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SEXUAL DESIRE, VIOLENT DEATH, AND THE TRUE BELIEVER

Abstract. The relationship among sexual desire, violent death, and fundamentalist belief leading to acts of terrorism is explored through the psychoanalytic lens of structural and object relations theory. Using contemporary and historical cases of jihadist, ethnic nationalist, and single-issue terrorist violence, the author posits that both the fear of and desire for sexual pleasure, and its condemnation and often punishment within the strictures of fundamentalist belief systems, are often intrapsychically managed through pre-Oedipal defenses, compensatory fantasies of death of the self and object, and the promise of unlimited sexual gratification through violent obliteration. The actual targeted violence, directed toward perceived unbelievers, also advances the fantasy of ambient purification (morally cleansing the environment), and the fantasy of ushering in a destined utopia, usually vaguely defined.

Keywords: Terrorism, violence, death, fundamentalism, sexuality, object relations

When Omar Mateen slaughtered 49 people in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando on June 12, 2016, his act conflated three primitive fears and desires: sexual penetration, murderous violence, and the Manichaeian belief that others are either good or evil. Although rarely contemplated, we were brought face to face with these largely unconscious conflicts through the acts of one young man, armed with an assault rifle and a semi-automatic pistol, whose behaviors vexed the public: he killed homosexuals, yet may have been homosexual himself;

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he was married and the father of a little boy—the traditional definition of male fecundity and fatherhood—yet killed other young people near his age with their own reproductive desires; and he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State which espouses a militant Sunni ideology, at war with the Shi'a Muslims for centuries: a 1,300-year conflict that originated over the question of whether or not direct lineage through procreation would define religious leadership (Aslan, 2006; FBI transcript at www.justice.gov/opa/pr/joint-statement-justice-department-and-fbi-regarding-transcript-related-orlando-terror-attack). Focusing on the psychodynamics among these contradictory and primitive states of mind may help us understand such individuals.

The Theoretical Frame

The theoretical frame for this analysis is built upon a structural and object relations model (Fairbairn, 1943; Jacobson, 1964; Kernberg, 1975, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, 1998; Klein, 1957), which, in turn, embraces Freud's (1920/1955) monumental theories of the sex drive and the death drive. These theories, especially the death drive, contradict a more optimistic view of human nature: if it were not for trauma, aggression would not be such a ubiquitous human issue. Whether it is the lone-actor terrorist¹, or state-sanctioned violence, the drive to existential destruction—in this context, the desire to kill and often to be killed—cannot be ignored. The Freudian theory of the closely associated sex and death drives, moreover, is consistent with neurobiological investigations of the amygdala, the almond-shaped “threat sensor” deep within the limbic system, which activates and regulates whenever biological survival is paramount (sexual arousal, a reaction to a threat) and dynamically relates to the pre-frontal cortex (Kiehl, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2015), possibly putting the neurological brakes on more primitive impulse. It is also consistent with mammalian research concerning the existence of two biologically distinctive modes of violence: predatory and affective (Meloy, 2006; Siegel & Victoroff, 2009; Siever, 2008). Predatory violence in all mammals finds its evolutionary genesis in the desire to hunt and kill and has been described as “coldblooded” (Declercq & Audenaert, 2011) or emotionless, whereas

¹ Throughout this article, the “lone-actor terrorist” will be referred to by the masculine pronoun, “he,” because the vast majority of these terrorists are male.

affective violence finds its evolutionary genesis in defense against an imminent threat and is impulsive and intensely emotional, often experienced as “defensive rage” (Siegel & Victoroff, 2009). None of us would be here if our ancestors did not do both exceedingly well.

When we move, however, from evolutionary adaptation to terrorism—the killing of noncombatants for political purposes—a psychoanalytic understanding of the internal world of the terrorist must shift from neurotic or normal personality organization to borderline or psychotic personality organization (Kernberg, 1975). Here again, contemporary nonpsychoanalytic research obliquely supports our psychodynamic theories: Corner and Gill (2014) found in a sample of 119 lone-actor terrorists that they were 13.49 times as likely to have a major mental disorder than a matched sample of terrorists embedded in a group. In a follow-up study, Corner, Gill, and Mason (2016) found prevalence rates of schizophrenia, delusional disorder, and autism spectrum disorder much higher in the lone-actor terrorists than the group-based terrorists and the general population. In our study of the same sample of 111 European and American lone-actor terrorists, we found a prevalence rate of 41% for a diagnosed mental disorder (Meloy & Gill, 2016). However, such descriptive phenomenology—although informative—does not begin to address the structural and dynamic characteristics of lone-actor terrorists.

Kernberg (1975, 1984) theorized these aforementioned levels of personality organization (neurotic, borderline, and psychotic) by focusing on the similarities and differences across identity integration, defensive operations, and reality testing. At the borderline level identity diffusion is apparent, with contradictory aspects of the self and others poorly integrated and kept apart; defensive operations are characterized by the use of generic splitting and other lower-level defenses, such as primitive idealization, projective identification, denial, omnipotence, and devaluation; and reality testing is marked by a confusion as to the origin of internal or external stimuli wherein internal fantasies often override the constraints of external reality.

At the psychotic level of personality organization, identity diffusion is marked by poorly delimited self and object representations, and possibly delusional identifications; defensive operations are similar to the borderline, but primarily protect the individual from disintegration and self object merging; and reality testing is marked by a merging of internal and external stimuli (Acklin, 1997; Kernberg, 1975).

These two predominant levels of horizontal personality organization characteristic of the lone-actor terrorist—borderline or psychotic—are vertically defined by a characterological formation that has, at its foundation,

a pathologically narcissistic self-structure in which primitive modes of thinking predominate. The capacity for forging normal attachments and object relating is seriously impaired, as evidenced by a failure to sustain meaningful relationships with either a partner or peers. Relations with others are narcissistically driven, the lone-actor's self-image fueled by omnipotent and grandiose fantasies whereas he views other people as objects to be denigrated or destroyed. This reflects a primitive, pre-Oedipal internal world in which part object relations predominate. Likewise, primitive affects such as shame, excitement, envy, rage, contempt, and disgust are prominent, whereas more mature affects (e.g., guilt, fear, depression, remorse, empathy, humor, or joy), which involve an appreciation of whole objects and a capacity for actual bonding, are impaired.

This affect regulation and object relating are underpinned by developmentally primitive modes of thinking, such as psychic equivalence and teleologic ideation (Fonagy & Target, 1996, 2000, 2007). These are characterized by rigidity, concreteness, simplicity, and certainty, whereas reflective capacity, symbolization, and mentalization are lacking. Moreover, although the lone-actor terrorist may consciously express ideological rationalization for his targeted violence, his moral outrage is the unconscious projection of personal grievance that defends against deficits in moral reasoning and superego functioning, and in some cases against psychotic decompensation (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014, p. 16).

This theoretical formulation somewhat narrows the characterological focus (Freud, 1914/1957); but—for the purpose of this study—a more granular analysis is required to home in on the wishes and fears of sexual desire, murderous violence, and extreme beliefs in the lone-actor terrorist. The question is how the interplay of these conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions, and desires contribute to an act of targeted violence, usually toward noncombatant strangers.

Sexual Desire and the Terrorist

The explicit sexuality of lone-actor terrorists has been the third rail of terrorism research; there is no published empirical study that has focused on their sexual behavior. Yet anecdotal contradictions concerning sexual

desire abound in the possessions, letters, and activity of the most senior terrorism leaders. Osama bin Laden castigated the exploitation of women in a 2002 “letter to the American people” in which he wrote, “your nation exploits women like consumer products or advertising tools, calling upon customers to purchase them ... you plaster your naked daughters across billboards in order to sell a product without any shame. You have brainwashed your daughters into believing they are liberated by wearing revealing clothes, yet in reality all they have liberated is your sexual desires” (Shane, 2011). Yet when he was killed by U.S. Special Forces in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, a considerable quantity of pornographic videos was found in his computer files. He also provided guidance on masturbation to the jihadists in a letter seized during the raid in 2011 but only released in 2017: “another very special and top secret matter—it pertains to the problem of the brothers who are with you in their unfortunate celibacy and lack of availability of wives for them in the conditions that have been imposed on them. ... [A]s we see it, we have no objection to clarifying to the brothers that they may, in such conditions, masturbate, since this is an extreme case. The ancestors approved this for the community” (Cottee, 2017).

The Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb (1951), considered one of the intellectual founders of the Salafist movement and bin Ladenism, was both disgusted and clearly stimulated by the erotic. While studying in the United States (1948–1951), he recorded his sexual observations, which he called the “appearance of the American temptress:”

The American girl is well acquainted with her body’s seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs and she shows all this and does not hide it. She knows it lies in clothes: in bright colors that awaken primal sensations, and in designs that reveal the temptations of the body—and in American girls these are sometimes live, screaming temptations! Then she adds to all this the fetching laugh, the naked looks, and the bold moves, and she does not ignore this for one moment or forget it!

Filled with erotic desire, he went on to morally condemn it through a polemical discussion of sex and Americans decadence: “For Americans sexual relations have always conformed to the laws of the jungle. Some Americans philosophize about it, such as one of the girls in the university

who once told me: “The matter of sex is not a moral matter at all. It is but a question of biology, and when we look at it from this angle it becomes clear that the use of words like moral and immoral, good and bad, are irrelevant.”

In Qutb’s mind, American women were the sources of sin and contamination, dirty and dangerous, fortunately only desired by males other than him (Qutb, 1951; Wrye, 1993).

In a much darker and violent behavioral pattern, the Islamic State constructed a religious narrative in 2014 to justify the sexual assault of Yazidi women by young jihadists to satisfy the young jihadists’ sexual desires, a “theology of rape.” In interviews with 21 women and girls, the revival of sexual slavery as an institution within the Islamic State was documented, following the capture of several thousand Yazidi women, considered unbelievers by IS, on Mount Sinjar, Iraq. Internal policies and memos recorded their justification of sexual violence, but also the elevation and celebration of rape as spiritually sanctified. The rapists, according to the young women, would refer to the assaults as “ibadah” or worship, and would bookend their raping with prayer before and after (Callimachi, 2015). Such acts appear to represent a compromise formation between the strict sexual repression within fundamentalist Islam and the apogee of sexual desire among young males, providing them with a sanctified sexual outlet without violating the tenets of their beliefs. Such a narrative would mitigate shame, the emotional byproduct of sadistic superego precursors in which sexual desire and its expression are not tolerated, always attributed to the behavior of the feminine, and often—if acted upon outside the strictures of marriage—punishable by death of the woman.

We also see the fear of and desire for sex among those terrorists whose ideological framing (Meloy & Gill, 2016) adheres to ethnic nationalism or anti-abortionism, two other belief systems that have resulted in the targeted killing of civilians. Timothy McVeigh, the terrorist who bombed the federal Murrah building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, and killed 168 people, was characterized in this manner by two reporters who extensively interviewed him and scores of others who knew him throughout his life: “But as McVeigh thought more seriously about death, he found that what truly gnawed at him was missing the opportunity to have a family. McVeigh had always been frustrated in his attempts to connect with women; *his only sustaining relief from his unsatisfied sex drive was his even stronger desire to die* [emphasis added]. As he grew

older, the realization that he would be leaving this world without having brought children into it became a preoccupation. It was one of the few things he had failed to fully anticipate when deciding to end his life” (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, pp. 440–441).

James Kopp, an anti-abortionist terrorist, murdered Barnett Slepian, an American physician who performed abortions, in his home in upstate New York on October 23, 1998. Kopp had a much more regressive and psychotic link to the negation of sexual desire in his identification with aborted fetuses, the unwanted human products of copulation: During the late 1980s and early 1990s Kopp would chain himself to the abortion medical equipment after having taken laxatives so that he would defecate on himself to be like the unborn and experience their helpless containment in the womb prior to their deaths. The chaining became more complicated over time—on at least one occasion it involved a car axle, multiple glues, and a lock and chain around his neck. Once he was wheeled into a clinic in a wheelchair with his legs under a blanket. He had encased them in cement. He did not become a sniper until after the death of his mother (personal communication, A. Robb, December 2016; Risen & Thomas, 1998).

Menninger (1938) was one of the few psychoanalysts to discern the components of eroticism and sexuality among martyrs, albeit today we see a much more aggressive form of martyrdom in the desire to not only sacrifice the self, but to kill others to advance one’s cause or belief system (Meloy, 2004, 2011). Menninger identified three unconscious motivations: the flight from the mother, the renunciation of sexuality, and moral masochism—the eagerness with which the martyr would seek suffering and death. I would add a fourth: the idealization of sexual desire in fantasy, no more apparent than in the young jihadist’s belief that he would have access to unlimited virgins—notice the emphasis upon purity—in the afterlife *if he dies a violent death* (Meloy, 2004).

At a developmental level for these young men, object relations remain split (Freud, 1938/1964) and partial: the mother, hence all women, are either good or bad objects, and cannot be trusted but only controlled. Yet they sexually stimulate the genitally mature male. There is no integration of the early pleasure and displeasure toward the maternal object into more complex ambivalent feelings, which, in turn, allow for the representation of woman as a desired object, a whole, real, meaningful person who stimulates both affectional emotions and erotic desire. Without whole object representation there is the absence of a

capacity for reciprocal love, joy, mutual eroticism, empathy, sympathy, gratitude, anger, guilt, and grieving as a response to loss. Instead, part object-related emotional states predominate: rage, boredom, envy, excitement (both sexual and nonsexual), shame, contempt, disgust, grievance, and sadism—emotions that thrive in a part object world, but are only diminished in intensity with the advent of whole object relatedness. Such developmental progress also requires the parallel path of disidentification with the maternal object, the reduction of symbiotic anxiety (Greenson, 1954, 1968; Wrye, 1993) and the emergence of whole representations of the self. These changes, in turn, diminish the need to utilize projection and projective identification (Grotstein, 1981) to blame the female for the penetration desires and fears of the male (Colarusso, 2012).

At a drive level for the lone-actor terrorist, however, sexuality and aggression remain raw and unmodulated. There is no intrapsychic room for the complexities of love and hate (Gabbard, 2000; Kernberg, 1998). Psychological splitting and terrestrial splitting dynamically reinforce each other, most apparent within fundamentalist religions. Women are to be physically kept separate and hidden (at home or under clothing) so in their perceived omnipotence they do not sexually stimulate men who cannot control (modulate) their desires. Thus, they are psychologically split off and kept separate as either good (the idealized and loved woman, often the asexualized mother or sister), or bad (the sexually stimulating, dirty, and feared woman outside the family or religion) object representation. Among anti-abortionist terrorists, rage toward the murderous mother is displaced onto the father-doctor complicit in the death of the unborn and helpless, a source of the terrorist's identification that shifts from the victim (fetus) to the aggressor (assassin) as was evident in the James Kopp case (A. Freud, 1936/1966; Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, & Hoffmann, 2015).

The evolutionary failure of sexual desire ultimately rests on the failure to form a sexually intimate pair bond, which facilitates psychological generativity (Erikson, 1950) and reproductive success (Dawkins, 1976). In our research of lone-actor terrorists, we found that 84% of the sample (N = 111) failed to form a sexual pair bond from the advent of puberty until their death or incarceration (Meloy & Gill, 2016). This striking finding is not *specific* to lone-actor terrorists, but a likely *sensitive* indicator of their distal risk.

How do such failures dynamically relate to murderous violence?

Violent Death

On March 2, 2011, a young Albanian jihadist named Arid Uka attacked a group of American servicemen boarding a bus at the Frankfurt Airport in Germany. Two soldiers were killed and two were severely wounded (Bockler, Hoffmann, & Zick, 2015). Uka's radicalization extended back several years, but most salient to the theory of this study was the triggering event that occurred the evening before the attack. Uka had never had a girlfriend or a sexual relationship, but that evening, as he had before, he visited multiple websites viewing jihadist recruitment videos. Police interviewers concluded that this was the event that resulted in his specific intent to attack American soldiers:

He came across two videos: one that showed the dead faces of "Islamic martyrs" and one that dealt with female Muslims harmed by U.S. soldiers. Uka said he was not aware that he was watching a radical Islamist propaganda video showing a staged rape scene taken from a Hollywood movie. He was disturbed and not able to return to his daily routine. He could not sleep all night, and even the next morning he still could not get the rape scene out of his head. After staying up, showering, watching TV, browsing the Internet, and eating breakfast with these pictures still in mind, he knew that he had "to do something." (Bockler et al., 2015, p. 156)

What was his disturbance? What were the "pictures still in mind"? From a behavioral psychology perspective, this is a classical conditioning paradigm between graphic visuals of death and sexual arousal: the death of those with whom he identified, and the sexual aggression of those he believed were his enemies. But how would a 21-year-old man feel, and what desires would be aroused, by viewing such material? Not knowing the rape video was taken from a Hollywood movie at the time, it is parsimonious to think that he was both sexually aroused by the rape scene and furious at what the unbelievers were doing to a Muslim woman; he consciously condemned their behavior, yet was left with an erotic desire that was intolerable to a young man who had no sexual experience, and was constricted by an ideology that provided no outlet for his desires, only guilt, envy, and shame. And the most intense cognitive dissonance was that he likely identified with both the men who were dead martyrs and sexual aggressors. He told the police he had "to do something" to consciously protect the sisters of the faith. On the way to the airport he listened to the following Arabic chant (*nashid*) on his iPod:

Mother, remain steadfast, I have joined the Jihad. Don't mourn for me and know I have been awakened. The umma has been blinded, but I have been honored. Mother, remain steadfast, your son has joined the Jihad. The umma has been blinded but I have been honored. Mother, remain steadfast, your son has joined the Jihad. The screams became louder, the injuries increased. The unfulfilled duty, I could not find peace. Today I must leave, tomorrow it is too late. Mother, remain steadfast, your son has joined the Jihad. Today I must leave, tomorrow it is too late. Mother, remain steadfast, your son has joined the Jihad. (Bockler et al., 2015, p. 157)

He found stability in the soothing affect and lyrical chanting surrounding his internal representation of his mother, and he sought release by killing those projective vehicles who carried his sexual desires, the American soldiers. He was also assured of his own martyrdom in fantasy, and his ascension in the storm to take his place with Allah among the *shabeed* (martyrs) that preceded him—a collectivity that he believed would also bring him the sexual pleasures he had never known in the terrestrial world.

Once again, we return to the words of Qutb (1951) written more than a half century earlier,

Indeed, the American is by his very nature a warrior who loves combat. The idea of combat and war runs strong in his blood. It is evident in his manner and this is what agrees with his history. For the first waves of people left their homelands, heading for America with the intention of building and competing and struggling. And once there, some of them killed others, as they were composed of groups and factions. Then they all fought against the original inhabitants of the land (the red Indians), and they continue to wage a bloody war against them until this very moment. Then the Anglo-Saxons killed the Latinos and pushed them south toward central and southern America. Then these Americanized people turned against their mother country, England, in a destructive war led by George Washington until they obtained their independence from the British crown.

Predatory or instrumental violence (McEllistrem, 2004; Meloy, 1988; Siegel & Victoroff, 2009; Siever, 2008) was always attributed to others by Qutb, and continues to be a rigidly held belief among today's terrorists, regardless of ideological persuasion. The state of mind of the lone-actor terrorist *always* justifies his violence as a defensive reaction to

an imminent threat, despite overwhelming empirical evidence that lone-actor terrorists will engage in offensive acts—that is, predation—against unarmed civilians in the planning, preparation, and implementation of their violence (Gill, 2015).

The capacity for both predatory (offensive) and affective (defensive) violence is an evolved and biologically rooted trait in all mammals; fortunately, most humans do neither. There is even a strong line of research indicating that both modes of violence are more frequently acted upon by psychopathic individuals, rendering this characterological disorder most dangerous (Cornell, Warren, Hawk, & Pine, 1996; Woodworth & Porter, 2002). However, in the context of terrorism, predation is morally driven, and is best understood as a *superego sanctioned homicidal act*, not the valueless, self-absorbed cruelty of the psychopath. There are, of course, psychopathic terrorists, but most terrorists who choose to act against their perceived enemy are committed to both homicide and suicide as a means to advance a particular belief system. And the advancement is almost always done to purify, particularly in the context of religious terrorism. Although purification may be only one goal for violence, it is central to the often paranoid belief that one is surrounded by contaminants and toxins, including women as temptresses, and violence is the means to purify the road to utopia, which is—by necessity—vaguely defined. Purification, in turn, requires the shedding of blood, a sacrifice: something is offered and made holy, but is also destroyed in the process (Jones, 2010)². Such acts may be compelled and even sanctified by cruel and sadistic superego precursors where violent death for both the self and the other is a religious imperative, and certainly contains a sadomasochistic dynamic³; the representation of the

² Although violent sacrifice is clearly evident among jihadists, it is not limited to Islam. In a decades-long scandal of violent atonement, a charismatic lawyer and Christian evangelical in Britain severely beat numerous adolescent boys for masturbating while attending a boarding school, telling at least one victim that he needed to “bleed for Jesus” (Ye-ginsu, 2017). Similar symbolism can be found in the images of Christian saints, “born up to paradise and ensconced in the highest heavens where, purified and sinless, they can intercede for others” (Jones, 2010, p. 95). We see this historically in the beliefs among the anti-abortion terrorists (for example, James Kopp, Eric Rudolph, Robert Dear, Paul Hill) wherein the oscillation and balance between homicidal and suicidal intent will vary, yet the assumption of sexual promiscuity as the cause of the desire for an abortion is a steady undercurrent in their thinking.

³ The sadism of the Islamic State jihadists—or more precisely a theater of necrosadism (Stekel, 1929)—is evident in the Internet postings of beheadings of unbelievers, individually or in groups, and the ritualized monologue that precedes them with the victim on his knees, done to both horrify and fascinate millions of viewers who dutifully flock to the Internet

self is further burnished by the conscious belief that one is an agent or a soldier for an omnipotent power—the narcissistic fusion of the ideal self and the ideal object, noted by Kernberg (1975) in his treatise on the narcissistic personality disorder, but in this context elevated to a theology that rationalizes violence.

This is the dream of the religious warrior (Gibson, 1994), and is often—in the case of lone-actor terrorists—a grandiose and violent compensatory fantasy that serves as an effective retreat from a socially and occupationally blighted life. The finding of a major loss in love or work has been replicated in most lone-actor terrorism studies (Gill, 2015; Horgan, 2014; Horgan, Gill, Bouhana, Silver, & Corner, 2016; Meloy & Gill, 2016), and carries within it the holding of a grievance, rather than the grieving of the loss, which may function as an emotional accelerant for the violence that has long been contemplated (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014). The losses are often experienced as shameful events and also help organize what Terman (2010) calls the “paranoid gestalt” for the otherwise narcissistically sensitive subject drawn to fundamentalist thought.

The Structure of Fundamentalist Belief *in Extremis*

Sexual desire and its interplay with violent death go nowhere without regression; they first fuse in fantasy—an incubation period or pathway that may last for weeks, months, or even years (Gill, 2015; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012)—then they are acted out. In a structured professional judgment instrument to assess risk of lone-actor terrorist violence (TRAP-18; Meloy, 2017; Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy, Habermeyer, & Guldemann, 2015), one of the indicators is “changes in thinking and emotion.” It is defined as follows:

Thoughts and their expression become more strident, simplistic, and absolute. Argument ceases and preaching begins. Persuasion yields to imposition of one’s beliefs on others. No critical analysis of theory or opinion, and the mantra, “don’t think, just believe,” are adopted. Emotions typically move from anger and argument, to contempt and disdain for others’ beliefs, to disgust for the outgroup and a willingness to homicidally aggress against them. Violence is cloaked in self-righteousness and the pretense of

videos, unwittingly self-traumatizing and likely intensifying the pleasure of the sadistic killers.

superior belief. Humor is lost. Engagement with others in virtual or terrestrial reality may greatly diminish or cease once the subject has moved into operational space (Meloy, 2017, p. 34).

Unpacking this definition, both structurally and dynamically, suggests that the individual either regresses to a borderline level of personality organization, or has been fixated at this level for some time, presenting a recruitment vulnerability to those interested in fostering a belief that the intent to kill both self and others to advance a particular cause is both justified and sanctified. In some cases, the regression or fixation may be at a psychotic level wherein there is a delusional identification with a holy figure or a holy warrior⁴. There is also the characterological imprint of pathological narcissism (Kernberg, 1975)⁵.

The fundamentalist mindset is critical to this psychological shift, and its generic organizing defense is splitting, or as termed by Strozier and Boyd (2010), the “centrality of binary oppositions⁶.” Splitting as a defense in adults is the psychopathological outcome of the normative infant and childhood need to separate objects and pleasure/displeasure feeling states, (Fairbairn, 1943; Freud, 1938/1964; Klein, 1957; Grotstein, 1981; and Kernberg, 1975). The predominance of splitting in adulthood is signaled by the tendency, if not conviction, to view the world in stark black and white terms, to simplify reality, to eliminate the gray zones, to perceive the self and others as part objects, and a gross failure to empathize with, or understand the inner lives of others—a failure to mentalize (Fonagy & Target, 1996, 2000, 2007).

For the true believer, splitting provides an open door to a moral framework that is absolute and Manichaeic; critical analysis is unnecessary

⁴ This became a contentious issue among psychiatric evaluators in the trial of Anders Breivik, a Norwegian terrorist who killed 77 individuals, mostly adolescents, in July 2011: Did he have schizophrenia or a severe personality disorder? Breivik believed he was a contemporary reincarnation of the 12th century Knights Templar, the special forces of the Christian crusades whose mission was to counter the influx of Islam into Europe (Meloy et al., 2015). The court found that he was neither psychotic nor insane, which pleased Breivik because this meant that the court believed his actions were rational.

⁵ Such regression can also occur in large groups, even at the nation-state level. I call this “poliregression.” See the excellent work of Volkan (2009, 2013) on large group identity and psychoanalysis.

⁶ The fundamentalist mindset is composed of dualistic thinking; paranoia and rage in a group context; an apocalyptic orientation; a relation to a charismatic leader; and a totalized conversion experience. The reader is referred to Strozier and Boyd (2010) for a brilliant explication of this complex concept, which is beyond the scope of this article.

and often cruelly punished because it is viewed as heretical, and anxiety is reduced. If in a group context, such confirmatory bias, i.e., the normal human tendency to not let contrary facts interfere with one's beliefs (Kahneman, 2011), will heighten the sense of group safety from others. If more specific, secondary psychological defenses such as introjection, projection and projective identification, denial, omnipotence, and devaluation that are dependent upon splitting come to the fore. Then differences are perceived as a threat, and paranoia and the apocalyptic—the end of the world—may invite violence if the lone-actor terrorist believes that he must be an active player, instead of a passive recipient within such an event.

In one forensic evaluation, a diagnosed paranoid and schizoid man went to a neighborhood grocery store armed with an AK-47 to buy a pack of cigarettes. A police officer drove up as he entered the store, and the man shot and killed the officer, who was still sitting in his car, with multiple rounds from his automatic rifle. He told me that he kept the AK-47 because he believed he would be left behind during the Rapture, and would need to defend himself during the seven years of tribulation in the battle of Armageddon before Jesus returned and ushered in the millennium, a thousand years of peace—his psychologic was dependent on a misreading of the Christian Book of Revelation⁷. When I asked him if he had actually joined a paramilitary group, he said, “no, I prefer to be my own fringe group.”

The definition of the term “rapture” is an expression of ecstasy or passion, being carried away by overwhelming emotion, to be seized, kidnapped, or raped. It is derived from the middle French word *rapture* and the Latin *raptus* (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=rapture>). Within the tribulations of the Apocalypse, those left behind suffer the absence of erotic pleasure. This young man had no history of a sexually intimate pair bond.

The emotional imprint of characterological narcissism in these cases is most apparent in their sensitivity to shame and humiliation. Actual or perceived losses may stimulate such emotion—the public exposure of the self as deficient—which in turn contributes to the formation of a

⁷ There are different theories within Christian theology as to the timing of the Rapture in relationship to the second coming of Christ, and whether or not they are separate events. This subject is articulating a pretribulationist premillennialist theory popular in contemporary evangelical Christianity, but note the necessity of “defensive” violence in his statement to me, which actually resulted in the offensive and predatory ambush of a police officer.

personal grievance toward the humiliating object. This grievance is joined with an apparent moral outrage as the lone-actor vicariously identifies with a suffering group, and then frames his outrage with a Manichaean belief (Meloy, 2017; Meloy & Gill, 2016). Such are the seeds of a lone-actor terrorist event.

The humiliation by the persecutory object is then undone. It is undone not through anger, but through contempt, the moral devaluation of the other, looking down on those who are thought to humiliate. In the internal world of the lone-actor terrorist, the actual contempt for the other is often magnified by persecutory objects that have been introjected and then continuously projected to rid the self, but once again projectively identified with and reintrojected in a borderline state of oscillation that never ceases and always threatens.

If contempt becomes disgust, there is a further path forward. Disgust is a universal emotion, likely an evolved defense to ward off contaminants and purge the environment of toxins with both moral and somatic correlates (Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009). It is evident in the psychology of the true believer, the lone-actor terrorist, when he is no longer angry or contemptuous of the unbeliever and no longer fears him, but instead equates the unbeliever with a toxin. The impulse is to be rid of it, to exterminate, to kill. Most people normatively react with disgust to spoiled food, filthy environments, and cockroaches; some to snakes and spiders. Such stimuli do not evoke anger, nor contempt, but disgust and a desire to cleanse, sometimes through violence, so they do not continue to poison (Matsumoto, Hwang, & Frank, 2013, 2017). In a mass psychology context (Hoffer, 1951/2010), the Nazis equated the Jews with vermin and other contaminants, and thus found an emotional accelerant for the Holocaust⁸. Purification takes a step forward if toxins and contaminants are obliterated. There is no longer a need for anger or contempt: For the violent true believer, the lone-actor terrorist, the utopian fantasy moves closer.

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest ways in which sexual desire, violent death, and fundamentalist beliefs *in extremis* can be understood through the psychoanalytic lens of object relations theory, structural deficiencies, and

⁸ The Matsumoto line of research (Matsumoto et al., 2013, 2017) has shown that the expressions of anger, contempt, and disgust toward those viewed as contaminants by leaders predicts political violence among their followers.

the contribution of the drives. It seems fitting to close with a quote from Eric Hoffer, the author of *The True Believer* (1951/2010). More than a half century ago, he wrote: “Though they seem to be at opposite poles, fanatics of all kinds are actually crowded together at one end. It is the fanatic and the moderate who are poles apart and never meet. The fanatics of various hues eye each other with suspicion and are ready to fly at each other’s throat. But they are neighbors and almost of one family. They hate each other with the hatred of brothers. ... The vanity of the selfless, even those who practice utmost humility, is boundless” (p. 86).

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