The Root Causes of Terrorism:

A Religious Studies Perspective

Edited by
Mahmoud Masaeli and Rico Sneller

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
CHAPTER ONE

BIBLICAL STORIES AND RELIGION
AS THE ROOT CAUSE OF TERRORISM

PAUL CLITEUR
UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS

Executive Summary

The following essay explores the relationship between terrorism and religion. Religious terrorism or theoterrorism (as the author prefers to call it) has a social dimension, a psychological cause, and a religious factor. In this article, the author focuses on this religious “root cause” of terrorism using Biblical stories and real life examples.

Keywords: Theoterrorism, Islam, religion, violence, ISIS, Biblical stories, apostasy and blasphemy

Biblical Stories and Religion as the Root Cause of Terrorism

One of the most elusive and, at the same time, one of the most important notions in science is “cause” (Russell, 1935, p. 147). What is the “cause” of me writing on religion and biblical stories as one of the root causes of terrorism? From my own – probably too optimistic – view: because I want it. The root cause of this contribution is my “will”. On the other hand, the theme has been suggested to me by the editors of this book, so is their idea not a little bit more “root cause” than my will? But why did the editors of this volume think it a good idea to make a book on the root causes of terrorism anyway? Probably because terrorism is one of the most annoying contemporary social problems. So is not terrorism itself the real root cause of me writing this essay?
Chapter One

What seems to appear from these preliminary musings is that the notion that there is one and only one cause for something we want to explain is a delusion. All events in this world are caused by probably more than one and in most cases, many causes. This is also the case with contemporary religious terrorism (or as I like to call it “theoterrorism”).

The aim of this essay is to explore the relationship between terrorism and religion. That does not mean I want to deny that terrorism comes in many variants. There is, of course, political terrorism, the Baader-Meinhof group for instance (Stefan, 1998). In political terrorism, a political conviction is a motivating factor in perpetuating the type of violence we call “terrorist violence”.

Political terrorism is not controversial in the sense that not many people feel the impulse to deny that a political conviction can be instrumental in terrorism. But for one reason or another, many people feel the urge to deny the existence of “religious terrorism”. The whole term, they explain, is a misnomer (Rapoport, 1984, pp. 658-677). On closer inspection, the “religious” aspect of religious terrorism appears to be “political”.

It is this widespread conviction that I hope to challenge in this essay: religious terrorism is really “religious” in the sense that the religious element in the worldview which motivates e.g. Yigal Amir to shoot Yitzak Rabin, or Michael Adebolajo to hack drummer Lee Rigby to death, can only be denied by tampering with the concepts, by a redefinition of the word “religion”.

Religious terrorism or theoterrorism (as I prefer to call it) has a social dimension: youngsters fighting in Iraq or Syria, trying to inaugurate a caliphate were estranged from the societies in which they were living (Mekhennet, Sautter, & Hanfeld, 2008). Theoterrorism also has a psychological cause: becoming a terrorist requires a certain mindset (Reich et al., 1990). But theoterrorism is also impossible or unthinkable without the religious factor. In this article, I will focus on this religious “root cause” of terrorism. I think this is necessary because it is so often neglected (at the end of this essay I will give some striking examples of this).

Theoterrorism has its base in the idea that there is a personal, omniscient, omnipotent, personal deity who has issued certain commands to his believers in this world, which have to be executed, no matter at what prize (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2003; Selengut, 2013; Avalos, 2005). Loyal believers
Biblical Stories and Religion as the Root Cause of Terrorism

(in their own view "pure" and unadulterated, although in the eyes of the outside world "fanatic", "fundamentalist" and "zealous") is the group from which theoterrorists can be derived.

Contemporary theoterrorism seems to be inspired by the revival of a fundamentalist religious worldview (Rutheven, 2004; Rutheven 2002). What we seem to witness nowadays is a return to premodern ideas about blasphemy, apostasy, heresy, and religious freedom (or rather the denial thereof) (Dershowitz, 2007; Herrenbery, 2014, pp. 1-19).

The best way to explain this may be by means of an example.

The Hebrew Bible on Apostasy and Blasphemy

An important text to understand contemporary theoterrorism is Deuteronomy 13:6-11, which states:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother, your father's son or your mother's son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend—saying, "Let us go worship other gods," whom neither you nor your ancestors have known, any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other, you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them. But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness.

This passage is important because it confronts us with a pre-modern conception of freedom of religion, or rather the absence of that. Freedom of religion, in the sense to freely choose a religious conviction, to change that religious conviction and even to completely forfeit that conviction, is a modern idea. It is non-existent in pre-modern societies. What we find here, is this:

(i) Apostasy, heresy or blasphemy is rejected in the strongest words (I will not distinguish between these, in itself, different concepts here, because it is not necessary for the point that I want to make in this chapter);  
(ii) These crimes, sins, errors are to be punished with capital punishment;
(iii) This punishment is, according to contemporary standards, quite cruel (stoning);
(iv) Any member of the community is exhorted to execute those punishments (vigilante justice);
(v) There are no exceptions to be made: you also have to punish e.g. the members of your own family;
(vi) The motive for this punishment is what we today call “general prevention”: discouragement of potential transgressors of the law.

For a proper understanding of contemporary theoterrorism, it is highly important to know that apostasy, heresy, and blasphemy are rejected in the strongest possible terms (i). But it is also useful to understand that in this specific passage the administration of justice is not deferred to the state, to the national government, to judges or people who act in some sort of official capacity to take action against the culprits of the crime of apostasy (iv).

In Deuteronomy 13:7 it is also said that when there are persons around trying to seduce you to apostasy, “you must not yield”. These warnings are, of course, perfectly legitimate. Exhorting someone “not to yield”, when someone else tries to convince that person to adopt a certain belief, is part of a legitimate discussion in society (also modern societies), what views to adopt and what views to reject. The story gets a more sinister turn, though, when “not yielding” appears to develop in showing “no pity” (Deut. 13:8). The full meaning of the line of argument, however, is disclosed when in Deuteronomy 13:9 we read the punch line:

But you shall surely kill them (Deut. 13:9).

This is the essence of theoterrorism. An individual citizen is supposed to act as the executioner. And, as if the author of the bible wants to make sure his message has come across, it is added: “Your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterward the hand of all the people (Deut. 13:9)”.

So “all the people” are supposed to take part in the execution of the blasphemers. You simply cannot leave this sacred obligation to the state or to official government.
The Stoning of Soraya M.

In *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, a 2008 American-Persian film adapted from French journalist Freidoune Sahebjam’s book *La Femme Lapidée* (1990), the father is invited to be the first one to throw a stone at his daughter. And then her husband and sons. And in the British drama-documentary *Death of a Princess* (1980), based on the true story of Princess Maha’il, a young princess executed for adultery together with her lover in 1977, it was the rightful “husband” who executed his victims.

Regarding the motives of theoterrorism, it is important to zoom in on the last part of the passage from Deuteronomy, the passage where the social function of the extra-judicial punishment is highlighted. The “enticers” (Deut. 13:6), i.e. the people who try to seduce you to “worship other gods” (Deut. 13:6-7), are to be punished for the sole purpose that “all Israel shall hear and be afraid” (Deut. 13:11). So the function of violence is to strike fear into the hearts of others. This is, of course, an important element in all definitions of terrorism (Coady, 2004, p. 3-15).

There is a real “religious element” involved in the sense that theoterrorists usually have the feeling they have no real choice - they simply have to act. The violent act they have to perpetrate is simply divinely mandated. The law they act upon comes “from above” (not the arbitrary man-made laws democracies claim to be regulated by).

Islamists like Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, or the ruling theocrats in Saudi Arabia, have the feeling that if they do not punish people like Salman Rushdie or Raef Badawi (the Saudi blogger convicted to 1000 lashes for making propaganda for liberalism), this will cause disorder and disruption (“fitna”) (“Lash and Jail,” 2013; Badawi, 2015; Kepel, 2004).

What Deuteronomy (13:6-11) distinguishes from the story which I am now going to introduce, is that Deuteronomy is not a narrative. It is an objective spelling out what has to be done with those who seduce you to apostasy. The next part of the Bible I want to discuss is a *story*, the story of Phinehas. And, as is always the case with stories, one may differ about the interpretation. Nevertheless, especially in combination with what we can read in Deuteronomy and other parts of the Bible, I do not think the interpretation of the story of Phinehas places us before insurmountable hermeneutical conundrums.
The Story of Phinehas in Numbers 25

In my interpretation of this story, the story of Phinehas is supremely important, because here we meet the first theoterrorist in flesh and blood: someone prepared to kill for the sake of religion or the supposed will of God, although his behavior contradicts the laws of the nation-state. The figure that is only alluded to in abstracto in Deuteronomy 13:6-11, and referred to as “you” (Deuteronomy 13:8), now stands up and presents himself to the reader with a name: Phinehas. So he is the first theoterrorist activist with a name, to be precise. Phinehas is also the biblical role model for zealots during the occupation of Palestine by the Romans. For the Zealots, paying tribute to heathen Rome was considered to be a breach of your religious duties. As the British theologian, S.G.F. Brandon (1907-1971) writes: “For the Zealots, such acts constituted apostasy towards Yahweh, the god of Israel, and they were prepared to face death by crucifixion for their faith. But the resistance they offered was not passive. Phinehas was their prototype, whom Yahweh commended for his zeal, and the Maccabees were examples of what might be achieved through the martyr-ideal” (Brandon, 1971, p. 5; Kirsch, 2004, p. 80).

The story of Phinehas is told in the book of Numbers 25 and begins when the people of Israel were staying at Shittim, the last wilderness stop; its precise location is uncertain, according to the commentators in the New Oxford Annotated Bible (Coogan et al., 2007, p. 223). It is a story about sex, freedom of religion, state religion and the compliance of the citizen with either religious law or the law of the state (which can be something entirely different).

The story is relatively short, so I can quote the passage in extenso. I will quote from the New Revised Standard Version:

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD’s anger was kindled against Israel. The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the LORD, in order that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.”

Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation.
of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting much zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, ‘I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him I f covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and I made atonement for the Israelites.”

The name of the slain Israelite man, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian.

The LORD said to Moses, “Harass the Midianites, and defeat them; for they have harassed you by the trickery with which they deceived you in the affair of Peor, and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister; she was killed on the day of the plague that resulted from Peor.”

An Interpretation of the Phinehas’ Story

What does this mean? Again, it is a story. It lacks the commanding tone of Deuteronomy 13 with its “you must” and “you shall”. It is a story about a murder, to name one thing. But does that have any significance for our time? And if so, what?

The story starts with the occurrence that the Israelites “began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab” (Numbers 25:1). The Bible also tells us what these sexual relations were. The women of Moab invited the “people of Israel” (from the context of the story it is clear that only the men of Israel are meant here) “to the sacrifices of their gods” (Numbers 25:2). Apparently, the men willingly complied because, as the Bible relates, “the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Numbers 25:2). The commentators of the New Oxford Annotated Bible interpret the words of the Bible as “illicit sexual activity”, perhaps intermarriage in the context
Biblical Stories and Religion as the Root Cause of Terrorism

of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting much zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, 'I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him my covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.'

The name of the slain Israelite man, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian.

The LORD said to Moses, "Harass the Midianites, and defeat them; for they have harassed you by the trickery with which they deceived you in the affair of Peor, and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister; she was killed on the day of the plague that resulted from Peor."

An Interpretation of the Phinehas' Story

What does this mean? Again, it is a story. It lacks the commanding tone of Deuteronomy 13 with its "you must" and "you shall". It is a story about a murder, to name one thing. But does that have any significance for our time? And if so, what?

The story starts with the occurrence that the Israelites "began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab" (Numbers 25:1). The Bible also tells us what these sexual relations were. The women of Moab invited the "people of Israel" (from the context of the story it is clear that only the men of Israel are meant here) "to the sacrifices of their gods" (Numbers 25:2). Apparently, the men willingly complied because, as the Bible relates, "the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:2). The commentators of the New Oxford Annotated Bible interpret the words of the Bible as "illicit sexual activity", perhaps intermarriage in the context
of idolatrous feasting (p. 223). The Moabite people are often associated with illicit sexual activity in the Bible (Gen. 19:29-37).

As to the nature of the rival gods, it is revealed that it is “Baal of Peor”, which means the Baal deity associated with the place of Peor. This kindled the anger of the Lord against the people of Israel, the Bible relates. God commands Moses to punish the Israelites. He says:

Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel (Numbers 25:4-5).

Apparently punishing the chiefs by impalement was meant to appease the deity. The impalement of Numbers 25 seems to have the same function as the stoning in Deuteronomy 13:10 (“Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God”).

Then something important happens. An Israelite man brought a Midianite woman “into his family”. Moses saw this, as well as the whole congregation. One man took immediate action: Phinehas. The “you” that is only referred to in abstract terms in Deuteronomy 13 gets personalized: one particular person in the religious community takes its responsibilities. Phinehas took his spear and followed the Israelite man into the tent. There he “pierced the two of them” through the belly. Because this supposedly happens in a single thrust, the suggestion is made that the two were having intercourse, as the commentators in the New Oxford Annotated Bible note (p. 223).

Why the story begins with Moabite women, yet the woman taken into the tent by the Israelite man is identified as “Midianite” is a subject of controversy among bible scholars. Most of them suggest that the story of Numbers 25 is composed of two separate stories (Fleurant, 2011, p. 285-294).

In the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, we see also that the names of the man and the woman who were slain by Phinehas are revealed. The name of the Israelite man was Zimri, son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. The name of the Midianite woman was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, ancestral house in Midean (Numbers 25:14-16).

Having the names of the two victims gives the story some sort of a feeling of intimacy. Now we know: Zimri and Cozbi died because some sort of
religious fanatic thought it was not their inalienable right to revere the gods of their own choosing. Phinehas thought that he should decide what they had to believe. It is the same pretense that Mohammed Geele has when he forces himself into the house of the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard to behead the artist, because he, Geele, pretends to know that his god, or his prophet, does not like cartoons ("Cartoon Trial," 2011). As they can be sure that they have inflicted the wrath of the one and only god on the right person, the terrorists usually do not fear death as long (Pantucci, 2012). Their only worry is: would their god agree with what they have done?

What makes the story of Phinehas’s killing particularly interesting is the Lord’s reaction. There are two ways in which this reaction was made manifest. First by means of a natural phenomenon, i.e. by a plague. A plague which had been raging among the people of Israel, one that had already killed twenty-four thousand people (Numbers 25:9), was stopped. So apparently the Lord was satisfied with Phinehas’s way of handling the problem. One may see this as an indirect way of God by expressing his appreciation of the double murder. Second, the Lord made his reaction known to Moses. This time in a much more direct way, viz. by expressing satisfaction verbally. As the Bible says “the Lord spoke to Moses” (Number 25:10) saying:

Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore, say, “I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites” (Numbers 25:11-13).

Apparently, there was a causal connection between the halting of the plague and Phinehas’ extrajudicial killing. The stopping of the plague was a reward for Phinehas’ action. The Lord was satisfied with Phinehas’ zeal. And we can also, so it seems, read the Lord’s implicit reproach of Moses in this story. However, this last point is less clear than the other things I have read in the story.

The Prophet Elia

Phinehas is what terrorism experts call a “lone wolf”. He does not act at the behest of a specific organization. He seems to have been “radicalized” on the basis of his own convictions, the conviction that the law of God has
to be executed, even if the legitimate authorities (Moses in his case) fail to do what is divinely sanctioned.

In many cases, though, theoterrorists operate in some sort of organizational capacity. The Kouachi brothers, who killed the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, were operating on the orders, or with the explicit sanctioning, of Al Qaida Yemen (Laes, 2015; Attali, 2015). So next to the theoterrorist *practician*, there is the theoterrorist *ideologue*. One of the most fanatic theoterrorist ideologues was the late Anwar al-Awlaki (1971-2011), an American and Yemeni imam and lecturer. He was very active on the internet with a blog, a Facebook page, but also a driving force behind the al-Qaeda magazine *Inspire*, where many instances of incitement to murder were published against supposed critics of Islam such as Salman Rushdie, Kurt Westergaard, Stéphane Charbonnier (the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* who died in the assault on January 7, 2015) and others.

When we might consider Phinehas, a literary precursor of the theoterrorist practician, so we may consider the prophet Elia as the literary precursor of contemporary theoterrorist ideologues. It was Elia who commanded to kill when was proven, or supposed to have been proven, that certain people revered the “false gods”.

Elia also spelled Elias (Hebrew Eliyyahu), who flourished in the 9th century BCE, ranks with Moses in saving the religion of Yahweh from being corrupted by the nature worship of Baal that was also the source of controversy in the Phinehas story. The Bible tells the story of Elia’s prophetic career in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reigns of two kings: King Ahab and Ahaziah. The story is to be found in 1 Kings 17–19 and 2 Kings 1–2 in the Old Testament.

Elia distinguished himself with a firm monotheism that had to be defended against rival gods (Wright, 2009; Kirsch, 2004). He claimed that there was no reality except the God of Israel. No God, but God (Aslan, 2005). It is for this very reason that he is also recognized as an important prophet in Islam.

In contemporary terms, we would qualify him as an extremely “intolerant” religious leader, at least if we take “tolerance” to mean that you put up with other religious creeds than your own (Mendus et al., 1988, p. 96; Zagorin, 2003, p. xiii). In his rejection of the foreign gods, Elia did not mince words. As Leonard W. Levy (1923-2006) writes in his classical
study Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie (1993): “Inoffensive speech was not the hallmark of Elijah, Isaiah, or Jesus himself” (Levy, 1993, p. 572).

Elia’s main counterpart is King Ahab (who ruled c. 874–c. 853), who was married to Jezebel (died c. 843 BCE) (Hazelton, 2007). Ahab was the son of the Israelite king Omri, who had already allied himself with the Phoenician cities of the coast. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon (the modern Lebanon). Jezebel plays the role of the seductress. With her Tyrian courtiers and a large contingent of pagan priests and prophets, she propagated a rival religion to the religion of Israel, viz. the religion of Baal in the royal city of Samaria. So during the reign of Ahab, there was not one religion in Israel but two.

In a modern pluralist society, this would be nothing special, but this was not the way Elia saw the matter. Accepting both Baal and Yahweh as objects of veneration made the Israelites guilty of blasphemy, apostasy, and heresy, the kind of charges contemporary Islamist ideologues make against the royal family in Saudi Arabia or against the president of Afghanistan. From the perspective of the Islamist ideologues, such leaders are even sneakier than the openly secularist and atheist leaders of the United States and the former Soviet Union. In their case, at least, you know what you have. In the case of those liberal sycophant pseudo-Muslims that pretend to be the representatives of Allah in this world, you have to deal with dangerous figures because not all serious believers see through their facade.

Jezebel’s policies and Ahab’s condoning of these policies also caused a kind of syncretism, again something orthodox believers abhor. And the theoterrorist not only abhors this, he thinks he must act like Phinehas had to act. It is his special mission to punish those who commit these acts of blasphemy and apostasy with great severity. This is the most urgent religious command.

Ahab’s spouse, Jezebel, also spelled Jezabel, plays a central role in the controversy between Ahab and Elia. She was accused of provoking internecine strife that enfeebled Israel for decades. She has come to be known as an archetype of the wicked woman. When Jezebel married Ahab, she persuaded him to introduce the worship of the Tyrian god Baal-Melkart, who was a nature god.
Jezebel was a woman of fierce energy, and she was accustomed to destroying those who opposed her. It was her command that most of the prophets of Yahweh were killed. And for the religious believers on the Israelite side, this is seen as a legitimation for the equally cruel treatment that Elia meted out to the Prophets of Baal. When Jezebel heard of the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, she angrily swore to have Elia killed, forcing him to flee to save his life (1 Kings 18:19–19:3).

Elia was from Tishbe in Gilead. The narrative in 1 Kings relates how he suddenly appears during Ahab’s reign to proclaim a drought in the punishment of the cult of Baal that Jezebel was promoting in Israel at Yahweh’s expense.

The Experiment at Mount Carmel

The miracle which Elia tries to make the God of Israel perform was also characteristic of the mindset of the other prophets, which are presented in the Bible. In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, captured Jerusalem. He destroyed the temple and he also removed a large part of the population to Babylon (Russell, 1972, p. 310). During the period which has come to be known as the “Babylonian captivity”, the Jewish religion went through an important development. Originally, Yahweh was a tribal god. He favored the children of Israel, but there were also other gods. Quoting “You shall have no other gods besides Me” (Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7), B.R. Tilghman writes: “These commandments do not deny that there are other gods, but insist only that it is Yahweh who is to be worshipped by the Israelites” (Tilghman, 1994, p. 29). And other peoples revered other gods.

After the Babylonian captivity, a more aggressive form of monotheism came to the fore. Now the idea “Thou shalt have none other gods but me” became more and more important.

The prophets were instrumental in this process. They first taught that the worship of other gods, heathen gods, was a sin. So Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elia and others came to teach that one and only god was the right one and that he would punish all kind of idolatry (Russell, 1972, p. 310). As Russell says: “there was a growth of every form of exclusiveness” (p. 312). Marriage with gentiles came to be forbidden, for instance. When Alexander the Great conquered Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, and the Punjab he promoted a friendly fusion between Greek and barbarian. He himself married two barbarian princesses, and he compelled
the leading Macedonians in his army to marry Persian women of noble birth (Russell, 1972, p. 220). The results of this policy were widespread and on the whole fruitful. As Russell writes: “The result of this policy was to bring into the minds of the thoughtful men the conception of mankind as a whole” (p. 220). From *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story*, intermarriage has always been seen as a perfect instrument to bridge the chasm between different ethnic groups. On the other hand, it is also miscegenation that conservative groups in particular abhor. But this is also anathema to the God of the Hebrew Bible. Characteristic for the temper of mind of the monotheist God is: “I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples” (Leviticus 20:24).

The most explicit statement of this exclusivism is to be found in the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is said to be the work of two different prophets. One lived before the exile, and the other after. The second also called Deutero-Isaiah, is the one who first introduced the most uncompromising idea of God, claiming “There is not God but I” (Russell, 1972, p. 312).

Elia’s struggle with the prophets of Baal is an important stage in this process. At Mount Carmel, the prophets of Baal and Elia came together. In front of the audience assembled there, Elia solicited a miracle. First, he harangued the people and the prophets of Baal in particular. Elia said: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

The people remained silent. Then Elia reminded the people and the prophets of Baal that although he was alone, and the prophets of Baal were four hundred and fifty, he would like to submit their mutual claims to venerate the one true God to a test. “Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God” (1 Kings 20:24).

All the people agreed. The prophets of Baal cried: “O Baal, answer us!” But their summonses were all in vain. There was no voice and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made, but to no avail. Elia mocked them: “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened”. But, as the Bible relates “there was no voice, no
answer, and no response”. Then it was Elia’s turn. He declaimed: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back”. Then, the Bible tells us, “The fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering”.

The people concluded that this must be a sign that Elia spoke the truth. They fell on their faces and said: “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God”.

“Seize the Prophets of Baal”

To modern ears, this story may sound astonishingly naïve. In Spinoza’s famous chapter VI on miracles of A Theologico-Political Treatise (1670), the philosopher writes:

As men are accustomed to call Divine the knowledge which transcends human understanding, so also do they style Divine, or the work of God, anything of which the cause is not generally known: for the masses think that the power and providence of God are most clearly displayed by events that are extraordinary and contrary to the conception they have formed of nature, especially if such events bring them any profit or convenience: they think that the clearest possible proof of God’s existence is afforded when nature, as they suppose, breaks her accustomed order, and consequently they believe that those who explain or endeavor to understand phenomena or miracles through their natural causes are doing away with God and His providence (Spinoza, 1951, p. 81).

From a post-Spinoza (post-Human (Hume, 1975, p. 86-131) or post-Paineian) perspective, miracles prove nothing, at least not what people who perform or solicit miracles claim they prove (divine intervention). Besides, is it not possible that the God of Baal is superior in many respects except in his capacity of performing miracles? But this is not what has to concern us here. Within the context of my reflection on theoterrorism, what is most important in this story is the clash between the pretensions of the king and the prophet of Israel to have the final word on what the state-religion should be. Who is the ultimate source of religious authority: the king (in this case basically allowing religious pluralism) or the prophet (in this case attempting to inaugurate the state religion of one god)?
In a theocracy, as the religious leader Elia wants to establish, this is the prophet. The king can be corrected and punished by the religious leader. It is also the religious leader who is authorized to inflict punishments upon the people and a disobedient king. In another episode of this conflict Elia says to King Ahab: “Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you” (1 Kings 21:20). The king could have said: “Who are you to lecture about the religion of this realm?” The king could also have said, as Frederick the Great (1712-1786) did, that everyone in his kingdom could live according to the religion of his own choice (“Jeder soll nach seiner Fasson selig werden”). Every state-mandated compulsion that Elia wants to introduce in matters of religion is anathema to the modern human rights perspective and certainly to the First Amendment of the American Constitution.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (Levy et al., 1990; Jefferson, 1984, p. 510; Madison 1999, p. 29-39).

Now let us compare this with the ambitions of Elia. Is this “anachronistic”? It certainly is, but that is what seems to be a useful approach here. Let me reiterate: what I want to do is understand what sort of opposition the secular nation-state is confronted with nowadays (Juergensmeyer, 2008). And with that aim in view, a comparison with the mindset of the biblical prophet Elia can be highly illuminating.

What Elia wants is (to use the words of the American First Amendment):

1. The establishment of one specific religion;
2. Frustrating or prohibiting the free exercise of other religions;
3. Probably also abridging the freedom of speech for advocates of other religions than the religion of Yahweh;
4. Abridging the right of the other believers to assemble peaceably, etcetera.

It is very hard to reconcile the ideas of Elia with the ideas that we find in international human rights documents and modern constitutions, like the American Constitution, European constitutions, or the European Human Rights Charter.

After the experiment with the prophets of Baal had turned out disastrously for the competing religion, Elia exclaims: “Seize the prophets of Baal; do
Chapter One

not let one of them escape" (1 Kings 18:40). The Bible relates the subsequent events: “Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there” (1 Kings 18:40).

So, the religious competitors were killed. This was, as we have seen in our analysis of Deuteronomy 13:6-11, all in accordance with the prescriptions of the Hebrew Bible. The Bible does not tell us (i) if it was Elia himself who killed the prophets of Baal, (ii) if the crowd assisted him in seizing the prophets, or (iii) if they collaborated in the sinister act of killing their religious competitors. But one thing is certain: Elia incited the mob assembled on Mount Carmel to vigilante justice. Elia contests the sovereignty of the king (Ahab) on religious grounds, and incites to murder on the basis of “messages from above”.

Within the context of our theme, this is hugely important. If Phinehas can be seen as the first theoterrorist hitman, Elia can be seen as the first theoterrorist ideologue, inciting believers to subvert state authority in the name of theocracy.

**Not Religious?**

Now no one would be inclined to deny that Phinehas’ motives were not religious. They were religious because he wanted to serve the one and only God. He wanted to show loyalty to the divine law (in his perception) which forbids apostasy and heresy.

Elia also contested the sovereignty of the state in which he was living. Again, on religious grounds. He pretended to know what the one true god wanted and he wanted to introduce a one-God-state (while Ahab and his wife Jezebel basically favored a form of religious pluralism and were, therefore, much more in alliance with contemporary views of religious pluralism).

Now, the mystery is that when contemporary religious fanatics want to punish blasphemers and apostates (Khomeini, Adebolajo, the Kouachi-brothers), and they do it allegedly for the same reasons as their biblical icons, many commentators feel urged to deny the religious character of their engagement emphatically. Hillary Clinton, commenting on the military successes of ISIS or Islamic State, said: “ISIS is neither Islamic nor a state” (Merica, 2014). She wants to call ISIS’ activity, “violent extremism”. Clinton was asked to give her opinion on the Islamic State in
a time when the Obama administration was reproached to have “underestimated ISIS” (Merica, 2014).

But, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that the Obama administration has not so much underestimated ISIS as misdiagnosed ISIS and denying the religious factor of contemporary terrorism is an important part of that misdiagnosis.

The practice of belittling or even flatly refusing to recognize religion as a causal factor in the genesis of contemporary terrorism is widespread. President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, Vice President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister David Cameron and “virtually every other politician in the Western world” agreed with Clinton on this issue, as Robert Spencer writes (2015, p. xxv). Another example of this view is the one voiced by CIA director John Brennan who, giving his comments on ISIS, declared “It is a corruption of the Islamic faith. It is a distortion of it. It does not represent the Muslim community or Islam” (“Look Who’s Talking,” 2015).

Now, that ISIS does not represent the Muslim community is perfectly clear. Indeed, only a small minority of the 1.6 billion Muslims in this world (23 percent) subscribe to the extremist convictions of ISIS. But does that make those convictions “not religious”, or “having nothing to do with Islam”?

That is certainly a dubious claim to make. And the reason is that not only in Islamic history but in the history of the three monotheist religions in general (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) there are the stories to be found which I have analyzed in this article. And it is those stories which deserve our attention if we want to come to a more in-depth analysis of contemporary terrorism. Saying that the behavior of Phinehas or Elia is a form of “violent extremism” may be true, even self-evident, but, at the same time, it is a vacuous contention. It lacks the specificity we need to come to a more realistic estimate of the situation.

On September 8, 2014, American Secretary of State John Kerry pledged that ultimately ISIS will be defeated. He presented a diverse program to fulfill that task. For some that will mean military assistance, Kerry said. For some, it will mean humanitarian relief effort. What is also necessary is to help to identify, track, and cut off ISIL’s funding, and prevent the flow of foreign fighters (Kerry, 2014). And then the Secretary of State made the remark I want to highlight here: “For still others, it will mean demolishing
the distortion of one of the world’s great peaceful religions and counteracting the propaganda ISIL uses to recruit new supporters” (2014).

In the last sentence, the word “distortion” is essential. Neither Clinton nor Kerry seems to have any theory on which they base their conviction that ISIL (or ISIS or Islamic State) is a “distortion” of Islam. Perhaps they depart from the same idea as John Brennan that a belief that is shared by only a minority of the believers of a certain religion cannot be religious and must be a distortion. Or, perhaps they think that any religious idea that is violent cannot be religious for that very reason (apparently claiming that religion, from the nature of the concept, must be peace-loving).

This is a widespread tendency that we find not only with the American administration but also in the European context. And not only with politicians but also with judges.

Conclusion

The issue of religious motivation was, for example, prevalent in an exchange of views between the British judge and the two theoterrorists who murdered Lee Rigby. The judge contended that their barbaric act had been a “betrayal of Islam” (Gallagher, 2015; Clegg, 2013). But Michael Adebolajo shouted, “Allahu Akbar” meaning “God is the Greatest” before being told he would die behind bars. And while Adebolajo, also during his trial extensively commented on his religious reasons to do what he thought he had to do, the British justice system insisted on interpreting these statements as “political”, not as “religious”, despite the fact that Adebolajo gave a testimony during which he told the jury he loved al-Qaida and that as a “soldier of Allah”, he had carried out the killing as revenge for the treatment of Muslims abroad. The British judge responding to Adebolajo’s own statements about his motives say that he was really “betraying Islam”. Again, the same remark we have met, time and again, in the American commentaries on ISIL: a categorical insistence on the non-religious nature of terrorism. Now, there is a danger lurking behind all this — no offense meant — “amateur theology” of politicians and judges. The danger is that one overlooks which specific ideas within the monotheist tradition are responsible for (or in the vocabulary of this article and this book: are the root causes of) terrorism.

There may be many causes for contemporary theoterrorism as exerted by ISIS, but that the religious idea that there is a God who requires you to
punish all the unbelievers, apostates and infidels is not among those causes is a highly irresponsible position to take.

We started this essay with the notion of “cause”. Identifying the right cause of contemporary terrorism makes it possible to develop the right cure of this phenomenon. If the diagnosis fails, the therapy is bound to fail. If politicians, judges, journalists, intellectuals, and scholars continue to disregard the Islamist ideology and its religious nature, an effective counterterrorist strategy will fail. And despite all evidence to the contrary, the American administration, just like many other governments in the world, tend to underestimate the religious factor. Underestimating, or in some cases even flatly denying the religious factor, is one of the most prevalent strategic miscalculations of our time.

Reference List

- “Yigal Amir’s family has no regrets over Rabin murder.” (October 24, 2014). The Times of Israel.
• Gallagher, P. (September 24, 2015). “Rigby killers dragged screaming from the dock as they deny ‘betraying Islam.’” *The Independent*.
Chapter One

- Merica, D. (October 7, 2014). “ISIS is neither Islamic nor a state, says Hillary Clinton.” CNN.
Notes

1 In this essay I will consider as “terrorism” (i) to strike fear into the heart of the population of a country; (ii) to force the government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing something, or (iii) to destroy or derange the fundamental political, constitutional or social structures of a country or international organization. This definition is derived from Article 83a of the Dutch Penal Code, where terrorism is defined by the aims stated. Implicit in these aims is that terrorism is perpetrated by non-state actors. In this essay I focus on religion as a motivating actor to perpetrate terrorism (hence “religious terrorism”), or, more exactly a certain conception of God (hence “theoterrorism”).

2 Yigal Amir (b. 1970) is an Israeli theoterrorist. He assassinated the Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995 in Tel Aviv. He is serving a life sentence for murder. He studied law and computer science, but also Jewish law
at the Institute for Advanced Torah Studies. As many other religious terrorists Amir expressed no regret for his actions, thinking they were divinely mandated. Rabin was considered to be a traitor to the Israeli people, giving away (with the Oslo agreements) land to the enemies of the Israeli people. See also: “Yigal Amir’s family has no regrets over Rabin murder”, in: The Times of Israel, October 24, 2014.


6 See the interview with the maker of the documentary is: “Interview Antony Lewis”, Death of a Princess 25 Years Later, Frontline/PBS 2005.


9 Israel was not a nation-state at the moment of the story, but that is irrelevant to the point I want to make.

10 New Revised Standard Version.
Biblical Stories and Religion as the Root Cause of Terrorism


12 Anwar al-Awlaki was an important recruiter involved in planning terrorist operations for al-Qaeda. He was killed by a U.S. drone strike. On the basis of his YouTube videos and blogs he was also called “bin Laden of the Internet”. His teachings were a source of inspiration for many theoterrorists and he repeatedly called for jihad against the United States. See on him: Bennoune, Karima, Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight against Muslim Fundamentalism, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 2013, pp. 23-24, 91, 217, 315.

13 Charbonnier’s (or “Charb”, as he was called by his friends) testament was: Charb, Lettre aux escrocs de l’islamophobie qui font le jeu des racistes, Les Échappés, Paris 2015, finished only a few days before his execution. See on him: Bougrab, Jeanette, Maudites, Albin Michel, Paris 2015; Fourest, Caroline, Éloge du blasphème, Bernard Grasset, Paris 2015.

14 Or in the Roman empire under Julian: “When the Emperor Julian, called the Apostate, ascended the imperial throne, he announced his intention of permitting all his subjects to exercise their own judgments in matters of faith, and to practice what religious forms they pleased, provided they preserved the public peace”. See: Blakey, Robert, The History of Political Literature from the earliest Times, Vol. 1, Richard Bentley, London 1855, p. 174.

15 See: Paine, Thomas, The Age of Reason, 1794, in: Thomas Paine, Collected Writings, The Library of America, New York 1995, pp. 665-885, p. 668 who writes about the miracle of revelation. His comment is: revelation is always “revelation to that person only.”15 He means: only a revelation to Moses (or Mohammad, or whoever else claims to have certain knowledge “revealed”): “When Moses told the children of Israel that he received the two tables of the commandments from the hand of God, they were not obliged to believe him, because they had no other authority for it than his telling them so (…)”.

16 As, according to some historians, happened in Canossa, the now ruined 10th-century castle southwest of Reggio nell’Emilia in Italy, famous as the meeting place (1077) of Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV. Pope and Emperor had a controversy on the investiture. On 28 January Henry journeyed to Canossa as a simple penitent. The pope had him waiting for three days before Henry received absolution. The name Canossa became associated with the submission of the secular power to the church. See: “Canossa”. Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Whether the story is based on solid historical facts is disputed. See: McCabe, Joseph, A History of the Popes, Watts & Co., London 1939, p. 273. During Prussia’s Kulturkampf against Roman Catholic influences in Germany Bismarck promised: “Nach Canossa gehen wir nicht” (“We are not going to Canossa”). See: Bury, J.B., History of the Papacy in the 19th Century, Edited, with a Memoir, McMillan and Co. Limited, London 1930, p. 163.

17 Needless to say, I do not want to suggest that Elia killed the prophets of Baal because the bible ordered this. The bible was, after all, not known to Elia. What I
want to claim, is that the mindset, which was prevalent in times described in the 
bible, thought of killing blasphemers and apostates as a religious duty. It was a 
“pious” act, religiously mandated. 

Clinton even uses the word “refuse” when she says “I refuse to call them the 
Islamic State.”

See also: “Woolwich attack: the terrorist’s rant”, in: The Daily Telegraph, 23 
May 2013. Here the word “rant” is important.