This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Sociotheology: The Significance of Religious Worldviews

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/12/14/sociotheology-the-significance-of-religious-worldviews/

MONA KANWAL SHEIKH, DEC 14 2015

This is an excerpt from *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century.* Available now on Amazon (UK, USA), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download. Find out more about E-IR's open access books here.

In International Relations (IR), religion's ability to provide legitimacy for an end other than religion has been the usual reason to include it in analysis. The instrumental use of religion is arguably a central concern for IR, but not a sufficient one. This chapter is based on the idea that there can be religious reasons behind the behaviour of political actors, and hence religion should not just be treated as a rhetorical gloss over 'real motives' or non-religious goals. The actions and ideas of political actors can be based on hopes for spiritual transformation in this life and the next, and on the longing for salvation and spiritual fulfilment.

In most cases the motivations of political actors who employ religious vocabulary or draw on religious imagery are neither fully religious nor secular. Rather, they represent a blend that challenges any clear-cut division. Research on activists involved in acts of terrorism show that they simultaneously understand their acts in religious terms *and* as part of struggles for peace, justice and a better socio-political order.[1] For them, there is no 'secular' distinction between defending faith and defending a just socio-political order since the latter is part of their religious vision.

Below I focus on the necessity of bringing into IR a focus on religious worldviews—a study object, which has traditionally been confined to the departments of theology. This does not mean that worldviews are only significant when it comes to understanding violent acts committed by adherents of religious traditions. Worldviews are also entry points to understanding 'secular violence' acted out as part of a secular vision of the world, and also relevant for debates that are not about violent behaviour at all. So even though I concentrate on religious violence in this chapter, the applicability of my framework is broader.

Whether we are talking about the suicide bombings of the Pakistani Taliban, the attack on the Hebron mosque by Baruch Goldstein, Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City or the shootings of Norway's Anders Breivik, they all represent a culture in which the justifications for violence are coloured by a religious understanding of social reality.

And in this lies the challenge: accounting for religious thinking and rationality is difficult within existing frameworks of thinking within social analysis and IR in particular. Rational choice theory is baffled by choices that do not seem to be rational in worldly calculations but have a far more distant time horizon and a more imaginative sense of rewards than most materialist calculations support. Strategic analyses flounder when the strategies do not seem to yield immediate benefits. Organisational theories falter when the communities of support are diffuse, unstructured, and lack a palpable chain of command. In order to address some of these challenges, I propose the adoption of a 'sociotheological framework' that enables an investigation of how the social reality looks through the eyes of religious activists.[2]

Sociotheology: Combining Faith and Milieu

Militant movements such as the Taliban, messianic Zionists and Christian abortion clinic bombers draw on specific religious myths, doctrines and ideas. Activists in the movements often present themselves as servants of God implementing a divine command. In India, Hindus and Sikhs have justified violence in defence of their religious faiths, and even Buddhism—a tradition for which nonviolence is its hallmark—has been fused with violence in political movements in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Tibet and in the activities of the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo movement. Though often the motives of these movements can be described in non-religious terms—defending social identity, securing justice and obtaining political order—they are simultaneously phrased in pious language and often characterised as having religious goals. Frequently the personal spiritual mission of salvation is fused with a communal longing for a redemptive social order. Thus these phenomena need to be analysed from both theological and social perspectives.

The *interdisciplinary trend* that Mark Juergensmeyer and I have previously labelled sociotheology emerged out of the recognition that politics has a religious side and religion can be an inherent part of public and political life. This insight was in fact part of the thinking of some of the founding figures of social studies—most notably Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx.[3] Most of the sociological work on religion in the first half of the twentieth century, however, tended to be reductionist and unappreciative of the impact of religious ideas and imagery.[4]

Typically social scientists have felt most comfortable by keeping theology at an arm's length, but the representatives of what we labelled a sociotheological approach have provided exceptions.[5] In some instances, the trend of combining a focus on faith with a focus on the social milieu has been a steady though often minority perspective within the disciplines. At times, the scholarly attention on faith and politics has increased due to particular political events. For example, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Sikh and Afghan Muslim rebellions in the 1980s, and the rise of a global jihadi movement that culminated in the spectacular aerial assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001 brought along an increased academic as well as public interest in the religious motives for political acts. In recent years, the issue of examining religion and politics together has returned, in part because of the public prominence of movements that blend together religious and political activism. Religious politics also gained focus because it appears to challenge secularism as an ideology, and this has led to an examination of the post-Enlightenment notion that religion is something private and separate from the public secular realm.[6]

For the social sciences and IR, this sociotheological turn means incorporating into social analysis the insider-orientated attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview. As a result, the social sciences need to recover an appreciation for a field long banished from the halls of secular academe: theology. The insider perspective on a religious worldview is, after all, what the field of theology has classically been about, long before the advent of the modern academic disciplines: attempts to structure the social, ethical, political and spiritual aspects of a culture's ideas and meanings into a coherent whole. It studies what Michel Foucault once designated as an episteme: the structure of knowledge that is the basis of an understanding of how reality works.[7] These structures of knowledge have traditionally been understood in language about ultimate reality that is today regarded as religious; thus theology was—as the name implies—the study of the logic of God. By extension, it is the study of the essential moral and spiritual connections in all aspects of life.

The power of theology as an academic discipline in the early modern period was its comprehensiveness. It attempted to survey the whole range of human activity and belief. For this reason, theology was once regarded as the queen of the sciences.[8] During the latter part of the modern era, theology fell into disrespect among social sciences partly due to the secularisation narrative that represented faith as the opposite to science, and theology became isolated as a field. Partly this was due to three limitations in the way that theology was increasingly practiced: it had only one religious tradition as its frame of reference, it asserted normative truth claims about its analyses, and its analysts often ignored the social context in which the ideas they study emerge and are cultivated.

Theory and Epistemology

The scholars who study contemporary worldviews from the sociotheological approach are different from the theologians described above in that they apply their analytic style to any tradition or worldview. They bracket truth claims asserted by either the subjects in the study or by the analysts studying the subjects' points of view, and they

take seriously the social location in which a view of the world emerges and the social consequences of a particular way of thinking about reality. The point is to try to understand the reasoning behind the truth claims, not to verify them.

Sociotheology is based on the realisation that much of the phenomena that modern people since the time of the European Enlightenment have called religion are related to other aspects of society, from economic and political factors to matters of social identity. For this reason, sociotheological analysis is seldom limited to a study of religion in the narrow sense, as if there were a separate cluster of actions and ideas relating to a notion of transcendence and of spiritual transformation that was unaffected by other aspects of public and private life.

A sociotheological framework for analysis is built upon epistemological revolutions across disciplinary borders that lead to a more dynamic view on inside and outside factors driving the individual. One example is the so-called Strong Programme in the sociology of science associated with the Edinburgh School, which holds that all human knowledge and ideas, including religious ones, contain some social components in its formation process. Another relevant methodological revolution has come from within discursive psychology and social psychology that dissolved the concepts of a mind-body dichotomy.[9] The dynamic view on the mind-body relationship is part of what has been called the 'second cognitive revolution' that challenged the idea that mental and psychological entities exist in a self-contained way.

The same sort of bridge building between inside and outside perspectives has taken place within the field of theology. Here one of the pioneers was George Lindbeck, who developed a 'cultural-linguistic' concept of religious doctrines by bridging anthropology and a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language that probed the relationship between language and culture, on the one hand, and experience and belief, on the other. Together, the approximation of the field of psychology and theology (the mind and belief) and sociology (the context) as two poles in the same discursive dynamics has contributed to eroding a stonewall dichotomy between theology and the social sciences and opened a space for sociotheology.

One of the implications of the epistemological basis of sociotheology is that it is more prone to take seriously the words of violent activists than instrumentalist or essentialist approaches to religious violence. Scepticism towards taking the words of one's study object seriously often reflects an image of the individual who has an isolated inner side that cannot be verified by positivist test methods. Statements representing the 'inside' are therefore also regarded as invalid since there is no theorised 'bond' between the inside and outside.

Epistemic Worldview Analysis

When activists who have supported violent actions are accessed from a sociotheological perspective, the main question relates to how they viewed the world in a way that would allow these actions to be carried out. What is being examined by taking a sociotheological approach is a way of looking at social reality that enables certain action: an 'epistemic worldview'. The idea of an epistemic worldview is a marriage between Foucault's concept of episteme—a paradigm of linguistic discourse based on a common set of understandings about the basis of knowledge—and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the social location of shared understandings about the world and how it should work.[10] We want to understand their framework for thinking about reality and acting appropriately within a perceived understanding of the world.[11]

To understand a perception of reality—an epistemic worldview—requires the sociotheological tasks of recovering the internal logic of this perception of reality and placing it within its social milieu. It also requires understanding the relation between those people who share a certain worldview and the social and power structures of the world around them. The task is similar to the hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of texts—an approach that has been employed in cultural sociology as well—in attempting to understand the range of ways that statements and social events have been perceived from various perspectives.

Hence epistemic worldviews are conceptual entities, but they are also tied to social realities. Others share these worldviews in a pattern of association that is usually contiguous with other social boundaries, such as a particular

ethnic or religious community. This means there are concentric circles of social realities that coalesce with particular epistemic worldviews. For example, among right-wing Christian Protestants in the American rural West and South, some share an even more extremist Christian identity variety. Though the inner levels of these concentric circles are not always socially distinct, there are often social markers—the movement is dominated by economically distressed, heterosexual white men, for example, a social category in which one would find few blacks, Asians or Hispanics, virtually no women in leadership roles, and no openly gay men or women.

The social boundaries of followers of a movement—those who sympathetically agree with the central tenets and narrative story that dominate a particular epistemic worldview—may be more difficult to demarcate. The supporters of the global jihadi movement at the turn of the twenty-first century provide a case in point. If one thinks of the Al Qaeda organisation as the people who worked directly under the leadership of Osama bin Laden before his death in 2011, the numbers were likely to be only in the hundreds. But if one includes all those who were influenced by, and to some extent sympathetic with, the general jihadi perspective that identified the United States as an opponent of Islam and insisted on militant resistance on the part of concerned Muslims, the number was much greater, in the thousands and perhaps even in the millions. In this situation, therefore, the concentric circle approach to epistemic worldviews applies, with a broad population of followers, often engaged through the internet and other forms of electronic social media.

In order to trace the forms of authority that underpin the epistemic worldview, a relevant question to ask is what constitutes the *bases of* authority in the epistemic worldviews. For religious militants, references to religious myths or spiritual dreams, Holy Scriptures or exegesis, or jurisprudential literature based on the interpretations of revelations or the will of God/gods have the same status empirical evidence would have in a scientific discourse—they are used as the basis of authoritative truth claims that can provide legitimacy to acts of violence.

Concluding Reflections

Sociotheology is a new opening for IR scholars and students interested in studying worldviews that set the scene for political violence to be played out. In an earlier contribution, Juergensmeyer and I laid out basic guidelines of how to conduct ‘good sociotheology’, drawing inspiration from anthropological methodology of getting close to your subjects of study and the ideals of *verstehen*.[12] The sociotheological approach has relevance for larger debates on what determines political behaviour and can be helpful in illuminating the presence of multiple rationalities, authority and legitimacy structures that matters in situations of political conflicts.

To facilitate the development towards a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between epistemic worldviews and their social location, there is still a need to develop a more systematic research programme for the archaeological reconstruction of epistemic worldviews in their social milieus. In particular, the methodological question of how to measure the impact of a epistemic worldview vis-à-vis other factors that enable violence requires more attention. Another limitation of the approach is that it cannot be used to explain why only some of those who share an epistemic worldview turn to actual violence. It can only point at the places where the rationality for violence is embedded.

The contemporary need to engage scientifically with worldviews is that in politics the enemy is often deprived of having a rationale. In a violent world, entering into the epistemic worldviews of adversaries is crucial both to explain and prevent the escalation of violence. Often spirals of violence emerge from responses to simplified images of ‘the enemy’ countered by actions also based on stereotypes. Being empathetic is not the same as morally approving of violence but understanding that there can be a political and religious rationale behind ‘their’ violence just as ‘we’ have one in war and other situations.

Resistance to taking an empathetic stance towards the subjects’ theologically informed worldview can have disastrous consequences. In the case of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) standoff at Waco, Texas, in 1993 with members of the Branch Davidian sect led by David Koresh, the FBI agents were criticised for having precipitated the fiery ending of the encounter (and the deaths of members of the movement) by not understanding the internal logic of the theological perception of history that was held by Koresh and that led him to take his tragically

decisive actions. To the agents, the rationales given by Koresh in their extensive telephone conversations with him during the standoff were just theological gibberish. Later analyses of the conversations revealed that Koresh had a biblically sophisticated view of the eschatological end of history and a vaunted role of his own movement in the end-time conflagration that helped to explain his responses to the FBI's actions.

Notes

[1] See e.g. Cynthia K. Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God, the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds), *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

[2] The present essay is based on the framework put forward in Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona K. Sheikh, 'The Sociotheological Turn in the Study of Religion and Violence', *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

[3] Durkheim attempted to immerse himself in the thinking of tribal societies to understand the socioreligious significance of totemic symbols (Emile Durkheim. [1912] 1915. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. New York: The Free Press.). Weber adopted a posture of verstehen in his social analysis that was sensitive to cultural values; and he integrated both theological ideas and social theory in his studies of the religions of India and China and in developing his understanding of the Protestant ethic (Max Weber [1905]. 2002. *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. New York: The Free Press; [1915] 1951. *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. New York: The Free Press; [1916]. 1958. *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. New York: The Free Press.). Karl Marx took seriously the relationship of ideological frameworks of thought to social structure, especially in his analysis of the role of religion in the German peasant's revolt (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1939. *The German Ideology*. Ed. R. Pascal. New York: International Publishers.).

[4] IR has been more silent about religion, though the mid-twentieth century scholars of classical realism were exceptions. They did actually point to the importance of religion for the discipline of International Relations, however the explicit debates on religion, theory, and International Relations that took place in Europe disappeared from mainstream IR within ten years. Instead, throughout the 1990s concepts like culture and identity found their way into the mainstream of IR research and, in this, religion has occasionally been implicitly involved as a subcategory of the broader concept of identity, or mentioned as part of a specific ethnic heritage, culture or history. See Kenneth Wald and Clyde Wilcox, 'Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?', *American Political Science Review*, 100:4 (2006), pp. 523–9; Daniel Philpott, 'The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations', *World Politics*, 55 (2002), pp. 66–95; Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Ole Wæver, 'In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:3, pp. 705–39.

[5] Within sociology, both Robert Bellah and Peter Berger have been hospitable to theological points of view with social thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Antony Giddens accepting, albeit more reluctantly, the viewpoints from within religious traditions. In the field of political philosophy, Charles Taylor has been consistently congenial to religious perspectives, while John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas came around to seeing the value of taking seriously religious elements of social thought relatively late in their academic careers. Anthropologists by disciplinary habit have been more disposed to take other people's perspectives seriously, and thus have accommodated more easily religious points of view. This has been true of such anthropologists as Clifford Geertz, Louis Dumont, Mary Douglas, Stanley Tambiah, Talal Asad, and Gananath Obeyesekere. Within the fields of religious studies and the history of religion, religious perspectives are part of the objects of their studies, and some of the scholars who study religion have also been mindful of the social implications of religious ideas. These socially-minded scholars of religion have included many comparativists, including notably Ninian Smart and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. And though theology sometimes appear as a closed system of thought, the political significance of religious thinking has been a theme of scholars from a variety of theological traditions, including such Protestant Christians as Reinhold Niebuhr and

George Lindbeck, the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the Jewish-Christian writer Simone Weil, the Muslim legal expert Abdullahi An-Naim, the Hindu thinker Rabindranath Tagore, and the Buddhist social activist Sulak Sivaraksa.

[6] This issue has been explored by Talal Asad, for instance, in his discussion of the genealogical origins of the separate spheres of religion and politics (Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2003.) Charles Taylor's examination of the post-Enlightenment emergence of "A Secular Age" (Charles Taylor. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.), Jose Casanova's discussion of the revival of public religions in the modern world (Jose Casanova. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.), and the revival of Carl Schmitt's idea of political theology. (Heinrich Meier. 2006. *What is Political Theology?* Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung.) Recent works on the idea of secularism within the field of political science and international relations theory also reflect this trend. For instance Elizabeth Hurd. 2007. *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. 2011. *Rethinking Secularism*. New York: Oxford Univ Press; Mona K. Sheikh and Ole Waever. 2012. 'Western Secularisms: Variation in a Doctrine and its Practice', In *Thinking International Relations Differently*, eds. Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney. London: Routledge, 275-98.

[7], Michel Foucault. [1966] 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Science*. New York: Random House.

[8] Such diverse thinkers in European history as Adam Smith, widely regarded as the father of modern capitalist economic theory, and Charles Darwin, one of the fathers of evolutionary biology, began their intellectual careers studying theology. The same is true of many of the most influential scientists from the Islamic culture such as Ibn Sina (commonly known by his latinised name Avicenna), who is regarded as a father of modern medicine and creator of the concept of momentum in physics; Ibn Hayyan, known as the father of molecular chemistry; or Al-Khawarizmi and Al-Kindi, who invented algebra. A common element in their scientific approach was that they all studied, went into dialogue with, or drew on inspiration from the field of theology.

[9], James P. Gee 1992. *The Social Mind*. New York: Bergin and Garvey; Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter. 1992. *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage; Horace R. Harre and Grant Gillett. 1994. *The Discursive Mind*. London: Sage.

[10], Michel Foucault. [1969] 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. Sheridan Smith. New York: Harper and Row; Pierre Bourdieu. [1980] 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by R. Nice. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

[11] The idea of an epistemic worldview has much in common with the notion of religion as being an awareness of an alternative reality. In a recent book, the sociologist Robert Bellah speaks about religion as one of the "other realities," like poetry and science that "break the dreadful fatalities of this world of appearances". See Robert Bellah. 2011. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, p. 9.

[12] Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona K. Sheikh, 'The Sociotheological Turn in the Study of Religion and Violence', *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

About the author:

Mona Kanwal Sheikh is a Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute of International Studies, where she specialises

in issues of religion and secularism in international relations. She is currently a Visiting Research Scholar at the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at UC Santa Barbara. Relevant publications include 'Sacred Pillars of Violence: Findings from a Study of the Pakistani Taliban' (*Politics, Religion, Ideology*, 2012), 'How Does Religion Matter? Pathways to Religion in International Relations' (*Review of International Studies*, 2012), 'Western Secularisms: Variations in a Doctrine and its Practice' *(*in *Thinking International Relations Differently*, eds Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, Routledge, 2012) and 'A Sociotheological Approach to Understanding Religious Violence' (in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence,* eds Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts, Oxford University Press, 2012).