

Are terrorists normal and sane? Perspectives from Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology

by Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D., Ph.D.

Abstract

The author conveys his response as an academic committee member to a Ph.D psychology dissertation that involved interviewing terrorism-expert psychologists who had a great deal of experience in interviewing terrorists, and who affirmed the current psychology mainstream conclusion that terrorists are 'normal' and sane. The author's dissertation feedback response involved a request for more inclusion about the cult indoctrination of terrorists, as well as including the issue of the normality and sanity of terrorists viewed from an alternative and deeper Humanistic Psychology perspective. In this article the author, in addition to further expounding upon his Humanistic Psychology perspective, conveys how the generic issue of normality and sanity is tied philosophically to the premises of ethical absolutism, relativism, and pluralism, and in political day-to-day affairs to the common practices in dictatorships of killing one's rivals, as well as the current controversial practice of drone warfare, and the policies of US President Trump. Finally the issue of the normality and sanity of terrorists is viewed from the perspectives of R. D. Laing and Echart Tolle, which question the sanity of whole societies, and from the transpersonal psychology Perennial Philosophy perspective of Aldous Huxley.

Introduction

Current mainstream psychology concludes that terrorists are normal and sane

In my online doctoral dissertation committee work with a Ph.D psychology student, I recently was involved with giving my feedback on a dissertation that interviewed terrorism-expert psychologists who had a great deal of experience with interviewing terrorists. The descriptions that I had to read were

certainly harrowing and repulsive to me, but what I found to be most shocking was that apparently the current mainstream psychology world, as opposed to the mainstream psychology world of 30 years ago which portrayed terrorists as mentally ill, abnormal, crazy, or psychopaths, who commit abhorrent crimes by executing cold-blooded killings, now concludes that terrorists are 'normal' and sane.¹ In a similar way to how Robert J. Lipton (1986) described the

'normal' day-to-day life of the Nazi doctors under Hitler, mainstream psychology has predominantly concluded that terrorists perform reasonably well on diagnostic psychological tests that determine mental pathology, and therefore they should not be considered to be abnormal or insane. Their deplorable actions of mercilessly killing hordes of innocent people, including children, are perceived as analogous to the actions that soldiers carry out during a war, as terrorists perceive their civilian victims as their enemies.

Similarly, terrorists are generally not considered to be psychopaths, as it is argued that they have caring social relationships with their families and their fellow recruits in their terrorist organizations, and they are performing their deadly actions as part of an idealistic cause.

I subsequently found myself reading through this dissertation, and everything within me was saying 'NO' to the mainstream psychology conclusion that terrorists are 'normal' and sane. As I thought about how I could give academically respectable feedback to support my opposition to one of this dissertation's main themes, I realized that a glaring omission in the dissertation was that very little was

said about the cult indoctrination of terrorists. I proceeded to impart my feedback about including much more about how terrorists are operating under extremely destructive and manipulative cult influences, and I also mentioned the idea that the normality and sanity of terrorists could be viewed from an alternative and deeper perspective in the context of the values and premises of Humanistic Psychology,² and I suggested in particular that my student familiarize herself with the book *The sane society* by Eric Fromm (1955). I was trying to approach giving my feedback through the perspective of how a whole society could be considered to be insane, as I had vividly remembered from R. D. Laing's (1967) book *The politics of experience*, but I didn't want to particularly recommend Laing for this general psychology dissertation, as his work is quite controversial. My student's next dissertation draft included good substantial material on the cult indoctrination of

terrorists, and some particular references to Fromm (1955) in regard to how terrorists may feel alienated from their societies. This was certainly a welcome improvement partially in the direction that I wanted her to go in, but it also left me feeling that what was most important to me, which was questioning the conclusion that terrorists are normal and sane, was essentially not included.

The terrorists' normality/sanity question and 'collateral damage' from a Humanistic Psychology perspective

I had been recently appointed to my student's dissertation committee as a replacement for a committee member, and there was a lot of administrative university pressure put on my student to quickly get her dissertation approved in this stage of the dissertation process. Therefore I gave her very specific wording suggestions as well as where to include them, utilizing the perspective of Humanistic Psychology in regard to caring and empathy for human beings,² in order for me to feel comfortable approving her dissertation at this stage. My goal was not to discount her research about the conclusion that mainstream psychologists have come to in regard to terrorists being normal and sane. My student merely reported accurately what her participating terrorism-expert psychologists had conveyed to her from their interviews with terrorists, and she backed up her research data with good solid academic work to support the theme that terrorists are normal and sane. What I wanted was for her to introduce what I believe is a deeper perspective to view this theme from, and based upon my background, training, affiliation, and values, I chose the perspective from Humanistic Psychology as an appropriate perspective from which to view this theme. I was very relieved that my student ended up incorporating all my suggestions, and that both she and the committee chair apparently felt that I greatly contributed to enhancing the quality of her dissertation.

However, I must admit that I was stretching things a bit here, as I was not able to find any particular articles, much less research, about terrorism

per se from a bona fide Humanistic Psychology perspective. Rather, I was hypothesizing the stance that Humanistic Psychology would take on this, given its position in psychology on mental health and disturbance, as well as its concerns about the use of mainstream psychology classification schemes and tests.² I did end up advising her to cite and reference R. D. Laing's (1967) book *The politics of experience*, as well as the seminal books by founding humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1962), along with Eric Fromm's (1955) *The sane society*. I also found some articles that disagreed with the mainstream psychology conclusion that terrorists are 'normal',³ including one article by an author, Adam Lankford (2016), that my student had already used in her dissertation to support her 'terrorists are normal' theme, that discussed research that concluded the opposite: that terrorists are frequently mentally disturbed.

The research which concludes that terrorists are 'normal' and sane relies heavily on terrorists' immersion in an idealistic cause, and their perception that they are killing their enemies, even if these enemies include children.¹ It is precisely their immersion in an idealistic cause that mainstream psychology researchers point to as a partial explanation that terrorist deadly attacks can be viewed in the same context as killing one's enemy as a part of deadly war attacks.¹ And undoubtedly terrorists are motivated out of justifiable anger and hatred toward the 'collateral damage' from seeing their children, parents, relatives, and friends killed by bombs, both manned and unmanned (drones), largely from the United States (Benjamin, M., 2012). To give a glimpse of the horrifying death and devastation from this kind of 'collateral damage,' antiwar activist Medea Benjamin (2012; no relation to myself) has painted some gruesome pictures in her book *Drone warfare: Killing by remote control*:

Born into a poor family living on the outskirts of Kabul, her father was a street vendor. Her mother raised five children and baked sweets for him to sell. One day while her father was out selling candies, Roya and her two sisters were trudging home carrying buckets of water.

Suddenly, they heard a terrifying whir and then there was

an explosion: something terrible had dropped from the sky, tearing their house apart and sending the body parts of their mother and two brothers flying through the air. The Americans must have thought Roya's home was part of a nearby Taliban housing compound. In the cold vernacular of military-speak, her family had become 'collateral damage' in America's war on terror. When Roya's father came home, he carefully collected all the bits and pieces of his pulverized family that he could find, buried them immediately according to Islamic tradition, and then sank into a severe state of shock. . . .

A tall, strong man with the calloused hands of a hard worker, he no longer works. He doesn't even walk or talk. He just sits and stares into space. 'Once in a while he smiles', Roya whispered. . . . Forty villagers were killed in another small town in the middle of the night. Their crime? They lived near the caves of Tora Bora, where Osama bin Laden was presumed to be hiding. The US news media reported the dead as Taliban militants. But the woman I met—who had just lost her husband and four children, as well as both her legs—had never heard of Al Qaeda, America or George Bush. Bleeding profusely, she was praying she would die. Surviving as a crippled widow with no income and no family was too much to bear. . . . In fact, President Obama carried out his first drone strike just three days after his inauguration. It was in Pakistan on January 23, 2009. But instead of striking a Taliban hideout, the missiles struck the home of Malik Gulistan Khan, a tribal elder and member of a local pro-government peace committee, and killed him and four other family members. 'I lost my father, three brothers, and my cousin in this attack', said Adnan, his eighteen-year old son. Adnan's uncle claimed, 'We did nothing, have no connection to militants at all. Our family supported the government and in fact. . . was a member of a local peace committee.' Reports later confirmed the family's story. (pp. 1–3, 7)

And the statistics of innocent civilians killed as 'collateral damage' by drones, as well as the mentality for doing this, are deeply disturbing:

Unknown to most Americans, in just three months between October 7, 2001 and January 1, 2002, over 1,000 Afghan civilians were directly killed by the US-led bombing campaign and at least ⁹ 200 more had died of starvation, exposure, associated illnesses, or injury sustained while in flight from war zones. . . . If there's one person they're going after and there's thirty-five people in the building, thirty-five people are going to die. That's the mentality. (pp. 3, 64)

It goes without saying that new terrorists have been

and are continually created from these ‘unintended’ civilian deaths from drones, just as this was the case from previous traditional bombings:

Drone attacks leave behind trails of human suffering—grieving widows, orphaned children, young lives snuffed out, lifetime disabilities. They enrage local populations, stoke anti-American feelings and prompt violent acts of revenge. . . . Somewhere in the United States, a drone operator sits in a booth with a joystick and commandeers a pilot-less aircraft armed with deadly bombs. Much like a video game, he aims, shoots and fires at targets he sees on a satellite map. . . . Sometimes the target is killed and sometimes the intelligence is faulty and a sleeping family or a wedding party bears the brunt of the miscalculation. At all times, however, the Taliban capitalize on the ensuing mayhem and gain new recruits and re-energize old ones. Terror thus spreads not simply in the village where the drone attack has taken place but far and wide in the bazaars of Peshawar and the streets of Lahore and the offices of Islamabad where these recruits avenge their anger against the drone attacks. . . . There are just pieces of flesh lying around after a strike. You can’t find bodies. So the locals pick up the flesh and curse America. They say that America is killing us inside our own country, inside our own homes, and only because we are Muslims. . . . Every one of these dead noncombatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as the drone strikes have increased. (pp. 28–29, 31, 202–203)

Yes it is certainly understandable why terrorists consider America to be their enemy, and how some of them can be persuaded to avenge the indiscriminate killing of their families and friends by doing the same to the foreigners who have grievously destroyed their loved ones. And it is unfortunately the case that the civilian casualties from drone attacks are already significantly escalating with the drone attack policies of President Trump, and will likely escalate further as Trump proceeds through his presidency (Bennis, 2017). All of this undoubtedly warrants a whole other exploration in regard to the ‘normality’ and sanity of drone attacks, President Trump’s war-mongering policies, and the policy of ‘collateral damage’ to begin with, but this goes way beyond the intent of this present article. But is there a difference between ‘unintended’ civilian victims from ‘collateral damage’ and the victims of terrorist attacks?

One way of looking at this is through the perspective that we understand how a psychopathic mass murderer may have been influenced to kill people he does not even know, based upon his childhood experiences of parental abuse, bullying, social ostracism, etc. But this certainly does not result in us calling this behavior ‘normal’ or sane, and I see the situation with terrorists as somewhat similar. The aspect of killing innocent people at a marketplace, inclusive of children, may be explained by mainstream psychology researchers as the terrorists’ way of going to war in the only way they are able to,¹ but I think there is an important factor that is being overlooked here, and this is the factor of ‘intention’. This factor of intention is directly related to what has been referred to as the ‘morality of the agent’ (Hinman, 2008, p. 52). Hinman (2008) described the intention factor in morality as follows:

Some philosophers take the *morality of the agent* [*sic*] as the principal focus. Among those who focus on the agent are the Kantians who ask if an act is being done for the sake of duty and those divine command theorists who are concerned that actions are done for God’s sake. Both these approaches look primarily to the agent’s *intention* [*sic*] as the key moral factor. (p. 52)

My perspective on the normality and sanity of terrorists is directly associated with this morality of the agent intention factor.

For the mainstream psychology researchers who view the terrorists’ deadly attacks in the context of being normal and sane, a key ingredient in their estimation is that terrorists are operating from an idealistic political/religious cause.¹ However, although this may sound plausible in the abstract, I return to the basic premises of Humanistic Psychology² to view the actuality of what transpires for terrorists when they commit their deadly acts. With few exceptions, terrorists do not feel any remorse for their victims but rather glorify in their gruesome acts, regardless of the fact that their victims may include young children (Kruglanski, 2013; Merari, 2010; Silke, 2013). As horrific as the ‘collateral damage’ of drone attacks are, as poignantly described in the above excerpts, I must also say that I think there is an important difference between intentional deadly terrorist attacks on civilians and killing civilians who

were not the actual targets of the drone attacks or traditional bombings. Furthermore, unlike the reactions of terrorists who survive their killings, it appears that the drone pilots who graphically see the results of their 'unintended' killings are generally left with disturbed feelings:

For drone pilots and other drone-crewmembers, viewing the real time video feed is often the biggest stressor related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)... Nearly a third of the US Air Force's 100 drone operators suffered 'burnout', with seventeen percent thought to be clinically distressed... nearly half reported 'high operational stress',... As a result, drone crews are generally 'tired, disgruntled and disillusioned'... Autonomous weapons won't suffer from PTSD. And that's why—ethical or not—the military will most likely be expanding its dependency on machines that do not possess the troublesome emotions and consciences of its human pilots. (pp. 95–97, 100)

And from the perspective of Humanistic Psychology,² I believe that these kind of disturbed feelings when one actually sees the deadly human results of one's drone attacks is 'normal' and 'sane,' as opposed to the stoic or even joyful reactions that terrorists display from their deadly attacks on human beings that they have been persuaded to view as the enemy. However, undoubtedly there are also drone operators who do not feel any remorse from their killing of 'foreigners', as this becomes little more for them than just playing a violent video game (Benjamin, M. 2012). Tragically the reality of 'collateral damage' during a war has been all too common throughout human history (Benjamin, M. 2012).

Humanistic Psychology founder Carl Rogers (1961) described his formulation of client-centered therapy, involving the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client, as one in which the therapist offered personal congruence/authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and compassionate understanding to the client.² And these kinds of Humanistic Psychology therapeutic interactions are related to peace psychology and counter the unwarranted use of violence (Pilisuk, 2015):

Peace psychology and Humanistic Psychology have spoken with similar voices on the contribution of the human psyche to violent behavior and participation in war... Humanistic psychology has always looked on the development of individuals whose respect for others would not permit

them to engage directly in unwarranted acts of violence. This is essential in the promotion of peace... Our collective survival requires the appreciation of a 'community of otherness' in which acceptance and willingness to dialogue comes without regard to our perceived differences. Peace psychology has brought forward the means for such dialogue in forms of dispute resolution that can be applied even under conditions of deadlocked distrust and ideological intransigence. (pp. 153, 156).

This notion of the 'community of otherness' and the respect for individuals even under conditions of 'deadlocked distrust and ideological intransigence' (Friedman, 1983; Pilisuk, 2015) is at the gist of humanistic/existential psychologist Kirk Schneider's (2013) thesis of the 'polarized mind'. The above perspective from Humanistic Psychology is reinforced in the following final excerpt from Medea Benjamin (2012):

While human beings do indeed commit atrocities when caught up in the heat of war, they sometimes also empathize with the supposed enemy. A World War II study by US Army Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall interviewing thousands of soldiers found that the majority of troops refuse to fire their weapons at other human beings. S.L.A. Marshall's methodology has been criticized, but his findings have been corroborated by many other studies... Indeed, data indicate that soldiers throughout military history have demonstrated a strong resistance to killing other people. (p. 160)

Normality, sanity, dictators, and US President Trump

In retrospect, perhaps I should have also advised my student to make use of the Perennial Philosophy, as described by Aldous Huxley in the 1940s in his very well-received book by the same name (Huxley, 2009/1944), which I first became familiar with through the writings of Ken Wilber (1977, 1983, 1995). However, this enters the territory of transpersonal psychology (Ferrer, 2000), which incorporates a variety of spiritual dimensions and experiences into psychology, inclusive of peak experiences, altered states of consciousness, meditation and mindfulness, psychedelic experiences, psychic phenomena, transcendence through the creative arts, etc.,⁴ and I wanted to keep some kind of a lid on how far I was asking my student to go in countering her mainstream psychology stance on the terrorism

normality and sanity issue (though see the section below for a discussion of the Perennial Philosophy in relation to the main theme of this article). But setting aside the context of an academic dissertation, it still disturbs me that psychologists – or anyone for that matter – thinks that terrorists are normal and sane. I'm not naive, and I understand that one can look at normality and sanity in relativistic terms, according to the beliefs of a society (Hinman, 2008). Nevertheless, killing innocent people inclusive of children, without remorse or distress or hesitation, is not what I choose to believe is sane or normal human behavior, and as I have described above, this belief is consistent with the basic premises of Humanistic Psychology.² Furthermore, this belief is also consistent with one of the basic principles of ethical pluralism: The Principle of Standing Up Against Evil, described by Hinman (2008) as follows:

The Principle of Standing Up Against Evil: (Sic) It is also important, at least in cases of egregious moral wrongdoing, to speak out against offenses wherever they may occur, whether in one's own culture or another culture. Here, pluralism differs from ethical relativism. . . . This is of particular importance because often the most outrageous wrongdoing is directed against the powerless of the world: children, women, and minorities (whether these are racial, ethnic, or religious minorities). An account of morality that provides no moral foundation for opposing such wrongdoing falls far short of the mark. (p. 55)

For Hinman, he does not have difficulty in deciding that some actions fall into the category of 'evil', as illustrated in the following passage: 'We know that torturing a little baby is morally wrong, and we do not need to ask a philosopher's advice to see that' (Hinman, 2008, p. 2)

One can bring in cult indoctrination, mass psychology, psychopathology, the psychology of evil, etc. to try to explain the killing of innocents by terrorists. I have no doubt that terrorists may perform relatively well on diagnostic psychological tests that are designed to determine if an individual is 'normal', as they rationally explain that the innocent victims they indiscriminately kill, including the children, are their enemies.¹ But in my opinion this is exactly where mainstream psychology is missing the boat. Even if we want to define 'normal' to be what is commonly

done in a society, then we can ask a similar question in regard to sanity.³ And from this perspective, I think R. D. Laing (1967) got it right in the following quote from *The politics of experience* (with the male pronoun language that unfortunately was quite common at that time):

Given the conditions of contemporary civilization, how can one claim that the 'normal' man is sane? The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow men in the last fifty years. (p. i)

Laing's contention that 'the normal man is not sane' is reinforced by Eckhart Tolle's (2005) description of 'collective insanity':⁵

Science and technology have magnified the destructive impact that the dysfunction of the human mind has upon the planet, other lifeforms, and upon humans themselves. . . . By the end of the century, the number of people who died a violent death at the hand of their fellow humans would rise to more than one hundred million. They died not only through wars between nations, but also through mass exterminations and genocide, such as the murder of twenty million 'class enemies, spies, and traitors' in the Soviet Union under Stalin or the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. They also died in countless smaller inner conflicts, such as the Spanish civil war or during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia when a quarter of the country's population was murdered. We only need to watch the daily news on television to realize that the madness has not abated, that it is continuing into the twenty-first century. . . . The collective manifestations of the insanity that lies at the heart of the human condition constitutes the greater part of human history. It is to a large extent a history of madness. If the history of humanity were the clinical case history of a single human being, the diagnosis would have to be:

chronic paranoid delusions, a pathological propensity to commit murder and acts of extreme violence and cruelty against his perceived 'enemies' (his own unconsciousness projected outward), criminally insane, with a few brief lucid intervals.

The above quotes from Tolle (1994) are evaluated in a 2011 context as follows:⁵

This is not new information, our collective insanity has been brought to our attention over and over again for millennia by

sages and enlightened teachers. It is just the acceleration of destructive intensity and deadly methodologies that increasingly threaten us today.

I think we can apply Tolle's and Laing's above quotes in particular to Lipton's (1986) description of the 'normality' of the Nazi doctors. and by emphasizing 'sane' as opposed to 'normal' we can apply their quotes to the revised question: Are terrorists sane? Furthermore, distinguishing between normality and sanity³ while utilizing the ethical pluralism principle of Standing Up Against Evil, as described above, lends itself to an analysis that is consistent with the principles of Humanistic Psychology,² of the horrendous acts that dictators have commonly undertaken throughout history that is consistent with the principles of Humanistic Psychology.² Examples of these kinds of horrendous acts are described in the following quote from the book *The dictators' handbook: Why bad behavior is almost always good politics* (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011):

Would-be autocrats must be prepared to kill all comers—even members of the immediate family. The Ottomans formalized this while the English merely relied on the tradition of doing in their rivals. Murder seems to be a favored solution under the extreme conditions of fear and insecurity that accompany monarchic and autocratic successions. . . . Mehmet II [1429–1481] institutionalized this practice with the fratricide law, under which all unsuccessful male heirs were strangled with a silk cord. A century later, Mehmet III allegedly killed nineteen brothers, two sons, and fifteen slaves who were pregnant by his own father, thereby eliminating all present and future potential rivals. (pp. 30–31)

Yes killing one's rivals was (and unfortunately still is in some places) 'normal' behavior if we take 'normal' to mean what is commonly done. And I have no doubt that it could be argued that it is even 'sane' behavior in the sense of sanity being rational and mentally sound³—as perhaps it is 'mentally sound' to eliminate your rivals to keep power in a dictatorship, as described in horribly graphic fashion in *The dictator's handbook* (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011). This is of course the kind of relativistic society perspective that mainstream psychology is coming from when they conclude that terrorists are normal and sane. And this is precisely why I choose to give an alternative context for what is normal and sane, from

the perspective of Humanistic Psychology. But then 'normal' goes beyond what is relative to any given society, and is closer in definition to 'natural', which is also commonly used to define 'normal'.³

These philosophical questions to understand the meaning of 'normal' and 'sane' are by no means simple, and one can embark on a long and complicated journey into the world of ethics to try to penetrate their meanings more deeply. One way of approaching this task is through the lens of ethical pluralism, in particular through its Principle of Standing Up Against Evil (see above). Ethical pluralism has been further described by Hinman (2008) as follows:

Ethical pluralism is simply the conviction that the truth, at least in the moral life, is not singular or unitary. There are many truths that are sometimes partial and sometimes conflicting. This does not mean that there is no truth, as the subjectivist claims. Nor does it mean that all truth is relative, as the relativist maintains. But it does mean that, at least in some situations, there is not just a single truth. (p. 49)

However, it may difficult to differentiate between ethical pluralism and ethical relativism, depending upon who is doing the philosophizing, as Hinman (2008) described one type of ethical relativism as follows:

It is clear, simply as a matter of fact, that different people have some different moral beliefs—sometimes radically so. Various societies in the past have engaged in such practices as cannibalism or sacrificing human beings to the gods, and those practices were viewed within those societies as morally acceptable, often even as morally commendable. Indeed, even in our own day, there exist some isolated societies that until recently have approved of such actions. (p. 34)

Clearly this view of morality, whether in the context of ethical pluralism or ethical relativism, lends itself to vastly different interpretations of normality, sanity, and what may be construed as 'unwarranted violence' that Humanistic Psychology and peace psychology both oppose, as described above. In particular, in the context of ethical relativism (Hinman, 2008), terrorists are able to justify their horrendous acts, inclusive of murdering infants and gang-raping their mothers, and chopping off heads and burning people alive while broadcasting their

horrid actions on social media for millions to watch. Their justification is that this is an effective way to incite terror in their enemies, and that their violence is warranted.¹ The scenario is further complicated by the cult indoctrination factor, in which the terrorist leaders skilfully manipulate their followers into performing these kinds of horrendous acts, with their followers commonly killing themselves as part of the 'normal' process of their violence.² Hinman (2008) described the essence of the extreme fundamentalist tradition in religion that may condone these kind of practices in the context of ethical absolutism, as follows:

This is the strain in religion that is convinced it has found the absolute truth and, all too often, that those who deny this truth are not to be tolerated. It is the spirit of the Inquisition, which tried and executed people for heresy. It is the spirit of all those who have died—and killed—for religion. We can call this the fundamentalist tradition in religion. . . . fundamentalism goes out into the world to convert it or, in its most extreme forms, to destroy the world of the infidels. (p. 92)

We thus see that from the perspective of ethical relativism in particular, that it can indeed be argued that terrorists are 'normal' and 'sane,' as their actions can be considered to be 'regular', commonplace, rational, and 'mentally sound' to achieve their aims, and this perspective is reinforced by terrorists performing relatively well on diagnostic psychological tests.¹

But we don't have to only focus on dictatorships and terrorists to see the disastrous implications of using relativistic society notions to conceptualize normality and sanity. In today's United States under the leadership of President Trump, it is 'normal' (in terms of mandated US government actions) for the president of the United States to engage in a horde of actions and statements (including tweets) that many people, including a growing number of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, find to be both 'abnormal' and 'insane' (Lee, 2017; Weisman, 2017), and may very well warrant a Humanistic Psychology perspective to 'stand up against evil' in the context of ethical pluralism (Hinman, 2008).

I have written a number of articles about this previously (see for example Benjamin, E., 2016,

2017a, 2017b) and I won't repeat myself here, except to remark that my fears of nuclear war based on President's Trump's narcissism, immature ego, and inability to constructively negotiate are distressingly looking more and more possible to explode with North Korea and Iran (Lee, 2017; Weisman, 2017). But let me quote Naomi Klein (2017) from her book *No is not enough: Resisting Trump's shock politics and winning the world we need* in regard to the branding of the Trump name and what is now dangerously close to 'normal' in Trump's United States:

You don't need to be objectively good or decent; you only need to be true and consistent to the brand you have created. That's why brand managers are so obsessed with discipline and repetition: once you have identified what your core brand is, your only job is to embody that brand, project that brand, and repeat its message. If you stay focused, very little can touch you. That's a problem when applied to a sitting US president, especially because over many, many years, and with a startling level of consistency, Donald Trump created a brand that is entirely amoral. On the campaign trail, Trump was able to shrug off almost every conventional 'gotcha'. Caught dodging federal taxes? That's just being 'smart', Wouldn't reveal his tax returns? Who's going to make him? He was only half joking on the campaign trail when he said, 'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters.' In Trump's world, impunity, even more than lots of gold, is the ultimate signifier of success. (pp. 33–34)

Yes one can certainly ask the normality and sanity question in regard to US president Trump, as well as in regard to his White Nationalist, racist neo-nazi supporters, who form a good deal of his base (Klein, 2017; Lee, 2017; Weisman, 2017).

The terrorists' normality/sanity question from a transpersonal psychology perspective

To conclude my perspective on the question of whether terrorists are normal and sane, I will now describe a perspective that I did not ask my student to include in her dissertation, which is that of Aldous Huxley (2009/1944) in his description of the Perennial Philosophy, which can be viewed in the context of transpersonal psychology (Ferrer, 2000). Huxley (2009/1944) conveyed various perspectives from religious sages in the East and World, inclusive

of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, on a host of spiritual matters. Huxley's perennial philosophy is consistent with the description that Hinman (2008) has given of saints, as follows:

We see a greater level of fundamental compatibility among religious leaders than we find among religious dogmas. Imagine, for example, the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, Bishop Tutu, and Black Elk coming together. They are all deeply religious persons of goodwill, and it is difficult to believe they could not find common moral ground. (p. 87)

Huxley found a great deal of agreement on a number of core spiritual themes, and the following quote talks about a spiritual Islamic perspective on how the peaceful contemplative nature of the soul can change into one that persecutes and makes wars:

In India, as in Persia, Mohammedan thought came to be enriched by the doctrine that God is immanent as well as transcendent, while in Mohammedan practice were added the moral disciplines and 'spiritual matters', by means of which the soul is prepared for contemplation or the unitive knowledge of the Godhead. . . . The politics of those whose goal is beyond time are always pacific; it is the idolaters of past and future, of reactionary memory and Utopian dream, who do the persecuting and make the wars. (Huxley, 2009/1944, p. 16)

We thus see from Huxley's Perennial Philosophy perspective that it is not 'sane', or normal in the context of 'natural', for terrorists to do their horrendous acts in the name of Islam, at least not from the perspective of the sages of this religion. Huxley (2009/1944) further explained how for any religion, the practice of idolatry and the concept of the personal, all-powerful, ruler God can reduce the bona fide spiritual component of one's religious practice, enter into 'horrible' propitiatory sacrifices, and justify power politics and war:

If we approach God with the preconceived idea that He is exclusively the personal, transcendental, all-powerful ruler of the world, we run the risk of becoming entangled in a religion of rites, propitiatory sacrifices (sometimes of the most horrible nature) and legalistic observances. . . . The philosophy that rationalizes power politics and justifies war and military training is always (whatever the official religion of the politicians and war makers) some wildly unrealistic doctrine of national, racial, or ideological idolatry. (pp. 31, 54)

Huxley (2009/1944) was very clear that authentic spirituality in the context of the Perennial Philosophy

has no place for a 'holy war':

Wars and violent revolutions have the effect of more or less totally eclipsing God for the majority of those involved in them. . . . The crimes which are everywhere forbidden proceed from states of mind which are everywhere condemned as wrong; and these wrong states of mind are, as a matter of empirical fact, absolutely incompatible with that unitive knowledge of the divine Ground, which, according to the Perennial Philosophy, is the supreme good. . . . For where there are violent passions and compelling distractions, this ultimate good can never be realized. That is one of the reasons why the policy correlated with eternity-philosophies is tolerant and non-violent. . . . the killing and torturing of individual 'thous' is a matter of cosmic significance, inasmuch as it interferes with the normal and natural relationship between individual souls and the divine ground eternal Ground of all being. Every violence is, over and above everything else, a sacrilegious rebellion against the divine order. (pp. 102, 211, 222-223)

In regard to putting one's own religion on a pedestal and disparaging the religions of others, Huxley (2009/1944) described the viewpoint of the Perennial Philosophy as follows:

The sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another. . . . He who does reverence to his own sect, while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own, with intent to enhance the glory of his own sect, in reality by such conduct inflicts the severest injury on his own sect. (p. 228)

Finally, the following excerpt can relate to a host of horrendous gruesome acts on the part of fundamentalist religions throughout history, as described above in the context of ethical absolutism by Hinman (2008). This includes the fundamentalist Christian justification for war and aggression on the part of the United States that is currently in operation, and the horrific deadly attacks of terrorists on civilians, inclusive of children. According to Huxley (2009/1944), the Perennial Philosophy is well aware that people who believe that they have 'divine justifications for their actions' may be:

tempted to use the name of God to justify what they do in pursuit of place, power, and wealth. And because they believe themselves to have divine justification for their actions, they proceed, with a good conscience, to perpetrate abominations, 'which nature, left to itself, would be ashamed to own'. Throughout recorded history an incredible sum of mischief has been done by ambitious idealists, self-deluded

by their own verbiage and a lust for power into a conviction that they were acting for the highest good of their fellow-men. (pp. 279–280)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have approached the issue of the normality and sanity of terrorists from a number of perspectives. From a mainstream psychology perspective, terrorists, in their deadly attacks on civilians, inclusive of children, are generally considered to be acting in a way that is construed as both 'normal' and sane. This conclusion is arrived at primarily through the use of diagnostic psychological tests, in which terrorists for the most part perform well enough, demonstrating that they are not 'dysfunctional' in their day-to-day lives and relations with people from their affinity group. This perspective is further explained by perceiving the deadly attacks by terrorists on civilians as essentially acts of war, with terrorists rationally deciding to commit their gruesome acts as part of their idealistic political/religious cause,¹ and is consistent with a philosophical stance of ethical relativism.

However, I have also looked at terrorists' deadly attacks on civilians from a Humanistic Psychology perspective, which has a basic reliance on empathy for human beings, as well as from an ethical pluralism perspective, in particular from The Principle of Standing Up Against Evil, and from perspectives by R. D. Laing and Eckhart Tolle that question the sanity of whole societies.

From these perspectives, I have concluded that the deadly attacks on civilians by terrorists are far removed from what can be considered to be morally justifiable, 'normal', or sane. I have also compared the unintended killing of civilians as 'collateral damage' from bombs with the deliberate killing of civilians by terrorists, and concluded that the factor of 'intention' is a crucial variable. Furthermore, I have discussed the different ways that 'normal' can be construed, in regard to what is 'common' as opposed to what is 'natural,' and applied this to dictators as well as to US President Trump. Finally, I looked at the issue of the normality and sanity of terrorists from a transpersonal lens, specifically from the lens of Aldous Huxley's

description of the Perennial Philosophy, and concluded that the horrific killing of civilians by terrorists is far removed from what is considered to be 'normal' or sane from the spiritual perspective of the Perennial Philosophy. ⑤



Biography

Elliot Benjamin has a Ph.D. in mathematics and a Ph.D. in psychology with a concentration in Consciousness and Spirituality. He is a psychology mentor/Ph.D.

committee chair at Capella University and has published four books and over 150 articles in various fields in humanistic and transpersonal psychology, pure mathematics, and mathematics enrichment. Elliot enjoys playing the piano, tennis and ballroom dancing, and has an author's website at benjamin-philosopher.com

***ben496@prexar.com**

Notes

- 1) For this statement and the subsequent statements in this paragraph, as well as for related statements throughout the article, see Booher, 2016; Krueger, 2013; Kruglanski, 2013; Merari, 2010; Metzger, 2015; Miller, 2014; Post, 2005; Silke, 2013.
- 2) For foundational books in Humanistic Psychology see Rogers, 1961 and Maslow, 1962; for books on cult indoctrination which can be applied to terrorists, see Lalach & Singer, 1995; Langone, 2006; and West & Langone, 1986. See also the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) website at www.ahpweb.org.
- 3) In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, 'normal' is defined to be 'regular, standard, natural' and 'sane' is defined to be 'mentally sound and healthy'. Furthermore, two of the definitions of 'sound' are 'free from error or fallacy' and 'showing good judgment.'
- 4) For foundational books in transpersonal psychology see Maslow, 1971 and Wilber, 1977, 1983. See also the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) website at www.atpweb.org.
- 5) For the following excerpts from Tolle, and the subsequent 2011 statement, see Tolle (2005) and the website <http://spiritualnotreligious.blogspot.com/2011/07/tolle-and-jung-collective-insanity-ego>.

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