

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to discuss the use and usefulness of psychological theory and psychological methods in the study of religious violence. My analysis of previous research revealed an imbalance between data, method and theory. There are few psychological studies on religious terrorism based on first-hand empirical data. The analysis also showed that psychological explanations of religious terrorism are, in general, not sensitive to cultural factors. Religious terrorism is a culturally constituted phenomenon. It is therefore important that research on religious violence is based on theoretical and empirical approaches sensitive to the cultural construction of violence. This means that psychologists of religion must be willing to use novel and creative methods sensitive to the unique cultural context where the violent behaviour is acted out and interpreted by the actors of the violent drama, for example, discourse analysis or narrative research. In the self-corrective and growth-inducing feedback process between these methods and primary data it would be possible to develop valid psychological explanations of religious violence.*

**Keywords:** psychology, religious, violence, theory, method

## INTRODUCTION

Religious violence is a global phenomenon, involving all of the world's major religious traditions in one way or another. The theatrical ways the violent acts are staged and performed have attracted the media and hence covers the headlines of our newspapers and magazines on a regular basis. Religious violence is therefore something people talk about in dining rooms and offices all over the world, but talking about religious violence is not necessarily the same thing as explaining it. Media describe these horrible events and sometimes they even try to explain certain aspects of the religious violence in the contemporary world. However, these explanations seldom contribute to a more thorough understanding of the individuals who are committing and

suffering from these acts.

Religious violence is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, involving, among other things, political, sociological, and psychological processes. A thorough understanding of this complex drama therefore requires analyses of political processes on national and international levels, social processes on regional levels, and psychological processes on individual levels. Political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists thus have the potential to explain different aspects of religious violence and no one interpretative scheme from these disciplines can by itself explain the origin, nature, and dynamic of religious conflicts and terrorism.

The aim of this article is to discuss the use and usefulness of psychological theory and psychological methods in the study of religious violence. The focus on theory and method is (or at least, ought to be) self-evident in the context of psychological research on religious behavior. Mainstream psychological research aims to establish (method) facts (data) and to explain human behavior by discovering the underlying influences that shape the way people think, feel, and act (theory). The proper aim of psychological research has been debated among psychologists during the last decades leading to a methodological and theoretical rethinking in contemporary psychology (of religion) (e.g., Kvale, 1992; Smith, 1995; Carrette, 2001; Belzen, 2009). However, most researchers seem to agree that there ought to be a self-corrective and growth-inducing feedback process between data, method, and theory in well-functioning psychological research.

## **METHODS AND SOURCES**

Political scientists and sociologists have published quite a few empirical studies of religious violence based on first-hand empirical data (e.g., Jurgensmeyer, 2003; Stern, 2004; Oliver & Steinberg, 2005; Bloom, 2005). The structural, political and socio-economic conditions that lead to religious violence are thus fairly well understood. There is, however, an obvious lack of empirical examinations of psychological aspects of religious violence. We are then, to paraphrase Jerrold Post, still “primitive” in understanding the psychology of religious terrorism (Post, 1987). This is remarkable since religious violence is always committed by individuals; religious actors who have been formed by a religious community and who are acting with the intent to uphold, extend, or defend its values and precepts.

My analysis of previous psychological research revealed an interesting imbalance between data, method and theory. Most studies are based on

secondary sources, such as books and newspaper reports (e.g. Avalos, 2005; Jones, 2008). This means that the religious perpetrators are seldom given the opportunity to explain the motives for their acts. This fact has, to some degree, been compensated by the insights we can get by reading autobiographical material written by terrorists (e.g., Khaled, 1973). Nevertheless, it is not unproblematic to base a psychological analysis exclusively upon secondary sources and autobiographies, the main material used in many case-studies and psychobiographies (e.g., Dennis, 2005). One obvious problem is related to the fact that secondary sources will never give the researcher any possibility to ask the perpetrators the theoretically saturated questions that might be needed in order to develop valid psychological explanations.

The main reason for the lack of primary data on religious perpetrators is a lack of fieldwork. I think John Horgan is right when he says that “there is a worrying tendency for the ‘favorite method’ of social scientists to come first, when systematically devised research should first identify ‘the puzzle.’ This has been one of the most significant problems that has bedeviled psychological approaches to understanding why people become terrorists. What psychological theorizing does exist on violence is frequently built on unreliable, invalid, and unverifiable data, frequently due to a lack of efforts to ‘go native’” (Horgan, 2005, p. 37). Thus, a certain degree of rigidity, or conservatism, concerning choice of methods might be one reason why we have a lack of primary data in psychological research on religious violence, but there are also other factors that complicate empirical studies on suspected religious terrorists. Rex A. Hudson writes:

“Researchers have little, if any, direct access to terrorists, even imprisoned ones. Occasionally, a researcher has gained special access to a terrorist group, but usually at the cost of compromising the credibility of his/her research. Even if a researcher obtains permission to interview an incarcerated terrorist, such an interview would be of limited value and reliability for the purpose of making generalizations. Most terrorists, including imprisoned ones, would be loath to reveal their group’s operational secrets to their interrogators, let alone to journalists or academic researchers, whom the terrorists are likely to view as representatives of the “system” or perhaps even as intelligence agents in disguise. Even if terrorists agree to be interviewed in such circumstances, they may be less than candid in answering questions” (Hudson, 2005, pp.23-24).

I know, based on my own experience of collecting primary data in South East Asia, that it is very difficult to establish first-hand contacts with radical religious groups (Lindgren, 2014). However, I still think that it is possible –

even though it might be time-consuming – and important to establish the confidence-inspiring contacts that make psychological analyses of religious perpetrators, as well as victims, possible without compromising our credibility as researchers. As a matter of fact, some psychologists have succeeded to establish such contacts and making interesting psychological studies on religious violence, for example Taylor (1991), Kakar (1996), and Atran (2010). Moreover, there are scholars within allied fields who have gathered important materials of religious perpetrators during extensive fieldwork that can be (but is not) interpreted from a psychological perspective, for example Oliver's and Stenberg's illuminating study of suicide bombers in Palestine (2005).

### **METHOD, CULTURE AND MEANING**

Violence has been a part of human experience throughout human history. It is present in each one of us as a possibility, but that does not mean that we are born as religious perpetrators. On the contrary, there are empirical studies indicating that is quite difficult for people to overcome a profound disinclination to kill others, even during war and serious ethnic conflicts (e.g., Grossman, 1996; Scheper-Hughes, 1997). Killing, then, is something that has to be learned in the same way as we learn other cultural practices.

It is important to remember that religious violence is a culturally constituted phenomenon. As a cultural phenomenon, it is located within and between individuals in shared meanings and practices. These meanings are rooted in both the personal life histories of the participants of the violent drama and culturally available meanings. It is these meanings that give religious violence its tremendous power. The cultural construction of religious violence ought to have methodological and theoretical consequences since it indicates that various forms of religious violence can never be completely explained and understood in terms of a de-contextualized biology, physiology or psychology. To do so is to miss the point of these horrendous acts.

The editors of *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2005) have argued successfully, I think, that “meaning holds much promise as a unifying construct in psychology” (Paloutzian & Parks, 2005, p. 13). However, the crucial thing here is how meaning is understood and how it is analyzed within the context of psychological research on religious violence. Israella Silberman (2005) has offered a model for analyzing how internalized religious meaning-systems can facilitate violent activism. Drawing on second-hand sources, Silberman's discussion focuses on five processes through which religion can facilitate religious violence, for example, that “religions often contain values and ideas that may facilitate prejudice, hostility, and violence

by encouraging the consciousness of belonging to a select and privileged community, and by emphasizing the 'otherness' of those who are not following the tenets of the religion or those who belong to other religions" (2005, p. 535).

Silberman's analysis of the meaning of religious violence indicates the importance of taking into consideration the context of the acts; for example, sacred texts, doctrines, sermons, symbols, and narratives. These linguistic conventions are important since they stimulate and organize religious violence as a psychological phenomenon. However, by basing her work mainly on an unhistorical scriptural understanding of religions, Silberman's analysis is not sensitive to how different historical and socio-cultural contexts promote various interpretations of a specific religious meaning-system. In other words, the religious meaning system is idealized as an essence rather than analyzed as an unfolding culture-bound dynamic of belief and behavior. Silberman offers then a model for analyzing how de-contextual religious meaning-systems can facilitate religious violence (usually in hypothetical situations, as if every member of a particular religion is equally prone to follow every prescription in the Scripture), but it can not explain with any certitude *why*, *how* and *when* certain religious discourses facilitates specific violent acts, and it can not explain the idiosyncratic meaning of specific violent acts in certain religious discourses or cultures.

The meaning of the texts that concerns us as psychologists of religion, according to me, lies not in what is written into them but in what religious people read out of them and what they do with them. Therefore, it is very important that psychological research on religious violence is based on empirical approaches sensitive to the socio-cultural modelling of various religious meaning-systems. This imply that the psychologists of religion must be willing to use novel and creative methods sensitive to the unique cultural context where the violent behaviour is acted out and interpreted by the actors (perpetrator and victim) as well as the audience of the violent drama, for example discourse analysis or narrative research. These forms of analyses focus on how psychological phenomena are organized in actual speech and texts. Hence, the analysis of religious violence will focus on the discursive dimensions of religious violence, for example, how certain actors within a religious community secure a preferential right of interpretation by using various linguistic devices, and how priests/pastors/imams use metaphors, images, and stories in order to create a convincing version of an actual conflict during sermons in churches or mosques. In other words, the analysis focuses on the rhetoric and linguistic organization of religious language in speech and texts and its behavioral and experiential consequences. In the self-corrective and growth-inducing feedback

process between these methods and primary data it would be possible, I think, to develop valid psychological theories of religious violence.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS**

The simple fact that we are not born as perpetrators of religious violence means that we must become perpetrators one way or another. The process of becoming a violent perpetrator entails numerous possibilities. In order to understand religious violence, it is therefore important to describe and explain both *how* and *why* certain people choose to become part of a violent community while other people prefer to remain, or become, non-violent (which is not necessarily a passive attitude as it can entail a non-violent fight against oppression), even in times of serious conflicts. However, answering questions about why people may wish to become involved in religious violence may have little bearing on the answers that explain why people commit violent acts and why they maintain a violent pattern of behavior.

A hallmark of religious violence is that the violent acts are coordinated by a group of people belonging to the same reference group. Mark Juergensmeyer mentions that

“It takes a community of support and, in many cases, a large organizational network for an act of violence to succeed. It also requires an enormous amount of moral presumption for the perpetrators of these acts to justify the destruction of property on a massive scale or to condone a brutal attack on another life, especially the life of someone one scarcely knows and against whom one bears no personal enmity. And it requires a great deal of internal conviction, social acknowledgement, and the stamp of approval from a legitimizing ideology or authority one respects. Because of the moral, ideological, and organizational support necessary for such acts, most of them come as collective decisions...” (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p. 11).

This fact indicates that involvement and engagement in religious violence might best be understood as a process whereby an individual joins a specific group and internalizes its values and norms. An important area of research, then, is to explain *how* people become involved, and *why* certain people want to become involved, in violent religious groups.

Research on militant religious groups indicates that they tend to attract people from relatively deprived strata of the population (Pape, 2006; Hudson, 2005; Atran, 2010). Contextual factors, such as political repression, marginalization, unemployment, and the pattern of distribution of wealth and income, thus may create a pool of potential recruits for terrorist acts since they have less to

lose and a great deal to win if the social order is changed. But intensification of grievances or relative deprivation is not a cause in itself of radicalization. Potential recruits must be convinced that their problems are not inevitable and therefore can be changed through collective actions.

The process of joining a terrorist group follows, in general, a pattern quite similar to the pattern found in research on joining new religious movements:

“Potential terrorist group members often start out as sympathizers of the group. Recruits often come from support organizations, such as prisoner support groups or student activist groups. From sympathizer, one moves to passive supporter. Often, violent encounters with police or other security forces motivate an already socially alienated individual to join a terrorist group. Although the circumstances vary, the end result of this gradual process is that the individual, often with the help of a family member or friend with terrorist contacts, turns to terrorism. Membership in a terrorist group, however, is highly selective. Over a period as long as a year or more, a recruit generally moves in a slow, gradual fashion toward full membership in a terrorist group” (Hudson, 2005, p. 24).

It is important to observe here that the process is characterized by a slow gradual process into committed involvement in terrorist activity and a simultaneous gradual movement away from conventional society (cf. Kellen, 1982; Taylor, 1988). Moreover, it is important to observe the function of significant others in this process. This analysis of the process of joining a terrorist group is most likely valid for joining many violent religious groups as well. However, many questions still remain to be answered. For example, given that many people are exposed to the grievances that generate religious violence, very few will, according to recent research (e.g., Barber, 2003), proceed to increased engagement and subsequently become operational activists for a terrorist group. Why? Moreover, there are reasons to believe that the psychology of joining a violent religious group and acting as a religious perpetrator may differ between different individuals depending on, among other things, cultural factors. If so, how shall we account for these differences?

### **PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PERSONALITY**

In earlier research, it was quite common to explain violent behaviors in terms of psychopathology, for example, antisocial personality disorder (Cooper, 1977; Kellen, 1982) and narcissistic personality disorder (Post, 2004). However, it is important to realize that most of the studies indicating psychopathology among terrorists are based on secondary sources. The terrorists are thus

diagnosed at a distance, a quite controversial procedure that many readers seem to overlook. Moreover, it is true that there are some superficial similarities in the behavior of sociopaths and terrorists, for example, the readiness to kill, and a lack of empathy and compassion. But there are also many important differences making the explanation problematic. For example, antisocial personality disorders are characterized by egocentricity and an unwillingness to conform to communal rules. These persons are then not easily used in terrorist organizations or armies of any kind. Further, there are differences in the way the perpetrators chose victims; the sociopath kills for personal reasons or personal fantasies while the terrorists are motivated by ideology and choose symbolic victims for their acts.

More than thirty years of first-hand empirical research has revealed little evidence that terrorists are suffering from any form of severe psychopathology (Merari, 2010). However, this does not mean that pathological personalities are never found in terrorists groups. Some researchers have found such individuals in their samples, but they “were a rarity, being the exception rather than the rule,” and when they do appear “such personalities tend to be fringe members of the terrorist group, rather than central characters” (Silke, 2003, p. 32). Thus, as most simple answers to difficult questions, the suggestions of psychopathology have proved to be a false explanation of terrorist behavior. As Clark McCauley put it in the following statement.

“Indeed, terrorism would be a trivial problem if only those with some kind of psychopathology could be terrorists. Rather we have to face the fact that normal people can be terrorists under some circumstances. This fact is already implied in recognizing that military and police forces involved in state terrorism are all too capable of killing noncombatants. Few would suggest that the broad range of soldiers and policemen involved in such killing must all be suffering some kind of psychopathology” (McCauley, 2004, p. 37).

There are no indications that religious perpetrators would differ from terrorists regarding their mental health. But what about personality or personality traits?

The reason why certain individuals seem to be more attracted to become members of violent groups than others, is sometimes explained in terms of personality or personality traits in previous psychological research (e.g., Shaw, 1986). For example, some terrorist leaders have been diagnosed as extraverted personalities while other leaders have been diagnosed as neurotically hostile (Post, 1998). There are many serious problems related to these explanations (Taylor, 1988). In order to keep this article to a reasonable length, I will only highlight one problem related to cultural influences on

psychological functioning.

We must take into consideration that institutionalized religious violence takes place in various cultural contexts and that the actors involved in the violent acts are cultural beings. During the last decade, several different approaches and methods have been used within psychological anthropology, cultural psychology, and cross-cultural psychology to examine the relationship between culture and personality. Although considerable evidence points to the universality of some aspects of personality, for example the five dimensions (“the big five”) of extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness (e.g., McCrae et al, 1998), a considerable amount of evidence also indicates the existence of indigenous constellations of personality traits (e.g., Ho, 1998), as well as cultural differences in supposed universal personality domains, such as locus of control (e.g., Hamid, 1994), self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Lawrence, 1999), self-monitoring (e.g., Gudykunst et al, 1989), cognitive styles and field dependence (Figueroa, 1980), and authoritarianism (Lederer, 1982).

Thus, cross-cultural psychological research of personality dimensions has revealed many ways in which cultures differ in mean levels of personality. These cross-cultural differences might reflect a difference in the underlying trait that has been measured or that personality traits are not the same across cultures. This indicates that it is very problematic to use personality or personality traits, at least as they are defined and function in a Western context, to explain why certain people in various non-Western cultures become attracted to violent religious groups.

The focus on the proposed psychopathology of religious perpetrators, or on abnormal personality traits, tells us more about our own personal wishes about who commits violent acts than it does about the real perpetrators: it makes it possible for us, normal people with normal human capacities, to distance ourselves from them. Moreover, these explanations single out certain inherent characteristics of the perpetrators as the crucial factors influencing violent behaviors. That might illustrate a tendency among Westerners to overestimate internal factors and to underestimate situational factors in explaining the behavior of other people, the so-called “fundamental attribution error”.

When the behavior of others are defined as “terrorist acts”, it is not a giant leap to declare the other as mentally deranged or deviant in one way or another; crazy acts are done by crazy people. This kind of reasoning is a typical example of circular reasoning: crazy people do crazy things and we know that they are crazy because they are doing crazy things. However, most research indicates that they are not crazy and we can not identify any single personality or

personality traits that can thoroughly explain violent behaviors.

Thus, the decisions to join a violent religious group and commit violent acts might be a normal thing to do under certain circumstances. What are these circumstances? When and why do normal people commit violent acts like hijacking of airplanes, fake executions, detonations of vehicle bombs on city streets, and suicide attacks on public busses? Previous psychological explanations of these types of behaviors center on, among other things, biological factors, cognition, emotions, and social dynamics.

### **BIOLOGY, COGNITION AND EVOLUTION**

Psychological explanations of violent behaviors in terms of instincts, or other biological factors, have a long history within psychology and allied disciplines. One of the first representatives for this perspective was Sigmund Freud in his theory about dual human instincts: life instinct and death instinct. He thought that the death instinct is primarily directed to ourselves, but gets displaced onto others in certain circumstances.

Later, Konrad Lorenz (1982) developed a theory that humans have inherited aggressive impulses during their evolution that might explain the way violent behaviors are expressed among human beings today. Theories about the evolutionary and neuropsychological origin of violent behaviors have been developed within modern biopsychology. These theories, emphasizing the evolutionary advantage of violent behaviors in human prehistory, explain why these types of behaviors have survived and they locate the origin of violent behaviors in specific parts of the brain (e.g., Valzelli, 1981).

The modern cognitive science of religion has explicitly addressed the problem of religious violence and explained it terms of cognitive and evolutionary psychology (e.g., Boyer, 2001; Atran, 2010). For example, Pascal Boyer's explanation of fundamentalism and religious violence takes its point of departure in coalitional dynamics, a common feature in human interaction. Coalitions are a special form of association that "presupposes an activity in which joining is (presumably) voluntary, defection is possible, benefits accrue with cooperation and there is a notable cost in being a cooperator when others defect" (Boyer, 2001, p. 126). This form of association requires sophisticated computations of other peoples' reliability, since it is very important to be assured of other members' loyalty. The problem of possible defection is manifest in all coalitions in several ways, for instance, in a desire to punish those who have defected, a wish to punish those who have failed to punish the defectors, and a wish to "screen people by submitting them to various ordeals

in which they have to incur substantial costs to demonstrate their loyalty” (Boyer, 2001, p. 127).

Fundamentalism and religious violence, according to Boyer, can be explained in terms of coalition dynamics. He understands fundamentalism not as a religion in excess or politics in disguise, but as a reaction to the pluralism and value relativism of modern society. The modern society signals to the religious coalition that it is possible to believe and act in various ways without paying a heavy price for that. This means that defection from a specific reality construction is not only cheap but also very likely. Religious violence thus “seems to be an attempt to raise the stakes, that is, to discourage potential defectors by demonstrating that defection is actually going to be very costly, that people who adopt different norms may be persecuted or even killed” (Boyer, 2001, p. 295). The coalitional background explains several features of modern fundamentalism and religious extremism, according to Boyer, for instance, a concern with control of public behavior; a propensity to make the punishment of immoral behavior public and spectacular (in order to send a message to potential defectors of how costly defection can be); that most violent acts are directed to members of the same cultural and religious group; that the main target usually is a local form of modernized religion (Boyer, 2001, p. 295-296)

This explanation, mainly based on secondary sources, is interesting and consistent with the theoretical and methodological approach of the modern cognitive science of religion. But there are also obvious limitations to this explanation. First, the emphasis on the individual rather than the socio-cultural factors means that he neglects political and socioeconomic factors in the dissemination of religious violence. Second, in spite of the fact that he focuses on the individual, he fails to explain individual differences in violent behavior on an empirical/ethnographic level. We still don't know for sure why certain people join violent religious groups and commit violent acts while most people refuse to do so.

David Hubbard (1978) explained individual differences in violent behaviors in biological terms. He examined eighty imprisoned terrorists in eleven countries and found that nearly 90 per cent of them had defective vestibular functions of the middle ear. This impairment causes poor balance and coordination and he suggested that it was linked with antisocial behavior designed to gain attention and an inability to relate to other people. His argument was, however, “fatally undermined by serious doubts over the validity and reliability of his work. He never released detailed descriptions of the data he gathered or of his analysis procedures, and there have been no replications of his very unusual findings

since” (Silke, 2003, p. 35).

There are, nevertheless, some indications that biological factors might influence violent behaviors, for example, that men in general are more aggressive than women (e.g., Potts & Hayden, 2008) and most of the recruits to various terrorists groups are also young men (e.g., Sageman, 2008, Atran, 2010). However, we do not have any valid scientific evidence that biological factors can exclusively explain why certain people behave in a more violent way than others. Biopsychology is most likely a factor in combination with others that might predispose some individuals to engage in religious violence. The identification of important biological factors and analyses of how biopsychology might interact with socio-cultural factors in the constitution and dynamic of religious violence is therefore an important area of future research.

### **PASSIONS OF VIOLENCE**

It is a well-known fact in psychology that behaviors are affected by both cognitions and emotions. Religious violence has been interpreted as an emotional expression. This means, for example, that the religious perpetrators are interpreted as furious actors blinded by uncontrolled emotions of anger or hatred. This line of reasoning is usually based on an idea of a relation between frustration and aggression. John Dollard (1939) thought that a sense of frustration appears when people are thwarted from attaining an expected goal and this frustration causes aggressive behavior. Consequently, when an aggressive behavior occurs, a frustration is identified as the cause of the behavior. When it is impossible to identify the cause of the frustration, the aggression is usually displaced on something else instead. The theory of a causal relation between frustration and aggression was later on developed by Berkowitz (1965), Runciman (1966), and Friedland (1992). It has become a popular explanation of terrorism and religious violence (e.g., Avalos, 2005)

Religious groups involved in various forms of violent acts are usually suffering from some form of economic frustration, insult or humiliation that is expressed in the performance of the violent attacks. Some of the members of these groups have experienced these sufferings and frustrations themselves while others have experienced them indirectly through group identification. We know that one motivating factor for joining violent groups is hatred and revenge. The theory of frustration and aggression then has its advantages as it highlights certain important circumstances that might function as necessary, though not sufficient, causes of religious violence.

However, there are some problems with this theory as well, particularly when it is applied to religious violence. First, even though there are experiments supporting the hypothesis that frustrations led to increased aggression on an individual level, some studies do not back up this argument. For instance, studies that take into consideration the time factor have revealed that frustrations are not very long-lasting, and this indicate that frustrations might not be a prime motivator for well-organized violent behavior. Moreover, Stanley Milgram's experiments reveal that some forms of aggression are not caused by frustrations at all, but obedience to authorities. As will be shown below, there are important individual and cultural differences regarding socialization and obedience that might explain some features of religious violence in a more plausible way than the frustration-aggression theory. Finally, there are reasons to believe that frustrations might be a better explanation for expressive than instrumental violence and, as is known by now, most institutional religious violence, such as terrorism and ethno-religious warfare, are instrumental since it tends to achieve a goal beyond the violent act.

#### **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CONTEXT**

We know a great deal about the power of the situation and the group processes by which violent behaviors are created. These processes include, for instance, obedience and deferring to authorities (Milgram, 1974; Bandura, 1998), peer pressure to conformity (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989), deindividuation of the actors (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989), groupthink (Janis, 1972), discounting the effects (Bandura, 1998), dehumanizing the victim (Brennan, 1995), training, and routinization of the violent acts (Grossman, 1996).

Recent studies indicate that engagement in terrorist groups might best be understood as a result of idiosyncratic learning experiences. If that is true, then we have to focus our interest on the perpetrators' life choices and try to "identify factors in any particular situation that helps us understand why particular life choices have been made" (Taylor & Quayle, 1994, pp. 34-35).

Horgan has identified six situational-experiential factors – formulated as working hypotheses – that might predispose an individual for increased engagement in violent groups: (1) the degree and nature of previous relevant engagement, including prior knowledge of the conflict situation and exposures to the accompanying lures of engagement; (2) the nature and extent of relevant early experiences, for example victimization at the hands of security services; (3) the nature and extent of adult socialization, which might both affect the individual's openness to increased involvement and the willingness of the group to accept the adept; (4) a sense of dissatisfaction or disillusionment

with current persona and activity; (5) the nature of the community context and its consequences for the individual regarding, for instance, an expected value of involvement; and (6) the nature and range of competing alternatives and opportunities (Horgan, 2005, pp. 102-103). This indicates, as Drummond (2002) argues, that a critical conjunction of societal events and personal triggers lead certain individuals to become perpetrators of religious violence.

Horgan's process model, based on rational choice theory, is immune to the aforementioned critique of the explanations that focus on personality and personality traits since it is not trying to explain why people become violent exclusively on the basis of certain internal psychological characteristics, but focuses instead on the interaction between the individual and external factors in concrete situations (for example, rewards and status enhancement accompanying increased involvement in a violent religious group within certain social strata) that might "push" the individual towards an increased engagement in violent terrorist groups. Nevertheless, Horgan's model is also lacking in cultural sensitivity since it does not take into consideration cultural influences on human behavior.

Terror management theory, a recent theory in social psychology, begins from the idea that humans are the only animals that are aware that they are mortal (Pyszczynski et al. 1997). Attitudes are substantially affected by heightened awareness of one's own mortality, according to recent experimental research. After priming with mortality related themes, subjects are more punishing, less tolerant of ethnic differences (Greenberg et al. 1990), more attached to cultural symbols and values, and more aggressive against people who threaten one's own cultural world view than controls (McGregor et al. 1998). Thus, attachment to social identity is a consequence of the terror induced by mortality. "Many cultural institutions – shared symbols, shared values, a sense of group membership – are seen as buffers against this natural anxiety. According to terror-management theorists, cultural institutions are a (somewhat illusory) remedy to such feelings because they provide safety and protection" (Boyer, 2001, p. 205). Religion has proved to be a powerful terror management since it provides ultimate safety and protection in the face of mortality during ethnic and national conflicts (McCauley, 2002).

Terror management theory indicates that situations of heightened awareness of mortality might affect human behaviours in various cultures in similar ways. Thus, the influence of values of traditional cultures might not play such a decisive role in the socialization into violent behaviour during a violent conflict. This is, I believe, related to the fact that violence is mimetic and creates a culture of violence that affects peoples' cognitions and behaviours

in a more dramatic way than traditional cultures. A culture of violence, then, transforms not only the geographical space, but also shared meanings and practices of a distinct cultural group.

Nevertheless, the significance of a culture of violence and its impact on the individuals does not mean that traditional cultures are of no interest at all in situations of serious conflicts, because a culture of violence is always mixed up with cultural, beliefs, values and behaviours. A challenge for psychological research on religious violence is then to examine the mixture of cultures and their effects on the individuals. These examinations require extensive ethnographic research, combining various forms of primary and secondary data, for example, participant observations, interviews, archives, diaries, sermons, leaflets, daily papers, photographs, and graffiti. Drawing on these data, it would be possible, I think, to develop valid psychological explanations of *how* and *why* people in concrete situations become engaged in religious violence.

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

Religious terrorism is a culturally constituted phenomenon. It is therefore important that research on religious violence is based on theoretical and empirical approaches sensitive to the cultural construction of violence. This means that psychologists of religion must be willing to use novel and creative methods sensitive to the unique cultural context where the violent behaviour is acted out and interpreted by the actors of the violent drama, for example, discourse analysis or narrative research. In the self-corrective and growth-inducing feedback process between these methods and primary data it would be possible to develop valid psychological explanations of religious violence.

This work is a matter of discussion if or how religious violence is different from other forms of political violence. Many researchers, however, argue that religious violence is particularly violent (Hoffman, 1998; Laqueur, 1999; Harmon 2000; Jurgensmeyer, 2003; Avalos, 2005; Jones, 2008). If that is true, it means that psychological examinations of religious perpetrators would yield insights into the individuals for whom violence exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever.

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