

## The Moral Questions on the Religious Basis for Terrorism

Chidiebere Obi<sup>1</sup>, Chidimma Stella Ukaulor<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

<sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy Imo State University, Owerri

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Terrorism has been informed and propelled by many factors such as tribal, political, religious and many other factors but experience has shown that religious factor has been a key factor for terrorism; sometimes, it is used to champion other courses which may be political or tribal. Religious terrorism is the justifiability of terror acts on the ground that such an act is sanctioned by a deity; thus, adherents are called to even kill in order to defend their faith. Religious motivated terrorism (e. g., Joshua conquest of the Canaanites in the Old Testament, ISIS terrorist attacks, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Boko-Haram in Nigeria etc.) is said to be the deadliest of all other kinds of terrorism. Looking at the religious basis for terrorism, one is poised to raise some moral questions such as: are there ethical justifications for religious terrorism? Is religion the bedrock for morality or vice versa? Since God has reason for all His actions, can He ever sanction the killing of His creatures for His delight? What is the moral undertone of martyrdom? Etc. This research considers these questions and more thereby unveiling a possible moral condemnation of religious basis for terrorism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Terrorism, Religion, Morality, Martyrdom*

---

### I. Introduction

Terrorism is “the use of violent acts to frighten the people in an area as a way of trying to achieve a political goal.”<sup>1</sup> Religious terrorism on the other hand is a type of political violence motivated by an absolute belief that an other- worldly power has sanctioned—and commanded—terrorist violence for the greater glory of the faith. Acts committed in the name of the faith will be forgiven by the otherworldly power and perhaps rewarded in an afterlife. In essence, one’s religious faith legitimizes violence as long as such violence is an expression of the will of one’s deity.<sup>2</sup> Today, at least twenty percent of the approximately 50 know terrorist groups active throughout the world can be described as having a dominant religious component or motivation.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, the religious extremists interpret their holy scriptures to suit their course.

In the history of human development, we have had so many religious motivated terrorist attacks such as: the Joshua led Israeli massacre of the Canaanites, the Roman Catholic crusade (by the Western Knights and Frankish Soldiers) against the Islamic East, the Order of Assassins (Ismaili sect of Islam) attacks against Sunnis and Christians, the Holy Spirit Mobile Force in Uganda opposing the new government of President Yoweri Museveni, ISIS wanton attacks in Syria and neighbouring countries, Al Qaeda, Boko-Haram insurgency in Nigeria and Cameroun etc. In his distinction between “holy terror” and “secular terror”, Hoffman states: What is particularly striking about “holy terror” compared to purely “secular terror”, however, is the radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimization and justification, concepts of morality and the Manichean world view that the “holy terrorist” embraces. For the religious terrorist, violence first and foremost is sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are thereby unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists. Whereas secular terrorists generally consider indiscriminate violence immoral and counterproductive, religious terrorists regard such violence not only as morally justified, but a necessary expedient for the attainment of their goals.<sup>4</sup>

In the light of the above, this research questions such stronghold of religion on man by resolving some moral questions like: are there ethical justifications for religious terrorism? Is religion the bedrock for morality or vice versa? Since God has reason for all His actions, can He ever sanction the killing of His creatures for His delight? What is the moral undertone of martyrdom? Etc.

To do justice to the above questions, the research will consider the following:

- ❖ The notion of terrorism and its religious basis
- ❖ Religion: concept and meaning
- ❖ Moral evaluation

### The Notion Of Terrorism And Its Religious Basis

Within the word terrorism is the word *terror*. The word Terror comes from the Latin *terrere*, which means “frighten” or “tremble.” When coupled with the French suffix *isme* (referencing “to practice”), it becomes akin

to “practicing the trembling” or “causing the frightening. Trembling and frightening here are synonyms for fear, panic, and anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

The word terrorism can therefore be defined as the deliberate use of violence, crime and threat so as to achieve political aims. According to Walter Laqueur,

Terrorism is the use or the threat of the use of violence, a method of combat, or a strategy to achieve certain targets... It aims to induce a state of fear in the victim, that is ruthless and does not conform with humanitarian rules... Publicity is an essential factor in the terrorist strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Bruce Hoffman explains further that,

Terrorism is ineluctably political in aims and motives, violent—or, equally important, threatens violence, designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target, conducted by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia), and perpetrated by a sub-national group or non-state entity.<sup>7</sup> The act of terrorism is deliberate and intentional. In other words, the act of terrorism is willed and voluntary. Hence Benjamin Netanyahu explains:

Terrorism is not defined by the identity of its perpetrator. Nor is it defined by the cause, real or imagined, that its perpetrators espouse. Terrorism is defined by one thing and one thing alone. It is defined by the nature of the act. Terrorists systematically and deliberately attack on the innocent.<sup>8</sup>

Terrorism is a pejorative term. When people employ the term, they characterize their enemies' actions as something evil and lacking human compassion. League of Nations Convention Definition of Terrorism: terrorist acts are “all criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public.”<sup>9</sup>

The act of terrorism is not accidental but the terrorists deliberately target the innocents. The root cause of terrorism is the deprivation of national/civil rights. This deprivation is what driving terrorism is. There are wars, struggles, conflicts and battles among humans, yet employed terrorism is different from murder, assault, arson, demolition of property, or the threat of the same; the reason is that the impact of terrorist violence and damage reaches more than the immediate target victims (e.g., government or military). Terrorism therefore proceeds from a totalitarian mind- set.

Terrorism is the use of violence to create fear (i.e., terror, psychic fear) for (1) political, (2) religious, or (3) ideological reasons (ideologies are systems of belief derived from worldviews that frame human social and political conditions). The terror is intentionally aimed at noncombatant targets (i.e., civilians or iconic symbols), and the objective is to achieve the greatest attainable publicity for a group, cause, or individual. The meaning of terrorism is socially constructed.

Terrorism can be religious, ethnic, and political. Religious terrorism is usually centered on fanaticism. Religious fanaticism is an extreme sense of ideological zeal complemented by a focused and unrelenting set of activities that express the high dedication of one or more people to their own belief system(s). Radical religious Islamism has been identified as a root cause of terrorism. The Islamist attacks against civilians from Glasgow to Jakarta confirm that many Islamists are ideologically determined to engage in terrorism.

Terrorism as previously defined and discussed and as practiced lacks legitimacy; the ends do not justify the means. Political rhetoric and valid causes aside, terrorism fundamentally diverges from the norms associated with warfare or insurgency, based largely on just war traditions of proportionality, even if often bearing the outward appearance and precision of military operations. Despite claiming to be soldiers, terrorists, by their acts, reject the recognition accorded belligerents in an armed conflict. Instead, terrorist attacks dwell almost entirely in the realm of criminal acts and include murder, assault, arson and kidnapping. If, as some would argue, terrorist groups constitute legitimate insurgents, often described as freedom fighters that should be considered as recognized belligerents, then their indiscriminate and deliberate killing of noncombatants and destruction of civil targets constitute war crimes. Yet such crimes may be essential to effectively realizing the psychological intent of terrorism. Unlike conventional or even insurrectionary military operations, terrorism must ignore constraints imposed by both political and legal convention. To do otherwise would be to severely reduce their effectiveness. Military forces, for the most part, are organized and dispatched to fight other military or paramilitary forces that operate, at least in principle, within the customary and legally binding laws of armed conflict. Armies failing to follow these norms face legal sanction, as Serbia's former president Milosovic discovered. Even guerrilla movements attempting to become legitimate belligerents turn to recognized standards for the conduct of war (which, notably, prohibit targeting and attacking civilians) to gain international recognition. Conduct, rather than the visible trappings of military or political movements determine their legitimacy. Terrorists, despite military-style training, titles and garb, have no intention of confronting military or police forces; to do so invite failure or even destruction. Terrorist targets often possess little intrinsic military value, the destruction of which rarely more than inconveniences, however tragic, their enemies. The nature of terrorism demands striking the very targets it does, at the same time places it in the realm of criminality. The difference between terrorist and military operations resides in the purpose, the effects and most importantly, the

nature of the results. Those who define terrorists in military terms or tout the justness of the cause miss this essential point. If terrorism, as some argue, constitutes another form of war, then its basic traits relegate it to being a war crime. Whatever the political or social goals, terrorism possesses its own unique character largely incompatible with recognized norms associated with military operations. This dichotomy may be the most distinguishing and consistent characteristic of terrorism no matter where it is practiced. The goals of the terrorists do not justify their means. The deliberate assault and killing of the innocent is evil. If terrorism can be conceived of as the moral if not legal equivalent of war crimes, we need to understand the relationship that terrorism also has to ordinary crime. Brian Jenkins explores this below. Terrorism differs from ordinary crime in its political purpose and in its primary objective. ... Likewise, not all politically motivated violence is terrorism... Terrorism is not synonymous with guerilla war or any other kind of war and it is not reserved exclusively for those trying to overthrow governments.<sup>10</sup>

The primary difference between terrorist acts and 'ordinary' crime is the political motivation of terrorists. Criminals may and often do terrorize their victims. However, their purpose is not to terrorize but to extract property, money or other tangible assets for personal enrichment or satisfaction. Terrorism is motivated by larger political causes and the acts are symbolically carried out in order to further that cause. Although most terrorist acts are violations of criminal statutes, they differ qualitatively from ordinary crime by their underlying motivation. Of all factors propelling the act of terror, religion appears to be the strongest and the most trending. Historically speaking, there have been several examples of religiously motivated terrorist groups and acts such as: Judeo-Christian Antiquity, Christian Crusades, the Order of Assassins, Secret Cult of Murder, Modern Arab Islamist Extremism, Al-Qaida, ISIS, Al-shaabab, Boko-haram etc. A look at afore-mentioned terrorist groups will make it crystal clear that any attempt to limit the religious terrorism to Islam is a biased and myopic because there have been traces of terrorism in a good number of religious affiliations.

Having said that Islam is not to be associated with terrorism alone, nevertheless, the onus is on the Islamic scholars who have been trying to exonerate Islam from the terror-like light the west has brought it to answer the question on why traces of terrorism have been significantly reduced in other religions other than in most Islamic states. This point was corroborated by Popular Western perception equates radical Islam with terrorism. ... There is, of course, no Muslim or Arab monopoly in the field of religious fanaticism; it exists and leads to acts of violence in the United States, India, Israel, and many other countries. But the frequency of Muslim- and Arab-inspired terrorism is still striking. ... A discussion of religion-inspired terrorism cannot possibly confine itself to radical Islam, but it has to take into account the Muslim countries' preeminent position in this field.<sup>11</sup> Terrorism in Islam has been identified with the Islamic doctrine of Jihad on which many fanatics based their act of terror. Against this backdrop, scholars like Karen Armstrong write: "the concept of jihad is a central tenet in Islam. Contrary to misinterpretations common in the West, the term literally means a sacred struggle or effort rather than an armed conflict or fanatical holy war."<sup>12</sup> This is the primary meaning of the term as used in the Quran, which refers to an internal effort to reform bad habits in the Islamic community or within the individual Muslim. The term is also used more specifically to denote a war waged in the service of religion.<sup>13</sup> Regarding how one should wage jihad, the *greater* jihad refers to the struggle each person has within him or herself to do what is right. Because of human pride, selfishness, and sinfulness, people of faith must constantly wrestle with themselves and strive to do what is right and good. The *lesser* jihad involves the outward defense of Islam. Muslims should be prepared to defend Islam, including military defense, when the community of faith is under attack.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the myriad defenses on the sanctity and perfect nature of these religious doctrines, records have shown that after carrying out their heinous acts, terrorist often attribute their act as being sanctioned by their faith and as such, underscores the religious basis of terrorism; thus, generates some moral questions. But before we consider these questions, let's first of all briefly throw light on what religion entails.

### **Religion: Concept And Meaning**

The reason for this brief insight on the meaning of religion is to fathom the authenticity or not of religious basis for terrorism. It is believed that a good understanding will help condone or condemn the wanton killing of the innocent in the name of defending one's faith or in the name of carrying out the will of God. In its etymology, Haring traced the term 'religion' to three Latin words as its roots, namely: *ligare* (meaning to bind), *relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link), and *religio* (meaning relationship).<sup>15</sup> In his analysis of this etymology of religion, Omeregbe (1993) holds that "...the etymology of the word 'religion' shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man."<sup>16</sup>

According to Merriam, religion is "the outward existence of God ... to whom obedience, service and honour are due, the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life."<sup>17</sup> In

his words, Bouquet sees religion as “a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God.”<sup>18</sup> Even though that religion lacks any universally accepted definition, we can deduce from the above definitions the basic features of religion which include: belief, relationship between the mortal persons and the immortal being(s), involves rites and ceremonies, demand of good conduct of life etc.

Pointing At The Roles Religion Plays, Obi Writes:

...going by the premise that all religions preach against evil, one may possibly conclude that religion embodies basic attributes that can be utilized in ensuring societal development. This is because, for a sustainable societal development to be there must be justice, equity harmony, honesty etc. All these attributes are what different religious groups inculcate in the minds of their faithful.<sup>19</sup>

In his confirmation of the role plays by religion in promoting justice, Nzomiwu (1999) confirms that, “Justice is of urgent concern to all mankind. Animists, Marxists confusionists, humanists, Christians are all interested in justice and clamour against injustice. The problem most times is the extension of religious teachings to the practical daily activities of man.”<sup>20</sup>

Having gone this far, we will now consider if there is any credence to the claim of a terrorist about a religious sanctioned terrorist act.

## **II. Moral Evaluation**

We may ask at this juncture; between morality and religion, which needs the other to thrive? The answer to this question cannot be over emphasized because it is crystal clear that every religion is built on moral foundation or a seeming moral foundation. If this is the case, then, any claim on the justifiability of an immoral act on the basis of religion is not only false but counterproductive to the social values of religion. Going by this premise, we can now argue that since act of terror is immoral (since it involves the killing of the noncombatants); it then contradicts every claim of religious sanction.

Considering the fact that one of the features of religion is ‘belief’, a critical mind may argue from the epistemological perspective that since ‘belief’ cannot be equated with knowledge (since knowledge is justified true belief), it then qualifies religious belief as a porous one. Due to this, a terrorist maybe right in claiming that God approves of his act of terror. This is because; we cannot ascertain both the claim of a non-terrorist that God forbids the act of terror and that of the terrorist who claims otherwise. But we can also ask: does the terrorist have a sufficient reason for his claim? Going by what we know about religion and God, we can decipher that the terrorist goes contrary to everything we know about these two. On one hand, religion as we discussed above is built on moral foundation and cannot but needs morality to thrive and on the other hand, God is presented as a perfect being that by nature is: Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient. Having established this, we can see that the act of terror goes against everything we know about religion and God and as such presents a terrorist as one who does not have sufficient reason for his claims.

We may also ask: on which religion or God does a terrorist base his action? This is because almost all religions of the world present the picture of a perfect God who is an epitome of morality. Whether it is God or Allah or Brahma etc, the Supreme Being worshipped in any religious affiliation is always presented in a perfect moral light as a being worthy of worship. So, a non-terrorist who frowns at the religious sanctioned act of terror has more sufficient reasons than an acclaimed religious terrorist. This is because; the non-terrorist was making his judgment on the basis of what everyone understands as religion and God. We may not condemn the act of religious terrorist if he fails to base his claims on the same religious affiliation and God of the non-terrorist. But since the claims of a religious terrorist always hinged on mainstream religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism etc, it then calls for moral questioning going by our understanding of what these afore mentioned religions preach and the image of God each presents. Assuming the acclaimed religious terrorist bases his claim on a religion whose God is presented in the light of an imperfect, volatile, violent and unmerciful being, then, his religious sanctioned terror act claim maybe understood in that light.

Another perspective to the claim of the religious basis for terrorism is the belief in martyrdom. Martyr in religion, according to the online Merriam-Webster, is “a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion.”<sup>21</sup> The belief in martyrdom also goes with the belief of a reward for those that died martyrs. Judging from this definition of martyr and the above explanation of what religion and God entail, then, we can argue that killing of the innocent lives in the name of defending one’s faith and dying in such process cannot make one a martyr. This is because; since martyrdom involves voluntary actions, we can argue that going by how terrorism in the name of religion is carried out, one can see a clear work of indoctrination. These terrorists have been indoctrinated into believing that they will die martyrs and sometimes, forced and threatened to commit such terror acts. In his comparison between martyrdom in Christianity and Islam, Ton Captures This:

If a fighter for Islam dies in battle with the “infidel,” he is promised a heaven in which he will have 70 virgins at his pleasure, and life in heaven will be an eternal carnal bliss suiting male fantasies. What is most shocking is the widespread contemporary form of Islamic martyrdom: a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, is wrapped with explosives and sent to explode himself or herself in enemy territory in an attempt to kill as many “infidels” as possible, and he or she is afterwards revered as a martyr.<sup>22</sup>

Walter Laqueur captures this; “awaiting them in paradise are rivers of milk and honey, and beautiful young women. Those entering paradise are eventually reunited with their families and as martyrs stand in front of God as innocent as a newborn baby.”<sup>23</sup>

Looking at the above, we can clearly see an act that proceeds from indoctrination and thus, can be categorized as “act of man” instead of “human act”. Acts of man are those acts man does not have control over; they are not voluntary. On the other hand, human acts are voluntary acts which man exerts some control over. Having established this, we can argue that belief in martyrdom on the basis of dying in the process of religious sanctioned terrorism is faulty since the terrorist in most cases is indoctrinated, forced and threatened into carrying out such acts.

Another perspective to this argument is the fact that martyrs are always remembered for their honourable acts that are backed with social values that will motivate and propel others to wanting to die martyrs; that is, martyrs ought to be role models. If this is the case, then, is it not a natural injustice to place someone that died while killing innocent people in the category of martyrs? What kind of role model is such a person? He/she can only be a role model to the social-paths like himself and thus, should not be identified with any religion.

Having gone this far, we can conclude by saying that every claim for a religious sanctioned terrorism is a faulty one. This is as a result of our understanding of what many mainstream religions preach. Many Islamic, Christian, Hindus etc scholars have so far presented us with the image of religion that preaches peace, justice, etc. Except if any religious affiliation can come out to defend its doctrines as the ones that support the killing of the innocent in the name of fighting for God. Also, from our analysis of what martyrdom presupposes, we can argue that every claim on becoming a martyr on the basis of killing for God is fallacious.

### Endnotes

- [1]. Merriam-Webster, terrorism, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrorism>, retrieved on 26/1/2016.
  - [2]. Sage publications, religious terrorism, [www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/33557\\_6.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/33557_6.pdf), retrieved on 10/12/15, p. 130.
  - [3]. Bruce Hoffman, “Holy terror”: the implications of terrorism motivated by a religious imperative, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2007/P7834.pdf>, retrieved on 10/12/15, p. 2.
  - [4]. Ibid.
  - [5]. Sage Publications, etymology of terrorism, [http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/51172\\_ch\\_1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/51172_ch_1.pdf), retrieved on 26/1/16, p. 1.
  - [6]. Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (2nd ed.), (Boston: Little & Brown, 1987), p. 143.
  - [7]. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (2nd ed.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 43.
  - [8]. Benjamin Netanyahu, “Three principles in the War against Terrorism” *Perspectives on Contemporary Issues Reading Across the Disciplines*, Katherine Anne Ackley ed., (Mexico: Wadsworth, 2009), p. 465.
  - [9]. League Convention, *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism*, Article 1(2), 1937.
  - [10]. Brian M. Jenkins and Konrad Kellen, *a Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1985), p.30.
  - [11]. Sage publications, religious terrorism, p. 12.
  - [12]. Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 201.
  - [13]. Armstrong, *Islam*, 201.
  - [14]. Josh Burek and James Norton, “Q&A: Islamic Fundamentalism: A World-Renowned Scholar Explains Key Points of Islam,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 4, 2001.
  - [15]. B. Haring, *The Law of Christ*, (New York: Newman Press, Vol. 111, 1964), p. 25.
  - [16]. Joseph Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion*, (Lagos: JOJA Press Limited, 1993), p. 19.
  - [17]. Merriam-Webster, (ed.) *Encyclopedia of religion*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1980), p. 312.
  - [18]. A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1941), p. 213.
  - [19]. Chidiebere C. Obi, “Religion and Societal Development: A Philosophical Appraisal of African Situation”, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v13i2.8>, retrieved on 19/1/16, p. 9.
  - [20]. J. P. C. Nzomiwu, “The Concept of Justice among the Traditional Igbo: An Ethical Inquiry”, (Enugu: Snaap, 1999) p. 22.
  - [21]. Merriam-Webster, martyr, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr), retrieved on 26/1/16.
  - [22]. Josef Ton, “suffering and martyrdom” in Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (editors), *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom: Theological Reflections* (vol. 2), (Johannesburg: AcadSA Publishing, 2010), p. 199.
- Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 100.