

Disbelief About Belief

Why Secular Academics Do Not Understand the Motivations of Religious Fundamentalists

by [Maarten Boudry](#) (May 2019)



Skeptics, József Szurcsik

The Dutch newspaper *Financieel Dagblad* recently published a rather disturbing [interview](#) with a former member of the

Hofstad Network, a jihadist group that was active in the Netherlands in the first few years of this century. This ex-Islamist, named Jason Walters, threw a hand grenade at police during a raid in The Hague in 2004, and was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in 2006 for his part in terrorist activities. However, Walters deradicalized himself in jail, mostly by studying the natural sciences and reading philosophers such as Plato. First he disowned the ideology of jihadism, then he renounced the Islamic faith itself. He is currently conducting research into the social networks of jihadism as an academic at Leiden University. One of the most remarkable parts of the interview is his opinion about the work of his academic colleagues. According to Walters, the studies and theories that they have been publishing for many years about radicalization and salafism are “complete bullshit”.

As an academic myself, I usually shy away from using that sort of language, but I think Walters is not far off the mark. In fact, there is a profusion of (mostly contradictory) theories on this subject in academic circles, with little empirical support or theoretical validity. What these theories have in common is that they try very hard to ignore the elephant in the room, namely religious ideology. Every conceivable motive for, or potential root cause of, radicalization (itself a weasel word) has been examined over the years, except the one that the terrorists themselves say is at the root of their actions. Religion has hardly anything to do with it, according to these academics, except perhaps as a superficial pretext that is invoked by terrorists to disguise their “true motives”.

These “bullshit” theories have a long pedigree. Consider the influential theory of suicide bombing by political scientist

Robert Pape. In his 2005 book, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Pape used a refrain that many other authors were to repeat afterwards, namely that suicide bombing is not driven by religious belief at all. According to Pape, terrorists blow themselves up because they are deliberately pursuing a “specific secular and strategic goal”, namely “to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland.” That statement was already implausible back in 2003, when Pape wrote these words in the *New York Times*, but it has become even less credible as Pape has been forced to extend and distort the concept of foreign military occupation in such a way that his theory is always rescued from the facts. Take Pakistan, which has been an independent country since the end of British rule in 1947, and yet has seen dozens of suicide attacks in recent years despite having hardly any foreign military presence and certainly nothing that could count as “occupation”. But Pakistan, according to Pape, is subject to something called “indirect occupation”, since the country has received foreign aid and its government’s policies were thus partly guided by the interests of the donor countries. In his [later work](#) with James Feldman, Pape also suggested that Pakistan “occupies” the tribal areas within its own borders; how presumptuous of a sovereign state to take control of its own territory! There are other obvious objections to Pape’s theory, too. How can it account for the fact that many attacks carried out by Sunni radicals on Shiite mosques (and vice versa), or by both of those groups on churches and Hindu temples, or the brutal lynching of secular bloggers and other people deemed “blasphemers”? Are those acts of violence also a response to “occupation”? In fact, the majority of suicide attacks in Pakistan have been committed, not by Pakistanis, but by foreign fighters. The fact that these people are prepared to travel to a foreign country to blow themselves up and kill dozens of people strongly suggests that their motivation has little to do with ethnopolitical questions of “occupation”. Another explanation (i.e.,

religious fanaticism) is far more parsimonious, yet Pape studiously ignores it.

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In Walters' words, there are many "bullshit theories" about jihadism and terrorism. It's a result of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Or, the attackers are just a bunch of mentally unstable people looking for a way to justify their pre-existent sadistic tendencies. Or, jihadists are just ordinary criminals, who hide behind a veneer of religiosity to kill and destroy. If ideology is allowed to figure in these theories, it's seen as a flimsy pretext at most. According to the anthropologist Scott Atran, jihadists commit suicide attacks because they are following a "thrilling cause" and crave "glory and recognition", which is true of many young men, although most stick to playing football. The political scientist Rik Coolsaet claims that the root cause of jihadi terrorism is a feeling of "not belonging"; jihadists have actually "never read" the Qur'an, and "religion or politics have little to do with it." (Note that Coolsaet's rejection of politics also conflicts with Pape's theory.)

Last year, the British anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse published a target article in the leading journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* in which he argued, like many others before him, that suicide attacks are not driven by religion or ideology. On Whitehouse's account, the main cause of suicide terrorism is the process of "identity fusion", which occurs when a group of people go through a traumatic ordeal together

with others, often in a ritual context. A typical example of such extreme self-sacrifice is that of a soldier jumping on top of a grenade to protect his comrades, after having bonded strongly with them through arduous drill exercises and prior combat experience. But what about collective suicide operations such as 9/11, where the express purpose of the mission was for the entire group to perish? Another problem for Whitehouse's theory, somewhat opposite to the first one, is that many of the terrorists who have committed lone jihadi attacks in recent years have radicalized themselves at home in front of their computers, by watching or listening to hate preachers and other online material. Although these "lone wolves" typically swear allegiance to IS or Al Qaeda in a video message before launching their attacks, in many cases they have had no direct contact with anybody from the terrorist network, let alone undergone painful initiation rituals. So how could these people have experienced the collective trauma that is needed for Whitehouse's process of identity fusion?

Now, I don't want to claim that these theories are completely worthless. It is plausible that identity fusion can lead to a greater willingness to sacrifice oneself, and it is surely true that radicalization often feeds on feelings of discrimination and other grievances. But again, those factors start to make sense only when you see them through the prism of the Manichean religious worldview, in which the world is separated into the "true believers" and an assortment of "enemies" (the *kufar*, the apostates, the traitors). What is the factor that connects young European-born terrorists to fellow fighters in other countries who speak different languages and come from a different cultural background? Why do many religious fundamentalists believe all sorts of conspiracy theories in which Islam is targeted, and become firmly convinced that the West is [hell-bent on destroying](#)

[their](#) religion? And yet, many researchers try very hard to ignore or downplay the ideological dimension of these actions. The self-proclaimed caliph of IS has a PhD in Qur'anic studies, their theoreticians such as al-Maqdisi, al-Zawahiri, and al-Muhajir have written countless theological tracts on jihadism, and an atmosphere of religious fervor leaps out at you in every video message and from every page of the IS magazine *Dabiq*, but still, our Western scholars know better.

One particular anecdote has often been cited by these researchers: The case of [two British fighters](#) who bought "The Koran for Dummies" from Amazon before traveling to Syria. Aha, you see, this proves that they (and by extension, everyone who ever left to join IS or contemplated committing a terrorist attack at home) knew nothing about Islam! In any other discussion, such logic would be laughed out of the room, but some academics and pundits seem to think it constitutes a "smoking gun" that nullifies all other evidence of the terrorists' religiosity. The obvious question, of course, is why these men felt that it might be a good idea to brush up on their knowledge of the Qur'an before traveling to Syria, rather than, say, "Arabic for Beginners," or the user manual for an AK-47?

Not only do the tortuous efforts of these academics ignore the elephant in the room ; they also obstruct the search for a solution. In the recent edited volume *Radicalization: A Marginal Phenomenon or a Mirror to Society?*, published by Leuven University Press, the authors criticize policymakers who have started to pay more attention to the ideological dimension of terrorism. Of course, this is understandable from the policymakers' point of view, since the whole point of deradicalization programs is to dismantle the extremist ideology that has taken root in the minds of jihadists.

Policymakers have a more practical mindset than academics: they want to prevent terrorist attacks. But the authors of *Radicalization* condemn this approach as “reductionist,” “essentialist,” “one-dimensional”, and a few other cardinal academic sins. Indeed, they find the whole concept of radicalization “problematic” in itself. The reason for this is obvious: it’s hard to talk about radicalization without asking, *what* are these people being radicalized into? And that’s exactly the question that these authors want to avoid, because it “stigmatizes” all Muslims. Simply uttering the word “Islamic” in the same breath as “terrorism” is “offensive”, according to Rik Coolsaet, who wrote the preface to the book. Even when the religious fanaticism is staring them right in the face, as in the chapter in which the authors conduct a content analysis of *Dabiq*, they conclude that, all things considered, religion hardly plays a role here.

Why do some academics have so much trouble taking religious motivations seriously? Many people, Jason Walters included, would point to political correctness about Islam. Most academics, especially in the humanities, have a progressive, leftist orientation. For them, Islam is the religion of an oppressed non-white minority, and criticism of the latter is suspect. Blaming Islam for violence and hatred is something to be avoided at all costs. Many academics in the humanities regard it as their duty to counterbalance the shift to the right in politics and public opinion. If minorities are being stigmatized, academics must push back. If certain politicians start talking about “Islamic terrorism”, academics should act as a counterweight. Moreover, academic specialization has led to the formation of ideological enclaves, in which researchers have laid down their own rules and end up talking mostly to like-minded colleagues.

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However, I do not think that this explanation is sufficient, as many political leaders themselves—such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton—have had a hard time taking the religious motivations of terrorists seriously (indeed, this may even have contributed to Donald Trump's unlikely victory). I would therefore like to propose another hypothesis. Most academics have grown up in a thoroughly secularized environment, in which religion played either no role at all, or only a very insignificant one. If they were acquainted with God at all, it was a touchy-feely version that had gone through the “washing machine of the Enlightenment”—as the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn called it—in which God was nothing more than an impersonal abstraction, or a metaphor for the goodness of human beings. Religious faith was primarily an intimate and personal affair, completely divorced from politics. Because of their indifference to religious faith, these godless Westerners have great difficulty imagining what it means to believe in a concrete personal God, the kind of deity who revealed himself in an infallible Holy Book, and who demands concrete actions and commitment from its believers, on pain of eternal hellfire. Not only do they themselves not believe in such a God, but they cannot imagine that others really believe in one either, let alone that their lives could revolve around that faith. This phenomenon, which I have previously called “disbelief about belief,” is especially strong in relation to Islamic fundamentalism, with its bizarre delusions about the impending End Times and the pleasure garden with 72 virgins. For these ‘disbelievers about belief’, it is tempting to look for other motives behind religious violence that make more

sense from a secular perspective, such as frustrations about exclusion and discrimination, or the struggle to dislodge a foreign occupier. I admit that I felt a certain trepidation myself when I sat down to write a critical commentary for *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* about Harvey Whitehouse's theory. It feels strange to be writing about the "blood of martyrs" and the "gates of paradise" in a serious academic journal. It all sounds so ludicrous and bizarre that you wonder: Does anyone *really* believe this stuff? In fact, Harvey Whitehouse has made his disbelief about belief quite explicit in [recent interview](#). For him, the thesis about extreme self-sacrifice is part and parcel of his broader take on religion. Religion is not about a "set of propositions" or a "rational understanding of nature" at all, but about "building cohesion" in a social group. For all these reasons, Whitehouse dislikes "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins who "offend people by attacking their identities."

Last month saw the publication in the Netherlands of two books that challenge the academic mainstream head-on: *Theoterrorism v Freedom of Speech* by the philosopher of law Paul Cliteur, and *Het Vervallen Huis van de Islam* (The Decaying House of Islam) by the sociologist Ruud Koopmans (which will soon be translated into English). It is no coincidence that both authors are highly controversial in their respective fields. Koopmans was even called out by his own students who claimed that his work might feed "anti-Muslim racism", an absurd suggestion that shows how stifling the politically correct climate in academia has become. Cliteur mainly focuses on jihadist violence against perceived enemies of Islam, such as cartoonists and blasphemers, while Koopmans analyzes the extent to which fundamentalism is the root cause of the deep malaise within the Islamic world today. What these two authors have in common is that, first and foremost, they are willing to listen to what the fundamentalists are telling us, and

second, they are free from any disbelief about belief.

It is probably not a coincidence that Koopmans, as he himself points out, was raised in a fundamentalist Pentecostal community. Just like Jason Walters, who turned his back on the Hofstad Network, he knows from first-hand experience what it means to believe that the end of the world will soon be upon us, and that this earthly life is only a temporary abode, insignificant in the face of the eternal life that awaits us. Most academics, raised in families that were either godless or perhaps little more than nominally Christian, have no clue about this sort of thing. It is time for them to shake off their complacent disbelief about belief and start to take the worldview of religious fanatics seriously.

This piece was based on an op-ed the author published in the Dutch newspaper, NRC Handelsblad. It was translated into English with the help of Nick Brown.

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