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Religious radicalization: social appraisals and finding radical redemption in extreme beliefs

Beatrice A de Graaf¹ and Kees van den Bos²

In this article, we review the psychology of religion and radicalization. In doing so, we note that both macro-level approaches (that study structural conditions in society) and micro-level approaches (that focus on psychological coping and personal appraisal of individual conditions) fail to adequately explain radical behavior of members of extreme religious groups. Instead, we propose that meso-level approaches best explain religious radicalization. These meso-level approaches explain how members of extreme religious groups appraise societal conditions and find redemption in radical beliefs. In particular, we argue for a more in-depth examination of the historical and societal contexts in which various radicalization processes take place and narratives of radical redemption hold sway.

Addresses

¹ Department for History and Art History, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

² Department of Psychology and School of Law, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: van den Bos, Kees ()

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Introduction

In March 2019, terror erupted in the peaceful and friendly city we live and work in. Four people were killed in the end and six others were injured as the result of a mass shooting on a tram in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The city went in lockdown and a manhunt was initiated, resulting in the capture and arrest of the perpetrator, Gökmen Tanis.

As it turned out, the 37-years-old Tanis, a Turkish migrant, had a history of violence and alcohol abuse. He had been intermittently addicted to hard drugs. In the periods between his addictions he focused on his Islamic faith. Witnesses heard him saying ‘Allahu akbar’ while shooting at innocent people taking the tram or riding their cars in the neighborhood. Tanis fled the scene

of the mass shooting in a hijacked car. A letter that was found later in the car revealed his terrorist motivations. The letter read: “I am doing this for my religion. You guys are killing Muslims and want to take my religion away from me. You will not succeed in that. Allah is great.” Tanis committed his attack on the Monday after the weekend when Brenton Tarrant killed 51 Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tanis indicated in court that this has been an important trigger for his acts. He was convicted of murder with terrorist intent and sentenced to life in prison.

As private persons we were shocked to see our friendly city to be brutalized by the shooting. We mourned the deaths, contemplated about the injured, and worried about our children and other people living and working in our city. As scientific researchers, we wondered about the radicalization process the perpetrator may have gone through. Indeed, the Utrecht shooting is a good example, we think, showcasing a mixture of different variables leading up to terrible acts. In the current paper, we are interested in the role that various forms of religion may play in radicalization into violent extremism and terrorism.

Macro-level approaches: structural factors in society

Theories on religion and radicalization into violent extremism and terrorism mostly focus on a ‘macro-level’ of analysis. These theories try to explain and map processes of radicalization by means of structural factors in society, zooming in on variables such as the occurrence of poverty, discrimination, and exclusion in a given state of society, a context of war, or failed states. Likewise, lack of a social safety net, obstacles for minorities to enter into higher education, or enjoy their political rights are considered to be elements that create fertile breeding grounds for radicalization processes [1–3]. National culture theory, for example, provides insight into how collective cultures promote the tendency to form ingroups and outgroups in a society, and how individualistic cultures actually generate violence within their own group [4,5]. Within this type of radicalization theories, some studies foreground religion — operationalized in terms of religious representation, religious narratives, or the existence of apocalyptic creeds — as ‘fuel’ for radical groups. Juergensmeyer [6•] is the most recent and influential exponent of this type of analyses.

Macro-level analyses regarding radicalization and terrorism are defined as ‘root cause theories’ [7]. Yet, while appropriating religion as root cause for radicalization, these theories oftentimes fail to operationalize and explain the transition from ‘absolute’ conditions in society to actual precipitating factors [8]. Instead of taking the factual state of social or economic oppression, or the concrete level of adherents to a specific religious group or sect as indicative or prospective to outbursts of radical violence, numerous studies have demonstrated that ‘meso-level’ mechanisms of relative deprivation, risky shift, or cognitive dissonance as induced by specific radical groups are more conducive to explain the emergence of violent radicalization (see, e.g. Refs. [9*,10,11*]). Macro-level factors clearly need a chain of translation and interpretation in order to be ‘weaponized’, indicating that analytically, prospective theories on radicalization should draw from societal-psychological insights rather than from economical, religious or historical theories (e.g. Ref. [12*]).

In short, ‘mass-level theories’ have been around since the 1980s and have the oldest papers in tying religion to radicalization. As a result, they have put religion center stage in explaining why radicalization and terrorism emerge in specific times and spaces (see also Refs. [13,14]). Moreover, they can be very useful for mapping trends and patterns in radicalization in the longer term, enabling transnational comparisons, especially when they succeed in identifying religious narratives, tropes and discourses and their changes, continuities and agenda-setting force over the course of time. Recent approaches on the macrolevel, as developed by religious studies, historical or political science scholars have done exactly that: they convincingly traced the changing discourse on martyrdom, miracles, eschatology, and sacred values in jihadist literature, for example (see Refs. [15–17]).

Micro-level approaches: personal appraisal and coping

Yet, in order to properly understand processes underlying and causal relations between religion and radicalization, a closer and more focused look on individual psychological factors is necessary. Here, recent articles work hard to offer a convincing framework to operationalize the religious factor in radicalization. The most recent framework, which captures religion in quite a sophisticated manner, can be encountered in the body of psychological coping literature. Here, rather than religious beliefs as individual difference variables, religious coping strategies and religious appraisals are typically emphasized (see Ref. [18]).

In trying to identify the role of religion in processes of radicalization, these studies look at how specific aspects of religion relate to individual coping processes, and examine the relation between specific religious beliefs and capacities of individual appraisals and coping. Such

relations require investigations into an individual’s psychological make-up, resulting in a micro-level approach to the analysis of radicalization and terrorism. Taylor Newton and McIntosh [19] proposed that religious beliefs act as a cognitive schema, shaping cognitive processes including the perception of stress through something called a ‘transactional model’. This model views cognitive appraisals as the intermediaries between beliefs and coping strategies [20]. For example, belief in a just and benevolent God correlates with surrendering control to God, which in turn leads to less psychological distress when coping with uncontrollable negative events [21].

In recent years, this approach has been tested in the field of radicalization (for a critical review, see Ref. [22]). Van Stekelenburg [23], for example, describes radicalization as a process towards increasing acceptance of violence which explains extremist behavior and exclusion of other groups [12*,24]. In this process, radical groups may begin to reinterpret anger-eliciting situations and reappraise them from a position of moral superiority [23]. They then make the attribution that the out-group is morally inferior and needs to be eliminated, based on a reappraisal fueled by the emotion of contempt. Here, emotion transformation theory aligns with religious beliefs regarding in and out group identities (see also Ref. [25]).

Importantly, personal appraisal and individual coping strategies can only be understood meaningfully if they are combined with theories on social identity mechanisms and group processes. After all, research has demonstrated convincingly how radicalization is influenced by personal and existential feelings of uncertainty, injustice, attitudes as moral outrage, guilt and narcissism, but these feelings need to be transformed into injustice frames, religious beliefs and narratives in order to trigger behavior, especially among those who engage in group-related forms of extremist and terrorist behavior (see, e.g. Ref. [26]).

Towards a meso-level analysis: social appraisals and radical redemption as social coping mechanism

Finding acceptance in religious groups provides protection from perceived threat and buffering of social exclusion [27*]. Furthermore, perceived collective support for one’s valued identity and beliefs can motivate group members in developing aggressive behavior against other people. Research indicates strong associations between radicalized religious beliefs and ideologies and violent behaviors, suggesting that individual coping and appraisal mechanisms, emotions and sentiments needs narrative carriers — such as social discourses of threat, (in)justice, salvation and significance — in order to be mobilized into radicalization (see, e.g. Refs. [11*,28,29]). These processes often take place in groups or other social contexts. This brings us to a meso-level approach that ties an

individual's need for coping with uncertainty to collective and social supply of ideological and religious beliefs.

Social psychological research has demonstrated how people's motivation and cognition assists them in goal attainment. For example, Kruglanski's goal systems theory has established a threefold interface between cognition, motivation and action. Within this goal systems approach, the quest for significance is a major explanatory factor in understanding processes of radicalization. With respect to religious radicalization, goal attainment can be such a strong mobilizing factor within specific religious groups that patterns of goal shielding enable them to ignore all other considerations of moderation, empathy or civil obedience [30]. Furthermore, when people are blocked in attaining their goals, huge frustrations and violent emotions or even extreme behavior will be elicited [31,32], as also explained through the appraisal and coping theories mentioned above.

Yet, as promising as these meso-level theories may be, in addressing the *mechanisms* of individual quests for significance and coping and appraisal, these approaches still leave unanswered the question of the content of the goals and beliefs that serve to provide radicals their quest. More research is, therefore, necessary to combine findings on social psychological mechanisms, emotions, cognitions and motivations with a better understanding of the specific overarching narratives, discourses, and instances of radical content.

Importantly, research by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence [33] studies motives for joining ISIS. Results indicate that for many radicalizing youngsters and foreign fighters who went to join the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, seeking redemption in extremist religious beliefs and terrorist religious groups was an important motive reported.

In line with McAdams [34**] research on 'the redemptive self', we can indeed identify narratives of redemption in stories convicted terrorists tell themselves and each other. By framing perceived injustices in a more eschatological framework of an eternal battle between good and evil, the radical may insert his own mundane life into this new virtual (religious) reality, thereby supercharging his own agency. Within a context of religious views on sin, redemption and salvation, as encountered in almost all major world religions, acts of violence, of martyrdom and warfare may be filled with higher, salvific and redemptive meaning.

Furthermore, the qualitative content of radical redemption motives functions as a cultural worldview that shapes both cognitions and appraisals of certain stressful situations, steers emotions in a specific direction, and facilitate mobilization towards radical and violent behavior (see, e.

g. Refs. [11*,35–37]). This fits with the observation that, radical violence may function as a buffer for the realization that life is unjust and that fundamental situations of injustice and inequality will continue to exist if you do not take arms against that injustice. In their struggle against injustice and oppression, radicalizing people will even more turn to actions to confirm their cultural worldviews, including violent actions.

Similarly, Becker [38,39**,40] offered a psychodynamic explanation of specific cultural worldviews that help to make sense of existential uncertainties and fears. Symbolic interactionism and social behaviorists have indeed mapped the rituals and symbols that were specifically geared towards helping people overcoming their crises [41,42]. Others have already pointed to the specific symbols, discourse and action repertoires developed by terrorists and radicals to give vent to feelings of injustice, uncertainty, threat and contempt [43–45].

Conclusion: the importance of religion in radicalization processes

Cavanaugh [14] argued convincingly that it is difficult to distinguish between sacred and religious violence. Furthermore, empirical research cannot always delineate religious beliefs in tight ways. Related to this, many social psychologists feel that emotional states can be operationalized in experimental studies, but that religious beliefs can be difficult to examine in meaningful ways in such experiments. Notwithstanding the possible difficulties of operationalizing religious beliefs in empirical research, this should not lead researchers of the psychology of radicalization to shy away from incorporating religion in their empirical studies and conceptual treatments of radicalization and the association with religious movements and acts of extreme violence.

Dawson [46] noted correctly that radicalization processes cannot be fully understood by only pointing to socio-economic or personal factors. He calls, therefore, for more dialogue on the role of apocalyptic belief systems and charismatic forms of authority and their possible significance. We concur. We also agree with Dawson's [47] critique of the inclination by most of the leading researchers in the field to treat religion as a secondary factor in instigating terrorist activity, and less important than various social, economic, political, and psychological considerations.

We conclude this short review on religious radicalization by arguing, with Dawson, that specific religious or sacred beliefs — as much contested, open, and fluctuating as they may be — should be taken seriously as a prime motivator and should receive more attention in both qualitative and quantitative studies by social psychologists and other researchers. When studying radicalization so that we can prevent or fight it, we need to pay explicit

attention to the historical and societal contexts in which concrete instances of radicalization take place — existing narratives and discourses included. The historical and societal contexts of these processes of interaction and radicalization matter [48]. Indeed, key publications have paid ample attention to the historical context of radicalization processes and their narratives (see, e.g. Refs. [9,28,49,50]). Furthermore, Gergen [51,52] has rightfully criticized social psychology as neglecting the historical processes that are relevant to understand what people believe, feel, and do in social contexts. Thus, we hope that the current contribution may spur the psychology of religious radicalization into a more in-depth examination of the historical and societal contexts in which various radicalization processes take place and narratives of radical redemption hold sway.

Author statement

BAdG and KvdB conceptualized the paper together. BAdG wrote the first draft and did most of the conceptualization. KvdB edited and revised the paper. KvdB serves as corresponding author.

Conflicts of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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