Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part II)

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Abstract

An unusual feature of the social scientific study of religious terrorism is the erasure of religiosity as a significant motivational factor. This article delineates and criticizes the presence of this peculiar interpretive preference, demonstrating that it is methodologically unsound and theoretically and empirically unhelpful. In Part I of the article, published by the same author under the same title in the February 2021 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism,* the foundations of the critique were established. In this article, Part II, three types of arguments commonly used to minimize the role of religiosity in motivating religious terrorism are examined. These arguments are identified by the primary interpretive errors they rely on. Some arguments (1) mistakenly treat the religious background and knowledge of homegrown jihadists as a sound indicator of their religiosity; others (2) inappropriately apply a modern Western normative conception of religion to homegrown jihadists; and some arguments (3) rely on an overly dichotomized conception of the relationship of social processes and ideology in the process of radicalization. The critique argues the need to develop a more refined conception of the role of ideology, and more specifically religiosity, in the determination of the actions of religious terrorists.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, extremism, ideology, Islamic State (IS), jihadism, radicalization, religion, religious terrorism, salafism

Introduction

Is the primary motivation for religious terrorism political or religious? This issue continues to be a source of controversy in the study of religious terrorism. Of course, one can say it is both, and largely be correct (for diverse reasons). In fact, however, many prominent scholars of terrorism have called into question the significance of religious motivations for "religious terrorism" (see Part I of this analysis and below). The causative role of religiosity is often minimized or dismissed altogether,[1]—but how significant is the role of religiosity in fomenting jihadist terrorism? Consider, for example, the following statement from the martyrdom testimonial of Mohammad Sidique Khan, the leader of the London 7/7 bombers.

> I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our religion is Islam— obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad.... This is how our ethical stances are dictated. Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets.[2]

Khan is explaining the political rationale for his actions, but the political objectives are framed by, and appear subordinate to, a profession of his religiosity. As a scholar of religion that much is clear to me, but for many other analysts it is not. In terrorism studies, there is a marked tendency to ignore or give short shrift to such motivational statements. Many researchers dismiss them as propagandistic and secondary to other, and often latent, political, social, or economic reasons for engaging in terrorism.

In this essay, I complete an argument begun in Part I of this analysis. I argue that there are no cogent a priori reasons for dismissing the role of religiosity as an authentic and significant motivator of religious terrorism, and

that many of the arguments advanced for doing so are seriously flawed in their premises, logic, and evidence. Here I criticize three very typical ways in which researchers dismiss the religious motivations for religious terrorism in the social scientific literature on terrorism. As indicated in Part I, the arguments provided for eschewing the motivational role of religiosity are not particularly systematic. Consequently, my approach must be somewhat indirect. It involves identifying three types of interpretive mistakes frequently encountered in such studies that are used to justify a minimizing of the role of religious motivations in religious terrorism. First, there are arguments that treat the religious background and knowledge (or lack thereof) of homegrown jihadists as an accurate indicator of their religiosity. Second, there are arguments that implicitly apply a modern Western normative conception of religion to homegrown jihadists. Third, there are arguments that treat the relationship of social processes and ideology in the conceptualization of radicalization as dichotomist. Each argument distorts the interpretation of religious terrorism. In practice, the three types of arguments appear in various combinations and permutations. Here they are analytically distinguished and illustrated with some examples. Having done so, I will discuss some alternative ways of conceptualizing the role of ideology, and more specifically religiosity, in the radicalization of religious terrorists, and thus the explanation of their actions.

Overall, my argument depends on a set of important methodological and theoretical conditions that were carefully specified in Part I of this analysis. To avoid predictable misunderstandings, I encourage readers to keep these considerations in mind.

Arguments Based on the Religious Background of Jihadists

This is the simplest and most pervasive reason for dismissing the significance of religion as a motivation for terrorism. It involves asserting that the religiosity of homegrown jihadist terrorists is superficial, and hence not a primary motivator for their actions. Researchers call on various kinds of data to support this claim: suggesting that homegrown jihadists lack a religious background, do not have a sound grasp of the doctrines of their religion, are recent converts, or have engaged in activities prohibited by their religion. Jessica Stern voices three of these points in the passage quoted in the introduction to Part I of this analysis.[3] She notes that "the majority [of the jihadists in custody in Saudi Arabia] did not have much formal religious instruction and had only a limited understanding of Islam", and she comments further "only 5 percent had been prayer leaders or had other formal religious roles." In addition, she states, the Saudi officials report that "one-quarter of the participants in a rehabilitation program for former jihadis had criminal histories, often for drug offences." A similar point of view is expressed in the conclusions of the British MI5 report discussed in the introduction to Part I as well. The secret service agency is reported to have discovered that few of the recruits to jihadism in the UK "were brought up in religious households" and many, especially converts, "were surprisingly illiterate about Islam."

At first glance, this information calls into question the religious *bona fides* of the jihadists. A bit of reflection, however, raises doubts about this impression. First, Stern's information is coming from a problematic source, the Saudi government. With their strong affiliation with Wahhabism (a highly conservative variant of Sunni Islam), the Saudis have an interest in downplaying the prominence of Islamist religious motivations for terrorism. Second, the information she cites is from jihadists participating in a government rehabilitation program. These individuals have a strong incentive to deny the religious motivations for their terrorist activities, if they wish to secure their release from custody and share in the generous material supports offered by the Saudi government for reintegrating into society. Third, and more fundamentally, the emphasis placed on the lack of religious background, education, and knowledge is misplaced. In principle and empirically, what is the relationship between the levels of religious education, religious knowledge, and religiosity?

Measurements of religiosity, of the salience of religion in someone's life, are notoriously difficult. Sociologists and psychologists have struggled to devise measures, developing scales for multiple dimensions of practice, devotion, belief, knowledge, communality, and experience.[4] In the end, there is little consistent covariation of the variables selected, and individuals and groups can be "religious" in highly different ways, even within the same religious tradition. The standards of religiosity operative at any time tend to be relative, ethnocentric,

and subjective.[5]

Over the centuries, proponents of pietism and theological orthodoxy have struggled over the primacy of religious knowledge in every religious tradition in the world. Sociologists, however, have consistently found a low correlation between levels of religious knowledge and levels of religiosity. Some minimal knowledge of the beliefs and practices of a religion is required to demonstrate commitment to a faith, but as Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle note:

> Religious knowledge, that is knowledge of a religion's scripture and tradition, is not considered a good measure of religiosity, simply because the majority of believers surveyed, in Western countries at least, seem to be quite ignorant of what are considered basic elements of (their own) religious tradition.[6]

When information appeared from a cache of 22,000 ISIS recruitment questionnaires smuggled out of Syria, media accounts highlighted that most recruits "knew nothing of Islam."[7] The sole evidence to support this claim was the fact that a majority of recruits rated their knowledge of Shariah as "basic". We do not know what this response actually means, and as Andrew Lebovich comments, "[t]he relative weakness of someone's knowledge of the Shariah does not necessarily say much about how religious they are or want to be. For one thing, a depth of knowledge of Shariah is not particularly common for observant Muslims, and it is in many ways a construct of outsiders to think it should be."[8] Overall, as Lebovich observes, "people join militant movements for a variety of intersecting reasons", and "limited knowledge of an area of Islam traditionally left to dedicated experts says little about the contours of individual religious belief."[9]

In media reports on Western foreign fighters, and elsewhere, much is often made of little evidence. It is common, for example, to cite the case of two British foreign fighters, Mahammed Ahmed and Yusef Sarwar, who ordered *The Koran for Dummies* and *Islam for Dummies* in preparation for traveling to Syria to join the jihad. Clearly, it is implied, this demonstrates how little religion factors into the choice to become a foreign fighter. Commentators, however, make little effort to interpret what their purchases actually portend, and we must ask how much stock should be placed in one incident. Many skeptics of the role of religious motivations in jihadism similarly find support in Aly and Striegher's article on the role of religion in becoming an Islamist extremist. This analysis is limited, however, to one Australian convert to Islam who became a jihadist.[10]

Alternatively, Dawson and Amarasingam found that 50% of the 20 Western foreign fighters they entered into dialogue with had received some formal religious education as children (e.g., Quranic studies and Islamic schooling), and in some cases the education was extensive.[11] The vast majority of their sample claims to have undergone a conversion-like experience in their youth, and both, converts and Muslims, stress that they became "much more religious, engaging in intensive study and practice of their faith" prior to radicalizing. [12] In fact, this finding is quite common, and even studies skeptical of the primacy of religiosity in jihadist radicalization[13] acknowledge that a sudden surge in conservative religiosity is the single most consistent indicator of radicalization in their samples.

How, though, should we interpret this finding? The surge in religiosity, so widely reported in studies of homegrown jihadists, is open to different interpretations. Most commonly, the significance of the surge is discounted, because it is interpreted as indicating that the faith of the recruits is recent, and hence, it is assumed, relatively weak. This point of view is often supplemented by noting the prior irreligious behavior of many of these individuals. However, "is a religious commitment of ten years' standing intrinsically (without other evidence) more sincere and influential than one newly undertaken? If so, how so, and how would we go about collecting pertinent evidence? Given the great fervor typically displayed by new converts, one might well argue the reverse is often true."[14] In principle and practice, neither depth of knowledge of a religion nor the length of time someone has been involved are reliable indicators of the authenticity and effectiveness of someone's commitment.

In most cases, the samples available in the studies casting doubt on the significance of religiosity are too small to support generalizing, and strangely, we have no serious studies of the widely reported turn to religion. It is

repeatedly noted, but the related experiences of the jihadists are largely unexamined. This curious gap in our knowledge bars us from drawing any strong conclusions about the lack of primacy of religiosity in motivating the radicalization of jihadists in the West.

To illustrate this situation, consider a recent study of "Radical Beliefs and Violent Behavior" by Carl Miller and Leah Selig Chauhan.[15] Like many others, they minimize the role of religiosity in Western jihadism. Citing one of the studies cited above,[16] they note that Dutch foreign fighters displayed "an increased interest in religion before they left to join ISIL." However, they note, a "number of academic studies have … argued that religion is not necessarily as significant as it was once believed to be and that a causal link between the role of religion, ideology, and narratives with extremist violence has not been empirically established."[17] In support of this conclusion, they cite Aly and Striegher's case study of one person, and Perliger and Milton's study of 1,175 foreign fighters.[18] Perliger and Milton report that less than 15% of the fighters had "any religious backgrounds and many … were not particularly religious." Miller and Chauhan also cite a study of 15 former members of al-Shabab, which found "many were not deeply religious", and two EUROPOL reports stating that many perpetrators of jihadist terrorism in Europe were not strictly practicing their religion, and less than half had a "pertinent understanding about their religion."[19]

Upon examining the evidence more carefully, however, doubts arise. Perliger and Milton's findings on the religiosity of foreign fighters is more tenuous than Miller and Chauhan imply. First, they derived their data set of 1,175 foreign fighters, 800 of whom hailed from Western countries, from open sources, and as they acknowledge, such sources are notoriously unreliable. Second, a close reading of their study reveals they were only able to find very limited information on the religiosity of the fighters. They could only find data for a "very small subset of fighters in the data set (n = 262)." They determined that about 68% of this small subset were Muslims, but only about 28% of these individuals "were described as being very religious" in their childhood. Thirty-two percent of the sub-sample appeared to be converts to Islam, but were not necessarily new to the religion. Rather, Perliger and Milton tentatively say, most (21%) "were not generally identified as having recently converted."[20] Based on an even smaller subset (n = 203), they further determined that only "a small minority of the foreign fighters had any formal religious education (less than 15%), while the majority of them had no religious guidance (or basic guidance) before their travel."[21] Yet with this very limited and fragmentary information they rather sweepingly conclude, "the majority of the foreign fighters had limited familiarity with the tenets of the Islamic faith."[22]

In truth, we have to admit that the status of the majority of the Western jihadists is unknown. What is clear is that the vast majority of the sources used to glean data did not bother to report on the religiosity of the jihadists, or were unable to secure reliable information on the religiosity of the individuals investigated. We have some information, of variable reliability, about the religiosity of a nonrepresentative minority of the jihadists captured in the larger, and still nonrepresentative, sample. Yet conclusions are drawn about the majority of jihadist foreign fighters, in the sample, and by implication, the overall population of foreign fighters.

In a similar manner, Stern notes that Saudi officials report "one-quarter of the participants in a rehabilitation program for former jihadis had criminal histories, often for drug offences." Does this mean, as implied, that the religiosity of most of the jihadists is insincere or inadequate? Seventy-five percent do not have criminal histories, and we must ask, for the unspecified minority guilty of drug offences, in what way is this information relevant to determining their religiosity? Empirically, and not normatively, there is no simple correlation between orthodox behaviors and being sincerely religious. Moreover, as Simon Cottee and others have noted, "religion provides script for personal salvation and is thus especially attractive to those whose lives are mired in sin. The more poignant the sense of sin, the more urgent the desire to escape it."[23] There is no simple correlation between criminality, past and present, and lack of religiosity.

Regrettably, close scrutiny of the existing research on Western foreign fighters reveals a pattern of large claims being made on scarce data.[24] In the Executive Summary of Perliger and Milton's report, for example, they state, "religiosity is not the strongest explanatory variable" for understanding the radicalization of the foreign fighters.[25] Yet a close look at their own data, let alone other sources, indicates we cannot possibly know this

to be the case. Discovering that there are more data available (in open sources) on the socioeconomic factors that may be driving radicalization is not the same as discovering that religiosity plays a less consequential role. Sufficient amounts of the right kind of data are simply not available, and as Perliger and Milton's analysis reveals, even when more information is available, the socioeconomic data are too complex, inconsistent, and incomplete to unambiguously determine whether they played a key role in the decision to become a foreign fighter. Without better primary data from detailed interviews with jihadists, we simply cannot know what is happening. As things stand, the problem of specificity looms large. All of the socioeconomic variables in question (e.g., high levels of unemployment) affect a demographically larger segment of the population which never radicalizes.

As Perliger and Milton also acknowledge, the data available may reflect the predilections of the journalists "who wrote the news stories that formed the bulk of the data available for this report." The journalists may prefer, they surmise, "stories of unemployed and downtrodden individuals going to fight."[26] Certainly, it is likely that open sources reflect the wider assumptions and biases of their readers, including those about religion (as discussed above and below).

Interestingly, Perliger and Milton's findings about the converts who became foreign fighters undermine the logic of one of the key assumptions underlying the dismissal of the religious motivations for radicalization by MI5, Stern, and Ali Soufan (see Part I of this study). Each implies that the high level of converts recruited to jihadism indicates that religious motivations are less significant because they assume such converts have a weaker knowledge or experience of Islam. Yet Perliger and Milton found that most of the converts were "not recent," whatever that means, and so presumably they would have a better grasp of the faith. Further, in line with other comments by these experts, this lengthier exposure to the practice of Islam should have insulated them from the propaganda of the jihadists.[27]

Again, however, this discrepancy only indicates that we lack the type and the amount of data required to make sound claims about the significance of a religious motivation. Findings from the sociology of new religious movements do suggest that those with "a well-established religious identity," to use Soufan's phrase, are less likely to convert to a new and usually more controversial religious worldview.[28] This does not mean, though, that the religiosity of converts, the intensity and authenticity of their experience and commitment, is less. To say that more knowledge of Islam works to moderate the views of believers is not the same as saying that those with less knowledge are less religious. Everyone familiar with genuinely religious people will know that this is the case. The protection provided by well-established religious identities, moreover, may stem from other factors, such as being older or more engaged in the social networks of the communities.

In fact, a recent study calls into question the entire presumption that the disproportionate number of converts amongst jihadists indicates that religiosity is not a significant factor in their motivation, while also casting doubt on making a simple differentiation between converts and Muslims with "a well-established religious identity." In his study of 25 Canadians who converted to Islam and became violent extremists (a near-complete sample for this nationality), David Jones discovered that the average time between conversion and subsequent involvement in violent extremism was, contrary to the dominant expectation, 3.24 years.[29] Using data from the PIRUS data set (Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States), he also discovered that "roughly 50 per cent of [the American] converts spent upwards of six years in their new faith community … before being involved in violent extremism."[30] These findings, as he states, "call into question the belief that these individuals lacked a clear understanding of their religious beliefs, as most spent a considerable time living as Muslims prior to involvement."[31]

Overall, we need to recognize that just as most religions operate well with only a small minority of members acquiring a depth of theological understanding, a small cohort of "entrepreneurs" steeped in ideology sustains most jihadist networks.[32] Not all those involved need to be knowledgeable to sustain the passion, commitment, and investment of the movement.

Arguments Based on Modern Western Normative Conceptions of Religion

The second interpretive error is more complex and harder to address. It involves understanding certain things about the history of religion as a social phenomenon, and engaging in the exegesis of studies of the radicalization of Western jihadists to discern the operative logic and assumptions about religion explicitly and implicitly at work in these studies. This kind of critical analysis of texts is not common in terrorism studies. I will seek to illustrate my critique using two exemplary studies, Bart Schuurman and John Horgan's "Rationales for terrorist violence in homegrown jihadist groups: A case study from the Netherlands"[33] and Manni Crone's "Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body."[34] These impressive studies have much to offer that is salutary, but the primary argument advanced in each case depends on accepting implicit claims about the nature of religion that are constitutive of modern Western normative conceptions of religion, and as such antithetical to how religion and religiosity are conceived and function for jihadists. This has a distorting effect on the analyses offered by these researchers. It leads them to employ criteria in their judgments about religious terrorism that inevitably minimize the role of religious motivations. The ways in which this happens are related, yet different, and this situation is indicative of the complicated variations of this interpretive error.

To grasp this critique, the first step is to understand certain basic changes in the scholarly conception of religion. Simplifying a complex state of affairs, the history of religion in Europe culminated in a normative conception of religion and its relationship with the rest of society that separated religion from politics, and the public sphere in general, by identifying religion as a private matter. Over time, this resulted in a practice of religion that reflected the normative stance, and this practice became the empirical subject matter of the academic study of religion in the West, especially in the social sciences. Nonspecialists discussing religion and its role in society, especially in the West, tend to continue to mistake this exceptional European situation, and the resultant understanding of religion, for a generic description of the nature of religion worldwide. The error is understandable, but its consequences are regrettable.

For several decades, scholars of religion have been reflexively examining the ways they conceptualize and then study religion. This process has been complex, multifaceted, and controversial. Here I can only provide a summary sense of the consensus that has emerged from this reflexive process, highlighting the insights that analysts of religious terrorism need to take more systematically into consideration.

First, as long noted, "religion" is inordinately difficult to define,[35] perhaps even more than terrorism. In part, this is because the detailed historical and social scientific study of religious practices globally has led most scholars to realize that "religion" is a social construct. It is more a category of thought and discourse, with specific historical and social roots and implications, than an observable thing. Seminal works have clarified the historical and socio-political context in which the notion of "religion" developed in the European context.[36] They have also elucidated the ideological role of the concepts of "religion," "religions," and the "religious" in diverse social and cultural disputes, including those related to imperialism and the process of globalization, as well as the creation of the academic study of religion.[37]

Second, this reflexive process involved recognizing that there were no "religions" for much of European history. People were just religious or nonreligious. This continued to be the state of affairs outside of Europe long after things changed in Europe. In Europe, a change in this situation followed on encounters with other societies and "religions" around the globe, and the schisms in Christendom and the internecine religious wars brought on by the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648). Overall, people did not think of themselves as belonging to certain "religions". That idea only emerged in the early modern era of exploration, growing international trade, and religious strife. Only then, and later under the critical gaze of Enlightenment philosophers, did the concept of "religion" emerge, as an independent thing whose essence could be studied and to which people belonged.[38]

By that time, however, talk of "religion" was also associated in Europe with efforts to free society from the tyranny of religious authority by differentiating the realms of the state and civil society from that of religion. The Enlightenment's quest for a less religious society established the modern Western notion of religions as sets of beliefs and practices to which people commit voluntarily that are distinct from the rest of society. In other words, the emergence of the modern Western conception of religion is part of the process of secularization, as

marked by the increased functional differentiation of religion from economics, law, science, medicine, education, sexuality, and first and most importantly, politics. This meant the emergence of "religion" and "religions" as concepts, and fields of study, was also concomitant with the progressive "privatization" of religion.[39] To accommodate a plurality of religions and minimize the contention between such religions, religion became essentially apolitical and private.

Third, in the rest of the world there was no systematic segregation of religious activity, either ideationally or in practice. As European and American missionaries and colonial officials found, in other societies there were not even any lexical equivalents to the Western notions of "religion," "religions," "religious belief," and "religious experience". What the West called religion was intertwined with the rest of social life, and while distinguishable realms of political authority existed, they were still largely legitimated by, and subservient to more pervasive religious views. Eventually, the differentiation of religion occurred in these societies as well, both conceptually and practically, under the influence of the economically and militarily more powerful Western imperialist states. This happened, to varying degrees with the active assistance of local elites,[40] who were seeking to adapt to the new opportunities and the power dynamics of imperialism. Many of these non-Western societies, however, never secularized to the same degree, or in the same way, as their European counterparts. Thus, contrary to the consensus that long prevailed, the model of religion in the modern West, and its delimited engagement with the rest of society, is exceptional rather than paradigmatic.[41]

For scholars aligned with critical studies these insights meant that "religion" is an "empty category" and researchers should confine their analyses to critically discerning how the category is used to serve specific social and political agendas in different social contexts.[42] Less skeptically, most social scientists studying religion continue to apply the term to understanding the set of phenomena subsumed within more operant conceptions of religion. Many of the insights discussed above critically inform this approach, but it remains nominally realist in its ontology with regard to the social phenomenon of religion.[43] Fundamentally, however, all agree that conceptions of the religious and nonreligious are socio-historically variable.

Within this framework, in different yet convergent ways, some argue that the religious can be minimally distinguished in terms of the presence of one factor: reference to the transcendent. That is any ostensive reference to another dimension of reality, which people believe has an impact on what happens in our ordinary consciousness and life. Any thought, statement, or action whose meaning depends on such a reference— interpreted broadly—is religious. The thought, statement, or action may be other things as well: political, moral, dramatic, and so on. If, however, it is semantically dependent on the reference to the transcendent in some significant way, then to a greater or lesser extent (from case to case), it is religious. Religions are the social institutions, again broadly conceived, that specialize in providing access to the transcendent.[44] Working within these kinds of parameters, most scholars of religion have gotten on with the task of studying "religion," much as others have proceeded with the study of the equally relative phenomenon of "terrorism."

Analysis of Schuurman and Horgan's Rationales for Jihadi Terrorist Violence[45]

Overlooking or minimizing the abundant primary data pointing to the religiosity of many terrorists simply because it is incongruent with the dominant Western assumptions about religion and its place in society is a pervasive interpretive proclivity. It aggravates, rather than ameliorates, the explanatory gaps encountered in seeking to explain why so few persons exposed to the conditions associated with terrorism turn to violence. A close reading of Schuurman and Horgan's article brings this problem to the fore. Their study investigates the rationales for terrorist violence in European homegrown jihadist groups by critically examining the strategic and organizational motives of the Hofstad group in the Netherlands. "Finding that neither rationale adequately explains the group's planned or perpetrated acts of terrorism", the authors state, "the analysis concludes by arguing that the turn to violence was instead predicated on predominantly *personal* motives that, moreover, were not strongly tied to extremist religious convictions as is frequently thought."[46] The analysis focuses on two individuals in the group, one of whom murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the other who was involved in several terrorist plots.

Schuurman and Horgan call into question the relevance of strategic rationales for the Hofstad group by examining statements made in court by these two individuals, seven "open letters" by one of them, and a videotaped message and unfinished autobiography by the other one. They find little evidence of "political motives" in this material.[47] Rather they document an idealistic desire to act "out of faith", "a sense of personal religious duty", an obligation to "help oppressed Muslims", the "emulation of jihadist role models", and "the need to find a release for feelings of anger and revenge."[48]

They next turn to the analysis of the six well-known organizational motives for engaging in terrorist violence, as delineated by Martha Crenshaw.[49] They find that four of these appear to have some bearing on this case: (1) the group offers a path to redemption; (2) there is the emulation of other terrorists held in high esteem; (3) they are responding to countermeasures taken by authorities; and (4) they are being driven by competition with other extremist groups. They argue, however, closer inspection reveals "that in many cases these motives were *personal* rather than *organizational* in origin."[50] In coming to this conclusion, it is noteworthy that Schuurman and Horgan call on the strong presence of religious motivations to justify seeing the motives as more personal than organizational. The two figures highlighted in their analysis were driven by a sense of duty to punish blasphemers, wage defensive jihad, obey God's commands, and satisfy a desire for martyrdom.[51]

More specifically, they argue that the murder of van Gogh "was triggered by two negative personal experiences [in the perpetrator's life]: time spent in prison in 2001 and the death of his mother that same year." The crime was not the direct result of the influence of the Hofstad group or jihadist ideology. That is why only this member of the group perpetrated such a violent offence. They characterize him as being "fanatical" because his life "revolved around his beliefs" more than the other members; his beliefs had a "millenarian aspect"; and "he lived the relatively most isolated existence of all the group's participants."[52] The discussion of these factors leads them to conclude:

> Van Gogh's murderer was primarily driven by his fanatical beliefs. Yet
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> even in his case, convictions alone only provide part of his rationale for
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> committing an act of terrorism. A farewell letter written to his family reveals
>
> that fear of spending an eternity in hell for failing to live up to his
>
> god's commandments, also played a role, underlining what Cottee and
>
> Hayward (2011) have labeled "existential" motives for terrorism.[53]

In addition, they state, "by attacking van Gogh in a busy Amsterdam street and trying to decapitate [him], the assailant turned the murder into a gruesome act of theater … One that underlined his overarching desire to show himself to the world as a 'true' Muslim."[54]

The evidence presented suggests, contrary to supposition of the authors, that religiosity played a prominent role in the motivation of these jihadists. Yet Schuurman and Horgan persist in declaring that the primary motivations were personal and not religious. In this regard, they introduce a number of further factors, such as the influence of authority figures, the desire for revenge, identification with the victims of perceived injustice, fear of death, moral disengagement, and emulating jihadist role models. Undoubtedly, many of these factors may well have played a role in the radicalization of these individuals and further helped prompt them to act on their beliefs. The evidence keeps pivoting back, however, to the desire to become and act like a "true Muslim". In other words, it was about taking on a shared and public identity (as the perpetrators conceived it), more than the expression of unique personal considerations. As Schuurman and Horgan's analysis repeatedly highlights, they were seeking to emulate certain revered jihadists. That is what matters most.

Every public act, whether economic, political, sexual, criminal, religious, or whatever, has a personal aspect. How consequential is this truism? In principle and practice, it is hard to see how a rather fuzzy set of speculative personal reasons help us to explain what is happening, even in this case, let alone the larger class of homegrown jihadist attacks and plots. Does that explanation have some greater discernable explanatory power than one

referencing religiosity?

Schuurman and Horgan rely heavily on the strong presence of these religious motivations to advance their argument. They strategically use the abundantly religious character of the beliefs and claims of these terrorists to demonstrate that their motivations were not political, and hence not strategic. Then they further use evidence of the religious character of their motives to help dismiss the relevance of an organizational approach. In both instances, however, the reference to religiosity works because it implicitly references a privatized conception of religion. The religiosity in question is conceptually reduced to the personal, and that is why they assume they can once again use evidence of the primarily religious nature of the claims of the terrorists to underwrite their last conclusion, that the motives of these terrorists are primarily personal. Religiosity plays a key role in the evidence marshalled throughout the analysis, yet in the end it is dissolved, because the authors assume a privatized (i.e., modern Western) conception of religion. They undertake this last step in their analysis, moreover, without much in the way of explicit argumentation.

However, the religious language they keep calling on to make their case persistently indicates, especially to scholars of religion, that something more is at stake. For example, I am not aware of any independent psychology of "redemption." The term is redolent with religious meaning and its power stems from participating in a shared religious heritage. The fervent wish to be a "true Muslim" is not a private matter; it is not a mere effloresce of personality. It is a public declaration of membership in a group deemed to be specific and special. To achieve the desired status requires public actions and social recognition. In this case in particular, the aspiration to be a "true Muslim" involves demonstrating that one is part of the Salafi-jihadist elect, those who will be saved while all else are damned. In this worldview, there is no separation of the religious and the political, the private and the public. The terrorists are explicitly declaring, if one chooses to listen, that their actions are simultaneously personal and public, as well as political and strategic. We may question the efficacy of the strategy involved, but the differentiation of these things is an instrumental part of the social order that these terrorists were rejecting in striving to set an example. To employ and advocate an interpretive approach that categorically ignores or dismisses their worldview is counterproductive, if our objective is to understand religious terrorists, and hence prevent such actions from happening again.

Analysis of Crone's Critique of Radicalization Theorizing

In her highly engaging study Crone examines "…what the currently dominant conceptions of radicalization leave out of sight and argues that radicalization is not an individual process driven by religious ideology, but can more precisely be understood as a process of politicization."[55] My critique of her argument is confined to the first three of the five parts of her analysis: (1) her critique of the view that religious ideology is a precondition for terrorist violence; (2) her argument that prior familiarity with violence is the most significant precondition for terrorist violence; and (3) her argument that "pathways towards terrorism that somehow involve religious ideas are not only religious, but first and foremost political."[56]

Crone's discussion of the first point sets the stage for her argument. She highlights the overly simplistic contention, with the emergence of "homegrown terrorism," that jihadist ideology was "the" factor in the process of radicalization, and the subsequent preoccupation with the "talk to action" problem. This variant of the larger problem of specificity involves recognizing that radical talk alone is a poor predictor of whether someone will engage in terrorist violence. Struggling with this problem led some terrorism scholars, she notes, to draw a distinction between "cognitive" (or "ideological radicalization") and "behavioral radicalization",[57] and to question whether the former is a necessary precursor to the latter—which is the real focus of public concern (i.e., violence). Crone aligns her argument with this distinction and suggests that the preoccupation with ideology had created an overly "intellectualist" reading of the process of radicalization. In her view, there was a consensus that the process of radicalization involves "an intellectual transformation and that ideology is somehow the precondition for violent acts."[58] Like others, she questions the validity of this assumption.

Crone's own rather unquestioning reliance on the distinction between ideological and behavioral radicalization, however, poses problems for the rest of her argument. While it is common to align the talk to action issue with the differentiation of cognitive/ideological and behavioral radicalization, the two issues are not synonymous. Moreover, both issues are often further confused with John Horgan's differentiation between the process of radicalization leading to involvement in violent extremist movements and the further process by which a few of those who join become violent.[59] This two-stage process of radicalization to violence may accurately describe what happens in most cases. In practice, however, it is almost impossible to segregate processes of cognitive and behavioral radicalization, and the tendency to reify this analytical distinction can create an ersatz conundrum, at least when it comes to religious terrorism. Almost all religions are about belief, behavior, and belonging, and one without the other is unimaginable for most practitioners, and a sign, for most sociologists of religion, that something is amiss (i.e., secularization).[60] Certainly, this is the case with most new religious movements. They are often subject to public scorn because they make totalistic demands in this regard. The Salafist new religious movement[61] undergirding jihadist terrorism quite characteristically emphasizes that "true Muslims" must manifest their beliefs in their actions. The behavioral embodiment of faith is the hallmark of authentic religious commitment.[62] In religious conversions, as with radicalization, the ideological, behavioral, and social aspects of the process are intertwined, and they coevolve. In each case, this may happen differently, and to varying degrees, but there is little evidence to support the notion of a strictly ideological or behavioral process of radicalization. A reciprocal process of change in beliefs and behavior is more plausible for most terrorists, especially religious ones.

Having called into question the primacy of ideology in the process of radicalization, Crone proposes the most significant precondition of jihadist radicalization may be experience with violence.

> Pathways towards terrorism … do not necessarily entail a step 'from talk to action'—from ideology to violence—but could entail a transition from one kind of violence into another. To put the point differently: instead of an ideological radicalization process, one pathway towards terrorism could be a 'politicization of violence'. … In contrast to most radicalization theories, which have highlighted the idea of … a huge step from ideas to violence, this perspective points to a less dramatic step from one form of violence to another.[63]

Crone is speculating, in other words, that the process may largely happen within the behavioral realm.

Crone uses two sources of information to support this alternative view. Her own contact with jihadist extremists, while part of a team carrying out fieldwork in Copenhagen from 2008 to 2011, and the data available on the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Europe from January 2012 to July 2015. With regard to the latter, she finds support for her view in the fact that 80% of these individuals had a "known criminal background" and 60% had been in prison. Data on the overall crime-terrorism nexus, however, are quite incomplete and fragmentary. Moreover, we lack clarity on the nature of the connection and its significance. Is there a continuum of motivations for the criminal and terrorist activities, as Crone and some other researchers[64] presume, or is the turn to jihadism indicative of an urge to overcome the criminality? Are jihadists seeking redemption from their criminal pasts? The distinction makes a difference in determining if religion has played a role in the process of radicalization. We need a more refined understanding of the pathways of these types of individuals. The best data available, for example, on Western foreign fighters, indicate that the majority, especially from North America, did not have criminal backgrounds.[65] For those that did, we know little about the actual journey from the criminal past to the jihadist future, whether the new religiosity is sincere or sketchy.[66] Other more significant issues arise, however, when we scrutinize the logic of Crone's supposition about violence as the precondition for radicalization.

The limited data Crone provides only indicate that a prior familiarity with violent milieus may be a precondition for engaging with violence. It cannot tell us, however, whether this factor merely played a role in opening these individuals to the possibility of becoming extremists or, more consequentially, explains why they were the ones who actually were willing to turn to political violence. In other words, the data available cannot help us with Horgan's distinction, and this means we cannot really determine the nature of their role as a precondition of

terrorist violence. Likewise, they lack the specificity to help us with the talk to action problem. Do those who become violent have more of a history of criminal violence than those who merely espouse jihadist views? To the best of my knowledge, we do not know. It is not clear, moreover, whether having a criminal record tells us much about how familiar these individuals were with violence, especially since their criminal records stem preponderantly from petty theft, drug, and fraud charges. If violence were a strong precondition for "engaging with extremist ideology," as Crone asserts, then surely far more of these individuals should be engaging in violence as well—but then it is unlikely that the talk to action problem would have attracted so much attention. To say that violence begets violence may be true, but it involves circular reasoning and does not do much to explain why these individuals chose to become jihadists. They could have satisfied their violent proclivities much more readily in the criminal community—a more pervasive subculture that legitimates and rewards violence. More is involved, clearly, in deciding to become a jihadist, and the one thing almost all the jihadist stress is their religious identity and commitments. So why would we favor the incomplete and problematic precondition of violence over the far more substantiated and manifest precondition of ideology (i.e., religiosity) in seeking to develop more specific explanations of radicalization? Crone does not consider this option because the parameters of her argument illogically exclude it.

Speaking of her fieldwork, Crone states that she realized that "extremist milieus are heterogeneous, including people of various kinds: some are interested in Islamism as a visible sign of opposition; others are attracted by action and violence." "Nevertheless," she goes on to stress, "the young men … were neither intellectuals who, through a long theological process, embraced an extremist ideology before eventually turning to violence, nor young people meeting up with a radicalizer who lured them into extremist ideology."[67] The set of options Crone is asking us to consider are unrealistically restrictive—keeping other possibilities out of sight. Most jihadists are neither theologians nor brainwashed dupes.

It is not surprising, working with these limited options, that Crone found little evidence of religious ideology playing a significant role in how these people radicalized. She has fashioned a straw man argument, one that repeats the problems associated with the "religious knowledge interpretive error" addressed above. Religiosity is neither about depth of knowledge nor length of time studying, and as Crone argues earlier in her article, few researchers assume any longer that jihadists are simply the victims of brainwashing. Ironically, in framing the interpretive options in this artificially restrictive manner, Crone commits the very intellectualist error she chastises others for when they too readily associated radicalization with mere exposure to an extremist ideology. She has reduced religion, and being religious, to the parochial modern Western notion that religion is primarily about consent to a codified and segregated set of beliefs.

Crone next makes a point that I agree with, namely that the "tendency to view radicalization through the prism of religion or religious ideas has often implied the 'depoliticization' of radicalization."[68] As she says, the "idea of a pure, depoliticized form of religion relies on a liberal, secularist ideology of religion as a strictly private … activity."[69] Her diagnosis of the problem, however, is incomplete and misleading. In fact, her approach relies on a concomitant aspect of this liberal, secularist ideology of religion that is also problematic. She separates religion from politics and elevates the political over the religious. As she goes on to say, pathways to terrorism "are first and foremost political processes, or, in the case of Islamist extremism, a politico-religious process. In violent extremist milieus … religion is always already political."[70]

Here, and elsewhere, Crone prioritizes the political over the religious—the political is somehow more fundamental, even though historically the opposite seems to be the case. In her article, she makes no argument to support this analytical decision, and as her own comments indicate, Islamists would stridently disagree. Here, as elsewhere, we need to pay close attention to how things are stated. In line with modern Western ways of thinking, it is assumed that political processes are "first and foremost", and that radicalization is a "politico-religious" process. In the midst of using a critical reading of the modern Western conception of religion to pillory other scholars for misreading the radicalization of jihadists as private and hence depoliticized, Crone relies on another assumption of that conception of religion, that religiosity is subordinate to politics, to keep the religious nature of the process at bay. In the Salafi-Jihadists worldview, however, not only is there no separation between religion and politics, but religion is superordinate, and politics is merely a means for achieving

religious objectives.[71] It is more accurate to say that radicalization is a "religio-political" process—putting the emphasis where it belongs—at least for the Islamist extremists.

Curiously, when Crone elaborates on the reasons for seeing the process as predominantly political, the religiousness of the evidence she cites comes to the fore and reinforces the opposite conclusion. First, in discussing the political agenda of the jihadists, she states "Islamist extremism proposes a political utopia: a political fantasy about society, where shari'a is applied to the letter and justice will rule."[72] This extraordinary situation speaks, however, to the ways in which religious ideas and commitments characteristically influence and distort the normal course of politics. Second, she states that Islamist extremist politics "are extremist precisely because they unfold outside the normal political framework." Jihadists reject participating in democracy, she notes, because it is "haram".[73] In other words, for jihadists, politics—at least as conventionally conceived—is secondary and subordinate to fomenting religious revolution. Third, she discusses the issues that are characteristically "political" for the jihadists, focusing on "foreign policy, wars, and atrocities committed against Muslims by authoritarian regimes and western powers in the Middle East."[74] The unifying theme of these concerns is solidarity with coreligionists, and not a concern with human suffering or the violation of human rights per se. Jihadists are responding to "perceived injustice", but only with regard to Islam and Muslims. Fourth, in seeking to explain the appeal of these kinds of politics, Crone notes that "extremist Islamist politics offers the possibility of combining heroism with politics: performing great deeds to make one's name famous and immortal … they are able to transform themselves from petty criminals, pariahs and outcasts into post-mortem heroes."[75] Immortality and postmortem heroism are "first and foremost" about religious martyrdom. There are secular political analogs, but there is no need to invoke such analogs in the explication of an explicitly religious political movement. It is what it is—unless we can demonstrate, free of interpretive biases, that there are substantial reasons for doubting the authenticity of the religious motivational claims repeatedly made by those engaged in the action.

Arguments Based on a Dichotomist Conception of the Relationship of Social Processes and Ideology

The third argument for discounting the significance of religiosity in the process of radicalization is the most complex and challenging to delineate. The argument takes many specific forms that appear to differ, but the underlying logic is consistent. In the post–9/11 era, many government officials and analysts, and perhaps some academic researchers, were conceptualizing the process of radicalization, especially in the case of Jihadism, as largely the result of indoctrination to certain ideological narratives.[76] This helped to foster an overly simple and naïve conception of the process of radicalization, one that often results in the stigmatization of Islam and Muslims. In reaction to this too-simple and overly cognitive approach, many scholars of terrorism developed models of the process involving multiple other psychological, social-psychological, and sociological factors.[77] This was done out of sheer recognition that more was involved in this complicated process, and to avoid even inadvertently lending support to Islamophobia.

It was also in response, however, to increased recognition of the specificity problem. As security services came under increasing pressure to protect their citizens from the attacks of homegrown terrorists, they sought help in differentiating who amongst the many espousing extremist views might actually become violent, and hence warrant closer attention. In other words, the talk to action variant of the specificity problem surged to the fore.[78] This helped to support new interest in developing a more fulsome understanding of the process of radicalization. The resultant research was more empirical and sophisticated, though it did little to resolve, practically, the talk to action problem. On the contrary, the models of radicalization that emerged demonstrate how hard it is to predict who will even radicalize, let alone eventually commit acts of violence. While the models show, in somewhat different yet overlapping ways, that there are trans-situational similarities, they also indicated that a great many factors play a role, in different combinations and to differing degrees, in the radicalization of each person. Limitations of data, moreover, leave an element of mystery in every case, and unpredictable contingencies (e.g., happening to meet a coconspirator with certain skills or resources)

influence the decisions people make.[79] Overall, with few exceptions, the new perspectives displayed a tendency to overcompensate for the earlier reliance on the simple internalization of beliefs by minimizing the role of ideology (and hence religion) altogether. In most cases, this involved emphasizing the importance of social-psychological processes, as delineated by social identity theory for example, while explicitly stating that the influence of ideological factors is secondary. In a few instances, however, the arguments come close to dismissing the relevance of ideology altogether;[80] though doing so raises a definitional dilemma, since it is ideological commitments that differentiate terrorists from other types of violent offenders.[81] Overall, discussions of radicalization have displayed a tendency to think about ideology and the social-psychological aspects of radicalization in overly dichotomist terms, especially with regard to jihadism.[82]

Elsewhere I have critically discussed the problems posed by this reactive tendency by examining some of the publications of prominent scholars of terrorism (e.g., Marc Sageman, Andrew Silke, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, and Bart Schuurman and John Horgan).[83] I will not reiterate those critiques here.[84] Rather, my focus is on the more general logic of these arguments and its inherent limitations. Nevertheless, a brief discussion of some aspects of the earlier analysis helps to set the stage for considering this more fundamental critique.

In their book *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*,[85] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, for example, provide the first comprehensive application of insights from multiple areas of experimental social psychology to the explanation of terrorist radicalization. In doing so, they make a very significant contribution to terrorism studies. Surprisingly, however, they dedicate fewer than two pages in their concluding chapter to the role of "ideology in political radicalization". This truncated analysis involves little more than a brief presentation of several variants of the arguments for minimizing the relevance of ideology, as discussed above. As such, the arguments advanced are logically and empirical insufficient to justify simply dismissing the role of beliefs in motivating terrorist violence.[86]

Less categorically, in *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, Marc Sageman advances an argument for replacing "the ideological explanation" for "the turn to political violence" with what he calls a "contextual" social-psychological explanation based on the application of "self-categorization and social identity theory."[887] Sageman argues that political violence results from "the activation of a politicized social identity, which generates an imagined political protest community."[88] This process is in turn the natural outgrowth of how social identities form, under conditions of social and political frustration. It is not "a pathological process" per se.[89] The inclination of people to categorize themselves in terms of contrasting in-groups and out-groups, as well established in social psychology, gives rise to prejudice and in-group favoritism and out-group denigration. Under conditions of escalating hostility between groups, the cumulative radicalization of discourse, disillusionment with peaceful means of resolving differences, and mounting "moral outrage" over the aggression of out-groups, some members of an in-group may develop a "martial social identity". These more-militant members may then set off a process of social encapsulation that heightens the boundaries between groups, narrows their horizons, and escalates hostilities. With time and under certain conditions (e.g., diminished social control), this can result in escalating violence.[90] This process, Sageman stresses repeatedly, "does not usually come as a conscious epiphany or a gradual evolution from careful reasoning or better understanding of an ideology."[91] Yet, as I demonstrated elsewhere, "in his own account of this process of radicalization he repeatedly points to the instrumental role of ideology and ideologues. This is because his social identity theory cannot, by itself, explain why only some of the people adopting an extreme social identity actually turn to violence, especially the indiscriminate kind associated with jihadist attacks in the West."[92]

To reduce the impact of the problem of specificity, we need to recognize that ideology matters, at least to some degree, and more, we need to adopt a more integrated, and hence realistic, approach to the interplay of ideology and social processes (i.e., social-psychological and social) throughout the process of radicalization. This is what some researchers are starting to realize.[93] In an even more preliminary sense, this requires that researchers studying the process of radicalization to do four things. First, avoid using straw man versions of "the ideological explanation" to frame the discussion.[94] Few scholars of note, or otherwise really, argue that ideology is the only significant factor in determining who radicalizes. Second, recognize the rudimentary

evidentiary value of the recurrent and pervasive ideological and/or religious professions of violent extremists.[95] Third, stop working with overly formal conceptions of codified ideologies, and recognize that ideologies, especially the ones that have shaped societies, are living and evolving systems of beliefs (like religions), with variable influence on the actions of individuals.[96] The methodological soundness of these proposals is obvious, yet, as indicated (see the endnotes), arguments were required to drive each point home. Fourth, and in addition, stop thinking that because only a few of those who cognitively radicalized become violent, this means cognitive radicalization (i.e., ideological radicalization) is not a precursor to violent extremism. Let me comment further on this last additional point.

In setting their argument for an alternative way of conceiving radicalization, for example, Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor quite typically state:

> Despite its ubiquitous use, radicalization has also attracted considerable criticism. Skeptics have noted its inherently subjective nature, the lack of agreement on definitional issues and the sometimes linear and deterministic conceptualization that made radicalization seem like a 'conveyor belt' to involvement in terrorism. Recent years have seen the development of notably more nuanced interpretations that have considerably advanced insights into how, why, and when people become involved in terrorism. Even so, a central shortcoming of radicalization has continued to exert a detrimental influence; namely, the frequently found assumption that the adoption of radical beliefs precedes and leads to involvement in terrorism.[97]

The last statement, which sets the grounds for their alternative contribution to understanding radicalization, illogically conflates two disparate claims for which there is variable empirical substantiation. It is one thing to say that extreme beliefs do not necessarily lead to violent behavior, or in other words, to assert that ideological indicators of radicalization alone fail to provide a sound way of assessing the potential for violence. It is another thing to assert that extreme beliefs simply do not precede involvement in terrorism.[98] These are logically distinct propositions, and while there is ample evidence (from polls and survey research) to support the first claim, empirical support for the latter is scarce. On the one hand, large numbers of people appear to share the grievances and some of the radical views of violent extremists, yet few choose to become violent. On the other hand, despite the claim that some individuals become terrorists without adopting extremist worldviews, it is clear that the vast majority of offenders do hold such views. Moreover, they call on these views to explain their behavior. This is especially the case for the most committed terrorists. Consequently, it is hard to see the utility of letting an unknown number of exceptional cases (i.e., where ideological commitments seem absent) to dictate how we explain terrorist violence.[99] Highlighting the cases where the role of ideology seems weak means cognitive radicalization is not a sufficient condition for violence to occur. In the analysis of social phenomena, however, we are dealing with tendencies and probabilities, and in most cases, having such views does precede becoming violent.[100] In most cases, it appears to be a necessary factor. As Jakob Guhl observes, moreover,

> …the authors claiming that cognitive extremism is not a necessary precursor to violent extremism usually offer slight caveats, which hint at a (possibly weak) connection between the two. Usually they claim that there are cases in which ideas were not the 'primary incentive' or extremists were not 'fully radicalised' or 'deeply ideological'. Obviously such cases exist, but that does not indicate that in these cases ideas were not an incentive at all or that extremists were not radicalised or ideological in any way.[101]

In examining the role of cognitive extremism as a precursor to violent extremism, Guhl suggests, and I concur (see above and Part I), it is more realistic to think of the relationship between ideas and actions in terms of degrees of influence and to start figuring out how we can detect and measure the level of relevance.[102] Guhl also argues, as I have previously,[103] that we are better off thinking in terms of "collective action frames"—a concept from social movement theory[104]—than in terms of the impact of "stable and coherent sets of values, beliefs, and goals."[105] Donald Holbrook and John Horgan propose much the same in their exacting critique of the ways terrorism scholars have misconceived the relationship between ideology and radicalization.[106]

Using the sociological concept of framing to delineate the pivotal role of ideology in the process of radicalization makes the discussion more concrete. It minimizes the reliance on straw man formulations of ideological explanations, given the extensive analyses available of the nature and operation of such collective action frames,[107] while also minimizing the reliance on too-formal, complicated, and coherent conceptions of the ideological influences at play when most people radicalize. In the case of the radicalization of jihadists, analysts seem to have sensed this state of affairs when they started to recast the jihadist ideology as the jihadist "narrative," and the attendant need to develop "counter-narratives".[108]

Various conditions and experiences create the cognitive opening to radicalization in individuals. As is widely recognized, however, the terrorist narrative (the proto-ideology of jihadism) "connects the dots in a satisfying way, one which offers a simple but definitive explanation for their angst, offers a grand solution, targets a culprit, and prescribes a course of action. Most of all, it sets the individual's struggles in a transcendent frame of meaning that gives an ultimate and virtuous purpose to their existence. It places their personal troubles in solidarity with those of a whole people."[109] For most individuals this is the precursor to action.[110]

The collective action frames of revolutionary movements tend to obliterate the distinction between talk and action. These frames may not always mobilize individuals to act, especially violently, but they are the living edge of more systematic, and perhaps even esoteric, bodies of thought that justify such actions, and more often than not they entail a demand to match words with deeds.[111] They intrinsically ignore the analytical distinction scholars may wish to draw between cognitive and behavioral radicalization. They are about the embodiment of ideas, and are inevitably about assuming and asserting certain identities. In their operation, the ideological and social processes of radicalization intertwine, and as Holbrook and Horgan conclude, it is misleading to see ideology as "resting uncomfortably alongside [the social processes of radicalization] as static doctrinal pillars impenetrable to all but dedicated 'ideologues'." Rather, "the role of ideology can best be explained through highlighting its social components, the collective maps and shared perspectives that help us make sense of the world and define who is or is not part of our community."[112] As with religiosity (as argued above), "[o]ne does not need to 'qualify' with any level of 'expertise' or knowledge in discourses associated with particular ideologies to be affected by them, or for them, to impact on our frames of reference", and we need to recognize that "ideology is embedded throughout journeys towards terrorism."[113] Dichotomizing the study and the conceptualization of the social (including social-psychological) and ideological aspects of the process of radicalization is ultimately unrealistic and hence counterproductive.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting, let me stress once again, that religion, or more particularly Islam, is the sole cause or motivator for religious terrorism in general or jihadism in particular. In many cases, however, religiosity—the level of commitment one feels to a religious worldview and practice—may play a significant role, and we have no good reason to discount this fact, especially in the face of the ample evidence from the religious terrorists themselves. As I have argued elsewhere in some detail,[114] jihadist radicalization is the result of a complex ecosystem of interactions between individuals and groups with different social environments, and it involves cascading influences and decisions. No two individuals radicalize in precisely the same way, but there are detectable patterns and typical issues at stake that can guide our examination of each case. In most instances, ideology plays a significant role; it is one of the environmental interactions to take into consideration in every analysis. Ideology, or in the case of jihadism, religion, frames the relatively inchoate worries and wishes of potential recruits, providing them with the specific sense of certainty, identity, and purpose that attracts them to extremist movements in the first place, and at a later stage facilitates the turn of some to political violence. Ideology works in conjunction with other factors, in a constant dialectical dance, as most scholars of terrorism realize, but to date have failed to articulate well.

This may all seem quite unproblematic. Nonetheless, it has been a point of contention in terrorism studies for some time. As a result, many researchers did not take advantage of pertinent insights and findings from the study of religious conversions and religiosity, on the one hand, and the ways ideology foments and shapes

types of collective violence, on the other hand.[115] This is regrettable and it is time to reverse the trend. The relevance of religiosity will vary, but there are no sound reasons for rejecting its relevance in explaining religious terrorism.

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Notes

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[29] David Jones, "Re-Examining Explanations of Convert Radicalization: Evidence from Canada," M.A. Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta (2020), p. 62; in endnote, the author states he found data for 17 individuals; see David Jones and Lorne L. Dawson, "Re-Examining Explanations of Convert Radicalization: Evidence from Canada," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (forthcoming 2021).

[30] Ibid., p. 66.

[31] Ibid., p. 63.

[32] Petter Nesser, "Joining Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe: Exploring Motivational Aspects of Recruitment and Radicalization"; in: Magnus Ranstorp, (Ed.), *Understanding Violent Radicalization: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 87–114.

[33] Bart Schuurman and John G. Horgan, "Rationales for terrorist violence in homegrown jihadist groups: A case study from the Netherlands," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 27 (2016): 55–63.

[34] Manni Crone, "Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body," *International Affairs* 92 (2016): 587–604.

[35] Thomas A. Indinopulos and Brian C. Wilson, Eds., *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Arthur L. Greil and David G. Bromley, (Eds.), *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular,* Religion and the Social Order Vol. 19 (New York: JAI Press, 2003); André Droogers, "Defining Religion: A Social Science Approach"; in: Peter B. Clarke, (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 263–279.

[36] For example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Peter Bryne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1989); Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in: Mark C. Taylor, (Ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[37] For example, Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category"; in: *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Peter Beyer, "The Emergence of Religions in the Global System of Religion," *International Sociology* 13 (1998): 151–172 and "Defining Religion in Cross-National

Perspectives: Identity and Difference in Official Conceptions"; in: Arthur L. Greil and David G. Bromley, 2003, op. cit.; Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, translated by W. Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[38] For example, David Hume, "The Natural History of Religions"; in: A. W. Clover and J. V. Price, (Eds.), *David Hume on Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976 [1757]); Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Elliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957 [1841]).

[39] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[40] Peter Beyer, 1998, op. cit. and Peter Beyer, "Social Forms of Religion and Religions in Contemporary Global Society"; in: Michele Dillon, (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[41] Peter Beyer, 2003, op. cit.; José Casanova, "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective," *The Hedge Hog Review* 8 (1–2) (2006): 7–22.

[42] Timothy Fitzgerald, 1999, op. cit.; Mitsutoshi Horii, "Critical Reflections on the Category of 'Religion' in Contemporary Sociological Discourse," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 28 (1) (2015): 21–36.

[43] James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Christian Smith, *Religion: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[44] See, for example, Lorne L. Dawson, "On References to the Transcendent in the Scientific Study of Religion: A Qualified Idealist Proposal," *Religion* 17 (4) (1987): 227–250; Peter Beyer, "What Counts as Religion in Global Society? From Practice to Theory"; in: Peter Beyer, *Religion in the Context of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[45] This critique was first presented in Lorne L. Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," *Numen* 65 (2) (2018): 141–164.

[46] Bart Schuurman and John Horgan, 2016, p. 56.

[47] Ibid., p. 58.

[48] Ibid., p. 58.

[49] Martha Crenshaw, "Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (4) (1987): 13–31.

[50] Bart Schuurman and John Horgan, 2016, p. 58.

[51] Ibid., p. 58.

[52] Ibid., p. 60.

[53] Ibid., p. 60.

[54] Ibid., p. 60.

[55] Manni Crone, 2016, p. 587.

[56] Ibid., p. 588.

[57] For example, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 (3) (2008): 415–433; Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4 (4) (2011): 7–36; Peter R. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," *International Affairs* 89 (4) (2013): 873–893.

[58] Ibid., 2016, p. 590.

[59] John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism,* 2nd. edition (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[60] See, for example, Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (London: Macmillan, 1967); Grace Davie, "Believing without Belonging: Is this the Future of Religion in Britain?" *Social Compass* 37 (4) (1990): 455–469; Christian Smith, 2017, op. cit.

[61] Roel Meijer, (Ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[62] For example, Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (SIME e-Publishing, 2005; original 1964).

[63] Manni Crone, 2016, p. 593.

[64] Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighter Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," Egmont—The Royal Institute for International Relations (March2016); URL: http://www.egmontinstitute.be/facing-the-fourth-foreign-fighters-wave/

[65] Lorne L. Dawson, Feb. 2021, op. cit.

[66] Expressing a somewhat skeptical view of the authenticity of these conversions, Cottee (2016, op. cit.) concludes: "These lapsed Muslims were never radical; they were criminal. And then in the Islamic State, and the scripted violence it offers, they found a way of spiritually transcending their badassery, all the while remaining badasses. They found authorized transgression, a hallucinatory vision that simultaneously allowed and redeemed their bad Muslim selves." But how can we know, no data is provided, just speculation from our own quite different point of view.

[67] Manni Crone, 2016, p. 592.

[68] Ibid., p. 595.

[69] Ibid., p. 596.

[70] Ibid., p. 595.

[71] Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terrorism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016).

[72] Manni Crone, 2016, p. 595.

[73] Ibid., p. 595.

[74] Ibid., pp. 595–596.

[75] Ibid., p. 596.

[76] Zeyno Baran, "Fighting the War of Ideas," *Foreign* Affairs 8 (6) (2005: 68–78; Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," New York Police Department (2007); Lorne L. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (1) (2010): 1–21; Stefan Malthaner, "Radicalization: The Evolution of an Analytical Paradigm," *European Journal of Sociology* 58 (3) (2017): 369–401; Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate, and Elizabeth-Jane Peatfield, "Assembling and Deconstructing Radicalization in Prevent: A Case of Policy-Based Evidence Making?" *Critical Social* Policy 37 (2) (2017): 180–201; Rik Coolsaet, "Radicalization: The Origins and Limits of a Contested Concept"; in: N. Fahil, M. de Koning and F. Ragazzi, (Eds.), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2019), pp. 29–51.

[77] For example, Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* (February–March 2005): 161–169; Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun*, Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009); URL: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jorgen_Staun/publication/237624856_Islamist_Radicalisation_A_Root_Cause_Model/links/55c9cfff08aebc967df972dc.pdf; Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," (The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017); URL: https://icct.nl/publication/sketch-of-a-social-ecology-model-for-explaining-homegrown-terrorist-radicalisation/

[78] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24 (2012): 1–21; James Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37 (2014): 198–211; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (1) (2014): 69–85; John Horgan, 2014, op. cit.; Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, "Indicators of terrorist intent and capability: Tools for threat assessment," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8 (3) (2015): 215–231; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 80–81, 90.

[79] For example, John Horgan, 2014, op. cit.; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (2015): 958–975; Lorne L. Dawson, 2017, op. cit.; Arie Kruglanski, David Webber, Katarzyana Jasko, Marina Chernikova, and Erica Molinario, "The Making of Violent Extremists," *Review of General Psychology* 22 (1) (2018): 107–120; Noémie Bouhana, "The Moral Ecology of Extremism:

A Systemic Perspective," Research Paper prepared for the UK Commission for Countering Extremism (2019); URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834354/Bouhana-The-moral-ecology-of-extremism.pdf.

[80] Andrew Silke, "Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization," *European Journal of Criminology* 5 (2008): 99–123; Randy Borum, 2011, op. cit.; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Marc Sageman, 2017, op. cit.

[81] A point noted as well by Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, "Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13 (6) (2019), p. 5.

[82] For example, Rik Coolsaet, 2016, op. cit.; Lydia Wilson, "Understanding the Appeal of ISIS," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29 (1) (2017): 1–7; Joel Day and Scott Kleinmann, "Combatting the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15 (3) (2017): 14–23; Max Abrahams, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32 (4) (2018): 78–105; Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, "Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link Between Ideas and Violence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12 (1) (2018): 3–22.

[83] Lorne L. Dawson, 2014, op. cit.; Lorne L. Dawson, "Discounting Religion", 2017, op. cit.; Lorne L. Dawson, "Challenging", 2018, op. cit.; Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating the Role of Religion", 2018, op. cit.

[84] Obviously, my critique of aspects of the argument of Schuurman and Horgan is summarized in the previous section of this article.

[85] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 2011, op. cit.

[86] See Lorne L. Dawson, "Discounting", 2017, op. cit., pp. 38–41.

[87] Marc Sageman, 2017, op. cit., pp. 97, 111–161; the critique summarized here was first and more fully developed in Dawson, "Debating", 2018, op. cit.

[88] Ibid., p. 117.

[89] Ibid., p. 115.

[90] The approach is highly reminiscent of the seminal work of Donatella della Porta (e.g., "Recruitment Process in Clandestine Political Organizations: Italian Left–Wing Terrorism," International Social Movement Research, Vol. 1, Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (Eds.) (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), pp. 155–169, though she drew on social movement theory and not social identity theory.

[91] Ibid., p. 143.

[92] Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating" 2018, pp. 108–109.

[93] For example, Jakob Guhl, "Why beliefs always matter, but rarely help us predict jihadist violence. The role of cognitive extremism as a precursor for violent extremism," *Journal of Deradicalization* 14 (2018): 192–217; Holbrook and Horgan, 2019, op. cit. This is a position I have been advocating for years (e.g., "Giving Religion a Role in the Social Ecology of Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization," PASILE (Psychology and Anthropology Assessment in Security, Intelligence and Law Enforcement) Conference, CSIS Headquarters, Ottawa, May 10, 2012; "The Social Ecology of Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization," RCMP National Security Interviewing Workshop, Calgary, Alberta, April 24, 2015; Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017; "Religion and the Radicalization of Western Jihadists," Meeting of "Like-Minded" Senior Counter-Terrorism Officials, Global Affairs Canada, Ottawa, Dec. 13, 2018).

[94] Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating", 2018, pp. 105–106 and Lorne L. Dawson, "Discounting", 2017, pp. 38–39. Of course, the same criticism was made of Crone's approach as well.

[95] See Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (3) 2017, pp. 202–205; Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating", 2018, op. cit., pp. 110–113; and Lorne L. Dawson, "Taking Terrorist Accounts of their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13 (5), 2019: 65–80.

[96] Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating", 2018, p. 109.

[97] Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, 2018, op. cit., pp. 3–4.

[98] The latter claim is advanced in varying ways, for example, but with little in the way of specific and substantial empirical evidence, in the following works: Max Abrahams, 2008, op. cit.; Randy Borum, 2011, op. cit.; John Horgan, 2014, op. cit.;

Schuurman and Eijkmann, 2015, op. cit.

[99] A view supported by, for example, Alessandro Orsini, "Poverty, Ideology and Terrorism: The STAM Bond," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35 (10) (2012): 665–692; Peter R. Neumann, 2013, op. cit.; Jakob Guhl, 2018, op. cit.; and Arie Kruglanski et al., 2018, op. cit.

[100] Exceptions are the rule in the social sciences, and reversing the onus of this discussion, just because some nonviolent Islamists have become violent Jihadists, does not mean that nonviolent Islamist groups will tend to be gateways to extremist violence. The situation is more complicated (see Lorenzo Vidino, "The Role of Non-Violent Islamists in Europe," *CTC Sentinel* 3 (11–12) (November 2010): 9–11.

[101] Jakob Guhl, 2018, op. cit., pp. 203–204; in the quoted passage Guhl associates these terms, in order, with Bart Schuurman and John Horgan, 2016, op. cit., Lorenzo Vidino, "Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (2) (2015), and Randy Borum, 2011, op. cit.

[102] Ibid., pp. 204 and 206.

[103] Lorne L. Dawson, "Social Ecology" 2017, op. cit.

[104] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–639 and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes, Ideology,and Discursive Fields," in: David Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 380–412.

[105] Ibid., p. 204.

[106] Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, 2019, op. cit., pp. 6–7.

[107] Ibid., p. 7.

[108] Studies into violent radicalisation; Lot 2 The beliefs ideologies and narratives, Change Institute, for the European Commission, Directorate General Justice, Freedom and Security (February 2008); Alex P. Schmid, "The Importance of Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative", in E.J.A.M. Kessels, (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010), pp. 46–56; Rohan Gunaratna and Orla Hennessy, "Through the Militant Lens: The Power of Ideology and Narratives," (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, June 2012); Alex P. Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the "Islamic State," (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, June 2015); Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39 (5) (2016): 381–404.

[109] Lorne L. Dawson, "Social Ecology" 2017, p. 8.

[110] See, Arie Kruglanski et al., 2018, op. cit. and Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, 2015, op. cit.

[111] As stressed over and again at the very beginning of the jihadist narrative in paradigmatic works such as Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, op. cit.

[112] Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, 2019, op. cit., p. 7.

[113] Ibid., p. 8; see pp. 9 and 10 as well.

[114] Lorne L. Dawson, "Social Ecology" 2017, op. cit. and "The Social Ecology Model of Homegrown Jihadist Radicalisation," in: Akil N. Awan and James R. Lewis (Eds.), *Radicalisation in Comparative Perspective* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press. Forthcoming in 2021).

[115] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); C. J. M. Drake, "The Role of Ideology in Terrorists' Target Selection," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10 (2) (1998): 53–85; Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (5) (2014): 821–841 and "Ideology and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 56 (5) (2019): 635–649.