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## Religions, terrorism and war

1. “Terrorism as a war”: a wrong qualification – 2. “Terrorism as a war”: a dangerous qualification – 3. A world civil war – 4. The personal drive to terrorism – 5. Context and strategies – 6. Interreligious dialogue – 7. Conclusion

The public opinion and specialists are all well aware now of the new presence of religion on the international scene<sup>1</sup>. Religion is a cultural background which motivates people from India to Islamic countries and to the United States of America. This is a soft power which could be stronger than any hard power. Thus, after Vatican II, a new version of soft power was practiced by the Church, that of influence and awareness.

But, since the beginning of this new millennium, many things have changed, terrorism has grown all over the world<sup>2</sup>. It happens in Europe, in the Middle East, in Africa, even in the United States with the attack in San Bernardino<sup>3</sup>. A new framework of analysis has become necessary to understand this new type of violence. Can it be considered as a war and what kind of war? How do you answer this new threat? The attacks have been so frequent these years that the expression “third world war” has been used in various circumstances<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> M.D. TOFT, D. PHILPOTT, T.S. SHAH, *Gods' century. Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, New York 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Among the many definitions of terrorism, we could define an act of terrorism as the will to create terror.

<sup>3</sup> December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Concept Paper for the Conference on “Religion and Diplomacy: a new strategic pillar for a comprehensive Mediterranean dialogue”, Rome, Farnesina, Thursday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, by Fabio Petito, 2016.

This transformation of international relations poses a new question for all religions, since they are integrated in this type of conflict<sup>5</sup>, simply by the fact that many authors of terrorist acts are claiming their religious belonging. How could the collaboration of religions help to deal with that phenomenon? This article has first to analyze this expression “third world war”, which raises many problems. It will see later how religions can collaborate in the search for peace in these circumstances in different social and cultural contexts.

### 1. “Terrorism as a war”: a wrong qualification

To qualify terrorism as a war seems wrong because a war takes place between two enemies, which are well identified, generally two nations with two armies fighting one another. Those responsible within the fighting forces are clearly identified and well known. The conflict has a precise location, in one of the two nations or at their borders, with the will of conquest or occupation of territories. It has a beginning with a declaration of war, and a vote by the Parliament to authorize the use of the army; and it has an end with the rendition of one of the belligerent. After negotiations, there is a treaty signed by the two parties, even if it is under constraint.

The multiplication of terrorist acts all over the world does not make a war in that sense. In a terrorist attack, we do not know who is responsible for these acts. They can occur in any place in the world. They are perpetrated by some civilians who declare themselves combatants. They strike civilians first and foremost. There is no formal declaration of war. Terrorist acts can start anywhere and go on for years. The world has been with modern terrorism now for more than 15 years, without really knowing precisely where the chain of command lies and where the enemy is and when it will strike again. The killing of Bin Laden<sup>6</sup> did not change anything that picture.

What is more complicated in these contemporary terrorist waves is that there is a mix of a local war in Syria and Libya against a clear an identified enemy, ISIS (or Daesh), and a globalization of terrorism through Al Qaeda<sup>7</sup>. These two groups had different strategies. ISIS has been mainly concerned by the establishment of

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<sup>5</sup> See G. KEPÉL, *La revanche de Dieu, Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Paris 1991.

<sup>6</sup> May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011 in Pakistan.

<sup>7</sup> L. WRIGHT, *The terror years. From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*, New York 2016.

a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, while Al Qaeda tried to multiply the locations of insurrection. Other groups are active under different names like Boko Haram, AQMI and so on.

The localized wars in Syria and Libya should be dealt with like any other territorial war. The armies of Iraq and the international coalition are attacking the ISIS forces anywhere they can find them. They are gradually regaining the territory lost to ISIS. After Palmyra, lost a second time at the end of 2016, they hope to reconquer the city of Mosul and get rid of this enemy from Iraq and Syria. Since there cannot be any discussion with Daesh whose leaders are invisible and refuse to talk, this enemy has to be contained and eliminated. The peace agreement in Syria, about the conflict between Assad and the rebellion is different. It does not cover that war with Daesh, since Daesh is not part of it. But in any case, if the local conflict in Syria and Iraq is a real war, it is not a world war. And if the international coalition succeeds in destroying ISIS-Daesh, this will be the end of the conflict, not the end of terrorism in the world.

This local war is a new configuration for terrorist actors, since, so far, Al Qaeda was acting out of any territorial pretention. ISIS has changed that vision by claiming a territory in order to have a base of action, which, they hoped, would be growing over the years. As a matter fact, it has attracted a lot of foreign fighters to the region, in order to participate in this conventional war. This territorial presence is a new strength because of the capacity of building up an army with all its equipment but it is also a weakness since it can be directly attacked by conventional armies. The year 2016 has shown how much territory Daesh had lost.

On the other side, there is real world terrorism, with an invisible enemy, coming from anywhere and everywhere, striking in the most unexpected but also well-chosen place. They come from countries in the West, and from the Middle East, acting anywhere in the world (Ivory Coast, Turkey, Mali, France, Lebanon, Egypt, United States, Nigeria, etc). We know little about the organization of these acts: are they coordinated? Are they taking decisions locally? Is this Al Qaeda or ISIS? Is there a competition between these groups? Sometimes information is available, sometimes not. The suicide bombers operations make the intelligence of this violence more complicated, since the authors are not there to answer their acts. Their death makes all investigation difficult concerning the origin and the strategy of the networks involved. Are they lone wolves or elements of a sophisticated undercover army?

What makes things very particular about the conflict, is that there is a relation between the local war with ISIS and the terrorist threats in the world. Many young people are inspired by this territorial conquest, this new Caliphate, the

perspective of rebuilding a new state<sup>8</sup>, which opens their mind up to the possibility of a new way of life, which could be extended gradually to other places and lead a general fight against the West. The utopia seems more plausible in building a state rather than just random acts of terrorism which do not build any alternative system. But the utopia seems to be far away since ISIS is in great crisis in Syria and Iraq.

Besides, terrorist acts do not threaten the whole economic and social system of the West, while the extension of a terrorist state could be a threat for the international system. In any case, it is not a world war.

## 2. “Terrorism as a war”: a dangerous qualification

The expression “third world war”, is also dangerous because it gives the impression that one will defeat terrorism by some kind of act of war, with the use of professionals and classic weapons and of the army. This is what happened with the declaration of the “War on terror” by George W. Bush. He thought that by declaring a war on terrorism this would end the terror. What did he really mean? The authors of the 9/11 massacre of the World Trade Center do not work for any foreign power, even if most of them were Muslim Saudis. This cannot be a reason to attack Saudi Arabia. So the expression “war on terror” does not make any sense technically. It has provoked a strategy, the war in Iraq, which did not end terrorism but on the contrary provoked more terrorist acts, in many places from New York to Bali, Charm el-Cheik, Paris, Beyrouth, Brussels and so many other cities, up to the year 2016.

The expression, war on terror, is used for internal politics, to give the impression that the government is doing something against that blind violence. But it is misleading since it does not target the real enemy and does not underline the real problem leading to terrorism. With the enemy being invisible, there is no way to destroy it. The “war on terror” leads to a fight without end and without solution since it does not target the real problem. It creates illusion and false hopes in the belief that the enemy can be put down by fighting far away from us. It misleads the people on the nature of reality and prevents approaches that could help solve the conflict.

Terrorism is a conflict of a special nature, which is closer to civil war than regular war. It can be solved only by questioning the reasons of that terrorism. So the

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<sup>8</sup> G. SALE, *Lo stato islamico e la stabilizzazione della Libia*, CivCat (2016), no. 3983, June 11<sup>th</sup>, p. 454–468.

analyst should avoid that expression “third world war” and use more the expression “globalized terrorism”, or if he wants a strong expression, he could say he has a “world civil war”, a civil war of low intensity. That is where religions could come in because in this civil war there is a cultural and religious dimension beyond the political opposition.

### 3. A world civil war

What would be the way out of this world civil war? Specialists would have to analyze the reasons for that terrorism. There are many. What we can say is that terrorism is the product of a structural situation on one side and multiple personal situations on the other side. Let us have a look at these two aspects.

The structural reasons for terrorism are long term trends which cannot be changed overnight by a treaty or some discussions. It has various origins. Extremist groups of the Islamic world have switched to terrorist acts after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980's. Al Qaeda expanded its actions in many parts of the world, mixing political purposes and religious proselytism. It became central in relation with the Middle East, not only Syria, but the Palestine questions. It is known now that the war in Iraq and the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime have been decisive in its expansion. ISIS started its own operation between Iraq and Syria in 2013 on the same ground of a political and religious revolution.

The origins of these movements are located in feelings of humiliation, sense of injustice, reactions against aggression and the search for one's own identity. It is a mix of culture and politics. This explains why religion is so much more present in this world civil war. Since the authors announced they are Muslims, it gives the impression of a revenge against the Christian world. Consequently, these terrorist attacks are often qualified as a war of religion, which they are not. During a colloquium in the Farnesina<sup>9</sup>, Bishop Gallagher, Secretary for relations with States, showed how wrong that interpretation is:

Too often, a superficial reading of history and “wars of religion”, which had less to do with religion and more to do with politics, is the basis for the repeated accusation that religions are the cause of war and conflict and the utopian assertion that a world without religions would be a world without conflict.

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<sup>9</sup> Organized by ISPI and the Italian Ministry of Foreign affairs, Rome, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Terrorism is the expression of a political conflict. In order to solve the conflict, the temptation has been to intervene into countries which were supposed to feed terrorism. This was the case of the war in Iraq and the intervention in Libya to oust Khadafi. But it produced more terrorism. This explains why President Obama did not want to get involved directly in Syria. Such interventions exacerbate the world civil war giving more reasons for people to join the terrorist armies. They feed the feelings of humiliation in many populations. They provoke the involvement of individuals who enter into this process for many different personal reasons which are important to analyze.

#### 4. The personal drive to terrorism

Here we will concentrate on this personal aspect of terrorism, especially in the West, where religions are directly concerned in an individual decision. In terrorism there is no draft and no army: it is all on a voluntary basis. The problem here lies on the reasons why and how an individual becomes, voluntarily and freely, a terrorist.

Many studies have been made on that question<sup>10</sup>: in brief, terrorists come from many different kinds of milieu; they are often isolated, looking for something which they frequently find on the Internet, through radical Muslim websites. There is at one point a moment of radicalization which uses Islam as its expression<sup>11</sup>. These young people are generally second generation Muslims, living between two worlds, the country of their parents and their new nation. They are not supported by a link with a specific community and a feeling of belonging to a nation. They are isolated, in unstable social conditions. They do not talk to anybody, but they are gradually radicalized in their search for themselves<sup>12</sup>. The next step is often the trip to Syria, where they are brainwashed to become active terrorists. ISIS is presented as a good cause against the evil West plagued by corruption and anti-religious feelings.

This poses a question to Western countries: how do our modern societies deal with their young generation? What kind of education and support do they get? Because of these type of questions which are cultural, political and religious, how can

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<sup>10</sup> For a wide study of the subject, see especially G. SALE, *Isis e radicalizzazione islamista in Europa*, CivCat (2016), no. 3974, p. 112–124.

<sup>11</sup> O. ROY, *L'islam è un pretesto*, “Internazionale”, 27 Novembre 2015. Quoted by G. Sale.

<sup>12</sup> F. KHOSROKHAVAR, *Les trajectoires des jeunes jihadistes français*, “Etudes”, June 2015.

our western countries respond to these challenges? The States should do their part, with education, urban planning, economic growth, social work, and what is going on in the jails, etc. But civil society can break the barrier of isolation and create the condition of a human life based on relations with others in the community, in the neighborhood and at work.

## 5. Context and strategies

The national culture in which this dialogue should take place is very important for a possible solution to the radicalization process in the West. It is probably easier in countries like Italy, with its culture more open to religions and family links than a country like France where religion is more and more expelled from the public space, where urban planning has been very poor, and where education in suburbs is not a priority. The religious context of Italy is more open. So it is a chance which should be used there.

Each context should draw its own strategy. This should be the work of civil society, but also the work of the administration in its different organizations, local at municipal level, regional or national. The Ministry of Education, through the local schools, should be directly involved and be part of these dialogues. The Ministry of Urban Planning, when they exist, have a lot to say and to perform to allow the constant mix of all social classes and religion. Even a Ministry like that of Foreign Affairs, could have the role to show that this dramatic international issue of terrorism has solutions at the national level and the civil society level, which have to be taken seriously, with the cooperation of religions. No diplomatic action should be undertaken without integrating that dimension. It can promote what I would call “global solutions” to terrorism, which means a global cooperation for local solutions.

Then the question should be asked: how religion is really part of a conflict, under which forms, with which actors? This will lead to strategies of action including or not the different religions in the analysis and the responses to terrorism. In some contexts like France, religion remains a blind spot, that the state and public administration do not want to look at. For instance, schools, which should be active on the social field do not want to accept the existence of religions in the public sphere. The potential role of religion is often forgotten or simply refused. Rejecting religion in the private space, a strict version of *laïcité* excludes a priori the pertinence of religious actors in the public debate and the public action against terrorism. Such a rejection, based on ideological principle, marks a great limitation in any possible solution.

## 6. Interreligious dialogue

In more open contexts to religions in civil society, faith based groups enter into the picture: they have a specific role to fulfill, because of the proximity of these issues to religious questions. With Bishop Gallagher we can say that

knowing more about the religious dimension of humanity, therefore, contributes to our knowledge about the other great shapers of human identity. Religions can thus be part of the solution rather than being considered the problem.

One of the most fruitful places of action for religions is the interreligious dialogue. It is essential, at the grass roots level, parish level and local mosque level. Christians often reserve that dialogue to high level groups, in official inter religious dialogue. This is important, and it should be more publicized. But it is not enough. Cardinal Tauran finds limitations to that:

We are condemned to this dialogue since the alternative would be war – but the fruits of our dialogue with Islam are barely discernable and have no impact in daily life.

And he goes on saying, “the dialogue is just too elitist”<sup>13</sup>.

If this dialogue is to be directly effective, it has to be practiced at the local level, in schools, in municipalities, in churches, in mosques and synagogues. At a local level Christians are not very convinced they can make a difference. They are often divided on the issue. Catholics movements have been great in the democratic process in the 1990’s in working for freedom and human rights in many places; they could probably make a difference now on the source of terrorism in the West through interreligious dialogue.

Today, they could get more involved in networking with Muslims, for two purposes: to create a better understanding between believers of these religions, and to be part of a movement to get young citizens, Muslims and Christians, closer to one another. A lot could be done at that level. The creation of personal links between people of different religions would foster a practical cooperation at the local level for charities or social work, and common prayers even if their expressions are quite different. This presence of the different religions in that dialogue of proximity is very important, because it is the concrete action for peace at every door. It could show young people another face of religion, other than a radicalized one. These are transformative actions.

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<sup>13</sup> April 2016.



Global dialogue has no impact on the field if there is no action and connection at the local level. And this local level should always be inspired and pushed by the general context of the relation between religions.

## 7. Conclusion

This interreligious dialogue concerns directly the strategy in the West and will help to de-escalate violence in that context. But

how can religious leaders and communities help government and non-governmental organizations to de-escalate violence and build peace in the context of the current Middle Eastern crisis?<sup>14</sup>

Because it remains that one of the sources of terrorism is the Middle East crisis. It has to be discussed at the higher level of world politics, with the world actors, and neighboring nations. A solution to the conflict in Syria is crucial. But beyond that, the divisions between Sunnis and Shiites should also be discussed because they feed a political opposition. The religious factor is directly involved in this internal division of Islam.

The Mediterranean Sea is obviously a great location for a dialogue between north and south, Christians and Muslims. It is already the place of many discussions and will remain so<sup>15</sup>. But they should be much more open to religions, which often is not the case. Religion is not naturally part of these regional debates. A new vision of the different dimension of culture and politics could help integrate religions for the better and for the future of peace.

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## Literature

KEPEL G., *La revanche de Dieu, Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Paris 1991.

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<sup>14</sup> Questions asked in the preliminary draft concept paper by Fabio Petito, for the conference *Religion and Diplomacy: A new strategic pillar for a comprehensive Mediterranean Dialogue*, Rome, Thursday 17 March, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, the MED, Rome Mediterranean Dialogues, which takes place every year in Rome. The next has taken place on December 1 to 3, 2016, organized by ISPI and the Farnesina.

- KHOSROKHAVAR F., *Les trajectoires des jeunes jihadistes français*, “Etudes”, June 2015.
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**Abstract:** Terrorism has expanded worldwide. It became necessary to look for a new framework of analysis in order to understand this type of violence. The expression “third world war” has been used in different circumstances. But terrorism is not a war because the two enemies are not well identified and conflict is not precisely located. There is a conflict in Syria and Iraq, but it is not a world war. The term “third world war” is also dangerous because it gives the impression that you will be able to end terrorism by some kind of act of war. The expression “war on terrorism” has technically not any sense. But terrorism has an aspect where religions are concerned: this is the individual decision to enter into a process of radicalization. One of the most fruitful places of peace building for religions is the inter-religious dialogue at local level, schools, municipalities, churches. Global dialogue has no impact on the field if there is no action and connection at the local level.

**Keywords:** War, religion, terrorism, interreligious dialogue.

**Streszczenie: Religie, terroryzm i wojna.** Terroryzm stał się zjawiskiem globalnym. Sprawia to, że niezbędne jest poszukiwanie nowych podstaw systematycznej analizy dla zrozumienia tego rodzaju przemyocy. W różnych okolicznościach było używane wyrażenie „trzecia wojna światowa”. Jednakże terroryzm nie jest wojną, gdyż nie można dobrze zidentyfikować dwóch wrogów, a konflikt nie jest precyzyjnie umiejscowiony. Mamy do czynienia z konfliktem w Syrii i Iraku, ale nie jest to wojna światowa. Termin „trzecia wojna światowa” jest niebezpieczny, gdyż tworzy wrażenie, że możliwe jest skończenie z terroryzmem za pomocą rodzaju aktu wojny. Wyrażenie „wojna z terroryzmem” technicznie jest bezsensowne. Jednakże terroryzm posiada wymiar, którym zainteresowane są religie. Jest

to indywidualna decyzja włączenia się w proces radykalizacji. Dla religii jednym z najbardziej owocnych miejsc budowania pokoju jest dialog międzyreligijny na poziomie lokalnym: szkół, społeczności lokalnych i Kościołów. Dialog globalny jest bezskuteczny jeśli brakuje działań i powiązań na płaszczyźnie lokalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna, religia, terroryzm, dialog międzyreligijny.