

Religion and World Change: Violence and Terrorism versus Peace

Israela Silberman,* E. Tory Higgins, and Carol S. Dweck

Columbia University

Our article portrays religion as a double-edged sword that can both encourage and discourage world change, and can facilitate both violent and peaceful activism. The article demonstrates how the meaning system approach to religion can shed light on the complicated relationship between religion and world change by illuminating the meaning of world change and the means to achieve it, inherent differences across religious groups, the complexity and malleability of religious meaning systems, and processes that can facilitate either the status quo or violent and peaceful activism. The article discusses context and personality variables that may determine whether religion supports world change and either violent or peaceful activism. It recommends intensive collaboration between researchers, policy-makers, and religious leaders in the contexts of national and international conflicts and religious terrorism.

Obedience to God may involve submission to any number of well-established earthly authorities which claim to speak in God's name; it may also describe the spontaneous heroism of a conscientious individual who challenges the powers that be (Walzer, 1982, p. 57).

Paradoxically, religions support both peace and the sword (Appleby, 2000, p. 27).

The violent message of Osama bin Laden, and his al Qaeda network, which suggests that a positive divine-guided world change can be achieved by religious holy war (jihad) against the infidel West, as well as against “apostate” regimes in

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Israela Silberman, Department of Psychology, 406 Schermerhorn Hall, 1190 Amsterdam Ave., MC 5510, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 [e-mail: silbermandaytime@yahoo.com or struch@netvision.net.il].

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the Middle East, has encouraged intensive activism beyond the religious/spiritual realm. It has been transmitted via modern electronic devices to millions of people, motivating many of them in a wide range of places (e.g., Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, the Philippines, Kenya, Tanzania, India, Russia, United States, and the United Kingdom) to political and military actions, which include self-sacrifice and murder in the name of Islam (Bergen, 2002).

The global activism of the al Qaeda network is only one example of the intensive religious activism that has captured the attention of the world in recent years. Our article starts with a description of religion as a double-edged sword that can both encourage and discourage the goal of world change, and can facilitate both violent and peaceful activism as means to achieve this goal. The article demonstrates how the meaning system approach to religion can illuminate the complicated relationship between religion and world change. It discusses variables that may determine whether religion supports world change and either violent or peaceful activism, and concludes with recommendations for intensive collaboration between researchers, policy makers and religious leaders and communities in efforts to solve national and international conflicts and to prevent religious terrorism.

The Complicated Relationship between Religion and World Change

The relationship between religion and world change has been a challenging issue for both the social sciences and the humanities. Historically, the dominant view in social science has emphasized the role of religion in tradition maintenance and in preserving and justifying the existing social structure (e.g., Durkheim, 1954/1912; Glock, 1973; see Schwartz & Huisman, 1995, for a review). Within this view, Marx (1964/1848), for example, described religion as an opiate for the masses, undermining any motivation to change society for the better. Machiavelli (1940), in a similar manner, advised leaders to uphold the foundations of the religions of their countries in order to keep their people religious and consequently well conducted.

An alternative view of the relationship between religion and change describes religion as encouraging change in the world. The religious call for world change and repair is expressed clearly in the biblical imperative "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20), and in the vision of the biblical prophets of a peaceful and harmonious society, e.g., "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4). Many theologians view the struggle for political and social equality as a spiritual struggle attempting to realize God's kingdom on earth (Spilka & Bridges, 1992; Walzer, 1982). Within this view, the Dalai Lama (1999) is calling for a spiritual/ethical revolution, Islam defines the creation of a moral order in human society as one of its main goals

(Nasr, 2003), Judaism calls intensively for world repair (Shakdiel & Shalvi, 1998; Silberman, 1999; Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2000), and Fundamentalist movements across religions are very active in their effort to create a new person and a new society (Einsenstadt, 2002, p. 12; Marty & Appleby, 1991–1995). Consistent with this view, King (1958, p. 36) claimed that, “any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion,” and Heschel saw the role of religion to “re-create the world in the likeness of the vision of God,” and stated that “the liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision” (Heschel, 1975, p. 217).

Religious and spiritual leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mohandas Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, have tried to put this theology into practice (Pargament & Park, 1995). Under the leadership of such figures, organizations of faith attempting to transform the world closer to a religious ideal and to realize “God’s kingdom” on earth, have contributed significantly to social change that aims at the correction of injustice (Spilka & Bridges, 1992). Religiously based social action to change the society for the better can be shown in numerous examples of religiously based charitable activities (e.g., Evans, 1979; Spilka & Bridges, 1992) and in political activism. The latter is exemplified in the significant contribution of people and organizations of faith to the mobilization of major movements such as the Black Civil Rights movement, Poland’s Solidarity movement, the South African Antiapartheid movement, and the movement for Indian independence (Smith, 1996). It can also be seen in interfaith dialogues among religious leaders and activists in both international and national arenas in order to facilitate the resolution of conflicts and bring about world peace (Appleby, 2000; Carroll, 2002; Gopin, 2000). For example, during August 2000, 2000 of the world’s preeminent religious and spiritual leaders gathered at the United Nations for a Millennium Peace Summit (“World religions converge at U.N. conference,” 2000), and during December 2001, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders met in Brussels to try to curb conflicts (“Religious leaders meet on terror,” 2001).

Unfortunately, intensive activism in the name of religion has also been demonstrated in numerous historical and recent acts of violence, wars, and terrorism across the world (Hoffman, 1998; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Kimball, 2002) such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the conflicts between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, Hindus and Muslims in India, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Christians and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, East Timor, Lebanon, Russia, and many countries in Africa, such as Nigeria, the global activism of the al Qaeda network, and the killing of physicians and nurses by Christian anti-abortion groups (Appleby, 2000; Carroll, 2001; Fox, 2002; Huntington, 2003; Silberman, this issue). This description of violent activism in the name of religion is consistent with

the assertion that more destruction perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history (Allport, 1966; Kimball, 2002). It is also consistent with the description of religious violence by experts on terrorism as being more intense and leading to more fatalities than the relatively more discriminating violence committed by secular terrorist organizations (Appleby, 2000; Hoffman, 1998), and as being an existential danger to modern civilization and the entire world (Ganor, 2005).

The Relationship between Religion and World Change: A Meaning System Perspective

The above description suggests that a comprehensive description of the relationship between religion and world change needs to acknowledge the role of religion as a double-edged sword that can facilitate either the status quo or world change (Berger, 1969; Fox, 2002; Walzer, 1982) and both violent and peaceful activism (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000; Silberman, this issue). We would like to suggest that the meaning system approach to religion (Geertz, 1973; James, 1982/1902; see Silberman, 2003, 2005a, this issue, for reviews) could shed important light on the complicated relationship between religion and world change. The meaning system approach describes 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 and special way in which it can serve to fulfill the quest for meaning (Silberman, this issue). This approach can contribute significantly, as demonstrated in the following sections, to the understanding of the complicated relationship between religion and world change by illuminating the following four issues: (1) The meaning of world change and of the means to achieve it; (2) inherent differences across religious groups; (3) the complexity and the malleability of religious meaning systems; and (4) the processes through which religion can facilitate either the status quo or violent and peaceful activism.

The Meaning of Change: Goals and Means

One way to summarize the complicated relationship between religion and world change in historical and recent events is by saying that throughout history religion has encouraged both the goals of preserving the status quo and of achieving world change, and any means to achieve these goals, i.e., both violent and peaceful activism (Fox, 1999; Pargament, 1997). The first way in which the meaning system approach to religion can shed light on this relationship is by exploring carefully the meaning that is given within different religious systems to goals, such as world change and tradition maintenance, and to the means that are used to achieve these goals.

The relationship between religion and world change within Judaism is an excellent demonstration of the importance of understanding the meaning of goals and means within a given religious system of meaning. Sociological analyses of the major religious trends within Judaism, which tend to focus on the openness of the participants to changing *tradition*, consistently show that the more traditionally religious trends tend to submit to the authority of the Jewish law, which they accept as divinely inspired, while the less traditionally religious trends try to change the Jewish law in an effort to adjust Judaism to the spirit of the time (Wertheimer, 1993). This information regarding tradition change, which is consistent with the historical view of religion as opposing change, is clearly important. However, the meaning system approach to religion, by exploring carefully the religious meaning of world change and of means to achieve it, has the potential to reveal a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the relationship between Judaism and world change. This potential of the meaning system approach to religion has been demonstrated in the following research, which asked students from the five major trends within Judaism (Ultra-Orthodox (a fundamentalist group), Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Secular) to fill out questionnaires in which they described their level of traditional religiosity, their beliefs regarding world change and the mechanisms that they endorse for world change (for detailed descriptions see Silberman, 1999; Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2000).

The results suggested that more traditionally religious individuals are *both* less likely to accept changes in the tradition *and* yet more likely to believe in and encourage radical world change. More specifically, the more traditionally religious participants predicted that the world is more likely to become the way that they ideally wish it to be, and that this future world change will happen sooner. In addition, they believed that they had more power to change the world and reported investing more effort in bringing about the change. In terms of means to achieve the world change, the more traditionally religious participants endorsed more strongly the mechanism of religious practices and evaluated religious practices as being more instrumental for bringing about world change. In contrast, the less traditionally religious participants endorsed more the mechanism of environmental protection and evaluated it as being more instrumental for world change. The groups did not differ significantly in endorsement of strategies that aim at fighting injustice.

This research, which is, thus far, the most direct illustration of the potential utility of the meaning system approach for understanding the relationship between religion and world change, illustrates how religion can oppose tradition change and modernization and yet be interpreted psychologically as motivating revolution and world change. It explains this phenomenon by showing that traditional religiosity contains the belief that tradition maintenance, through religious practices, *is itself a strategic means* for bringing about the desired world change.

The importance of understanding the meaning of world change and the means to achieve it can be demonstrated in the context of other Western and non-Western

religions as well. Within Islam, for example, the goal of world change may mean political goals such as social justice and democratic governments. However, the Islamic call for world change can also mean a call for more discrimination against religious minorities, Muslim dissidents, and women. Shari'a (the Islamic law) has been interpreted within different Islamic meaning systems as a means to achieve both types of goals (Mayer, 1993). Within Buddhism, which is often perceived by Western thinkers as socially apathetic, the enlightenment process has actually been interpreted and recommended as a unique means for bringing about revolutionary world change. The principle that is at the heart of the Buddha's social revolution is that helping individuals transform themselves is what transforms society. More specifically, Tibetan Buddhism suggests that through the enlightenment process each individual becomes aware of her/his potential and learns how to free oneself from suffering. This individual enlightenment can stimulate similar experiences for other individuals, and can bring spiritual growth, goodness, and social liberty to the world (Thurman, 1998).

The above discussion suggests that understanding the meaning of world change and the means to achieve it requires explorations of issues such as whether desired world changes involve changes in the tradition or not, whether the change is conducted in the spiritual or the social political realm, and whether the means to achieve the change are perceived as effective or not within given religious or nonreligious systems. Understanding the meaning of world change may also require illumination of the positive or the negative evaluations of relevant goals and means within different meaning systems. This issue may underlie many academic and nonacademic discussions on the nature of religious terrorism. Such discussions often mention disagreements about the definition of terrorism and about the appropriate evaluation of terrorists' goals and means. These disagreements can be expressed in the controversial claim that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter." However, such discussions also tend to emphasize the need for working definitions for terrorism that could help international and interfaith efforts to deal with this dangerous phenomenon (Ganor, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005).

The meaning system approach to religion can contribute to such discussions in two ways. First, it can illuminate the meaning systems of religious terrorists (Silberman, 2005b). 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. In the words of Stern (2003, p. 281) about religious terrorists that she interviewed: "From their perspective, they are purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is antihuman." Second, because of its ability to systematically compare religious and nonreligious systems in terms of psychological constructs such as goals (Silberman, this issue, 2005a), the meaning system approach may be helpful in the challenging effort to develop international working definitions for religious terrorism that define terrorism in terms of goals

and means to achieve these goals. The following definition, which emphasizes the goals of terrorists (political goals), the means they endorse in order to achieve their goals (violent actions), and their targets (civilians) could be viewed as an important step in that direction: "Terrorism is a form of violent struggle in which violence is deliberately used against civilians in order to achieve political goals (nationalistic, socioeconomic, ideological, religious, etc.)" (Ganor, 2005, p. 17).

In sum, the above discussion on the meaning of world change within Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism and on religious terrorism illustrates how the meaning system approach to religion can shed light on the complicated relationship between religion and world change by illuminating the meaning of relevant goals and the means to achieve them.

Inherent Differences across Religious Groups

A second way in which the meaning system approach can contribute to an understanding of the complicated relationship between religion and world change is by exploring whether groups, which endorse different religious meaning systems (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), differ inherently from each other in this context. More explicitly, the meaning system approach, by exploring systematically the contents of the beliefs, goals, and actions of different religious groups may be helpful in the challenging effort to construct a meaningful typology of religious groups based on their attitudes toward world change and toward violent or peaceful activism.

In terms of attitudes toward world change, cross-cultural and cross-religious comparisons have indeed yielded several insightful typologies of religious groups based on their openness to social change. Yinger (1965), for example, distinguishes between *church-type* religious groups and *sects*. In order to establish themselves alongside the ruling powers, church-type religious groups are willing to accept the basic pattern of the status quo despite its failure to meet the religious ideal. Sects, on the other hand, choose to maintain their ideals as much as they can within small intimate groups, challenging explicitly or implicitly those aspects of society that contradict their ideal. Lincoln (1985) has distinguished among three basic types of religions based on their attitude toward the status quo: Religions can be "religions of the status quo" (i.e., religions that support the dominant party and the sociopolitical status quo), "religions of resistance" (i.e., religions that define themselves in opposition to the religion of the status quo, defending themselves against the ideological domination of the latter), or "religions of revolution" (i.e., religions that define themselves in opposition to the dominant social party itself, not its religious arm alone, promoting direct action against the dominant party's material control of society). In this context, it is also important to mention the following, somewhat controversial, distinctions. First, the distinction between temporal-oriented religions versus outworldly oriented religions, suggesting that the first type may

inspire activism, while the second type tends to inhibit it (Marx, 1967). Second, the distinction between Western religions as encouraging social activism, and Eastern religions as encouraging detachment from the world and passivism (see our earlier discussion on Tibetan Buddhism and Thurman (1998) for criticism on the distinction).

In a similar way, discussions of violent activism versus peaceful activism have suggested that some religious groups tend to be inherently more violent than others. For example, Muslims have sometimes been described as relatively militant (e.g., Huntington, 2003), while groups, which endorse religious systems that include doctrine pacifism, such as Buddhism, have often been viewed as being less prone to conflict (Fox, 2004). In one of the most direct empirical comparisons between Christians, Muslims, and other groups, Fox (2004) found that during the years 1965–2001 Christians were involved in most conflicts on an absolute level. Muslims were involved in most conflicts in proportion to their population size, and the majority of these conflicts were intrareligious rather than interreligious. His results for religious conflicts (e.g., conflicts between two groups, which belong to different religions or between two groups, which belong to different denominations of the same religion) showed that Muslim groups engaged in the most conflicts in both absolute and proportional terms. Fox (2004) was careful in his interpretation of the above results, emphasizing that while they reflected the relationship between religions and conflict during a specific historic period, they did not imply anything about inherent violent tendencies of the religions.

Religions as Complex and Malleable Meaning Systems

As implied above, arguments suggesting inherent differences among religious groups in terms of their wish to change the world and their endorsement of violent or peaceful activism have often been rightfully criticized as overgeneralizations (Fox, 2004). We would like to emphasize that whether the inherent likelihood of certain religious groups to support the status quo or violent or peaceful activism varies or not, historical evidence suggest that each of the major religions, as demonstrated below, has the potential to support both the status quo and opposition to it and to facilitate both violent and peaceful activism (Appleby, 2000; Fox, 2004; Rapoport, 1993).

In discussing the malleability of religions in terms of attitudes toward the status quo, Yinger (1965) proposes that a sect grows out of certain aspects of the teachings of the church, and if it is to survive in the currents of history, it must grow again into a church. One may say that, historically, all major established religions, regardless of how much they may currently support the status quo, have started as small revolutionary movements (Kimball, 2002). Lincoln (1985), in a similar manner, suggests that religions of resistance can transform themselves into religions of revolution, while religions of revolutions can become religions of

status quo if they succeed in their struggle, or may fall back into being religions of resistance if they are defeated.

In this context, Catholicism, which historically has often supported the establishment, has also been interpreted as supporting forms of political action in order to affect human liberation from social injustice. Finally, the Muslim belief that the “messianic” Mahdi will return, overturn a disliked social system, and bring justice to earth has been used during certain historical periods, when Shi’i-supported governments came to power, to justify the status quo. During other historical periods this belief fueled Shi’i revolts (Keddie, 1985).

In terms of violent versus peaceful activism the malleability of religious meaning system can be demonstrated in the following historical examples: (a) The same Catholicism, which does not reject the strong pacifism tradition within Christianity, is also responsible for the Crusades and the Inquisition (Fox, 2002), and according to some scholars has facilitated to some extent the Holocaust (Carroll, 2001). (b) Judaism throughout history has usually encouraged peaceful resistance of the often violent repression against the Jews. However, in both modern and ancient times Judaism has inspired some violent activism (Rapoport, 1993; Sprinzak, 1993). (c) Finally, Buddhists in Tibet have, despite a tradition of pacifism, on occasion, violently opposed the Chinese occupation.

The above historical examples raise the question of how can the *same* religion (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Judaism) support both the goals of status quo and world change, and both violent and peaceful activism as means to achieve them. The meaning system approach to religion attempts to answer this question by emphasizing the complexity of major religious meaning systems that tend to include within themselves a wide variety of messages (e.g., major religious meaning systems can include some messages that encourage support of the status quo and other messages that oppose it; they can also include recommendations for *both* violent *and* peaceful activism as appropriate means to achieve these goals). By emphasizing the malleability of these complicated religious systems (i.e., their ability to accommodate to different situations, and to develop and change over time), the meaning system approach suggests that it is possible to direct both the idiosyncratic religious meaning systems of individuals (e.g., of religious or spiritual leaders) and the collective religious systems of groups toward a variety of goals (e.g., support or challenge of the status quo) or toward peaceful or violent activism by choosing to selectively emphasize certain religious messages over others (Gopin, 2000; Lewis, 2003; Silberman, this issue, 2005b).

The above view of religion as a complex and malleable meaning system that can encourage both the status quo and world change, and can facilitate both violent and peaceful activism as means to achieve these goals has encouraged conceptual and empirical research on the circumstances and the personality variables that are related to whether religious individuals or groups choose to support the status quo

or challenge it, and to endorse either peaceful or violent activism. Some of the main findings of this research are demonstrated below:

Context variables: Social, political, economic, and historical. Many contextual factors have been proposed as moderating the relationship between religion and its tendencies to either support the status quo or to challenge it (see Billing & Scott, 1994; Fox, 2002, for reviews). Some of these factors include the level of compatibility between a given theological tradition and the existing social order (Westhues, 1976); oppositional relationship between church and state (Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Roccas, this issue); the interests of the elites who control the religious institutions (Fox, 2002; Gill, 1998); the secular interests and the class position of the individuals to whom the religious movement appeals or attempts to appeal (Yinger, 1965); whether religious groups see themselves as oppressed minorities in need of protection (Martin, this issue); variation in regime needs for external legitimation (Johnson & Figa, 1988); spatial position in core or peripheral zones of the world system (Budde, 1992; Wuthnow, 1980); and temporal phases (expansion, polarization, and reconstitution) of world system development (Wuthnow, 1980). For example, religious groups tend to change from being a radical challenge to the social structure (i.e., sects), into accepting it (i.e., churches) when their members gain wealth (Yinger, 1965), and the Catholic Church in Latin America generally supports the state unless there are successful competing religious movements in the state, in which case the Church supports the masses in order to avoid losing members (Gill, 1998).

In a similar way, many factors have also been proposed as triggering or magnifying the tendency of religious actors to employ extreme violence (see Appleby, 2000; Stern, 2003, for insightful reviews). Some of these factors include a sense of personal or collective alienation, humiliation, deprivation, and victimization (Stern, 2003); ineffective or inaccessible political institutions that fail to provide basic services, to protect human rights, or to fight extremists (Appleby, 2000; Stern, 2003); claims over territory, demographic shifts; discrimination on the basis of religion, history of devaluation and even demonization of outgroup members (Moghaddan, 2005; Staub, 2004); and encouragement by leaders to displace aggression onto outgroups (Moghaddan, 2005). Poverty may be a risk factor in itself (Appleby, 2000) since terrorists have found cruel ways to prey on, and manipulate the poor and ignorant (Stern, 2003). The communication revolution may magnify religious violence by facilitating the spread of the messages of religious terrorists around the world, and by increasing the sense of personal deprivation (Stern, 2003; Staub, 2004).

A simultaneous exploration of both the conditions that facilitate political activism and those that facilitate violence suggested that religious institutions tend to inhibit peaceful opposition unless there is a sufficient level of perceived threat to the religious institutions or the religion itself, in which case religious

institutions tend to facilitate political opposition among ethno-religious minorities. However, the decision to violently oppose a regime is based mostly on secular factors including the desire for some form of autonomy or independence (Fox, 1999).

Personality variables. Going beyond context variables, one may approach the question of why do some religious leaders and other individuals choose religious messages that either support or challenge the status quo or that encourage either violent or peaceful activism from a perspective of individual differences in personality variables. Decisions of supporting or challenging the status quo by religious leaders or other individuals may be related to individual differences in views of human nature and of the world as being either malleable or fixed (e.g., Dweck, 1999) or to personal tendencies toward promotion or prevention (Lieberman, Chen-Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999), which are related to choosing options of change versus stability across situations.

In the context of choosing violent or peaceful goals or means, attempts to explain religious violence and terrorism within a personality “defect” model (i.e., by searching for personality problems that result from childhood negative experiences) might be helpful in certain cases. However, the appropriateness of this approach to the study of religious violence as a whole has been criticized (Ruby, 2002, for a review). Instead, the meaning system approach to religious violence and peace suggests that individual differences in terms of other kinds of personality variables, such as basic beliefs and goals, may impact the choices of religious leaders and individuals. For example, retributive and forgiveness motivations may cause individuals to endorse either messages of revenge or messages of forgiveness from within their religious meaning systems (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, this issue). In addition, individual differences in the ways in which individuals relate to their religious meaning systems may also influence their choices regarding violence or peace. Relating in a fundamentalist way (i.e., in a way that suggests closed-mindedness, and the belief that one has access to absolute truth) tends to be connected to prejudice, discrimination, and violence toward outgroups, while connecting to religious meaning systems as a quest (i.e., in a doubting, flexible approach to religious issues) is related to more openness and tolerance toward others (Hunsberger & Jackson, this issue).

These lines of research imply that both directions of causality are possible in the context of religion and world change. On one hand, religious meaning systems may influence whether religious individuals or groups choose world change over support of the status quo or violence versus peaceful activism. On the other hand, individual or communal tendencies for change or for violence may influence the type of religious meaning system that individuals or communities would choose, or the specific messages regarding world change, violence, and peace within their meaning system that they would endorse.

Processes through which Religion Influences World Change

The fact that religious meaning systems can facilitate both support for the status quo and opposition to it, raises the question, “What are the processes through which religion facilitates support or opposition to the status quo?” Since processes through which religion can support the status quo have been discussed extensively in the literature (Pargament & Park, 1995; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995; Silberman, 1999, 2005b), we would focus mainly on processes that can facilitate activism.

One process through which religion can facilitate both the status quo and any type of activism is the process of sanctification through which religion can give any belief, goal, or action, as well as any object, a special significance (Pargament, Magyar, & Murray-Swank, this issue; Silberman, this issue). By providing a sacred basis for prevailing norms and social structure, religions can discourage questioning and innovation, and can encourage believers to accept the social order. However, through the process of sanctification religion can also define the goal of world change as sacred evoking strong motivations for either violent or peaceful activism as sanctified means to achieve this goal (Pargament et al., this issue; Silberman, 2004).

In terms of activism, there is general agreement that religious institutions can provide organizational resources for mobilization (see Fox, 1999, for a review) in several ways. For example, religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples can facilitate activism by providing convenient meeting places, which might be the safest places under oppressive regimes, and by having extensive access to the media. The meaning system approach to religion (Silberman, this issue) can further illuminate the processes through which religion motivates people to passionately conduct both peaceful and violent activism (see also Silberman, 2005b):

1. Religion as a meaning system may facilitate activism by encouraging a sense of self-efficacy; that is, by suggesting that individuals have the power to change and improve both themselves and the world around them (Silberman, 1999, 2004; Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2000).
2. Religion can also encourage activism by recommending certain values. Two interesting examples for religious values that might facilitate both violent and peaceful activism would be “selflessness” (i.e., nullification in front of God, and a focus on religious goals and objectives, rather than on the self; Silberman, 2004) and “self-sacrifice.” Within certain religious meaning systems and under certain circumstances these two values, which may be described by religious meaning systems as means to demonstrate one’s faith (Fox, 2002), can guide people to sacrifice other needs and even their lives in religious wars or in acts of homicide (suicide) bombings, while within other religious meaning systems or under other circumstances these values can facilitate selfless acts of love and compassion.

3. Religion can motivate activism by offering a dramatic system of extreme rewards and punishments for people's behaviors. A common contingency in this context is that righteous people would get rewarded for their good deeds, while sinners would get punished. It is hard to compete with the rich and detailed descriptions of both the rewards and punishments that some religious systems offer. Spiritual rewards can include inner happiness and tranquility in this life or beyond, a uniquely powerful experience of closeness to a powerful spiritual force (Pargament, 1997), participation in a utopian redemption, or in the resurrection of the dead (e.g., Miller, 2002). Punishments, on the other hand, may include emotional and physical suffering in this world, rejection by God, or eternity in hell (e.g., Woodward, 2002). While the concept of heaven can be a source of help to those who cope with personal or communal tragedies, both concepts of heaven and hell have been used, sometimes in a cynical manipulative way, by political and terrorist leaders to justify their world views (Miller, 2002). These dramatic promises can, in different conditions, facilitate either support for the status quo or different types of activism (see Rapoport, 1988; Silberman, 1999, for discussions on possible influences of Messianic beliefs).
4. Religion may encourage activism in an indirect way by facilitating the fulfillment of an exceptionally wide range of basic needs beyond the spiritual, such as the search for happiness, optimism, calmness, and decisiveness (Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2001), the search for meaning in the world, positive self-concept and group identity, a search for a shelter from human impulses, a search for community, intimacy, and a social consensus (Pargament, 1997).

Stern's (2003) description of the reported religious and nonreligious motivations of religious terrorists around the world is an excellent example of the many ways in which religious meaning systems can motivate people to intensive violent activism. All the terrorists that were interviewed by her claimed to be motivated by religious and spiritual goals. They emphasized the goals of contributing to the good cause of purifying the world, and of being virtuous by transforming themselves from being spiritually perplexed to focused on action, from being selfish to becoming altruistic. Some mentioned religious goals, such as helping to bring the redemption or the apocalypse and the End of times predicted by Biblical texts. They mentioned heavenly awards, such as pleasing God and getting closer to him, and the sense of spiritual transcendence. Most of them combined spiritual with political goals, such as obtaining political power, imposing religious laws, or expanding their territory, as well as frightening the enemy, damaging the economy, or routing the troops.

On a more emotional-psychological level, one of the most important motivations seemed to be the simplification of the meaning of life—a life in which good and evil, victims and oppressors, were clearly defined, and martyrdom provided escape from life's dilemmas and difficulties. Other goals on the

emotional-psychological level included expression of rage, as well as the achievement of status, glamour, fame; a sense of identity, pride and strength; friendship and community; adventures and fun. Stern adds that some individuals seemed to join religious terrorist groups as a way to cope with their fear of a Godless universe, of chaos, and of loneliness, and to reach a peak experience of transcendence. In her words (p. 282): "To be crystal clear about one's identity, to know that one's group is superior to all others, to make purity one's motto, and purification of the world one's life work—this is kind of a bliss." They also mentioned that the atmosphere at some training camps can be of intense psychological pressure enforced by the torture of those who did not embrace the violent code. On a material level, the terrorists mentioned that terrorist groups often provide cash payments for successful operations or money to "martyr" families, or long-term jobs.

In sum, the meaning-making power of religion can motivate people to intense activism by encouraging a sense of self-efficacy to bring about self-change and world change, through values such as selflessness and self-sacrifice, and by offering both spiritual and nonspiritual rewards and punishments. These processes can facilitate *both* peaceful and violent activism. We next discuss additional processes through which religion can facilitate *either* violent *or* peaceful activism.

Religious meaning systems as facilitators of violent activism. Religion, when internalized as an individual or collective system of meaning, can facilitate violent activism in a variety of ways. First, religions often contain values and ideas that may facilitate prejudice, discrimination, and violence by encouraging the consciousness of belonging to a select and privileged community, and by emphasizing the "otherness" of those who do not follow the tenets of the religion (Appleby, 2000; Martin, this issue; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). According to Allport (1966), religion includes the following three basic invitations to bigotry: (1) the belief that one's religion teaches absolute and exclusive truth may lead to derogating the teachings of other religions and philosophical formulations as if those teachings are wrong and are a threat to human salvation (Hunsberger & Jackson, this issue; Kimball, 2002); (2) the doctrine of election (e.g., the concepts of God's chosen people or God's country), which may imply the inferiority of others as rejected by God; and (3) theocracy (i.e., the view that a monarch rules by Divine right, that the Church is a legitimate guide for civil government or that the legal code, being divinely ordained, is inviolable on the pain of severe punishment). In addition, some religious teachings seem to explicitly or implicitly tolerate or even encourage prejudice against certain targets such as gay men and lesbians, Jews, or women (Hunsberger & Jackson, this issue).

The second process through which religion can facilitate violence is desecration. Any object, belief, goal, or action that is perceived as sacred can be desecrated by being lost, destroyed, or violated. Since a perception of desecration has unique adverse effects, such as intense negative affect (e.g., feeling distressed, nervous,

scared, and upset; Pargament et al., this issue), it may facilitate intensive political or violent activism against those who are believed to have caused the desecration. For example, the Middle East conflict seems to be fueled to a certain extent by a sense of desecration of both Jewish and Muslim Holy sites. A sense of desecration of Saudi Arabia (which is the Muslim Holy Land par excellence), especially of its two holy sites, Mecca and Medina, by the American presence has been mentioned as one of the main sources of Bin Laden's anger toward the United States (Lewis, 2003).

Third, religion as a unique meaning system that can give meaning to every aspect of human life (Silberman, this issue) is often at the core of individual and group identity (Seul, 1999). Accordingly, religious beliefs that seem to threaten one's religious meaning system or other ideological threats to one's religion are often perceived as particularly dangerous attacks on both personal and communal identity. Such perceived threats often provoke violent reactions among the adherents of the challenged religions, who perceive themselves as defending not only their religion but also their most important personal and collective identities (see Fox, 2002, for a review).

Fourth, the rules and standards of behaviors that religions as meaning systems usually provide often result in behavior that is likely to provoke conflicts. This can happen in two ways: First, the prescribed action might be inherently conflictive as in the case of religious calls for "holy wars." Second, the required actions may be perceived as threatening by another group, forcing the members of the second group to defend their beliefs (Fox, 2002). Evangelism, which suggests that there is "either an obligation unfulfilled or spiritual reality unfulfilled as long as the whole world does not profess the tenets of a particular religion" (Gopin, 2000, p. 31), is a good example of the two ways in which religious rules can increase violent conflicts. The idea of evangelism, which requires the effort to change the religious meaning systems of members of outgroups, does not inherently require violence, but when imposed forcefully, it has brought about extreme violence throughout history (e.g., during the time of the Inquisition), and has the potential to do so in the future. Beyond that, evangelism, which is restricted by law in many countries, can provoke a violent response against it. For example, the recent increase (particularly since September 11, 2001) in the activism of Christian missionaries in Islamic countries has been a source of tension. It has been interpreted by some individuals as a threat to the fragile peace among Muslims and Christians in countries like Lebanon, and even as a crusade against Islam on the part of the Bush administration. This missionary activism has coincided with increasing anti-Western militancy in regimes of Islamic-majority countries—militancy, which involved the arrest, imprisonment, or even the murder of some Christian missionaries (Van Biema, 2003).

Fifth, religion can facilitate violence by offering seemingly simple and powerful myths or stories that summarize very complicated situations in a cognitively manageable way within individual or collective systems of meaning. "Such myths

are critical means of organizing the world and making sense of one's history, one's origins, and even one's future" (Gopin, 2002, p. 7). Unfortunately, such myths often emphasize the otherness of the nonreligious or of those who hold different religious views in a derogating way. "The facile invocation of religious symbols and stories can exacerbate ethnic tensions and foster a social climate conducive to riots, mob violence, or the random beatings and killings known as hate crimes" (Appleby, 2000, p. 119).

A famous example of a powerful myth is the biblical story of the Abrahamic family—a myth that is part of the lives of hundreds of millions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The myth discusses the competition and rivalry between the two sons of Abraham—Isaac, who is described as the key to Jewish lineage, and Ishmael, the key to Arab Islamic lineage, and between their mothers. The sons compete over who is idolatrous and who is authentic, and they compete for the love of their father. "In this metaphor of Abrahamic family, identities are established . . . old wounds are expressed . . . ancient competitions and conflicts are given a quality of cosmic significance" (Gopin, 2002, p. 7). Another famous myth is the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in early Christian writings—an inaccurate myth, which was developed according to some interpretations for political reasons (Carroll, 2001). In that myth, the Jews are portrayed as the killers of Jesus, and the disagreements between Christians and Jews are described dramatically as a cosmic struggle between evil and good, with the Jews defined as evil, as the offspring of Satan. This demonization of the Jews as a symbol of "all evil" has aroused and legitimized hostility toward Jews in the course of Christian history (Carroll, 2001).

Sixth, because of its power to morally justify any goal or action through the process of sanctification, religion can provide an excellent source for the legitimization of the most violent acts within both individual and collective meaning systems (Fox, 1999). It can provide a particularly strong basis for the processes of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and dehumanization. According to Bandura (2004), individuals, through socialization, adopt moral standards that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct. These internalized moral standards cause individuals to anticipate self-condemnation if they behave in unethical ways, i.e., in ways that are not consistent with their moral standards. When individuals wish to engage in behaviors that are seemingly inconsistent with their moral standards without experiencing a sense of self-condemnation, they endorse psychological mechanisms that allow them to view their unethical behavior as moral. These mechanisms enable them to disengage their moral self-sanctions from their unethical behavior.

The moral disengagement process of moral justification involves the cognitive redefining of a destructive conduct as servicing socially worthy or moral purposes, and, accordingly, as personally and socially acceptable (Bandura, 2004). One example of religious-based moral justification would be the attacks of the al Qaeda organization across the world, which have been described by the organization as

part of a holy war, and as consistent with the teaching of spiritual leaders such as Prophet Muhammad and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, and as sanctified by the Ulema or clergy (Bergen, 2002; Silberman, 2003). This idea is expressed in the following description of the self-perception of religious terrorists: "They know they are right, not just politically but morally. They believe God is on their side" (Stern, 2003, p. 282).

Another way in which religious violence is presented as morally justified is by describing it as a response to pressing emergency situations (Appleby, 2000; Selengut, 2003; Stern, 2003). Conditions such as difficult political and economic situations or a sense of threat to religious values or to religious freedom are used by religious individuals and communities to define violence as morally legitimate. In the words of Appleby (2000, p. 88), "Fundamentalists believe themselves to be living in unusual extraordinary times of crisis, danger, or apocalyptic doom: the advent of the Messiah, the Second Coming of Christ, or the return of the Hidden Imam; and so on." The urgency of this special time requires true believers to make exceptions, to depart from the general rule of the tradition (e.g., its preaching for peace), and to subordinate all other laws to the requirements of survival.

Beyond that, as implied above, religion can be successful in the moral disengagement process of euphemistic labeling, which can be seen as based on the psychological idea that people behave more cruelly when assault actions are given a sanitized label than when they are called aggression (Diener, Dineen, Endersen, Beaman, & Fraser, 1975). Religious violence and killing are often re-defined through theological reinterpretation as holy wars, as sacred events, or as being fought for God and his honor. These battles are not viewed as violence within the religious meaning systems of those who participate in them. On the contrary, they are viewed as religious battles for justice aimed at making a more peaceful and just world. In their eyes these are battles to educate those who are living in sin, to bring truth and redemption, to inspire truth and faith for which even the fallen enemies will eventually be grateful (Selengut, 2003, p. 20).

Finally, basic beliefs that compose the religious meaning systems of individuals can encourage the process of dehumanization, which is defined as the stripping of individuals from their human qualities by defining them as subhuman or even as satanic or evil (Bandura, 2004; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Examples include the dehumanization of the Jews in both Christian (Carroll, 2001) and Muslim (Bodansky, 2000) anti-Semitism; the portrayals by some Muslim extremists of the Western civilizations as the "enemies of God" or as the Crusaders, and of the United States and Israel as the "great Satan" and the "small Satan," respectively (Lewis, 2003). Additional examples include the Christian white supremacists' view of Jews and non-whites as "the literal children of the Satan" (Hoffman, 1993), and the dehumanization of Muslims by the Christian Crusaders (Bandura, 2004).

Religious meaning systems as facilitators of peaceful activism. Religious meaning systems, then, can encourage hatred, discrimination, and violence. However, they also seem to have a strong potential for facilitating conflict resolution and peace (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000; Helmick & Petersen, 2001; Silberman, 2005b). First, religious meaning systems (individual or collective) often include values that can facilitate peace (Gopin, 2000, for a review), such as (1) sanctity of life, which is sometimes supported by the religious idea that all humans are created in the image of God (Gopin, 2000; Montville, 2001); (2) selfless love and compassion (Poethig, 2002), including in some systems (e.g., Christianity) the idea that one needs to love or at least care for the enemy (Gopin, 2000); (3) empathy (Gopin, 2000), which can facilitate understanding of the pain and traumas that others, including enemies, are experiencing; (4) forgiveness (Helmick & Petersen, 2001; Tsang et al., this issue); (5) humility (Gopin, 2000), self-examination and self-criticism (Carroll, 2002), which can facilitate apologies and compensation for harm done, therefore facilitating reconciliation between groups; (6) religious discipline; i.e., the religious idea of self-restraint may facilitate restraint in violent situations (Gopin, 2000); (7) the notion of interdependence, that is, the idea that the acts of one individual or nation can affect the whole world (Poethig, 2002); (8) messianism, that is, the vision of a more just society that may, under certain circumstances, encourage yearning for a more peaceful world (Gopin, 2000; Silberman, 1999); (9) the explicit encouragement of nonviolence, and the call for peace and pacifism (which is a critical concept of the inner life in the Eastern traditions of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) (Gopin, 2000).

Second, religion systems of meaning can include powerful myths in a way that may facilitate peaceful activism. For example, the powerful Abrahamic myth that was discussed above can be reframed as emphasizing the family relations between Jews and Muslims—a family that might be somewhat disturbed, but that is still a family. Reports that religious Jewish and Muslim participants in conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East often refer to each other as cousins may reflect longings for this family unity (Gopin, 2000). When it comes to the myth regarding the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, there have been efforts by the Catholic Church since 1962 to change its hostility toward the Jews, which may eventually lead to a perception of Judaism within the meaning systems of many Catholics as the older sister of Christianity, rather than the rejected religion (Carroll, 2002). Pope John Paul II in some of his actions (e.g., affirming that God “chose” the Jews and asking the Jewish people for forgiveness for their long suffering; Van Biema, 2005) contributed significantly to the process of changing this myth.

Third, religious meaning systems can provide some rules and standards of behavior that may facilitate peaceful relations with outgroup members. For example, biblical Jewish laws instruct the Jewish people to treat the “ger” (non-Jews residents in Israel who abide by basic moral rules) with care and with love, while

respecting their different religious beliefs and their needs for unique identities (Gopin, 2000).

Fourth, religions as systems of meaning can increase activism for peace by prescribing special rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation that can be applied in both interpersonal and intergroup contexts (Gopin, 2002). Two examples for such rituals would be the processes of “Sulh” (Arab method of reconciliation), and the Jewish Teshuva (repentance). These processes have the power within religious systems of meaning to reverse harm done in a gradual formal and symbolic process, which may have significant psychological effects (Gopin, 2002).

Concluding Comments

Our article portrays religion as a double-edged sword that can both encourage and discourage the goal of world change, and can facilitate both violent and peaceful activism as means to achieve this goal. Using the meaning system approach to illuminate the complicated relationship between religion and world change, the article suggests that the goal of world change and the means to achieve it may be interpreted differently within different religious meaning systems, and emphasizes the view of religions as complex systems of meaning that tend to include within them a wide variety of seemingly contradictory messages regarding world change, and the appropriate means to achieve it. The article suggests that religious leaders and believers have some flexibility in choosing certain religious messages over others; for example, whether to prefer messages supporting change versus status quo, violent or peaceful activism (see Hunsberger & Jackson, this issue; Martin, this issue; Silberman, this issue; Tsang et al., this issue). The view of individual and collective religious meaning systems as complex and malleable may implicitly underlie recent academic and nonacademic discussions about the continuous struggle between hardliners and moderates for the soul of Islam; i.e., over the future of the faith and its relationship with the West (e.g., Benard, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Powell, 2004). This view suggests that it is extremely important to realize *both* the potential of religious meaning systems to be directed toward a variety of goals and toward more peaceful directions, *and* the tendency of religious systems to resist change (Fox, 2002; Silberman, this issue). This potential resistance suggests that intensive efforts on both national and international levels would be needed in order to motivate violent religious leaders and communities and religious terrorists to redirect their religious meaning systems by choosing more peaceful goals and means within their religious systems. Psychologists who combine knowledge of conflict resolution theories (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000), priming accessibility techniques, (Higgins, 1996) and motivated cognition techniques (Kruglanski, 1996) with knowledge about religion as a complex meaning system that can develop and change and about the decision-making processes of religious terrorists (Silberman, 2003, 2005b; this issue) could contribute significantly to such efforts.

Religious violence and terrorism have been described by leading experts within the academic world and beyond as particularly destructive and dangerous to modern civilization and the entire world (e.g., Ganor, 2005; Hoffman, 1993; Kimball, 2002). The fact that this millennium has started with religions demonstrating their destructive potential in facilitating conflicts and terrorism across the world (e.g., Juergensmeyer, 2003; Silberman, this issue) is not going to make it a unique millennium. Hopefully, through the collaborative efforts of researchers, political and religious leaders and communities, this millennium will become a special and memorable one by revealing the unique potential of religions to facilitate conflict resolution and world peace.

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ISRAELA SILBERMAN received her PhD (with distinction) in social-personality psychology in 1999 from Columbia University where she is currently Associate Research Scientist. Dr. Silberman has written extensively on the relations between religion as a meaning system and individual and societal well-being, particularly in the context of recent world events. She got numerous grants and awards including the Richard Christie Award, and awards from the Columbia University Center for the Study of Science and Religion, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the American Psychological Association.

E. TORY HIGGINS is the Stanley Schachter Professor of Psychology and Professor of Business at Columbia University where he received his PhD in 1973. He has received the Donald T. Campbell Award For Outstanding Contributions to Social Psychology, the Thomas M. Ostrom Award For Outstanding Contributions to Social Cognition, the American Psychological Society's William James Fellow Award For Distinguished Achievements in Psychological Science, the American Psychological Association's Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, and the Society of Experimental Social Psychology's Distinguished Scientist Award.

CAROL S. DWECK is the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. Dr. Dweck, a leading researcher in motivation, personality, and developmental psychology, received her PhD from Yale University in 1972. Her recent books include *Motivation and Self-Regulation Across the Life Span* (with Jutta Heckhausen), *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* (winner of the book of the year award from the World Education Fellowship), and *The Handbook of Competence and Motivation* (with Andrew Elliot). She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.