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Religion and Violence: 'Islamic' Terrorism or Terrorizing the Victims?

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Abstract:

The notion of religious violence has gained much currency in present era. It is not to mean that violence in other forms is completely absent, rather the fact that the violence which has become a global issue is seen as a monopoly of religion and of one particular religious group – Islam. The discourse on religious violence is often reduced to discussions of Islamic terrorism at least in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks and often leads to misrepresentations and assumptions of Islam and violence.

This paper is an attempt to reflect on the relationship between religion and violence and discuss how the whole notion of religious violence and Islamic terrorism particularly has a bearing on Islam and Muslims. It intends to dwell on the counterterrorism policies and securitization faced by Muslims in the West. This paper shall discuss the various theories on religious violence and the validity of the notion. It shall also offer clarifications on the idea of Islamic terrorism with reference to jihad and thereby question the idea of 'Islamic' terrorism. In other words, does this form of violence have religious roots or can one talk of terrorizing the victims?

Key words: Religion, violence, Islam, Muslims, terrorism, War on terror

INTRODUCTION

Enlightenment brought with it forces of reason and rationalization. It was widely believed that the power of reason would erode the inconsistencies of religion, the fact that is was based on fear of the other, superstition, unprovable beliefs, etc. Religion was expected to disappear by twentieth century (Bell 1978). Max Weber (1978) argued a close association between disenchantment and modernity. Disenchantment and the process of rationalisation marked the process whereby natural world and human experience becomes less mysterious and comprehended more by means of reason and science rather than magic and religion. This marks the advent of secularization and declining role of magic and religion. On the other hand, Berger (1999) argues that "the world today with some exceptions is as furiously religious as it ever was and in some places more so than ever" (Berger 1999: 2). The idea of a modern, secular society was based on the premise that religion would suffer a decline and there would be relegation of religion to the private sphere. This idea however remains contested as in recent years there has been reappearance of religion in the public realm. Jurgen Habermas (2008)[1] argues a case for a "post-secular society", where religion maintains public influence in what is called a secularised society.

In contemporary times, religion has increasingly come to be associated with violence and violent activities around the world. It is not to mean that violence in other forms is completely absent, rather the fact that the violence which has become a global issue is seen as a monopoly of religion and of one particular religious group – Islam. The discourse on religious violence is often reduced to discussions of Islamic terrorism at least in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks and often leads to misrepresentations and assumptions of Islam and violence. There is often a lack in understanding the social, political motives behind such acts and simply reducing it to

religious terrorism. The presumed association of Islam and violent activities has led to securitization of Islam and thereby it becomes important to attempt a coherent study of assumptions of religion and violence in relation to this particular faith.

This paper is an attempt to reflect on the relationship between religion and violence and discuss how the whole notion of religious violence and Islamic terrorism particularly has a bearing on Islam and Muslims who are securitized and faced with *Islamophobia* in contemporary times. This paper intends to cogently structure arguments around the notion of 'religious violence' with reference to Islamic terrorism and thereby question the idea of 'Islamic' terrorism. In other words, does this form of violence have religious roots or can one talk of terrorizing the victims?

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on secondary sources of information, using various sources ranging from books, journals, newspaper, media reports, et al. It is interdisciplinary in nature as it can be contextualized within terrorism studies, Islamic studies and sociological insights.

Religion and Violence

Religion and violence seem to have an odd attraction. In fact relation of the two is not a new phenomenon and discussions of violence in religious traditions in form of ritual sacrifice, martyrdom have been always present. Violence and terrorism is nothing new, it can be seen in terms of phases, earlier it was communism and now it has come to be religion. As pointed out by Price (2012)

"The first instances of modern terrorism, in the second half of 19th century in Russia, were committed by anarchists. Waves of terror that followed offered other secular ideologies

including nationalism and socialism. Religion did not become an important cause of terror until the 1980s with the beginning of civil war in Lebanon, the Iranian revolution.." (Price 2012: 26).

David Rapport identified four modern waves of terrorism, namely, nihilist, anti-colonialism, the New Left, and the current religious wave (ibid.). There is an assumption that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence rather than what may be identified as secular. Scholars like Charles Kimball and Bruce Hoffman saw a close association between religion and violence. Hoffman (1993) argued that religious violence has a transcendent purpose, divine duty which loosens the constraints on mass murder. Religion for him functions as a legitimizing force which sanctions violence.

William T. Cavanaugh challenges this idea in his work – *Myth of Religious Violence* (2009). He does not attempt to deny that human beings may be motivated by religion to act in violent ways rather he attempts to question the idea that rational, modern secular ideologies is something distinct from disruptive, divisive religion that is inherently prone to irrational, intractable violence. He argues that secular ideologies like nationalism, capitalism, etc. are no less prone to be absolutist, irrational and divisive (Cavanaugh 2009). He argued that "in Western societies, the attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state" (ibid.: 4). The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. Their violence is portrayed as irrational while other as peace making. There are invoked distinctions of 'their' violence and 'our' violence, where the latter has legitimacy and justifications.

Mark Juergensmeyer in his work '*Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence'* (2000) reinforces the

idea that religious violence is ubiquitous and particularly lethal threat to world order and security. He believed that religion provides moral justification for killing and gives the impression that they are spiritual scenarios. He clarifies that it does not mean that religion causes violence but it often provides the mores and symbols that may lead to acts of terrorism. He argues that

> "religion personalizes the conflict, it provides personal rewards—religious merit, redemption, the promise of heavenly luxuries—to those who struggle in conflicts.. It also provides vehicles of social mobilization, it gives the legitimacy of moral righteousness in political encounter. It absolutizes the conflict into extreme opposing positions and demonizes opponents by imagining them to be satanic powers. So religion can be a problematic aspect of contemporary social conflict even if it is not the problem, in the sense of the root cause of discontent" (Juergensmeyer, 2008:258).

In examining recent acts of religious terrorism he tries to understand the cultures of violence from which such acts emerge. He refers to these acts as forms of public performance rather than aspects of political strategy aimed at providing a sense of empowerment to desperate communities. Often religion's ties with violence are explained in terms of aberration arising from fundamentalism but Juergensmeyer offers a different perspective and looks for explanations in forces of geopolitics and focuses on cultural, global, social contexts of religious violence. He was of the view that religion does not ordinarily lead to violence and it "happens only with the coalescence of a peculiar set of circumstances-political, social, and ideological when religion becomes fused with violent expressions of social aspirations, personal pride and movements for political change" (Juergensmeyer 2000: 10).

Similarly, Daniel E. Price (2012) argues that those who are engaged in terror activities in the name of religion share a common faith with the majority of people who are not engaged

in terrorism, which points to the fact there are certain differences amongst them which might be rooted in religious texts, ideologies, etc. Price argues that although religion has potential to facilitate violence, it is the social, economic, political and other factors which lead to an interpretation of religion which justifies violence and terrorism (Price 2012: 26). This leads us to reflect on the aspect of Islamic terrorism.

ISLAMIC TERRORISM

In events of recent past the relationship between religion and violence is dominated by discussions of dangers of Islam, *Islamophobia*, an irrational fear of things Muslim, has taken on new urgency. There are arguments offered that the demise of communism led to a 'threat vacuum' for the western world and Islam serves to fill the 'threat vacuum', since "Islam constitutes the most pervasive and powerful transnational force in the world, with one billion adherents spread out across the globe. Muslims are a majority in some forty-five countries ranging from Africa to Southeast Asia" (Esposito 1992: 4) which makes it a potent threat. There is widespread prejudice that violence and terrorism is inherent to Islam. Many texts on Islamic terrorism involves the discussion of doctrines of *jihad, jahiliyyah, dal al Islam*, etc. which try to evoke the idea that Islamic violence emerges from Islamic doctrine and practice rather than political or ideological concerns. Such perceptions have led to questioning of religion itself, that it cannot play a role in the wellbeing of societies. In drawing from the above discussion, it becomes important to analyze the role of religion, and political-cultural, nationalist undertones of Islamic terrorism.

Most discussions of religion and violence, particularly Islam and violence are with reference to the notion of *jihad* in Islam. *Jihad* "is an Arabic word that means 'struggle'" (Silverman 2010: 6). If we look into the epistemology of the

term *Jihad* it "derives from the root *j-h-d*, denoting effort, exhaustion, exertion, strain" (Landau-Tasseron 2010: 5). It is important to clarify that the "qur'anic concept of jihad was not originally connected with antagonism between the believers and other people" (ibid.: 7) rather its usage had other meanings. It may be associated with notions whereby believers prove their worthiness for divine reward to the deity (ibid.) or it could be a test for differentiating between true believers and others. However, over the years jihad has predominantly come to be identified as war.

Bassam Tibi in his work *Islamism and Islam* (2012) points out that "in classical and traditional Islam, *jihad* can mean either self-exertion (*jihad al-nafs*) or physical fighting (*qital*)" (Tibi 2012: 135). It must be noted that "Muslims fought the jihad wars of the *futuhat* from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries in order to extend *dar al-Islam* (the world of Islam) throughout their known world. These wars were in line with the Quranic concept of jihad as war, not terror (ibid.). There is an image of Islam constructed as the 'religion of sword'. Tibi (2012) argues that "the idea that religiously inspired violence is historically central to Islam encourages the conflation of modern *jihadism* with traditional *jihad*" (ibid.: 137). Often what is happening today isunderstood in terms of the historical fact of proselytization which was combined with jihad wars. The spread of Islam and proselytization may have been carried out in the name of jihad but the nature of jihad differs. Tibi emphasizes on the need to differentiate between traditional jihad and jihadism, whereby jihadism a reinterpretation of jihad.

Richard Jackson (2007) draws attention to the ways in which 'Islamic terrorism' is interpreted and socially constructed as an existential threat. The notion of 'Islamic terrorism' is laden with its own set of assumptions and embedded political-cultural narratives. Jackson argues that using terms like *Islamism, Jihadism* are highly contestable since there is much

variation within Islam and Islamic movements to be reduced to a monolithic identity. Jackson draws on Fred Halliday to contest the idea of religious foundations of Islamic terrorism, according to whom, religious ideas are secondary to strategic decision in employing violence in pursuit of political goals. He argues "the fact that the majority of terrorists are men, for example, does not mean that being male predisposes one to terrorism" (Jackson 2007: 415). As pointed out by Halliday, the Islamist discourse, although often expressed in religious terms, is a form of secular or nationalist protest at external and internal domination and forms of exclusion.

Irm Haleem (2012) argues that justifications for radical Islam or Islamic extremism are consequentialist rather than theological in essence and there is nothing distinctly Islamic about Islamist extremism. The existing literature of Islamic terrorism can be categorised under different threads, those who put forward theological explanations and point to religious scriptures as motivation for violence (Haleem 2012: 3). On the other hand there are those who look for other causes of violence. For instance, Christoph Reuter deals with Palestinian Islamist extremists argues that 'religious convictions do not form the basis of the motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers rather it is their rejection of western values' (Haleem 2012: 3).

However, most western understanding of Islam is rooted in clash of civilization thesis which divides 'us' and 'them' which in turn has not only shaped western understanding of violence but also of just and 'unjust' wars (Haleem 2012: 4). One primary assumption here is that Islam is in essence violent, which further leads to other assumptions:

> "(1) Islamist extremism is Islamic in essence and thus an unavoidable manifestation of an apocalyptic religious culture; (2) the violence unleashed by Islamist extremists is preemptive and not reactionary; and (3) Muslims, by the very fact of subscribing to Islam, are tacitly supportive of violence and brutality" (Haleem 2012: 4).

Such notions of clash of civilizations have been criticised by many. One prominent line of thought comes from Talal Asad (2007) who criticised the western world's exclusive focus on Islam as an explanation for violence rather than acknowledging the fact that violence is universal in nature as is "committed as much by transnational and supranational groups as by official (legitimate) governments, both in the West and in the Muslim world" (Haleem 2012: 6). Another point of contention is that there seems to be little correlation between religion and violence or suicide terrorism if we take the case of LTTE. Such other groups deconstruct the idea of Islamic preoccupation of terrorism or a certain mode of terrorism like suicide terrorism.

Despite much discussion on this prejudiced notion of Islamic terrorism, Islam and Muslims continue to bear the brunt of the terror activities that occur round the globe.

SECURITIZATION OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS

Muslims are becoming the new Jews of the world (Malik 2004: 3). The antisemiticism which defined the hatred towards Jews, seems to be acquiring a new life where Muslims are the target group. Muslims are seen as the threatening other, the 'suspect community'. This has come to be called *Islamophobia*. It can be defined as "an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims" (Runneymede Trust 1997:4). *Islamophobia* should not be understood as an abrupt phenomenon in the aftermath of 9/11. It has deep historical roots like anti-Semitism and xenophobia (Esposito 2011: xxii). It was triggered by the immigration of Muslims to the West from various regions, the Iranian revolution, September attacks and other attacks that followed 9/11 (ibid.).

The impact of September 2001 attacks was not confined to the United States alone, but changed the way Muslims were perceived worldwide. In this cultivation of stereotypical notions of Islam and Muslims, the media and to an extent intellectual

discourse has played a major role. It is not unknown that "in the global 'West', the racialized 'Muslim other' has become the pre-eminent 'folk devil' of our time" (Morgan and Poynting 2012: 1). This idea of 'folk devil' has its roots in a moral panic which is often engineered by elites for political benefits. Elite engineered moral panic can be defined as "when an elite group deliberately undertakes a campaign to generate and sustain concern or fear on the part of the public over an issue or group that is not terribly threatening to society" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994 in Bonn 2012: 84). An important example of this is the construction of Iraqi Folk devils by the Bush administration and the US news media after 9/11 which exploited the pre-existing negative stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims in order to support the invasion of Iraq (Bonn 2012).

The point of contention is how 'War on terror' has turned to 'War on Islam' and Muslims. As pointed out in the work of Morey and Yaqin (2011) the distorted images of Muslims paints all Muslims as homogeneous, barbaric, incompatible with the West and how such images have only been exaggerated post 9/11. It seeks to trace the restricted ways in which Muslims are stereotyped and "framed" within the political, cultural, and media discourses of the West. After 9/11 there was emergence of a new distinction between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims'. The difference being that the latter were responsible for terrorism, while the good Muslims would support the State in the war against bad ones. This, however could not hide the underlying message that every Muslim was presumed to be bad unless proved otherwise. Madood Mamdani who dealt with the aspect of 'culture talk' pointed out that after 9/11, the practice of terrorism has increasingly been associated with Islam and Islamic terrorism is offered as an explanation of the events of 9/11 (Mamdani 2004). This to a large extent highlights the 'closed' view of Islam leading to *Islamophobia*.

Today the Muslim population is seen as threatening and as 'suspect communities'. Suspicion is manifested in form of ban on building of new Islamic minarets in Switzerland, banning headscarves in French schools, et al. reflect the fears and prejudice towards Islam and Muslims. Such fears of Islam and Muslims were confirmed by London bombing in 2005 which was the result of 'home-grown' terror, in other words, the culprits held responsible for this incident were young British Muslim citizens (Allen 2010; Hussain and Bagguley 2012). There were other incidents of riots in parts of United Kingdom in 2001, viz. Oldham, Bradford; the Satanic Verses Affair in 1989, murder of Dutch filmmaker in 2004, Paris attack in November 2015, Brussels bombing 2016, all has led to much stereotyping of Muslim community which has led to *Islamophobia* (Allen 2010; Hellyer 2009; Runnymede Trust 1997). The terror activities in the recent years have ensued a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' which led to prejudiced notions that Muslims neither want to be nor will they ever be able to be a part of who 'we' believe we are (Allen 2010: 222).

The Western political discourse has come to be a correlation between the war on terrorism, internal security measures and immigration policy with a specific focus on individuals of a Muslim background (Cesari 2010). This rising anti-terrorism and security concerns fuel a desire to compromise liberties and restrict Islam from the public space. This translates into difficulty to accommodation of Islam for instance accommodating women's head and face covering, resistance to building mosques, extending religious instruction in public schools to Muslims. In addition to this there are grave concerns of radical preaching in the mosques which has led to increased control over the sermons of imams (ibid.)

The counterterrorism policies have led to discrimination towards Muslims in many ways, especially in case of nationality and citizenship tests (Monshipouri 2010). Such measures and policies "tend to undermine the efforts of those

Muslims who have sought to bridge their faith with Western values. Such counterterrorism policies are likely to reinforce radical tendencies in diaspora communities, further intensifying identity politics and local unrest" (ibid.: 46). This securitisation is not confined to one region rather spreads throughout the Western world. The requirements of naturalization, attendance of civic integration courses and passing standard language tests in Germany, law of daily security in France, *Life in the UK* tests, cracking down on terrorism in terms of interrogations, stop searches, detentions, etc. all lead to harassment of Muslim immigrants.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE?

The most important question that poses us is whether this violence is religious at the core. We need to understand the intricacies of the phenomenon and look at the related aspects of elite engineered moral panic, just and unjust war and xenophobia. This whole notion of Islamic terrorism and that Muslims as a monolith whole susceptible to violence needs to be understood in terms of elite engineered moral panic and how the 'War on Terror' or more appropriately 'War on Islam' can be seen as the artwork of this elite engineered moral panic. This further leads one to question the difference between 'just' and 'unjust' wars.

There are two prominent forms of violence which came to for by 20th century – terrorism and ethnic cleansing or genocide (Ali 2004). The former is carried out by "non-state actors and is directed against states in order to make demands upon and extract concessions from the state. The other form of violence, ethnic cleansing, is actually carried out using the state's repressive apparatus" (Ali, 2004: 521). Despite this there is only discussion and debates over the first form of violence – terrorism and that too specifically in relation to Islam. A predominant belief in the world today is that war, terrorism

and *jihad* is an Islamic preoccupation which is absolutely alien to the other groups – religious and secular. However as Melissa Finn (2012) has elaborated in her work that if we examine the values underpinning *jihadism* and martyrdom operations and then substitute them for western ones, these concepts may not be as alien as they seem (Finn 2012). Finn cites the example of *jihadis* who supposedly work for a religious cause and the soldiers who are recruited for nationalist cause (Finn 2012: xvii). Both of these groups have a cause worth dying for, for one it is the defence of homeland and the other is religion itself. Both of them "employ a mythology of valour, glorifying fighting itself" (Finn 2012: xviii). Such comparisons are neither drawn to bring out similarities nor to justify any form of violence. It is simply to question the idea of a 'just' war and more importantly to challenge the idea of 'religious' violence. We need to comprehend the extra-religious forces which lead to violence which manifests as 'religious violence' and also look at other forms of violence like state sponsored violence.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages I have critically looked at the notion of 'religious violence'. This paper lays emphasis on the fact that violence and terrorism are not a monopoly of Islam and Muslims are not inherently predisposed to it. I have also tried to lay emphasis on the fact that rather than Muslims being seen as a threat, violent and terrorists, there is need to look at the other side of the coin and point to their securitization and *Islamophobia*, whereby Muslims who are at the receiving end of this terrorism are being terrorized in the larger intellectual and media discourse. There is a need to comprehend the politicization behind this terrorizing of Muslims, in terms of moral panic created by the elites, xenophobia and biased notions of a 'just war'. The notion of religion sponsored violence

and particularly, 'Islamic' terrorism is primarily a social construct rather than a fact.

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