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## CONVERTING TO TERRORISM: WHAT THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION TELLS US ABOUT RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED TERRORISM

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Fritz Martin Gelowicz was born in Munich Germany on Sept. 1, 1979. By all accounts his was a normal middle class German upbringing. His mother is a physician and his father runs a company that manufactures solar energy equipment. At the age of 5 his family moved to Ulm Germany. In Ulm his parents separated and Fritz worked for his father to pay for his education in business and engineering. Also working for his father's company was a German national of Turkish descent who invited Fritz to attend the Multi-Kultur-Haus, an Islamic center known for its strict Wahabi form of Islam. While apparently most of the Muslims living in the area are moderate in their outlook, the Multi-Kultur-Haus was known for its incendiary preaching and teaching. German intelligence refers to the situation there as the "Ulm scene." In that context at the age of 18 Fritz converted to Islam, began to wear long white robes and a skullcap and changed his name to Abdullah. He began to work in Ulm city's Islamic information center.

*The London Times* reported that Mohammed Atta visited the center in Ulm to spread the jihadist message and Abdullah may have met him there. In 2004, after an incident in which Abdullah started a small fire on the sidewalk (apparently trying to burn a book he didn't like), he and a friend were found to have materials praising jihad, bin Laden, and the 9/11 attacks,

Sometime in the early years of the new century Abdullah began to travel throughout the Middle East, traveling in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and studying Arabic in a language school in Damascus, Syria in 2005. According to the *New York Times* he also visited a “terrorist training camp” in Pakistan. The same report says that he was also in a training camp of the “Jihad Union, a terrorist splinter group in Uzbekistan, in March 2006” [“From Fritz to Abdullah: conversion shocks Germans” Nicholas Kulish and Souad Mekhennet, September 8, 2007 available from <http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/from-fritz-to-ahmed-ahmed-ahmed-conversion-shocks-germans/2007/09/07/1188783495046.html#>. (accessed Nov. 1, 2007)]

Back in Munich, Abdullah and his friends spent a lot of time visiting Islamicist websites and chat rooms and were apparently in touch with jihadists in Pakistan and Great Britain. Sometime at the end of 2006 or the beginning of 2007, German authorities began intercepting these email correspondences. *Der Spiegel* reports that the contacts in Pakistan “did not give specific orders to the German cell but rather acted as mentors” [M. Gebauer & Y. Muserbash, “German Investigators seek Identities of terror masterminds” *Der Spiegel* online, Sept. 6, 2007. Available at [www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,504327,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,504327,00.html). Accessed Nov. 1, 2007). Abdullah sought to avoid detection by leaving his messages in online folders rather than sending them but German authorities were able to access them too. They also sent their messages from Internet Cafes rather than from home. From these interceptions the police learned that Abdullah and his friends

were checking out the US airbase at Ramstein and the Frankfurt airport, that they had purchased 1,500 pounds of highly concentrated hydrogen peroxide, and material for bomb detonators. The press reports that for ten months, about 1000 German officers tracked this group. When the group rented an apartment and began making bombs, on September 5, 2007 the police raided the apartment. Fritz Martin Gelowicz was named the ring-leader of the group. The fact that they knew the police were watching them and yet went ahead with their plans “underlines their devotion, or fanaticism, in regards to their goal” said the head of the German Federal Crime agency. Along with Abdullah, the police arrested a Turkish man living legally in Germany, and Daniel Martin Schneider, age 22, another German national who converted to Islam.

Fritz and Daniel are not alone, according to the *Berliner Zeitung*, 4000 Germans converted to Islam in 2006 compared to 1000 in 2005. It reports that there are currently about 3.3 Million Muslims in German and about 18,000 are German nationals who converted [“German authorities watch increasing conversions to Islam with concern” Sept. 5, 2007. Obtained from [http://www.expatica.com/actual/article.asp?subchannal\\_id=26&story=43596](http://www.expatica.com/actual/article.asp?subchannal_id=26&story=43596)]

Nor are they unique in terms of the current jihad. Recent research suggests that most current jihadists are living in the Muslim diaspora and were not raised in strongly traditional Islamic families, or (like Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Schneider) were not raised as Muslims at all, but rather are converts to this militant brand of Islam (Atran, 2005; see also Khosrokhavar, 2005). This is obviously also true of the members of Aum Shinrikyo (the group that released

Sarin gas in the Tokyo subway) and many of the extreme right-wing Christians militant groups in the United States (see interviews by Jessica Stern). Thus, in the domain of religiously motivated terrorism the term “conversion” can apply to two separate but related phenomena: people raised in a more moderate or assimilated form of a religion joining a more militant or fanatical form of that same religion or people who raised in one religion, or no religion, who join a militant or fanatical form of a new religion. The Ulm group, like many religiously motivated terrorist cells, contained both types of converts. And the psychological processes involved in both types of conversion appear basically the same.

Rather Martin Gelowicz and Daniel illustrate many of the motifs seen in many contemporary converts to the jihad: conversions occur in Europe among the Muslim diaspora or native European who convert to Islam; conversion comes after a long, self-motivated search for a new worldview—similar to what Erikson called a moratorium” ( ); that the internet plays a major role in these conversions; that, as the NYPD report on radicalization emphasizes, converts remove themselves from mainstream Muslim mosques and join more radical, *takfuri*, groups.

### Understanding Conversion

Like religion and terrorism, conversion too is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon (Hood, et al,1996: 268). Pargament in his review of the research defines religious conversions as “an effort to re-create the self [in which] the individual experiences a dramatic change of the self, a change in which the self becomes identified with the sacred” (Pargament, 1997: 248). While there are parts

of this definition I will challenge (for example I don't think it has to be dramatic), this definition emphasizes two things I consider essential: that religious conversion involves a transformation of the self and that it connects the individual to something considered sacred, ie., something that functions to connect the individual to something greater than their own ego and give them a sense of meaning and purpose and a source of values to live by. Gooren (2007) insists that conversion be "a comprehensive personal change of worldview and identity" (350). Thus conversion is different from simple religious recruitment where a person joins a new religious group without a real rupture in relation to his previous life or significant change in world-view or behavior.

In the 70's research on conversion shifted from the clinical consulting room to the social-psychological journal, given the increasingly prominence of new religious movements often labeled as cults. These theories of -conversion—based on studies of converts to new religious movements—stressed social networks and group influence. In some cases, social scientists invoked categories like "brain-washing" and "thought reform" and claimed that unsuspecting young adults were being coerced into signing up with unscrupulous "cults." Such claims regarding people who most generally joined groups voluntarily have been severely criticized and few current researchers accept them (cf., Galanter 1989, Paragament, ).

In addition such social influence models theorized the individual as passive and as simply moved around by social forces. The same thing is true of current models of terrorist radicalization which rely exclusively on group processes. In fact, most religious conversions then and now—including to the jihad or militant

Christianity—are self-initiated and the end result of a spiritual search or struggle that the individual voluntarily undertakes on their own (Hood et al, 1996; Rambo 1993). This appears true of those Muslims living in the diaspora who find their own way to radical mosques or to jihadist websites on the Internet.

The contemporary understanding of conversion envision a “gradual, rational processes of active search and self-realization.” Richardson (1985) argues that the “old conversion paradigm” which assumed “the passivity of human beings” in the face of social influence is being replaced by another viewpoint which “stresses human beings as volitional entities who assign meaning to their actions and to the actions of others within a social context” (1985: 164). Conversion as currently understood is a process in which the convert is “actively seeking the conversion experience to resolve life difficulties” (Zinnbauer & Pargament 1998: 162). A recent study of (Lakhdar et al (2007: 12-13) contemporary French converts to Islam found the most predominate motif (16% of the total variance) was a striving to improve the self, gain self-knowledge, etc.” (2007: 13)]. They conclude “The overall message carried by the data is that the main motives of conversion to Islam [in France] are very personal ones (societal motives don’t seem to be dominant). This overall pattern of results is completely consistent with ... views, indicating that the convert is much more frequently an active, purposeful person who willingly chooses a new faith, rather than a passive person conforming to social pressures or the victim of uncontrollable psychological forces” (2007: 13).

Earlier social influence and social process models of conversion applied best to tight-knit religious cults and terrorist groups (the IRA, the Red Brigades, etc) where there is a structured process of recruitment, initiation, training, and eventual deployment (this is the kind of process described by Horgan and most of the essays in Reich's collection and that of Moghaddam & Marsalla). Here the type of group dynamics emphasized by many current writings about terrorism (eg., Bandura, Milgram, Zimbardo, Horgan and others) are certainly strong factors. But contemporary terrorism is more likely the result of rapidly evolving "leaderless groups" or "self-starters" in which there is little overt recruitment and much of the training is done over the internet or in small cliques (Sageman). Al Qaeda boasts it has more volunteers than it can use and the Aryan Nation, rather than sending out recruiters, on its website calls for local, self-organized groups. In such loose confederations of the like-minded, often forming over the internet, (which at least partially describes Fritz and his group), classical models of social influence may lose some of their explanatory power.

A new sense of self is a necessary part of any definition of conversion. A new identity is one of the most universal results of the conversion process. Conversion experiences often serve as the solution to an identity crisis (Rambo, 1993). That is one of the reasons they most commonly occur during adolescence and early adulthood when issues of identity are predominate. In the anomie of our post-modern, global society with its smorgasbord of options and life-styles (Giddens, 2000), a religious conversion provides clear norms, a prefabricated answer to the post-modern dilemma of "who am I," and a sense of rootedness in

a timeless tradition that transcends and feels more substantial than the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of contemporary communities of reference. Thus it has particular appeal to the young Muslim men in the immigrant communities of Europe (Khosrokhavar, 2005: 206-217) and probably to alienated youth in the United States as well.

Whether periods of crisis or a personal struggle precedes conversion experiences remains unresolved. A major problem with studies that emphasize a preceding personal crisis is that few contain a control group so it is not clear if such turmoil is a characteristic of a certain age cohort whether they convert or not. Relatively few people who report significant stress in their life end up experiencing a conversion. However, most converts tell of a major life stress before their conversion. One might recall Fritz's parent's separation in this context. Galanter found significantly higher levels of emotional distress just prior to conversion in those joining the Unification Church. Other studies stressed chronic feelings of depression, loneliness and alienation (reviewed in Paragament 250-251). But some studies have found little or no evidence of a crises or conflict prior to conversion and stress instead that people just "drift" into new religious groups (Bromley and Shupe, 1979; Gooren, 2007). So there are clearly many paths to a new religious identity.

Research is also clear that the vast majority of those who are in distress, even those who are "spiritual seekers," attending meetings and reading literature, do not end up joining a new religious movement, less than 1% according to Rambo (1993). Before 9/11, not every alienated Muslim in Germany joined a

fanatical Mosque. And not everyone who joined a fanatical Mosque journeyed to a training camp in Afghanistan or Uzbekistan. And not everyone who went to these camps pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. And not everyone who joined al-Qaeda actually volunteered for a martyrdom mission on 9/11 or afterward. So individual factors also play a role and cannot be ruled out in understanding terrorist conversions. Rather, I think, we must think in terms of an individual-group interaction in our understanding of conversion.

In any case, all current research insists that for those who do join a new religion, conversion is a process (Rambo, 1993, Straus, 1979). For example, a study of those joining the Hare Krishna movement in the 70's found that the vast majority had been reading about Eastern religions, attending meetings, experimenting with vegetarianism long before joining (Melton, 1986, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*). Certainly that has been my experience as a clinician dealing with religious patients. Even those conversions that on the surface appear most spontaneous, when they are unpacked in a careful interview, always have some antecedent event or process leading up to them. Many converts to the jihad, like Gelowicz, had spent time reading jihadi literature, visiting jihadi websites, and attending discussion groups in the mosque. The same thing is true of the two men who turned out to be leaders of the Madrid cell that blew up the trains in Spain.

One almost universal precondition is some contact, usually personal, with members of the religious group. Often an encounter with another person or persons (whom Rambo refers to as "the advocate") is a significant factor in the

conversion process. Such interpersonal activity appears crucial to a religious conversion. The current question is, Is this possible over the internet?

Research confirms that conversion experiences can be powerfully transformative and produce lasting results in the lives of individuals (Paloutzian, 2005; Rambo, 1993). The question is, what kind of change is it? Not a total personality change. Basic personality traits, characters and personality styles (as measured by standard personality inventories) do not change that much even in the most dramatic of conversion experiences — St. Paul remained a Pharisee in outlook even after he became a Christian. What does change, according to current research, is a person's goals, values, attitudes, long-range plans, and behaviors (Paloutzian, 2005).

Current studies insist that conversions need not necessarily be sudden, spontaneous, or dramatic in order to produce major changes in a person's life (Hood, et al, 1996; Rambo 1993). Studies find little difference in the effects and outcomes of conversions that are dramatic and those that occur more gradually.

Most studies find that in general converts are better off psychologically for having undergone a conversion experience. Study after study finds that converts report increased self-esteem, less depression and anxiety, better interpersonal relations (reviewed in Paragament 295-297). Studies that rely on psychological tests and not only self-report find the same result. So powerful is this "relief effect" of conversion that Galanter (1989) attributes the significant sense of commitment that often follows conversion to the reinforcement effect of feeling so much better.

The story of Fritz Gelowicz illustrates many of the salient themes in the stories of current converts to militant, fundamentalist, and even terrorist religions: 1. the search for a new identity often in adolescence, while some evidence suggests that conversions to Islam in the West happen somewhat later, in early adulthood rather than adolescence; 2. usually an educated, middle class subject who often begins the conversion process as a self-directed spiritual search; 3. in the case of the jihadis, usually the subject lives in Europe; 4. the intervention of an “advocate” or a group (either in person or increasingly online) who points the potential convert in a certain direction; thus there is a reciprocal individual-group interaction effect between an open and receptive person and a group looking for converts; 5., withdrawing from the mainstream church or mosque or synagogue (NYPD Report on Radicalization); 6. the central role of the internet in contemporary religiously motivated terrorism.

#### Conversion online

Given the importance of the Internet to contemporary terrorism, it is interesting that I could not find any studies of online conversions *per se*. But there is a large body of research that demonstrates that online interaction can generate a full “social world” complete with passion, commitment, dependency, trust, a shared vision, and mutual responsibility (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Fernback, 2007; Kazmer, 2007; Wang, 2008). Which can result in the formation of a new identity. One review of the research reports that “membership and participation in Internet groups can have powerful effects on one’s self and identity” (Bargh & McKenna, 2004: 581). And there is some suggestion that this is particularly powerful for people

with social anxiety (Stevens & Morris, 2007). And that when people disengage from online groups, they go through much the same processes as when disengaging from face to face communities (Kazmer, 2007). Like conversions in general, joining a new social world online is usually the result of individual curiosity, interest, and a self-directed search. People are not simply, passively drawn in or seduced (or “brainwashed”) by online groups. Seekers take the initiative, explore, and consider online communities just as much as face-to-face communities (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Fernback, 2007). Here too joining is a choice. So the process of identifying with an online social world is quite parallel to the process of conversion to a new religious world, especially given the contemporary understanding of conversion as a process.

However there is an additional element as well. Research suggests that the anonymity of the internet impacts, in all sorts of ways, the dynamics of group formation there (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Fernback, 2007). For example, such anonymity may be disinhibiting and allow people to express more extreme and unpopular sentiments and experiment with more radical identities. The number of websites advocating violence and containing information on obtaining weapons and making bombs has grown and researchers report that in many of these sites there is active encouragement for members to act on their violent ideas (reports reviewed in Bargh & McKenna, 2004). So we must take seriously the reality that people convert to the jihad or the Aryan Nation or come to share the west bank settlers’ vision of Israel wholly online and receive encouragement and advice there to translate violent belief into violent action.

## Religiously Motivated Terrorism as Religion

The centrality of conversion in contemporary religiously motivated in terrorism underscores its fundamentally religious nature. A brief look at some of the themes common to religious terrorists across traditions underscores the religious nature of religious terrorism

### 1<sup>st</sup> Humiliation

Feelings of humiliation has been one of the most frequently cited “root causes” of the turn to fundamentalism. In order to understand contemporary religiously motivated terrorism, it is important to emphasize that the humiliation that leads to violence does not have to be experienced directly and personally; for example, it may be the humiliation of a family member or of the whole Muslim community with which Islamic terrorists identify. The rise of mass media and the Internet throughout the Muslim world has extended the range of this identification. The pictures from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq or the demolition of family homes in Palestine evoke these identifications and feelings of humiliation that can lead directly to terrorist acts. Khosrokhavar (2005) calls this “humiliation by proxy.” For another example, some conservative American Christians claim to feel humiliated by the separation of church and state, the teaching of evolution, or images in the movies.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> The Apocalyptic Vision

One of the most common and widespread beliefs of fanatically violent religious movements is their apocalyptic vision of a cosmic struggle of the forces of the all-good against the forces of the all-evil. Bin Laden says it clearly: there

are “two adversaries; the Islamic nation, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. It is either victory and glory or defeat and humiliation.” The Reverend Paul Hill, who shot and killed a physician in front of a family planning clinic in the USA, wrote “The conflict is between God’s will and kingdom and Satan’s opposing will and kingdom”. Virtually all religious terrorists agree that they are locked in an apocalyptic battle with demonic forces.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Demonizing the Other

The demonizing of enemies is a major tactic of fanatical religious movements. Khomeini proclaimed the west the “Great Satan.” Shortly before his assassination I heard a group of ultra-orthodox rabbis on a New York radio station calling the late Israeli Prime Minister Rabin a traitor to the nation and an enemy of God who should be removed “by any means possible.” Which, of course he was, when an ultra-orthodox Jewish student shot him. Enemies who embody pure evil cannot be argued with or compromised with; they can only be destroyed. And as morally or spiritually sub-human, destroying them is not an immoral act but is, rather, a moral duty. Such us-against-them thinking, so central to religiously inspired apocalypticism, leads inevitably to what Waller calls “the social death of the victim.”

### 4<sup>th</sup> The Rage for Purification

Beyond naked aggression or revenge, the drive for purification also powers such terrorist actions. The theme of purification by death and rebirth is common theme to almost all the world’s religions. Apocalyptic religion takes this theme and historicizes it. Purification by death and rebirth are now something

that can and must happen within history, in real time. Lifton describes Aum Shinrikyo, in a phrase that could equally well apply to many religiously motivated terrorist groups, when he writes that they were driven by “the relentless impulse toward world-rejecting purification”. Jessica Stern says that religiously motivated terrorism is often a “project of purifying the world through extermination”.

In reference to the theme of purification by self-sacrifice, Hassan reports that in Palestinian neighborhoods:

Calendars are illustrated with the ‘martyr of the month.’ Paintings glorify the dead bombers in Paradise, triumphant beneath a flock of green birds. The symbol is based on a saying of the prophet Mohammad that the soul of a martyr is carried to Allah in the bosom of the green birds of paradise... A biography of a martyr ... tells of how his soul was borne upward on a fragment of a bomb... [An Imam] explained that the first drop of blood shed by a martyr during jihad washes away his sins instantaneously. On the Day of Judgment, he will face no reckoning. On the Day of Resurrection, he can intercede for several of his nearest and dearest to enter Heaven... (Hassan, 2001: 39)

Scholars familiar with the hagiographic traditions of the world’s religions will see many common themes here – for example the images of Christian saints and Buddhist Bodhisattvas borne up to paradise and ensconced in the highest heavens where, purified and sinless, they can intercede for others. By their offering and sacrifice, the human bombers and other martyrs have indeed

become holy. All of this illustrates the sacrificial, that is to say religious, nature of these actions. And it is that sacrificial, religious nature of these acts of violence that gives meaning to them in the eyes of their proponents.

Since these terrorists are offering a religious sacrifice, their actions are not primarily motivated by “a utilitarian or pragmatic calculus” Most religiously motivated terrorist acts are “not done to achieve a strategic goal but to make a symbolic statement”. One important and perhaps unhappy practical conclusion of this, I would suggest, is that it is a mistake to seek to understand religiously motivated terrorists using the game theoretic or rational choice models so prominent in the social sciences these days. Rational choice models cannot really comprehend sacred values that are deeply held for non-instrumental reasons. Such values are not open to the instrumental calculus of statistically based social sciences. Social scientists trained only in these methodologies, and the policy makers they advise, may have only a limited understanding of religiously motivated terrorism.

In addition, given the sacred nature of these acts, counter-terrorism policies based on either appealing to the religiously motivated terrorists’ self-interest or frightening them into surrendering by an overwhelming show of force will probably have little success. The religious drive to sacrifice and make holy one’s life and one’s cause transcends and subsumes any pragmatic or purely self-interested motivations.

What sort of God is it that demands sacrifice as the means of purification? Most often it is an angry, punitive God. Here the psychologist of religion can

contribute to the discussion by pointing to some of the correlates of such an image of God. There is research that suggests, at least for religiously committed populations, that punitive and wrathful images of God are associated with external locus of control, anxiety and depression, lack of empathy and less mature inter-personal relations. The reverse has also been found to be true, ie., that a more benevolent internal representation of God is associated with more mature psychological development and the capacity for more mature relationships. Thus it makes theoretical as well as empirical sense that a person who envisions God as wrathful, punitive would also be more inclined towards a more rigid dichotomizing of the world and less capacity for empathy – traits that appear to characterize many religiously motivated terrorists.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Union with God

Virtually every report on militant Muslims stresses the reward of entering paradise as a major motivator for their actions. “Religious redemption” is one of the primary enticements to undertake suicide bombing. Clearly this is not unique to fanatical religious. Quite the reverse. The desire for an experience of union with a transcendental or divine reality appears foundational in virtually every religion. This desire for spiritual reunion may well be the beating heart of every living religion. What is unique to fanatical religions is the linkage of this desire for spiritual reunion with violence, especially the violence of sacrificial killing or apocalyptic purification. It may be this linkage of a well-nigh universal and powerful spiritual desire with the themes of bloody sacrifice and purification through violence that turns spiritual longing into terrorist action.

How does this happen? It appears connected to the image of God that is at work here – the image of a vengeful and punitive and overpowering patriarchal divine being. The believer must find a way to relate to an omnipotent being who appears to will the world's destruction. The punitive, omnipotent being must be appeased, placated. A bloody sacrifice must be offered. So we return again to the combination of a wrathful, punitive image of God, the insistence on purification at any cost, and the theme of bloody sacrifice. The wish for a bloody, apocalyptic day of reckoning and acts of religiously motivated terrorism are not simply reactions against modernity. While that anti-modern sentiment may play a role, these groups are a potent force in their own right (and not just a reaction to modernity), driven by their need to purify the world.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> The Sanctification of Violence

Another way in which religion promotes terrorism and genocide is by directly sanctioning violence and killing and by providing a moral justification for terrorists' actions done in the name of God. Religions, however, do not simply justify violence the way other ideologies do. For religiously motivated terrorists, violence takes on a sacred purpose. Violence and genocide can become religious imperatives, carrying a cosmic or spiritual meaning beyond that provided by any political or legal authority. This inevitably leads to a significant reduction in the usual restrictions on the deployment of violence, thus opening up the possibility of full-scale, unrestricted genocidal campaigns with weapons of mass destruction. For al Qaeda, jihad means total, all-out, unrestricted warfare. Exactly the same position is modeled in the writings of American apocalyptic

Christians and the *Left Behind* series of novels. This mixing of religion and violence in combination with the increasing sophistication and lethality of modern technologies of killing result in contemporary terrorism's increasingly deadly results. This transcendental legitimation of killing is another way in which religions create and maintain a culture of violence out of which terrorism and genocide can easily emerge.

### The Psychology of Religious Terrorism

What psychological processes are involved when religion leads to violence? My answer is this: that universal religious themes such as purification or the search for reunion with the source of life or the longing for personal meaning and transformation — the classic instigators of spiritual search and religious conversion — become subsumed into destructive psychological motivations such as a Manichean dichotomizing of the world into all-good, all-evil camps, or the drive to connect with and appease a humiliating or persecuting idealized patriarchal Other. The result is the psychological preconditions for religiously sponsored terrorism and violence.

Based on interviews with jihadists around the world, Scott Atran speaks of them as “yearning for a sense of community and a deeper meaning in life” (Atran, 2006b: 135). These are the same desires that motivated young Japanese to join Aum Shinrikyo and that motivate religious converts around the world, whether it is contemporary American intellectuals embracing Buddhism or a New Age spirituality, or anomaic suburbanites joining far-right mega-churches (Hedges, 2006), or students in the sixties flocking to cults (Galanter, 1998). Interviews with

and statements by jihadists make it clear that the lure of jihad is not simply the lure of revenge or rage but rather the lure of spiritual renewal, moral seriousness, and a meaningful life (Atran, 2006; Stern, 2003). If we do not understand the spirituality that motivates the jihadists and other religiously motivated terrorists and the power of religious conversions to reorient and give meaning to people's lives, we will never counter them effectively. If part of the attraction of jihad and other fanatical religious activities is the attraction of personal transformation and spiritual renewal, then a crucial part of our response must be the articulation of an equally powerful alternative religious and moral vision.

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