

# The Moral Psychology of Terrorism



# The Moral Psychology of Terrorism: Implications for Security

Edited by

Jalil Roshandel and Nathan Lean

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Moral Psychology of Terrorism: Implications for Security,  
Edited by Jalil Roshandel and Nathan Lean

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Jalil Roshandel and Nathan Lean  
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## INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a dramatic shift in the security issues confronting the United States and the world. Terrorism is now a household term, one that conjures up images of the splintered World Trade Center or the mangled London subway system. Its once-marginal status has been transformed with these types of world events and now it is difficult to turn on the television or pick up a newspaper without hearing or reading about the latest terrorist attack or counter-terrorism meeting or the execution of some foreign policy measure that resulted in the killing or capturing of a state enemy.

Despite the prominence of national and international discussions about terrorism, though, the simple presence of the word within our vocabulary and our repeated usage of it to describe violent events often means that we discuss terrorism more than we actually attempt to *explain* it. As a result, there is a void — an empty space where we constantly hear about a pressing security issue but don't actually seek to ask the “why” or “how” questions that may, in fact, help solve the issue. As Xavier Raufer notes in the preface to John Corgan's *The Psychology of Terrorism*, “The more talk there is about terrorism, the more reports of terrorist crimes grab the headlines — be it in the press, on television or in the media at large — the less experts and commentators feel they have a grasp of what is really happening?”<sup>1</sup> What led the hijackers of 9/11 to commit their atrocious act? What is it about their mental state that compelled them to interpret their religious scriptures so severely? Was it their religious convictions in the first place, or were there underlying political grievances that intertwined? What must someone like Timothy McVeigh have felt the moment their bomb exploded, and what were the mental conditions that caused him to travel down such a violent path? How can someone like Anders Behring Breivik shut out emotion from his psyche and systematically shoot children camping on a Norway island without flinching?

As the examples above note, acts that are classified by governments or societies as “terrorist” acts are changing. Thus, just as we have entered an era in which terrorism seems to be the primary security concern of most governments, that concern is no longer based on the phenomenon of terrorism as a originating from centralized groups that act from within the borders of their respective states and direct their violence at those who

exist outside their borders. The case of Al-Qaeda is an instructive example. No longer a nuclear group that extends its tentacles out from its Afghan base, the terrorist organization has taken on a global dynamic and now, its various offshoot groups often act completely independent of the parent organization — a parent organization that, with the death of Osama bin Laden, is in tatters<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, as groups like the Eritrean Islamic Jihad or others show us, terrorism is often a tactic designed for expressly political purposes — to overthrow governments. This discussion falls within the purview of “old” and “new” nomenclatures of terrorism. Works in recent years have proposed that the “new” terrorism that is emerging on the global stage is one that is uniquely motivated by religious belief and is more concerned with taking over the world than it is with specific political goals.<sup>3</sup> The standard argument suggests that “old terrorism,” the comparative model of which is detailed by Bruce Hoffman, cannot easily compete with forces of “new terrorism” which is broader in scope, more lethal in its manifestation, and derives its power from the fact that its perpetrators do not feel responsible to earthly authorities, but instead cosmic or heavenly ones.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these two models, which are comprised primarily of group actors, many terrorism analysts do not think that personality factors can account for terrorist behavior and that terrorism is indeed a group activity.<sup>5</sup> It is not within the scope of this book to flesh out a counterpoint to such an argument, and there is much reason, indeed, to believe that group mentalities influence terrorists in significant ways. But it is important to consider, even if just briefly, the emergence of right-wing terrorists, who though not connected to any particular group (in fact many of them operate independently), manage to affect society through their violence in a great way. The aforementioned Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, and Anders Breivik, the Norway killer, are two examples of this. Have we reached a place where terrorism is no longer an especially group activity? If so, how might this paradigm shift change the ways in which we study terrorists?

These great variances, we believe, demand that the study of terrorism adapt, and expand its scope such that it addresses not only group mentalities, tactics, political goals, and unpacks the broader definition of terrorism itself, but also focuses on the *individual*. Behaviorist literature that examines terrorism from a psychological standpoint is often overlooked, despite the fact that it holds the best hope for possibly understanding the reasoning and logics that calculate into the horrific manifestations of violence that we too commonly see. The individual is important for several reasons, many of which are discussed in this volume.

Most significantly though, it is the individual that commits the acts and while his or her actions as associated with or inspired by a group do offer vital clues about the underlying factors for why such a terrorist act was carried out, at the end of the day the conscious decision to become a terrorist and to enact violence takes place within the mind of the individual.<sup>6</sup>

Further, because the individual and his or her psychological mapping is so crucial — and because individuals themselves are quite diverse and distinct (that is, after all, the very definition of an *individual*), we may find that it is more useful and helpful to resist discussions of “the terrorist mentality” or even the overall “psychology of terrorists” as a whole and complete unit. The widespread assumption that the “terrorist personality” exists is a false one. That is, it is more correct to discuss “psychologies” and “personalities” of terrorists rather than resort to reifications that generalize and place all of those who commit terrorist acts under one large umbrella that we can then say defines, describes, or encompasses something essential about *the* psychology all terrorists. Additionally, the one difference that distinguishes human beings from animals is morality. It is also something that is deeply personal. Though we may derive our moral worldview from external sources (religion chiefly among them), and though we may also be influenced by the dynamics of group morality (society) and intergroup relations, it is always the individual that must process these influences and come to some conclusion about what he or she views and moral or immoral and accept or reject it. John Horgan, the director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University, notes that, most always, terrorists have “internal limits.”<sup>7</sup> Horgan found that while terrorists must believe that violence against the enemy is not immoral, some terrorists for instance, abhor the killing of animals or set limits in terms of the number of casualties they are willing to cause.<sup>8</sup>

It is from these perspectives that this volume begins. The chapters included in this work were selected from more than three dozen papers and presentations submitted to a conference on the moral psychology of terrorism at East Carolina University in April 2012. The purpose of the presentations that follow is to offer a series of possibilities — all grounded in psychology — that do not simply discuss terrorism, but explain it from an individual, psychological and moral standpoint. We aim to deconstruct the mental mappings of various terrorists, problematizing and critically examining along the way the various factors that influenced them. This is not an attempt to examine, in a clinical sense, or to diagnose, but rather is an effort made possible by the rich contributors of scholars across a variety

of disciplines to move beyond the more traditional (and in fact, political) discussions of terrorism and situate this phenomenon within the context of the human mind and the temperaments, characteristic makeups, and morality, that make us unique.

The unique aspect of this book is that its contributors, as mentioned above, span a variety of disciplines. Despite the fact that this volume focuses on the moral psychology of terrorism, the authors and scholars whose work lines these pages come from many different backgrounds, each offering their particular expertise based on their interests and their experiences as clinical psychologists, security studies experts, political scientists, religious studies scholars, philosophers, ethicists, and historians. In that regard, this work is interdisciplinary in every sense of the word. We believe that, in fact, this is the best approach to understanding terrorism. The traditional borders that are often defined by think tanks, academic institutions, and the government foster an environment where these topics are pigeon-holed — labeled and defined in such a specialized way that meaningful discussion takes place only within the framework of a particular field. But terrorism is not only a political phenomenon, nor is it only a psychological one. Its perpetrators are themselves students of history, influenced by events of the past. It is a field that demands examination from an ethical perspective, just as it is one animated by the pulses of various religions. The aim here is to provide as comprehensive an approach as possible, opening up this important discussion to a variety of individuals and allowing the public to understand terrorism from the perspective of several different lenses.

The discussions that follow are laid out in three distinct parts. Part One is comprised of philosophical discussions. In an ideal world, tragic events like terrorist attacks should be so unforeseeable and irruptive that they upset even our ability to anticipate their possibility. But this is not the world in which we live, thus there is some imperative to examine critically some of the various dynamics that may lead to a clearer understanding of what terrorism is and to evaluate how its actors — terrorists — and deal with issues like morality, for instance. Indeed, analyzing and clarifying the terms of the debate, the arguments proposed, as well as problematizing conventional beliefs and conceptions is necessary.

In chapter one, Rico Sneller examines the intersection between dreams, and acts of terrorism, particularly with regards to inspiration and morality. He suggests that dreams frequently affect our decisions, particularly when rational choices are hard to make; this is particularly so in the case of terrorism. Thus, he notes, all religious traditions claim that their founders have had revealing dreams and many terrorists claim to have been inspired

by dreams as well. Sneller explores the ways in which several prominent terrorist groups who religious interpretations as a basis for their violence have interpreted dreams, placing particular focus on the case of Muslim terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui and his relationship with, and dreams about, Osama bin Laden prior to the 9/11 attacks.

Martine Berenpas explores the writing of the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre in chapter two. She discusses Sartre's views of oppression and violence and unpacks his statements about the necessity of violence under certain conditions to show that, in fact, he does not necessarily view violence as moral even when one would otherwise deem it necessary. Berenpas traces this view back to Sartre's philosophical deliberations on existence; the moral individual, she concludes, acknowledges that terrorism is ultimately a cover up for the existence of a great number of personal failings and is an act of the alienated consciousness.

In a similar vein, Germán Bula, in chapter three, discusses the alternative between non-violent resistance and terrorism in the face of an asymmetrical conflict. "What causes the weaker side in an asymmetrical conflict to choose either peaceful or violent strategies?" he asks. Bula introduces the reader to Baruch Spinoza, the Jewish-Dutch philosopher whose seminal work *Ethics* presents mind and body as parallel manifestations of a single underlying striving. Spinoza's model of human behavior allows Bula to present strategy and emotion in a single, integrated framework and show that any strategic approach to asymmetrical conflicts must be complemented with an emotional and moral understanding of the same.

Chapter four by Richard Feist, "The Indecisive Nature of Battle" Montesquieu and Counter-Insurgency," proposes that victory in war is a contestable concept, and that presuming victory is even dangerous as it has the potential to lead to, among other things, the privatization of war. Through a series of historical surveys that beginning with the War of 1812 and conclude with a robust discussion of strategic victory and counter-terrorism, Feist lays out clearly the well-known philosophical view of concepts: not only do our conceptualizations of the world guide our interpretations of the world, but these conceptualizations can actually influence the future directions that the world, in fact, takes. In the spirit of the French philosopher Montesquieu, Feist shows the dangers of thinking about war in terms of the "decisive battle" and urges the reader to conceptualize such conflicts in much broader terms, namely culture and history.

Maria Ericson's chapter, "Encounters between Violent Perpetrators and their Victims" is an appropriate endpoint to part one. In it, she

highlights many of the themes previously discussed and analyzes what might happen morally and psychologically in the event of a reconciliation between the perpetrator of a violence crime like terrorism and his or her victims (or in some cases, the families of victims). She combines historical and empirical examples from Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Oslo to propose several key areas that must be addressed if reconciliation is to take place, namely, the aggressor's worldview and view of conflict, their views of themselves in relation to their victims, and their interpretation of certain values. Ericson also proposes issues that may prevent or hinder any reconciliatory process and aims to clarify, overall, just how possible it may be to emerge from instances of tragedy and heal psychological wounds that could guide society in the direction of forgiveness, patience, and ultimately peace.

Part Two of is comprised of four distinctive surveys of narrative construction as it relates to religious and political perspectives. Narratives are, to put it quite simply, the means through which we process the happenings of the world around us. The complexities of life are often formulated, intentionally or unintentionally, into a timeline that orders events and classifies them in such a way that we can make sense of our experiences. Narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner suggests that "a good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds" and while the former "verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical truth," the latter "establishes not truth but verisimilitude" and lifelikeness.<sup>9</sup> Within political and religious contexts this is particularly so. The construction of narratives — and those who construct them — wields great power, as the chapters that comprise this section show. The way in which discursive mechanisms are employed, the way in which terms are defined, and, with particular regard to theme of this book, the way in which morality is situated on one particular side of a given debate, all factor into the birthing of narratives that take a life of their own and become, over time, aligned with conceptions of truth.

In chapter six, "Tibetan Terrorism? A Case Study in Name-Calling," Derek Maher explores the terminology of "terrorism" in the political context of Sino-Tibetan relations. He examines how the term is applied to Tibetans in contemporary China, and situates that usage within the range of exonyms utilized by China throughout its history. He argues that the language of terrorism came into currency in Chinese depictions of Tibetans only within the past decade and that China began using this language in an effort to gain support in the west for policies relating to their rule over the Tibetan people. Additionally, he suggests that China deployed the rhetoric in the hopes that if the actions and motives of the



Dalai Lama, members of the Tibetan exile communities in the Himalayan region, or Tibetans within China itself could be branded as “terrorist” in nature, China might garner a more sympathetic response to its Tibet policy from the United States, Europe, and other international actors participating in the terrorism discourse.

Calvin Mercer, in “The Male Warrior God and the Threatened Egotism of His Mighty Men,” moves the discussion away from politics and towards religion. He examines fundamentalist violence, and in particular the sexist attitudes and behaviors common in fundamentalist groups. Whereas themes of fundamentalism and sexism are too commonly discussed only within the context of Islam, Mercer’s research studies these themes within the context of fundamentalist Christianity, and unpacks the psychological underpinnings of fundamentalists both at the individual and organization levels. Specifically, Mercer shows how the long tradition of the “male warrior God” allows Christian fundamentalists to advance and justify their views of women as inferior and subordinate subjects, and highlights the concept of threatened egotism — whereby a highly favorable view of self is defended against someone who seeks to undermine or discredit that view — to do so.

Chapter eight, “One and Indivisible:” The Ideal of Undifferentiated Virtue as a Motivation for Violent Terrorism in Jihadist and Jacobin Circles,” by Liam Harte, aims to complicate the conventional narrative spun by expert that suggests that “new terrorists” — fanatics willing to cause mass casualties in pursuit of an ideological (and often religion) aim — have largely displaced “traditional terrorists,” whose aspirations are not as globally focused as they are with local domestic politics. Harte contends that neither the “new terrorism” nor the moral psychology that accompanies it are new at all, and that describing the phenomenon as merely “fanatical” is overly reductive. Instead, he argues that, for instance, al-Qaeda and its affiliates are strongly “mythic” forms of terrorism — a type that recurs in many places throughout history. To highlight this point, he compares an old manifestation of mythic terrorism, France’s Reign of Terror, with the activities and strategies of contemporary violent Muslim terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. He argues that the Rousseauist zeal that drove the Revolutionary Government never to shrink from huge death tolls as a means to purify the French Republic bears comparison to, for instance, Wahhabism that motivates and many Islamist groups. He concludes by outlining specific security issues that are raised by understanding terrorism within this “new” versus “traditional” dichotomy.

In chapter nine, Sedi Minachi offers a case study of Rafiq Taghi, an Azerbaijani writer who was stabbed outside his home in Baku-Azerbaijan

and later died of his injuries. One day before his death, he told an Azarbaijani radio station interviewing him about the attack that he suspected Iranian agents were involved and that it may have been in retaliation an article he wrote, which criticized the ideology of political Islam. The case of Taghi, Miacho shows, offers useful and instructive examples of how those who promote terrorism brainwash their followers by using religious vocabulary to construct powerful narratives of moral obligation, urgency, and divine sanctity. She draws particular attention to the tragic impact of this narrative of violence on youth, who are often targeted with it, and shows how they are encouraged to identify with a sense of belonging espoused by terrorists groups, and, afterwards, are convinced to form a strong commitment to carry out any form of violent activity against the “other.”

Motti Inbari, in “Between Prophetic Failure and Terrorism and Contemporary Judaism,” examines the ideology of Yehuda Etzion, one of the founders of the Jewish Underground who was arrested in 1984 for attempting to blow up the Dome of the Rock. Inbari presents Etzion’s theocratic perspective, which advocates the “cleansing” of the Temple Mount as a first step toward the Jewish redemption, and discusses the steps he has taken to advance that position. Etzion’s ideology, he argues, is driven by a profound sense of crisis; he once argued that Zionism had reached a dead end and as existing mechanisms could not overcome the crisis new ones needed to be set. Inbari’s presentation shows that Etzion’s approach was the product of his internal struggle with a failure of faith. Since the peace process between Israel and Egypt (1978), many religious Zionists were forced to confront the growing contradiction of their basic assumptions regarding the nature and destiny of the state due to Israeli territorial compromises. Etzion’s reaction to this crisis, Inbari concludes, was to reinforce his messianic faith, and to engage in forceful action with the goal of expediting the realization of the coming of the messiah.

Finally, Part Three examines the political and security implications of terrorism from a perspective of moral psychology. In order to address fully and effectively the current challenges posed by terrorism, it is necessary to consider the psyche of terrorist and based counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism security measures on that information, not merely on political strategies of military goals. That involves, surely, bridging what appears to be a wide gap between two or more disciplines (psychology and security studies, for instance). But the two are related in an intricate way. Moving, then, from a more theoretical discussion that invokes historical, theological, and philosophical references, this section will aim to complicate the practical application of many of these theories, and compact them into

several possible ways forward in terms of implementing security measures that address the new challenges posed by terrorism.

In chapter eleven, “A Psychological Model of Terrorism: Implications of Addressing Religiously Oriented Terrorists,” Julian Montaquila argues that while multiple security paradigms exist that enable us to understand the threat posed by terrorists, a psychological model of terrorism is actually more valuable at offering insight into the causes, underlying motives, organization, functionality, recruitment, and the radicalization processes of terrorists. Montaquila examines, in great detail, a wealth of statistical and clinical data that clarifies common misconceptions about terrorists, and answers questions about the aforementioned areas. He studies both the group and individual, and shows how age, fear, and a deprived environment, among other things, are significant determining factors as to whether or not one becomes a terrorist. Most importantly, though, Montaquila outlines in each of his analyses the risks and possible implications that may result from each particular level of radicalization, showing that it may be capable to prevent a future-terrorist from being fully radicalized but only if we begin to understand the importance of these psychological factors.

David Durant, in chapter twelve, examines Al Qaeda and its Associated Movements (AQAM), and shows that they have been involved in an unconventional, asymmetric struggle against the United States and its allies. Specifically, he examines the phenomenon of “culture war” and shows, through a series of mini-case studies, how important it is to shift our view away from the merely political causes of terrorism, and address what he has identified as a parallel threat: the silencing of Muslim “apostates” and those deemed guilty of blasphemy against Muhammad. Al-Qaeda, he argues, views the elimination of what bin Laden has called “freethinkers and heretics,” be they Muslim reformers or Danish cartoonists, as an essential duty and one that is indispensable to their objective of forcibly transforming Muslim societies. While Durant offers examples of European cases (such as the cartoons of Muhammad) as evidence of violence that attacks cultural elements, he also suggests that terrorists do not only engage in this new program abroad. In fact, in many cases their violent agendas are directed at their own countries and fellow religious believers — an occurrence that may provide clues and windows into the psyches of potential threats.

In chapter thirteen, “The Personal Motivation of Suicide Bombers: Exploring Security Implications,” Halil Aydinalp offers several security suggestions that relate to the personal motivations of Muslim suicide bombers in Chechenistan and Palestine. In that light, he utilizes a model

that involves four personal motivation levels. At the first level, he observes the presence of some occupation or military intervention. At the second level, Aydinalp places social dynamics. The third level of motivation deals with the terrorist, or potential terrorist's personal goals, while the fourth is connected with organizational aspiration and political goals. Each of these goals has specific and important security implications. Some of them include: reconsidering conflict resolution methods and eschewing asymmetric military operations; giving priority to human centered regulations and policy implications rather than rigid secular/religious ideologies or unlimited and uncontrolled aspirations to gain more; developing social and economical conditions, especially reducing unemployment and supplying social security even at least minimum rate; frustrating legitimacy forms of bombers and invalidating their modes of justification. Ultimately, his model suggests that occupation creates a "de facto" condition for suicide bombings, and social and psychological dynamics operate in this position as a catalyst facilitating a possible bomber's decision.

This volume, which contains detailed case studies, models, analytics, and theories, should not be considered as a comprehensive study. That is not the point to begin with. In fact, all researchers and scholars who discuss this topic and similar ones should be cautious about drawing inferences from such detailed, specific, and often complex issues. What follows is not intended to indicate a pattern or even emphasize the importance or suggest the superiority of this emerging new field. Rather, it is simply to show that there is much to learn from examining terrorism through the lens of psychology, and much to learn about considering the moral issues that relate to the psychological makeup of terrorists and potential terrorists. As other scholars who have written about this important topic have noted, the interdisciplinary approach is both of great benefit and detriment. As previously mentioned, the wealth of knowledge that stems from several academic disciplines can augment our understanding of terrorism in many meaningful ways and move us beyond the paradigm of political science and security. But at the same time, the approach also inescapably renders gaps that we must be mindful of and eventually aim to fill. If, as most all would readily admit, the aim of the study of terrorism is to provide some analysis that may help alleviate the suffering caused by this global problem and put forth information that could help thwart future attacks, how might we integrate discussions of history, philosophy, ethics, security, politics, government, psychology, morality, and so forth into one streamlined approach? Certainly each field in and of itself offers much opportunity, but new ideas about any one of

the fields divorced from the others is less powerful in its ability to realize such goals. Still, we hope that the reader will gain something valuable from the voices that comprise this necessary work, and learn something about the relationship between psychology, morality, and terrorism. We hope that terrorism, as a result, may become less mysterious to some and that, as a result of understanding it as a phenomenon grounded in the psychology and morality, future scholars (and current ones as well) may build on this research and work towards the realization of a more peaceful future.

Jalil Roshandel  
Nathan Lean  
2012.

## Notes

1. Xavier Raufer, Preface, In John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), iii.
2. For an excellent discussion of the newly amorphous nature of once-centralized groups like Al-Qaeda, see Bruce Hoffman, "The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, No. 6 (2004): 549-560.
3. W. Laqueur, *The New Terrorism* Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.
4. Bruce Hoffman, *Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Analysis of Trends and Motivations* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1999), n.p.
5. E. Sprinzak, "The Psychological Formation of Extreme Left Terrorism in A Democracy: The Case of the Weathermen," In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 65-85.
6. For a detailed discussion about the ways in which individuals often make rational choices that hinge on an innate desire to belong to a group, see Dipak K. Gupta, "Toward An Integrated Behavioral Framework For Analyzing Terrorism: Individual Motivations to Group Dynamics," *Democracy and Security*, 1, No. 1 (2005): 5-31.
7. Sarah Kershaw, "The Terrorist Mind: An Update," January 9, 2010, New York Times.
8. Ibid.
9. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11.



**PART ONE:**

**PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS**

# CHAPTER ONE

## DREAMS, MORALITY, AND TERRORISM

### RICO SNELLER

#### **Introduction**

It is frequently argued that our moral decisions rest upon rational choices. Sometimes, however, if the choice is too difficult for us, a rational decision seems impossible. This is this case primarily in matters of life and death. In many religious traditions, and especially in Islam, dreams play a preeminent role in decision-making. In this chapter, I will explore the relationship between dreams and terrorist acts, particularly with regards to inspiration and morality. Many Muslim suicide agents have reported that inspiring dreams stimulated their actions. This need not be a surprise since suicide acts always result in death and those preparing their own execution likely experience extreme mental conditions. But even if suicidal acts can be accounted for on a rational basis (e.g., by giving them a political explanation), it seems fairly unlikely that such accounts will necessarily be informative. The British anthropologist Iain Edgar has researched how jihadist dreams may lead to violence. Not only has he studied dreams and their significance within an Islamic framework, but he has also retrieved information on the dreams of several well-known terrorists like Osama Bin Laden, Mullah Omar, Richard Reid, and Zacarias Moussaoui. His studies were used in a 2009/2010 Intelligence Assessment of the Canadian Secret Service, obtained by the Canadian National Post.<sup>1</sup>

Below is an extensive passage, — a quotation — of one such a dream by Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen sentenced to life in prison for conspiring to kill Americans as part of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He said:

Basically, I had, I had a dream, and I had more later, but I had a dream, and I went to see Sheikh Usama bin Laden, and I told him about my dream. He told me, “Good.” Maybe, I don’t know, a few days later, I have another dream. So I went again, I saw him, and I told him about this. This was after I had declined, I was asked before. Then I had this dream. Then maybe a week, a short time, Sheikh Abu Hafz [Mohammed Atef] came to



the guesthouse and asked me again if I wanted to be part of the suicide operation, me and Richard Reid, and this time I said yes.

A description of the dream follows:

But if I want to say the original reason, okay, what I believe, okay, it is I thought I had a dream where I was into the runway of an airport and I actually took a map out, okay, and I open it and it was the White House with a circle with a cross, like when you do when you do target. And next to me, okay, in front of there was the four brother, I couldn't recognize. And next to me there was a 747, the very distinct, you know, like the cockpit, was very distant.

Finally Moussaoui mentions Bin Laden:

So I refer to sheikh Usama bin Laden and some other sheikh there to explain to me the reality, but the dream about the White House, it was very clear to me.<sup>2</sup>

No matter how one wishes to analyze such dreams, they at least hold a crucial meaning for the dreamer's justification of his performance. In Islam, dreams count as a perpetuation of prophecy, albeit at a lower level than the Prophet Muhammad's revelations, which are conveyed in Qur'an and Hadith. Still, his prophecy is also grounded in dreams and visions.<sup>3</sup>

In Islam a distinction is made between three types of dreams: those coming from God (*al-ruya*), those coming from the devil (*al-hulm*), and those relating to the dreamer's own physical or mental condition. An alternative distinction takes good dreams as coming from God, nightmares as coming from the devil, and other dreams as originating in the dreamer's own anxieties.<sup>4</sup> One need not be surprised about such distinctions. In case a meaning is given to dreams in religious or spiritual traditions, criteria will be mandatory to mark the trustworthiness of these dreams.<sup>5</sup>

## **Dreams and Moral Consciousness**

Let us assume for the moment that dreams do offer a solution for moral dilemmas. If that is so, the question then becomes how the dream content relates to our moral consciousness. It is necessary to respond to this inquiry apart from the common question of how exactly dreams should be interpreted. Whether or not dreams can be acknowledged as relying upon an external (prophetic or divine) inspiration, one can always ask if our dream consciousness is susceptible to moral inspiration, or if it is

indifferent, or even hostile to it. To put it differently, do we possess any form of moral awareness in our dreams, whatever their nature?

Freud asks this question in his *Traumdeutung (Interpretation of Dreams)*. He refers to the opposite views of Schopenhauer and F.W. Hildebrandt. Schopenhauer holds that our character betrays itself in our dreams. Hildebrandt, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century German author of a short treatise, believes, on the contrary, that our moral awareness persists even in our dreams. “No matter how much of that which accompanies us during the day may vanish in our hours of sleep, Kant’s categorical imperative dogs our steps as an inseparable companion, of whom we cannot rid ourselves even in our slumber.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly Carl du Prel, in his *Philosophie der Mystik (Philosophy of Mysticism)*, claims that our moral consciousness is located in our unconscious, i.e., exactly in the range of our consciousness to which only our deepest dreams give us access.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, German social psychologist Erich Fromm takes a third position, arguing that in our dreams we are most often wiser, more intelligent and more sensitive morally than during our waking hours.<sup>8</sup>

In this debate, Freud himself holds an intermediary position. Indeed, he affirms, our dreams frequently manifest “immoral” thoughts, ideas, and acts. However, these are, at least partially, censored by our super-ego.

We may draw here a provisional conclusion: provided that dreams are censored, any form of moral consciousness must be inherent to our dream consciousness. Dream censorship may be rooted in anxiety. Still, it demonstrates an initial openness to something like a “moral consciousness.” A similar conclusion can be drawn from Fromm’s view. For if we do possess moral, artistic or intellectual sensitivity in our dreams, this also testifies to some form of moral consciousness or moral receptivity.

This conclusion relies upon any censorship actually taking place in dreams, and upon some intellectual sensitivity and creativity truly producing itself in our dream consciousness. If these two phenomena are denied then this conclusion is invalidated.

## **Dreams and Inspiration**

Moving forward, it is useful to consider further the point that Fromm raises. Dreams can inspire people’s actions and mindset, i.e., their artistic creativity, their philosophical subtlety, and their political acuity. We have sufficient testimonies of this.<sup>9</sup> The question, rather, is *how* this inspiration can take place. Only if we have a sharper idea about that we can say something more about the jihadist dream inspiration I started this article with.

It seems that two opposite explanations can be given here. One could, for example, assert that dream inspiration does indeed allow for an externalist explanation. A prophet or a divine messenger would have produced it. Such an explanation would obviously still be in need of a further clarification, even for the believer. The less one will have to appeal to “esotericism,” the more convincing an explanation will be.

It may be useful to bear in mind the medieval Islamic doctrine of the *‘alam al-mithal*, or the *mundus imaginalis*. This doctrine that has clear neo-platonic and gnostic ancestries originates in thinkers as Ibn Arabi, Molla Sadra, and Sohrawardi. It introduces an intermediate realm between the world of the senses and the world of the purely spiritual: a world of images and forms. Henry Corbin, the great scholar of Shi’ite Islam, has written about it extensively. He says that this world is pictured as “a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state. The existence of this world presupposes that it is possible to leave the sensible state without leaving physical extension.”<sup>10</sup> Corbin then refers to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Cambridge Platonists to show that this medieval doctrine was also held elsewhere, albeit in a different religious context. The Pakistani theologian Fazlur Rahman writes: “Although the *‘alam al-mithal* is created for the very purpose of serving as a place where the incredible is rendered credible and where the miraculous is somehow made ‘normal’, the physical world is still not saved from the encroachments of the realm of figures. Indeed, the intellects of the heavenly bodies also project angels from this realm into the mundane world and that is whence the angel of revelation physically manifests himself.”<sup>11</sup>

The truth of the mystical Islamic doctrine of the *‘alam al-mithal* was upheld in later Islam as well, and mainly among Muslim intellectuals. The Leiden Islamologist Umar Ryad points here to the theology of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Shah Wali Allah, and to the ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sayyid Ahmad Khan; in their respective theologies the medieval doctrine is transmitted to modern generations of Muslims.<sup>12</sup> The aforementioned Fazlur Rahman can be seen as a contemporary representative of the *‘alam al-mithal*, as appears from his 1958 book *Prophecy in Islam*.

These first explanations of dream inspiration will probably only convince those who already believed in them, while others may reject it as being exotic or fictitious. Without going further, comprehensive details on this issue are available in the writings of German philosophers Schelling and Schopenhauer, who each in his own way tried to articulate an analogous escape of the immediate sensuous world. While Schelling mentions the age-old doctrine of the “subtle body,” in his text *Clara, oder*

*über den Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geisterwelt* (Schelling - Clara: *Or, on Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*), Schopenhauer purports that the Platonic ideas form an intermediary sphere between the World Will and the everyday world of representation. Admittedly, however, these parts of their doctrines have hardly, if at all, convinced even their most loyal adherents, let alone other philosophers. In addition, we could perhaps also refer here to Spinoza. In his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* divine revelation by means of the prophets is interpreted as a form of human *imaginatio*. *Imaginatio* offering a lower type of knowledge than the philosophical and the rational, it nevertheless remains a type of knowledge for Spinoza; it is not as such disqualified. Similarly, Spinoza's view of the human body and matter -which as a divine attribute is infinite- in the *Ethica*, leaves space for alternative ways of perception.

A fully different approach of dream inspiration looks for an origin inside the psyche itself, refusing to resort to some intermediary world, let alone a purely spiritual one. Whereas the latter is usually immediately rejected as "speculative," we must admit that it at least offers the simplest explanation with dream inspiration allegedly deriving from a subtle sphere in between the sensuous and the divine. An internal-psychological explanation of dream content would much more difficult to understand inspiration. A Freudian account, for instance, would probably propose a retrospective approach, and connect the dream content to suppressed memories and desires. It is not sure, however, that such a retrospective, internalist approach would at all be able to account for dream *inspiration*.

For that matter, Eduard von Hartmann and William James have offered alternative accounts. These accounts testify to a wide range of possible states of consciousness and their interconnectedness. They do not have anything esoteric or exotic in themselves. Rather, they take our immediate consciousness to be necessarily selective. As our consciousness is unable to receive permanently all the variegated stimuli by which it is affected, it must expressly and intentionally focus itself. Meanwhile, the other stimuli will be stored in a peripheral sphere, or, in Jamesian terms, at a "subliminal" level. James declines the Freudian notion of the unconscious, and believes that any content of consciousness can essentially be made accessible. If someone, for example, "suddenly" undergoes a conversion process, James writes in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, this must be taken with a grain of salt: for at a "subliminal" level an incubation period must have been taking place, preparing for the conversion.

How could dream inspiration be accounted for with reference to different levels or intensities of consciousness? Twentieth century psychologists as M. Nachmansohn or Richard R. Pokorny have argued

that external or internal stimuli that were unable to find their way to immediate perceptual consciousness will nevertheless incorporate into the psyche's structure. Nachmansohn calls this our *Binnenbewusstsein*, or our "inner consciousness." In it, stimuli are stored that have not immediately been consciously apprehended. These stored stimuli assume a life of their own and frequently give rise to increasing tension. As is always the case with tension, a sustained effort to release makes itself felt. Such release can only take place as soon as the level of daily, focused consciousness is lowered, e.g., during sleep or under hypnosis.<sup>13</sup> He writes:

The true artist belongs to those who possess a rich inner consciousness [*Binnenbewusstsein*], because being more susceptible than the average people they assume plenty of impressions that cannot possibly all be perceived [*apperzipiert*], and that therefore remain at the background and are eventually also suppressed. In the inner consciousness they engage in all kinds of associations. As long as, despite ample strength and abundance, they cannot find any release, the individual will feel an almost unbearable tension, that produces the most characteristic poet's quirks [*Dichterschrullen*] and that can justifiably be called hysterical. He suspects that something must break forth from within, until that which has matured in him will almost without spiritual effort be perceived [*apperzipiert*] and represented within the shortest time.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneous with inspiration, Nachmansohn continues, noting that the following phenomena can manifest themselves: passivity, suddenness (*Plötzlichkeit*), overabundance (*Überfülle*) and over-strong feelings of desire (*überstarken Lustgefühle*).<sup>15</sup> That which Nachmansohn calls *Binnenbewusstsein* is called "sphere" (*Sphäre*) in Pokorny:

Sphere, accordingly, is the field that is stored [*gelagerte*] around the focus of attention [*Brennpunkt der Aufmerksamkeit*], in which all memories (engrams) – slowly fading away towards the periphery and getting paler – and all experiences occurring outside immediate attention [*alle ausserhalb der Aufmerksamkeit ablaufenden Erlebnisse*], are stored; not unconsciously, but vaguely, unclearly conscious. Triggered by an actual perception [*Wahrnehmung*] or representation [*Vorstellung*] this adumbrated region is searched through, while our attention is going through it like a spotlight.<sup>16</sup>

To this Pokorny adds that, in order to acquire the habit of thinking intuitively, giftedness, attentiveness and self-confidence are also needed. For a truly prophetic inspiration to take place, there also needs to be an increased feeling of selfhood and a belief in one's "chosen-ness."<sup>17</sup>

## Dreams between Psychology and Ontology

For the moment I shall not choose between an internalist, psychological, and an externalist, ontological explanation of dreaming. I first want to draw the attention towards three rising problems.

To begin with, provided one upholds an ontological explanation, and provided one believes, as is current in Islam, in inspired dreams, how, then, should one distinguish between *divine* dreams and *diabolic*, or even *personal* dreams?

Islamic dream traditions, as well as others, classify several criteria for reliable dreams (*al-ruya*).<sup>18</sup> Dream interpreters, that is, wise and pious Muslims whose advice is asked in case of remarkable dreams, keep a close watch on this.

In general dreams of just, loyal, and patient people count as valid, as opposed to those of the wicked. This criterion, therefore, applies to the dreamer himself and to his over-all state of mind prior to the dream.

Next, if the prophet Muhammad, an angel, or God's throne figure in dreams, these dreams are also considered to be veridical. This criterion sees to the dream content.

Dreams that have been dreamt in the correct position, i.e., on the right side, or dreams that have been dreamt at the correct moment, preferably just before dawn, are taken to be valid. This criterion relates to the dreamer's and the dream's condition.

Premonitory dreams of upcoming disasters are usually seen as truthful, just as dreams in which God calls on the dreamer to act. These criteria regard the urgency under which a dream manifests itself. Finally, a dream in which a deceased individual reveals his or her will to the dreamer, are mainly seen as authentic. This criterion is connected to the previous one.

There are also criteria for false dreams (*al hulm*). Confused dreams, for example, are supposed to have been produced by *jinns*, or spirits. Sexual dreams or nightmares are deprived of veracity, as much as dreams about the past. Finally, dreams that have been influenced, or even evoked, by magicians or sorcerers are also discredited.

Obviously, such criteria are liable to continuous reevaluation. They merely insist that a differentiation should be made in dream content (This conviction is paralleled to Spinoza's or Maimonides', according to whom the revealed content of the Bible should be differentiated; for not every prophetic message recorded in the Bible has the same authoritative position as Moses' Torah. If, for example, Maimonides minimizes the revealed content of the book of Daniel to the favor of Moses, it is in virtue of the former receiving divine messages in confused *dreams*, which,