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# Religious Terrorism: Where Humanity Stoops Low

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## ABSTRACT

*“We are not Angels that always act good, we are not Demons that always act bad, we are just Humans, we have both abilities. So, if some human made a mistake, blame themselves, not their religions, not their races, not their origins or their families.”*

*- Zak Ebrahim, son of former terrorist El Sayyid Nosair*

*The concept of terrorism has to be viewed from a broad perspective. Although, the first picture that comes to mind when terrorism is mentioned, is that of gory and brutal killing of innocent people on the whims of the terrorists. However, there are several forms of terrorism which are equally prevalent and these inter alia, include religious terrorism, eco-terrorism, cyber terrorism and narco-terrorism. This article specifically focuses on the subject matter of religious terrorism and the author in pursuance of the same has delved into its research and critically analyzed its substance along with comments and suggestions for the same.*

**Keywords** – religion, terrorism, non-state actors, politics, religious-beliefs, attacks

## I. RELIGION AND TERRORISM- AN INTERWOVEN COLLOQUY

Religion is an inextricable part of mankind. Found in different forms, it is as pervasive as the air we breathe, as comprehensive as the universe itself and as indispensable to a person as his own identity. Karl Marx in one of his introductory works has stated that religion is the opium of the people.<sup>2</sup> Its conception is immemorial and unlike the other notions which alter or change with the changing society, religion, on the other hand, has always remained immutable.

The power of religion ranges from a simple influence to complete control of society or a community. And it is undoubted that without religion, we would in all likelihood be living in a different kind of society. Religious influence is so immense that there are people who are

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, (2015)

willing to sacrifice their lives and that of others for the sake of religion. Some of them leave aside their profitable businesses and prospering careers to pursue a Godly path. There are others who even renounce their families and the world and everything they possess just to follow some religious tenets or avenue which would bring them closer to God.<sup>3</sup> It is when such acts of sacrifice and offering are aggrandized and undertaken with an extremist and fanatic point of view, it becomes indispensable for it come under the ambit of terrorism.

According to the Black's Law Dictionary, terrorism is defined as the use or threat of violence to intimidate or cause panic, especially as a means of affecting political conduct.<sup>4</sup> There has always been difficulty in laying down a concrete definition of terrorism by the United Nations. The controversy arises due to the fact that the use of violence is done by both state and non-state actors to achieve a certain goal. However, in 1994, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution which was essentially concerned with eliminating international terrorism, incorporates a provision to describe terrorism. It provides for terrorism as a criminal demonstration planned or determined to incite a situation of threat in the overall population, a group of people or some specific people for political purposes.<sup>5</sup> Various other definitions have been given by different members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Their construction of the intention of terrorist activities is that they envisage to disrupt law and order of a particular region or community and to influence a government and public body.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the essence of terrorism lies in its motive, which is to destabilize the political order and create unrest and upheaval.

## II. WHEN TERRORISM IS CONDEMNED YET CONDONED

Delving further into the nexus between terrorism and religion, this article primarily focuses on the four major religions namely - Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity.

The manifestation of terrorist ideas have been seen by the world in various cases viz. the landmark incidents of 9/11 in the United States<sup>7</sup>, 26/11 blasts and the serial bomb blasts in Mumbai in 1992<sup>8</sup> and the militant attacks carried out in the name of creating the separatist

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<sup>3</sup> Jaspreet Wasu, *Importance of Religion in our Life*, The Speaking Tree, Nov. 06, 2012, 2:49 PM, <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/importance-of-religion-in-our-life>.

<sup>4</sup> BRYAN A. GARNER, *BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY* 4603, (8th ed. 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, *Various definitions of Terrorism*, <https://dema.az.gov/sites/default/files/Publications/AR-Terrorism%20Definitions-BORUNDA.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> *Definition of Terrorism by Country in OECD Countries*, OECD International Platform on Terrorism Risk Insurance, <http://www.oecd.org/daf/fin/insurance/terrorism-risk-insurance.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Henne, *Terrorism and Religion: An Overview*, Oxford Research Encyclopedia, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-69>.

<sup>8</sup> Fawzan Husain, *How the 1993 Blasts Changed Mumbai Forever*, BBC News, July 30, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33713846>.

state Khalistan.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in this year itself, from January to August, a total of 1,346 terrorist attacks have been carried out which have resulted in 5,996 fatalities.<sup>10</sup>

Terrorists groups that are motivated by religious beliefs are found in not one but many religions. However, with complete respect to each and every community, the author believes that the reason why one particular religion is accused or targeted to harbour most of the terrorists is that it actually does. Some states encourage non-state actors and tacitly groom them. Among all the terrorist incidents, the occurrences of terrorist activities being carried out to further Islamic beliefs are the highest. This certainly doesn't mean that the religion preaches this barbaric behaviour. No religion is about war or peace. Each religion is about supreme faith in its own superiority and the holy right to force its construction of truth upon others.<sup>11</sup> It is simply that certain sects of the religion have interpreted it in a different and radical manner. This is made very conspicuous in the example of Malala Yousafzai and the men from Tehreek-e-Taliban who attacked her. Both the former and the latter follow Islam however, where one is a Nobel Peace Prize winner<sup>12</sup>, the other group is an ignorant and deranged fanatic. Many terrorist groups commit the felony in order to further their religious beliefs, however, some of them kill people from their own community members who do not completely adhere to their perverse ideology. A primary example of such an organization is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the words of the former U.S. Secretary of State, "*ISIS kills Christians because they are Christians, Yazidis because they are Yazidis and Shia because they are Shia.*"<sup>13</sup>

Hence, it is the criminal minds of the terrorists backed with their religiously driven psyche which compels them to do such an act to make everyone conform to their religious tenet and castigate those who do not adhere to it.

The unfortunate part is that sometimes such unacceptable acts are condoned by the communities and the government themselves. One such incident is that of the purging of Kashmiri Pandits and their mass exodus in 1990. The horrors of that time are still recollected by the displaced Kashmiri Pandits who had the option of either being killed by the terrorists

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<sup>9</sup> Pruthi, Raj (2004), *Sikhism and Indian Civilization*, Discovery Publishing House, p. 169, ISBN 9788171418794

<sup>10</sup> *Terrorist Attacks*, ESRI, Story Maps Lab, <https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/terrorist-attacks>.

<sup>11</sup> David Schafer, *Islam and Terrorism: A Humanist View*, *American Humanist Association*, June 2002, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/islam-terrorism-humanist-view>.

<sup>12</sup> *The Nobel Peace Prize for 2014*, The Norwegian Nobel Committee, The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2014/press-release/>.

<sup>13</sup> *ISIS's Persecution of Religion*, Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions>

or leave their homes and find an abode in another state.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Khalistan Movement led by Jagjit Singh Chohan meant to create a theocratic homeland for the Sikh Diaspora. The movement exhibited its intentions by carrying out savageries like assassinating people in power who do not conform to their ideas<sup>15</sup>, which will threaten the common man not to do the same, hijacking airplanes<sup>16</sup> and trains, attacking buses and trains, etc.<sup>17</sup> These incidents are long bygone, however, the ideologies of a separatist state still float in Punjab and even abroad, especially in Canada. In fact, in the last year itself, pro-Khalistan radicals were arrested in Punjab<sup>18</sup>, most of which were supported by like-groups in Canada. Justin Trudeau, nonetheless, has announced that the country would not tolerate the re-establishment of the separatist movement.<sup>19</sup> Now, these incidents certainly indicate that religion is the root cause of such militant attacks; however, the astounding fact is that the Punjab insurgency was brought under control in India by a Sikh himself, Mr. Kanwar Pal Singh Gill, who was the Director-General of Police at that time.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore deduced that is not the religion which effectuates or prompts terrorist activities, it is its wrongful interpretation which does that.

Although not as prevalent, terrorist activities by people driven by extreme Christian beliefs are also a common happening in the world. The historical bridge which links Christianity with terrorism dates back to the Establishment of the Ku Klux Klan. It wanted to re-establish white-supremacy and had a highly racist perspective. Their terrorist activities included blowing up black churches and schools and condemn the immigrants.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, the post-depression period saw depletion in the popularity of the Klan as its membership decreased. Another instance is that of the Anti-Balaka group in the Central African Republic which majorly comprises of Christians and have carried out massacres of Muslim people, especially women who refuse to convert to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> The most recent example of white supremacy

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<sup>14</sup> IBNLive, *A Kashmiri Pandit Recounts the Horror of January 19, 1990*, News 18, Jan 19, 2016, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/a-kashmiri-pandit-recounts-the-horror-of-january-19-1990-1192089.html>

<sup>15</sup> Fair C. Christine, *Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies* 128, (2005)

<sup>16</sup> Jugdep S. Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India* 71-75, Sage Publications India, ISBN 9788132105381

<sup>17</sup> *Gunmen Slaughter 32 on Bus in India in Bloodiest Attack of Sikh Campaign*, The Philadelphia Inquirer A03, July 07, 1987

<sup>18</sup> Ravinder Vasudeva, *New Brand of Sikh Militancy*, Hindustan Times, Jan 09, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/a-new-brand-of-sikh-militancy-rears-its-head/story-JH3XbAGk6sSxIYrVEDyISK.html>

<sup>19</sup> Harpeet Bajwa, *Most Punjabis in Canada Don't Support Khalistan*, The Indian Express, April 08, 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2018/apr/08/most-punjabis-in-canada-dont-support-khalistan-expert-1798460.html>

<sup>20</sup> Jyotsana Singh, *Profile: KPS Gill*, BBC News, May 08, 2002, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1975997.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1975997.stm).

<sup>21</sup> Editors, *Ku Klux Klan*, History.com, May 22, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/reconstruction/ku-klux-klan>.

<sup>22</sup> David Smith, *Christian Threats Force Muslim Convoy to turn back in CAR Exodus*, Feb 14, 2014, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/14/muslim-convoy-central-african-republic-exodus>.

terrorising the other communities is the Christchurch Mosque Shooting in the name of ethnic cleansing. Looking at the facts of the case and the chauvinistic behavior of the gunman, it is very clear that the activity is the result of the sickened and psychotic mentality of the perpetrator and his deviant belief in his religion.<sup>23</sup> Once these activities targeting other religions start, it is difficult to put an end to it as every religion has an extremist group which will make attempts to seek vengeance. As a retaliation to the Mosque Shootings in New Zealand, Sri Lanka witnessed blasts on three churches in this year's Easter.<sup>24</sup> The suicide bombers involved were a part of the Islamist militant group who carried out the attack to seek revenge for the Mosque Attacks in New Zealand.

The religious retaliation terrorism is also seen in the classic example of the Best Bakery Case.<sup>25</sup> This incident saw communal violence in India at its peak. The Hindu-Muslim feud was taken to another level by engaging in mob lynching, train burning and massacres. All this resulted in nothing but loss of property and innocent lives.

The terrorist activities carried out in the name of Hinduism although not by any organized groups, is a stark reality which persists in the country. It majorly happens in the form of mob lynching. Apart from the renowned cases of cow vigilantes in India,<sup>26</sup> mob lynching is being done for various unnecessary reasons. Recently, five women who were suspected of doing witchcraft were lynched to death by people<sup>27</sup>. The happenings of religious mob lynching are a common occurrence in India mostly carried out by fanatics of Hinduism who do not care to regard the ideas of other religions. This initiates a chain reaction and the fanaticism is met with the extremism of other religions as retaliation and hence becomes a never ending process.

All these acts of terrorism are inextricable from politics. Politics is nothing but administration of a nation. And the religious fanatics wish to take the governance and administration into their own hands. As the eminent Australian Researcher, Riaz Hassan has stated, "It is politics more than religious fanaticism that has driven the terrorists to blow themselves up."

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<sup>23</sup> Nick Perry, *New Zealand Mosque Shooter Broadcast Slaughter on Facebook*, AP News, March 15, 2019, <https://apnews.com/ce9e1d267af149dab40e3e5391254530>.

<sup>24</sup> Asian News International, *Attackers of Sri Lanka Easter Sunday Bombings Inspired by Islamic State*, India Today, July 25, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/sri-lanka-attack-isis-1573253-2019-07-25>

<sup>25</sup> *Zahira Habibullah Sheikh v. State of Gujarat*, (2006) 3 SCC 374.

<sup>26</sup> Soutik Biswas, *Why Stopping India's Vilante Killings Will Not be Easy*, BBC News, July 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40505719>.

<sup>27</sup> *Women Accused of Witchcraft lynched by Indian Mob*, AlJazeera, Aug 08, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/women-accused-witchcraft-lynched-india-mob-150808111054841.html>

### III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While embarking on this article, the question persisting on the mind of the author was how to mitigate religious terrorism? And the answer to it, no matter how far-fetched and utopic it seems, is education of the masses. Educate one and educate all.

The people who are incited to act in furtherance of terrorist motives are driven with impractical and absurd incentives like the gates of heaven would be opened for them once they successfully carry out the terrorist activity. In fact, after the Pulwama Attack, the video released of Adil Dair, the suicide bomber of Jaish-e-Mohammed shows the perpetrator talking about going to heaven after the deadly attack.<sup>28</sup> This shows the sheer ignorance of the people involved in such activities. And mostly, poor and jobless people are targeted to join these banned forces for this reason as their naive brains can be moulded easily. They are basically selling a dream. Recently, a pastor was arrested in Virginia for selling tickets to heaven for \$500. People believe that anything in the name of religion is justified. Hence, education can eliminate this vice by teaching rectitude to these people.

Concluding with the quote of Malala Yusafzai - *“With guns you can kill terrorists, with education, you can kill terrorism.”*

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<sup>28</sup> India Today Web Desk, *Pulwama Terror Attack: Jaish-e-Mohammed Claims Responsibility*, India Today, Feb 14, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-terror-attack-kashmir-jaish-e-mohammad-adil-ahmad-dar-1456169-2019-02-14>.