Dangerously Uninformed:
Myths of Religion and Violence

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Abstract

The claim that religion and religion alone motivates extremists to violence is dangerously misinformed. In this paper I will argue that such claims are psychologically suspect and empirically unsupported. Most grievously, attributing extremist violence to religious belief commits the fundamental attribution error. But this is no simple, harmless error. Proponents of this error, especially if they are in positions of power, are likely to *increase* violence. As understanding decreases, violence increases. They are not innocently wrong, they are dangerously uninformed.

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Introduction

Boudry (2016) claims that religion and religion alone motivates ISIS and ISIS-like extremists to violence. He claims (without citation) that other factors, "socio-economic disenfranchisement, unemployment, troubled family backgrounds, discrimination and racism," have been "repeatedly refuted." Thinking that religion plays any lesser motivational role is, he claims, "a dramatic failure of imagination." Since the claim that religion plays a lesser motivational role in extremist violence is, contra Boudry, empirically well-supported, Boudry's claim itself is "a dramatic failure of imagination." Moreover, it is dangerously uninformed.

In this paper I will argue that claims like Boudry's are psychologically suspect and empirically unsupported. Most grievously, attributing extremist violence to religious belief commits the fundamental attribution error. But this is no simple, harmless error. Proponents of this error, especially if they are in positions of power, are likely to *increase* violence. As understanding decreases, violence increases. They are not innocently wrong, they are dangerously uninformed.

Dangerously <u>Uninformed</u>

It is easy to think that the troubles in Ireland were religious because they were widely reported as Protestant vs. Catholic. But giving each side a religious name obscures the real sources of conflict--discrimination, poverty, imperialism, autonomy, nationalism and shame; no one in Ireland was fighting over theological doctrines such as transubstantiation or justification (they probably couldn't explain their theological differences). It is easy to think that the Bosnian genocide of 40,000 Muslims was motivated by Christian commitment (the Muslim victims were killed by Christian Serbs). But these convenient monikers ignore (a) how shallow post-Communist religious belief was and, more importantly, (b) such complex causes as class, land, ethnic identity, economic disenfranchisement, and nationalism.

It is also easy to think that members of ISIS and al-Qaeda are motivated by religious belief. But blaming such behaviors on religion commits the fundamental attribution error: attributing the cause of behavior to internal factors such as personality characteristics or dispositions, while minimizing or ignoring external, situational factors. As an example: if I'm late, I attribute my tardiness to an important phone call or heavy traffic, but if you're late I attribute it to a (single) character flaw (you are irresponsible) and ignore possible external contributing causes. So, when Arabs or Muslims commit an act of violence we instantly believe that it's due to their radical faith, all the while ignoring possible and even likely contributing causes.

Let's look at some examples. Within minutes of Omar Mateen's 2016 massacre of gays in Orlando, even before learning that he had pledged allegiance to ISIS during the attack, he was labeled a terrorist. Pledging fealty to ISIS sealed the deal for most people – he was a terrorist, motivated by radical Islam. If a white (Christian) man kills 10 people, he's crazy. If a Muslim kills, he's a terrorist, motivated by exactly one thing – his extremist faith.

Yet, Mateen was, by all counts, a violent, angry, abusive, disruptive, alienated, racist, American, male, homophobe. He was likely bi-polar. With easy access to guns. According to his wife and father, he wasn't very religious. His multiple pledges of allegiance to warring factions

such as ISIS, Al Qaeda and Hezbollah suggest that he knew little of any ideology or theology. The CIA and FBI have found no connection with ISIS. Mateen was a hateful, violent, (mostly) irreligious, homophobic racist who killed 50 people on "Latin Night" at the club (Troubled. Quiet. Macho, 2016).

While the structure of motivation for Mateen is murky, it would be bizarre to elevate his religious beliefs (such as they were) to some special motivational status.

Mohammad Atta, leader of the 9-11 attacks, left a suicide note indicating his fealty to Allah:

> So remember God, as He said in His book: 'Oh Lord, pour your patience upon us and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels.' And His words: 'And the only thing they said Lord, forgive our sins and excesses and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels.' And His prophet said: 'Oh Lord, You have revealed the book, You move the clouds, You gave us victory over the enemy, conquer them and give us victory over them.' Give us victory and make the ground shake under their feet. Pray for yourself and all your brothers that they may be victorious and hit their targets and ask God to grant you martyrdom facing the enemy, not running away from it, and for Him to grant you patience and the feeling that anything that happens to you is for Him. ("Last Words," 2001)

Surely, though Boudry (2016) would argue otherwise, we should not take Atta at his word. Atta (along with his fellow terrorists) seldom attended mosque, partied almost nightly, was a heavy drinker, snorted cocaine, and ate pork chops. Hardly the stuff of Muslim submission. When his stripper girlfriend ended their relationship, he broke into her apartment and killed her cat and kittens, disemboweling and dismembering them and then distributing their body parts throughout the apartment for her to find later. Makes Atta's suicide note seems more like reputation management than pious confession. Or maybe it was a desperate hope that his actions would attain some sort of cosmic significance that his otherwise insignificant life lacked.

When Wilson (2015), a research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Oxford University, recently conducted field research with ISIS prisoners, she found them "woefully ignorant of Islam" and unable to answer questions about "Sharia law, militant jihad, and the caliphate." Not surprising then that when wannabe jihadists Yusuf Sarwar and Mohammed Ahmed were caught boarding a plane in England authorities discovered in their luggage *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies.* In the same article, Saltman, senior counter-extremism researcher at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, says that "Recruitment [of ISIS] plays upon desires of adventure, activism, romance, power, belonging, along with spiritual fulfillment."

England's MI5's behavioral science unit, in a report leaked to the Guardian, revealed that, "far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practice their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could . . . be regarded as religious novices" ("MI5 report," 2008). Indeed, the report argued, "a well-established religious identity actually protects against violent radicalization."

Why would England's MI5 think that religion plays virtually no role in extremism? Boudry is half-right about those "other factors." There is no single, well-established profile of terrorists.

Some are poor, some are not. Some are unemployed, some are not. Some are poorly educated, some are not. Some are culturally isolated, some are not. Nonetheless, these sorts of external factors, while neither necessary nor jointly sufficient, do contribute to radicalization in some people under certain circumstances. Each extremist has his or her own unique socio-psychological profile (which makes their identification nearly impossible).

In parts of Africa, with sky-high unemployment rates for 18 to 34-year-olds, ISIS targets the unemployed and impoverished; ISIS offers a steady paycheck, meaningful employment, food for their families, and an opportunity to strike back at those viewed as economic oppressors. In Syria many recruits join ISIS solely to topple the vicious Assad regime; liberated criminals find ISIS a convenient place to hide from their past. Palestinians are motivated by the dehumanization of living as disempowered second-class citizens in an apartheid state.

In Europe and America, where most of the recruits are young men who are educated and middle class, cultural isolation is factor number one in driving Muslims to extremism (Efraim and Klor, 2017). Young, alienated Muslims are attracted by slick media that offer adventure and glory to their tedious and marginalized lives. German Muslims are motivated by adventure and alienation (Hellmuth, 2016).

Long gone are the days of listening to boring and monotonous Osama bin Laden sermons. ISIS's highly skilled recruiters use social media and personal contact (through the internet) to create personal and communal bonds of otherwise disaffected Muslims who are then enticed to leave their mundane and meaningless lives and fight together for a noble cause. That is, they are motivated by a sense of belonging and a quest for human significance.

One might think that dreams of afterlife virgins are especially conducive to violence. But as far as some greater good goes, just about any ideology will do. Indeed, non-religious ideologies in the 20th century caused vastly more suffering and death than all of the religiously-motivated violence in human history combined (Scarufi, 2016). Adolf Hitler's Germany killed more than 10,000,000 innocent people, while WWII saw the deaths of 60,000,000 people (with many more deaths attributable to war-related disease and famine). The purges and famines under Joseph Stalin's regime killed millions. Estimates of Mao Zedong's death toll range from 40,000,000-80,000,000. The current blaming of religion ignores the staggering death toll of secular ideologies.

Once human beings feel like they belong to a group, they will do anything, even commit atrocities, for their brothers and sisters in the group. I have a friend who fought for the US in Iraq. He and his mates grew increasingly cynical of the US mission in Iraq. Although he was no longer ideologically committed to US goals, he told me that he would have done anything, even sacrificed his own life, for members of his group. This dynamic increases if one is able to disidentify with and dehumanize those who are not in one's group.

Atran (2010), who has spoken with more terrorists and their families than any Western scholar, concurs. In testimony to the US senate in 2010, he said, "What inspires the most lethal terrorists in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world" (Atran, 2010). Jihad, he said, is "thrilling, glorious and cool."

Oxford's Harvey Whitehouse directed an international team of distinguished scholars on the motivations of extreme self-sacrifice. They found that violent extremism isn't motivated by religion, it is motivated by fusion with the group.

There is no psychological profile of today's terrorist. They are not crazy, they are often well-educated and many are relatively well off. They are motivated, like many young people, by a sense of belonging, a desire for an exciting and meaningful life, and devotion to a higher cause. Extremist ideology, while not a non-factor, is typically low on the list of motivations.

Dangerously Uninformed

I said that Boudry's views are dangerously uninformed. I've shown why they are uninformed. On to the dangerous part. Perpetuating the myth that religion is the primary cause of terrorism, especially by those in positions of power, plays into ISIS's hands and prevents recognition of our responsibility for creating the conditions for ISIS. ISIS's playbook is, interestingly, not the Quran, it's *The Management of Savagery (Idarat at-Tawahoush)* (Naji, 2016).

ISIS's long-term strategy is to create such chaos that submission to ISIS would be preferable to living under the savage conditions of war. To attract young people to ISIS, they seek to eliminate the "Gray Zone" between the true believer and the infidel (in which most Muslims find themselves) by employing "terror attacks" to help Muslims see that non-Muslims hate Islam and want to harm Muslims. If moderate Muslims feel alienated and unsafe as a result of prejudice, they will be forced to choose either apostasy (darkness) or *jihad* (light).

Boudry (2016), and those like him who hold that religion is the primary or most important motivator of extremists, are helping to squeeze out the gray zone. By tarring Islam with the extremist brush, they perpetuate the myth that Islam is a violent religion and that Muslims are violent. Boudry's mistaken narrative reinforces Western media's predominantly negative portrayal of Muslims as violent, fanatical, bigoted, and terrorists (ignoring the 99.999% of Muslims who are not). And then we're on to Islamophobia.

It is very difficult for Westerners to isolate their understanding and loathing of ISIS and other extremists without sliding into Islamophobia. And increasing Islamophobia, ISIS hopes, will entice young Muslims out of the gray and into the fight. The vast majority of Muslims, it must be noted, find ISIS and other extremist groups tyrannical, oppressive and vicious (Poushter, 2017). Violent extremism is, they believe, a perversion of Islam (as the KKK and Westboro Baptist are perversions of Christianity). They cite the Quran which states that there is no compulsion in matters of religion (Al-Baqara: 256). According to the Quran, war is only for self-defense (Al-Baqarah: 190) and Muslims are instructed not to incite war (Al-Hajj: 39). Abu-Bakr (573-634 CE), the first Caliph following Prophet Muhammad's death, gave these instructions for (defensive) war:

> Do not betray or be treacherous or vindictive. Do not mutilate. Do not kill the children, the aged or the women. Do not cut or burn palm trees or fruitful trees. Don't slay a sheep, a cow or camel except for your food. And you will come across people who confined themselves to worship in hermitages, leave them alone to what they devoted themselves for. ("War Ethics in Islam").

Given this background, violent extremism does indeed seem like a perversion of Islam.

Muslim leaders are in a pitched battle against extremist ideologies. For example, in 2001, thousands of Muslim leaders around the world immediately denounced Al Qaeda's attacks on the US. On September 14, 2001, nearly fifty Islamic leaders signed and distributed this statement:

> The undersigned, leaders of Islamic movements, are horrified by the events of Tuesday 11 September 2001 in the United States which resulted in massive killing, destruction and attack on innocent lives. We express our deepest sympathies and sorrow. We condemn, in the strongest terms, the incidents, which are against all human and Islamic norms. This is grounded in the Noble Laws of Islam which forbid all forms of attacks on innocents. God Almighty says in the Holy Qur'an: 'No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another'. (Surah al-Isra 17:15)

Finally, I think it is dangerous to attribute extremism to religion and to ignore external conditions, because it makes extremism their problem when it is also our problem. If extremism is motivated by their religion, then they are entirely responsible (and they need to change). But if extremism is motivated in response to external conditions, then those who are responsible for those conditions are responsible (and need to work to change those conditions). As Gilligan (2001) writes: "We cannot even begin to prevent violence until we can acknowledge what we ourselves are doing that contributes to it, actively or passively" (76).

How has the West contributed to the conditions that motivate violent extremism? For starters, we overthrew a democratically-elected President in Iran and installed a despotic Shah (to regain access to cheap oil). After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, we divided up the Middle East according to our own economic advantage and in defiance of good cultural sense (Sykes-Picot, 2016). For decades we have purchased cheap oil from Saudi Arabia, the profits of which have fueled Wahhabism, the ideological roots of Islamic extremism (Wahhabism, 2001). We destabilized Iraq on false pretenses resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians (Iraq Body Count). We tortured Arabs in defiance of international law and basic human dignity, and have kept Arabs that we know are innocent imprisoned without charge or legal recourse in Guantanamo (Clark, 2013). Our drones have killed countless innocent people and their constant buzzing in the skies plagues children with PTSD (The Psycho Logic of Drones, 2013). And the US's unilateral support of Israel perpetuates injustices against Palestinians.

In short, our shaming, humiliation and harming of Arabs have created the conditions which inspire violent responses. Given the huge power imbalance, the weaker power is forced to resort to guerilla tactics and suicide bombing. The problem is not just theirs. It is also ours. Justice demands that we stop laying the blame entirely on them and assume responsibility for our contributions to the conditions that inspire terror. Without attending to the conditions that are conducive to terrorism, it will not go away. Therefore, carpet-bombing mostly civilian populations within which ISIS hides will just exacerbate these conditions.

Conclusion

Boudry and I surely agree that insofar as extremist violence is motivated by religion, the

religious motivation needs to be resisted. I support the efforts on the parts of Muslim leaders to inoculate young Muslims against the co-option of true Islam by extremists. Boudry's insistence on religious motivation is empirically unsupported. The motivational structure of extremists is vastly more complicated. Moreover, we Westerners have contributed conditions that motivate extremism. We need to work hard and together with our Muslim brothers and sisters to create instead conditions of justice, equality and peace. Even if conditions conducive to extremism are rectified, some true believers will probably continue their violent struggle to create the caliphate. But their pool of recruits will have dried up.

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