



“The Opposites of Using Weapons vs. Using Spirituality to Solve Problems,” by Kristin Powers. This piece was created when Kristin attended the Hearthstone School in Sperryville, VA.

Terrorism and the Dark Side of Religion

William J. Ventimiglia

ABSTRACT:

The author examines the rise of Middle Eastern religious fundamentalism favoring a theocratic social order and its inevitable clash with secular, post-modern and materially-oriented western civilization. Jung's view that the psyche is a "self-regulating system" that unconsciously compensates for "any one-sidedness" is presented as an aid to understanding the contemporary phenomenon of religious terrorism. The terrorist's sacred rage dissolves his conscious individuality in a "negative alchemical *solutio*" and transforms him into a "new collective being."

KEY WORDS:

fundamentalism, dark side, terrorism, psyche, ego consciousness, doubt

Soon after the beginning of US hostilities in Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden said something very interesting. He boasted that within the ranks of Al Qaida there were thousands of believers who were as anxious to become martyrs to their faith as we in America are anxious to enjoy the good life. Jung has taught us to look upon the psyche as a self-regulating system in which any one-sidedness of consciousness calls forth a compensation from the unconscious. I suggest that it might be helpful to look upon the emergence of religious terrorism as just such a compensation. There is shadow conflict here but also much more.

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It is generally appreciated that in Jung's system of psychology, religion is treated as of fundamental importance. In a lecture delivered before the Alsatian Pastoral Conference at Strasbourg in May 1932 Jung stated, "Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook in life" (*CW* 11, par. 488-538).

The religious instinct, or what many people prefer to call spirituality, remained a touchstone for Jung all his life. In a seminar on analytical psychology given in 1925 he states: "For example, you can run across people who think them-

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selves born without a religious sense, and this is just as absurd as if they said they were born without eyes. It simply means they have left all that side of themselves in the unconscious" (Jung, 1989, p. 106). Ours is a culture dominated by an inflation of ego consciousness and rationality, where the non-rational is given short shrift. This is the collective prejudice of our time. What can neither be seen, nor touched, nor subjected to experimental verifiability is often held in intellectual contempt.

Jung stands, therefore, in awkward contradistinction to our post-modern psychology with its fracturing of the Self-*imago*. In post-modernism, truth is conceived as relative to the subjectivity of the perceiver; the possibility of universal truths is rejected. Nevertheless, while reason in our day has surrendered the quest for metaphysical certainty as indeed it must, feeling rebels against the limits of the subjectivist trend. Experiential knowledge continues to insist upon the possibility of a superordinate Other. In a letter dated March 13, 1958

Jung writes, “My *raison d'être* consists in coming to terms with that indefinable Being we call ‘God’” (1979, p. 207). And in *Psychology and Religion* he explains:

Religious experience is absolute: it cannot be disputed. You can only say that you have never had such an experience, whereupon your opponent will reply: “Sorry, I have.” And there your discussion will come to an end. (*CW* 11, par. 167)

This is Jung’s response to the problem of the demise of our traditional western god-image. If God can’t be found “up there” in the clouds or in outer space because reason has made plain the folly of theistic anthropomorphism, that does not mean that religious feeling is invalid. What it does mean, however, is that the normal projective process—a naïve and literalistic approach to religious experience—is wounded, and quite possibly mortally so. As Jung realized in his analysis of the death of God experience articulated by Nietzsche, this carries profound cultural and psychological implications. It is, I believe, the root-source of radical fundamentalism and its terrorist offspring. Sacred rage has many sources and behind many of these is the inexorable evolution and spread of western culture with its demythologizing and secularizing influence.

If we want to understand the dark side of religion, then nationalism and religious tribalism must be taken into consideration. In the twentieth century, nationalism became a secular religion organized around the personality cults of Adolf Hitler, Chairman Mao, Lenin, and Stalin. Jung saw the psychology of the *Übermensch* (superman) in Nazi Germany as the consequence of the collapse of institutional Christianity which served for many centuries as a container of the mysterium (Jung, 1988). The divine Spirit, no longer always accessible through the rites and rituals of the Church, does not simply disappear, however. It fell into the ego of man and inflated him with a God-Almighty sense of moral non-accountability and political ambition. If God was not going to reveal himself as God anymore, man would take His place; man would become God! That is the psychology of the Superman.

Today we are witness to the rise of a new form of collective megalomania and moral insanity. One extreme manifestation can be seen in radical Islam;

but Islam's sister religions, Christianity and Judaism, are not immune. All three great monotheistic religions—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—have representatives who both literalize the symbolic word and have embraced an attitude of militancy in a religious and political fundamentalism (Armstrong, 2000). The charismatic leaders of religious terrorism have rejected the superman psychology of sacred nationalism. They share, however, the moral insanity of the superman by attempting to force a new incarnation of the divinity along conservative, tribal lines. Once again the ego is inflated with a demonic spirit. And they find legitimacy in sacred literature.

For example, in his book *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Joseph Campbell explains:

In Islamic thought the nations of the earth are distinguished as of two realms: *dar al'islām*, "the realm of submission [to Allah]," and *dar al'harb*, "the realm of war," which is to say, the rest of the world. And in Christian thought, the words reported of the resurrected Christ to his eleven remaining apostles—"Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19)—have been interpreted as a divine mandate for a conquest of the planet. (1986, pp. xviii-xix)

Nor is Judaism exempt from finding a scriptural basis for xenophobic programs for it is stated unequivocally in the Hebrew Bible, "There is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

Sacred writings that define as separate and adversarial the religious tribes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam provide the psychological distance necessary for projections of the shadow to take place. Sacred writings are easily deployed by charismatic leaders in support of violent aggression against the enemies of their particular tribal God. The darkness they fail to recognize in their own personal nature and social institutions they find rampant in those of their neighbor. Like the missionary enterprises of medieval and even modern Christianity, it is much easier to focus upon converting or exterminating the stranger than it is to confront one's own doubts and short-comings (Carroll, 2001). Intolerable doubt is externalized, deposited in the stranger or the enemy to one's faith, and confronted there from the safe position of presumed moral

superiority or “righteousness.” Extraverted ambition to “save” the other or, if necessary, kill the enemy and take possession of his land relieves the inner burden of conflict and uncertainty. Shadow repression is the defense of preference. The alternative is transformation through internal conflict consciously chosen in an active confrontation with one’s own shadow material.

Cultural differences and sacred literature are used to legitimize conflict, but they are obviously not the cause of conflict. External sources are easy to find. A motivation for fundamentalist Islam can be found, for example, in the well-documented history first of the British Imperialism throughout the Middle East and then that of Standard Oil, particularly in Iran. The paradigm of Israel in conflict with the Palestinian Arabs now threatens to become mirrored on a grand scale in the relationship of the United States with radicalized Islam throughout the world.

A sense of victimization ferments rage which attaches to an ethnocentric belief system. We find, therefore, an extreme hatred of the moral values represented by western culture. Consider this quote from Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), the founder of Sunni fundamentalism:

Humanity today is living in a brothel! One has only to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, ballrooms, wine bars, and broadcasting stations. Or observe its mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick, suggestive statements in literature, the arts and mass media! And add to all this, the system of usury which fuels man’s voracity for money and engenders vile methods for its accumulation and investment, in addition to fraud, trickery, and blackmail dressed up in the garb of law. (Armstrong, 2000, p. 240)

The evening before their September 11th attack on the Twin Towers of New York City, it was widely reported that one group of hijackers visited a strip club where they cursed America.

S. Amjad Hussain states in his book, *The Taliban and Beyond*, “During colonial [British and French] rule [in the Middle East], many reformist movements sprang up in the Muslim and Arab world to protect Muslim identity from what was thought to be the corrupting influences of Western culture” (Hussain, 2001, p. 19). In Egypt, for example, a Pakistani journalist and politician

named Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-79) “. . . feared that Islam was about to be destroyed. He saw the mighty power of the West gathering its forces together to crush Islam and grind it into oblivion” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 236). “Muslims,” he taught, “. . . must resist the Western forms of government imposed upon them by the colonial powers, since such governments constitute a rebellion against God and usurp his authority. . . .He demanded a universal *jihad* which he declared to be the central tenet of Islam (*Ibid.*, p. 238). The historian Karen Armstrong notes that “No major Muslim thinker had ever made this claim before [Mawdudi]” (*Ibid.*, p. 238). Sadly, today—a quarter of a century after Mawdudi—the need for *jihad* is accepted by many as a self-evident article of faith. This is a new development.

It should be obvious that an idea cannot be destroyed by killing the adherents to that idea. An effective confrontation with sacred rage must pause to consider the possible sources of extremist thinking—for example, how threatened radical Islamists tell us they feel—and not simply seek victory through a fruitless war of attrition. At one level the problem is really quite simple: when we show little respect for people and threaten their dignity by the quality of our presence and commerce, then we aggress against the God-place inside them. If we exploit a person or an entire social community, not stopping to consider upon what principles their social and spiritual well-being depends, if we dismiss their concerns and demoralization as unworthy of our consideration, then quite naturally the God-instinct within that community rises up against us. On the other hand, it is often possible to heal a wounded God-place in a person’s heart through a consistent attitude of respect and admiration. Social intercourse based upon mindful respect is the operative attitude in all constructive interpersonal and cultural exchange.

Unfortunately, the problem runs far deeper than that. We in the West must realize that we bring the plague not only of an anti-sacred materialism that is as exploitive of human as it is of natural resources. We also bring the plague of our demythologizing rationalism. We cannot help ourselves because this is the state of our collective individuation. We are hosts to a world-view that is antithetical to traditional religious feeling. The rational differentiation of the consciousness of the West, producing the Protestant Reformation in the six-

teenth century, the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and the Death of God Movement in the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth, now directly threatens theistic Islam.

Theism depends upon the projection of what is divine in the human psyche upon a suitable object. Only the unknown and the unknowable is capable of carrying the god-image. The *numinosum*, the deep mystery of the universe, retreats in step with the technological conquest of the environment. Of course, mystery still calls at the frontiers of scientific knowledge, and chasing this knowledge could be likened to a pursuit of the *deus absconditus*. What is Thor's thunderbolt in comparison to one nuclear bomb, however? Gradually we assimilate the prerogatives of God. And for ordinary man, or the ordinary man in everyone, this is problematic because God can no longer be so easily imagined "out there." What is left is wasteland, the *barren land*.

Traditional religious practice is dependent, as the nineteenth century philosopher Feuerbach rightly understood, on the mechanism of projection (Feuerbach, 1967). Unfortunately, Feuerbach drew the false conclusion that because the experience of God rests upon projection then God is an illusion. A more modern psychological understanding is that as consciousness becomes more differentiated we withdraw the projections that hitherto were the basis for our sense of belonging in the world. And here we run straight into confrontation with one very important function of religion.

The function of religion has always been to provide humanity with a sense of belonging in the universe. The mythologies of religion populate the cosmos with familiar ancestor spirits, with the traces of heroic encounters with the divine in sacred history through prophets, priests, mystics and kings, and with the conviction of a special relationship with the Creator or creators of existence. Christians make pilgrimages to Jerusalem, many Jews view Zionism as a sacred undertaking, and Moslems make their annual Hajj pilgrimage. Religion provides the believer with a sense of belonging in an otherwise cold and impersonal world. The depth psychologist would use different language: I feel at home in the world because I give my psyche to the world. In the East that is called *maya*, the illusion that forever fascinates and draws us into life. But far from being demoralized by the discovery of maya illusion—i.e., the problem of

doubt—the world of illusion is actively embraced. In Tāntric philosophy it is even found worthy of worship as the presence of the Goddess Māyā-Sakti. We populate and inhabit the world with our own unconscious material. We do not realize we are projecting the god-image because projection is an unconscious process. But all that is now endangered by the spread of western culture and western consciousness.

The sacred rage of terrorism in the name of God is the *anima* emotion and *animus* ideology of militant fundamentalism. Emotion and ideology provide a grand negative alchemical *solutio* dissolving the conscious individuality of the holy warrior and making him into a new collective being. He is relieved of the burden of doubt, of alienation, of wounded identity, and of lost self-respect. Mythology is realized in action. God is no longer felt as a haunting absence. The wrath of God is glorious again as it was in ancient times, and the true believer is again His mighty arm. The burden of helpless victimization vanishes, and the Second Coming, the dream of theocracy, and the Second David are at hand. The orphaned, the abandoned are now the Chosen. An emotional connection to one's tribal God is won through the blood of martyrdom. The theological implication is that God will be awakened to take notice and fulfill His ancient promises—concretely, tangibly, in history, and no longer just in the invisible, indefinite kingdom of the soul. The unthinkable has become thinkable. Perhaps even the Almighty can be forced to incarnate in a once-and-for-all battle with the powers of evil. To what greater purpose could a human life aspire?

Consider two concrete examples of this tendency. First is the spectacle of Mohammed Omar donning the cloak purportedly once worn by the Prophet Mohammad! This occurred in the year proceeding the American war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The moment was captured in one well-publicized, grainy photograph of Mullah Omar surrounded by a throng of his admirers. Not only were the Taliban restoring law and order to a nation of warlord banditry; they were also reaching for a restoration of the Age of Muhammad and his successors, the Caliphate. It was a moment of tremendous symbolic significance. Mythology was realized in action. Sacred time displaced secular time in a politically charged symbolic act. Imagine if

Mohammad could be caused to live again, now incarnate in a modern day prophet. It was an act of inspired megalomania, and for militant Islamists the world was re-created in a single stroke.

A second example is seen in the ideology of the Kookist Party in Israel. In grotesque contrast to the mystical conception of Israel found in Orthodox Judaism, Karen Armstrong tells us that Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook promulgated the view that the “secular State of Israel was the Kingdom of God *tout court*; every clod of its earth was holy” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 261). This sacrality was also extended to the protectors of Zion, the Israeli army.

Where the Haredim forbade their students to watch the army parade on Independence Day, [Rabbi] Kook the Younger insisted that, because the army was sacred, it was a religious duty to watch it. The soldiers were as righteous as Torah scholars, and their weapons as holy as a prayer shawl or phylacteries. (Armstrong, 2000, p. 261)

Political activity was no longer considered to be “tainted” because of its participation in an “unredeemed world.” On the contrary,

. . . Kook the Younger believed that the messianic age had begun and that political involvement was like the mystical journey of the Kabbalist, as ascent to the pinnacles of holiness. His vision was literally holistic. The Land, the People, and the Torah formed an indivisible triad. To abandon one was to abandon all three. Unless Jews settled in the whole Land of Israel, as this was defined in the Bible, there could be no Redemption: the annexation of the whole land, including territory at this time belonging to Arabs, had become a supreme religious duty. (*Ibid.*, p. 261)

This expression of sacred nationalism can be understood as a reaction to the secularization and assimilation of Jews in pre-war Europe—not to mention their wholesale betrayal under fascism and national socialism. Today, fundamentalist Moslems tell us they are also afraid of a spiritual annihilation or religio-cultural assimilation. While these two movements are not equivalent, there is, however, a common ground in the crisis of the symbolic process.

It is well understood that, individually and collectively, people become emo-

tionally reactive when threatened. Extreme positions displace the generosity of spirit typical of those who feel secure. Radical fundamentalism's tendency to concretize mythology is, however, defensive, anti-psychological, and brazenly unselfconscious.

In the mystical journey of the Kabbalah, the Land was linked symbolically to the last stage of the interior descent into the self, and was identical with the divine presence the Kabbalist discovered *in the ground of his being* (emphasis added). (*Ibid.*, p. 150)

In contrast to the bloody ambitions of Al Qaida, the Koran teaches that Muhammad saw in a vision that "if God is God, then there can only be what

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God is: there cannot be a God of the Christians, [and] a God of the Jews" (Bowker, 1997, p. 663). Presumably, the door is thus open to a religious conviction that God can have many names and live with many peoples. No religious tribe need be pronounced alien, gentile, unclean, orphaned, and of the devil.

In a sense, the whole of Islam is a footnote to this simple observation: there is only one God and all creation is derived from him. Therefore all humans should live in a corresponding unity (i.e., community, 'umma); and Islam is the quest for the realization of 'umma, under God. (*Ibid.*, p. 663)

It is a beautiful and inspired vision. How, then, do we address the problem posed by the dark side of religion? One answer must be to extend an attitude of respect and admiration to people whose belief systems are foreign to us. If we respect and admire the stranger we must be prepared to learn from him. And if we are threatened by the presence of the stranger in our midst, it is our job to seek a wider truth capable of embracing him. This is why it is crit-

ically important that we *not* consider God's revelation complete. For if God's revelation of Himself is ongoing, it is still possible for Islam's *'umma* and the new Jerusalem of Judeo-Christianity to be reconciled. Jung foresaw that in the Aquarian age this will mean that each person will need to sacrifice the hope of being contained in a collectivist institution and must instead forge his/her own individuation path of redemption.

In her *Psychological Memoirs*, Veronica Ladenburg shares two dreams that show this happening.

I was walking towards a Catholic church with the intention of going in to pray or attend a service, feeling a great need to do so. But something kept me from crossing the threshold. I saw that there was an orchard surrounding the church. A group of men were gathered there in some kind of celebration. I walked towards them and they invited me to join them and offered me a drink. It was apple juice! (Ladenburg, 1995, p. 8)

A second dream is equally delightful.

Men were digging deep down in the earth to discover the secret of life. They [then] found what they were looking for, . . . [and] there was lots of excitement and rejoicing. . . . What they had found were iron filings. [Then after this discovery] Word went around that when you knew the secret you had to sing it. In the distance a man and woman were singing a duet. (Ibid., pp. 4-5)

Finally, Marie-Louise von Franz published this example from a woman who fought against her love for a married man:

I heard the mighty, deep sound of a bronze bell, an extraordinary ringing, such as I had never heard or imagined, a sound from beyond, of extraordinary beauty, irresistible! Fascinated, I got up, for I somehow had to get to the source of this sound, which could only be a divine one. Since the sound seemed sacred to me, I thought it could come from a church, and instantly I was in a church of the purest Gothic style, of white stone, and I was getting ready to climb the bell tower to find the source of this grave rhythmic ringing, which I could still hear. But everything changed.

The church became a broad vault, like the nave of a cathedral made of a transparent living red-orange material, bathed in a reddish light and supported by a forest of pillars that reminded me of stalactites in a cave that I had once seen in Spain. For a moment I saw myself as standing tiny and alone in this immense hall, dazzled with the sense that I had a whole world to explore there.

[Then I realized] It was my heart. I was standing in the interior of my own heart, and I realized at this moment that the wonderful bell sound, which I could still hear, was nothing other than the beat of my own heart, or that this external sound and my heart-beat were one and the same. They were beating in the same rhythm. Macrocosm and microcosm were synchronized, the rhythm of the world's heart and my own heart were identical. (von Franz, 1993, pp. 248-249)

Inspiring examples, but how do we get there from here? In *The Bible and The Psyche*, Edward Edinger remarks upon how difficult it is to surrender the fundamentalist ambition and trust the voice found within. "It is no easy transition," he states, "from the metaphysical standpoint of religious faith to the empirical standpoint of the psyche. Between these two mountain ridges lie a dark valley,

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the valley of *lost faith, alienation, meaningless, and despair*" [italics are mine and the geo-political implication is not to be missed] (Edinger, 1986, p. 11). Jung is very clear that religion lies at the core of man's search for meaning. Terrorism in the name of God is a reminder that in spite of the clear victory of capitalism over all other economically based systems of government, people find intolerable a life without reverence for the sacred.

Jung realized that with the institutional containers of theism broken, modern man stands exposed and vulnerable to flooding from the unconscious

that is truly demonic. A substitute had to be found, and that frail substitute is the individual human ego in commitment to the pursuit of greater consciousness. It seems hopelessly naïve to assume that large numbers of people are suddenly going to become Jungians, or that the religious authorities of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity may one day soon give up extraverted efforts aimed at propagating their own tribal religion as “the one true faith.”

It may well be enough, however, for each person *who is listening to the voice within* to seek the truth for his or her own life while remaining respectfully connected to the outsider. Jungian psychology is not meant to be a new religion. It is, however, an immensely spiritual path.

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