BOOK REVIEW: Why they turn to terrorist violence

THE FUNDAMENTALIST MINDSET: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION, VIOLENCE AND HISTORY

Edited by Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman and James W. Jones

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Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

Politically motivated violence by religious fundamentalist militants around the world is a serious security threat facing our democratic societies. In America, the "suspected" perpetrators of recent terrorist plots and attacks, such as Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, Najibullah Zazi in the New York City subway bomb plot, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab of the aborted airline bombing, and Faisal Shahzad of the failed Times Square bomb, are recent examples of a turn to violence by religious fundamentalist extremists.

Our allies in places such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen face threats and violence from such militants practically on a daily basis.

At the same time, virtually all of today's major religions, whether Christianity, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism, are being threatened by extremist minorities of varying sizes that seek with violence to impose their fundamentalist interpretations over mainstream theologies and practices.
How can we understand the root causes and manifestations of the fundamentalist mindset and why, with most of them nonviolent, does a minority turn to terrorist violence?

These questions are examined by the academic contributors to "The Fundamentalist Mindset," who are practicing psychoanalysts and experts on religion.

The edited volume is divided into two parts: a conceptual framework, followed by historical and contemporary case studies.

The conceptual framework is the volume's outstanding achievement and should be read widely for its many insights. Several factors are identified as drivers to fundamentalism. As explained by Charles Strozier (director of John Jay College's Center on Terrorism) and Katharine Boyd (a doctoral student at John Jay College):

"The fundamentalist mindset, wherever it occurs, is composed of distinct characteristics, including dualistic thinking; paranoia and rage in a group context; an apocalyptic orientation that incorporates distinct perspectives on time, death, and violence; a relationship to charismatic leadership; and a totalized conversion experience."

To those unfamiliar with academic terminology, "dualistic thinking" refers to categorizing all aspects of life, including one's adversaries, either as "good or evil," "safe or threatening" or worthy of "living or dying" but with no middle ground "to imagine the inner world and humanity of others." Adding to such dehumanizing of one's adversary, what makes someone an extremist is the grounding "in a rigid psychology that denies the possibility of error."

"Totalized conversion" refers to a "change in religious belief or orientation" that is fanatical in nature.

To these factors, the authors add what is perhaps the most important characteristic of fundamentalism: the inclination to interpret authoritative texts, laws and teachings, which are primarily religious, in the most literal terms.
In our democratic, pluralistic society, one has the right to be a religious fundamentalist as long as held beliefs do not lead to violence. Such beliefs, however, become a security threat when believers view their adversary, the "out-group," as dehumanized and begin to "rationalize the use of violence toward 'the other.'"

Although this book is generally well-written, readers should be cautioned about occasional overuse of academic jargon, such as the following by Daniel Hill, a psychoanalyst and educator: "Among its characteristics mentioned above, the preoccupied pattern with respect to attachment involves a dependence on dyadic regulation and a concomitant deficit in autoregulation, in this case an overdependence on God or the charismatic leader of the group for affect regulation." Please don't expect this reviewer to translate it into plain English.

Two contributors (Bettina Muenster, Mr. Strozier's former research associate, and David Lotto, a psychoanalyst), conclude their chapter on "The Social Psychology of Humiliation and Revenge" with an inaccurate and unfair polemic against what they term a "fundamentalist mindset" in American counterterrorism policy following Sept. 11, without providing any evidence to substantiate such a claim.

After examining each of these concepts in detail and showing the ways in which they lead to violence among widely disparate movements, the theories are then applied to historical and modern cases. These cases, however, are the volume's weakest component. Readers will be disappointed in reading the examples of fundamentalism in the American experience and among Islamic jihadists - a particular disappointment, given its importance today.

Even less successful are their attempts to illuminate aspects of fundamentalist psychology in the French Revolution (which is not generally viewed as an example of political fundamentalism), the Nazi movement and post-partition India's Hindu fundamentalist movements of 1948 (which the case study's author does not tie in to developments in today's India, a country with a highly developed, technologically sophisticated political economy and educational system, as well as a pluralist political system - everything that the Hindu fundamentalists vehemently opposed 50 years ago).
By selecting such idiosyncratic case studies, the reader is left to wonder what to make of more important contemporary religious fundamentalists and how they pose national security threats, such as Israel's Jewish fundamentalists or Sinhalese and Tamil fundamentalists in Sri Lanka, for example.

I also found the chapter "The Psychology of the Global Jihadists" by Farhad Khosrokhavar, professor at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, problematic because of the absence of any discussion or application of psychological theories explaining the jihadists' "fundamentalist mindset." His discussion of the factors leading to alienation of Muslim minorities in Western societies is so generalized that at no point does he explain why only a tiny proportion choose to take up violence to redress their grievances.

Finally, his discussion about the "Jihadists" repeatedly confuses the differences between modernization and traditionalism, secularism and religion as they apply to these religious extremists.

What is the solution to the threats posed by individuals and groups that embrace the "fundamentalist mindset"? As explained by Mr. Strozier and David Terman (director of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis), they need to be provided the capacity to show more empathy and respect for their adversaries, "drawn to loving their neighbor as themselves, even when they embrace millennial and utopian dreams." To Bettina Muenster and David Lotto, the solution involves adopting a capacity for empathy and forgiveness by taking "the other's perspective."

Despite the flawed case studies, the "The Fundamentalist Mindset" is recommended for its many insights on the ever-vexing source of much terrorist violence.

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