



Sociological understanding of the relationship between terrorism and religion

Hüseyin Cinoğlu¹

Abstract

Sociology is one of the rare social mechanisms developed by individuals facing difficulties in defining, understanding and coping with the events surrounding them. Therefore, it is argued that any vague area in social life calls for sociological approach. One evident area where fuzziness prevails as to the functions and meaning is the notion of religion. Sociology did not turn a blind eye to religion and defines it as a significant institution playing pivotal roles in shaping the nature of individual's relationship with others. Some terrorist groups attribute similar amounts of importance to religion and after reinterpretation of basic teachings, they use religion to their benefit. In this article, the attentions were drawn to the process of how religion and particularly Islam has been revisited and reinterpreted in a way to provide terrorist groups guidance - as the literature suggested - in four basic ways. First; how religion becomes the key element in legitimating violence; second, how it has been used as the cure to alienation of in-group members; third, the ways in which religion sets free the group from the need to appeal to larger constitutes; and lastly, how it is used in target selection period.

Keywords: Terror; sociology; religion; terrorist groups exploiting religion.

¹ Dr., Lecturer, Turkish National Police Academy, International Center for Terrorism and Transnational Crime (UTSAM), hcinoglu@pa.edu.tr

Introduction

Sociology is one of the rare disciplines that offer effective analytical and theoretical tools to investigate, analyze and interpret events in individuals social life. It not only offers vast venues to its students to better grasp the realities around them, but at the same time sociology presents alternative windows for them to observe them. Usually each of those windows enables one to focus on particular aspects of the social phenomenon at hand. This characteristic of sociology should not be taken as its weakness at all. As a matter of fact it is that characteristics of sociology that makes it a powerful tool, because after healthy application of its theoretical perspectives one can easily see social realities in their purest form.

As a matter of fact, one of the major goals of this article is to explore ways to apply pure sociology to terrorism, especially to the type claiming to act either on behalf of or to protect religion (Islam). There is a current trend in the literature to define this type of terrorist groups as “terrorist organizations exploiting (the teachings of) religion”. Throughout the article this definition will be utilized.

In this article the author conducts an extensive literature review to investigate how social sciences in general and sociology in particular see terrorism exploiting religion. A special reference has been given to classical sociological perspectives to better understand the interrelatedness among individuals, social structures, religion, and terrorism.

Significance of Study: Importance of Theoretical Applications

Theories are necessary components for us to systematically observe, interpret, give meanings and/or revisit, reinterpret and scientifically understand the events that are happening in our lives. Unfortunately, especially after September 11, 2001 incidents, terrorism became an inseparable part of people’s lives all over the world. It is the researcher’s personal opinion that when struggling to better understand why some people could ever commit such acts indiscriminately, scholars and practitioners need to go beyond commonsense, personal beliefs and biases, and should turn to theoretical/scientific ways to understand terrorism. It is especially imperative for practitioners to comply with this rule since they also have the responsibility of changing the policies to offer better living standards to the people whom they are supposed to serve. Therefore, this paper is dedicated to explore terrorism exploiting religion from a more theoretical perspective.

Theory and Terrorism

According to Akers (2000, pg. 1) theories are about and related to real life situations, such as our behavioral preferences on a matter and our experiences with other individuals and institutions. Akers (2000) also divides theories into two general categories. As to the first group, he specifically talks about the theories that explain or deal with the making and/or enforcing criminal law. Apparently, the ones that are placed in this group tend to deal with the deterrence strategies, and also the process of forming legal measures against criminals. To him (Akers, 2000), the other group of theories tend to assume a more theoretical and abstract perspectives on crime, which he calls (2000, pg. 4) “theories of criminal and deviant behaviors”. In this part he compiles the theories elaborating on why some people commit crimes while others in similar social, economic, political and environmental situations do not. And as Ronald Beiner (1997) points out “The point of theory isn't to think safe thoughts, but dangerous thoughts”. To that end, terrorism has become something that people in modern times increasingly encounter either directly by being victimized or indirectly by being exposed to its aftershocks through the media.

Having known the impossibility of creating the best and ultimate theory for terrorism, reinterpreting or reshaping the existing ones became a venture for many scholars. Actually, it is because of that we have a trend in criminology and sociology to create new theories or redesign contemporary ones to deal with terrorism. We clearly see this trend in political theories to understand crime, in some theories related to religion, in globalization theories, some sociological and criminological theories and also theories trying to explain the occurrence of any types of crime from an economical perspective.

So far, the nature of the relationship between terrorism and sociology was scrutinized. However, the relationship between sociology and religious terrorism is still vague or needs some improvements. This part of the paper will elaborate on the relationship between religion and sociology, and the part following that will specifically be dedicated to religious terrorism and its sociological interpretation.

Major Sociological Perspectives and Religion

No religion or at least no major religions favor or encourage armed struggle and violence as the first and final resort. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that religions in essence are opposed to using of violence at all. The nature of the relationship between the two has already been scrutinized by sociology.

A) Functionalism and Religion

According to functionalism, religion is a social institution with specific and crucial tasks in the survival of the society. Most functionalists do not question religion as to why people created or have it, but they tend to focus more on the functions of the religion. According to them, religion is pivotal in the preservation of status quo and preventing rapid social changes and movements. As was mentioned before, rapid changes comes as a shock to society, and like other living organisms, it may not survive afterwards. Therefore, religion functions in a way to ensure, support, and encourage evolution over revolutions (Durkheim, 1933).

B) Conflict Theory and Religion

Unlike functionalists, with their variations, conflict theory followers tend to see religion as a tool that was not only utilized by the powerful in their efforts of exploiting workers, but also religion is created by them. These thinkers assert that, owners of the means of production (members of bourgeoisie class) created religion as a mechanism to keep workers (proletariat) under constant supervision and control. As compensations for the sufferings of this world, religion offers or promises wealth and happiness in the hereafter. That's why Marx (1844) identifies religion as the "opiate of the masses". To him, religion gives a false happiness and a notion of comfort which deflects workers' attention from their real condition (being exploited by the rich) to an uncertain future promise of happiness.

C) Symbolic Interactionism and Terrorism

On the other hand, symbolic interactionist theory mostly endeavors to develop an analytic understanding of religion with a relatively more micro level perspective than the first two theories (functionalist and conflict theories). The literature suggested that creation of social networks is fundamental in the creation of meaning systems by the individual. Those meaning systems are essential parts of individuals' identity, and his or her place in the group or in the society. In short, religion becomes a symbol and a meaning system that is possessed by a group, which is also imposed on new comers. After adopting the meaning system of that particular group, and choosing that group as the symbolic network, that group takes on the role of the reference group for that individual. On the other hand, maintaining the membership becomes dependent upon future obedience to the norms of the group and cherishing their values (Wimberley, 1998).

As could be seen from the above explanations, each sociological tradition has different views on religion. They do have weaknesses and strengths over others. For example, functionalists are very effective in identifying and analyzing the functions of religions in maintaining a healthy society and in supporting evolution; while on the other hand, they might easily be characterized as ineffective in seeing the religion's role in generating conflict in the society. And conflict theory might be competent in identifying the conflict directly or indirectly generated by religion; while on the other hand, they might not draw our attentions to some of its major latent and manifest functions. Those functions are essential in maintaining the order and equilibrium. Symbolic Interactionism mostly deals with individual level attributes of religion, and its power of reshaping the self through the symbolic networks that it offers to individuals. Main concern of this perspective is not to explain and reveal the functions of religion in maintaining the equilibrium or as the generator of conflict, but they place considerable amounts of importance over its role in the self identity formation through symbolic meanings, values and networks. In sum, these three perspectives separately provide the reader with diverse and rich perspectives that are very helpful in the analyses of the religion as a phenomenon. However, conciliation and combination of the three and presenting a single sociological examination about the relationship is still a hefty and unlikely task.

Religion and Terrorism

The relationship between religion and terrorism became more evident with the attacks of September 11, 2001. Although it may be seen as a new phenomenon, in reality religious terrorism is centuries old. However, the intensity of the attacks and increase in the numbers of religiously motivated terrorist groups is a new development. Rapoport (1984) states that the relationship between religion and terrorism is three tiered. Until the 19th century, religion was almost like the only motivational force that terrorists used to draw inspirations from. From nineteenth century to 1960s, majority of the terrorist groups were secular in nature. In other words, they were not using religion as their justifying and legitimating source. Majority of them had ethnic, nationalistic, political, separatist, etc. agendas. And from 1960s to our day, the world witnessed, and is still witnessing in a sense, the reemergence of strong ties between religion and terrorism.

Hoffman (1998) gives a detailed analysis of the nature of the relationship between them. To him, sociological analysis of the existing relationship between religion and terrorism needs to center on four basic factors.

A) Religion as key legitimating force for violence

Due to its creation of “us vs. them” (infidels, dogs, mud people, etc), religious imperatives has the potential to lead more violent actions. Religion offers its followers a unique value system with the power to legitimizing and justifying the approved acts. Terrorist groups’ interpretation of these value systems dramatically differ from the mainstream. Most of the times, even at the risk of being expelled as outcasts, they choose to deviate from the fundamental teachings of their religions. This is especially the case for Islamic terrorist groups. One of Islam’s uniqueness comes from its involvement with almost every aspects of human life. Islam as a monotheistic religion has a predetermined view on human life. According to Islam, the life (human or animal) is sacred, and taking of one innocent human life is equal to killing of the whole humankind. Therefore, the Islam that the groups refer to needs to be different than the Islam the mainstream refers to.

Additionally, the nature of the acts of terrorism requires determined and dedicated individuals who are willing to commit the types of acts that the group wants. Those individuals will need a very strong reinforcement in order to continue acting towards the groups goals. Religion comes handy as an external, independent, powerful, respected, and unquestionable source for energy. The terrorist groups use/abuse the power of Islam through their differing interpretations in a way to promote violence as the only means to achieve religious ends which, under normal circumstances, are to be achieved through legitimate means.

That is why new recruits undergo intense training sessions where they are also exposed to new interpretations of religious values, norms, goals, means, etc. This is very evident in Turkish Hizbullah, as was mentioned in their propaganda book (Bagasi, 2004), new recruits are indoctrinated and rescued from the insufficient/mislead and passive interpretations of Islam during those training sessions. The group does not limit education only to new recruits. Turkish Hizbullah is known for its emphasis on continuing education through the pamphlets, books, and other training materials that the group prepared.

B) Religion as the cure to alienation

Due to their dramatically different radical perspectives of the world, the members of terrorist groups inevitably feel a strong sense of alienation. According to Durkheim (1897), alienation is the sense of powerlessness, isolation, normlessness, and feeling a gradual estrangement from the mainstream. In this state, alienated individuals relatively feel as if they do not need the whole society to sustain their existence. Therefore, they may choose not to conform to the norms, and might prefer to rebel. For terrorists, the major source for alienation comes from the very belief system that they possess and the action system as well. In most terrorist groups' members, either to solidify their membership or to become a full-fledged member, are required or even forced to participate in terrorist acts. Cinoğlu (2008) sees this stage as the probable ultimate turning point for individuals, and also he identifies it as the major source for alienation.

However, terrorist groups' perspective of alienation is somewhat different than the one mentioned above. According to them, their deeds and ideology is not the source of alienation, on the contrary, it is the cure for alienation. These groups tend to believe that alienation is functional since it wakes up people from the daily routines and channels them towards alternative ways to deal with their lives. Using alternative ways for explanations, individuals will have the chance to observe the exploitative nature of society over them, and they will also be able identify that it is that exploitative characteristic of the society that creates alienation. Therefore, terrorist groups become the cure, rather than being the cause of alienation. This becomes evident when we consider their goals majority of which center round changing or protesting the status quo (Koseli, 2006).

The hands of religious terrorist groups are stronger here. Because, they have a divine institution (no human influence, comes directly from God) that supports their arguments (Seligman & Katz, 1996). As a matter of fact, no religion in the world sees violence as the first resort in their quest to deal with others, even invaders. Islam has strict rules about the use of armed measures even in wars. For instance all children, non-combatant civilians, plants, animals cannot be seen as legitimate targets under any circumstances (Aktan, 2004). However, Islamic terrorist groups tend to have their own versions of interpretation of religious texts, and through long indoctrination processes, their members believe that those interpretations are the true ones, and the previous ones were blended in by enemies of Islam. Actually, that is one of the reasons why they do not hesitate to target and kill fellow Muslims

or even respected Muslim religious leaders, since they see those people as helpers of infidels (others, out-group).

In short, newer interpretations of religion done by terrorist groups are seen as sources for cure to alienation not only for the members, but also for all the people who feel alienated from the society.

C) Religion sets free the group from the need to appeal to larger constitutes

Organizations use those constitutes to gain new members whom are vital in the group's survival and transferring the cause, values, and norms to future generations. In other words, for terrorist organizations, they serve as the pool from which new recruits are drawn, therefore the numbers of sympathizers (candidates who are sympathetic to group's activities and its perspective) are fundamentally important. In short, for their survival and to be able to maintain their vitality, groups need their own constitute to appeal (Hoffman, 1998). Majority of terrorist groups are no exception to that. However, the religiously motivated terrorist groups deviate from that, widely due to their inner dynamics and general agenda. Most Islamic terrorist organizations believe that trying to only please people and seek their approval are very close to the acts of blasphemy and a major disrespect to God's might. To them, it is God whose sanction is needed to be sought. In their version of Islam, God specifies the goals for not only organized members such as their fellow group members, but also for every Muslims. So it is the job of every Muslim to fulfill those tasks. Therefore, their main duty is not to appeal those bystanders, but to have them realize the God's will that was hidden from them for centuries and make them actively involve in their struggle.

The statements above makes Islamic terrorist groups relatively free of the feeling to appeal to larger constitutes, since it is God who will protect their movements, not the people. This is not the case for secular terrorist groups. Most of them believe that their survival is radically dependent upon the flow of new members. This sole fact forces them to create a separate group of people in the society. As will be explained below, other than the "us and them", they also believe that there is others in the society, which are in between or outside of the prior two categories. Secular terrorist organizations see others as potential group that they could draw new recruits. That's why appealing to others becomes one of the most essential parts of their activities.

D) Religion as helper in target selection

One of the unexpected consequences of religious involvement in terrorism is that it saves the organizations from spending energy/time to distinguish groups or people among larger crowds as their legitimate targets. Therefore, every group regardless of their religion (they might be fellow Muslims as well) becomes a legitimate target due to the justifying reasons mentioned above.

One of the major differences between secular terrorist groups and religious terrorist groups comes from their classification of the society (Pape, 2003). According to secular terrorist groups society comprises of three distinct groups: us, them, and others. Us represents the in group members, while them represents the total opposite or the group that conflicts with in-group members. Others are the people who do not want to be a part of the conflict, and choose not to support any one of the sides, and choose not to align themselves with any one of the groups. Majority of the secular terrorist groups do not see others as threats and do not target them unless it is strategically imperative to their cause.

However, religiously motivated terrorist groups, especially Islamic terrorist group do not have three layered approach to the society. They tend to believe that the society is made up of two groups of people: us and them. And they do not believe it as “us and them”, however, “us vs. them” approach would explain their view of society more illustratively. Because, they tend to believe that there is a cosmic war going on for centuries and everybody is a part of it, will be a part of it in the future, or could be considered as a part of it. Their interpretation of religion (Islam for Islamic terrorist groups), would allow them to make that distinction and will also provide legitimization and justification for the deeds that will be committed, and also will provide a cure for alienation.

That would not be unfair to present this as one of the major reasons for higher numbers of fatality and indiscriminate targeting practices of religious terrorism. For instance, to Turkish Hizbullah, the meaning of killing someone is reduced down to a justified means to achieve God’s will which was long overdue. According to Bagasi (2004), even if the armed struggle is still the last resort, when it is employed, innocent ones who are killed are considered as casualties of Jihad (holy war) and they automatically are considered as martyrs, while on the other hands, the ones that are not innocent (enemies of God, members of Hizbusseytan [party of Satan]) are the ones who received and will also continue to receive God’s fair punishment in the hereafter. Therefore, in the end, terrorist acts are not hurting people because it enables innocents to go to heaven. In other words, Turkish Hizbullah is

actually not to be blamed for killing indiscriminately, because if the victims are innocent, they might lose their chances of living the remainders of their lives, but when compared to an eternal life in heaven, this loss becomes a very insignificant sacrifice that majority is supposed to make willingly (Bagasi, 2004). And by punishing the members of Hizbusseytan, they also get to be the hand of God in this world, which pretty much makes them Hizbullah (party of God, individuals who are on the path of God). They see themselves as the awakened subjects of God since they know what God truly wants, and in what manners.

Conclusion

First, sociology acknowledges the importance of religion on individuals' daily social life. Its impact becomes more evident especially when an individual faces a phenomenon that he or she cannot explain but strives to understand, or suffers from something that he or she cannot stop. At that juncture, religion becomes one of the most powerful agents that could offer meaningful arguments or suggest patience for an unearthly reward for the current sufferings. Unfortunately it is that very potential of religion makes it the energy and motivational source for some terror groups. As known, as all other organizations, terrorist groups also needs individuals who are committed to serve and foster the group that they are a part of, even at the expense of themselves. Those direly needed committed individuals come with a price, and offerings of religions become practical and cost effective charges to pay. However, as stated above no major religion suggest violence as first resort. This constitutes the major challenge for terrorist groups. Those organizations find ways to revisit, reread and reinterpret the teachings and create themselves sanctuaries within religion (Islam).

Second, this article also evaluated the historical trend in terrorism where we witness a surge in the number of religiously motivated terrorist groups, especially Islamic ones. Religiously motivated terrorist organizations tend to differ dramatically from the more secular groups in many major ways. Target selection practices, the sources for motivational and justification factors, and the perspectives on the society as a whole constitute most significant differences. Those differences are sufficient to explain the increase in the number of fatalities when actually the number of incidents is in decline throughout the world.

Third, according to the literature review, it became evident that sociology has many arguments and comments to make about terrorism exploiting religion. However, it also became clear that many analyses on terrorism noticeably lack theoretical background.

Therefore, this area might be considered fertile for scholars and experts with sociology background.

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