

Rejoinders

Granting Efficacy to the Religious Motives of Terrorists

A Reply to Schuurman's Response to "Bringing Religiosity Back In, Parts I & II"

by Lorne L. Dawson

Abstract

In this reply to Bart Schuurman's response to my two-part article "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism," I address how we are speaking at cross-purposes and this leads to misunderstandings. When it comes to discussions of the role of religiosity in motivating jihadist terrorism this situation is common, and hence it is instructive to reexamine how we agree and disagree. Relative to some other prominent scholars, we agree that religiosity can play a role in radicalization and that the level of someone's religious knowledge is a poor way of determining this on a case-by-case basis. Schuurman implies incorrectly, however, that I treat people's beliefs as a sufficient explanation for their violent actions. My critique focuses instead on his reliance (with his coauthor John Horgan) on a modern Western privatized conception of religion that reduces the religio-political commitments of Western jihadists to "personal" (i.e., largely psychological) motivations, when religious motivations, which are intrinsically social, play a more independent role in the social ecology of radicalization.

Keywords: Belief, extremism, Hofstad Group, ideology, religion, terrorism

Academic exchanges are often fraught with misunderstandings. Such seems to be the case with Bart Schuurman's response to my two-part article "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Terrorism." [1] As Schuurman repeatedly states, [2] we actually agree on most aspects of the debate over the role of religiosity in motivating religious terrorism. His response seems to be driven, however, by a fear of being tainted by association, since the article he coauthored with John Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence in Homegrown Jihadist Groups," [3] is included in my critique. In my article I criticize several scholars for their illogical and empirically unsound tendency to dismiss the relevance of religion, or even more broadly, ideology or beliefs, in the explanation of the radicalization of religious extremists and their violent behavior. I understand his concern on this front, and his desire to set the record straight by publishing a more extensive statement of his position. He argues that "rather than seeking to dismiss the role of extremist beliefs, Horgan and I sought to better understand their influence and relation to other motivational forces." [4] Overall, I would say this is true, but in terms of the criticism of their article, as I will argue below, it is somewhat beside the point.

Taking the time to understand what I mean in this regard is instructive. On the one hand, it adds to our appreciation of the complexity of the issues involved, while on the other hand, it illustrates the ongoing problems arising from talking at cross-purposes. In seeking to clarify his own position, moreover, Schuurman alternatively creates the false impression that I am just naïvely arguing, as Sageman puts it, that "bad ideas lead to bad actions." [5] He acknowledges that I am not, but the framing of his discussion would lead uninformed readers to think otherwise. A close reading of my article reveals there is, in fact, little real contrast in our views, beyond some tension in the emphasis we give to the relative possible significance of religiosity in motivating religious terrorism.

In fact, I have never discussed Schuurman's overall stance on the extent to which beliefs influence the actions of terrorists, either in the article under debate or elsewhere. Having read almost everything he has published,

including his dissertation, I am well aware of his views, as well as those of Horgan. I have benefitted from much they have written, and hold each of them in high regard. That is why I focused on their article to illustrate an aspect of my critique. I wish to demonstrate that the interpretive problems I am examining lie at the heart of the field of study, not its periphery.

My critique, it will be recalled, hinges on identifying and tracing the presence and consequences of three types of interpretive mistakes frequently used to justify 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.”[6] The critique of Schuurman and Horgan’s article illustrates one of the two aspects of the second interpretive mistake, namely their implicit reliance on a privatized conception of religion, which provides the rationale for too readily conflating the personal and the religious motivations of religious terrorists. The second aspect, relating to the differentiation of religion and politics, and the subordination of the religious to the political, is the focus of my critique of an article by someone else.

As stipulated by Schuurman, we agree that religious beliefs do not just constitute “an ideological veneer that masks underlying grievances of an economic, social, political or personal nature.”[7] We also agree that “the motivational potential” of religious beliefs should not be dismissed because terrorists may have only “a superficial understanding of [their] religion.” The key consideration is the degree of their personal religious commitment and not the depth of their religious knowledge or the orthodoxy of their beliefs.[8] I would also argue we fundamentally agree that while religious beliefs can play an important originating and/or modifying role in fomenting terrorism, they constitute but one aspect of the motivations for religious terrorism. The last point of agreement is an essential part of countering those who claim religious terrorism has nothing to do with religion, and it seems quite straightforward. This gets lost, however, in Schuurman’s response, where it seems what he gives with the right hand is taken away by the left hand.

Schuurman’s view of the role of religious beliefs and convictions in determining the actions of terrorists is captured succinctly in the abstract for his response:

Rather than dismiss the role of ideology, I have argued the need for its contextualization. Extremist beliefs certainly play an important role in motivation and justifying terrorist violence. But they are not sufficient as explanations for such violence because most people who hold extremist views will never act on them. Secondly, even fanatical adherents of extremist beliefs tend to be motivated by more than their convictions alone. Finally, the different degrees of ideological commitment found among terrorists further underline the need to remain critical of the explanatory power of extremist beliefs alone.

The abstract leaves the distinct impression that I do not agree with these very sensible claims. This is not the case, and thus I too feel the need to clarify my position further.

In Part I of my article, I carefully specified ten qualifications of my argument. I did so to forestall certain anticipated and unwarranted misunderstandings. Given the pervasive and almost taken-for-granted quality of the views I was criticizing, I realized critics would be tempted to dismiss my arguments by simply identifying me as a die-hard supporter of the outdated notion that terrorist actions are simply and solely the result of ideology. Apart from the fact that no serious social scientist studying terrorism holds such a view, it certainly is not mine. Let me review three of the ten qualifications of my argument to make this clear.

First, I specify my awareness of the sound distinction Horgan makes between “the processes of joining the jihadist movement and deciding to cross the boundary from talk to action—to engage in terrorism.” In arguing for the evidentiary value of claims about religiosity made by terrorists, I note, “I am not challenging this differentiation.” On the contrary, as I stipulate, it is important to determine the relative role played by religiosity in either joining terrorist movements and/or engaging in violence. It may be involved in both,

just one, or neither. But I am not aware of any reliable evidence allowing us to prejudge, as many seem to do, when and to what extent this happens.[9]

Second, as I state: “I am not arguing that religion causes religious terrorism. On the contrary, like many of the researchers whose work I criticize, I have sought to understand how persons become religious terrorists in terms of a larger set of psychological and social processes focused on identity formation and change, as influenced by a variety of context-specific social structural variables.”[10] In this regard I referred readers (in an endnote) to my brief “Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization” and the later elaboration of this model in a forthcoming book chapter.[11] This multifactorial model of the process of radicalization aligns with the approach I took many years ago to explain why some new religious movements become violent. Both explanations seek to integrate insights from multiple areas of study, disciplines, and levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro). To help explain the mass murders and suicides perpetrated by several new religious movements, I synthesized insights on the potential role of apocalyptic beliefs, charismatic forms of authority and leadership, and the process of social encapsulation—in other words, the relative and variable contribution of the social-psychological consequences of specific beliefs, organizational factors, and group dynamics.[12] More fundamentally, as I state twice in “Bringing Religiosity Back In (Part I)”: “The precise role of religious ideas and commitments in the radicalization of each individual and group may differ and must be determined on a case-by-case basis. In doing so, an array of data and contextual factors need to be considered.”[13,14] Of course, with time, this approach may reveal patterns of importance.

It is rather misleading, then, when Schuurman twice states: “Dawson makes a case for taking [the religious motivational claims of terrorists] at *face value* [emphasis added].”[15] On the contrary, in my critique I simply argue there are no reliable grounds for making categorical or a priori judgments about the relevance of religious motivational claims. Yet, as I point out, many experts do. I have explained in some detail why I think there is evidentiary value in the accounts terrorists provide about their religious motivations,[16] and further I have examined the methodological reasons offered by scholars of terrorism for treating the religious motivational claims of terrorists with suspicion, if not outright skepticism. Advancing arguments from the sociological study of accounts and the psychology of attitudes and behaviors, I have sought to demonstrate why it is reasonable to grant more credibility to such claims.[17]

In the end, Schuurman argues that “rather than exemplifying a dismissive attitude to the role of extremist belief systems, the [article] that Dawson critiques [seeks] to highlight the shortcomings of explanations for terrorism that rely too heavily on beliefs alone.” In some respects, this is indeed the case, and if my argument caused anyone to think otherwise, that was not my intent. Schuurman’s claim, however, is a bit of a red herring, since it does not address the real issue at stake in my analysis of the article coauthored with Horgan.

Let me restate why, contrary to Schuurman’s protestations, I did group their article with other works minimizing the role of religious motives. As stated in my article:

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”.[18]

My critique of Schuurman and Horgan’s article illustrates how studies of religious terrorism that discount the significance of religious claims often rely on certain modern Western normative conceptions of religion that are misleading. Simplifying a complex situation,[19] there are two ethnocentrically limited aspects of modern Western conceptions of religion that are problematic when applied to the study of jihadism (even in the West): (1) what sociologists call the “privatization” of religion, and (2) the separation of religion and politics. These two ideas are closely interrelated, conceptually and historically, but can and should be analytically distinguished. My critique of Schuurman and Horgan’s article is limited to demonstrating their

implicit reliance on a privatized conception of religion, which provides the rationale for too readily conflating the personal and religious motivations of the terrorists they were studying. Distortions related to reliance on Western conceptions of the differentiation of religion and politics, and the consequent subordination of the religious to the political, are illustrated in my critique of another strong contribution to terrorism studies, Manni Crone's "Radicalization Revisited: Violence, Politics and the Skills of the Body".[20] Without fully reiterating my breakdown of the underlying logic of Schuurman and Horgan's article, I argued that by subsuming the many religious motivational claims made by members of the Hofstad group to the category of "personal motives", Schuurman and Horgan were robbing these claims of their full meaning—their social and political significance as understood by the terrorists. In the course of the secularization of Western societies, religion was normatively exiled from the public realm and confined to the private (and subjective) sphere. This normative state of affairs was later mistaken for the reality of religion, one which makes expressions of religiosity functional equivalents of other personal concerns such as romantic love or lifestyle preferences. However, the religiosity at the heart of Salafi-jihadism is founded on the categorical rejection of this privatization of religion, and the concomitant demotion of the religious relative to the political. Consequently, I argued, Schuurman and Horgan's repeated characterization of the religious justifications for violence of these jihadists as evidence of the primacy of "personal motives" for their actions was misleading. This characterization is technically inaccurate (or at least incomplete), and it belittles the real significance of the religious language used by the terrorists to explain their motivations. Readers steeped in the privatized conception of religion dominant in the modern Western context of this research are likely to reduce the religious rationales of the terrorists to the kinds of psychological issues implied by the term "personal motives," ones that are best countered with therapy. Therefore, in effect we are back to assuming that the real motives of the terrorists are hiding under a cloak of acquired religious rhetoric.

This means they were not accurately identifying the "rationales for terrorist violence" operative in the group they were studying, and by implication, their argument is a typical instance of the kind of problematic reductionism that has plagued the social scientific study of religion for decades.[21] In my original analysis of their article I did not mention this issue of reductionism directly, but it is addressed more generally in Part I of my article.[22] There I recognize that while reductionism is in some respects a cardinal principle of all science, some reductionist explanations are problematic because they imply a hierarchy of phenomena and explanatory theories. In the study of terrorism, for example, "while [it] is common ... to note that the causes of terrorism are multiple, and that we need to take a multifactorial approach to explaining radicalization, there is a tendency to treat religious data as decidedly secondary, if not irrelevant, and treat other kinds of data as superior and capable of subsuming religious data." [23] I may have over-interpreted the intent of Schuurman and Horgan in this regard—but not without reason. The emphasis on "personal motives" lends itself readily to psychological reductionism in the contemporary context, unless carefully qualified.

Schuurman acknowledges there are several points in their article where the 'personal' and 'religious' were "unhelpfully ... juxtaposed" and states that "our view of the relationship between the personal and the religious should have been stated less ambiguously." [24] He then states:

Reformulating my position on this relationship now, I would argue that the desire to act violently did not just stem from the content of Hofstad group participants' beliefs ... The adoption of these beliefs was predated by personal experiences, such as a loss-induced search for existential meaning, that functioned as 'cognitive openings' which, among a range of other factors, increased the likelihood that alternative worldviews would be found appealing. While the personal and the religious are thus not somehow different categories of individual-level motivations, it still makes sense to tease them apart.[25]

My concern, however, was never whether the religious choices made by the extremists may have been influenced by prior experiences and psychological factors. This influence goes without saying. Likewise, I agree that it is important to tease apart such individual-level motivations for action. But doing so does not mean, as Schuurman's and Horgan's analysis keeps implying, that the prior experiences and factors carry an explanatory import that overrides or sidelines the motivational significance of the meanings given to these

experiences by the religious commitments of the terrorists—a process which involves a near inextricable concertation of beliefs and practices, cognitions and emotions. Realistically and methodologically, I argued, the numerous explicit references made by the terrorists to the religious grounds for their actions have more explanatory credence, or evidentiary value, than the vague and unsubstantiated speculations of some ill-defined psychological troubles advanced by Schuurman and Horgan, such as the impact of the death of the mother of one of the terrorists.

As I state in my critique, Schuurman and Horgan introduce a grab-bag of motivational concerns that are rather broadly categorized as “personal”: 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. Grouping such diverse phenomena together so rudimentarily is itself analytically suspect, but what is more, as I commented,

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.[26]

Recognizing the constitutive nature of the intersubjective and sociopolitical aspect of many of the motivations espoused by and/or assigned to the terrorists in this case, is paramount to explaining their actions and countering them effectively. Simply identifying them as “personal” in nature will fall short on both counts.

The fact that the religious claims of terrorists are discounted in so many analyses of religious terrorism speaks to the implicit assumption that the religious claims prioritized by the actors are almost by definition epiphenomenal. By nature, they are not worthy of being granted greater explanatory significance. Whether this interpretive tendency reflects a secular bias in terrorism studies, as I have speculated,[27] is irrelevant—as I state in Part I of “Bringing Religiosity Back In.” If we wish to address the specificity problem lurking throughout studies of radicalization, if we wish to better explain, that is, why people get involved in jihadism and then also why some may take the further step from talk to action, it is methodologically more sensible to start with the abundant religious motivational claims made by the jihadists that we have in hand than rely, at this point, on conjectures about some as yet undocumented psychological—or “personal”—needs and drives.

This does not mean that the religious commitments in question are not derived in part from some underlying “search for existential meaning.” On the contrary, this is true in many cases, and for many other things that people do, so how is it pertinent? Moreover, not all such searches are instigated by unresolved psychological issues that could be better resolved by therapy. The history of religion reveals an abundance of positive and negative motivations for devotion, which have profoundly shaped the world in ways both good and bad. [28] Once initiated, religious motivations, which are intrinsically social in nature, take on a life and force of their own that cannot simply, completely, or categorically be reduced to either prior and other nonreligious factors involved in the process, and that applies to radicalization as well. The religious commitment, as an ideological and social phenomenon, has its own quasi-independent role to play in the social ecology of radicalization—at least in the case of jihadists, which is my sole focus of concern. The search for identity or belonging influences the adoption of an ideology, but the ideology influences which groups will become the relevant in-groups and out-groups. It is a dialectical situation. The importance of the religious commitment in this regard is indicated by the passionate persistence of the professions of the terrorists, and their willingness to die for what they profess. By the time the religious conviction, and accompanying identity, are in place it is fair to say those espousing this worldview are dying for it, and not the psychological needs *per se* that set the process in motion. We can choose to call those who blow themselves and others up “fanatics,” to use Schuurman’s preferred term,[29] but in doing so we need to guard against being seduced into reducing their dedication to a religious obligation, no matter how jarring to us, to underlying psychological considerations. This is especially the case if those considerations resemble the ones underlying other quite ordinary actions

in other contexts.

Much more could be said, but in the end, I find solace in all that Schuurman, Horgan and I agree on. Relative to the comments of others I cite, who dismiss the significance of religiosity in motivating jihadist terrorism, it is a sign of progress. I would recommend reading Schuurman and Horgan's article on the "Rationales for Terrorist Violence," despite my criticism, since it provides excellent insights into the analysis of the motivations for terrorism. I agree with most of their analysis, with the exception of their treatment of the religious rationales that figure so prominently in the discourse of the Hofstad group. In the study of religious terrorism, it is still too common, however, to see the religious talk of terrorists treated as little more than a witting or unwitting front for other real motives, even though these other motives are largely conjectural. The situation calls to mind the old new left notion of "false consciousness," but its application in this case is less controversial because those supposedly suffering from the false consciousness are so morally distant from us.

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Notes

[1] Lorne L. Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Terrorism, (Part I)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15(1), 2021, pp. 2–16; Lorne L. Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Terrorism, (Part II)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15(2), 2021, pp. 1–21.

[2] Bart Schuurman, "The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism: A Response to Lorne L. Dawson's article "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflection on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Parts I & II)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 15, nos. 1 & 2 (February & April 2021), *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15(5), 2021, pp. 85–92.

[3] 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), pp. 55–63.

[4] Schuurman, "The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism," (2021), op. cit., p. 86.

[5] Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

[6] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In (Part II)," 2021, op. cit., p. 2.

[7] Schuurman, "The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism," (2021), op. cit., p. 85.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 89.

[9] Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In ... Part I" (2021), op. cit., p. 5.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[11] Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Research Note 8, No. 1, 2017; URL: <https://icct.nl/publication/sketch-of-a-social-ecology-model-for-explaining-homegrown-terrorist-radicalisation/>; Lorne L. Dawson, "The Social Ecology Model of 'Homegrown' Jihadist Radicalization"; in: Akil N. Awan and James R. Lewis (Eds.), *Radicalisation in Comparative Perspective* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press) (forthcoming).

- [12] Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1st edition, 1998, 2nd revised and expanded edition, 2006; Italian translation: *I nuovi movimenti religiosi*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005. See also: 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, pp. 1–21.
- [13] Dawson, “Bringing Religiosity Back In ... Part I” (2021), op. cit., pp. 6, 7.
- [14] This approach has been put into practice, admittedly in a preliminary way, in analyses of the Toronto 18 terrorist group: L. Dawson, “Trying to Make Sense of Home-Grown Terrorist Radicalization,” (2014) op. cit.; Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization: The Toronto 18 in Comparative Perspective,” in Michael Nesbitt, Kent Roach, and David Hofmann (Eds.), *Canadian Terror: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Toronto 18 Terrorism Trials*. Winnipeg: Special Issue of the *Manitoba Law Review* 44(1), 2021: 1–33 (released as well as Edited Book).
- [15] Schuurman, “The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism,” (2021), op. cit., pp. 85, 90.
- [16] 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. 191–210; see the discussion on pp. 202–205.
- [17] Lorne L. Dawson, “Taking Terrorist Accounts of their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13(5), 2019, pp. 65–80.
- [18] Dawson, “Bringing Religiosity Back In ... (Part II)” (2021), op. cit., p. 7; quoting material from Schuurman and Horgan, “Rationales for terrorist violence” (2018), op. cit., p. 56.
- [19] See my full article, or the more exhaustive analysis provided in William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, Chapter 2 – The Invention of Religion, pp. 57–122.
- [20] Manni Crone, “Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body,” *International Affairs* 92 (2016): pp. 587–604.
- [21] See, for example, Daniel Pals, “Is Religion a Sui Generis Phenomenon?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 55(2), 1987, pp. 259–282; Thomas Idinopulos and Edward Yonan (Eds.), *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1994); Russel McCutcheon, (Ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1999).
- [22] Dawson, “Bringing Religiosity Back In ... Part I” (2021), op. cit., pp. 8–9.
- [23] *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
- [24] Schuurman, “The Role of Beliefs in Motivating Involvement in Terrorism,” (2021), op. cit., p. 87.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- [26] Dawson, “Bringing Religiosity Back In ... Part II” (2021), op. cit., p. 8.
- [27] Lorne L. Dawson, “Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism,” *Numen* 65(2), 2018: pp. 141–164.
- [28] See Scott Appleby’s seminal discussion of this issue in *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.
- [29] Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, “Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link between Ideas and Violence,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12(1), 2018, pp. 7–10.