

Islamist Suicide Terrorism and Erich Fromm's Social Psychology of Modern Times

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Abstract

Mainstream social science has struggled to explain the appeal of suicide terrorism to so many Muslim youths, relying as it does on standard socio-economic indicators and research meant to identify suicidal tendencies. The existential emphasis is missing. This commentary is inspired by the work of clinical psychologist Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and his investigation of the social psychology of modernity, as well as how this intermingles with existential fears related to mortality (death-related fears) and the passage of time (the end of the world or apocalypse). Modernity, explained Fromm, makes one feel small, insignificant and isolated in the larger scheme of things. This demands a violent response, often involving self-sacrifice, to reassert the balance, which allows Islamists to take advantage of death-related anxieties and exaggerate the sense of confrontation with the world through apocalyptic prophecies. Current psychological research on death and studies of terrorism and religious extremism both confirm many of Fromm's findings and expand on them. In this commentary I argue that the religion of Islam, far from being a source of suicide terrorism, has historically restrained both suicidal tendencies and political violence directed at civilians, but it is the slow yet sure encroachment of modernity that has eroded these theological and communitarian defences. Other problems, such as household politics, gender roles, and theological teachings concerning death likewise feed this process, as documented by Arabic researchers in contexts other than political violence.

Keywords: suicide, self-harm, Islam, terrorism, modernity, apocalypse, gender, family, Freud, Durkheim

The aim of this commentary is to find a satisfactory explanation for Islamist suicide terrorism, a phenomenon that social scientists still have not fully understood. Suicide here is defined as “self-inflicted intentional death” (Abdel-Khalek, 2004, p. 100). Wanting to kill others to attain a political goal can be construed as perfectly rational, but why insist on killing oneself in the process? (Abrahms, 2008; Findley & Young, 2012; Lake, 2002). Terrorism is one thing, *suicide* terrorism is something else entirely; a “*self-destructive* [emphasis added] act of political aggression” (Victoroff, 2009, p. 398). How can you enjoy the attained goal, or even be sure it will come to fruition, if you are dead? How does one overpower one's instincts towards self-preservation?

Rational choice theorists have struggled with these dilemmas themselves, leading many to dabble in the fields of sociology and psychology for an answer (see Caplan, 2006; Hafez, 2006; LaFree & Dugan, 2009; Nalbandov, 2013; Tosini, 2011; Wooldridge, 2008).¹ Of equal importance, presumptions of rationality also leave “us virtually with-

¹ A basic problem with rational-actor theory is the ‘free rider’ problem (Brym & Hamlin, 2009, p. 92). People shirk their political and social responsibilities and wait for others to bear the brunt of solving these problems. Only a sense of solidarity can overcome this, which is not amenable to practical

out any understanding of life-denying, suicidal, and homicidal processes that appear utterly senseless from the viewpoint of the individual” where notions of “self-and-survival are central” (Steinhart, 2005, p. 9). The question is how to designate *layers* of motivation. How honest are the suicide bomber-martyrs being with themselves about why they insist on fighting back this specific way, and no other way? And how aware is the individual bomber of his or her true motivations?

The thesis of this paper is that the answer to this research quandary is not in the conventional literature on suicide so far cited by most terror experts as we shall see below. The factor that has so far not been accounted for is *modernity*, which opens up fissures in Muslim societies that create opportunities for self-destructive behaviour. Something more existential is going on and, while I do not believe religion in any way to be the culprit, structural features of the societies in question and the prevailing cultural mood *are* partly to blame. Political actors then enter the picture, with recruiters carefully stoking problems already there, albeit in the psychological background.

Case studies of terrorism, whether of individuals or entire movements, will bear all these conclusions out but even more fruitful is to rely on three less well known fields of research in psychology and social psychology that tackle the relationship, or lack thereof, between religion, death and suicide. These three fields are: community psychology, terror management theory, and death-anxiety research. Terror management deals with psychological coping mechanisms related to death – stemming from Ernest Becker’s (1975) classic *The Denial of Death* – whereas death-anxiety deals less with coping mechanisms than with the exact nature of people’s fears about death. There is considerable overlap, but the two fields of research nonetheless developed separately. Supplementary literature on suicide, anxiety and self-harm in the Arab world will further flesh this out. The connective glue that holds these strands of research together, however, is the social psychology of modernity as explicated by the German psychoanalyst and clinician Erich Fromm (1900-1980), a thinker who always incorporated the social dimension into his research and writings.

considerations. With their own research in the field, Ginges and Atran have concluded that the “greater the priority given to communal values, the more likely an individual was to be willing to participate in violent collective action” while “communal causes are often purely symbolic in nature, involving sacred values” (Ginges & Atran, 2009, p. 121).

The Current State of the Literature on Suicide Terrorism

It is impossible to talk about suicide and religion without talking about Durkheim. He was the first to chart the tortuous relationship between the two societal factors and he has been referred to by terror experts to explain away Islamist suicide terrorism under the misunderstood category of altruistic suicide (Abdel-Khalek, 2004). The irony is that Durkheimian sociological studies are traditionally used to argue that Islam was *more* successful than Christianity at preventing suicides in spite of the context of abject poverty and political marginalisation that many Muslims suffered from in the developing world.¹ The charge of “fanatical self-sacrifice” then cannot account for suicide terrorism once the sociological literature is taken into account (Orbach, 2004, p. 115). Islam was so successful, in fact, that it was argued to be an *independent* factor that operates over and above society in blunting people’s suicidal tendencies (Simpson & Conklin, 1989, p. 962). This is because Hindus and Buddhists in South Asia have the same kinship structures as Muslims, and yet suicide rates among Muslims, of all socio-economic classes, are distinctly lower (Simpson & Conklin, 1989, p. 949). This, in turn, exposes the limitations of the Durkheim paradigm, such as the family attachments argument, given that the kinship system (in South Asia) crosses religious boundaries. This argument contrasts Protestant individualism to Catholic collectivism, a problem which I discuss below.

Critics of this misapplication of altruistic suicide to Islam also point out that this practice is allowed for in certain faiths but not in others; Buddhism and Japanese Hari-Kiri being the classic examples (Wen, 1973, p. 216). Islam, however, is like Christianity and Judaism in its *condemnation* of suicide and traditionally does not allow for suicide missions (Demirzen, 2011, p. 15). Bernard Lewis has stated repeatedly that “classical Islamic legal and religious texts are quite clear on the subject of suicide... a *mortal sin* [emphasis added]” (Lewis, as cited in Lugo, 2006, p. 22). Moreover, at “no point do the basic texts of Islam enjoin terrorism and murder [or]... even consider the slaughter of uninvolved bystanders” (Lewis, 1998, p. 19). Suicide terrorism is a “very recent development. It came in stages” (Lewis, as cited in Lugo, 2006, p. 22). Israeli historian Meir Hatina (2006), adds that even with the Islamist revival in the modern

¹ For some of the more interesting applications and sociological critiques of Durkheim to suicide terrorism, please see Bodin (2012) and Zevallos (2006), and Pedahzur, Perliger, and Weinberg (2003). For psychological critiques that centre round the contentious notion of altruism, please see Stack (2004), Leenaars (2004) and Stack (1979).

period, for the longest time “suicide acts in the name of Islam had been rare because the perpetrators, as angry as they were, had internalised the theological prohibition of suicide, as well as moral reservations about killing innocent people in societies that were, after all, Muslim” (p. 31). As if in anticipation of Durkheim, Franz Rosenthal (1946) admitted that while suicidal missions and the “desire for martyrdom are considered highly commendable according to Muslim religious concepts... such cases, are not suicides in the proper sense of the term” (p. 256).

Rosenthal was a staunch Orientalist who never entirely believed the Quran’s blanket condemnation of suicide. He added nonetheless that suicide in Muslim intellectual history was seen as heretical and so “Muslim education also might account for the fact that suicide among the *insane is very rare* [emphasis added]” (Rosenthal, 1946, p. 255). When it comes to answering how such groups *got around* the religious prohibitions on both committing suicide and killing non-combatants, many researchers have recourse to traditional Freudian concepts. Here, the Oedipus complex is used to explain why Palestinian boys commit suicide attacks in the enemy ranks. This theory posits that these individuals are angry at their fathers for not being able to live up to their parental expectations as providers and protectors, in the context of the overwhelming power of the Israeli occupation. They have to repress their paternally-directed anger, out of fear of their fathers, and so they “ultimately direct their anger on to themselves. Killing oneself is also killing the hated internalized object” (Silverman & Parger, as cited in Aggarwal, 2011, p. 11). No one doubts the centrality of the father figure in the psychodynamics of cults and religious experiences (Arehart-Treichel, 1979, p. 382), but this account does not match the empirical evidence at both the macro (society at large) and micro (individuals and groups and their interactions) levels of analysis.

Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran (2009) devised a questionnaire called “Father versus Family” for a study on politically motivated violence in the Palestinian territories. The issue posed was whether it is acceptable for a suicide bomber to postpone his mission to take care of his ill father. The answer provided by the 720 Palestinian university students interviewed was predominately in the negative, meaning it was commonly seen as unacceptable. When the participants were asked if it was alright to delay the mission in order to prevent Israeli retaliation against the suicide bombers’ family (which includes women), the result was also overwhelmingly in the negative (Ginges & Atran, 2009, p. 117-118).

A joint CIA-DIA report, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism*, also found that suicide bombers had none of the usual “socially dysfunctional attributes (fatherless, friendless, or jobless) or suicidal symptoms” (Atran, 2003, p. 1537). Volunteers for suicide operations were not nihilistic or captivated by a sense of hopelessness, of having nothing to lose for “lack of life alternatives that would be consistent with economic rationality.” On the contrary, the adolescents all “displayed strong individual pride and social cohesion” (Atran, 2003, p. 1537). Recruits were well adjusted when it came to their families and even well-liked by their peers (Atran, 2004, p. 75). Such individuals are “rarely suicidal in the pathological sense.” If anything, they are often

“better off than average for their community and better educated” (Bond, 2005, p. 18). Psychologists like Ariel Merari, an Israeli who has had the opportunity to meet with and survey failed suicide bombers, has also found this lack of traditional pathologies in his experience (Bond, 2005, p. 18). Explaining suicide terrorism and how Islamists get around prohibitions over suicide and political violence targeting civilians clearly lies elsewhere, since conventional research cannot afford us an answer.

A Better Methodology: Mortality, Suicide and Terrorism

Ideology and Historical Background

A better way to bridge the gap between micro- and macro- levels of analysis is to rely on social psychology, but with added emphasis on the social psychology of *modernity*. We shall see exactly why below, but at this point it must be understood that while doctrinal violence and suicide operations are as old as religion itself, terrorism specifically is a *modernist* phenomenon. Terror experts themselves trace the term to the Great Terror following the French revolution and note that terrorism is a Utopian exercise, exhibiting the distinctly modernist faith that the world can be made anew, but only after the *ancien regime* is completely smashed (Atran, 2003, p. 1534; Fine, 2008; Hoffman, 1999, p. 15-17). Literary critic Terry Eagleton also sees terrorism in modernist terms, citing the professor in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* as the archetypical terrorist bomber: someone who wants to obliterate everything to rebuild human society from the rubble (Eagleton, 2008). Ted Kaczynski, the domestic terrorist known as the Unabomber (his campaign in the U.S. stretched from 1978 to 1995), took the Professor as his inspirational role-model. Kaczynski even called himself "J. Konrad" on select occasions (Borowitz, 2005, p. 100).¹ When queried by the author on how Islamic fundamentalists fit into this framework, Eagleton's response was that Islamism is much like nationalism. Islamism is a thoroughly modern political phenomenon that nonetheless incorporates and revives aspects of antiquity: national heritage, creation myths, tribalism and cultural xenophobia.

Consequently, the main theoretical framework that will be analysed here is the work of Erich Fromm, someone who witnessed first-hand the rise of Nazism in a thoroughly modern, European setting. It was his thesis, compounded in works like *Escape from Freedom (1941)*, that modernity had laid the psychological grid-work for totalitarianism and the self-destructive pursuit of total war. Whereas most of the psychological and sociological literature on Muslim suicide bombers deals with suicide and possible

¹ Another novel cited by researchers is Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* where the terrorists – atheists and believers alike – believe that violence against the innocent is more than justified in order to "achieve *tabula rasa*" (Glucksmann, 2011, p. 1). Marc Sageman has made similar modernist observations and historical comparisons, adding that many, many Islamist suicide bombers are 'engineers' (Sageman, 2008a).

motivations (nihilism, depression), relying on Fromm allows us to focus instead on related matters such as self-harm, obsession with death, and some religious states of mind of direct relevance to terrorism and extremist movements in general.

Fromm argued that the more modernity advances, the smaller you feel. This is due to having lost touch with all the original “medieval ties” – clan, tribe, sect, guild, extended family, neighbourhood, etc. – that formed the pre-modern basis of personal identity (Fromm, 1955, p. 8). Modernity then has given birth to the individual while leaving him (or her) defenceless, alone and *alienated* against his opposite, society – not to mention the state, the economy, the global order (see Mahdism below), and, nature, fate and the gods or God. All of this is in spite of the expanding set of tools at one’s disposal. Thus the “individual overcomes the feeling of insignificance in comparison with the overwhelming power of the world outside of himself either by *renouncing* his individual integrity, or by *destroying others* so that the world ceases to be threatening” (Fromm, 1941, pp. 208-209; emphasis added). Most people take the first route, what Fromm called automaton conformity. This is a species of blind imitation driven by the desire for anonymity in the harsh world of individual choice; what Søren Kierkegaard called the anxiety of freedom (Grøn, 2008). Of the select individuals who rise above the herd, some are destined to be leaders and among them are those who become dictators, people who respond by the “inflation of oneself psychologically to such an extent that the world outside becomes small in comparison” (Fromm, 1941, pp. 208-209). Even more dangerous are those who are followers but proactive and rebellious nonetheless, since it is these persons who take up political violence. All forms of brutal excesses associated with “*xenophobia*, at football matches, at black masses, in cases of *collective suicide* or of violence that is completely unprovoked... can be read as compensations for an inability to love life” (Funk, 2000, p. 5; emphasis added).

The logic then goes: “if I cannot love and confer life... then I at least want to experience myself through the act of destruction” (Funk, 2000, p. 5). All of this is driven by internal weaknesses – coming to see anything external as threatening and exaggerated out of proportion. Not only does this lead to violence, it is also intimately related with religious extremism. Fromm connected this disposition with *apocalyptic* traditions. People who suffer from this sense of superfluosity positively enjoy the “images of the horrendous death and destruction reined on the earth during the so-called last days, vivid and graphic accounts of the unbearable pain and suffering of nonbelievers, the burning and melting of the flesh [of] sinners, and the destruction of billions of lives of those who are not members of the right religion” (Wilson, 2009, pp. 18, 7). Or, as one Islamic thinker has put it, terrorism is the fruit of a “fanatical culture and extremist ideology that sees life, its pleasures, and its beauty as unimportant” (Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ansari, as cited in Middle East Media Research Institute [MEMRI], 2007).

Fromm’s merging of social psychology with theology came in anticipation of what researchers of apocalyptic traditions in Islam (Amanat & Bernhardsson, 2002) and other religions (Strozier, Terman, Jones, & Boyd, 2010) have found – that the ideology of the apocalypse is related to self-destructive political violence. This research into

the apocalypse in turn foreshadowed the sudden emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS] in 2014,² demanding a further merging of Fromm's heritage with contemporary trends in terror research, a central task that will be carried out here.

Death-Related Research and Insights in Modern Psychology

This brings us to the abovementioned fields of study that are of relevance to death – community psychology, terror management theory and death-anxiety research. Each leaves us with a remarkably similar picture of the psychological dynamics responsible for how people handle the prospect of death (self-inflicted or otherwise) and the role religion plays as a factor, among many others. In the process the three approaches independently corroborate each other qualitatively and quantitatively while also adding refinements and modifications to each other's empirical findings and theoretical conceptions.

It may surprise some that community psychology – studying how individuals relate to their communities and society at large – has some bearing on the topic of suicide terrorism or death in general, but it does. As community psychologist Seymour Sarason explains, it is “one thing to identify one's self with a particular religion; it is quite another to feel a part of a religious *community* and all that implies about social-personal relationships, obligations, and practices” (Sarason, 1993, p. 190; emphasis added). Separation from the community is tantamount to death, meaning that the need for such attachments is more psychological than religious or, as a minister put it, parishioners “come to church on Sunday as much or more to commune with each other as to commune with God” (quoted in Sarason, 1993, p. 190). They go to church because they “do not want to *feel so alone* in the world” (quoted in Sarason, 1993, p. 190; emphasis added). It is the “*terror or regret or pain* that knowledge of our *mortality* engenders inheres in its *separating us* from the human community of which we are a part” (Sarason, 1993, p. 189; emphases added). In his own studies Sarason asked fellow psychologists such questions as, “Have you ever found yourself imagining that you have died but you are still able to observe those you love?” (Sarason, 1993, p. 188). The answers were always in the affirmative, and his colleges were agnostics and atheists.

Terror management theory, as a body of theory and empirical studies found – not surprisingly – that religion plays a major role in helping people (consciously or unconsciously) cope with the prospect of death. Religion provides human beings with a kind of symbolic immortality through such theological notions as the afterlife. More detailed studies, however, found that it was values in general, whether religious or secular, that

² This article was already in draft form prior to 2014, highlighting once again the utility of Fromm in the here and now and his relevance across cultures.

allow “individuals to feel that they are key performers in a meaningful cultural drama” (Mandel & Heine, 1999, p. 527).

Anything will do to convince you that you are making a lasting mark, and not necessarily anything strictly speaking religious; beginning with group memberships and moving to such seeming ephemeral signifiers as “awards, books written,” or even “... acquiring tangible symbols of value” such as luxury products. This is because luxury products (as opposed to regular consumer items) made test subjects “feel *more valuable within* the culture” (Mandel & Heine, 1999, pp. 527-528; emphasis added). For Sarason (1993), this logic is amply illustrated by the thoroughly secular example of Socrates, someone who never bothered himself with the gods when defending the decision to drink the hemlock instead of go into exile, mixing a kind of blind patriotism with his temporal woes. Athens laws, however cruel and inconsiderate, “antedated him and should continue after his death”. He was nothing more than a mortal; “Athens, he hoped, was not” (Sarason, 1993, p. 195).

As a Christian colleague explained to the author – as a Muslim I have to periodically consult others over Christian theological constructions – the Greeks and Romans after them identified eternity with the polis (city-state), citing Hannah Arendt’s *Between past and future: six exercises in political thought* (Arendt, 1961, p. 121). He further explained that with the rise of Christianity the Roman dictum “take the world and you have eternity in the city”, slowly became “give the world up and you have eternity with Christ” (Libarid, personal communication, November 29, 2016).

What is more, these philosophical insights hold up clinically. In a similar vein, terror management theory researchers found that inflating one’s sense of self-worth would reduce “self-reported anxiety in response to a graphic death-related video”; “skin conductance... in response to the anticipation of painful electric shock” was likewise reduced (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997, p. 25). Ego is such a powerful coping mechanism that it can blot out religion (or “worldview”) itself, since research also found that “increasing self-esteem *decreased* the worldview defense that occurs in response to reminders of mortality” (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997, p. 28; emphasis added).

As for death-anxiety research, a well-established literature applying the field to the Arab world exists, with a special focus on Muslim case subjects. Arab psychologist Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek has been researching Arab death-anxiety since the 1980s, and specifically at the level of young people, and has repeatedly found the most persistent fear Muslims suffered from was *azab al-quboor* (Abdel-Khalek, 2002, p. 677). These are the torments of the grave that all Muslims, even the devout, are supposed to endure before the Day of Judgement. This theological affliction topped the list of Arab death-related anxieties. Other documented anxieties identified among Arab samples – 1,046 volunteer, male and female undergraduates from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia – were: “Fear of Pain and Punishment, Fear of Losing *Worldly Involvements*, Religious Transgressions and Failures, and *Parting from Loved Ones*” (Abdel-Khalek, 2002, p. 674; emphasis added).

Death-anxiety research has independently supported Sarason's work, since it is the "social interaction and personal experience" involved in religious *practices* that are "more important to frustration reduction than religious orthodoxy or self-identification with transcendental significant others" (Nelson & Cantrell, 1980, p. 153). Belief, by itself, is never enough. More than this, death anxiety does not vary that much in relation to the usual socio-economic indicators of "income, education, age, occupational status, area reared, and area of residence" (Nelson & Cantrell, 1980, p. 148). The crucial factor, almost an independent factor, again is religiosity. But that depends on how seriously you take religion and *what* specifically religion means to you in your daily life, since it has also been found that people engaging in acts of worship, even communal ones, still score highly on the "multi-dimensional death anxiety index" used by Nelson and Cantrell among other death-anxiety researchers (Nelson & Cantrell, 1980, p. 150).

That is, worshippers continue to fear death provided they are just going through the motions out of outward observation – extrinsic as opposite to "intrinsic" religiosity driven by genuine faith (Wen, 2010, p. 36). The communal or individual and intrinsic or extrinsic dimensions are what allow religion to rise above worldly concerns and troubles, or be dragged down by these fleshy weakness and anxieties to their mundane level. Instead of religion correcting such fears, death-obsessed morbidity is imprinted onto religion. Note that the dreaded *Azab al-quboor* isn't actually an unanimously accepted notion in Islamic theology and is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran.

Anecdotal and Fictive Accounts: Melding the Semiotics of Suicide and Terrorism

As said above, essentially the same image emerges whichever body of theory you use, but at a higher level of detail, where general tendencies become more concrete in their more specific contexts. It is only with this multidisciplinary, multidimensional framework in mind that we can make sense of the complex set of motivations driving Muslim and Arab suicide bombers on their missions. One invaluable source of information in this regard are fictional works produced in the Arab world – literature, cinema – as they help illustrate the sentiments of both the originators and the audience. Authors and directors speak the same language as the perpetrators of acts of terror or martyrdom, so to speak, and so help expose the inner workings of their minds. The relevant works, as we shall see below, are not even always directly related to terrorism or politics.

Brym and Hamlin (2009) have famously cited the Arab movie *Paradise Now*, the fictional story of two Palestinian suicide bombers, Khaled and Said. While the two heroes “clothe their decision in terms of religious rectitude” they are in fact “*not very religious* [emphasis added] themselves, *fear death* [emphasis added], and are uncertain they will enter paradise when they complete their task” (Brym & Hamlin, 2009, p. 92). Death anxiety is clearly evident here. As for the coping mechanisms outlined in terror management theory, note that only Said goes through with the suicide operation, out of revenge and to expunge the shameful reputation of his father who was a collaborator with the Israelis (Brym & Hamlin, 2009, pp. 91-92). He wants to be remembered differently by cleansing the family name. Death obsessions, not religion, drive people to look for such symbolic substitutes for the worldly life.

There are also parallels with Sarason’s community psychology in a short story by Jordanian author Aqlah Haddad, which is a fictionalised account of an actual suicide mission carried out in 1987 by Palestinian *fedai* (guerrilla fighter), Khaled Al-Akr.¹ The story is aptly titled “*Lover of the Homeland*” and, interestingly, half of it is centred on Khaled’s wife Rajaa. Her name means *beseech* in Arabic and not coincidentally, his

¹ A *fedai* is a guerrilla fighter, in the modern usage, but the original *fedayeen* (plural) were the sectarian Medieval *Hashashin* [Assassins], and the term means “one who offers his own life as a sacrificial ransom” (Pinault, 1992, p. 43).

wife is described as having an angelic face and small hands and is typically fearful for his safety. The hero does not want to die but retorts that the homeland cannot prosper and be liberated without taking such risks. More substantively, Khaled adds: “We only live one life, and my hope is to help the homeless, the destitute and those of our people held captive.” Later he explains that the most he wishes for is to be “nothing more” than a (small) candle to be “added to the thousands of candles that have lit the way before and will continue to light afterwards” (Haddad, 1990a, p. 14). Note also that Khaled means “the eternal” in Arabic, and one of the suicide bombers in *Paradise Now* is also called Khaled. Haddad’s hero, moreover, is a left-wing guerrilla and so is more motivated by nationalism and social justice than anything specifically theological. And yet he thinks in much the same way as modern-day Hamas recruits, as we shall see below.

While on his mission in Haddad’s story, attacking an Israeli encampment in occupied Palestine at night, Khaled declares his undying love for his land, the land of his parents and *ancestors*. He even imagines he can hear the voice of the oppressed and occupied Palestinians on the winds. Khaled’s talk of candles is a clear allusion to *continuity*, lights along the path, before and after him. We can add that candles look very much like twinkling stars in the night sky, which would explain why another symbolic representation of present-day Palestinian suicide bombers are “green birds flying in a purple sky” (Hassan, 2001, p. 1). Green is the colour of Islam and eternity is commonly affixed with the stars and heavens. Note that a Hamas suicide bomber recruit is told repeatedly that if he sacrifices himself this way, he can “*intercede* [emphasis added] for seventy of his nearest and dearest to enter Heaven” on the Day of Resurrection (Hassan, 2001). Recruits are also told that the shortest, guaranteed path to paradise is a suicide operation, probably a veiled reference to the *azab al-quboor* because this is an intermediary stage that Muslims are supposed to go through if they make the mistake of dying normally.

Such quasi-theological existential fears, then, overlap and amplify the fears of loneliness charted by Sarason (and Erich Fromm). You can see this intermingling in Ashraf Al-Khamaysi’s very apolitical Egyptian novel, *God’s Land of Exile*, the tale of a century old character, Hijazi, who is informed in a dream that he only has three more days to live. What terrifies him is “ceasing to be... being left out to be eaten by dogs and vultures” and, not surprisingly, his knee jerk reaction is to contemplate “how he can *stay around* even after he’s dead, perhaps just propping up his body in front of his house” (Cormack, 2014, emphases added). More specifically, he “just wants to keep on living... *in* his village *with* his family and *small* group of close friends”, while what terrifies him is not “... dying, I’m afraid of being *buried*” (Al-Khamaysi, quoted in Cormack, 2014, emphases added).

The exact same logic is operating in the minds of suicide bombers, albeit in more extreme form, as attested to by a less well known American example – Samuel Joseph Byck. In 1974 he tried to hijack a passenger plane to crash it into the Nixon White House. In a tape-recording, Byck said his one wish was to “*be alive, after I’m dead* for

about a week afterward to see... what people say and think... not that it makes any difference... but I want to see who sheds an honest sincere tear, who's really going to miss me" (quoted in Borowitz, 2005, p. 93).

Note also that Byck described himself as a "grain of sand on the beach of the U.S. of A." (Borowitz, 2005, p. 92). This hooks into another story by Haddad, "Returning to the Battlefield", a graphic portrayal of the aftermath of a battle sequence in some unnamed Arab war (Haddad, 1990b). The bodies of fallen soldiers are described as mixing seamlessly with the destroyed machinery and, critically, the loose dirt of the land. The specific word used is *ashlaa*, which means torn or shredded flesh. The land itself is pictured in inhospitable terms, populated only with dry grass and emaciated wood. The opening scene says it all since you have soldiers heading towards battle, loaded onto a truck like cattle in the middle of the night.

Now look at the language deployed by the *Salafis* in Egypt, their whole discursive framing of religion. The adherents of this religious purist Islam have called for the demolition of the Sphinx and Pyramids on the Taliban model on the grounds of idolatry (Al-Arabiya News Staff, 2012). But more revealing is the nonchalant way they talk about the civilization that produced these monuments, describing it as *afina* (rotten and putrid) and outdated with references to desiccated bones (*izaam nakhira*). To them Islam is about nothing but death, preparing the faithful for the afterlife by making them positively hate (and fear) this world and its many temptations. Even regular mosque sermons, at least in Egypt from the author's personal experience, are replete with words like *reem* (fungus-infested, decaying flesh) and *dunya* (the world), saying that *dunya* comes from *dooniya* (lowness, of low stature).

Cultural signifiers play a critical role in moulding personality traits and influencing behaviour, as demonstrated by the findings of medical anthropology. In one famous case, medical anthropologists studying Turko-Iranian women found that the very terms used to describe health and bodily functions, embodying out of date medical paradigms, actually made them more susceptible to heart problems (Good, 1977). The death anxiety literature adds an extra dimension to this linguistic angle (death-related words and their attendant pungent sensations) since Salafis, as staunchly literal as they are in their religious interpretations, suffer from moral hypocrisy much like everybody else – in some cases Salafis have even be known to engage in drinking, drugs and everything from sexual laxity to sexual assault (Schielke, 2009, p. 181). This has resulted, in part, from doctrine because observing *ibada* (ritual worship) is favoured over ethical conduct, *suloq*, transforming prayer and religious appearance on many occasions into egotistical exercises, as many researchers have documented (Moll, 2013, p. 2). Such an extrinsic attitude to religiosity (see above) is clearly not conducive to spiritual health and would help explain another curious finding of death anxiety research – the religious are often the more mentally healthy, "excluding extremists" (Abdel-Khalek, 2011, p. 88).

The CIA-DIA report cited above also found that volunteer suicide bombers, before recruitment, were not especially more religious than the general population (Atran,

2003, p. 1537). This category of Islamists, then, are not being honest with themselves and they are the ones most eager to kill the innocent and of their own kind. The Al-Qaeda affiliated group responsible for the Madrid bombings was led by a self-professed womaniser and successful “hashish and ecstasy” dealer who “wavered between point-less criminality and redemptive religion” (Sageman, 2008b, p. 39). Atran (2006) notes how suicide bombers tend to be “‘born again’ radical Islamists, including converts from Christianity, [who] embrace apocalyptic visions for humanity’s violent salvation” (Atran, 2006, p. 129, as cited in Holdredge, 2007, p. 39). Theology is a secondary concern to the capricious leaders of fanatics, merely a tool to make death and destruction always seem close at hand (see Amanat, 2009).

In sum, what Islamist suicide recruits are trying to do is conquer their (carefully stocked) fears of death by *embracing* them. Nothing quietens death-related fears and suicide ideation like putting yourself in the line of fire, if not the firing range itself. This is very explicitly evident in the tactics used in the Palestinian territories since organisations get the volunteer to watch his own video will over and over again. As one trainer explained, these “videos encourage him to *confront death, not fear it* [emphasis added]. Then he can greet death like an old friend” (as cited in Hassan, 2001, p. 8).

In a similar vein, Israeli psychologist and terror expert Ariel Merari insightfully described the 9/11 hijackers as gladiatorial; young men “prepared to kill and die spectacularly” because they saw “themselves occupying a lowly status... heroic self-destruction was a way of altering that rank” (James, 2001, p. 36). Even rational-choice theorists have come to acknowledge the role of such seemingly irrational, ethereal factors as reputation (or dignity) as a critical motivator for suicide bombers whereby such “symbolic, emblematic and evocative” (Tosini, 2010, p. 408) acts of bodily self-sacrifice are carried out for their own sake, regardless of whether they will achieve anything of military or political significance.

As stated above with reference to terror management theory, values (religious or secular) are what helps drive this process psychologically, not theology per se. Sprinzak uses the “Marxist-Leninist” Tamil Tigers to illustrate this point, proclaiming that this organisation – which sees suicide operations as a permanent tactic in revolutionary war (see also Asad, 2007, p. 54) – constitutes the “most significant proof that suicide terrorism is not merely a religious phenomenon” (Sprinzak, 2009, p. 71). Self-immolation as a mode of public protest or personal suicide is just as a-religious, and suicide is at base just an extreme form of self-harm. A classic example cited in the literature that help bears this out is the suicide note of a Buddhist Vietnamese self-immolator, Nhat Chi Mai. She set herself on fire in protest over the Vietnam War but describes her decision in these terms:

I offer my body as a torch
to dissipate the dark
to waken love among men
to give peace to Vietnam

the one who burns herself for peace
I am only an ordinary Vietnamese
woman, without talent or ability. But
I feel pain every time I look at the
situation of my country. I want to say
that the empty words you have been
using, ‘to defend freedom and happiness
for Vietnam’, have lost all their
meaning...

(as cited in Leenaars & Wenckstern, 2004, p. 132).

It is this perception of looming darkness that can push even normal people over the edge. Hence the dark and light symbolism evident in the short story cited above, “Lover of the Homeland”. The psychic afflictions of certain individuals and groups in the Arab world can thus be explicated in a universal frame that transcends specific cultures and eras.

Or as Fromm put it, “masochistic sacrifice sees the fulfilment of life in its very negation, in the annihilation of the self” (Fromm, 1941, p. 295). Christianity and (Shiite and Sufi) Islam have long suffered from this due to self-flagellation. Note that much Sufi thinking is premised on the notions of *fana* (literally, annihilation), losing oneself, existence and individuality in the person of God, and thus attaining persistence, *baqa* (Khan, 2010; Melchert, 1996). *Baqa* is another word for immortality and is why the mad variety of dervishes living on the street keep saying *hay, hay* (alive, alive), in reference to God. This is not unlike people carrying “The End is Nigh” and “God is Alive” placards in the West, and relates again to the much sought after apocalypse. While Sufis are pacifists and mystics, self-sacrificial movements in religious history have often used their pains as a stalking horse for political power. This is evident with the Ninth-Century Christian martyr movement in Muslim Spain with volunteers getting themselves executed by the Muslim authorities to foment sectarian dissent (Daniel, 1993, p. 16), or the far more garrulous “flaggelants” during the Black Death who wanted to take the place of the Catholic clergy as conduits to the Almighty through the sacrificial of flogging themselves (Cartwright, 1991, p. 42).

But, again, the instinct is universal and exists in ultra-modern contexts. This is quite evident in the rising tide of cyber suicides – industrialised countries like South Korea and Japan top the list – and the related phenomenon of self-harm videos posted on Youtube (self-cutting and self-immolation). Kids post their obituaries beforehand in the hope that the prestige associated with this high-tech medium will rub off onto them (O’Sullivan, 2008; see also Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012). As one researcher has put it, “Facebook can become a constituent of and influence on our cultural worldviews, enhancing its capacity to afford users a feeling of self-worth and the hope of symbolic immortality” (O’Leary McNeice, 2011-2012).

The line between cyber-jihadists and cyber-suicides, then, is blurred at best, non-existent at worst given that you no longer need an organisation to recruit and indoctrinate Islamists, just a free floating Islamist discourse (see discursive framing above). Sageman (2008a) likens this wave of jihadists and takfiris to self-conscious glory seekers who are attracted to suicide-martyrs like rock stars.

This is very clear in the curious case of neo-Nazi Willi Voss, who was involved with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in his early days. Thanks to his abusive father he felt “completely powerless and that triggered a naked fury, utter shame and the feeling that I was the most worthless thing in the world” (as cited in Assmann, Bohr, Latsch, & Wiegrefe, 2013, p. 2). Voss also highlights how superfluous ideology (or religion) is here given that he started out as a petty criminal, later got involved with right-wing elements, then eventually turned into an informant against the Palestinians, for the CIA. In his own words, he was a ‘stray dog’ who wanted to bite back at anybody and anything and almost joined the German left-wing terrorist group Baader-Meinhof at one point. In sum, terrorism is another one of Fromm’s ‘options’ for dealing with modernity. Interestingly, at one point in his life Voss contemplated suicide through self-immolation; when his story (his neo-Nazi, then CIA past) became known. His excuse was that he felt so isolated, and he wanted to kill himself in public view (Assmann et al., 2013).

Additional Dimensions: Family, Gender and Urban Transitions

Another finding of terror management theory is the relationship between peers, self-esteem, and mortality fears. People under duress tend to huddle together and form ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups and polarize the world into extreme us/them divisions, hostile to anyone or anything deemed foreign, alien, or sacrilegious (Webb, 1998, p. 76). This is doubly true in the case of people who are “closed-minded” to begin with (Dezutter et al., 2007, p. 11). Group membership, in turn, is an ego-booster, an “echo chamber, amplifying grievances, intensifying bonds” that better prepares you to face your own death, even if it is a horrendously painful death (Sageman, 2008b, p. 41).

This relates to “social identity theory,” which has been used by researchers to help better explain both Islamist and non-Islamist terrorism (Al Raffie, 2013; Schwartz, Dunkel, & Waterman, 2009). Islamist groups certainly do actively foster “indoctrination of recruits into relatively small and closeted cells – emotionally tight-knit *brotherhoods* – terror organizations create a *family* of cellmates who are just as willing to sacrifice for one another as a parent for a child” (Atran, 2004, p. 79; [emphases added]). When interviewed, the recruits all “believed that by sacrificing themselves they would help secure the *future* of their ‘family’ of *fictive kin*” (Atran, 2003, p. 1537; [emphases added]). Going beyond the family, however, presumes a certain dissatisfaction with it, a finding that is not to be trifled with given that Durkheim’s original argument was that family was one of the chief reasons how certain religions were so successful at blunting suicidal tendencies. A series of studies conducted by Arab medical professionals on suicide and self-harm in twelve Arab countries (Karam, Hajjar, & Salamoun, 2007, 2008) found the opposite to be the case. Family conflicts and marital problems were the chief reported causes of depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, parasuicide and self-harm. The age ranges of the most vulnerable groups are adolescents, 15 to 18, and young adults, from 19 to 24 years. The age range for “self-immolation” was broader, from 14 to 55, but weighted more towards females.

These studies also found that men and women interpret societal pressures very differently, which would explain why most suicide bombers are men. An Egyptian study found that whereas females were “more likely to report bereavement, romantic relationship problems and marital problems,” males were “more likely to report financial difficulties and conflicts related to work and school” (Karam et al., 2008, p. 5). A suicide study in occupied Gaza and the West Bank not only found that men were chiefly motivated by depression “related to the political and economic hardship that

Palestinians encounter on a daily basis,” but also that they were less impulsive in their decision to kill themselves and planned ahead, unlike women (Karam et al., 2007, p. 103).

A far more contemporary study of stress and anxiety in Egypt, following the January 25 revolution, found the same gender bifurcations (Abdelmonem et al., 2015). Religion was found to be the chief coping mechanism used by respondents, but primarily when it came to the older generation and women. They were the ones who believed God was going to sort things out for them, eventually. Younger men, on the other hand, were either more proactive or, failing this, fell into substance abuse as a means of coping. In fact, the only men that fit the female and elderly pattern were married respondents (Abdelmonem et al., 2015).

Youthful males just do not find these options for dealing with problems – the family as a support system and passive religiosity – to be attractive. In a Saudi study cited in Karam et al. (2008), female respondents explained that they saw attempting suicide “as a way to get back at others” (p. 13). Women in this context, of course, often do not have the same peer options at their disposal as men. They are too embedded within their families and so either rely on religion more or internalise their rage and direct it at themselves; another rebuttal to the Silverman and Parger thesis. Islamist organisations then are really just peer groups, no different in principle from “cults” and “gangs” (Serwer, 2010).

Siblings are part of this dissatisfaction with the family among Arabs and Muslims. Siblings are, at the end of the day, peers in their own right. The problem is that in traditional settings, such as the countryside or poorer neighbourhoods, Arab parents often deliberately try to toughen up their sons through name-calling and encouraging sibling jealousy (Bill & Springborg, 2000, pp. 123-124). This is actually quite common in social history and is especially endemic of royal families:

Just as Richard III killed his nephews in the Tower, so rivalry between brothers and cousins has flourished in Arab dynasties. The tradition of sibling murder in the ruling family of Abu Dhabi was once so strong that the last two emirs, Shakhbut and Zayid, were compelled by their mother to swear an oath that they would live in peace together (Craig, 2007, p. 9).

Even Osama bin Laden, born into privilege, fell afoul of this tradition. As an infant he was castigated by members of his extended family as the ‘son of the slave’ because his mother was the fourth wife of his father and from outside of the bin Laden clan (Burke, 2001). Osama bin Laden, moreover, did boast openly that: “My father was very keen that one of his sons should fight against the enemies of Islam. So I am the son who is acting according to the wishes of his father” (as cited in Bergen, 2001, p. 52).

The family unit, already riven with conflict in the Arab world, is now coming under an additional set of strains thanks to the transition to modernity. Karam et al. (2008)

observed that while Arab suicide rates are lower than in the West, the numbers have been increasing, and in all likelihood the following development is taking place due to:

... economic and social changes which are the result of rapid modernization and urbanization in the region, such rapid changes [are] creating a growing rift between younger and older generations, with the resulting dissonance and intensifying conflicts between Arab youth, the conservative society and homes they live in. (Karam et al., 2008, p. 18)

Arab psychologist Ahmed Okasha's clinical research in Egypt found that suicide and parasuicide are rarer in the countryside, in part because of the absence of a generation gap: "Children learn crafts and appropriate conduct smoothly from their everyday coexistence with parents and elders, and are gradually initiated into the fuller social responsibilities of the extended family community" (Okasha, 2004, p. 269). Problems crop up when families are uprooted and head to the city, since parents work away from home in a mechanised setting and so "pass on to their children little knowledge and fewer skills which could earn them the children's respect... delinquency and behaviour disorders tend to develop out of lack of modelling and identity crises" (Okasha, 2004, p. 269). Even among the original urban populations in countries like Egypt, "population density and over-crowding can lead to self-centered behavior and alienation" (Okasha & Okasha, 1999-2000, p. 64).

It seems pre-existing social problems are then exaggerated with the advent of modernity. We know from other studies that societies in transition, like Buddhist Taiwan, experience a declining altruistic suicide rate while egoistic and anomic suicides increase in accordance with Durkheim's model (Wen, 1973, p. 221). Under closer inspection however it emerges that the "second most important" cause of the rising tide of egoistic and anomic suicides was (still) "domestic quarrels" and even "forced marriages" (Wen, 1973, p. 217). Erich Fromm anticipated much of this analysis through his designations of different family types. He classifies the traditional family as "symbiotic", where the children are not allowed to have personalities of their own and are effectively "swallowed up" by their parents (Boeree, 2006, p. 6). The modern family, by contrast, is built on egalitarian notions of seeing children as equals. The problem is that parents become "cohabitants with their children" who no longer provide "real adult guidance," which encourages the young to "turn to their peers and to the media for their values" (Boeree, 2006, p. 6-7).

Ajit Shah and Mahmood Chandia (2010), whilst trying to substantiate the Durkheim thesis, came to the conclusion that one of the key reasons why Islam was able to play such a successful role against suicide for so long, was specifically because of the slow progress of modernisation – urbanisation, industrialisation, secularisation. With modernity progressing at a faster pace, though, cultural safeguards that worked against suicide become eroded and suicide increasingly becomes politically motivated suicide terrorism when it comes to young Arab and Muslim males.

Missing Links – Fromm and Millenarianism

Whilst discussing Durkheim's thesis on suicide and religion Fromm also argued that it is was not just the far more all-encompassing nature of Catholicism as a religion that explained the higher suicide rates of Protestant countries, but the fact that "Protestant countries are the ones in which the capitalistic mode of production is developed further, and has molded the character of the population more completely" (Fromm, 1955, p. 151). Even in his own analysis of the statistics available on suicide, homicide and alcoholism in the Western world at the time, Fromm found that it was the richer, more advanced countries of the West that suffered the more dire figures (Fromm, 1955, pp. 7-11). Looking at changing suicide rates in 19th century Europe he found a similar pattern. The more that capitalism and modernity advanced, the higher the suicide rates (Fromm, 1955, p. 150). He also found parallels between "alienation" as a root cause of many suicides and what Durkheim called *anomie* resulting from the "destruction of all of the traditional social bonds, to the fact that all truly collective organization has become secondary to the state, and that all genuine social life has been annihilated" (Fromm, 1955, p. 151).

Almost as if he took a page out of Fromm, Sarason (1993) argues that the secular, scientific lifestyle entails a "sense of unwanted privacy, of a loneliness, of a lack of social embeddedness, of being one in an unconnected sea of many" (Sarason, 1993, p. 192). This is why the adherents of a faith explicitly "seek to reunite the needs for community and transcendence" and so "go to the jugular of the modern person" (Sarason, 1993, pp. 192, 200). Terror management theory gives Sarason's analysis of human drivers a slightly different focus, since many people, instead of reuniting with the wider community, unite only with their own kind, narrowly defined. Peers, in other words. Death-anxiety research comes to play here too because such selfish modes of self-identification deny their adherents the opportunity to eliminate their fear of death which is really a fear of loneliness and *uselessness*.

Ernest Becker explained that the ideology of self-sacrifice "transmutes the fear of death into the security of self-perpetuation, so much so that people can cheerfully face up to death and even court it under some ideologies" (Becker, 1975, p. 217). Heroic self-sacrifice doesn't eliminate mortality fears, however, merely channelling them elsewhere. Consequently, any "failure of the social role, the cultural project... then reinforces the natural animal helplessness." Becker adds that "instead of the eternity of life that one has a right to take for granted... the depressed person feels instead condemned to an

eternity of destruction” (Becker, 1975, p. 216). The tragedy of all such brotherhoods of violence is that they only provide a temporary balm. Once the exhilaration runs out the only option left is a glorious exit. This might explain the most stunning finding of all in Karam et al. (2007), which is that “Lebanon had the lowest lifetime prevalence of suicide ideation” (p. 101) in the Arab world, and specifically during the Lebanese civil war. This is not because the Lebanese did not have the same social problems, far from it. Nor is it a country known for religious conservatism, certainly compared to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. What Lebanon *is* known for is tribalism, sectarianism and all forms of religious identification in the form of sectionalist parties and armed militias, exploding into political violence from time to time. This is identity-politics, not religion at all.

The same holds true of Fromm’s appreciation of the apocalypse, the sense of self-righteous superiority that comes with the designation of the saved as opposed to the damned. These associations have been found repeatedly in research conducted by terror experts on millennialism (apocalyptic cults). The nerve gas cult in Japan, Aum Shinrikyo, justified their actions on prophecies of a nuclear Armageddon (Hoffman, 1999, pp. 122-124; Olson, 1999). Here only the chosen will survive; variously defined as cult members or of a select few “superhumans” within its inner circle (Kenny, 2013, p. 92). Christian extremists in the United States also welcome a nuclear confrontation, seeing it as proactively heralding the second coming of Christ (Hoffman, 1999, pp. 105-120, 116-117; see also Jacob & Jacob, 1980; Mead, 2008; Obenzinger, 1996). The common theme is that the world as we know it has to be destroyed first, completely obliterated, for a new moral order to rise (Foden, 2002). Note the modernist undertones here, to recollect Terry Eagleton’s comments on Conrad – the need to obliterate everything to rebuild humanity from the rubble.

The Islamist variant of millennialism is *Mahdism* (Arjomand, 1990; Habibis, 1989; Voll, 1982; Werbner, 2004).¹ Here a saviour figure – the Mahdi or ‘guided one’ – emerges at the end of time to both save and unite the Muslim nation (*umma*) under his leadership in an apocalyptic confrontation with the forces of evil, united and led in their own right by the satanic Anti-Christ. Also in line with Eagleton’s remarks on nationalism fusing the ultramodern and the archaic, Mahdism is a “Utopian” project, hoping to unite Muslims round the world into a state that is both a superpower on a par with others and “fundamentally different for any other political system” resurrecting as it does the khilapha (Kersten, 2015, p. 6). The supreme manifestation, or utilization, of this millenarian, pan-Islamic ideology has come, needless to say, in Iraq with ISIS. The symbolism involved is all too evident, to cite Carol Kersten:

[The] proclamation of the Caliphate itself was done with great fanfare, in a carefully choreographed and scripted event on 28 June 2014 or 1 Ramadan 1435. It featured Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim dressed in black

¹ For a more contemporary journalistic reference on the ubiquity of such theological constructions as Mahdism see *The Economist Staff* (2013).

garb, a reference to the colour of the Abbasid Caliphate, given a sermon in the Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, named after Nur al-Din al-Zangi, the 12th-century ruler of Aleppo and Mosul, nemesis of the Crusaders and erstwhile patron of Saladdin (Kersten, 2015, p. 7).

The black flags of Al-Qaeda themselves were stylised on the black banners of the 8th century Abbasids, a dynasty that came to power through alliances with Shiites and heretical groups who prophesised the end of the world and coming of the Mahdi. This saviour would ride to glory with an army from Khorasan (modern-day Afghanistan) where, by pure coincidence, the Abbasids did most of their recruiting (Serwer, 2013). Even the staunchly Sunni Umawis portrayed the fifth rightly guided (*rashid*) khalifa, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, as a Mahdi-like saviour-figure who would bring justice to the world, just before it ends, and as prophesised in the Old Testament Book of Daniel (Arjomand, 2002). Such sectarian gene splicing (Acosta, 2010) is taking place in the here and now with the even more staunchly Sunni Al-Qaeda. The third generation of Al-Qaeda devotees are in part the product of Jihadist proselytising on the Internet that is directed at non-Arab Muslims residing in the West, playing up their supposed special *ethnic* role in these concocted end-of-world prophecies (Serwer, 2010).

Mahdism is a tool for recruitment and indoctrination and no more; and its mere adoption actually involves the defiance of religious strictures. Scott Appleby, a historian who specializes in comparative religion and controversial topics like millenarianism, explained in a lecture that the Mahdi is only supposed to arise when morality and society have decayed beyond all (divinely unaided) human ability to save it, and it is in this context that the rules of war can no longer be adhered to. Even God's law itself has to be broken, in order to save it. The end-of-the-world is an "emergency clause" used to justify the killing of innocent civilians since the passive hordes that make up society are the whole problem (Appleby, 2009). Israeli terror expert Reuven Paz has found this in his research too. the only difference is that instead of an otherworldly theological threat, the Missih Al-Dajal (False or Anti-Christ) whom the Mahdi is supposed to ultimately slay, you have the worldly Great Satan of the United States. (Great Satan is the Islamist equivalent of the 'Evil Empire', applied to the United States by Ayatollah Khomeini following the Iranian revolution). Prophecies of America's impending doom always lying just around the corner are coupled with the portrayal of the United States as all-powerful and culturally all-pervasive. Globalisation is seen as a morally-corrupting Americanisation of everything (Paz, 2003, p. 59-60). This creates a hysterical "state of siege, which calls for self defense." This fictitious "confrontation justifies the use of all means" (Paz, 2003, p. 57).

Like self-flagellation in the Islamic experience, Mahdism is originally a Shiite doctrine. In a personal communication with Scott Appleby – during his lecture – the issue of the behaviour of the 9/11 hijackers was raised, since it has been reported that they often drank and had casual sex before carrying out their mission. There were two explanations, Appleby said: either *taqiyah* or *naskh* (Appleby, 2009). *Taqiyah* in Islam

refers to avoiding persecution when living among disbelievers (even if Muslims from a different sect) by disguising oneself as a disbeliever through acting like them, a Shiite practice frowned upon by Sunnis (Pinault, 1992, p. 44). Naskh is an even more theologically controversial notion since it involves the abrogation of Quranic *sharia* rulings. The argument is that these rules are only there to maintain order in this life before the world's end, signalled by the coming of the Mahdi. Naskh, again, is a Shiite notion condemned by Sunnis and is even considered to be a heresy in mainstream Shiism (Cole, 2002, p. 120).

Sunni textual fundamentalists, then, are wilfully aping doctrines that they detest and condemn in their sectarian opponents, the Shiites.² The very word *al-mahdi* “appears nowhere in the Qur’an”, while the two canonical sources of Hadith – Bukhari and Muslim – “eschewed such accounts” (Furnish, 1999, p. 22). More than this, Islam is “non-millenarian in the true sense of the word” since the “Latin *milleni* means 1000, a period of time which holds no resonance for Muslims” (Furnish, 1999, p. 22).

One can quite justifiably deride the behaviour of the 9/11 hijackers as no more than hypocrisy, as Jerrold Post (2005, p. 631) does, but it is the mental dualism involved that should interest us more. The very commitment to Islam is what allows Islamists to disobey its strictures, since they are the chosen few; the ones sacrificing for the faith unlike the passive hordes of so-called fellow Muslims. We saw this above with reference to Salafi hypocrisy and – critically – how intimately tied up this is with exaggerating death anxiety and stultifying religion as a coping mechanism.

² According to Paz the turning point came with the Iraq War. This gave Sunni groups an unprecedented launching pad for their regional ambitions but it also terrified them with the prospect that Hassan Nasrallah would take the place of Osama bin Laden as the iconic new Saladin (Paz, 2004, p. 2). Hence the sectarian spill-over between Syria, Lebanon and Iraq following the Arab Spring rebellion against President Bashar Al-Assad.

Conclusion

Exploiting and creating this sense of confrontation and doom and gloom to justify the killing of innocents is also found in other religions, argues Appleby (2009), using Sikh extremists as an example. Note that Sikhism, like Hinduism and Buddhism, has a cyclical view of cosmological time without a final reckoning day (Bassis, Gelles, Levine, & Calhoun, 1991, p. 66-70). It is an even less millenarian religion than Islam, but religious precepts can always be turned on their head in the right political hands. Merari has also documented that the “Hindu belief in reincarnation has been used by Tamil Tiger guerrillas to perpetuate the lore that for every freedom fighter who dies, another is born to take his place” (Morris & Shahin, 1996, p. 43).

Christianity is a millenarian religion, technically, but is also supremely apolitical and non-violent (Barbre, 2011; Strozier, 1994; Strozier, 2007-2008; Wojcik, 1996). Nonetheless, fundamentalists have transformed the scriptural Jesus who taught his followers to care for the “poor and the marginalized... to turn the other cheek and love their enemies, the Jesus who rejected the mantle of secular power” into a politicised Christ who is a “King of Kings,” “Lord of Lords” (Hedges, 2005, p. 57). They see their mission as a “holy war” where they are “God’s soldiers.” Or as one militia recruiter put it: “Soon we will be asked to kill, but we will kill with love in our hearts because God is with us” (quoted in Hoffman, 1999, p. 111). It is not the ideology of the apocalypse that makes all the difference, since the notion has always been there, but the allure of modernity, of complete control of or by society. The technological and ideological tools at the disposal of fanatics, of whatever religion, are what give such theological backlogs a wider appeal than ever before. Therefore, in answer to the above question about Islamic prohibitions against both suicide and terrorism, Islamists get around them through this modernist siege mentality.

There are no innocents in this way of thinking, and if death is inevitable then it isn’t so bad provided it is in the right cause. As one captured Palestinian bomber put it: “... consider the state of our country, the conditions of the occupation... death is death, everyday” (quoted in Lankford & Hakim, 2011, p. 103). In the process the apocalyptic mindset catalogued by Erich Fromm comes to the fore. With this mindset, the baggage of notions we have adapted from terror management theory, community psychology and death anxiety research allows some of the “chosen” to extinguish their lives so that the remaining can persevere and inherit the earth. It is this vision that “transforms ordinary people into fanatics... to consider themselves special, part of a small vanguard trying to build their version of an Islamist utopia” (Sageman, 2008b, p. 40).

Our ultimate line of defence against this is a re-conceptualisation of religion into what Fromm called the “biophilous, lifeloving” mode of religiosity (as cited in Boeree, 2006, p. 9). The *biophil* is someone “repulsed by death and believes in the sanctity of... all life” and where *evil* is understood as that “which stifles life or obstructs human growth” (Wilson, 2009, p. 7). To carry out this transformation reform from the top – political upheavals on the Arab Spring model and democratization – is not enough. The Arab Spring revolutions themselves were all triggered by the tragic example of Tunisian boy Bouazizi who set himself on fire in protest over the poverty and injustices he suffered, a practice that has continued in Arab countries even after the democratic transformations and before the current security crackdowns (Hendawi, 2011; Hope, 2012).

Deep rooted changes have to take place at the multiple levels identified above: the insular and conflict-ridden nature of the extended family; gender and power relations; corporal mortification, the obsession with the grave, and apocalyptic notions that are all theologically suspect to begin with. Only then can we move towards what Erich Fromm called *The Sane Society* (1955), and dry up the wellspring of extremism once and for all.

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