CHAPTER 3

What Terrorism is and is Not

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If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.... For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.¹

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

On the Definition of Terrorism and Terrorisms

I begin with a search for definitions. The words “terror”, “terrorism” and “terrorist” are derived from the Latin verb “terrere”, meaning “to instill fear” in people, “to frighten”. To frighten is to cause an event, the transactional effect of which is to generate a state of acute, sudden or prolonged fear in victims. If the event is so sudden and shocking, acute fear is induced; the term then is more properly “to terrorize”. Thus “terrorism”, “acts of terrorism” and “acts of terrorist” take the response in other people over time with an intensity of emotional response. Of course fear is a normal cause-effect of war: mention the word terrorism at the same time and we then can become confused about causes and effects.

Deliberately inducing terror and terrorism reached the political lexicon of Europe in the 14th century, when the works of Livy (Titus Livius 59–17 BCE) were translated from Latin into French. It is generally accepted that the term

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Kegan Paul 1922) 6.41. He also writes of “the limits of my language signify the limits of my world”, ibid 5.6, with events happening beyond our powers of expressing them in language, and signifying our intuitive recognition of value beyond what we can ever say or write.
gained currency during 1793–4, when the French Revolution reached a stage of internal crisis. The most frightful atrocities were inflicted not only on the ancien régime, but towards supposed reactionaries amongst the revolutionaries themselves. Known as the “Reign of Terror”, such societal revolutionary terrorism gave the lie to the earlier and loudly proclaimed rationality, as well as a denial of sorts with the romantic aura which the French Revolution produced in European and World history. The ensuing power struggle, while precursory to the general spread of republicanism and nationalism as legitimate ends, later took on the more traditional characteristics of protracted and conventional wars of conquest against other nations, the Napoleonic wars.

But we encounter the problem today in that scores even hundreds of definitions, tangential to the different legal codes of different nation-states, by and large are negative, reflecting death and destruction only in a generic paradigm, describing what terrorism is not, things being denied to victims, rather than what terrorism is, and how the dynamics of terrorist actions can be understood. The definitions of terrorism are thus paralleled by what is termed in theology as apophatic (negative), and cataphatic (positive) way of describing God, noted by the 9th century theologian John Scotus Erigena (800–877 BCE).3

In similar manner, terror and terrorism reside in peoples’ minds as a supreme negative, and therefore categorically confounding jus in bello principles. Terrorists as revolutionaries seemingly challenge “legitimate authority” and “just cause” principles of jus ad bellum. However, more often than not, this is also true of war-fighting in general. The crux of all the arguments is that, in addition to a great deal of mystification, “terrorism” becomes a statement of negative value and emptiness, its tactics being nihilistic in character. Indeed, the terrorist becomes an object of fear, hatred and scorn, irrespective of any meaning behind the terminology.4 Of course even the most obvious contemporary terrorists do not negate their own being. They see themselves as positive agents, “freedom fighters”, “insurgents”, or “soldiers of Allah”, etc. It is also apparent that somebody’s terrorists are always somebody else’s freedom

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3 A theological term, apophatic means negative, the positive term being cataphatic. “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because he is not a thing. Literally God is not, because He transcends being”. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scottus-erigena/ accessed 30 April 2017. To contradict Erigena, God of course knows what he is. He knows he transcends being, which further perplexes our human ontological understandings.
4 In the 19th century in Russia it was otherwise. Those Russian terrorists considered themselves to be the descendants of the French Revolution, proud to be called terrorists, often being objects of admiration, adoration and romance. Che Guevara had a similar romantic mystique for the 1970s.