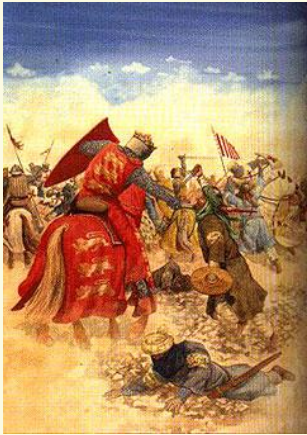# Religious & Cultural Theories

Religious, cultural, and nationalist theories of terrorism involve strongly held collective identities and communal belief systems.

Christian fanatics led the 11-13th century Crusades to take control over the Holy Land away from Muslims

Conquests of Jerusalem in 1099 and 1147 resulted in slaughters of both its Islamic and Jewish residents

In 1240, European Catholics defeated the Orthodox Christians, sacking Byzantine capital Constantinople

"Crusader" remains a derogatory term today – a gaffe by Pres. Bush who said, "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile." (9/19/01)

Are conflicts among religions central to most modern terrorism?

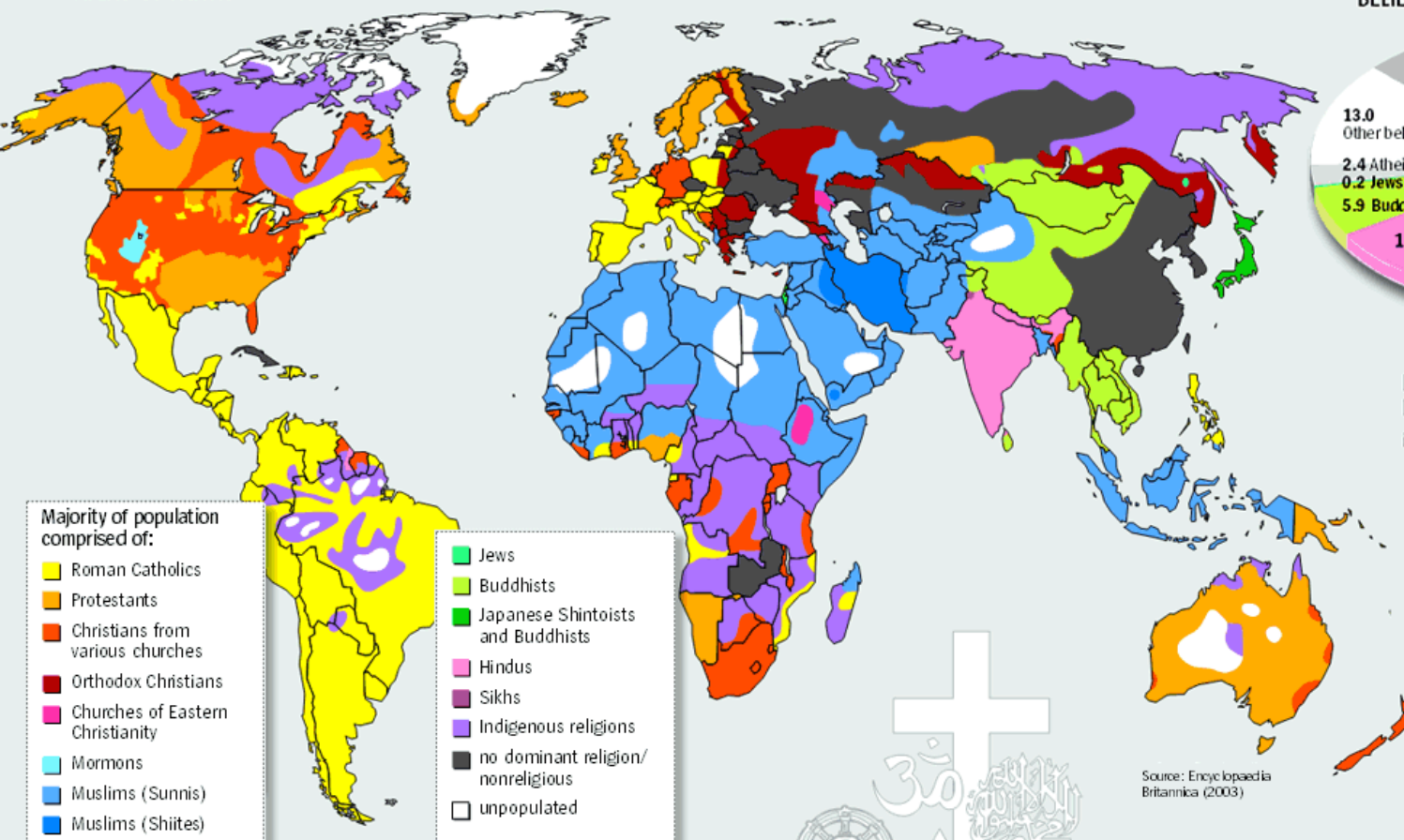Are nationalist struggles for ethnic homelands at the heart of terror?

How do cultures of some doomsday cults push members to violence?

Is a "Clash of Civilizations" (Samuel Huntington) between the secular West and Islam the fundamental cultural divide for the 21st century?
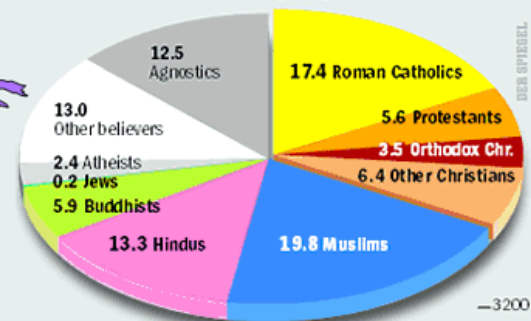
World religious diversity often cited as source of conflicts <u>between</u> groups, especially where in close contact (India; Israel-Palestine).

Yet disagreements <u>within</u> any religion about correct interpretation of doctrines may lead to peaceful <u>or</u> to violent religious activism.
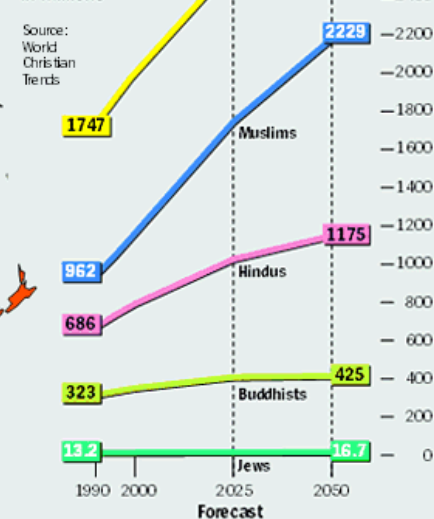

ATLAS OF FAITHS

BELIEVERS as percentage of global population (2002)

- 12.5 Agnostics
- 13.0 Other believers
- 2.4 Atheists
- 0.2 Jews
- 5.9 Buddhists
- 13.3 Hindus
- 19.8 Muslims
- 17.4 Roman Catholics
- 5.6 Protestants
- 3.5 Orthodox Chr.
- 6.4 Other Christians

Majority of population comprised of:
- Roman Catholics
- Protestants
- Christians from various churches
- Orthodox Christians
- Churches of Eastern Christianity
- Mormons
- Muslims (Sunnis)
- Muslims (Shiites)
- Jews
- Buddhists
- Japanese Shintoists and Buddhists
- Hindus
- Sikhs
- Indigenous religions
- no dominant religion/ nonreligious
- unpopulated

BELIEVERS BY RELIGION in millions

Source: World Christian Trends

Total Christians: 1747 → 3052
Muslims: 962 → 2229
Hindus: 686 → 1175
Buddhists: 323 → 425
Jews: 13.2 → 16.7

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2003)

1990 2000 2025 2050
Forecast

Religions – Double-Edged Sword

As beliefs and practices about supernatural and moral claims, most religions take positions on using violence to achieve political ends.

Silberman et al. apply a **meaning system approach** to impacts of religions on world change. All can potentially "facilitate <u>both</u> violence & peaceful activism."

> **"… religion as an individual or collective meaning system that is similar to other systems in its structure, malleability, and functioning, yet is unique in centering on what is perceived to be the sacred, and in the comprehensive & special way in which it can serve to fulfill the quest for meaning" (p. 764)**

Bruce Lincoln says religions take one of three stances toward political power:

Status quo – Gives support to dominant political system (Confucianism & Chinese Empire; Catholic Church & Holy Roman Empire, 800-1806 A.D.)

Resistance – Defends against status-quo religion (Jains in India; Buddhists in China; Baha'is in Iran)

Revolution – Seeks to overthrow <u>both</u> the status-quo religion and the dominant political system (French, Russian, Chinese revolutions; 1979 Iran?)

Lincoln, Bruce. 2003. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religon After September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Religions: Complex & Malleable

How can the <u>same</u> religion support both status quo & world change?
What is the meaning-making power of religion to motivate activism?

"Research suggests that those who commit acts of cruelty, destruction, and violence in the name of religion usually believe that through their actions they create a better world" (Silberman et al. 2005:766).
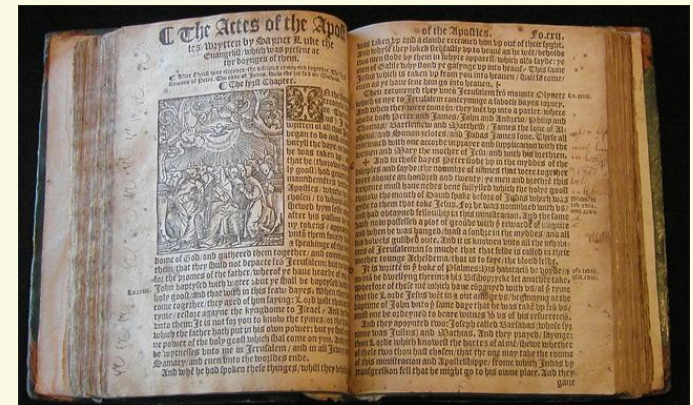

➢ Religious texts contain many complex messages

➢ Some passages may contradict others (see below)

➢ Passages are open to alternative interpretations

➢ Religious authorities can quote Scripture to legitimatize their own political preferences

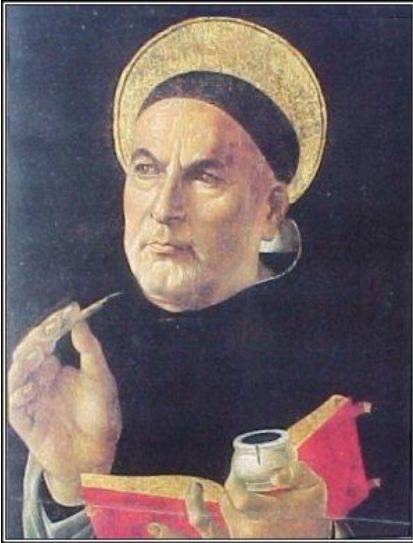Christian advocates of **pacifism** or **just war** each cite New Testament passages for legitimacy:

"Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:39)

"It [authority] is God's servant to administer retribution on the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:5)

Just War Against Terrorism?

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, building on the philosophy of St. Augustine, argued that performing immoral acts of brutality and contributing to evil consequences in war can be just only if certain conditions are met:

- ✓ **Proper authority:** war must be declared by a sovereign authority
- ✓ **Just cause:** wage war with the good intention of restoring peace, not for revenge or to harm
- ✓ **Reasonable chance for success:** do not needlessly waste people's lives and property
- ✓ **Proportionality:** the harm caused in responding to aggression must not be greater than the harm caused by the aggressor

Does the rhetoric of "Global War on Terror" imply a religion-based justification? Or is GWOT primarily legitimized as a national-security matter?

Did the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11 meet all just-war criteria?

Was Pres. Bush's 2003 decision to invade Iraq a just war?

Can terrorists legitimately claim they also wage just war against aggressors?

Do some interpretations of the Islamic duty to *jihad* ("struggle") – as struggle in a "holy war" – parallel Christian just-war doctrine? How is it different?

Dexter, Helen. 2008. "The 'New War' on Terror, Cosmopolitanism and the 'Just War' Revival." *Government and Opposition* 43:55-78.

Support **and** Challenge

Religious traditions are sometimes criticized for legitimating the oppression of the poor, women, racial & sexual minorities. Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the masses" because it keeps them submissive, weak, & accepting.

Other religious traditions challenge the status quo; e.g., Latin American "liberation theology" emphasizes social justice for the poor & downtrodden.

Class divides into small groups to discuss and answer Silberman et al.'s question:

"What are the processes through which religion facilitates support **or** opposition to the status quo?"

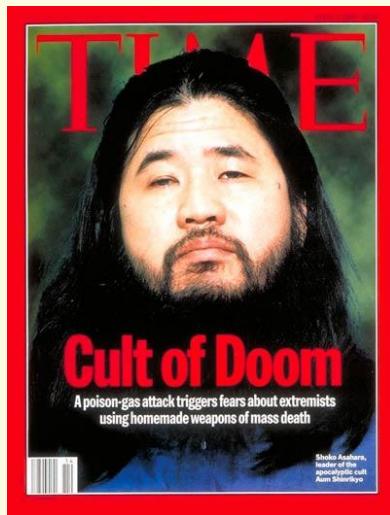Give examples of how religions foster both peaceful and violent activism by:

- Sanctifying or condemning specific beliefs, truths, actions, political goals, …

- Providing resources (funds, equipment, buildings) for activist mobilization

- Promoting values, e.g., selflessness, self-sacrifice, tolerance, bigotry, ...

- Rewarding & punishing particular behaviors (including promises of the afterlife)

- Offering spiritual & other meanings, self & group identities, social consensus …

Cultures of Deadly Religious Cults

Root of both culture & cult from Latin "cultus" = cultivate, care, adoration

Greedy Institutions: Pathologies of unconstrained self-demands when members internalize an organizational culture into a total-institution identity

❑ Personality absorbed into cult's mission; cut off all ties to friends & family

❑ Isolation inside a fortress blocks members' access to external information

❑ At extreme, cult may demand members sacrifice their resources, even lives

Aum Shinrikyo, founded by Shoko Asahara in 1984, grew to 9,000 Japanese & 30,000 worldwide by 1995. A pastiche of Buddhism & Hinduism, Aum attracted many graduates of elite Japanese universities.

Aum accused of holding members against their will & murdering several anti-cult activists. March 20, 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo subway killed 12, injured 1,000. Asahara and others still await execution ...

U.S. charismatic cults that have used violence/terror include the Aryan Nations, Christian Identity, Branch Davidians (Waco, TX), ….

Nationalism or Religion?

Northern Ireland's 1969-2007 "Troubles" had <u>both</u> religious & nationalist dimensions, reflecting the Protestant-Catholic and UK-Ireland cleavages.

Britain sent paratroops to stop violence between loyalist & IRA paramilitaries. On "Bloody Sunday," January 30, 1972, British troops shot and killed 14 unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry.

After more than 3,000 deaths, both sides reached a political solution and the withdrawal of troops.

Many 19-20th c. anti-colonial struggles used terror: Katipunan (Philippines); Mau Mau Revolt (Kenya);

Recent instances are East Timor's break-away from Indonesia & conflict over creating "Kurdistan"

Are conflicts about nationhood & ethnic identity less/more violent, and amenable to negotiated outcomes than are conflicts around religious identity? Why/why not?0