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## 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)

by Bart Schuurman

### Abstract

*The causes of involvement in terrorism continue to be subject to a rich academic debate. In several recent contributions, Lorne Dawson, professor of new religious movements, has argued that terrorism researchers too often downplay the role of religious convictions. In setting out his arguments, Dawson has repeatedly referred to some of my own work as an example of this practice. In this article, I respond to Dawson's criticism in order to show that it does not accurately represent the views that my co-authors and I have put forward. Rather than dismiss the role of ideology, I have argued the need for its contextualization. Extremist beliefs certainly play an important role in motivating 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.*

**Key words:** Ideology; terrorism; Hofstadgroup; Dawson; religion, response

### Introduction

Is religious belief an important element in motivating involvement in jihadist terrorism? According to scholar of new religious movements Lorne Dawson, too many researchers on terrorism are inclined to answer 'not really'. In two recent contributions to *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Dawson takes a stance against what he sees as the unwarranted dismissal of religiosity as an explanation for involvement in jihadism. Rather than perceiving religious beliefs as an ideological veneer that masks underlying grievances of an economic, social, political or personal nature, Dawson makes a case for taking them at face value. Neither, he argues, should academics dismiss the motivating potential of religious beliefs in cases where an adherent only has a superficial understanding of religion.[1] To a large extent, I think these are convincing and important arguments. The trouble is that Dawson has repeatedly pointed to some of my work as an example of how terrorism scholars get the role of religious beliefs wrong.[2]

With this contribution, I aim to achieve two goals. First, to provide a response to Dawson's specific critiques of my work and so clarify that my alleged dismissal of the importance of religious beliefs rests on several misunderstandings. Second, to use this opportunity to respond to criticism to clarify how I view the importance of belief systems, whether religious or secular, for motivating and justifying involvement in terrorism. My intention is not to offer a point-for-point defense of the articles that Dawson criticizes. While I think his criticism is overstated in several important regards, he also points out some weaknesses in my own work that I can do little but agree with. Not only is hindsight a great adviser, but my thinking about the importance of extremist belief systems has developed slightly from where it was half a decade or so ago. Therefore, I would like to use this opportunity not just to offer a rebuttal to criticism that I think is unfounded, but to indicate areas of agreement as well.

### ***Beliefs Alone are not Sufficient as Explanations***

Dawson has written three articles that criticize what he sees as an unwarranted dismissal of the role that religious beliefs play in motivating involvement in jihadist terrorism. In two of them, he provides detailed critiques of specific publications that he views as epitomizing this incorrect appraisal of religiosity. One of these is 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence', which appeared in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* in 2016 and which I co-authored with John Horgan.[3] Although a standalone piece, this article came out of my doctoral research on how and why involvement in European homegrown jihadism occurs. That project focused specifically on the Dutch 'Hofstadgroup' which was active between 2002 and 2005 and became infamous after one of its participants murdered Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 on the streets of Amsterdam. Looking back on this project now, I would point to the understated importance of religious beliefs as one of its weaknesses. For example, although the Hofstadgroup's participants are specifically placed within the Salafi-Jihadist current in one chapter, the importance of these beliefs to their behavior is often treated as a given in the remainder of the text.[4] When the group's extremist[5] beliefs are mentioned specifically, it is often to note that beliefs *alone* provide an insufficient explanation for the group's planned or perpetrated acts of terrorism.[6]

The assumption that extremist beliefs (religious ones in this case) are a key element in explaining involvement in terrorism, yet have insufficient explanatory power by themselves, is clearly reflected in the 'Rationales' paper with which Dawson takes issue. In fact, one of the main conclusions that John Horgan and I reach is summed up by the following quote from our article. Namely, that 'Van Gogh's murderer was primarily driven by his fanatical beliefs. Yet even in his case, convictions alone only provide part of his rationale for committing an act of terrorism'.[7] Like my doctoral thesis on which it is largely based, our co-authored article could, and perhaps should, have made more explicit that we see extremist beliefs as key components of the terrorism puzzle. Still, Dawson's criticism that we underplay the role of religiosity strikes me as odd given that he specifically uses the quoted sentence above to support his own argument. Rather than underplaying the importance of extremist religious beliefs for the behavior of Hofstadgroup participants (like the one who murdered Van Gogh), Horgan and I repeatedly emphasize their explanatory power, albeit with various qualifications.

My critical appraisal of the role that extremist beliefs can play in motivating involvement in terrorism had two main sources. First of all, my doctoral work continuously confronted me with a group of individuals who appeared to share similar degrees of commitment to jihadist convictions, who came from broadly comparable socioeconomic backgrounds and participated in similar social networks. Yet out of several dozen Hofstadgroup participants, only a handful acted or planned to act violently on their convictions. Even among the group's 'hard core', where extremist religious beliefs were most strongly manifest, different motivational elements for planned and executed acts of terrorism were present. Horgan and I make this point explicitly in the article, noting that Van Gogh's killer was mainly driven by his extremist beliefs whereas another 'inner circle' member's motivation to engage in terrorism was part religiosity, part personal hatred of the Dutch justice system and part desire to help Muslim victims of oppression and injustice in places like Palestine and Chechnya.[8]

The conclusion that involvement in terrorist violence cannot be explained by a single factor is, of course, not that surprising. Research has long established that there is a myriad of factors at play in drawing people and groups to terrorism, including feelings of belonging and a shared sense of purpose.[9] Yet it became a key point in my thesis as well as in the article that Dawson critiques for a second reason: the emphasis that the concept of radicalization places on the importance of beliefs as behavioral motivators. While no serious academic would claim that radicalization processes are characterized *solely* by the internalization of extremist beliefs, the centrality of such worldviews to explanations for terrorism was, at least in the early to mid-2010s, frequently encountered.[10] Beliefs are crucial elements of explanations for involvement in terrorism but insufficient as accounts by themselves. This seemed to me then, and still does today, an important argument to make. Rather than seeking to dismiss the role of extremist beliefs, Horgan and I sought to better understand their influence and relation to other relevant motivational forces.

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### ***Disentangling the Personal and the Ideological***

Dawson's most convincing criticism of the 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence' article is his point that we tend to label motivations for terrorism as 'personal' in nature, even when they have a clearly religious character. [11] At least in part, this stems from the overall design of that article, which asks whether strategic or organizational rationales for terrorism, such as attaining clearly defined political goals or ensuring group survival, can explain the Hofstadgroup's planned and perpetrated attacks, only to conclude that they have their origin mostly at the level of the individual. Religious belief is one such individual-level motivator for terrorism but, for reasons described in the previous section, we are careful to qualify its influence even on the group's most fanatical and murderous participant and to point to a range of other individual-level motivational influences. Re-reading the article with Dawson's commentary in mind, however, I agree that 'personal' and 'religious' are unhelpfully presented as being juxtaposed at several points. Even though we are clear in our conclusions that fanatically-held beliefs and a desire to express newfound identities as 'true' Muslims were key factors in the group's planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism, our view on the relationship between the personal and the religious should have been stated less ambiguously.[12]

Reformulating my position on this relationship now, I would argue that the desire to act violently did not just stem from the content of Hofstadgroup participants' beliefs, e.g. religious injunctions to murder blasphemers. 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.[13] While the personal and the religious are thus not somehow different categories of individual-level motivators for terrorism, it still makes sense to tease them apart. For the Hofstadgroup participants described in the article, religious extremism was able to take hold not just because jihadist ideology was somehow intrinsically attractive, but because other (individual-level) factors had made them angry, bored or spiritually lost enough to become amenable to the worldview proffered by Salafi-Jihadism. And as the previous paragraph argued, with the exception of Van Gogh's murderer, religious beliefs were not the only source of inspiration for the group's violent plans, since motives such as a desire to avenge a personal insult or gain admiration also played important roles.

Another point to keep in mind when assessing whether personal motives or ideological convictions influenced involvement in terrorism, is that it can be very hard to tease the two apart. On the one hand, this supports Dawson's criticism that Horgan and I treat religious and personal motives as separate where we should not have done so. On the other hand, however, it is a reminder that we should distinguish between ideology's ability to motivate as well as to justify the use of violence. For someone like Van Gogh's murderer, who became a fanatical adherent of Salafi-Jihadist views, both of these functions were clearly present when he carried out his attack. For the other members of the Hofstadgroup, however, it is much more difficult to assess the degree to which the justificatory function of extremist beliefs did not, at least to some extent, serve as a convenient cover for motives besides the strictly ideological. This is not to say that religious motives did not play a role in their planned terrorist acts; they most certainly did. But it does serve as a reminder that extremist beliefs can mask motives for violence outside of their ideological boundaries, and that through socialization extremists may also learn to describe their motivations in ideological terms.[14] As Cottee writes, '[r]eligion matters because it is a legitimizing resource of real potency [...] This does not mean that religious ideology is the sole or exclusive cause of violence carried out in the name of religion.'[15]

### ***Do Extremist Beliefs Predate or Follow Involvement in Terrorism?***

Dawson also criticizes an argument that Max Taylor and I made in a 2018 contribution to *Perspectives on Terrorism* with the title 'Reconsidering Radicalization'. There, we argued that involvement in terrorism is not always preceded by the adoption of extremist beliefs.[16] According to Dawson, 'the vast majority of [terrorist] offenders do hold [extremist] views'[17] Part of the issue here is a lack of clarity around what we mean by involvement in terrorism. 'Reconsidering Radicalization' does not explicate that it follows Taylor



and Horgan's useful distinction between involvement and event decisions, which points out that most of the people who become involved in terrorist groups or movements do not actually go on to execute attacks themselves.[18] For most, their involvement is limited to lesser offences such as propagandizing, recruiting, fundraising, logistical support or simply being hangers-on. When Max Taylor and I criticized the notion frequently found in 'radicalization' theories that the adoption of radical beliefs precedes involvement in terrorism, we were referring to involvement in a broad sense of joining a terrorist group or movement, not just as meaning engagement in acts of terrorist violence. This is borne out by the examples we give in the article, but it should have been stated more explicitly.[19]

Presented more clearly, our argument is essentially that the internalization of extremist beliefs does not necessarily precede an individual's participation in an extremist or terrorist group or movement. Many members of the Provisional IRA only came to fully develop their political convictions and views on the utility of violence once they had been imprisoned, which gave them years of relative inactivity in which to discuss and reflect on these issues.[20] Similarly, as Merkle notes with regard to German left-wing terrorists, '[m]ost of the [Red Army Fraction] members hardly knew their Marx and Lenin before imprisonment gave them the opportunity to read them, and there is no reason to believe that any other German terrorist groups graduated from reading Marx, Engels, and Lenin to terrorist action'.[21] Numerous accounts of involvement in neo-Nazism are equally revealing when it comes to demonstrating that the initial appeal of these movements is frequently their ability to provide a countercultural identity, a source of excitement or a sense of belonging, with actual ideological engagement following later, if at all.[22]

Again, rather than dismissing the role of extremist ideology, my co-authors and I sought to better understand where, in the processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism, its influence becomes most salient. We took, and I still do so today, issue with the notion that involvement in extremist or terrorist groups or movements necessarily *follows* from an individual developing an initial interest in an extremist worldview. Of course, there are plentiful cases where this has happened. The Hofstadgroup participant who murdered Van Gogh being a clear example of this. But I would argue that it is more common for the adoption of extremist views to follow socialization into an extremist movement. Such socialization is itself predicated on a wide variety of factors, ranging from an individual identifying with the countercultural aesthetics found, for instance, in neo-Nazi rock music or developing an altruistic desire to help co-religionists in war-torn countries, to simply making friends with people who turn out to have extremist views.[23] It is precisely this nuanced yet certainly not dismissive view of extremist beliefs as one among several motivational drivers that Horgan and I put forward in our 2016 article, which makes Dawson's argument that we did not take beliefs seriously a spurious one.

### ***The Degree of ideological Commitment Matters***

Just as ideological radicalization does not necessarily form the 'jumping-off point' for engagement with extremist or terrorist groups or movements, so too should we be careful in seeing ideology as the prime mover of actual terrorist acts. While I agree with Dawson that 'the vast majority of [terrorist] offenders do hold [extremist] views', the degree of commitment to these views varies along with the influence of other motivational influences.[24] This was one of the points that Horgan and I made in 'Rationales for Terrorist Violence'. Yes, extremist ideology matters when explaining involvement in terrorist violence as it provides adherents with the motivation and justification to carry out their attacks. But, even among members of a relatively small entity like the Dutch Hofstadgroup, the degree to which ideology alone formed the motivational palette differed quite significantly. To recap briefly; Van Gogh's murderer appeared to be almost entirely consumed by extremist beliefs. But another individual with apparently advanced plans for multiple attacks complemented his ideological motives for violence with a distinctly personal element (hatred of the Dutch justice system for arresting him, scaring his wife and child in the process and being prevented from traveling abroad) as well as a more political rather than strictly religious one (advocacy of the Palestinian cause). A third person, also discussed in the article, wanted to carry out an attack in part because he too wanted a share of the hero-worship that he saw Van Gogh's murderer receiving from the broader jihadist

movement.[25]

In none of these three examples is extremist ideology absent as a motivational influence and I have not argued, as Dawson implies, that terrorist violence is likely to occur in the absence of some degree of ideological commitment.[26] My goal was, and remains, to *qualify* rather than dismiss outright the importance of commitment to an extremist ideology as an explanation for terrorist violence. To be clear, the Hofstadgroup-derived examples given above are in no way unique in demonstrating the varying degrees to which extremist worldviews can motivate terrorist violence. Consider, for instance, how Andreas Baader, one of the leaders of the aforementioned RAF, appears, at least initially, to have been less deeply ideologically committed than Ulrike Meinhof, another leader of the group's first incarnation, and was motivated to a greater degree by an attraction to the thrill, adventure and imagined romanticism of the underground life of a revolutionary on the run from the authorities.[27] Or take the case of Gundolf Köhler, who carried out the 1980 bombing of Munich's *Oktoberfest*, still the deadliest post-1945 act of right-wing extremist terrorism in Germany, while apparently going through a period in which he had begun exploring other political ideologies.[28]

My current research project, which looks at the differences between extremists who become directly involved in terrorist violence and those who do not, suggests that a higher degree of ideological commitment is more typical of extremists who carry out attacks, yet it is not ubiquitous for this subset of individuals, nor is a high degree of ideological commitment unheard of among extremists who do not turn to terrorism.[29] There is always likely to be some degree of cognitive radicalization among people involved in terrorism and terrorist violence, but that is precisely the problem.[30] This observation does little to help us distinguish between a) those involved in terrorist groups and movements who do become personally involved in attacks and b) the much larger group of individuals who share (elements) of a radicalized worldview but assume no personal role in acts of terrorist violence.

Where I do agree with Dawson is on his point that the depth of understanding of a particular extremist worldview does not appear to influence its ability to inspire (violent) behavior.[31] Jihadists who traveled to Syria with 'Islam for Dummies' in their backpack, for instance, could still be ideologically highly motivated.[32] Even a superficial understanding of a belief system can prove very inspirational and help justify and motivate the use of political violence. A sincere belief, however misguided or scripturally 'wrong', that Islam is under threat and that its defense is a personal duty of the utmost importance, to be rewarded with eternal life in paradise, would suffice to have the capacity for acting as a strong motivational influence. Similarly, most of the people serving in Western countries' armed forces are unlikely to have a particularly deep understanding of their states' constitution, electoral politics, or legal system, but this does not mean we need to question their dedication to defending democracy and their country. Degree of ideological commitment rather than degree of ideological knowledge seems to me to be the most important element here.

## **Conclusion**

As Donatella della Porta has aptly put it when writing about left-wing terrorism in Italy and Germany, 'conversion to violence requires a specific redefinition of reality'.[33] In setting out motivations and justifications for violence, in sketching a utopian future and the obstacles standing in its way, or portraying an idealized community beset by existential dangers, ideologies are an important piece of the puzzle of why involvement in terrorism occurs.[34] But their importance is also at risk of being overstated, especially through the still ubiquitous concept of radicalization which, at least implicitly, centers the adoption of 'radical' worldviews as an explanation for terrorism. The qualifications that my co-authors and I have attached to the role of beliefs for explaining involvement in terrorism in past work, and which I still hold on to today, serve not to dismiss the importance of ideology, but to qualify it.

Principally, I argue that we need to keep in mind that extremist beliefs alone are insufficient to explain both involvement in extremist and terrorist groups generally, and involvement in the planning, preparation, or execution of terrorist attacks specifically. This is an obvious point, perhaps, but one that bears repeating as it remains an ongoing challenge for both scholars and counterterrorism practitioners to distinguish between

extremists who espouse violent views and those who act upon them. Secondly, even among extremists who are fully-committed to their ideologies, other influences found at the individual, group or structural levels of analysis are likely to exert influences that also need to be acknowledged if a full understanding of their behavior is to be gained. The fact remains that most people who embrace extremist beliefs do not go on to put into practice the violence they claim to support. This brings me to the closely related third point, namely that the degree of extremists' ideological commitment is likely to vary. While this may not be easily observable, given that statements of ideological fidelity and other outward appearances of commitment are ubiquitous among extremists, it further underlines the need to look to other motivational influences and reminds us that the justificatory mechanism offered by extremist ideologies can also be conveniently used to mask motives of a more personal rather than ideological nature.

It is important to keep debating the roles that extremist beliefs play in bringing about involvement in terrorism. Dawson's arguments in favor of taking such views at face value are a welcome antidote to notions that beliefs, religious or otherwise, amount to little more than window-dressing for underlying motives. But, as I have wanted to demonstrate with this rebuttal, Dawson has argued his case in part by presenting some of the work of my co-authors and myself in a way that does not do justice to our actual views on the role of extremist worldviews. Rather than exemplifying a dismissive attitude to the role of extremist belief systems, the articles that Dawson critiques sought to highlight the shortcomings of explanations for terrorism that rely too heavily on beliefs alone. My co-authors and I underline that even when ideological fanatics are driven to terrorist violence, they are likely to do so based on more than convictions alone.

Getting the role that extremist beliefs play in motivating involvement in terrorism right matters. Not just to advance academic understanding, but also because the topic has ramifications and concrete implications for counterterrorism policy and practice. Perhaps the clearest example of this lies in the field of reintegration or deradicalization programs. If the importance of extremist beliefs to involvement in terrorism is exaggerated, then such programs may suffer from one-sidedness as they prioritize cognitive deradicalization even for individuals who were mainly attracted to extremism for non-ideological reasons. Conversely, dismissing ideology as just a convenient veneer masking underlying political, economic, or personal grievances is also likely to be mistaken. Academics and those working in the security sector will benefit most when we acknowledge the importance of extremist beliefs while remembering that we need to qualify and contextualize their influence.

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## Notes

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- [25] Schuurman and Horgan, "Rationales for Terrorist Violence."
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- [29] The project is currently still in the data-collection phase. For background on the research, please see: Bart Schuurman, "Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence: Understanding the Most Common Outcome of Radicalization Processes," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 6 (December 2020): 14–26.
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