

The Root Causes of Terrorism

The Root Causes of Terrorism:

A Religious Studies Perspective

Edited by

Mahmoud Masaeli and Rico Sneller

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INTRODUCTION

RELIGION: BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE

MAHMOUD MASAEI AND RICO SNELLER

Everybody seems to know today what we mean when we speak about religion and violence. Hearing these words, we can hardly avoid thinking of ISIS, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and other religiously acclaimed terrorist actions, and of the cruel performance they give on the world stage. Fifteen years after the tragic event of September 11th, and less than one year from the attacks in Paris, bombs are still blasted, and innocent people are being killed by terrorist groups. A fact that is basically ignored is that many victims of terrorism are themselves believers in God, often Muslims, who step away from the violent reading of their religion. A short look at the terrorist events in the last two decades reveals the fact that more than anyone else, innocent people of the Middle East, who are religiously inspired, are paying for the viciousness of terrorism. Most of these sinisterly threatening events are motivated by religious claims or are taking place in religiously affected places. In this turbulent context of the nastiness of terrorist violence, the first question that preoccupies us is whether religious faith is indeed the main stimulus of terrorist acts. But, do we really know what “religious faith” is? Or violence? Is religion the main cause of terrorism, or does terrorism still arise because of leaders who brainwash and coach future terrorists so that they kill under the banner of religion? Religious imagination seems to hold here an influential power in the creation of “delusion”, orienting the “bigoted” believers toward the fulfillment of their religious duty against those who are religious in a different way or are not religious at all. Religion, in this sense, is tightly allied with political aspirations, as can be seen in most of the current instances.

In spite of the religious justification of the act of killing, “enlightened” religious leaders and religious minded people believe and argue that

religion is a source of love and affection. Therefore, they say, since the ultimate message of religion is about the appreciation of the principle of humanity, the sacred texts of religious traditions must be read from a “humanist” perspective. This is a growing attitude among many religious people today who believe that God is merciful and compassionate, hence never orders resentment, violence, and killing of innocent people. In addition, they hold that no true religious tradition appreciates self-serving interpretations promoting violence against others. If religion disregards love, affection, and compassion as its essence, it drops into the dire vortex of ideological dogma, as it is observed, for example, in the case of ISIS and Boko Haram, the two main currents of today’s terrorism. Therefore, they conclude, any interpretation that admits violence and acts of killing would be a mere provincial reading of the religious texts, agitated by purposeful intentions aiming at political goals.

In this light, a conceptual clarification seems indispensable, even if this leads to further obfuscation. For once we try to get a grip on both concepts, we might discover that we all too soon lose track of their alleged susceptibility to reflective manipulation.

Religion

As this volume is concerned with religion, we will start proposing some thoughts about this difficult notion. Easy as it seems to go from the signifier *religion* to its signified referent (viz., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.), things become more complex when we consider the signifier’s origin. *Religion* comes from the Latin *religio*, a term primarily portraying a political, rather than an ontological, and let alone a religious, interest. The Roman Empire had to deal with its many cultural practices, the majority of which it allowed for, and some of which it forbade. Judaism counted as *religio licita*, whereas the up-and-coming Christianity was a *religio illicita*, its adherents considered atheists. There used to be no ancient Hebrew word for “religion” (contemporary Hebrew, drawing on biblical Hebrew, resorts to the word *dat*, originally meaning “knowledge”), and it is doubtful if Jesus would have understood what it means to be religious. The first Christians, coming from both Roman occupied Israel and elsewhere, obviously did not have a word for their belief system either, let alone that they considered their beliefs in terms of a system. The contemporary Arabic word used for “religion” is *din*, an originally Persian word also used in Zoroastrianism and among Christian Arabs, which expresses something like “the right way.” In the Qur’an,

which starts with *Bismillah Hir Rahman Nir Raheem*, God as the source of mercy and compassion, God has been called *malik yaum ad-din*, King of Judgment day. Interestingly, therefore, the term *din* is ambiguously used by referring both to the divine and to human things. Finally, what is called “Buddhism” today tends to designate itself with the Sanskrit word “dharma” (teaching, or, doctrine) – yet another extremely multifaceted term – the previous meanings of which seem to have even ontological connotations.

The reader will fully understand us if we will not continue this brief survey by taking into account “primitive,” or rather, pre-literate, cultures. We would immediately fall prey to not only anachronisms but also to erroneous attributions of conceptuality to cultures lacking the most basic assumptions and premises of contemporary “western” societies.¹ That this does not in the least entail a deprecatory judgment follows from what we try to address here: concepts confuse.

It is likely the case that “religion” is a non-religious term outlining the political interests of a state to identify, if not to domesticate, the practices of its citizens. “Religion” will certainly not be the only term revealing extra-religious concerns; one might question conceptuality (the creation of concepts) at large as an attempt to bring phenomena under control.²

It would, however, be all too easy to do, as if “religion” does not exist today due to the unruly, extra-conceptual dimensions the concept tries to cover. For even though concepts have as their background interests that transcend the conceptualized phenomena, those phenomena may very well start “obeying” their conceptual denominator. To put it more concretely: someone strongly affected by Jesus’ message of hope and forgiveness, or someone adhering to Muhammad’s ideals about complete dedication to God, may very well start calling him or herself a “Christian”, or a “Muslim,” implying, for that matter, an adherence to a global phenomenon put under the header of a common, difference-erasing denominator, “Christianity, “Islam,” or, at best, a “religion.” Even people from India, a country with one of the greatest varieties of cultural practices and beliefs, do not shy away from calling themselves “Hindu” today. The Chinese and Japanese languages, lacking an “appropriate” word for “religion,” have not prevented the speakers of these languages from introducing foreign terms or from exploring their own language in the search for the approximate equivalents needed to participate in the global vocabulary enhanced by Western culture’s unmistakable expansion.

Still, “religious” individuals may continue to feel uneasy with their fellow believers, with whom they find themselves surprisingly united under a common concept. The force of language, then, deprives such individuals of expressing their uneasiness, since “they are all Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc., are they not?” Completely distancing themselves from their (violent, credulous, irascible, etc.) fellows seems just as unrealistic as taking full responsibility for their intractability. The individual finds him or herself engaged in (and immersed by) ambiguity itself, an ambiguity enhanced by singular (“authentic”) experiences, conceptualizing strategies from the outside (politics, state, etc.), and, not to forget, both internal (“you belong to us, so you should also...”) and external group pressure (“you also belong to them, so you are just as well...”). Global discourse creates its own reality which at some point cannot be distinguished anymore from extra- or pre-discursive realities.

Violence

The concept of violence, so widely applied, is just as tricky a concept as religion is. Whereas religion at least pretends to be a purely descriptive term and to merely designate an extra-linguistic reality, violence cannot keep up such appearances anymore. Whoever deems an act violent, albeit his own, cannot avoid expressing his or her disapproval. True, the Marxist tradition, from Karl Marx to Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre,³ and beyond, has always taken violence to be an indispensable ingredient of progress (“class struggle”); but it has never approved of violence as something intrinsically good, its value having always been esteemed as instrumental.

Again, if we took into account pre-literate cultures and their use of “violence,” we would soon be left conceptually empty-handed, which would, in this volume, inhibit our attempt to come to terms with what is today so frequently called “religion and violence.” Not only do such cultures dispense with a conceptual approach to the phenomenal world, but they also lack the moral premises involved in the term “violence.”⁴

The historical and systematic unity of world religions may be debatable, but this does not exonerate those who say they merely adhere to their founders. The factual existence of these religions cannot be neglected anymore, neither by their believers nor by any other witnesses.

Just as little can we shun the notion of ‘violence’ today, a careful conceptual analysis is and will always be requisite (e.g. to escape the

penchant of actual rulers to identify any attack on their legitimacy with violence pure and simple, and their own response to it with sheer justice). There is no intrinsic need to relegate violence to the sole sphere of those governed, since the latter, if they feel ‘oppressed’, may simply retaliate with a primordial, provocative violence from the side of the authorities.

We owe the French philosopher Sartre a thorough analysis of the term “violence” and its presuppositions. In his post-war *Cahiers pour une morale*, Sartre holds that violence can only be meaningfully applied to a human freedom, or, to a human artifact in which this freedom is incarnate. I can only violently destroy man-made tools (and of course human bodies), but it would be meaningless to speak of using violence against a rock or a piece of wood. Violent behavior violently neglects, defies, challenges, or disrupts a free will, either directly (by killing someone), or indirectly (by blasting, let’s say, a door or a gate). It disrupts a form – an organic unity in a complexity – offering resistance.

Interestingly, Sartre concludes, violence is bound to fail, since freedom cannot be eradicated. Sartre’s examples (rape and *autodafé*) are most elucidating: by raping his victim, the rapist rescinds what he wants to elicit, and by burning the heretic, the inquisition demolishes what it wants to conquer (i.e. free, voluntary engagement).⁵ Worse, they tacitly know this in advance. Violence, Sartre insists, is ultimately a rejection of two things: one’s own finitude and the other’s liberty. Acting violently is acting in bad faith (*par la mauvaise foi*). A quick glance at the effects of contemporary suicide attacks in Israel, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, or France, immediately shows the relevance of Sartre’s analyses. But, we would have to add immediately, government oppression of minorities or dispossessed people will be equally unsuccessful. Disentitlement and impoverishment cannot deprive someone of his or her inalienable condition of being free.

Here, it would not make sense to integrally follow Sartre’s analyses of violence since they are not integrally unproblematic. For example, when Sartre states that violence (i.e. neglect of human freedom) is unavoidable in *any* form of human cooperation, one could retort that such a thesis relies on a defective subject theory that cannot account for intersubjectivity. Not even Sartre’s belief in human freedom is beyond doubt; however, rejecting the latter could very well be compatible with accounting for something that cannot be renounced – something of infinite value. Here, Emmanuel Levinas reminds us of the inviolable face of the other, Martin Buber of a Thou-experience, and Gabriel Marcel of an original, mysterious “presence” that cannot be objectified.

This book investigates and addresses the root causes of terrorism from a religious studies perspective. The themes analyzed and discussed mainly include a range of religious and philosophical issues, such as religious violence in scriptural monotheism, radical interpretations of religious texts, militancy and sacrifice, apocalypticism and terrorism, and religious terrorism in today's particular cases.

The novelty of the content of this book derives from the new approaches adopted by the authors, to not only trace the causes of terrorism in various religious interpretations and realms, but also to reach a common definition of the main religious causes beyond the diversity of perspectives, and advance solutions against religious-inspired terrorism.

The main objectives of the book (which can also be used as a textbook) include the following:

- Introducing the common root causes of religious-inspired extremism and terrorism
- Examining the contexts in which religious beliefs turn into violence
- Presenting the peaceful interpretations of sacred religious texts with the aim of illustrating the peace-loving capacity of the faith traditions
- Discussing the means of improving a dialogue among religions for mutual understanding with the aim of creating a counter-terrorist discourse
- Highlighting the dynamism of shifting away from self-regarding to the common other-regarding capacity of religious thoughts

This book has been structured around three main themes: (a) Violence and Religious Monotheism in the context of erupting terrorist instances. This part explores the implications of the religious justification of terror for socio-political life; (b) Religion and non-violence with an insight into the condition of obscurity in an understanding of religious faith; (c) Religious violence in context by drawing on specific cases.

Notes

¹ Cf. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Paris 1910.

² One of the most important philosophical critiques of conceptuality can be found in the work of the German philosopher Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), mainly in his

(untranslated) magnum opus *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, Bonn 1929-1932.

³ Cf. Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, Paris, Marcel Rivière, 1930 (1908); Walter Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', 1921, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Hrsg.: Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, Bd. II, 1; Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960f.

⁴ Simone Weil has shown this for the epos at the dawn of western civilization, Homer's *Iliad*, the main character of which, she argues, is *force* (not violence). Cf. Simone Weil, 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force' 1940-1941, in : *Œuvres*, pp. 529-552. Trans. *Simone Weil's The Iliad or Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*. James P. Holoka, ed. & trans. Peter Lang, 2006. Also cf. Lévy-Brühl, *op. cit.*

⁵ Cf. "L'idéal impossible de la violence c'est de contraindre la liberté de l'autre à vouloir librement ce que je veux." *Cahiers pour une morale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, 212.

CHAPTER ONE

BIBLICAL STORIES AND RELIGION AS THE ROOT CAUSE OF TERRORISM

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Executive Summary

The following essay explores the relationship between terrorism and religion. Religious terrorism or theoterrorism (as the author prefers to call it) has a social dimension, a psychological cause, and a religious factor. In this article, the author focuses on this religious “root cause” of terrorism using Biblical stories and real life examples.

Keywords: Theoterrorism, Islam, religion, violence, ISIS, Biblical stories, apostasy and blasphemy

Biblical Stories and Religion as the Root Cause of Terrorism

One of the most elusive and, at the same time, one of the most important notions in science is “cause” (Russell, 1935, p. 147). What is the “cause” of me writing on religion and biblical stories as one of the root causes of terrorism? From my own – probably too optimistic – view: because I want it. The root cause of this contribution is my “will”. On the other hand, the theme has been suggested to me by the editors of this book, so is *their idea* not a little bit more “root cause” than *my will*? But why did the editors of this volume think it a good idea to make a book on the root causes of terrorism anyway? Probably because terrorism is one of the most annoying contemporary social problems. So is not *terrorism itself* the real root cause of me writing this essay?

What seems to appear from these preliminary musings is that the notion that there is one and only *one* cause for something we want to explain is a delusion. All events in this world are caused by probably more than one and in most cases, many causes. This is also the case with contemporary religious terrorism (or as I like to call it “theoterrorism”).

The aim of this essay is to explore the relationship between terrorism and religion. That does not mean I want to deny that terrorism comes in many variants. There is, of course, political terrorism, the Baader-Meinhof group for instance (Stefan, 1998). In political terrorism, a political conviction is a motivating factor in perpetuating the type of violence we call “terrorist violence”.¹

Political terrorism is not controversial in the sense that *not* many people feel the impulse to deny that a political conviction can be instrumental in terrorism. But for one reason or another, many people feel the urge to deny the existence of “religious terrorism”. The whole term, they explain, is a misnomer (Rapoport, 1984, pp. 658-677). On closer inspection, the “religious” aspect of religious terrorism appears to be “political”.

It is this widespread conviction that I hope to challenge in this essay: religious terrorism is really “religious” in the sense that the religious element in the worldview which motivates *e.g.* Yigal Amir to shoot Yitzhak Rabin,² or Michael Adebolajo to hack drummer Lee Rigby to death,³ can only be denied by tampering with the concepts, by a redefinition of the word “religion”.

Religious terrorism or theoterrorism (as I prefer to call it) has a social dimension: youngsters fighting in Iraq or Syria, trying to inaugurate a caliphate were estranged from the societies in which they were living (Mekhennet, Sautter, & Hanfeld, 2008). Theoterrorism also has a psychological cause: becoming a terrorist requires a certain mindset (Reich et al., 1990). But theoterrorism is also impossible or unthinkable without the *religious factor*. In this article, I will focus on this religious “root cause” of terrorism. I think this is necessary because it is so often neglected (at the end of this essay I will give some striking examples of this).

Theoterrorism has its base in the idea that there is a personal, omniscient, omnipotent, personal deity who has issued certain commands to his believers in this world, which have to be executed, no matter at what prize (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2003; Selengut, 2013; Avalos, 2005). Loyal believers

(in their own view “pure” and unadulterated, although in the eyes of the outside world “fanatic”, “fundamentalist” and “zealous”) is the group from which theoterrorists can be derived.

Contemporary theoterrorism seems to be inspired by the revival of a fundamentalist religious worldview (Ruthven, 2004; Rutheven 2002). What we seem to witness nowadays is a return to premodern ideas about blasphemy, apostasy, heresy, and religious freedom (or rather the denial thereof) (Dershowitz, 2007; Herrenbery, 2014, pp. 1-19).

The best way to explain this may be by means of an example.

The Hebrew Bible on Apostasy and Blasphemy

An important text to understand contemporary theoterrorism is Deuteronomy 13:6-11, which states:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend—saying, “Let us go worship other gods,” whom neither you nor your ancestors have known,⁷ any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other,⁸ you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them.⁹ But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people.¹⁰ Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.¹¹ Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness.⁶

This passage is important because it confronts us with a pre-modern conception of freedom of religion, or rather the absence of that. Freedom of religion, in the sense to freely choose a religious conviction, to change that religious conviction and even to completely forfeit that conviction, is a modern idea. It is non-existent in pre-modern societies. What we find here, is this:

- (i) Apostasy, heresy or blasphemy is rejected in the strongest words (I will not distinguish between these, in itself, different concepts here, because it is not necessary for the point that I want to make in this chapter);⁴
- (ii) These crimes, sins, errors are to be punished with capital punishment;

- (iii) This punishment is, according to contemporary standards, quite cruel (stoning);
- (iv) Any member of the community is exhorted to execute those punishments (vigilante justice);
- (v) There are no exceptions to be made: you also have to punish *e.g.* the members of your own family;
- (vi) The motive for this punishment is what we today call “general prevention”: discouragement of potential transgressors of the law.

For a proper understanding of theoterrorism, it is highly important to know that apostasy, heresy, and blasphemy are rejected in the strongest possible terms (i). But it is also useful to understand that in this specific passage the administration of justice is not deferred to the state,⁵ to the national government, to judges or people who act in some sort of official capacity to take action against the culprits of the crime of apostasy (iv).

In Deuteronomy 13:7 it is also said that when there are persons around trying to seduce you to apostasy, “you must not yield”. These warnings are, of course, perfectly legitimate. Exhorting someone “not to yield”, when someone else tries to convince that person to adopt a certain belief, is part of a legitimate discussion in society (also modern societies), what views to adopt and what views to reject. The story gets a more sinister turn, though, when “not yielding” appears to develop in showing “no pity” (Deut. 13:8). The full meaning of the line of argument, however, is disclosed when in Deuteronomy 13:9 we read the punch line:

But you shall surely kill them (Deut. 13:9).

This is the essence of theoterrorism. An individual citizen is supposed to act as the executioner. And, as if the author of the bible wants to make sure his message has come across, it is added: “Your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterward the hand of all the people (Deut. 13:9)”.

So “all the people” are supposed to take part in the execution of the blasphemers. You simply cannot leave this sacred obligation to the state or to official government.

The Stoning of Soraya M.

In *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, a 2008 American-Persian film adapted from French journalist Freidoune Sahebjam's book *La Femme Lapidée* (1990), the father is invited to be the first one to throw a stone at his daughter. And then her husband and sons. And in the British drama-documentary *Death of a Princess* (1980),⁶ based on the true story of Princess Maha'il, a young princess executed for adultery together with her lover in 1977, it was the rightful "husband" who executed his victims.⁷

Regarding the motives of theoterrorism, it is important to zoom in on the last part of the passage from Deuteronomy, the passage where the social function of the extra-judicial punishment is highlighted. The "enticers" (Deut. 13:6), *i.e.* the people who try to seduce you to "worship other gods" (Deut. 13:6-7), are to be punished for the sole purpose that "all Israel shall hear and be afraid" (Deut. 13:11). So the function of violence is to strike fear into the hearts of others. This is, of course, an important element in all definitions of terrorism (Coady, 2004, p. 3-15).

There is a real "religious element" involved in the sense that theoterrorists usually have the feeling they have no real choice - they simply have to act. The violent act they have to perpetrate is simply divinely mandated. The law they act upon comes "from above" (not the arbitrary man-made laws democracies claim to be regulated by).

Islamists like Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, or the ruling theocrats in Saudi Arabia, have the feeling that if they do not punish people like Salman Rushdie or Raef Badawi (the Saudi blogger convicted to 1000 lashes for making propaganda for liberalism), this will cause disorder and disruption ("fitna") ("Lash and Jail," 2013; Badawi, 2015; Kepel, 2004).

What Deuteronomy (13:6-11) distinguishes from the story which I am now going to introduce, is that Deuteronomy is not a narrative. It is an objective spelling out what has to be done with those who seduce you to apostasy. The next part of the Bible I want to discuss is a *story*, the story of Phinehas. And, as is always the case with stories, one may differ about the interpretation. Nevertheless, especially in combination with what we can read in Deuteronomy and other parts of the Bible, I do not think the interpretation of the story of Phinehas places us before insurmountable hermeneutical conundrums.

The Story of Phinehas in Numbers 25

In my interpretation of this story, the story of Phinehas⁸ is supremely important, because here we meet the first theoterrorist in flesh and blood: someone prepared to kill for the sake of religion or the supposed will of God, although his behavior contradicts the laws of the nation-state.⁹ The figure that is only alluded to *in abstracto* in Deuteronomy 13:6-11, and referred to as “you” (Deuteronomy 13:8), now stands up and presents himself to the reader with a name: Phinehas. So he is the first theoterrorist activist with a name, to be precise. Phinehas is also the biblical role model for zealots during the occupation of Palestine by the Romans. For the Zealots, paying tribute to heathen Rome was considered to be a breach of your religious duties. As the British theologian, S.G.F. Brandon (1907-1971) writes: “For the Zealots, such acts constituted apostasy towards Yahweh, the god of Israel, and they were prepared to face death by crucifixion for their faith. But the resistance they offered was not passive. Phinehas was their prototype, whom Yahweh commended for his zeal, and the Maccabees were examples of what might be achieved through the martyr-ideal” (Brandon, 1971, p. 5; Kirsch, 2004, p. 80).

The story of Phinehas is told in the book of Numbers 25 and begins when the people of Israel were staying at Shittim, the last wilderness stop; its precise location is uncertain, according to the commentators in the New Oxford Annotated Bible (Coogan et al., 2007, p. 223). It is a story about sex, freedom of religion, state religion and the compliance of the citizen with *either* religious law *or* the law of the state (which can be something entirely different).

The story is relatively short, so I can quote the passage *in extenso*. I will quote from the New Revised Standard Version:

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab.² These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.³ Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD’s anger was kindled against Israel.⁴ The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the LORD, in order that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.”⁵ And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.”⁶

Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation

of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting.⁷ When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand,⁸ he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel.⁹ Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.¹⁰

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:¹¹ “Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites.¹² Therefore say, ‘I hereby grant him my covenant of peace.¹³ It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.’”¹⁴

The name of the slain Israelite man, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites.¹⁵ The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian.¹⁶

The LORD said to Moses,¹⁷ “Harass the Midianites, and defeat them;¹⁸ for they have harassed you by the trickery with which they deceived you in the affair of Peor, and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister; she was killed on the day of the plague that resulted from Peor.”

An Interpretation of the Phinehas’ Story

What does this mean? Again, it is a story. It lacks the commanding tone of Deuteronomy 13 with its “you must” and “you shall”. It is a story about a murder, to name one thing. But does that have any significance for our time? And if so, what?

The story starts with the occurrence that the Israelites “began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab” (Numbers 25:1).¹⁰ The Bible also tells us what these sexual relations were. The women of Moab invited the “people of Israel” (from the context of the story it is clear that only the men of Israel are meant here) “to the sacrifices of their gods” (Numbers 25:2). Apparently, the men willingly complied because, as the Bible relates, “the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Numbers 25:2). The commentators of the New Oxford Annotated Bible interpret the words of the Bible as “illicit sexual activity”, perhaps intermarriage in the context

of idolatrous feasting (p. 223). The Moabite people are often associated with illicit sexual activity in the Bible (Gen. 19:29-37).

As to the nature of the rival gods, it is revealed that it is “Baal of Peor”, which means the Baal deity associated with the place of Peor. This kindled the anger of the Lord against the people of Israel, the Bible relates. God commands Moses to punish the Israelites. He says:

Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel (Numbers 25: 4-5).

Apparently punishing the chiefs by impalement was meant to appease the deity. The impalement of Numbers 25 seems to have the same function as the stoning in Deuteronomy 13:10 (“Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God”).

Then something important happens. An Israelite man brought a Midianite woman “into his family”. Moses saw this, as well as the whole congregation. One man took immediate action: Phinehas. The “you” that is only referred to in abstract terms in Deuteronomy 13 gets personalized: one particular person in the religious community takes its responsibilities. Phinehas took his spear and followed the Israelite man into the tent. There he “pierced the two of them” through the belly. Because this supposedly happens in a single thrust, the suggestion is made that the two were having intercourse, as the commentators in the New Oxford Annotated Bible note (p. 223).

Why the story begins with Moabite women, yet the woman taken into the tent by the Israelite man is identified as “Midianite” is a subject of controversy among bible scholars. Most of them suggest that the story of Numbers 25 is composed of two separate stories (Fleurant, 2011, p. 285-294).

In the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, we see also that the names of the man and the woman who were slain by Phinehas are revealed. The name of the Israelite man was Zimri, son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. The name of the Midianite woman was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, ancestral house in Midean (Numbers 25:14-16).

Having the names of the two victims gives the story some sort of a feeling of intimacy. Now we know: Zimri and Cozbi died because some sort of

religious fanatic thought it was *not* their inalienable right to revere the gods of their own choosing. Phinehas thought that *he* should decide what *they* had to believe. It is the same pretense that Mohammed Gelee has when he forces himself into the house of the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard to behead the artist, because he, Gelee, pretends to know that his god, or his prophet, does not like cartoons (“Cartoon Trial,” 2011).¹¹ As they can be sure that they have inflicted the wrath of the one and only god on the right person, theoterrorists usually do not fear death as long (Pantucci, 2012). Their only worry is: would their god agree with what they have done?

What makes the story of Phinehas’ killing particularly interesting is the Lord’s reaction. There are two ways in which this reaction was made manifest. First by means of a natural phenomenon, *i.e.* by a plague. A plague which had been raging among the people of Israel, one that had already killed twenty-four thousand people (Numbers 25:9), was stopped. So apparently the Lord was *satisfied* with Phinehas’s way of handling the problem. One may see this as an indirect way of God by expressing his appreciation of the double murder. Second, the Lord made his reaction known to Moses. This time in a much more direct way, *viz.* by expressing satisfaction verbally. As the Bible says “the Lord spoke to Moses” (Number 25:10) saying:

Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore, say, “I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites” (Numbers 25:11-13).

Apparently, there was a causal connection between the halting of the plague and Phinehas’ extrajudicial killing. The stopping of the plague was a *reward* for Phinehas’ action. The Lord was satisfied with Phinehas’ zeal. And we can also, so it seems, read the Lord’s implicit reproach of Moses in this story. However, this last point is less clear than the other things I have read in the story.

The Prophet Elia

Phinehas is what terrorism experts call a “lone wolf”. He does not act at the behest of a specific organization. He seems to have been “radicalized” on the basis of his own convictions, the conviction that the law of God has

to be executed, even if the legitimate authorities (Moses in his case) fail to do what is divinely sanctioned.

In many cases, though, theoterrorists operate in some sort of organizational capacity. The Kouachi brothers, who killed the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, were operating on the orders, or with the explicit sanctioning, of Al Qaida Yemen (Laes, 2015; Attali, 2015). So next to the theoterrorist *practician*, there is the theoterrorist *ideologue*. One of the most fanatic theoterrorist ideologues was the late Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011), an American and Yemeni imam and lecturer.¹² He was very active on the internet with a blog, a Facebook page, but also a driving force behind the al-Qaeda magazine *Inspire*, where many instances of incitement to murder were published against supposed critics of Islam such as Salman Rushdie, Kurt Westergaard, Stéphane Charbonnier (the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* who died in the assault on January 7, 2015)¹³ and others.

When we might consider Phinehas, a literary precursor of the theoterrorist practitioner, so we may consider the prophet Elia as the literary precursor of contemporary theoterrorist ideologues. It was Elia who commanded to kill when was proven, or supposed to have been proven, that certain people revered the “false gods”.

Elia also spelled Elias (Hebrew Eliyyahu), who flourished in the 9th century BCE, ranks with Moses in saving the religion of Yahweh from being corrupted by the nature worship of Baal that was also the source of controversy in the Phinehas story. The Bible tells the story of Elia’s prophetic career in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reigns of two kings: King Ahab and Ahaziah. The story is to be found in 1 Kings 17–19 and 2 Kings 1–2 in the Old Testament.

Elia distinguished himself with a firm monotheism that had to be defended against rival gods (Wright, 2009; Kirsch, 2004). He claimed that there was no reality except the God of Israel. No God, but God (Aslan, 2005). It is for this very reason that he is also recognized as an important prophet in Islam.

In contemporary terms, we would qualify him as an extremely “intolerant” religious leader, at least if we take “tolerance” to mean that you put up with other religious creeds than your own (Mendus et al., 1988, p. 96; Zagorin, 2003, p. xiii). In his rejection of the foreign gods, Elia did not mince words. As Leonard W. Levy (1923-2006) writes in his classical

study *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (1993): “Inoffensive speech was not the hallmark of Elijah, Isaiah, or Jesus himself” (Levy, 1993, p. 572).

Elia’s main counterpart is King Ahab (who ruled c. 874–c. 853), who was married to Jezebel (died c. 843 BCE) (Hazelton, 2007). Ahab was the son of the Israelite king Omri, who had already allied himself with the Phoenician cities of the coast. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon (the modern Lebanon). Jezebel plays the role of the seductress. With her Tyrian courtiers and a large contingent of pagan priests and prophets, she propagated a rival religion to the religion of Israel, viz. the religion of Baal in the royal city of Samaria. So during the reign of Ahab, there was not one religion in Israel but two.

In a modern pluralist society,¹⁴ this would be nothing special, but this was not the way Elia saw the matter. Accepting both Baal and Yahweh as objects of veneration made the Israelites guilty of blasphemy, apostasy, and heresy, the kind of charges contemporary Islamist ideologues make against the royal family in Saudi Arabia or against the president of Afghanistan. From the perspective of the Islamist ideologues, such leaders are even sneakier than the openly secularist and atheist leaders of the United States and the former Soviet Union. In their case, at least, you know what you have. In the case of those liberal sycophant pseudo-Muslims that pretend to be the representatives of Allah in this world, you have to deal with dangerous figures because not all serious believers see through their facade.

Jezebel’s policies and Ahab’s condoning of these policies also caused a kind of syncretism, again something orthodox believers abhor. And the theoterrorist not only abhors this, he thinks he must act like Phinehas had to act. It is his special mission to punish those who commit these acts of blasphemy and apostasy with great severity. This is the most urgent religious command.

Ahab’s spouse, Jezebel, also spelled Jezabel, plays a central role in the controversy between Ahab and Elia. She was accused of provoking internecine strife that enfeebled Israel for decades. She has come to be known as an archetype of the wicked woman. When Jezebel married Ahab, she persuaded him to introduce the worship of the Tyrian god Baal-Melkart, who was a nature god.

Jezebel was a woman of fierce energy, and she was accustomed to destroying those who opposed her. It was her command that most of the prophets of Yahweh were killed. And for the religious believers on the Israelite side, this is seen as a legitimation for the equally cruel treatment that Elia meted out to the Prophets of Baal. When Jezebel heard of the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, she angrily swore to have Elia killed, forcing him to flee to save his life (1 Kings 18:19–19:3).

Elia was from Tishbe in Gilead. The narrative in 1 Kings relates how he suddenly appears during Ahab's reign to proclaim a drought in the punishment of the cult of Baal that Jezebel was promoting in Israel at Yahweh's expense.

The Experiment at Mount Carmel

The miracle which Elia tries to make the God of Israel perform was also characteristic of the mindset of the other prophets, which are presented in the Bible. In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, captured Jerusalem. He destroyed the temple and he also removed a large part of the population to Babylon (Russell, 1972, p. 310). During the period which has come to be known as the "Babylonian captivity", the Jewish religion went through an important development. Originally, Yahweh was a tribal god. He favored the children of Israel, but there were also other gods. Quoting "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7), B.R. Tilghman writes: "These commandments do not deny that there are other gods, but insist only that it is Yahweh who is to be worshipped by the Israelites" (Tilghman, 1994, p. 29). And other peoples revered other gods.

After the Babylonian captivity, a more aggressive form of monotheism came to the fore. Now the idea "Thou shalt have none other gods but me" became more and more important.

The prophets were instrumental in this process. They first taught that the worship of other gods, heathen gods, was a sin. So Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elia and others came to teach that one and only god was the right one and that he would punish all kind of idolatry (Russell, 1972, p. 310). As Russell says: "there was a growth of every form of exclusiveness" (p. 312). Marriage with gentiles came to be forbidden, for instance. When Alexander the Great conquered Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, and the Punjab he promoted a friendly fusion between Greek and barbarian. He himself married two barbarian princesses, and he compelled

the leading Macedonians in his army to marry Persian women of noble birth (Russell, 1972, p. 220). The results of this policy were widespread and on the whole fruitful. As Russell writes: "The result of this policy was to bring into the minds of the thoughtful men the conception of mankind as a whole" (p. 220). From *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story*, intermarriage has always been seen as a perfect instrument to bridge the chasm between different ethnic groups. On the other hand, it is also miscegenation that conservative groups in particular abhor. But this is also anathema to the God of the Hebrew Bible. Characteristic for the temper of mind of the monotheist God is: "I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples" (Leviticus 20:24).

The most explicit statement of this exclusivism is to be found in the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is said to be the work of two different prophets. One lived before the exile, and the other after. The second also called Deutero-Isaiah, is the one who first introduced the most uncompromising idea of God, claiming "There is not God but I" (Russell, 1972, p. 312).

Elia's struggle with the prophets of Baal is an important stage in this process. At Mount Carmel, the prophets of Baal and Elia came together. In front of the audience assembled there, Elia solicited a miracle. First, he harangued the people and the prophets of Baal in particular. Elia said: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

The people remained silent. Then Elia reminded the people and the prophets of Baal that although he was alone, and the prophets of Baal were four hundred and fifty, he would like to submit their mutual claims to venerate the one true God to a test. "Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God" (1 Kings 20:24).

All the people agreed. The prophets of Baal cried: "O Baal, answer us!" But their summonses were all in vain. There was no voice and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made, but to no avail. Elia mocked them: "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened". But, as the Bible relates "there was no voice, no

answer, and no response”. Then it was Elia’s turn. He declaimed: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back”. Then, the Bible tells us, “The fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering”.

The people concluded that this must be a sign that Elia spoke the truth. They fell on their faces and said: “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God”.

“Seize the Prophets of Baal”

To modern ears, this story may sound astonishingly naïve. In Spinoza’s famous chapter VI on miracles of *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), the philosopher writes:

As men are accustomed to call Divine the knowledge which transcends human understanding, so also do they style Divine, or the work of God, anything of which the cause is not generally known: for the masses think that the power and providence of God are most clearly displayed by events that are extraordinary and contrary to the conception they have formed of nature, especially if such events bring them any profit or convenience: they think that the clearest possible proof of God’s existence is afforded when nature, as they suppose, breaks her accustomed order, and consequently they believe that those who explain or endeavor to understand phenomena or miracles through their natural causes are doing away with God and His providence (Spinoza, 1951, p. 81).

From a post-Spinoza (post-Human (Hume, 1975, p. 86-131) or post-Paineian)¹⁵ perspective, miracles prove nothing, at least not what people who perform or solicit miracles claim they prove (divine intervention). Besides, is it not possible that the God of Baal is superior in many respects *except* in his capacity of performing miracles? But this is not what has to concern us here. Within the context of my reflection on theoterrorism, what is most important in this story is the clash between the pretensions of the *king* and the *prophet* of Israel to have the final word on what the state-religion should be. Who is the ultimate source of religious authority: the king (in this case basically allowing religious pluralism) or the prophet (in this case attempting to inaugurate the state religion of one god)?

In a theocracy, as the religious leader Elia wants to establish, this is the prophet. The king can be corrected and punished by the religious leader.¹⁶ It is also the religious leader who is authorized to inflict punishments upon the people and a disobedient king. In another episode of this conflict Elia says to King Ahab: “Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you” (1 Kings 21:20). The king could have said: “Who are you to lecture about the religion of this realm?” The king could also have said, as Frederick the Great (1712-1786) did, that everyone in his kingdom could live according to the religion of his own choice (“Jeder soll nach seiner Fassung selig werden”). Every state-mandated compulsion that Elia wants to introduce in matters of religion is anathema to the modern human rights perspective and certainly to the First Amendment of the American Constitution.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (Levy et al., 1990; Jefferson, 1984, p. 510; Madison 1999, p. 29-39).

Now let us compare this with the ambitions of Elia. Is this “anachronistic”? It certainly is, but that is what seems to be a useful approach here. Let me reiterate: what I want to do is *understand* what sort of opposition the secular nation-state is confronted with nowadays (Juergensmeyer, 2008). And with that aim in view, a comparison with the mindset of the biblical prophet Elia can be highly illuminating.

What Elia wants is (to use the words of the American First Amendment):

- (1) The establishment of *one specific* religion;
- (2) Frustrating or prohibiting the *free exercise* of other religions;
- (3) Probably also *abridging the freedom of speech* for advocates of other religions than the religion of Yahweh;
- (4) Abridging the right of the other believers to *assemble peaceably*, et cetera.

It is very hard to reconcile the ideas of Elia with the ideas that we find in international human rights documents and modern constitutions, like the American Constitution, European constitutions, or the European Human Rights Charter.

After the experiment with the prophets of Baal had turned out disastrously for the competing religion, Elia exclaims: “Seize the prophets of Baal; do

not let one of them escape” (1 Kings 18:40). The Bible relates the subsequent events: “Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there” (1 Kings 18:40).

So, the religious competitors were *killed*. This was, as we have seen in our analysis of Deuteronomy 13:6-11, all in accordance with the prescriptions of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ The Bible does not tell us (i) if it was *Elia himself* who killed the prophets of Baal, (ii) if the crowd assisted him in seizing the prophets, or (iii) if they collaborated in the sinister act of killing their religious competitors. But one thing is certain: Elia incited the mob assembled on Mount Carmel to vigilante justice. Elia contests the sovereignty of the king (Ahab) on religious grounds, and incites to murder on the basis of “messages from above”.

Within the context of our theme, this is hugely important. If Phinehas can be seen as the first theoterrorist *hitman*, Elia can be seen as the first theoterrorist *ideologue*, inciting believers to subvert state authority in the name of theocracy.

Not Religious?

Now no one would be inclined to deny that Phinehas’ motives were *not religious*. They were religious because he wanted to serve the one and only God. He wanted to show loyalty to the divine law (in his perception) which forbids apostasy and heresy.

Elia also contested the sovereignty of the state in which he was living. Again, on *religious* grounds. He pretended to know what the one true god wanted and he wanted to introduce a one-God-state (while Ahab and his wife Jezebel basically favored a form of religious pluralism and were, therefore, much more in alliance with contemporary views of religious pluralism).

Now, the mystery is that when *contemporary* religious fanatics want to punish blasphemers and apostates (Khomeini, Adebolajo, the Kouachi-brothers), and they do it allegedly for the same reasons as their biblical icons, many commentators feel urged to deny the religious character of their engagement emphatically. Hillary Clinton, commenting on the military successes of ISIS or Islamic State, said: “ISIS is neither Islamic nor a state” (Merica, 2014). She wants to call ISIS’ activity, “violent extremism”. Clinton was asked to give her opinion on the Islamic State in