WHAT WOULD GANDHI DO TODAY? NONVIOLENCE IN AN AGE OF TERRORISM

by Scott Atran

(Prepared for Gandhian Nonviolence Conference, Georgetown University and
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The Wall Separating Jerusalem from the West Bank, Kalandiya Checkpoint, June 2006

(Author's Photo)

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"As long as it is acceptable for a person to believe that he knows how God wants everyone on earth to live, we will continue to murder one another on account of our myths." In *The End of Faith: Religion, Terrorism and the Future of Reason* (p.134), Sam Harris, philosopher and neuroscientist, pulls no punches in deference to the tender religious sensibilities of others. (God help us now that academic pundits have suddenly discovered we are all faced with the *End of Faith, End of History, End of Evil, End of the Nation-State, and so on).* Harris bemoans the destructive nature of faith and implores all people with any modicum of reason, atheists and religious moderates alike, to turn against all gods and goblins. In the same tradition as Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian," Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion,* and Dan Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* Harris insists, as if it were scientific fact, that ecumenical tolerance and secular moderation toward religion only enable the irrationality of faith to thrive and extremists to flourish, with cruel and savage consequences for the whole world.

But though I nearly worship Russell's philosophical clarity and empirical reason, can only praise Dawkins' scientific acumen, wholeheartedly embrace Dennett's attempt to scientifically study religion as a natural phenomena (after all, he lauds my own evolutionary study of religion as the way to go on this) and truly admire Harris's keen insights and polemical skill, I think these thinkers are all arrogantly out of their depth. What stirs me in this reflection is the image I have conjured of the Mahatma reading such a book, lamenting that his earthly sojourn was for naught.

Let me quote you an excerpt from the first chapter of the *The End of Faith:*

 "The young man boards the bus as it leaves the terminal. He wears an overcoat. Beneath his overcoat, he is wearing a bomb. His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings, and rat poison. The bus is crowded and headed for the heart of the city.

The young man takes his seat beside a middle-aged couple… The young man smiles. With the press of a button he destroys himself, the couple at his side, and twenty others on the bus. The nails, ball bearings, and rat poison ensure further casualties on the street and in the surrounding cars. All has gone according to plan.

The young man's parents soon learn of his fate. Although saddened to have lost a son, they feel tremendous pride at his accomplishment. They know that he has gone to heaven and prepared the way for them to follow. He has also sent his victims to hell for eternity. It is a double victory.

These are the facts. This is all we know for certain about the young man…. Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy—you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy—to guess the young man's religion?"

The situation, Harris argues, is this: Once a person believes—really believes—that certain ideas can lead to eternal happiness, or to its antithesis, he cannot tolerate the possibility that the people he loves might be led astray by the blandishments of unbelievers. Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.

Despite this obvious "truth," however, criticizing a person's ideas about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolitic in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not –

this goes beyond mere political correctness – in Muslim societies if you seriously challenge belief in God to seriously risk being put to death. Even in our society, when a Muslim suicide bomber obliterates himself along with a score of innocents on a Jerusalem street, the role that faith played in his actions is invariably discounted. His motives must have been political, economic, or entirely personal. So even people who know better fear to tell the truth.

But new advances of technology now conspire with the age-old struggle for survival to trash old habits, however ingrained. According to Harris: "Our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—antithetical to our survival. We can no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom, [and] are now armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that these developments mark the terminal phase of our credulity. Words like 'God' and 'Allah' must go the way of 'Apollo' and 'Baal,' or they will unmake our world."

"All pretensions to theological knowledge should now be seen from the perspective of a man who was just beginning his day on the one hundredth floor of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001," Harris intones. As for the devout perpetrators, he stresses that they "were certainly no 'cowards,' as they were repeatedly described in the Western media, nor were they lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith--*perfect* faith, as it turns out--and this, it must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be" (p. 67).

These arguments lead Harris to a stunningly provocative position:

Science must wage an uncompromising intellectual war to destroy religion, and the first great battle of this war has to be the obliteration of Islam, with the opening sally perhaps a nuclear first strike against jihadis; for, "Islam is undeniably a religion of conquest more than any other religion human beings have devised," writes Harris, "[it] has all the makings of a thorough-going cult of death."

Consider, first, the unwise idea of war between science and religion; then, I want to focus on the rash call to battle against Islam.

Human reason can only ever reveal partial truths, because our perspectives are partial and nobody knows everything. But faith cannot reveal anything at all about the material underpinnings of our world, the true springs and causes of our being and surroundings. This can be seen in the difference in effectiveness between scientific medicine - based on a process of testing reality - and faith-based medicine, based on guesswork and delusion. Harris infers from such observations hat the conflict between religion and science is inherent and (very nearly) zero-sum.

"The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science. It is time we conceded a basic fact of human discourse: either a person has good reasons for what he believes, or he does not. When a person has good reasons, his beliefs contribute to our growing understanding of the world."[i]

But does a gradually growing scientific understanding of the world really suffice to replace religion? Of course not.

Science is not particularly suited to dealing with problems of human existence that have no enduring logical or factual solution, such as avoiding death, overcoming loneliness, finding love, or ensuring justice. Science cannot tell us what we ought to do or what should be, only

what we can do and what is. Religion thrives because it addresses our deepest emotional yearnings and society's foundational moral needs. No society has ever lasted more than a few generations without a moral foundation that is considered to be true without question but which is not rationally scrutable.

In the competition for moral allegiance, secular ideologies are at a disadvantage, for if a better ideology might be available down the line, then there's no better reason to accept the current ideology than convenience. And if people come to believe that all apparent commitment is self-interested convenience—or, worse, self-interested manipulation of others—then commitment withers and dies. In times of vulnerability and stress, the pursuit of self-preservation is likely to take precedence over the pursuit of the public good, as the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldûn noted centuries ago. Religion passionately rouses hearts and minds to break out of this viciously rational cycle of self-interest and adopt group interests that can benefit individuals in the long run. In the narrowest case, a couple bound by devotion more easily overcomes personal ups and downs; in the broadest case, a shared faith in an omniscient and omnipotent agent (the supreme being of Abrahamic religions) weakens the every-man-for-himself mentality.

Science, therefore, will not likely ever replace religion in the lives of most people or in any society that hopes to survive for very long. Gandhi knew this and, while granting science it's due, masterfully and sincerely used the power of faith to rouse people's passions and move political mountains. Without a dream, and without hope – both critical components of any religious sentiment as the great social psychologist Gordon Allport noted years ago – life may be just brutal and barren.

Now to the battle with Islam. Harris says starkly, "We are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so." Oh Really? Why are 'we' automatically on the side of an evangelical Christian President against even the most moderate of Muslims? He goes from blasting all religions for their dangerous fantasies to claiming that Islam is a uniquely evil system, and that all and only Muslims are inherently prone to organized suicide-murder.

So let me say something here about suicide killers. I know first hand a bit about them – something Harris and most others in our society who write and talk about them do not - because I have interviewed a number of would-be suicide bombers, failed suicide bombers, families of successful suicide bombers and leaders of organizations that sponsor suicide attacks, from the cities of Western Europe to the jungles of Southeast Asia.

First some contrary facts: Harris is wrong that suicide bombers are invariably Islamic. In fact, the single most prolific group of suicide attackers has been the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, an avowedly secular movement of national liberation whose major constituency is nominally Hindu. True, since 2001 the overwhelming majority of suicide attacks have been sponsored by militant Muslim groups, but there is little if any precedent in Islamic tradition for suicide terrorism. As for the "tremendous pride" that invariably trumps parental love, which Harris posits as a trivial truth about the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, I have yet to meet a parent who would have done anything in his or her power to stop their child from such an act, but none I talked to ever knew and few ever imagined their child doing such a thing.

Here's a diary entry from my interview in Gaza's Jabaliyah refugee camp, in September 2004, with the parents of Nabeel Masood, a 16-year-old who exploded himself in the Israeli port of Ashdod the previous April. Nabeel's mother was reading a letter from her son's high school head master when I walked in the door; she was crying although her son had already been dead for months. She handed me the letter. It read:

"Mr. and Mrs. Masood, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that your son Martyr Babeel[sic], has passed his tests successfully in the 11th grade. He was first in his class. He was distinguished not only in his hard studying, sharing, and caring, but also in his good morals and manhood. I would really like to congratulate you for his unique success in both life and the hereafter. You should be proud of your son's martyrdom."

Shortly before the attack, Nabeel had received word that he had a scholarship to study in England, but the two cousins he most loved were then killed in an Israeli raid, so he went to the Mosque and prepared himself to die. I asked his father, "Do you think your son's sacrifice will make things better?" "No," he said, "this hasn't brought us even one step forward." I asked him if he was proud of what his son had done. He showed me a pamphlet, specially printed by Al Aqsa' Martyrs Brigades and endorsed by Hamas, praising the actions of his son and the two other young men who accompanied him. "Here, you take it," he pushed the pamphlet into my hands, "burn it if you want. Is this worth a son?" The reaction of Nabeel's parents was typical.

Earlier that month, Sheikh Hamed Al-Betawi, spiritual leader of Hamas, told me in Nablus: "Our people do not own airplanes and tanks, only human bombs. Those who undertake martyrdom actions are not hopeless or poor, but are the best of our people, educated, successful. They are intelligent, advanced combat techniques for fighting enemy occupation." The statistics that I and others have gathered confirm much of what he says – most Hamas suicide bombers, for example, are college educated and come from families that are economically better off than their surrounding populations. Marc Sageman, a former CIA case officer and professor of forensic psychiatry who tracks Al Qaeda and who is currently working with our research team on the analysis of terror networks, finds a similar demographic profile. One remarkable characteristic of suicide bombers, whether associated with Hamas or Al Qaeda, is that a plurality has an engineering background. Knowledge of science, it appears, does not in the least immunize people from becoming, or supporting, suicide bombing.

Despite atavistic cultural elements, global jihadism is a thoroughly modern movement filling the popular political void in Islamic communities left in the wake of discredited western ideologies co-opted by corrupt local governments. Appeals to Muslim history and calls for a revival of the Caliphate are heartfelt, though to some extent jihadism is also a counter-movement to the ideological and corresponding military thrust ensconced, for instance, in the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, which enshrines liberal democracy as the "single sustainable model of national development right and true for every person, in every society."[ii] Jihadism's apocalyptic yearnings and born-again vision of personal salvation through radical action are absent from traditional Islamic exegesis and, indeed, perhaps as much may be learned about them from the New Testament's *Book of Revelations* as from the *Qur'an*.[iii] Nor does Islam *per se* or "Muslim civilization" really have anything to do with terrorism – no more than some impossibly timeless or context-free notion of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism can be held responsible for the dead millions these religious traditions have been accused of.[iv]

There is a curious dualism in the approach of U.S. academics, politicians and pundits to the jihadi movement in general and suicide terrorism in particular. Most social and political scientists, economists and policymakers argue that suicide terrorism is an eminently rational and instrumental tactic of war for the martyr-sponsoring organization but, for the individual, it is an irrational and bizarre behavior. Our recent work suggests that, both at the organizational and individual level, such actions are at least in part motivated by non-instrumental sacred, or "protected," values, that is, with considerations of moral obligation ("deontological rules") rather than calculations that strictly weigh benefits against costs or link means to ends ("consequentialist rules"). People with sacred values often say that one

has a moral obligation to act, independent of likelihood of success, as in acts of terrorism OR heroism, "because I couldn't live with myself if I didn't."

Rather than obey a utilitarian "logic of rational consequence" these actors perhaps more closely follow a "logic of moral appropriateness."[iv] Consider, for example, our recent interviews with a number of self-identified recruits for martyr attack from the Hamas Block at al-Najah University in Nablus (which provides more suicide bombers than any other demographic group of Palestinians) as well as a number of active fighters in Indonesia from Jemaah Islamiyah, Al-Qeda's main ally in southeast Asia, trained in Afghanistan, the southern Philippines, Sulawesi and the Mollucas. All were asked questions of the sort, "So what if your family were to be killed in retaliation for your action?" or "What if your father were dying and your mother found out your plans for a martyrdom attack and asked you to delay until the family could get back on its feet?" *To a person they answered along lines that there is duty to family but duty to God cannot be postponed.* "And what if your action resulted in no one's death but your own?" The typical response is, "God will love you just the same*." For example, when these questions were posed to the alleged Emir of Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Bakr Ba'asyir, in Jakarta's Cipinang prison in August 2005*, he responded that martyrdom for the sake of jihad is the ultimate <u>fardh 'ain</u>, an inescapable individual obligation that trumps all others, including the four of the five pillars of Islam (only profession of faith equals jihad). What matters for him as for most would-be martyrs and their sponsors I have interviewed is the martyr's intention and commitment to God, so that blowing up only oneself has the same value and reward as killing however many of the enemy.[vi]*

Such answers suggest that sacred values are not very sensitive to standard calculations regarding cost and benefit, to quantity,[vii] to tradeoffs across moral categories (e.g., family vs. God) or to commensuration between different cultural frames.[viii] This means that traditional calculations of how to defeat or deter an enemy - for example, by providing material incentives to defect or threatening massive retaliation against supporting populations - might not succeed. But some of our recent experiments with Palestinian refugees and Israeli settlers suggest that even a token sacrifice of one side's symbolically held position may weaken the other side's rigid adherence to its own adversarial position.[ix]

"We need a dialogue of civilizations, not a clash of civilizations," Hamas leader and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya told me in his Gaza City office shortly before it was destroyed in an Israeli missile attack earlier this summer. "We have no problem with a sovereign Palestinian state over all our lands within the '67 borders, living in calm," Haniya said, "but we need the West as a partner to help us through just as you need to work with us, not against us, to restore your credibility in Muslim eyes."

Indeed, in a survey released last month by the Pew Center's Global Attitudes Project,[x] Muslim opinions about the West worsened over the past year by overwhelming margins, and many commentators, including former secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Senator John Danforth, believe that a "talk of civilizations" is pressing. Pakistani Senator Khurshid Ahmad, a leader of the Jama'at-e-Islami, one of the world's oldest and most important Islamist movements, concurs. In Islamabad, he recently told me that if the Hamas government accepts a two-state solution, "with both Palestine and Israel having full economic, political and military sovereignty over their pre-1967 territories, and with Palestinians allowed into Palestine and Jews into Israel, then I would recommend this solution to the entire Muslim ummah." Given prevailing stereotypes, this is a remarkable statement by a self-proclaimed "Islamic fundamentalist," who considers such a solution key to bridging and narrowing the otherwise widening gulf between Muslim and Western societies, marginalizing Al-Qaeda, and reducing violence across the world.

"But," interjected Ghazi Hamad, the Hamas government spokesman who was in Haniya's office with me, "Israel must recognize responsibility for our tragedy in 1948 before we can talk about negotiating over our right of return to historic Palestine or recognizing Israel." Figuring out how to negotiate between conflicting values that people hold sacred, and which transcend the material values of *realpolitik* or the marketplace, may be key to ending what the Pew survey shows to be the world's most dangerous and emblematic conflict in the minds of most people. But whereas figuring out material tradeoffs and compensation can be calculated, even if the calculations are complex and difficult, assessing the relative merits and limits of conflicting sacred values and cultural preferences can be much harder.

More innovative approaches may be required to avoid a direct clash of culturally important values. In the well known case of "ping-pong" diplomacy between the USA and China, the sacrifice of something of marginal value to one side (losing a ping-pong match where, ping-pong was considered a "basement sport" by most of the U.S. population) was amplified by its value-differential into producing something of great symbolic value for the other side (ping-pong was a sport of national prestige to China). This exchange contributed to a world-historic breakthrough during the Cold War. (Note that cricket matches between India and Pakistan are not likely to have such an effect because cricket has more or less equal value for both countries, so that game becomes zero-sum, with only a loser and a winner). [xi]

Perhaps were France to yield on the issue of allowing Muslim women to wear headscarves in public schools, the effects would now reverberate throughout the Muslim world to the good. The problem, however, is that France, unlike, the USA considers signs pf physical and religious distinction in school an affront to the symbolically defining value of French political culture ever since the French Revolution, namely, a universal and uniform sense of social equality (however lacking in practice). "The only community is the nation," declared French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin.[xii] Indeed, the American ideal of cultural diversity is perceived by the entire political spectrum in France as an attempt to force an alien notion of community and identity between the only two moral entities recognized in that country – the individual and the state.[xiii]

The key is *not* to try to undermine the sacred values that inspire people to radical action, or attempt to substitute one's own preferred values by forceful imposition or through propaganda: Experiments in cognitive and social psychology repeatedly show that such tactics usually only incite further moral outrage and extreme behavior.[xiv] Rather, the aim should be to show how deeply held sacred values can be channeled into less belligerent paths. What has struck me in my interviews with mujahedin who have rejected suicide bombing is that they remain very committed to Salafism, a contemporary movement of Sunni Islam which holds that literal readings of the Qur'an and the hadith - or oral traditions – should guide everyday life for the believing Muslim. Those who seem to best succeed in convincing their brethren to forsake wanton killing of civilians do so by promoting alternative interpretations of Islamic principles that need not directly oppose Salafi teachings. Sincere alternative appeals to sacred values could undermine consensus for violent jihad. But it is not evident that the United States and its allies would or could embrace this process without strangling it.

Seeking a sense of community through the power of faith is something the current US administration seems to understand, but only at home and primarily in mobilization for war. Gandhi preached the power of faith for peace and for all. It is well we remember his dream, as Martin Luther King did.

i   S. Harris, "Science Must Destroy Religion," *The Huffington Post*, January 2, 2006; available at http://news.yahoo.com/s/huffpost/20060102/cm_huffpost/013153.

ii   G. W. Bush, Introduction to *National Security Strategy of the United States*, White House, Washington, D.C., September 2003; available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.

iii   For an extreme example of convergence, compare Ayman Al-Zawahiri's *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* (trans. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, December 2, 2001; available at www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ayman_bk.html) and the works of White Supremacist ideologue William Pierce: for example, *The Turner Diaries* (Washington DC: National Alliance, 1978), which ends with the hero ploughing his jet into the Pentagon on a successful suicide mission; also Pierce's analysis of the 9/11 attacks being carried out for the right reasons by the wrong people, *Free Speech* 7, November 2001; available at www.natvan.com/free-speech/fs0111c.html. After the closing of the Aryan Nation compound in Idaho and several recent leadership changes, these people have begun calling their new mission "Aryan Jihad." Before opening up a bit to other races that oppose Judaism, it is necessary that "the System" be disrupted and broken down. This is the same 'System' that not only oppresses Aryans but is also responsible for oppressing all persons of whatever race or nationality who oppose the erroneous, Judaic-based authority which is the premise for System-rule; available at www.aryan-nations.org/about.htm.

iv   Arguments by outsiders that militant Islam can be undermined by showing it doesn't reflect the religion's "truth" or "essence" are likewise vacuous, for there is no "essence" or fixed content to *any* religion: S. Atran, A. Norenzayan, "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* **27**, 713 (2004). Nevertheless, debates among Muslims about – for example – whether killing children is acceptable, are critical to how their religion will be interpreted and applied.

v   B. Hoffman, G. McCormick, "Terrorism, signaling, and suicide attack," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* **27**, 243(2004).

vi   S. Atran, "The Emir," *Spotlight on Terrorism* (Jamestown Foundation), September 15, 2005; available at http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369782.

vii   Sensitivity to quantity depends on whether the focus is on the moral impulse of the act, where there seems to be little or no sensitivity (e.g., Does God love less the martyr who dies killing 1 enemy versus the martyr who dies killing 10 of the enemy? Answer: "No") or on the consequences, which appears to heighten sensitivity ("Does God approve more a mujahid's action that kills 10 of the enemy versus a mujahid's action that kills 1 of the enemy?" Answer: "Yes").

viii   Granted, instrumental cost-benefit calculations often prevail within a moral frame. Most would-be martyrs and jihadi religious leaders we've interviewed also say that if a roadside bomb can produce the same damage without killing any members of the group, then it is preferable.

ix   S. Atran, *Global Network Terrorism: I. Sacred Values and Radicalization*. Briefing to the National Security Council, White House, Washington, DC, April 28, 2006; available at http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/whitehouse/atrannsc-042806.pdf.

x   "America's Image Slips, But Allies Share U.S. Concerns Over Iran, Hamas" (Pew Research Center, 13 June 2006); available at http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252.

xi   Contrast this with the efforts of Japan to conciliate China in 2005, which were destroyed by the Japanese Prime Minister's symbolic attendance at a World War II shrine. Also, much of the back-and-forth between the American colonies and Britain in the lead up to the revolutionary war concerned the validity of a tax that Britain set deliberately at a low level to make the symbolic point that it had the right to tax the colonies as it chose.

xii   Interview with Dominique de Villepin in *La Vie* (Paris), no. 314, February 24, 2005, p. 16 : « Il n'ya de communauté que nationale ». The autumn 2005 riots in the immigrant suburbs of Paris, which spread to France's other major urban centers, should have been the wake up call that galvanized attention and action. Instead, France's political groups have used the events mostly to try and gain leverage over rivals (including within one's own party), and U.S. reaction has mostly been to point a finger at what the French are doing wrong, and often wrongly attributing the riots to Islamic militancy.

xiii   O. Roy, *Globalized Islam* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2004).

xiv   L. Ross, C. Stillinger, "Psychological factors in conflict resolution," *Negotiation Journal* **7**, 389 (1991). One reason pro-American news and broadcasts worked in Eastern Europe to undermine communism was that the majority of Eastern Europeans never wanted to be communists, and there were also varying degrees of familiarity with democratic processes before imposition of communist rule. But most Muslims are more attuned to messages that will help them become *better* Muslims.