Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs

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ABSTRACT

Although research into the processes and outcomes of radicalization has yielded significant discoveries regarding antecedent risk factors and the role played by societal circumstances and individual variables, research regarding the process of radical conversion remains in its infancy. We believe that the psychology of religion may hold the key to unlocking new insights into this conversion process. As a result of assessing both Lofland and Skonovd’s religious conversion motifs and Rambo’s integrative model of religious conversion, we suggest that issues of culture, society, and the individual which are prevalent in first-hand accounts of conversion to terrorism provide crucial insight into the application of theories of religious conversion to the process of radicalization, and that this application is ripe for helping to further develop existing pyramid and staircase models of radicalization.

Keywords: Radicalization, terrorism/counter terrorism, religious violence.
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Introduction

In order to counter violent extremism efforts must be made to stem the tide of new recruits and to do this effectively more needs to be known about the ‘radicalization’ processes involved in people altering their beliefs and moving towards engaging in violent extremism.\(^1\) With regards to these issues, the present article will initially explore the antecedent factors of radicalization and involvement in violent extremism which are well supported by research. Then we will suggest how research from the psychology of religion could be incorporated into this work to provide a model for further exploring radicalization and engagement in terrorism.

Since 9/11 there has been an increase in both the supply and demand for research focusing on terrorism, and the rise of Islamic terrorism. A particular fascination has been with the psychology of the terrorist and the ‘radicalization’ process that transforms normal young men into fanatics determined to kill for ideology.\(^2\) Unfortunately, research on terrorism and radicalization has a tendency to lack adequate data or utilize poor methodological practices.\(^3\) This poor practice, the problematic nature of the terms under investigation, such as ‘terrorism’ or ‘radicalization’, plus the lack of dedicated researchers working in the area has led to a media-centric focus purveying incorrect assumptions of psychological instability.\(^4\)

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A comprehensive review of the research suggested that an understanding of a terrorist’s mind and motivations requires a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of factors; an analysis which moves away from the readily available intra-individual explanations toward an understanding social factors and the socio-political history of the community which play into the radicalization process\(^5\). However, although much research is hindered by its reliance on secondary data, or lack of direct contact with the individuals in question, there have been salient discoveries made by researchers\(^6\).

**Antecedents of Terrorism**

Research has developed a range of antecedent risk factors that consistently have the potential to increase the likelihood of individuals’ involvement with terror groups or a campaign of armed insurrection\(^7\). Many of these factors are well documented, for example, the repeated existence of a grievance or perceived injustice by a subgroup of the population\(^8\). Age and gender are also important considerations, with terrorist acts generally committed by young males aged 15 to 25\(^9\), with jihadist movements primarily focusing their recruitment on unmarried males in their late teens or early twenties\(^10\).


The individual’s family and friends having a past involvement with or showing support for the movement have also been shown to be key, with strong bonds with family and friends, rather than behavioural disorders, suggested as the key motivating factor for young Muslims joining the jihad. Indeed recent research discussed by Bond has further demonstrated that three out of every four foreign fighters currently travelling to Syria to fight do so as clusters of friends.

High levels of community support for the insurgent group is commonly cited as an important factor in radicalization. Being a terrorist places immense physical, psychological, and social burdens on the individual; they can be isolated, face death or imprisonment. Yet these risks are outweighed by gaining status, respect, and esteem within their community and the possibility that membership may also bring financial and/or sexual rewards as well as increased social status.

One of the most consistent findings from research dealing with the reasons people engage in terrorism is having a need for vengeance or reporting a desire to hit back and right wrongs. The personal histories of armed insurgents from across the globe are frequently filled with stories about incidents in which they, their acquaintances, or communities are

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16 See notes 2 & 9 above
victimized by ‘the other’ pushing the protagonist to take action, seek revenge, and join an armed group.

The routes into violence may be long, and eventual membership tends to be the result of an incremental process of increasing acts of insurgence. This process may start with relatively mundane behaviour such as stone throwing or spray painting graffiti before progressing to destroying property and finally becoming involved in injuring and killing opponents. For example, many of the paramilitaries and ex-combatants Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood interviewed discussed how they would begin on the fringes of the conflict, perhaps running with gangs and getting involved in riots, before being approached by or approaching armed groups and becoming involved in assassinations or bombings.

However, while the route into engaging in a terror attack may be long, many current and former combatants report the importance of ‘critical incidents’ or ‘trigger moments’ in directing them down this route. These critical incidents were normally attacks on themselves, their family, or the wider community they identified with. For example Burgess et al. report examples of former Northern Irish Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries whose narratives pinpoint their involvement due to violent trigger events. Likewise Horgan reports that 90% of militants from the Swat Valley in Pakistan included a drone attack as a trigger moment in their narratives of becoming involved. While these recollections of critical incidents fuelling recruitment into armed groups were widely reported and also recognized by non-combatants, the retrospective nature of research makes it difficult to unpack whether this

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18 Burgess, Ferguson, Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action”.
20 Burgess, Ferguson, Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action”.
choice of rationale is accurate or devised to justify the violent actions undertaken as a militant.  

Witnessing violence against family, friends, or the wider group an individual identifies with, directly, indirectly, or vicariously could suggest that exposure to these events may cause trauma and possibly Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Speckhard further argues that these traumatic events can also cause dissociation (a feeling of separation from the body, thoughts, perceptions and/or emotions), which has been offered as an explanation for a number of cognitive responses to trauma and which may cause an individual to become fixated on revenge and the defence of the group regardless of risk to one’s life or well-being.

Clearly, wishing to join an armed group involves identifying with the people that the group represents, so prospective members need to perceive themselves as categorically interchangeable with other ingroup members. This heightened identification allows them to become stereotypical ingroup members, taking on the group ideology, culture, and values. Research has also revealed how, in addition to the individual strongly identifying with his or her group, identification with role models who support the actions of the armed group is important in sustaining and committing the individual to political violence. Burgess and colleagues found that some Northern Irish paramilitaries were moved to engage in political violence due to ‘idols’ in their community openly supporting armed confrontation. After interviews with members of armed Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, Post et al. reflected

22 Ibid.
24 Burgess, Ferguson, Hollywood, “A social psychology of defiance: From discontent to action”.

RADICALIZATION THROUGH CONVERSION MOTIFS
upon how the interviewees had upheld religious figures who espoused violence, or revolutionaries such as Ché Guevara, as heroes.\textsuperscript{25}

Research evidence on the role of ideological commitment to a ‘cause’ in driving engagement in violence, however, has been mixed.\textsuperscript{26} Recent research on the role of ideology in pushing people towards involvement in politically motivated violence has argued that devotion to sacred political or religious values, particularly when they are fused to a collective identity, are important factors in distinguishing those willing to fight and die, from those who are less willing.\textsuperscript{27}

Additionally, numerous other antecedent factors have been reported which have received less attention or garnered less support, such as a need for a reduction of uncertainty, to overcome cognitive and emotional dissonance, or create more limited ‘black’ vs. ‘white’ choices which help simplify the world into good and evil, the just and unjust, heretic and true believer.\textsuperscript{28} Kruglanski and colleagues\textsuperscript{29} also suggest that a quest for personal significance constitutes a major motivational force in pushing individuals towards violent extremism.

Many of these antecedent factors can be seen to play a role in the detailed accounts of jihadists such Mubin Shaikh, former Al Qaeda (AQ) sympathiser and undercover counter-terrorism operative for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Shaikh was involved in

\textsuperscript{25} Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, *The terrorists in their own words…*
the arrest of the Toronto 18 in 2006 and suggested the perceived injustices in his life, his crisis of identity, and his need to right the wrongs as he saw them played into his decision to join AQ. While Mohammed Emwazi aka ‘Jihadi John’ who is currently fighting in Syria with Islamic State (IS), reported systematic harassment by the British Security Services to an advocacy group and points to events during his arrest in Tanzania in as a key critical trigger moment. While Emwazi’s claims are contested, they illustrate that narratives around perceived injustices, collective identity, and critical incidents persist in individual accounts of radicalization, and as social psychology has consistently shown us, what people believe is a motive for their conduct is at least as important as the actual sequence of events.

While this search for an understanding of how an individual can become radicalized into committing politically or religiously motivated violence is in its infancy, the search for a model of the conversion process, where the individual goes from a place of non-engagement to one where he is committed to the organisation and involved in their activities, is not new and many well-researched suggestions have been made regarding this process. We believe the psychology of religion may offer new insights into this conversion process, drawing on established frameworks to offer a deeper and more thorough understanding of the process of radicalization.

Viewing Radicalization through Religious Conversion Motifs

Similar to the area of terrorism, the psychology of religion is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and the process of religious conversion has many similarities

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32 See note 1 above
with the processes involved in radicalized conversion. For example, both conversions are arguably a transformational process whereby the individual goes from believing in and adhering to and/or practising one set of values/teachings, to believing in, adhering to and practising another set of values/teachings. Similar to radicalization, religious transformation also occurs in a ‘dynamic force field’ of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and experiences. Importantly, the research within the psychology of religion suggests several major types of conversion that resonate with examples of radicalization.

Lofland and Skonovd identified six unique religious conversion motifs, each of which offers a distinct, defining experience that makes the process of conversion discrete and individual, and which echoes the antecedent factors discussed previously. The six motifs that they suggest are: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. While these motifs will be discussed individually, it is important to remember that many converts will combine aspects of multiple motifs in their conversion.

Intellectual conversion involves the pursuit of knowledge about the group that the individual plans to join, although this knowledge is usually derived from secondary sources (books, media, etc.) rather than from one on one contact with people that can lay claim to group membership. In terms of radicalization processes, this would clearly map onto the routes of many Islamist militants from Europe and elsewhere who initially engaged with IS or jihadist sites online in what Neumann refers to as ‘self-recruitment’, where an individual

becomes radicalized ‘virtually’, without personal contact with other likeminded individuals or militant groups.  

*Mystical conversion* is viewed as the prototypical conversion motif and is exemplified by Saul’s conversion to Paul whilst on the road to Damascus as reported in Acts 9 in the New Testament Bible. Mystical conversion involves a critical event or period of stress which triggers a dramatic feeling of change and signals the onset of new beliefs and behaviours associated with the new religion.

While Lofland and Skonovd title this conversion ‘mystical’, it should be viewed as ‘transformational’ as it comprises of a cognitive rather than spiritual re-organization. The philosopher Jaspers also recognised the importance of these ‘grenzsituationen’ or boundary situations created by having to deal with a situation that prior knowledge or rational objective reasoning cannot prepare a person to overcome. Jaspers believed having to deal with these critical events (such as facing death, the death of a child, or an inevitable struggle) causes a radical change in an individual’s thinking, rousing them from normal spontaneous instinctive thinking, creating a radical change in personality and world view in which they take responsibility for their new future. This ‘Pauline’ motif is very similar to the critical incidents reported by Northern Irish paramilitaries and Swat Valley militants discussed earlier in this paper and resonate with Liht and Savage’s view of radicalization processes which involve fomented changes in integrative complexity.

*Experimental conversion* involves the individual actively exploring their religious options where the individual may ‘try on’ different aspects of the new beliefs, experimenting

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38 See note 36 above.
40 See note 21 above
with the ideologies and practices before deciding on one. Köse and Loewenthal in a study of British Muslim converts found that 60% of the converts reported ‘trying out’ different aspects of Muslim religious practice, such as dress, prayer, diet, abstention from alcohol or sexual relations, before committing to the faith.\textsuperscript{42} Interestingly, Richard Reid, aka the shoe bomber, initially converted to Islam for better prison food before joining Brixton and Finsbury Park Mosques on his release. For terror converts this behaviour may also involve assessing the available active groups (e.g., UVF \textit{vs}. UDA) and comparing their ideologies, courses of action, and track record before making a conversion decision.

\textit{Affectional conversion} highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in the process of conversion. Indeed, Lofland and Skonovd argue that personal attachments or a strong liking for members of the convert’s new faith are central to the process of driving that conversion. As discussed earlier, interpersonal and familial links are well documented antecedents to joining armed groups\textsuperscript{43}.

\textit{Revivalist conversion} relies on the use of crowd conformity to generate conversion behaviour, making use of powerful and emotive speeches and witnessing family and friends exerting direct pressure on the individual to convince them to convert. Research with Loyalist paramilitaries illustrates the role of protest marches and political rallies, organized by Protestant demagogues such as Ian Paisley, played an important role in radicalizing and mobilizing them to join loyalist paramilitary groups in conjunction with other conversion processes.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} See notes 11, 12 & 13 above.

\textsuperscript{44} Neil Ferguson, James W. McAuley, “Ulster Loyalist Accounts of Armed Mobilization, Demobilization and Decommissioning,” In Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio (eds.), \textit{The Troubles: Northern Ireland and Social Movements Theories} (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, (In press).
Coercive conversion, sometimes previously known as ‘brainwashing’, was conceived of as being rare by Lofland and Skonovd because specific conditions are required for it to take place, including but not limited to food and/or sleep deprivation and, in more severe cases, psychological and physical torture. Although outright coercive conversions may be rare, depending on the amount of social, personal or familial pressure brought to bear on the individual, many conversions could be said to contain an element of coercion. Similarly, while many individuals volunteer to join armed groups, some, such as child soldiers, are clearly coerced, while others face Hobson’s choice and join groups because they have no other obvious means of dealing with the poverty and precarious existence they face in underdeveloped or chaotic war torn countries.

Utilizing Conversion Motifs

It must also be remembered that Lofland and Skonovd highlight that there is not necessarily one single path to conversion, but that the process is necessarily multi-layered and complex. So we often find a combination of motifs reported amongst converts, for example, Köse and Loewenthal demonstrate that British Muslim converts report a combination of intellectual, experimental, and affectional motifs in their biographies.

Rambo builds on Lofland and Skonovd’s motifs to create a integrative model of conversion which considers the role of cultural, social, personal, and religious systems in charting an individual’s conversion experience (see Table 1). The stages involved in Rambo’s systemic stage model map very closely onto the well-known antecedents of terrorism, with the demographic suggestions and history of perceived injustices identified by any number of radicalized individuals represented by the Context, the critical incident identified by researchers closely resembling the Crisis stage, and with the incidents encountered at this stage having the potential to lead to intentional engagement (Quest) prior

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45 Rambo, Lewis R., Understanding Religions Conversion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993)
to making contact with the new movement (*Encounter*) and interacting with this movement in a meaningful and deliberate way (*Interaction*). The subsequent identity construction and assimilation into the movement (*Commitment*) leads to the consolidation of the identity and experiences and an intention to act (*Consequences*).

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

This systemic stage model highlights the complex and multifaceted conditions that combine to result in radicalization, with each of the stages visible to varying degrees in the cases of individuals who have experienced the process of radicalization, from al-Shabaab supporter Zachary Chesser’s acknowledgement of the social context as a key driver in his radicalization, to the well documented online encounters with jihadi activities and IS activists by three underage girls who fled the USA in 2014 to join IS in Syria. The consequences of successful completion of these stages are all too evident, when the commitment to new identities, beliefs, and ideologies manifest themselves in the bombing of public areas, the murder of civilians, and the intent to further proselytise.

If religious conversion motifs are useful in aiding the understanding radicalization, it would appear that Rambo’s suggestions provide a rational and effective starting point – issues of culture, society, and the individual are important not only to religious conversion but are prevalent in the first-hand accounts of conversion to terrorism by researchers that have sought face-to-face interactions. We suggest that those interested in understanding or

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46 Majority and Minority Staff Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,” Zachary Chesser: A case study in online Islamist radicalization and its meaning for the threat of homegrown terrorism,” February, 2012, Available at: https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=701274

countering this process should explore these motifs further to help develop the models of radicalization based on pyramids or staircases which are currently utilized. 48

Conclusion

To understand radicalization and engagement in violent extremism researchers and policy makers require comprehensive models which incorporate micro, meso, macro, and exo factors, such as intra-individual psychological motivations, community influences, and the role of ideology in the analysis. To achieve this we propose that scholars and practitioners examine research from across the globe which focuses on a range of groups, both active and disbanded, to explore the processes evident in people who engage in violent extremism. While viewing this process as a transformation from non-engagement to active commitment, we believe that exploring the psychology of religious conversion research offers useful insights and models for understanding these processes at a variety of levels of abstraction, while integrating a variety of conditions, factors, and actors into the analysis. Radicalization and religious conversion share many similarities and the conversion motifs and models offer ready templates which can assist in building and managing our understanding of the complex multifaceted radicalization processes currently taking place.

Table 1: Rambo’s (1993) Integrative Model of Conversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of Conversion Process</th>
<th>Factors to be Evaluated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>Historical, religious, social, cultural and personal factors are assessed based on their ability to promote or impede conversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Crisis</strong></td>
<td>Personal / social (or both) disruption that stimulated quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Quest</strong></td>
<td>Intentional engagement with crisis and its resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Encounter</strong></td>
<td>Recognition of and contact with new movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Interaction</strong></td>
<td>Multi-layered extended exchange between convert and movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Commitment</strong></td>
<td>Construction of new identity and become a valid member of the movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Consequences</strong></td>
<td>Conversion as a result of new commitment and consolidation of experiences, identities and commitments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>