



DEEPER CAUSES

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN TERRORISM

JOHN E. MACK

IT SEEMS DIFFICULT in these heady times of action to seek beyond evil to its roots, much less to the sources of the very idea of evil in the way that human beings seem programmed to think. But seek we must; otherwise a world we have trouble understanding may, finally, crash around us with all of the shock, disruption, and loss of life that we experienced in the destruction of the Twin Towers.

The words of wise leaders have cautioned us about the need for a fundamental shift in thinking and perception. Former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Albert Einstein are two such figures. Havel, in his February 1990 address to the United States Congress, spoke of the “antiquated straitjacket of the bipolar view of the world,” and stressed that “without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans.” Einstein warned repeatedly that without a fundamental change in human thinking, our species would drift toward ultimate catastrophe.

The search for the understanding, knowledge, and insight that such wisdom demands may seem “soft” in a time of radical patriotism, polarization, and simplification. ➤

Global Mind Change



But it may be that only a profound shift in how we perceive the world—in consciousness itself—can, in the end, create a secure and just civilization in which opportunity is available for all, and no one is left out.

October 21, 2001, on the radio program *Me and Mario*, former New York governor Mario Cuomo said, “This may get me into trouble [indicating his awareness of how unpopular any effort to understand seemed to be in the jingoistic climate of that moment], but the only way to solve the terrorist problem is to change the minds of those who practice terrorism.” Cuomo is on the right track, I think, but it is not likely that the minds of the terrorists themselves will change, nor is it only terrorists whose thinking is problematic. The need to “change minds” must apply to all of us who would prefer to avoid trying to face the fact that terrorism does not arise in a vacuum, nor from some inchoate reservoir of evil out of which particular bad people may spontaneously emerge at certain times in history.

The proper place to begin our effort to understand (*not excuse*), it seems to me, is with the question of causation. For no matter how loathsome we may find the acts of “fanatics,” without understanding what breeds them and drives them to do what they do in a particular time and place, we have little chance of preventing further such actions, let alone of “eradicating terrorism.”

We can think of three levels of causation, each calling for solutions or responses appropriate to its own level. These might be called 1) Immediate causes—in this case, the purposive actions of men or women who are willing to die as they destroy other lives in the process; 2) Proximate causes—the human pain and socioeconomic breeding ground of such desperate behavior; and 3) Deeper causes—deriving from the nature of mind, of consciousness itself.

IMMEDIATE CAUSES

At the most immediate level, the cause of the recent events is obviously the actions of people governed by implacable hatred, who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in the process of killing others without regard for those they destroy. The natural, perhaps inevitable, response to such actions is to find out “who did

it,” stop others like them, and punish their supporters. This involves gathering intelligence, and a military campaign. Military action may produce real successes, but focusing exclusively on this level of the problem, while ignoring or giving too little attention to the deeper levels, may result mainly in provoking still greater antagonism that spawns more terrorism, and, in the long run, bringing about a widening war without doing anything about what gave rise to the hatred and aggression in the first place.

PROXIMATE CAUSES

Listening to the pronouncements of President Bush and other American leaders in the weeks after the events of 9-11, one could get the impression that the rage that leads to the planning and execution of terrorist acts arises from a kind of void, unconnected with history, without causation other than pure evil fueled by jealousy. Yet it is not difficult to discover that the present conflict has complex historical and economic roots. It has grown out of the affliction of countless millions of people in the Middle East and elsewhere who perceive themselves to have been victims of the policies of a superpower and its allies that have little concern for their lives, needs, or suffering; and to the actions of multinational corporations that, in the words of Indian writer Arundhati Roy, “are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think.” For these millions, a figure such as Osama bin Laden, whom we see only as a mass murderer, can become a hero because he moved beyond helplessness to action against the seemingly indifferent and invincible oppressor.

It is inconceivable that terrorism can be checked, much less eradicated, if these causes are not addressed. This would require, at the very least, a re-examination of government policies that one-sidedly favor Israel in relation to the Palestinians (not to mention our support of Saddam Hussein against Iran before he set off a conflict a few years later). It would require further help with the growing refugee problem, and a turning of our attention to the toll that poverty and disease are taking in the Middle East and other parts of the globe. These may not be the conditions under which the terrorist leaders themselves have lived, but they create

the reservoir of misery, hurt, helplessness, and rage from which the foot soldiers of terrorism can be recruited.

The role of the United States in creating these conditions can be debated, but as a superpower that consumes a major portion of the Earth's resources, there can be little doubt that not only are we seen in many parts of the world as responsible for them, but we are looked to, along with other privileged Western nations, to do much more to help in their solution.

Certainly there is much more that could and has been said about the causes of terrorism that I am calling "proximate," but the principal focus of this article is different. I am concerned here with what might be thought of as more fundamental causes, the roots of terrorism that derive from mind, from consciousness itself, and from the institutions that express its purposes and intentions.

DEEPER CAUSES

WORLDVIEWS. Political psychology, or the application of psychological understanding to political phenomena, should begin with a consideration of worldviews. A worldview is an organizing principle or philosophy, a fixed way of thinking or habit of mind. Worldviews are similar to ideologies but broader in scope. (Ideologies derive from worldviews, but are more specific, usually having to do with particular social, political, and economic systems.) A worldview might be thought of as a kind of mental template into which we try to fit events. Without some sort of worldview, which can also be thought of as a lens through which to see the world, we would feel even more helpless, unable to orient ourselves in a world that has become increasingly complex and unsettling. Worldviews tend to be rather rigidly structured, and are able to withstand a huge amount of information that is difficult, if not impossible, to fit into them. When faced with data that might appear to challenge a worldview, or reveal it to be dysfunctional, most of us, most of the time, will construe a situation, or reconstruct the facts, rather than modify the worldview.

DUALISTIC THINKING. In relation to the events of 9-11, and to the terrorist threat they represent, we have

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a chance to observe two largely contradictory worldviews. One might be thought of as the dualistic, dichotomizing, or polarizing habit of mind. The dualistic mind divides the world into conflicting polarities—good and evil, God and the Devil, for or against, friend or enemy, deserving or undeserving. (This is particularly important in providing the assumptive underpinning for perpetuating racial and socioeconomic differences). The dualistic mind fragments, seeing separation and difference more easily than unity and connection. The polar-

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izing mind is not incapable of love, but such love is restricted in its application to one side, leaving the lover free to hate a designated enemy.

A second worldview holds tightly to the ideal of universal love and oneness. This worldview has its own rigidities, and can be inappropriate when applied uncritically to a situation that defies its precepts.

But I will focus here on the first, for it is expressions of dualistic thinking in the form of blindness to diversity, obliviousness of the effects of inequalities of resources, and a lack of concern for the vast suffering that prevails on this planet that have given rise to the present dangerous crisis. The polarizing mind will always be with us because it is the mind

of instinct and survival. But it is also the mind of revenge and war that must be transcended if we are to survive as a species. In the months following 9-11, the proponents of dualistic thinking on both sides (“This is a war of good against the evildoers,” or “We must destroy America, the great Satan”) have had a lock on public discourse, as committed patriots have heaped scorn upon those that do not fall into line, while cheerleaders of terrorism exhort their followers to commit further acts of violence.

NATIONALISM. Political and religious institutions have a powerful role in shaping and perpetuating dualistic thinking. Nationalism, the emotional attachment to the idea of one’s own country or nation, is a particularly powerful augmentor of dualistic thinking. For the nation state has usually carved out its boundaries at the cost of other peoples’ lives (“natives,” “aboriginals”), and nationalistic supporters stay in denial of unsavory elements of the nation’s history while glorifying the conquests that brought the country into being.

Although nationalists tend to resist looking at the harmful actions in their nation’s history, nevertheless they may unconsciously fear that retribution for the crimes of the past lies just across the next border. Patriotism is the emotional partner of nationalism, brought forth most intensely when the country or nation is threatened. Patriotism tends to be dualistic, for usually it is mobilized by political leaders to counter a real or perceived threat, but it does not have to be so narrow. Patriotism can be wedded to generosity, courage, loyalty, and love of country, although it can also give way to extreme divisiveness, blindness to complexity, and hatred of the “other.”

RELIGION. Religion, as theologian Paul Tillich and others have noted, deals with spiritual or ultimate human concerns, such as the source of life and death, our highest values and selves, the roots of evil, the existence of God, the nature of divinity and goodness, whether there is some sort of life after the body has died, the idea of the infinite and the eternal, defining the boundaries of reality itself, and the possibility of a human community governed by universal love. Religious assumptions (atheism and agnosticism are themselves forms of religious belief) shape our minds from childhood, and for this reason religious systems and institutions have had, and continue to have, extraordinary power to affect the course of human

history. If anyone ever questioned this, the present crisis should put such doubts to rest. On each side the faithful have been rallied by religious slogans and exhorted to destroy the evil enemy. The language of crusading and of religious warfare is all about us.

There have been efforts recently to “let religion off the hook.” Jesus, it is said, preached of love, and Islam opposes the killing of innocents, but it is not that simple. For, as former Paulist priest James Carroll has written, dualistic language is readily found in religious texts. Messages of universal love and peace coexist in the Bible and in the Koran with contrasting statements. “Our noblest impulses,” he writes, “come inevitably intertwined with opposite inclinations.” Messages of universal love or of division and exclusion, of lasting peace or of holy war, can all be found in the Bible and the Koran: It is a matter of selection and interpretation. Religion and religious institutions can serve to polarize and stimulate violence, or to unite and transcend it. Religious leaders bear a huge responsibility in the present crisis, and can play a critical role in moving beyond it.

PUBLIC DISCOURSE. At this turning point in history, probably nothing less than a radical reorientation of mind and an authentic mastery of the psychology of violence can offer any hope for the future of human life on this planet. The accumulated hurts are so deep, the consequent rage so intense, the ignorance of their roots so prevailing, and the technological means of destruction so sophisticated and so readily available, that, as President Bush stated in his December 11, 2001 address to the Citadel (a military academy in South Carolina), a relatively few determined killers can now plan and execute projects of annihilation that can end life as we know it. There is no guarantee that a profound psychospiritual sea change, a transformation of mind and heart, can prevent this, at least in time. But I cannot see how anything short of this offers the possibility of survival for our species.

The transformation I write of here must, of course, start with attention to what I have referred to above as proximate causes. These include the unconscionable inequalities in the distribution of resources, the unmet material needs of much of the world’s population, and the strong’s continuing political oppression of the weak, who will inevitably turn into terrorists and dictators in desperation, if not for justice and relief, at least for an outlet for their

rage and frustration.

My focus, for purposes of this article, is different. The quest for understanding that can lead us out of our present catastrophic morass begins with the recognition that knowledge of the ways of the mind in the arenas of political conflict is relevant and useful. Political psychology is a relatively new field, but one to which not only academic psychologists and social scientists are being increasingly drawn, but also diplomats and other political professionals.

The dualistic mind is not by nature self-reflective and, inasmuch as it attributes good to its own motives and actions, it will find the opposite of good in the other. Negative or aggressive ideas and feelings that are not consistent with this positive self-regard must be pushed away, or projected outwards and attributed to the enemy. A vulnerable and frightened public can all too easily be enrolled into this dangerous way of thinking. Psychologists, social scientists, spiritual leaders, and political professionals (as well as government and other institutional leaders who understand this basic truth), have a responsibility to do whatever they can in their speaking and writing to change the public conversation so that the role of one’s own group in the creation of political conflict can be acknowledged and examined, and new possibilities brought forth to create a genuine global community.

TRANSCENDING THE DUALISTIC MIND

Once we begin to look at the private aggressor or terrorist in ourselves, and, as a nation, begin to look publicly at our own contribution to creating the hostility of which we find ourselves the target, other kinds of knowing become possible. Then we can begin to look at how the mind deals with differences, and is prone to the creation of enemies, especially when our very existence appears to be threatened. Then we can begin to look beyond mere tolerance to true knowing of the other. Only the mind that has recognized and integrated or transcended its primitive dualistic habits can begin to identify

with the suffering and rage of geographically distant peoples. Only then can we see the aggression and ignorance that underlies our dominance and neglect, and perceive our own role in the creation of victims far from our own shores.

EMERGING POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Even as we face unprecedented peril from the forces that divide us, there is emerging in science, religion, psychology, and technology possibilities that may bring us back from the edge of destruction. Certainly the internet and other information systems offer the possibility of worldwide interconnection, although these have yet to realize their potential for transcending duality and enmity. But, more fundamentally, we are now witnessing a coming together of science, psychology, and spirituality after centuries of ideological and disciplinary fragmentation. Both modern physics and depth psychology are revealing to us a universe in which mind and matter appear intimately related. The very notion of separation seems to be a kind of illusion, and all that we can perceive around us is connected by resonances, both physical and nonphysical, that can make the possibility of universal justice, truth, and love more than just a utopian fantasy.

At the heart of this possibility lie what in the Western secular world are called “non-ordinary” states of consciousness, but in the world’s great religious traditions is variously called primary religious feeling, mystical oneness, connection with the ground of being, or universal love. For a person in this state of consciousness, neglect of the needs of others, the toleration of great suffering, the killing of innocents (“collateral damage”), the making of war itself, or the desecration of the Earth’s environment is virtually unthinkable. At the heart of these states of consciousness or being is a potential extension of the self beyond its usual boundaries. Thus these states make possible the identification with other beings or objects, wherever they are located, and with the Earth itself.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls this quality of conscious interconnectedness “interbeing.” It is what

Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat had in mind when, after the events of September 11, they adapted his poem “Please Call Me by My True Names” to read, “I am a loyal American who feels violated, and vows to stand behind any military action it takes to wipe terrorists off the face of the Earth,” and “I am a boy in a faraway country rejoicing in the streets of my village because someone has hurt the hated Americans,” and “I am a doctor in a hospital treating patients burned from head to toe who knows that these horrible images will remain in my mind forever,” and “I am a stone in the graveyard of Trinity Church covered with soot from the buildings that once stood proudly above me, death meeting death.” The sequence is long, taking in all beings, including the terrorists themselves.

TOWARD A CONSCIOUSNESS OF INTERCONNECTION

It is no longer just Buddhist monks or other holy people and religious leaders who are undertaking the practices that create a consciousness of interconnection. A great shift in consciousness is taking place, even as the threat of annihilation grows around us. In the United States and throughout the world, a vast and growing movement to return to ancient traditions is arising, creating new forms of psychospiritual practice that can bring about the extension of empathy and the possibilities of knowledge beyond ourselves, the kind of knowledge of which Thich Nhat Hanh and his students write.

This is taking place in several ways., For instance:

- the revitalization of established religions, enabling them to be more relevant to the challenges of our time;
- the recognition that strong intuitive powers, sometimes crudely called “psychic” abilities, are, at root, not psychopathological as they have sometimes been regarded in the mental health professions, but, if used appropriately, shortened avenues to transformation, understanding, and love;
- the increasing commitment of millions of people to various forms of individual and group spiritual practice;
- the proliferation of large- and small-group experiential modalities that open consciousness and break down the

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barriers to connection and love;

- increasing recognition of the power of extraordinary experiences (such as spontaneous spiritual epiphanies, unanticipated traumas that lead to personal transformation, near-death experiences, and so-called extraterrestrial encounters) to shatter the boundaries of the ego, expand identity, and open us to empathy, love, and relationship;

- the emergence of new sociopolitical forms and institutions (such as the NGOs at the United Nations, and the emerging power of citizen diplomacy), which enable a wider range of professionals and ordinary citizens to take part in the processes and practices of international relations and relationships.

The United States is in a particularly strong position to take a leadership role in this transformation of consciousness. We are a pluralistic society with a long experience of living with diversity. The relative security that our privileged isolation has provided has given us the luxury of freedom, even though it has left us unprepared to deal with the terrible assault upon our nation that occurred in September, 2001. Yet this very safety and freedom has allowed us to become strong and creative in developing a practical understanding of the human psyche. We are jittery in the face of our new vulnerability, especially since we seem to receive alternating messages to beware of new attacks, but to go on living as if all were normal. But as we have been pioneers in creating a new political form—a democracy that has inspired the world in its discovery of the power that resides in diversity, and a unity that can transcend differences—we could also lead the world in developing the transformation of consciousness that could lead the human species away from the brink of disaster.

CONCLUSION

Humanity seems to be at a turning point. We are experiencing a kind of race to the future between the forces of destruction and creation. The preservation of our lives and possibilities will come not from the strategies of terrorists, nor from the bombs of the self-righteous. This can happen only through a great awakening, a worldwide shift of consciousness that can transcend the habits of dualism, and enable the citizens of the Earth to become a genuine family of people and peoples, in which each of us can come to feel a responsibility for the welfare of all. As Gandhi once said, “We must *be* the change.”

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