to support and discern the righteousness of politico-religious violence as a valid alternative (Wikstom, P.H 2014). The process of social learning and signaling set up the cultural transmission of violent extremism (Gottfredson, M. R and Travis Hirschi 1990). Strain, negative treatment by others or perceived notion of unfair and unjust behavior towards oneself may affect an individual being's behavior, cognitive and emotional outcomes and lead to violent attitude and behavior (Robert Agnew 2010).

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It has been witnessed that an individual whose psychology is dominated by the view that one's own religion is the ultimate truth can be easily manipulated into use of violence in order to solve any kind of socio-political conflict if inspired by external factors like a strong leader, lack of ability to meet their essential needs, or a disputed space (Szlachter D and Piotr Potejko 2017). Feeling of threat, fear, harm or frustration leads one to seek an authority of either a leader, who can be political or religious or that of an idea or notion (Altemeyer, B and Bruce Hunsberger 2009).

Research suggest that there is a joining link among the feeling of shame, humiliation and violence. A way that religion contributes to terrorism is through creating or reinforcing the feeling of shame and humiliation, which may cause violent outbursts. This potential for violence is then exploited and channeled in ways which are socially approved. Fanatical religion instigates concepts of crusades, dehumanize outsiders and encourage prejudices to provide targets for violent aggression, which are sanctioned through religious connotations (Jones, J W 2006).

A common belief that violent religious movements portray is their immense belief in a cosmic struggle of forces. These forces are depicted in terms of all-good against all-bad (Kimball 2000). At times, religious terrorists have declared secularism to be their enemy as can be seen from Rabbi Meir Kahane's declaration that "secular government is the enemy" (Juergensmeyer, M 2000, p 55). Kahane's Jewish Defence League attacked Muslims in the United States and Israel. A shocking common characteristic of all the cultures that these religious terrorists belong to, is their notion of the contemporary world being at war (Juergensmeyer, M 2000).

Religions that believe in an apocalypse divide the world into good and evil, where evil needs to be eradicated violently and thus a purified world shall emerge. The whole process of purification is presumed to be bloody. A way to purify the world could also have been a spiritual path, however, the apocalyptic religion taints the path with warfare, blood, images of gruesome violence (Jones, J W 2006). There are times when religious cults also rely on science, high technology, science fiction as much as they rely on religion (Reader, I 2000 pp 185-187).

UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Every major religious tradition is based on themes of purification, deaths and rebirth. In fact, religious consciousness arises out of the division between pure and impure and sacred and profane (Durkheim, E 1965). Religious terrorists do not get satisfied by merely withdrawing away to protect their purity but they rigorously aim to transform the world and purify it. This can be seen in the Asahara's Japanese doomsday-cult's notion which supports a vision of event and series of apocalyptic event that would devastate the world in the service of renewal (Lifton, R 2000).

For a number of religions purification comes with sacrifice, a sacrifice to the divine as well to the community. The practice of sacrifice is an old concept and can be traced as back as those to the early Indian Vedas and Hebrew Torah. Though in later phase, Upanishads in Hinduism gave way to a wide range of metaphysical discourses and yogic, meditational and devotional practices. Hebrew prophets ridiculed the idea of God needing any bloody sacrificed and emphasized on Isaiah-broken and contrite heart and Micah- justice, mercy and humility. However, the whole notion of sacrifice could not be fully washed away (Jones, J W 2006).

The theme of sacrifice is central to the emergence of "human bombers". As one reads Mohammad Atta's Last Letter to his comrades, religious connotations attached to sacrifice and purity is extensively obvious (The Guardian 2001). He talks about the sacrifices as obedience and about purification of one's soul from all blemishes. The terrorist is portrayed to be sacrificing himself as well as the victim ritually. The "human bombers" are considered to be sacred by their communities of reference who are holy beings and thus, all their deeds are accepted. They are holy saints who are raised to lofty moral as sacrificial victims (Strenski, I 2003).

In Palestinian neighbourhood, calendars depicting "martyr of the month" were published. Paintings displayed the victory of dead bombers in paradise. All such connotation derives its ideas from the saying of the prophet Mohammad that the soul of a martyr is brought to Allah in the paradise. An imam explained that the first drop of a martyr's blood washes away all his sins instantly and he shall

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not be reckoned on the day of judgement (Hassan, N 2001). A Palestinian militant said that when a bomber attains the highest level of martyrdom. Another rebuke the term suicide and instead called such bombings as istishad, i.e. self-sacrifice in the service of Allah (Post, J et al. 2003). The members of the Sri Lankan LTTE denote their suicide bombings to mean "to give oneself". The Tamil Tigers take an oath where they promise to give their everything including their life (Strenski 2003). The most important thing to note is that the understanding and interpretation of self-sacrifice is not a traditional concept in Islam and has been condemned by various Muslim clerics (Davis, J 2003). Rather, it should be understood as a major theological development on the part of Islamists like bin Laden (Jones, J W 2006). For most extremist religion followers, the unique way to salvation is through following exclusively one's own tradition. Any acceptance of others' is considered to be betrayal of their own deepest religious convictions as is evident in the debated that surround homosexuality, marriage and ordination (Ganzevoort, R. R 2006).

WHY TAKE THE EXTREMIST PATH?

It is crucial to understand an individual in the extremist environments like socio- political, economic, psychological and the factors of religion that develop radicalized opinion in them. It is in such an environment and how and individual perceives oneself and their specific belief can we trace why they move towards religious extremism (Szlachter, D and Piotr Potejko 2017). Co-occurrence of religious fundamentalism and the fact that the only way to salvation is following one's own religion. On religious lines of role of religion to solve one's socio-political conflicts and the degree of violence used to attain that can help in defining the criterion features of political extremism-both religious and secular (Altemeyer B and B Hunsberger 1992).

It is presumed that personal differences in terms of religious extremism arise due to the components of particular believes about oneself and the social world. There can be several variables to measure an individual's psychology and what shapes a religious extremist, namely authoritarian personality, legitimization of social order, social trust, cynicism- political and social and assessment of one's quality of life (Szlachter, D and Piotr Potejko 2017). *use data as in https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4bgx.13?seq=9#metadata_info_tab_contents. However, we need to understand the difference between psychology of aggression and violence and that of trauma and witness to violence, as religion has different roles to play in each perspective. Similarly, violence needs to be understood not only in terms of physical injury that is observable but also mental and spiritual oppression and desecration of symbolic structures, specially connected with religion. Any kind of violence should be taken more than mere grouping it into theoretical categories. It should be constructed in social context where moral judgement and social powers are also expressed. How a violence is expressed is after all a matter of perspective. Further, violence exhibits itself not only in terms of an individual's behavior but in forms of texts, structures etc. (Ganzevoort R 2006).

A number of factors goes into making a person commit violence ranging from biological to psychological. Researchers have shown that violent behavior and stress are correlated and reinforce each other at neurophysiological level (Kruk M.R et all 2004). Violence and hormones, especially testosterone is co-related (Soler, Vinayak and Quadagno 2000) and so are violence and brain function (Raine, A et al 2000). Apart from these two, violence also depends largely on social learning. Social learning pertains to the idea that a particular behavior, in this case violence, may not be an innate or a result of detrimental experience but is shaped by observing others personally or through medium like media (Bandura A 1973). Furthermore, another factor in turning towards violence can be notion of strength and satisfaction by gaining status, or power. Violence and coercion may serve social purpose in influencing others for achievement of something, to express one's grievances and initiate social justice or to enhance and defend social identities (Tedeschi J.T and R.B Felson 1994). However, it is important to note that for violence, like genocide and terrorist attack individualistic theory does not suffice and thus, theories of collective violence need to complement it. Processes like racism, sexism and homophobia, which can be taken to be covert processes are collective in nature and not individualist (Suarez-Orozco, M.M and A.C.G.M Robben 2000).

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Even if researches are not enough to show neurological connection between religion and violence, it cannot be disagreed that religion does play important part in justifying innate aggression. Researches show that when social learning theories are applied on religion and violence, the interactions can be seen in the terms of both-peacemaking and violence. Religious tradition on the message of violence is quite ambiguous. Several important stories which are part of religious tradition may be quite violent and may shape up the religious roles and intervention of God of an individual (Sunden, H 1975). Many a times religion fosters pro social behavior, however the fact that religion in majority of times religion instills ethnocentrism, dogmatism, authoritarianism and prejudice (Wulff, D.M 1991).

A deep understanding of religious texts reflects its co-relation with violence. Scriptures justify the use of violence by holy warriors which transcend social or legal purview. Certain religious group tend to interpret religious texts in their own way giving rise to utopian communities with inclination towards violence. Then there is "clash of civilizations" where identities of a group are exemplified at religious level. Notion of suffering and martyrdom easily leads victims to undertake violence instead of resisting it (Selengut C 2003). Incidents of performing religious violence are filled with numerous religious symbols where religious imagery is absolutized. The violence perceives a metaphysical cosmic war with resemblance to religious resemblance (Juergensmeyer, M 2003).

Apart from strong ties with religious teachings like radical value system, binary thought process, loyalty towards cult leaders who have spiritual and emotional influence etc. religious extremism possesses other strong idiosyncratic characteristics. Such terrorist groups craft conceptual and emotional manipulations like oversimplification, deceit and mass suggestions which routinely precedes the physical form of terror (Hindery, R 2003). The extensive infrastructure of indoctrination by the way of private and isolated gatherings among members lays the strong foundation of struggle through decades. The commitment of religious terrorists is seen to belong to the highest order in terms of determination and spirit. Religious terrorism transcends boundaries of nation-states in terms of loyalty. The followers do not aim to protect the nation state or any territory.

The induction of a person in a religious terrorist organization is done through a traditional network that exists depends mainly on person-to-person relationship. In several cases the recruiter is usually a known member and shares and seldom a member is recruited through third party (Post J M, et al 2003). The recruited members internalize their values and are true believers who subordinate their individuality to the bigger ambitions of the group (Post, J M 2002). For religious terrorist, winning a battle is not the ultimate aim but they may find peace in the whole process of attainment of martyrdom in the public opinion and instead focus on the popularity that they achieve on satellite TV more than on the ground. Massive recruitment of young men or women is the main target of religious terror groups. Their vulnerability, passion, commitment and hunger for action are easily exploitable. Global ideology of hatred, easy access to technology and openness of free societies fertile grounds for religious terrorism (Jinying, F 2006).

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