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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The coloniality of the religious terrorism thesis

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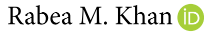

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Abstract

A dominant narrative, produced and reproduced especially by terrorism scholars, holds that terrorism in its worst form is religious. The most dangerous and non-negotiable form of terrorism, in other words, is the religious kind. At the same time, there is a recurring implication, proposed by many terrorism scholars and reflected in public discourse, that terrorism, no matter its official designation, is always inherently 'religious' or 'religious-like'. Both this implication and the dominant narrative about the uniquely dangerous character of 'religious terrorism' – which I summarise as the Religious Terrorism Thesis – builds on colonial knowledge and assumptions about 'religion'. Religion is also, as I argue, written into the category 'terrorism' and enables its negative discursive power and the colonial imagination of 'terrorism' as racialised and a system-threat to (Western) modernity. Terrorism, therefore, can never constitute a neutral signifier of a specific kind of political violence. Instead, it functions as a negative ideograph to Western societies, which means it functions to uphold the project of Western modernity/coloniality. The Religious Terrorism Thesis, which I identify as the foundation for the dominant discourse on terrorism today, is a crucial element of coloniality and justifies many controversial and contemporary counterterrorism practices.

Keywords: coloniality; modernity; race; religion; religious terrorism; terrorism

Introduction

According to some of the most prominent and well-known terrorism scholars in the field, terrorism and religion have a natural and historical connection.[1] This assumption continues to be a popular one, rarely questioned and usually framed as common-sense knowledge, within Terrorism Studies and the discipline of International Relations (IR) more generally.[2] This is closely linked to and rooted in the popular taken-for-granted assumption, prevalent in the study of IR, that religion has a natural propensity to war and to violence more generally.[3] The supposed natural connection between religion and terrorism, then, is said to have produced a category – i.e. religious

[1] See David C. Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling: Terrorism in three religious traditions', *The American Political Science Review*, 78:3 (1984), pp. 658–77; Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (London: University of California Press, 2000); Magnus Ranstorp, 'Terrorism in the name of religion', *Journal of International Affairs*, 50:1 (1996), pp. 41–62.

[2] See also the canonical work that has contributed to this popular assumption outside of Terrorism Studies and within IR more generally: Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004); Samuel Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (1993), pp. 22–49; Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.

[3] William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2011).

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terrorism – which, according to terrorism scholars, sets itself apart from secular terrorism through its exceptionally lethal, dangerous, non-negotiable, and nihilistic nature.[4] Although notable challenges to this narrative have been made (most notably by Gunning and Jackson, who also reveal how this narrative is not supported by convincing empirical evidence),[5] the colonial foundation of this narrative has yet to be acknowledged.

Building on previous challenges to it, I show that the dominant narrative about 'religious terrorism', which I refer to as the Religious Terrorism Thesis in this article,[6] builds on colonial knowledge. As I further argue in this article, not only does the category 'religious terrorism' build on colonial knowledge and assumptions, its employment today also continues to operate for colonial purposes. The Religious Terrorism Thesis functions as an element of coloniality and helps the West define itself by negation. This, then, further enables and justifies many of the most controversial contemporary counterterrorism practices that Western and non-Western states alike have sanctioned in response to 'terrorism', especially when it is considered the 'religious' (and within that category usually 'Islamist') kind.

David Rapoport, usually credited with establishing the category 'religious terrorism' in Terrorism Studies, drew from colonial administrators' records in British India to make his claims about 'religious terrorism' as uniquely more lethal, fanatic, and nihilistic.[7] Rapoport provides the colonial examples of the historical Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots as the supposed ancient prototypes of 'religious terrorism', which he also argues constitute ancient prototypes of 'terrorism' more generally. These colonial examples have subsequently (and increasingly so after 9/11) been cited as proof of the uniquely dangerous, uncompromising character of 'religious terrorism' and as proof of its dominant connection to Islam by countless other scholars, among them the most well-known and -cited ones within Terrorism Studies.[8] This perception of the religious terrorist as exceptionally fanatic and non-negotiable is reflected in contemporary counterterrorism practices, which disproportionately target racialised, oftentimes Muslim, citizens in the West and often constitute extreme measures, usually seen as incompatible with the values of liberal, modern democracies but acceptable when it comes to countering the religious extremist/terrorist.[9]

Unsurprisingly, then, the dominant scholarship in Terrorism Studies also produces a disproportionate focus on 'religious' – usually 'Islamist' – terrorism.[10] However, it also perpetuates a racialised imagination of terrorism more generally, one that stands in opposition to the modern,

[4]See Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling'; Bruce Hoffman, '"Holy terror": The implications of terrorism motivated by a religious imperative', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 18:4 (1995), pp. 271–84; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2003); Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Understanding the new terrorism', *Current History*, 99:636 (2000), pp. 158–63; Ranstorp, 'Terrorism'.

[5]Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, 'What's so "religious" about "religious terrorism"?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 4:3 (2011), pp. 369–88.

[6]MacDonald et al. have referred to the 'religious terrorism' thesis before (see Stuart MacDonald, Nyasha Maravanyika, David Nezri, Elliot Parry, and Kate Thomas, 'Online jihadist magazines and the "religious terrorism" thesis', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 11:3 (2018), pp. 537–50). However, as I explain in more detail below, I refer to the Religious Terrorism Thesis in capitals to emphasise that it goes beyond just constituting the dominant narrative on 'religious terrorism' but also applies to the dominant discourse on 'terrorism' itself and further constitutes a major element of coloniality and the West's self-identity.

[7]See Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling'.

[8]E.g. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006); Jeffrey Kaplan, 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted: Premodern religious terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31:5 (2019), pp. 1070–95; Audrey Cronin, 'Behind the curve: Globalization and international terrorism', *International Security*, 27:3 (2002), pp. 30–58; Peter Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

[9]See e.g. Rizwaan Sabir, *The Suspect: Counterterrorism, Islam and the Security State* (London: Pluto Press, 2022); Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014); Mahmood Mamdani, 'Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), pp. 766–75.

[10]Bart Schuurman, 'Topics in terrorism research: Reviewing trends and gaps, 2007–2016', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:3 (2019), pp. 463–80.

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liberal nation-state,[11] even if the terrorist group in question is not necessarily always stating anti-modern/anti-statist goals itself.[12] The basis for this, I argue, is constituted by the Religious Terrorism Thesis. The 'religious' is assumed to be a component of terrorism, whether explicitly stated or not. This, I argue, is another component that facilitates the racialisation of terrorism as a concept more generally. 'Terrorism' stands in opposition to the secular, i.e. rational, modern, Westphalian, nation-state, which has moved past and beyond 'religion' – a category that is said to have caused violence, chaos, and war in Europe's pre-modern, less developed state and which continues to do so in less developed, non-Western parts of the world.[13] Terrorism, then, is a racialised concept that is predominantly ascribed to non-Western violence. It also racialises Western violence, labelled as 'terrorist', as less white even if it is perpetrated by white actors.[14] It functions, as I will go on to argue, as an element of coloniality by upholding the project of Western modernity; it helps the West define itself by negation.

Coloniality, a term coined by Quijano[15] and further developed by Mignolo,[16] describes the logic and intellectual and structural foundation of Western civilisation (from the Renaissance until today) that enabled the activity of colonialism but also preceded and succeeded it. It could be described as the mindset and the intellectual but also structural framework that have enabled the conditions that initiated colonialism and which continue to exist today. As Gani explains, 'unlike the historical event of colonisation, coloniality relates to epistemologies, ways of thinking, and *where* one is doing that thinking'.[17] Colonialism therefore only constitutes one aspect or outcome of the larger framework, i.e. coloniality, in which it is embedded.

Coloniality, then, is made up of multiple, overlapping structures, such as racial, epistemic, and linguistic hierarchies, which are constitutive of what we call 'modernity' today. Indeed, coloniality constitutes modernity's constitutive 'darker side', which is composed by the different nodes that tie together capitalist, patriarchal, racist, and religious hierarchies into the so-called colonial matrix of power.[18] Coloniality, in other words, constitutes the untold, hidden but constitutive side of modernity. With this in mind, modernity itself is best understood as a complex 'narrative that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, "coloniality"'.[19] As Mignolo therefore notes, there is no modernity without coloniality.[20] In fact, the 'modernity' from which Europe draws its self-identity is 'so deeply imbricated in the structures of European colonial domination over the rest of the world that it is impossible to separate the two'.[21] The reason I refer to 'colonial-modernity'[22] instead of just 'modernity' on many occasions throughout this article is to emphasise exactly this inextricability of modernity

[11] Caron Gentry, *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race, and Heteronormativity Structure Terrorism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[12] E.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which has at times either supported or opposed the state (see Jasmine Gani, 'Escaping the nation in the Middle East: A doomed project? Fanonian decolonisation and the Muslim Brotherhood', *Interventions*, 21:5 (2019), pp. 652–70.)

[13] See also Cavanaugh, *The Myth*; Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics*.

[14] Terrorism, therefore, constitutes an example of 'racialisation', i.e. an example of how 'race' operates in racialising not just bodies but also concepts, phenomena, or practices (see also Amal Abu-Bakare, 'Why race matters: Examining "terrorism" through race in international relations', *E-International Relations* [2017]), available at: {https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/09/why-race-matters-examining-terrorism-through-race-in-international-relations/}.

[15] Aníbal Quijano, 'Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad', *Perú indígena*, 13:29 (1992), pp. 11–20.

[16] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[17] Jasmine K. Gani, 'The erasure of race: Cosmopolitanism and the illusion of Kantian hospitality', *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 425–46 (p. 435, emphasis in original).

[18] Mignolo, *Darker Side*.

[19] Ibid., pp. 2–3.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Gurminder Bhambra, 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies*, 17:2 (2014), pp. 115–21.

[22] See also Robbie Shilliam, 'Intervention and colonial-modernity: Decolonising the Italy/Ethiopia conflict through Psalms 68:31', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1131–47.

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from its darker side. It is also to emphasise that 'modernity' is not a neutral signifier of an era but carries problematic imaginations and ideas that serve to reinstate Western superiority vis-à-vis non-Western inferiority.

To demonstrate the coloniality of the Religious Terrorism Thesis and its function for Western modernity, this article is structured into four main sections. I first introduce the much-neglected colonial history and origins of the category 'religion' in Europe and its construction as prone to violence, which was central to Europe's narrative about its ascension to 'modernity', coinciding with and linked to the formation of the Westphalian, modern nation-state. In the second part of this article, I demonstrate how 'terrorism' is a racialised concept embedded in colonial logic that allows for the West's self-identity in opposition to it. As I show in the third part, the coming together of two colonially infused concepts – religion and terrorism – constitutes a doubly colonial concept, manifesting in the popularity, influence, and harmful consequences of the Religious Terrorism Thesis. However, and as I demonstrate in the last part of this article, religion is also assumed as the natural and historical basis for terrorism more generally, as argued by many of the most foundational terrorism scholars in the field. This becomes especially clear from the popular 'ancient prototype' narrative, introduced by David Rapoport. This narrative locates the earliest forms of terrorism in different religious, and more specifically 'Oriental', groups and traditions. I conclude by reflecting on how the coloniality of the Religious Terrorism Thesis has implications for contemporary counterterrorism policies, which continue to disproportionately target minoritised and racialised communities in the West and beyond.

The colonial invention of 'religion' and the myth of Westphalia

Despite the fact that ideas about 'religion' are so central to the category 'religious terrorism', religion never gets acknowledged as a category that might have to, at least, be defined rather than accepted as a taken-for-granted-concept. How Terrorism Studies could have produced so much scholarship on 'religious' terrorism without ever engaging with the discipline of Religious Studies, let alone engaging with the definition of religion, is, I would argue, another testament to the fallacy and weak evidential grounding of the Religious Terrorism Thesis. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of scholarship on 'religious terrorism' seems to be based on the widely held belief of religion's natural propensity to war and violence if not kept private and out of politics.[23] As Cavanaugh and other scholars from the disciplines of history as well as Religious Studies have demonstrated for some time now, this assumption is based on weak and unsubstantiated evidence about Europe's past.[24]

However, as Gunning and Jackson note, this unsubstantiated assumption that religion constitutes a constant risk factor that can produce, increase, and brutalise violent conflicts has a long genealogy in Western scholarship and continues to inform dominant scholarship on terrorism.[25] This assumption can be traced back to the common belief – which is a belief foundational to the disciplines of IR and Politics and widely accepted as common knowledge and truth – that the Peace of Westphalia constituted the starting point of modern international relations.[26] However, as many scholars across disciplines have now pointed out, Westphalia has been misrepresented in a number of ways, for example, as constituting the establishment of the modern nation-state and sovereignty as a principle of it.[27] This, as historians have noted, is a misrepresentation of the peace treaties and

[23] Cavanaugh, *The Myth*.

[24] Ibid.; Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics*; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[25] Gunning and Jackson, 'What's so "religious"', p. 379.

[26] Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[27] Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, 'The big bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919', *Millennium*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 735–58; Alexander Bick, 'Westphalia: Beyond the Myth', *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)* (2020), available at: {https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26045.4}; Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, international relations, and the Westphalian myth', *International Organization*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 251–87.

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what they actually and historically achieved. Sovereignty, for example, was neither established here nor practised after as a result of these treaties specifically.[28] It is also conveniently erased from the dominant narrative that European countries' recognition of each other's overseas territories was an essential demand of the treaties, showcasing how the development of the modern nation-state in Europe went hand in hand with the project of colonialism.[29] This, yet again, demonstrates the inseparability of 'modernity' from its other side, 'coloniality'.

However, the part of the Westphalian narrative – or Westphalian myth – that is important for understanding the origins of the Religious Terrorism Thesis is that of Europe's so-called religious wars, which are said to have been ended with the Peace of Westphalia, which separated church from state power and created the secular, modern nation-state in Europe. As Cavanaugh notes, historians have since questioned the dominant narrative that the Thirty Years War was indeed 'religious'.[30] Nevertheless, this narrative has functioned as the ideological legitimation of the modern nation-state in Europe and therefore constitutes an essential element defining the advent of Western modernity (or as I argue *colonial*-modernity). According to Cavanaugh, the 'attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state'.[31] This narrative has further set into place a binary between 'good religion' (i.e. the religion that stays in the private sphere and is only concerned with inner spirituality) and 'bad religion' (which interferes in politics, causing violence as it had in Europe's pre-modern past).[32]

'Religion', then, has meant different things at different times, depending on what purpose its employment was meant to serve.[33] Whilst it was invented in post-Westphalian Europe as separate from the secular in order to ensure the legitimacy of and loyalty to the nation-state, it was reinvented during the era of European colonialism as a tool of subjugation against colonial subjects around the world. However, in all cases, 'religion' has served the project of Western modernity. In the 15th century and pre-Westphalia, the term religion was uncommon; it usually referred to an order or a monastery and was reserved for the Christian faith only.[34] The adjective 'religious' was used to differentiate between people who took monastic vows and other people, who were Christian by default.[35] During the Enlightenment period, the category 'religion' was then reinvented as something that was separate from and standing in opposition to the secular sphere of power, politics, science, and rationality.[36] However, whilst 'religion' during its early reinvention in Europe still only applied to Christianity, it took on new meaning and was reinvented yet again to apply to other belief systems during the period of European colonial expansion. Crucial here is that this shift in meaning happened to fulfil a very specific (colonial) purpose.

During the era of colonial expansion, colonial administrators first denied 'religion' to Indigenous peoples on the basis that the concept 'religion', modelled on Christianity in Europe, did not fit the belief systems they encountered. It further was assumed that Indigenous people were not rational enough to have arrived at 'religion', a marker of civilisation that Europe had achieved.[37] However, this subsequently changed when colonial administrators realised that assigning religion

[28] Ibid.; Bick, 'Westphalia'.

[29] See also Bhambra, 'Postcolonial'; Bick, 'Westphalia'.

[30] Cavanaugh, *The Myth*.

[31] Ibid., p. 4.

[32] Rabea Khan, 'Speaking "religion" through a gender code: The discursive power and gendered-racial implications of the religious label', *Critical Research on Religion*, 10:2 (2021), pp. 153–69.

[33] Cavanaugh, *The Myth*; Pieter Nanninga, 'The role of religion in al-Qaeda's violence', in James Lewis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 158–71.

[34] William Cavanaugh, *The Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Time and Space* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), p. 32.

[35] Thomas Lynch, 'Social construction and social critique: Haslanger, race, and the study of religion', *Critical Research on Religion*, 5:3 (2017), pp. 284–301.

[36] Khan, 'Speaking religion'.

[37] David Chidester, 'Apartheid comparative religion in South Africa', in Richard King (ed.), *Religion, Theory Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 555–62 (p. 556);

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to colonial subjects could serve the purpose of privatising, sidelining, and erasing their cultures and belief systems in opposition to the coloniser's culture, religion (i.e. Christianity), and values.[38]

The assigning of religion, then, acquired the function of confirming European superiority.[39] Given that modern religion is based on the Christian, more specifically Protestant, model, religion consequently finds 'its clearest an most developed manifestations in European avatars'.[40] As a result, all other religions outside Europe constitute at best 'rough drafts, archaic or primitive forms of religion'[41] and therefore can only ever occupy a subordinate position to Christianity, which is thereby linked to whiteness. They are implied to be 'bad religion' by default – religions that still need to be privatised as Europe had done to emerge out of its violent past. Assigning it to colonised peoples' practices or beliefs therefore naturally racialises them as less developed and less civilised, serving as a racial signifier.[42] As Vial showed, assigning 'religion' fulfilled the same function as assigning 'race'.[43]

The invention of 'religion' as a category that encompasses all major world religions was a colonial invention that served the purpose of sorting people (and their belief systems) on a race hierarchy.[44] Monotheistic religions or religions with an assumed proximity to Christianity (and hence whiteness) were considered more developed and rational than, for example, so-called tribal religions. Thus, Africans and Aboriginals as well as other Indigenous people were considered at the bottom of a racial-religious hierarchy, their religions assumed as signifiers for their racial inferiority and lack of development. Interestingly, Islam was considered a tribal religion reserved for Arabs only for a long time before it was accepted as a monotheistic religion alongside Christianity.[45] This, then, further highlights the historic racialisation of Islam in which Muslims are still implicated today.[46]

The Religious Terrorism Thesis, then, cannot be fully understood without understanding the colonial construction, genealogy, and employment of what we today know as 'religion'. However, whilst 'religion' and its association with irrationality is a colonial invention and functioned as a colonial tool, 'terrorism', too, functions as a colonial tool, as I show in the next section.

Mitsutoshi Horii, 'Historicizing the category of "religion" in sociological theories: Max Weber and Emile Durkheim', *Critical Research on Religion*, 7:1 (2019), pp. 24–37 (p. 30).

[38] Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics*; Cavanaugh, *The Myth*, p. 86; Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[39] William Arnal, 'Critical responses to phenomenological theories of religion: What kind of category is "religion"?', in Richard King (ed.), *Religion, Theory Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 421–34 (p. 425); Ellen Armour, 'Jacques Derrida on religion', in Richard King (ed.), *Religion, Theory Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 481–68 (p. 483).

[40] Arnal, 'Critical responses', p. 425.

[41] Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 114.

[42] Khan, 'Speaking religion'.

[43] Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); see also Andrew Delatolla and Joanne Yao, 'Racializing religion: Constructing colonial identities in the Syrian provinces in the nineteenth century', *International Studies Review*, 20 (2018), pp. 1–22.

[44] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[45] Ibid., pp. 205 and 179.

[46] Jasmine Gani, 'Racial militarism and civilisational anxiety at the imperial encounter: From metropole to the post-colonial state', *Security Dialogue*, 52:6 (2021), pp. 546–66. Racialisation of Muslims also dates back much further. Edward Said, for example, noted how certain discourses of Arabs/Muslims can be traced back to ancient Greek times. The Crusades constitute another example. However, 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' were usually equated as a race, and prior to the colonial (re)invention of 'religion', this racialisation did not occur through the category 'religion'. My thanks to reviewer 2 for inviting reflection on this point.

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The coloniality of 'terrorism'

Similar to religion, terrorism, too, has meant different things at different times. Unlike, 'religion', terrorism, however, is acknowledged for its definitional instability and remains a hotly debated topic within Terrorism Studies. A survey of academic literature found over 100 different definitions of terrorism used by terrorism scholars.[47] Most scholars of terrorism, however, usually agree on a few core elements that are central to 'terrorism' as a political concept, such as its political intention, violent mode, and the targeting or threat of targeting of civilians or civilian sites usually to invoke fear and/or terror.[48] Thus, simply put, terrorism is usually understood as the violent targeting of civilians or civilian sites for political purposes.[49]

However, more important than its definitional debate is the discursive power 'terrorism' holds. As Richardson pointed out, the only universally accepted attribute of the term terrorism is that it is pejorative.[50] Scholars of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) have therefore argued for some time that it is the 'productions and constructions of terrorism' that should be studied rather than its content.[51] As CTS scholars have argued, terrorism functions as a negative ideograph within Western states, i.e. a cultural taboo.[52] Whilst an ideograph constitutes a virtue word, often used by political actors (such as freedom, democracy, justice), whose clear meaning or definition is assumed but in fact not clear at all,[53] negative ideographs 'identify a society's key values by negation, defining what a society is not'.[54]

Terrorism as a discursive construct and negative ideograph, then, functions to work for and not against society and therefore, is naturally defined by what Western society is (supposed to be) not. The racialisation of the terrorist, then, seems an almost-logical consequence of this, which further facilitates the construction of the terrorist and terrorism as mainly non-Western, non-white. One important signifier of this racialisation of terrorism is the indirect denial of rationality to terrorism as a tactic and the terrorist as a perpetrator. Denying or assigning rationality has been a, if not *the*, main colonial tool of subjugation, mirrored by the denying and assigning of religion (also deemed to be a signifier for [ir]rationality), which has justified the colonisation, enslavement, and dispossession of lands and people.

As such, terrorism is regularly referred to as a form of 'asymmetrical' or 'unconventional warfare'.[55] Many definitions of terrorism have further included, or made central, the term 'extra-normativity'[56] or describe it as an 'unorthodox' use of political violence.[57] This is a coded way of ascribing disorder and irrationality to the terrorist actor and putting it in contrast with and

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[47] Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), p. 5.

[48] Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, 'Terrorism and political violence', in Laura Shepherd (ed.), *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 121.

[49] Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 20.

[50] Ibid., p. 19.

[51] Lee Jarvis, *Times of Terror: Discourse, Temporality and the War on Terror* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 12.

[52] Marie Breen Smyth, Jeroen Gunning, Richard Jackson, George Kassimeris, and Piers Robinson, 'Critical terrorism studies: An introduction', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 1–4 (p. 2).

[53] Dana Cloud, '"To veil the threat of terror": Afghan women and the (clash of civilizations) in the imagery of the U.S. war on terrorism', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90:3 (2004), pp. 285–306 (p. 288).

[54] Richard Jackson, Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning, and Marie Breen-Smyth, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 70; Breen Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, and Robinson, 'Critical terrorism studies', p. 2.

[55] Irving Louis Horowitz, 'The routinization of terrorism and its unanticipated consequences', in Martha Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism, Legitimacy and Power: The Consequences of Political Violence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), pp. 38-51 (p. 40); Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 15.

[56] See Wilkinson, *Terrorism*, p. 1; Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 675.

[57] Martha Crenshaw, 'Introduction: Reflections on the effects of terrorism', in Martha Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism, Legitimacy and Power: The Consequences of Political Violence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), pp.1-37 (p. 2).

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as a challenge to the stability of the modern(-colonial) Westphalian system, implicated in whiteness.[58] Thus, and as noted by Gentry and Sjoberg, the terrorist actor is regularly used to 'exemplify disordered thinking or disordered politics'.[59] Terrorism is also often framed as the 'weapon of the weak', which further positions terrorist actors in opposition to the strong, rational, and legitimate state.[60] Terrorism constitutes the disordered and non-normative form of violence in contrast to the legitimate, ordered, and just violence perpetrated by the modern nation-state (such as *counter*terrorism). This is further tied to the inherent immorality attached to terrorism:[61] terrorist violence is seen as 'senseless' or 'mindless' violence,[62] 'desperate' violence,[63] as well as the form of violence that in Western societies constitutes the 'ultimate evil', being 'atrocious, mad, mindless' and unjustifiable.[64]

Importantly, this dominant construction of terrorism relies on the assumption that terrorism is mostly perpetrated by non-state actors that challenge the legitimate, Westphalian state. As Gentry further observes, an epistemic bias against non-state actors in IR scholarship prevails as a result of the popular 'Westphalian narrative'.[65] This narrative is the foundational idea of the primacy and legitimacy of sovereign states in IR scholarship, which leads to the 'hermeneutical injustice of denying power, credibility and ultimately legitimacy to nonstate actors'.[66] This automatically delegitimises violence perpetrated by non-state actors. This also makes them prone to be labelled as 'terrorist'. Sen further notes that this facilitates the delegitimisation of anti-colonial movements, which were and are often framed as 'terrorist'.[67] The fact that anti-apartheid activists were labelled as terrorists,[68] with Nelson Mandela only taken down from the United States' terrorism watchlist in 2007, is a case in point. Many other non-state, Indigenous, and anti-colonial revolts have been referred to as 'terrorism' by Europeans in the early 20th century.[69]

This primacy of the state, prevalent in IR scholarship, is also colonial. As noted above, the Westphalian state system as we know it today emerged at the same time as European colonial expansion. As Ahmed notes, the colonial project was integral to 'the constitution of the modernity of European nations'. The relationship to its colonies was an important part of building the identity of the modern state in Europe.[70] Thus, the primacy of states within IR scholarship is not only the primacy of states, it is the primacy of the modern(-colonial), Western, white state. This Westphalian system is also the modern-colonial system, which not only racialises and delegitimises non-state actors, or non-conforming religion as I have shown above, but also does so with non-Western states that do not conform to the modern-colonial ideal of a 'state'. This then explains why 'state terrorism', on the rare occasions where it is addressed, is usually only discussed when it pertains to the

[58] Caron Gentry, 'Gender and terrorism', in Simona Sharoni, Linda Steiner, Jennifer Pedersen, and Julia Welland (eds), *Handbook on Gender and War* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), pp. 146–69 (pp. 151–2).

[59] Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters and Whores* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p. 41.

[60] Gentry and Sjoberg, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, p. 122.

[61] Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 8; see also Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 34.

[62] Amanda Third, *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[63] Wilkinson, *Terrorism*, p. 15.

[64] Charles Townshend, Terrorism: A very short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.2. See also Third, *Gender and the Political*, p. 21.

[65] Gentry, 'Gender and terrorism', p. 146.

[66] Caron Gentry, 'Epistemic bias: Non-state actors and just war's legitimate authority', in Caron Gentry and Amy Eckert (eds), *The Future of Just War: New Critical Essays* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), pp. 17-29 (p. 21).

[67] Somdeep Sen, 'The colonial roots of counter-insurgencies in international politics', *International Affairs*, 98:1 (2022), pp. 209–23.

[68] Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 10.

[69] Phillip Deery, 'The terminology of terrorism: Malaya, 1948–52', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34:2 (2003), pp. 231–47; Amit Prakash, 'Colonial techniques in the imperial capital: The prefecture of police and the surveillance of North Africans in Paris, 1925 – circa 1970', *French Historical Studies*, 36:3 (2013), pp. 479–510.

[70] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 10.

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non-Western, 'developing', 'weak', or 'fragile' state.[71] These states are not perceived as having arrived at the same stage of modernity and development as the West has.[72]

In the dominant Western discourse, then, state terrorism is often used to describe violent and persecutory practices of communist or totalitarian states, i.e. states associated with 'eastern bloc' nations or the 'third world'.[73] This is at once 'distancing Western democratic regimes from the practice of terrorism and … enabling the construction of Western democracies as the victims of terrorism'.[74] 'Liberal democracies' (code for the modern state) are therefore constructed as the natural victim of terrorism and the natural *counter*terrorist.

This demonstrates an understanding of terrorism not just as an attack on the legitimate state but also as an attack on *modernity*,[75] one to which less developed, less modern states are naturally more susceptible. Terrorism scholars, such as Laqueur, for example, state that 'terrorists want to disrupt economic, social and political order'.[76] Terrorist actors are thereby positioned outside the 'formal structures of power within the societies they attack' and predominantly described as a mode of 'violent and *subaltern* resistance'.[77] As Hozic notes, the way terrorism is spectacularised in (Western) media and dominant discourse confirms state legitimacy and presents 'terrorism in such a way that it start[s] working for and not against society'.[78] Terrorism is consequently often described as targeting *modern*, Western democracies,[79] which can be seen as an attack on the modern-colonial order more specifically.

Thus, although not all terrorism – acknowledged or labelled as such – is obviously racialised (as occurring in the non-West or perpetrated by non-Western, racialised people), it is nonetheless racialised conceptually as an act of violence that is imagined as an attack on either the state, modernity, or that which is associated with it. Thus, explicitly anti-capitalist, communist, and left-wing groups or dissent, even when perpetrated by 'white' actors, have much more readily been labelled and studied as 'terrorism'[80] than right-wing, white supremacist, and Christian-inspired terrorism, which is seriously under-studied and rarely labelled as such in the first place.[81] The notorious Ku Klax Klan in the United States, for example, has evaded the label to this day and instead is listed as a domestic extremist group or 'hate group'.[82] These groups are (implicitly) system-affirming and not system-threatening and therefore do not readily fit into the racialised imagination of 'terrorism' as an attack on the state/modernity, which is also governed by white supremacy. Anti-capitalism and anarchism, on the other hand, constitute implicit threats to the modern(-colonial) system, which is built on capitalism.[83] Thus, the dominant discourse on and imagination of 'terrorism' continues to be a tool to uphold coloniality, sometimes more directly, other times indirectly, but almost

[71]CTS scholars have challenged Terrorism Studies' non-engagement with (especially Western) state terrorism, building on the work of earlier scholarship, such as William Perdue, *Terrorism and the State: A Critique of Domination through Fear* (New York: Praeger, 1989); George Alexander, *Western State Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); George Lopez and Michael Stohl, *The State as Terrorist: The Dynamics of Governmental Violence and Repression* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

[72]See e.g. Wilkinson, *Terrorism*, p. 21.

[73]Third, *Gender and the Political*, p. 84.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, p. 79.

[77]Third, *Gender and the Political*, p. 21, emphasis in original.

[78]Quoted in Amanda Third, 'Mediating the female terrorist: Patricia Hearst and the containment of the feminist terrorist threat in the United States in the 1970s', *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 39:3 (2014): pp. 150–75 (p. 158).

[79]Horowitz, 'The routinization', pp. 41–9; Wilkinson, *Terrorism*.

[80]Atiya Husain, 'Deracialization, dissent, and terrorism in the FBI's Most Wanted program', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 7:2 (2021), pp. 208–25 (p. 208).

[81]Zoltán Búzás and Anna Meier, 'Racism by designation: Making sense of Western states' nondesignation of white supremacists as terrorists', *Security Studies* (2023); Anna Meier, 'The idea of terror: Institutional reproduction in government responses to political violence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 64:3 (2020), pp. 499–509.

[82]Southern Poverty Law Center: available at: {https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/ku-klux-klan}.

[83]On the connection between capitalism and white supremacy, see Mignolo, *The Darker Side*, and Quijano, 'Colonialidad'.

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always to delegitimise groups or violence that threaten the global modern(-colonial) system, which is governed by the structures of white supremacy.

Contemporary counterterrorism practices as a continuation of colonial rule

If terrorism functions as a negative ideograph and defines what a society is not, it is only logical then that it will be primarily imagined as predominantly non-Western, and implicitly racialised. The racialisation of 'terrorism', as I demonstrated above, is already implied in its very conceptualisation as the ultimate evil and opposition to Western society (or the 'negative ideograph'). This imagination, logically, requires the Western state to be a *counter*terrorist. This is also reflected in mainstream terrorism research, which, as CTS scholars have pointed out, often provides justification for state policies.[84] Indeed, many terrorism scholars seem to view their role as 'counterterrorism by other means'.[85] This means that terrorism research itself needs to be interrogated for its negative bias towards the racialised 'terrorist' and positive bias towards the counterterrorist state. This conceptual racialisation of terrorism is reflected in the colonial logic underpinning many counterterrorism practices today.

A growing body of literature demonstrates how contemporary counterterrorism practices either reinstate racial hierarchies in Western societies, thereby constituting or resembling a form of neo-colonial violence, or indeed stem from colonial forms of governance and control that have previously been practised in the colonies to quell anti-colonial resistance before they have been brought back 'home'.[86] Sentas, for example, notes how contemporary Australian counterterrorism policies and laws are reminiscent of colonial forms of rule in the same country and target its 'racial' and Indigenous subjects.[87] As she further argues, counterterrorism can be understood as a 'state investment in the future of white supremacy' and a way to (legally) continue the violence of white supremacy.[88] Australia's colonial violence against its Indigenous people, i.e. indiscriminate killings, terrorising of whole Indigenous neighbourhoods, etc, is continued until today through mass incarcerations and surveillance and other regulations against its Indigenous as well as other non-white citizens in the name of counterterrorism laws. Meier further notes how contemporary counterterrorism practices in the United States have anti-Black origins (developed to suppress Black resistance to white supremacist violence) and continue to disproportionately target its Black citizens, thereby continuing the original function for which they were developed.[89]

International counterterrorism campaigns that have been carried out in the name of the Global War on Terror have also utilised methods and tactics that were first introduced in colonial contexts to fight anti-colonial resistance.[90] Other authors have further investigated the United States-led War on Terror in Afghanistan as a form of neo-colonial rule and invasion.[91] However, many post-colonial countries, too, use colonial forms of violence, inherited from their former colonisers,

[84]See e.g. Gunning and Jackson, 'What's so "religious"'.

[85]Schuurman, 'Topics in terrorism research', p. 2.

[86]Sunera Thobani, 'White wars: Western feminisms and the "war on terror"', *Feminist Theory*, 8:2 (2007), pp. 169–85 (p. 171); Alexander Dunlap, 'Counter-insurgency: Let's remember where prevention comes from and its implications', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 380–5; Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Vicki Sentas, 'Counter terrorism policing: Investing in the racial state', *Acrawsa E-Journal*, 2:1 (2006), pp. 1–16; Anna Meier, 'Terror as justice, justice as terror: Counterterrorism and anti-Black racism in the United States', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:1 (2022), p. 83–101; Husain, 'Deracialization, dissent, and terrorism'.

[87]Sentas, 'Counter terrorism policing'.

[88]Ibid., p. 2.

[89]Meier, 'Terror as justice'.

[90]Husain, 'Deracialization, dissent and terrorism'.

[91]See e.g. Anna Agathangelou and Lily H. M. Ling, 'Power, borders, security, wealth: Lessons of violence and desire from September 11', *International Studies Quarterly*, 48:3 (2004), pp. 517–38; Owens, *Economy of Force*.

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against their own population and under the guise of counterterrorism.[92] Methods of surveillance and restriction of movement as well as containment in Tunisia and Egypt, for example, which were first introduced by its colonial powers, now continue to be upheld by its rulers.[93] Thus, as Abu Bakare summarises: 'Counterterrorism practices occur under circumstances already existent, granted, and transmitted from a colonial past.'[94] Counterterrorism therefore is an 'issue of coloniality' if it is analysed as part of the 'systematising logic of colonialism' that continues to operate under the contemporary disguise of modernity.[95]

The Religious Terrorism Thesis

Whilst terrorism on its own already constitutes a racialised concept, explicitly referring to 'religious terrorism' constitutes a doubly racialised concept. It is system-threatening to modernity on two accounts. Consequently, 'religious terrorism' is constructed and imagined as incorrigible by default. The implications of this become clear from scholars' – seemingly logical and natural – suggestion of exceptional measures for counterterrorism efforts when it comes to 'religious' terrorism.[96] Portraying religious terrorists as more fanatical, irrational, and uncompromising appears to leave no choice but the suggestion of counterterrorism, which eliminates the group completely without considering negotiation or any root-cause approach.[97] As CTS scholar Tellidis so aptly observed, 'terrorism and violence more broadly generate distinct attention and security reflexes when linked to religion.'[98]

Richardson, for example, states that religious groups are far less open to compromise, and that they are therefore 'less susceptible to conventional responses like deterrence or negotiation.'[99] Hoffman states that 'traditional counterterrorism approaches and policies may not be relevant, much less effective, in the face of religious terrorism.'[100] Jones further argues that religious terrorists' sacred values '[transcend] any pragmatic or purely self-interested motivations.'[101] Their terrorism can therefore not be understood by conventional (rational) methods, and common counterterrorism measures are unlikely to be successful.[102] Enders and Sandler recommend more drastically that '[a] religious or amorphous terrorist group must be annihilated completely' if security is to be provided to all potential targets of it.[103] Contemporary counterterrorism practices, such as the United States-led War on Terror, demonstrate the exceptionality applied to terrorism considered to be 'religious' even more obviously and are well known to have disregarded liberal values, human rights, and other more measured approaches, usually considered befitting of liberal democracies and the modern nation-state more generally.

This narrative, positing the exceptionality of 'religious terrorism' despite a lack of evidence for its higher lethality, non-negotiability, or irrationality more generally, and the resulting suggestions and implications for harsher and exceptional counterterrorism practices, together constitute what

[92] Fatemah Alzubairi, *Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Anti-Terrorism Law in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Ahmed Abozaid, *Counterterrorism Strategies in Egypt: Permanent Exceptions in the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[93] Ibid.

[94] Amal Abu Bakare, 'Counterterrorism and race', *International Politics Reviews*, 8:1 (2020), pp. 79–99 (p. 83).

[95] Abu Bakare, 'Counterterrorism and race', p. 91.

[96] See Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 127.

[97] See e.g. Boaz Ganor, *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers* (London: Transaction, 2005), p. 25.

[98] Ioannis Tellidis, 'Religion and terrorism', in Richard Jackson (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 134-144 (p. 137).

[99] Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 92.

[100] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 127.

[101] James Jones, 'Sacred terror: The psychology of contemporary religious terrorism', in Andrew Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), pp. 293–303 (p. 299).

[102] Ibid., p. 299.

[103] Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, 'Is transnational terrorism becoming more threatening? A time series investigation', *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 44 (2000), pp. 307–32 (p. 330).

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I refer to here as the Religious Terrorism Thesis. However, the Religious Terrorism Thesis, as I have argued before, not only constitutes the dominant narrative on 'religious terrorism', it is also built on the colonial knowledge and imagination of 'religion' and 'terrorism', both of which facilitate the West's construction and self-identification as the counterterrorist. This construction then facilitates the continuation of colonial practices of control, governance, and elimination of racialised bodies.

Interestingly, despite the well-known obsession of terrorism scholars with defining terrorism or at least endlessly debating it, in the vast majority of cases absolutely no attempt at defining *religious* terrorism is made at all; instead, its meaning is taken for granted and assumed to be common sense, as it is based on an essentialist, and as I argue colonial and racial, understanding of religion in the first place. Thus, what can be observed in academic terrorism literature is that most scholars, instead of providing a definition of religious terrorism, seek to distinguish it from other, secular forms of terrorism by outlining some of their, supposedly, typical characteristics. In other words, they invoke the Religious Terrorism Thesis as proof for the Religious Terrorism Thesis. Religious terrorism is assumed to be more dangerous, irrational, lethal, and uncompromising than secular terrorism since it is common-sense knowledge that religion is prone to violence and fanaticism – especially when it is paired with the assumption that it is perpetrated by non-White actors who are assumed to be more susceptible to 'religion' to begin with.

David Rapoport, who is usually credited with introducing the scholarly rubric of 'religious terrorism' into Terrorism Studies, first referred to it as 'holy terror' or 'sacred terror' in his widely cited article 'Fear and trembling: Terrorism in three different religious traditions'.[104] He further labelled religious terrorism as the 'fourth wave' of terrorism, which emerged, or to be more precise *resurged*, in the 1980s, allegedly lasting until today and mainly represented by its Islamic manifestation.[105] The notion of a distinctively religious terrorism therefore became popular in the wake of his work and in response to the growth of Islamist movements after the Iranian revolution and the increase of suicide bombings in Lebanon in the 1980s.[106] It therefore pre-dated 9/11, although it subsequently increased exponentially. Although Rapoport has in many ways established the sub-category 'religious terrorism' within Terrorism Studies, he also never provides an actual definition of religious terrorism. Instead, he implies the commonsensical nature of 'religious terrorism' as something that has always existed and, in fact, can be observed throughout history as the earliest form of *terrorism* more generally. Religion for Rapoport, then, is the *historical basis* of terrorism.

Rapoport claims that the 'holy' terrorist is motivated by a transcendent purpose where a 'deity' provides the ends and means to the terror: 'The transcendent source of holy terror is its most critical distinguishing characteristic; the deity is perceived as being directly involved in the determination of ends and means.'[107] Hoffman[108] and Juergensmeyer[109] are among the most prominent scholars who expanded on the literature on religious terrorism in the 1990s after it was introduced by Rapoport. Religious terrorism is presented by them and other scholars as 'new' (but also ancient at the same time) as well as uniquely more lethal, brutal, non-negotiable, and less discriminate.[110]

However, like Rapoport, most of them either do not provide a definition for religious terrorism or provide one based on an uncritical and essentialist understanding of religion as 'common sense',

[104] This article is currently cited more than 900 times on Google Scholar: available at: {https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=fear+and+trembling+rapoport&btnG=} (accessed on 25 November 2022).

[105] David Rapoport, 'The four waves of terrorism', in Audrey Cronin, and James Ludes (eds), *Attacking Terrorism Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), pp. 46–74 (p. 61).

[106] Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 65.

[107] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 659.

[108] Hoffman, *Holy Terror*; Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

[109] Juergensmeyer, *Understanding the New Terrorism*.

[110] See Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, p. 127; Rapoport, 'The four waves'; Ranstorp, 'Terrorism'; Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*; Kaplan, 'Nothing is true'; Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 41; Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*; Juergensmeyer, 'Understanding the new terrorism'; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

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which erases its colonial origins and the function it fulfilled during the European project of colonial expansion. Instead, most scholars invoke the supposedly unique characteristics of 'religious terrorism' in lieu of a definition. Jessica Stern defines 'religious terrorism' as those acts of terrorism committed by actors who 'claim to be seeking religious goals' and further asserts that 'religious terrorist groups are more violent than their secular counterparts and probably more likely to use weapons of mass destruction.'[111]

Bruce Hoffman, one of the most prominent scholars on the 'new' religious terrorism, does make an attempt at defining it; according to him, religious terrorism is 'terrorism motivated either in part or whole by religious imperative, where violence regarded as a divine act of duty or sacramental act'; he then goes on to argue that it 'embraces markedly different means of legitimation and justification than that committed by secular terrorists, and these distinguishing features lead, in turn, to yet greater bloodshed and destruction.'[112] He further states that religious terrorism 'assumes a transcendental dimension.'[113] On another occasion, he provides a slightly more specific definition and states that he 'define[s] terrorism as "religious" when some liturgy, scripture or clerical authority is involved in sanctioning the violent act.'[114] However, Hoffman, like so many other authors, does not provide a clear definition of what he perceives to be 'religious' in the first place, and what qualifies as 'liturgy', 'scripture', and/or 'clerical authority'. Juergensmeyer in his book *Terror in the Mind of God* similarly provides such a lacking definition.[115] Religious terrorism constitutes 'public acts of destruction, committed without a clear military objective, that arouse a widespread sense of fear … for which religion has provided the motivation, the justification, the organization, and the world view'. Whilst none of these scholars have engaged with critical scholarship on 'religion', they all agree on the higher lethality and danger of terrorism that is considered 'religious'.

Another popular assumption among these scholars is that notions of sacrifice, ritual, and martyrdom are uniquely 'religious' and therefore predispose the religious terrorist to higher lethality and less restraint.[116] This is closely connected to the implication that suicide terrorism is a typical characteristic of religious terrorism.[117] This is further closely tied to the popular assumption that the religious terrorist perpetrates his actions for first and foremost 'symbolic' rather than strategic value, further implying its higher degree of irrationality.[118] Juergensmeyer refers to religious violence as 'performance violence', whose violence could better be analysed as 'symbol, ritual or sacred drama', rather than trying to understand it as strategic.[119] As Rapoport states, 'for the holy terrorist the primary audience is the deity' and not the public audience.[120] Jones's account of 'sacred terror' clearly illustrates the notion of irrationality that accompanies the concept of religious terrorism. According to him, it would be a 'mistake to seek to understand religiously motivated terrorists using the game theoretic or rational choice models so prominent in the social sciences'. Religious terrorists cannot be understood rationally, as their motivations stem from 'sacred values' which

[111] Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. xx.

[112] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 88, 83.

[113] Ibid., p. 88.

[114] Bruce Hoffman, 'Religion and terrorism: A conversation with Bruce Hoffman and Jeffrey Goldberg', in Michael Cromartie (ed.), *Religion, Culture and International Conflict: A Conversation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 29–53 (p. 30).

[115] Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, p. 5.

[116] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 83; see also Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Religion as a cause of terrorism', in Louise Richardson (ed.), *The Roots of Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 133–45 (p. 141); Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, p. 83; Ranstorp, *Terrorism*, p. 51.

[117] See Leonard Weinberg, 'Suicide terrorism for secular causes', in Amy Pedazhur (ed.), *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Global Martyrdom* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 108–21 (p. 108); Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 136. However, Robert Pape's work constitutes an important exception, which finds and argues that religion cannot be seen as the root cause for suicide terrorism: Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

[118] Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, p. 154.

[119] Juergensmeyer, 'Understanding the new terrorism', p. 160.

[120] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 660; see also Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*.

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are held for 'non-instrumental reasons' and their actions are therefore not 'motivated by rational or pragmatic calculus'.[121] Religious terrorism is therefore argued to be different (i.e. less rational) from secular terrorism as it has 'no real-world constituency'.[122]

The irrationality of religious terrorists is further implied through these scholars' popular assertion that the religious terrorist (unlike the secular one) is driven by cosmic, dualistic, and polarised worldviews.[123] Or as Cronin claims, the religious terrorist 'feel[s] engaged in a Manichaean struggle of good against evil'.[124] The assumption that religious terrorism is dictated by dualistic, unreasonable, and nihilistic worldviews further informs the popular assumption that this kind of terrorism is 'incorrigible', to use Paul Wilkinson's words.[125] This kind of terrorism is non-negotiable since the religious terrorist is willing to neither negotiate nor compromise, nor does he care about any other (earthly) constituency or audience than God and himself.[126] The religious terrorist has no tangible, attainable goals but rather transcendental ones. He is therefore unrestrained and prone to use weapons of mass destruction.[127]

Important to note here is that most of these scholars rarely, if ever, discuss Christian-inspired violence as implicated in this category. The colonial invention of 'religion' as a Euro- and Christian-centric concept, as discussed above, seems to shield Christian forms of violence from being implicated in 'bad religion' or the kind of racialised religion that is imagined as prone to violence/terrorism in the first place. Instead, most scholars seem to use the category 'religious terrorism' as code for 'Islamist terrorism'. Cronin, for example, outlines the central characteristics of 'religious terrorism' as more brutal, lethal, destructive, and non-negotiable and then goes on to refer to the 'jihad era' as showcasing this.[128] The only example she provides for this 'religious terrorism' is Al Qaeda. Sageman's work is another example of the dominant linking of 'religious terrorism' to Islam.[129] Almost all of his work is solely focusing on Al Qaeda and the rise of 'Salafi' jihadism. Ranstorp similarly almost exclusively discusses the menace of the *Muslim* religious terrorist, also focusing mainly on Al Qaeda and jihadism.[130] Laqueuer uses almost exclusively Islamic cases of terrorist groups or acts. The other examples he uses are still non-Christian and non-Western.[131] Whilst Hoffman, Juergensmeyer, and Rapoport also draw on other examples than just Islamic ones for 'religious terrorism', it is no surprise that the majority of terrorism scholars discussing 'religious terrorism' see it as code for 'Islamist terrorism': although Rapoport, as the founder of the category 'religious terrorism', also drew on other examples, he claimed that Islam is 'at the heart' of the category 'religious terrorism'.[132] Thus, even Critical Terrorism scholars who have spearheaded critique of the dominant discourse on 'religious terrorism' often and involuntarily end up reproducing this connection between Islam and terrorism.[133]

[121] Jones, 'Sacred terror', p. 299.

[122] Münkler, cited in Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, p. 94.

[123] Juergensmeyer, 'Religion as a cause of terrorism', p. 141; Ranstorp, 'Terrorism', p. 52; Jones, 'Sacred terror', p. 293; Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 92.

[124] Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 41.

[125] Wilkinson, *Terrorism*, p. 4.

[126] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Cronin, 'Behind the curve'; Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*; Jerrold Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to al-Qaeda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 240.

[127] Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. xxii; Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 44; Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist*, p. 24.

[128] Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 41.

[129] Sageman, *Understanding Terror*.

[130] Ranstorp, 'Terrorism'.

[131] Laqueuer, *The New Terrorism*, pp. 140–55.

[132] Rapoport, 'The four waves'.

[133] Rabea Khan, 'Race, coloniality and the post 9/11 counter-discourse: Critical Terrorism Studies and the reproduction of the Islam-terrorism discourse', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 498–501.

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'Ancient prototypes': Religious terrorism as regress from modernity

As noted above, Rapoport's understanding of 'religion' is typically essentialist, stemming from the Christian-centric conception of 'religion' in colonial-modernity. This is further evidenced by his discussion of the ancient 'prototypes' of religious terrorism, which all constitute non-Western and 'Oriental' examples. These prototypes, which Rapoport identifies as the Jewish 'Sicarii'/Zealots, the Hindu 'Thugs', and the Ismaili Shia sect, the 'Assassins', are one of the most important building blocks of Rapoport's account of religious terrorism, which is repeatedly cited among both scholars and policymakers to this day. Rapoport refers to the Zealots, Thugs, and Assassins as 'precursors' of religious terrorism to demonstrate the inherent (causal) link between religion and terrorism. As Rapoport further states, 'despite a primitive technology, each [group] developed much more durable and destructive organizations than has any modern secular group'.[134] Important to note here is that Rapoport's account of the Thugs clearly draws from colonial records, which he emphasises in multiple places of his article, sometimes quoting colonial administrators' accounts of the Thugs at full length.[135] But the accounts of the Jewish Sicarii and the Ismailian Assassins have also been refuted by historians as inaccurate.[136] However, despite the fact that Rapoport's prototype-narrative is deeply colonial and based on weak scholarly foundations and evidence, it has become an unquestioned and repeatedly recycled narrative.[137]

According to this popular account of the ancient prototypes, the Zealots, Assassins, and Thugs constituted independent groups who conducted violence for religious purposes. The Thugs, according to the popular, Western narrative, were a Hindu sect of travellers who killed innocent strangers on the road by strangling their victims, simply for the pleasure of the Hindu goddess Kali, the goddess of 'terror and destruction'. Apparently, they had no political reason or cause for their actions that they wanted to be known to the wider public, and they killed their victims clandestinely.[138] The Assassins were a Muslim, millenarian, Persian Shia sect who, unlike the Thugs, did want political attention and change as a result of their actions. Rapoport holds that 'terror in Islam, therefore, has an extra dimension not present in Hinduism'.[139] The Assassins killed their victims by stabbing them in open places where publicity was ensured, and their subsequent capture was welcomed, which, as Rapoport suggests, further showcases Islam's love of martyrdom. The Zealots, a Jewish group who also killed with the dagger, sought to inspire uprisings against Roman rule and similarly killed in open places to ensure publicity and motivate revolts.[140]

Not surprisingly, these groups, so commonly used as prime examples for religious terrorism, are all 'Oriental', with the Thugs originating in what is today India and the Assassins and Zealots of Persian and Middle Eastern origin. They work so well as examples for the early forms of religious terrorism because their places of origin are already part of a racist and colonial imagination of the Orient and more generally the non-West as a place susceptible to fanaticism and the 'grip of religion'.[141] The cases themselves do not have strong scholarly grounding either. As Tickell points

[134] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 658.

[135] Ibid., pp. 660–4.

[136] David Cook,'Ismaili assassins as early terrorists?', in Carola Dietze and Claudia Verhoeven (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 89–107; Joseph McQuade, *A Genealogy of Terrorism: Colonial Law and the Origins of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Kim Wagner, '"Thugs and assassins": "New terrorism" and the resurrection of colonial knowledge', in Carola Dietze and Claudia Verhoeven (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp.127-147; Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[137] See Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*; Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*; Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Cronin, 'Behind the curve'; Juergensmeyer, 'Understanding the new terrorism'; Ranstorp, *Terrorism*; Kaplan, 'Nothing is true'.

[138] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 664.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid.

[141] See also Masuzama, *The Invention of World Religions*, discussing how the non-West has been constructed as susceptible to the 'grip of religion'.

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out, historic and colonial records that have described the Thugs as religious fanatics are questionable and their credibility not established.[142] Indeed, some colonial accounts note the prosecution of both Muslim and Hindu Thugs, which brings into question the dominant narrative of the Thugs as a caste organisation which was killing for no other purpose but devotion to the Hindu goddess Kali.[143] This is further supported by Wagner, who criticises how popular contemporary accounts of the Indian Thugs are derived from colonial records: 'Similar to witchcraft in Early Modern Europe, the only sources available to historians examining the "Thugs" of early nineteenth-century India are those produced by the very authorities who persecuted them.'[144] McQuade's excellent critique of Rapoport's colonial account further elaborates on how this narrative was not only convenient for colonial administrators but also rooted in the colonial imagination of Indian religion: 'The notion that thuggee constituted a religious phenomenon fit well with British colonial perceptions of Indians as an inherently superstitious people held in the thrall of an exotic and barbaric religion.'[145]

Rapoport's colonial bias further becomes clear from his commentary regarding the differences among those prototypes. According to Rapoport, the Hindu Thugs were the least comprehensible terrorists, as they had 'no cause that they wanted others to appreciate'.[146] Instead, their violence was allegedly non-political and symbolic only. They killed for 'obscure religious reasons' alone.[147] As Rapoport further explains, the Islamic Assassins' cause was more comprehensible, but the Jewish Zealots were especially 'understandable' to some degree because they sought national liberation as one of their major goals.[148] The Thugs, however, 'did things that seem incongruous with our conception of how "good" terrorists should behave'.[149] Good terrorists, it seems, are supposed to fight for something understandable, such as national liberation. This, I argue, would constitute an indirectly system-affirming goal: it supports the Western, modern-colonial imagination of nationalism as the principal element defining the modern era and therefore advance and progress.[150] This is linked to the Westphalian primacy of the state dominating the study of IR as discussed further above.

Rapoport's reliance on and presentation of these three cases is deeply flawed and embarrassingly non-scientific. Yet these cases remain unquestioned and reiterated by almost every terrorism scholar writing on religious terrorism within (mainstream) Terrorism Studies. The scholars, besides Rapoport, who can best be described as the supporting pillars of the dominant discourse on religious terrorism include Hoffman, Cronin, Laqueur, and Kaplan. Bruce Hoffman, who is today known as a world-leading expert on terrorism and counterterrorism, is one of the most prominent scholars who perpetuates the Religious Terrorism Thesis. As he claims, the perpetrators of religious terrorism are 'unconstrained by … political, moral, or practical constraints'.[151] Not only do statements such as these have clear, even if unspoken, implications for counterterrorism, they also draw on unsubstantiated evidence. In this case, for example, Hoffman evidences his remarks about religious terrorists' lack of restraint with a reference to Rapoport's example of the Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots. Many other scholars have done the same and unquestionably accepted Rapoport's account on the Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots as established fact and as proof for the

[142] Alex Tickell, 'Excavating histories of terror: Thugs, sovereignty, and the colonial sublime', in Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (eds), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 177–202 (p. 181).

[143] Ibid., p. 192.

[144] See Wagner, 'Thugs and assassins', p. 1; Wagner further notes how some records clearly show that captured Thugs emphasised the pragmatic rationale behind their killings as deriving from a lack of options and the need to ensure their own survival, rather than religious fanaticism.

[145] McQuade, *A Genealogy of Terrorism*.

[146] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 660.

[147] Ibid., p. 662.

[148] Ibid., p. 660.

[149] Ibid., p. 660.

[150] To kill for God, as Cavanaugh notes, is not acceptable in the modern Western imagination, whilst to die for one's country and nation is honourable and laudable.

[151] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 88.

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Religious Terrorism Thesis they perpetuate on this basis. As becomes even clearer in the next section, the Assassins, Thugs, and Zealots trope constitutes a main pillar of the (colonial) discourse on 'religious terrorism', especially within Terrorism Studies.

Religion as the natural and historical basis for terrorism

Interestingly, the ancient prototype trope often gets cited as not just the oldest example of 'religious terrorism' but also as an example for the oldest forms of *terrorism* more generally. As I have indicated above, the Religious Terrorism Thesis is a product of the colonial invention of religion; however, it is also reinforcing the colonial logic inherent to discourses on 'terrorism' more generally. It further shows that 'terrorism' needs to be interrogated for the colonial logic that is perpetuated in the discourses surrounding it. This starts with the 'origin story' of terrorism. Rapoport himself in his essay draws on the examples of these three prototypes to illustrate the 'ancient lineage of terrorism'.[152] Notable here is that he speaks of terrorism more generally and not necessarily 'religious' terrorism. Cronin similarly refers to the Zealots, Assassins, and Thugs to claim that 'terrorism is as old as human history'.[153] She refers to them more specifically to demonstrate the 'deep roots' of contemporary terrorism (which most terrorism scholars identify as mainly religious, most clearly exemplified by the events of 9/11). Kaplan similarly refers to the trope of the Zealots, Assassins, and Thugs in a recent article where he argues that 'violence is inherent to all religions' and then goes on to imply that religious terrorism is the oldest form of terrorism more generally.[154] Hoffman more indirectly supports this with the cliché of noting that 'terrorism and religion share a long history'.[155] Neuman, also referring to the Assassins, Zealots, and Thugs trope, claims that the 'oldest instances of terrorism can be attributed to groups or individuals claiming to act in the name of faith'.[156] Richardson more specifically notes that the religious Zealots and Assassins are the 'historical precursors' of suicide terrorism more generally.[157] Laqueur implies the same with reference to the Assassins more specifically.[158]

Drawing on the alleged long history of religious terrorism further and conveniently relieves scholars from having to problematise, let alone define, 'religion', given that its nature and propensity to violence and terrorism is assumed to be a given and proven by history. It further functions to erase its coloniality. It signifies the regress inherent to modern terrorism, especially the kind that is deemed 'religious'. As Neuman, commenting on the rise of religious terrorism, states, 'one would expect globalisation to promote more enlightened, more secular and more rational attitudes and ideologies, but instead we see a rise in seemingly medieval ideas"[159] Thus, the 'new' terrorism of today (which apparently is predominantly religious) is also 'old' and actually constitutes a *regress from modernity* and signifies the failure of modernity especially in non-Western (less 'developed') contexts.[160] This logic is also illustrated by Rapoport's remarks, arguing that the contemporary, sacred terrorist finds his 'rationale in the past', in divine revelations from the past, sanctifying their violence.[161] Hoffman refers to religious terrorism as an 'ancient breed adversary',[162] and Ranstorp further claims that the 'resort to terrorism by religious imperative … [is] deeply embedded in the history and evolution of the faiths'.[163]

[152] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 659.
[153] Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 34.
[154] Kaplan, 'Nothing is true', p. 1073.
[155] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 84.
[156] Neuman, *Old and New Terrorism*, p. 83.
[157] Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 136.
[158] Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, p. 140.
[159] Neuman, *Old and New Terrorism*, p. 82.
[160] See also Cronin, 'Behind the curve', p. 35.
[161] Rapoport, 'Fear and trembling', p. 674.
[162] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 129.
[163] Ranstorp, 'Terrorism', p. 62.

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The racial implication of connecting religious terrorism to the past and its contemporary forms as desperate responses to the superior processes of secular advancement and globalisation further becomes clear from the example provided by Munroe and Moghaddam, who, writing on the connection between religion and terrorism, argue that religion needs to be seen as a major cause for terrorism as it has repeatedly resurfaced in 'desperate' societies.[164] They use the case of Indigenous Americans during the 'American Indian Wars' in 1865–91 to illustrate how Indigenous Americans, as a result of the threat of extinction due to the westward-moving white settlers, 'clung fast to religion' and responded with violence, best understood as terrorism. Thus, they argue that due to desperation and the fear of loss of identity, Indigenous Americans became more religious and transformed some of their peace rituals into war rituals ultimately resorting to terrorism.[165] In other words, Munroe and Moghaddam imply that Indigenous American resistance to setter colonialism (which included colonial genocide) constituted a form of 'religious terrorism'. This deeply problematic argument does many things at once: it perpetuates the colonial ascription of 'religion' to 'tribal' and 'native' peoples where the colonial concept of 'religion' did not pre-exist in society; it also shows how the Religious Terrorism Thesis functions to justify and rationalise counterterrorism perpetrated against minorities and marginalised or, in this case, colonised communities. Although Munroe and Moghaddam do not explicitly justify settler colonialism, their rationalisation and language used for explaining Indigenous American behaviour through the assigning of 'religiosity' and 'terrorism' are likely to provide the grounds for exactly this. Thus, the assigning of both labels 'religion' and 'terrorism' to Indigenous Americans in this case is colonial and harmful and, as I argue, especially so in combination, invoking the Religious Terrorism Thesis.[166]

Other scholars contribute to this line of argument. The theme of 'desperation' of marginalised communities as a cause for their (religiously) terrorist actions is commonplace. A popular claim in the dominant academic literature on terrorism is that religious terrorism's resurgence can be explained by desperation and identity crises of, especially non-Western, people who failed to benefit from globalisation (and advancement) the way other (more advanced) civilisations, such as the West, have.[167] Rapoport's foundational article already provides this narrative, and it is further reiterated by the most prominent terrorism scholars. Ranstorp for example, explains that globalisation has led to an increased sense of 'fragility, instability, and unpredictability' among religious extremist groups.[168] This further serves to make the racial and colonial implication that non-Western people are more susceptible to the grip of religion and less advanced, therefore struggling to keep up with Western-led advancement.

This narrative, dominant in mainstream Terrorism Studies and IR literature more generally, ties the Religious Terrorism Thesis to the 'new terrorism' thesis. The 'new' terrorist, it is claimed by the most prominent terrorism scholars, is mainly religious (and mainly Muslim). Thus, whilst the new terrorism, or the fourth wave as Rapoport referred to it, is mainly 'jihadist' in character, hence 'religious', it is also at the same time a resurgence of 'old'/ancient terrorism, the terrorism for which religion has historically always served as the basis. It therefore seems that we have come full circle.

[164] Amanda Munroe and Fathali Moghaddam, 'Is religious extremism a major cause of terrorism? Yes: Religious extremism as a major cause of terrorism', in Richard Jackson and Samuel Sinclair (eds), *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 121–7 (p. 126).

[165] Ibid., p. 126.

[166] As Schotten has further argued, the settler-colonial labelling of Indigenous peoples in the Americas as 'savage' has today been replaced by the term 'terrorism' in the US, which is fulfilling a similar if not the same racialising function for Muslims today as 'the savage' used by settler colonisers against Indigenous peoples previously. With their argument, outlined above, Munroe and Moghaddam illustrate very explicitly how, despite the fact that the term 'terrorism' was not used then, it was *imagined* as such. See C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[167] Cronin, 'Behind the curve'; Neuman, *Old and New Terrorism*, p. 85; Ranstorp, 'Terrorism', p. 47.

[168] Ibid., p. 45.

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When we refer to terrorism today, religion is usually implied either directly or indirectly. When it is not implied, it is imagined nonetheless. The images the term 'terrorism' conjures up today are those of Muslim fanatics, driven by religious zeal. This, as I have argued in this article, further implies that religion is inscribed on the idea of terrorism; historically, in the public imaginary, and in scholarship more generally.

Conclusion

Although the notion of an explicitly 'religious terrorism' might be a relatively recent category, the colonial knowledge and imagination it is built on and which have produced it as a category that is uniquely dangerous, irrational, lethal, and evil (the ideas summarised within what I call the Religious Terrorism Thesis) date back much further. It is the same knowledge and imagination that have been integral to the project of modernity/coloniality, a project that continues to be dependent on the construction of a racialised other and the criminalisation of their resistance to the modern-colonial system and project. Categories such as 'religion' and 'terrorism', which have been constructed and used as tools that served a colonial purpose, continue to be instrumental in upholding this project. As demonstrated in this article, colonial ideas about 'religious', non-state, and violent Indigenous, non-Western people constitute the pillar upon which the rubric 'religious terrorism' has been built within Terrorism Studies specifically and International Relations more generally.

The Religious Terrorism Thesis, then, is far more than just the way 'religious terrorism' has been synthesised in the dominant academic literature. Instead, it comprises the more deep-seated racialised and colonial ideas about 'religion' and its inherent connection to violence. It is therefore not just relevant as an academic concept, useful to describe how mainstream Terrorism Studies has framed 'religious terrorism'. Instead, the Religious Terrorism Thesis refers to the colonial knowledge that has produced it and its consequently self-fulfilling nature. It refers to the assumptions that are behind it and have produced it as the ultimate evil in contemporary (Western) society, functioning as a way to confirm this society's self-identity by negation. It indicates how the ideas and colonial assumptions this thesis sits on precede the discipline of Terrorism Studies and the introduction of 'religious terrorism' as a distinct category and are applicable beyond it as well. It further indicates how even 'secular', or not explicitly 'religious', terrorism is often read through the colonial imaginary of terrorism's almost natural connection to religion or religious-like qualities.

Since the Religious Terrorism Thesis works for and not against Western society, by providing that against which Western society defines itself against, it then naturally and by design works *against* its minoritised and racialised citizens. These citizens who, having been othered, marginalised, and minoritised, have also historically provided the foil against which the West defines itself and confirms its own self-identity are further subject to being assumed prone to, implicated in, or susceptible to 'religion' as well as 'terrorism'.

Finally, the purpose of this article is not to condone or trivialise acts, labelled as 'religious terrorism' today. Instead, it is to demonstrate why the concept of terrorism, and especially so religious terrorism, cannot ever act as an objective or 'neutral' signifier of a certain form of political violence, however horrendous and condemnable some of the acts thus labelled are. Whilst some of the most recent and brutal attacks perpetrated by terrorists considered to be 'religious' are in no way justifiable, labelling them as such does not neutrally describe their acts or motivations but rather racialises both in opposition to a Western, white, modern-colonial state and society, serving as another way to affirm Western self-identity. (Settler-)colonial genocidal acts and far-right extremist and/or white supremacist violence on the same scale, however, do not do so. The resistance to label these as terrorism, which is a category signifying system-threats and which functions for Western society, reflects this. White supremacist violence and actors are system-affirming, i.e. affirming the global structures of white supremacy central to the project of colonial-modernity. They are therefore unlikely to be interpreted as threats to the states, which see themselves in the role of the

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counterterrorist,[169] a role which I argue facilitates neo-colonial forms of governance and control over the state's own racialised and minoritised citizens.

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[169] See also Meier, 'Terror as justice'.

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