# FROM NRMs TO SALAFI-JIHADIST TERRORISM

## An Interview with Professor Emeritus Lorne L. Dawson



**WRSP:** For much of your career you studied new religious movements (NRMs) from a sociological perspective, writing about groups like the Church Universal and Triumphant and Soka Gakkai, and also authoring the book, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (1998; second ed. 2006). What was it that led to your interest in this topic to begin with?

**Prof. Dawson:** My dissertation was very theoretical. It examined theories of rational action and explored their relevance for understanding religion. It was really an exercise in meta-theorizing. I had published several articles before graduating, but obviously the readership for this kind of work is small. As part of the post-doctoral fellowship I secured, I was asked to teach a large course on new religious movements (NRMs), even though I had no prior background in the area. The course was popular, engaging, and interesting, and I soon realized that NRMs represented a natural context in which to investigate many of the very fundamental theoretical and methodological issues I had been researching about the study of religious phenomena.

This teaching led to a few publications about the then burgeoning study of NRMs and once I eventually landed my permanent position at the University of Waterloo (1990) it became one of the (but not the only) primary areas of my research and teaching. At one point I was teaching the course on NRMs at two major universities, and by distance education, to a total of about 1,200 students a year. While I eventually cut back on the number and size of these classes, it remained a course that I taught to large numbers of students every year for over twenty years.

In terms of research, I was fascinated by the impulse that created these movements, at the individual and collective levels, the nature of social strife that surrounded them, and the reasons why so many in the mainstream were threatened by these small groups. They represented fascinating social, moral, intellectual, and spiritual experiments in the midst of a time of growing secularism. Consequently, my work tended to concentrate on better discerning who joined them, how and why, and the social and cultural significance of

contemporary NRMs. I knew people involved in many groups and spoke with the leadership of some groups, and I did case studies on a few, but my interests remained theoretical.

**WRSP:** I know that you have engaged in debates about the validity of the concept of brainwashing, but I wondered if your work had brought you into interactions with the countercult/anticult movements more broadly? Did you find that there was still a confrontational atmosphere between these movements and scholars of new religions when you were getting involved in the latter field?

**Prof. Dawson:** At one time people active in the anticult movement participated quite regularly in the meetings of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and other academic groups studying religion, as did representatives of some of the NRMs. I interacted quite a bit with both groups during presentations, in the hallways afterwards, and while relaxing later over coffee, drinks, dinner, or whatever. There were strong differences of opinion, and some lobbying happening as groups competed to secure academic support and hence legitimacy. I strove to stay as neutral as possible while seeking to learn more about all the people engaged in the disputes through dialogue with them. By then I was friends with sociologists James T. Richardson, David G. Bromley, Jeffrey K. Hadden (1936-2003), and many other prominent scholars of NRMs, and there was a very lively discussion happening at these meetings.

My own study of the research literature convinced me, however, that the anticult movement was misguided in important respects and that it was having an injurious effect on individuals, and society overall. Therefore, I did seek to debunk some of the specific claims involved in the fearmongering that was occurring. As the public controversy started to fade in the 2000s, however, so did my interest and more of my time was being spend on other research topics (e.g., the nature of charismatic authority and leadership; the influence of postmodernism on the social sciences).

**WRSP:** With Douglas E. Cowan, you brought out the 2004 edited volume *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Routledge). Where did your interest in religion and the internet come from and is this something that you have continued to pursue over the past two decades?

**Prof. Dawson:** Quite interestingly, my attention was drawn to this topic by two of my undergraduate students in the NRMs course. We turned their term paper into what I think may be the first publication on religion and the internet, or at least NRMs and the internet (i.e., Tim Cottee, Nicky Yateman, and Lorne Dawson, "NRMs, the ACM, and the WWW: A Guide for Beginners," in L. L. Dawson, ed., *Cults in Context*. Canadian Scholars Press, 1996). The first internet browser—MOSAIC—had just been launched in 1995, and everything was new and intriguing. NRMs and their opponents were amongst the early adopters of this communication technology. That led to some research and the next publication: "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies," in J. K. Hadden and D. Cowan, eds., *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise*, Religion and the Social Order series, vol. 8 (New York: JAI, 2000), which sort of set an agenda, and soon everyone was quoting my own words back to me at conference presentations.

A small group of young scholars were drawn to the subject and *Religion Online* sought to capture this new development, its possibilities, and limitations. Both Doug Cowan and I realized, however, that doing good work in the area was going to require spending a lot of time online and staying abreast of all the technical advances—neither of which appealed to us, and we had too many other interests. It also became apparent

that good work needed to take into consideration the extensive research developing in the sociology of the internet and computer-mediated communication in general. So, we left the field for others, like Heidi Campbell, to develop.

I developed a course called 'Cyberspace and Social Life' that received a lot of fanfare (i.e., attention from the university and the media), but it never attracted the student numbers expected. I soon realized that the internet was rapidly becoming a normal part of life for students, and consequently they did not see the need to think about it critically. After years of research that tended to be either utopian or dystopian in its approach to the impact of the internet, it became apparent that there was a lot more continuity between life online and offline than thought. The key takeaway, however, is that technical features of the internet were modifying many aspects of social and religious life in more subtle, yet consequential ways. The change effected is a qualitative one that is hard to track and appreciate, but significant.

**WRSP:** Since at least the 2010s your work has increasingly looked at the radicalization that leads people into Salafi jihadism. Can you tell us a little bit about what this phenomenon is and why you decided to refocus your research towards it?

**Prof. Dawson:** The process of radicalization has a discernible order that research can delineate, much like converting to an NRM, yet the paths taken by individuals are often influenced by contingencies that cannot be predicted (e.g., meeting a certain person at a certain time). Careers are much the same, and my own has been marked by a certain eclecticism since many questions spark my intellectual curiosity. In 2009 I was invited to speak to a federal government advisory body on security issues about my research into why some NRMs become violent. This led to an invitation to join a panel being presented by CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) at a conference, and a contract to produce a research paper for them. Soon Public Safety Canada and the RCMP (our national police) were inviting me to speak to their officials as well, and everyone wanted me to apply my ideas to terrorism—of which I knew little. By then I had been studying NRMs for about twenty years, and so I took a risk and decided to become an expert in a new field.

In truth this decision was also influenced by another development in my life: my wife was dying of cancer, and I had already cancelled a string of speaking engagements and publication commitments dealing with NRMs. I had the time then to read and master the new research emerging on the process of radicalization. Examining what we knew about who was becoming a Salafi-jihadist in the West, and studying the largest terrorism plot in Canada in detail (the "Toronto 18"), it became apparent that there are strong parallels between who joins NRMs, how and why, and what we knew about jihadists. On this basis I quickly formulated my social ecology model of jihadist radicalization—which seemed to resonate with the findings of security officials and hence I was asked to present the model numerous times ("The Social Ecology Model of Homegrown Jihadist Radicalisation,"in Akil N. Awan and James R. Lewis, eds., *Radicalisation: A Global and Comparative Perspective,* Hurst, 2023: 33-56).

As summarized years later in a report for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2018), I argue that overall what appears to be happening with these young people is a mixture of six factors: (1) acute, emerging adult, identity struggles, (2) in individuals with a moralistic problem-solving orientation, (3) conditioned by an inordinate quest for significance (to make a difference in this world), (4) which is resolved by exposure to a religious ideology and participation in a fantasy (literally) of world change, (5) by way of the psychological impact of intense small group dynamics and perhaps the influence of charismatic leadership, (6) resulting in a fusion of the personal identity of the individual with the new group identity and its cause. What I would

add to this now is an emphasis on the strong empirical evidence of the mediating role played by jihadist social networks. As recent research has demonstrated, radicalization is a localized and scattered phenomenon because much depends on the presence of strong local networks with appropriate international connections. The parallels with findings from the study of NRMs are obvious.

**WRSP:** Several of your recent writings have looked specifically at Canadians who get involved in Salafi jihadism. Is the Canadian situation largely the same as that in other Western countries, or are there unique elements at play there?

**Prof. Dawson:** We now know just how complex the process of radicalization is; it depends on the interaction of multiple factors, whose relative presence and interaction is variably conditioned by a host of other circumstances. Quantitative studies of large purposefully derived data sets have been able to identify and measure the variables and interactions in question and measure the differences for difference types of violent extremism (e.g., jihadists vs. far-right or lone-actors vs. group-based).

Other cross-national comparative studies, using smaller data sets, like the ones I have done (with others) for Canada, Australia, and Sweden, demonstrate variations in the socio-demographic profile of those perpetrating acts of violent extremism. For example, Canadian jihadists appear to be markedly better educated, more from the middle class, and more often female, than is the case in most of Europe and in Australia. In this regard they are more like American jihadists. Does this situation weigh against the strong inclination in Europe to interpret radicalization as the outcome of socio-economic marginalization?  This is an important question, but we need much more and better data to make headway, and even more we need many more, better quality, and more comparable qualitative case studies to really grasp the 'relevance' of different factors and their interactions.

I think the qualified support (at best) for the socio-economic marginalization hypothesis indicates the ongoing importance of people's perceptions and interpretations of their situations. In this regard ideology matters, something that terrorism scholars have been neglecting in their rush to discern the behavioural underpinnings of radicalization. In the end, as with joining NRMs, if we wish to make headway, much depends on taking up the difficult task of securing more first-person accounts of people's experiences—a task few researchers seem willing to pursue, given the considerable practical costs and methodological hurdles.

**WRSP:** You have been critical of the way that certain scholars of terrorism have tried to minimise or ignore religious influences on terrorist ideology. Could you tell us a little bit more about this, and what you see as the importance of having scholars of religion actively contributing to research into terrorist networks and activity?

**Prof. Dawson:** Yes, I have published a series of book chapters and articles criticizing the way in which some leading scholars in the field of terrorism studies have systematically neglected or even dismissed the relevance of religious motivations in accounting for religious terrorism. Much depends on their reliance on a set of assumptions, present in different ways in different publications, that reflect their lack of familiarity with recent research on religion. To correct the resultant unwarranted interpretive bias and shortcomings I have engaged in the detailed criticism of the ideas and language used by these scholars—the kind of textual analysis that is more common in religious studies than the rest of the social sciences.

Simplifying a complex critique, I argue that research on religious terrorism has been distorted by the infiltration of three insufficient interpretive assumptions: (1) religion is about love and compassion, etc. and hence violent religious acts are not really religious; (2) religion is largely about privately held beliefs and subjective states and experiences, so public acts of religious violence are really about politics, they are politically and not religiously motivated; (3) evidence of a lack of religious knowledge amongst the recruits to religious violence means their motivation is not really religious. These assumptions reflect an unwitting acceptance of various aspects of a modern Western normative conception of religion—its nature and social function—and applying them uncritically to the interpretation of Western jihadists. It misunderstands the nature of "lived religion" and the extent to which converting to jihadism involves turning to an alternative worldview in which the private/public distinction and the separation of religion and politics is normatively rejected. Seen from the right religious perspective the acts of the religious terrorists are clearly religious and consequently more evidentiary value needs to be accorded to the religious motivational claims so frequently made by religious terrorists (with due consideration for all the usual caveats about the reliability of first-person accounts).

This argument has resonated with many, and others are making similar arguments in recent years. Yet the larger fear of inadvertently fostering Islamophobia continues to drive resistance to my argument, despite the important qualification that my argument is limited to the influence of a particular radical sectarian interpretation of Islam, etc. The secular bias, and simply the lack of knowledge about religion, that characterizes much of the scholarship on terrorism (by political scientists, international relations scholars, and psychologists, etc.) has meant the religious basis of at least some extremist violence has been under-researched in significant ways, and hence an important aspect of the knowledge needed to support more effective prevention programs is missing.

**WRSP:** Has your research generated much of a response from the groups that you have studied, whether that be new religions or Salafi-jihadists? Have you had much pushback from groups, whether political or religious, that may wish to deemphasise the religious aspect of Salafist-jihadist terrorism?

**Prof. Dawson:** In fact, I have heard very little in that regard, apart from some concern about even using the term "jihadist." Yet I use that term to avoid using others employed regularly in public or in terrorism research, such as "Islamic terrorism" or "Islamist terrorism," whose use could implicate Islam more broadly. I even use the term "Salafi jihadism" sparely—and when the context specifically warrants—because the vast majority of Salafists (those who wish to recreate the idealized *ummah* [community] and way of life during the first three generations of Muslims, the *salaf*, the pious predecessors) are not jihadists. But realistically those engaging in this kind of violent extremism justify their actions by referring to a tradition of "religio-political" discourse and scholarship going back to the middle of the twentieth century—a set of writings that seeks to elevate and justify engaging in jihad ("struggle," in this case, warfare against perceived enemies of Islam) to reform Islam and save humanity. As Roel Meijer and others argue, global Salafism is best seen as an Islamic NRM, and Salafi-jihadists are a radical sub-sect of that larger movement. Using some other abstract euphemism to identify them would be disingenuous and disrespectful to the subjects of our research (whatever our thoughts about the nature of their beliefs and actions).

The other group resistant to my argument are those who identify as "critical terrorism scholars," who object to almost all aspects of mainstream terrorism studies because they think the field has been shaped by a neo-liberal political agenda, and any reference to religion is part of a larger campaign of suppression of

ethno-religious minorities in favour of a white, capitalist elite, etc. I have yet to directly engage with this perspective, though I have read the relevant specific publications and have formulated counterarguments.

My views have been shaped by a unique project I undertook, in partnership with another religious studies scholar, Amar Amarasingam. We interviewed, by social media, Western foreign fighters fighting in Syria and Iraq for various jihadist groups, including the Islamic State. Contrary to people's suspicions, these young men were eager to speak with us about their situation and motivations. As another young colleague seeking to do similar research said to me when we were discussing his ethics application, the foreign fighters he had interacted with were surprisingly polite, intelligent, and easy to interact with. That was our experience as well. This experience and my face-to-face interactions with members of the Toronto 18 terrorist plot (to carry out attacks on targets in the Toronto metropolitan area), upon their release from prison, led me to strive to "humanize" our perception of these individuals, rather than further demonize and "other" them. Once again, this situation parallels my experiences interacting with members of various NRMs, as speakers in my classes, at conferences, and in a few fieldtrips taken to their offices, temples, and churches in Canada and the United States.

**WRSP:** What do you see as the particular value of sociology for the study of religion? Do you feel that there is enough integration and interaction between sociologists of religion and those studying religion from other disciplinary angles?

**Prof. Dawson:** This is an interesting and difficult question. I am trained in religious studies but spent most of my career in sociology departments. I have published work in both fields, plus now terrorism studies. My orientation has been largely theoretical, but mostly what sociologists call middle-range theory—the sort of theorizing that guides empirical work and is informed by empirical findings. Much of that work has consisted of informing religious studies scholars about developments in sociology, and vice versa, and much the same applies to a lot of what I have done in terrorism studies. Each field is fairly insular and has much to gain from cross-fertilization—which I have been able to facilitate a bit, and admittedly exploit, but always with regard to specific topics or problems.

I think it is still the case that sociology of religion can help religious studies scholars to think more generally about the groups and traditions they have expertise in, to recognize them as social phenomena that like other aspects of social life are subject to developmental pressures and forces falling outside the traditions. To think more abstractly about the historical traditions and belief systems they are studying to gain insight into the behaviour of leaders and followers. In my own case, this happened in two ways that readily come to mind: work I did on church/sect/cult typologizing was picked up by biblical scholars trying to understand developments in the early Christian period, and I have been able to synthesize and apply sociological (and psychological) understandings of charismatic authority and leadership to NRMs, religious violence, and terrorist radicalization so specific events or groups are understood better.

Alternatively, I think many sociologists have a poor grasp of the complexity and richness of religious thought and belief systems, and the nature and power of religious commitments and orientations. Without being an idealist (philosophically), with Max Weber (1864-1920) I think that ideas matter to people (no matter how rudimentarily they are grasped) and they play a key role in determining the course of people's actions. Likewise, ideas about the ultimate point and purpose of our fragile lives continue to have a profound effect, no matter how materially advanced our societies become—even if these ideas are too often exploited by unprincipled leaders for their personal and political gain.

**WRSP:** When it comes to both new religious movements and religious terrorism, what particular topics do you think are in real need of greater research going forward?

**Prof. Dawson:** This is another tough question because there are so many possibilities. I must be cautious about commenting on NRMs since I have not been actively engaged with the research for more than a decade. Curiously, however, I recently published an invited handbook chapter on "Insights from the Study of New Religious Movements into the Process of Radicalization" in Joel Busher, Leena Malkki, and Sarah Marsden, eds., *The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation and Countering Radicalisation* (2023). Given the space limitations I concentrated on insights from the study of religious conversions—a literature heavily influenced by studies of NRMs—and was surprised to find that while there had been some advances— empirically and theoretically—the basic issues were much the same as when I published on the topic several times years ago. This leads me to suspect that in both cases, the study of NRMs and religious terrorism, the most urgent need, and one we can ill afford to keep postponing, is to secure more primary data (as indicated above). We need more case studies based on qualitative research, or even better ethnographic research. We need to hear the voices of those engaging in these activities in greater breadth, detail, and sincerity. Without more of that data, and in comparable form (so with some degree of standardization), much that we discern and say will remain too speculative.  Despite decades of research, for example, on NRMs and terrorists, we still lack sufficiently detailed insight into the processes of "involvement." I have long planned, but yet to undertake, a reframing of this issue in terms of the existing research literature on how people get involved in host of other social activities, and as theorized in the small but impressive set of studies on the "generic social process" of involvement.

Similarly, and complementarily, it is obvious that experimental social psychology has much to offer in understanding this process (as many studies document in various different and rather piecemeal ways), yet we lack the data drawn from actual participants in these phenomena to test the actual relevance of these more general social psychological theories and findings (e.g., the work done on uncertainty and extremism, on personal and group identity fusion, on identity challenges and the quest for significance, on group think and other aspects of small group dynamics). Regarding my own more immediate concerns, to cite another good example, it has long been noted that the single strongest, and most common, indicator of radicalization for the young men and women who become jihadists in Western society is a surge of religiosity. Even those discounting the importance of religious motivations acknowledge this—though they choose to explain away its significance as a post hoc rationalization for engaging in violence. Yet I cannot think of single study that seeks to focus on what this entails—to ask current and former extremists about their actual experiences and thoughts during this surge. We simply rely on the reports of others, from friends, family members, associates, and officials, about changes in the behaviour of these people, and these reports are usually quite superficial. We don't really know what is going on at this time—and their interpretation of their situation.

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**Prof. Dawson, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!**
**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,**
**Dr. Ethan Doyle White (http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/)**

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movements and resulted in publications like *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Since the 2010s his research has focused increasingly on radicalisation and Salafi jihadism, with Dawson co-editing the volumes, *Religious Radicalization and Securitization in Canada and Beyond* (University of Toronto Press, 2014), and *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2020).

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**WRSP Interviewer:**
**Dr Ethan Doyle White**