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**The Devil Made Them Do It:
Desecration & Demonization & the 9/11 Attacks**

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Synopsis

Introduction. We were interested what impact the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center had on people's spirituality. Prior research shows that traumatic events violate people's basic psychological assumptions about the world (e.g., world is a good or safe place) and influence their psychological adjustment. However, traumatic events like 9/11 are also likely to violate people's spiritual assumptions about the world. In turn, people may seek out spiritual ways to make sense of traumatic events and also look for spiritually-based causes of the attacks. Such spiritually-based beliefs are likely to be linked to broader psychological, spiritual and interpersonal functioning. In this study, we looked at two new ways in which people might interpret the 9/11 attacks in spiritual terms. We used two different samples. In November & December of 2001, we surveyed 259 college students from a mid-sized state university in the midwest (i.e., Bowling Green State University). In April & May of 2002, we surveyed 57 college students from a small, private university in New York City founded by Jesuits (i.e., Fordham University).

Desecration. First, we examined the extent to which people viewed the terrorist attacks as a violation of something they held sacred, or as a desecration. Desecration reflects one type of spiritual meaning that could be given to the terrorists' actions. Based on prior research developed within S.P.i.R.i.T., the Spirituality and Psychology Research Team at Bowling Green State University, we asked people 14 questions about whether they viewed the 9/11 attacks as a desecration. This means they viewed the attacks as having violated or desecrated an aspect of their life that they viewed sacred or connected to God. The two samples reported similar levels of low to moderate rates of desecration (for OH sample: \underline{M} = 30.0, \underline{SD} = 11.0 OH; for NY sample: \underline{M} = 28.1, \underline{SD} = 9.7 NY). The four most commonly endorsed items were: "This event was an immoral act against something I value" (83% OH, 70% NY); "This event was a sinful act involving something meaningful in my life" (55% OH, 32% NY); "This event was both an offense against me & against God" (57% OH, 49% NY); "Something sacred that came from God was dishonored" (34% OH, 30% NY).

Demonization. The second thing we looked at was how people explained the cause of the attacks from a spiritual point of view. Specifically, we focused on whether people demonized the terrorists, or believed that the devil inspired their actions. Specifically, we asked people eight questions about whether the terrorists had intentionally done the devil's work or if the devil had manipulated the terrorists. Both groups reported levels of moderate to high levels of demonization (for OH sample: \underline{M} = 38.0, \underline{SD} = 15.6; for NY sample: \underline{M} = 33.6, \underline{SD} = 15.6). The four most commonly endorsed items were: "The devil is at work in these people's actions" (64% OH, 49% NY); "These people are confusing God's work with the devil's work" (60% OH, 56% NY); "These people are on the devil's side" (55%, OH; 42%, NY); "The devil is using these people for his purposes." (52% OH; 35% NY).

Results. As indicated in Table 1, people from both samples who reported higher levels of desecration in connection with the attacks also reported higher levels of post-traumatic symptoms and depression following the attacks. However, they also reported higher levels of personal psychological and spiritual growth. This means that people were more likely to take stock of their lives, revise their priorities, form deeper connection to others, and grow spiritually. In addition, greater desecration was related to greater "extremist reactions" toward terrorists as well as more support for the US government's decisions about how to handle the attacks. We also found that greater desecration correlated with greater willingness to engage in a higher level of

solidarity with the US as evidenced by specific behaviors (e.g., display flag, defend US when hearing criticism, donating blood, money or volunteer time).

For demonization, a clear and robust finding was that the more people demonized the terrorists, the more likely they were to endorse extremist reactions against the terrorists. Such severe actions would include statements like "no punishment is too extreme for these people," "these people should be tracked down and assassinated" and "these people should suffer for all of eternity." Thus, the more that people demonized the terrorists, the more extreme measures of revenge and retaliation they supported. In addition, greater demonization was related to greater post-traumatic distress symptoms and illness as well as greater spiritual and psychological growth for one or both samples. People who believed they saw the power of the devil operating in life vividly were more likely to take stock of their lives and rethink their values.

Independence of desecration & demonization. The two different types of religious processes related to the attacks, namely desecration and demonization, were not correlated at all. This means that for some people greater desecration can occur without greater demonization. Alternatively, for others, greater demonization can occur without greater desecration. For others, the two things happen together. Thus, these two religious processes are distinct from each other, and each one contributes separately to psychological, spiritual, and interpersonal adjustment.

Information on general religiousness of sample. 71% of the BGSU sample and 48% of the NY sample believed in the devil. These rates were similar or lower than national rates; namely 65% of people in the general population believe in the devil, according to a national survey conducted in 1988-91. Likewise, the majority of participants in both the BGSU and NY samples described themselves as "moderately" or "very religious," and as "moderately" to "very spiritual." These self-descriptions are very similar to what is reported in the general US population.

Conclusions

Proximal "take-home" messages. Desecration and demonization are two distinct types of negative spiritual interpretations that people may ascribe to traumatic events. These beliefs reflect the "dark side" of the spiritual interpretations of events. Believing that 9/11 was a spiritual violation or that the terrorists were operating under the devil's influence relates to greater anxiety, personal growth, desire for revenge, and national solidarity. The more people make either appraisal, the more likely they are to experience a sense of threat, revise their priorities, develop deeper spiritual roots, reach out to others, defend the government and endorse extreme retaliation against perpetrators.

Broader "take-home" messages. Religious or political leaders who implicitly or explicitly encourage desecration and demonization are tapping into a rich source of human motivation. Assuming desecration and demonization reflect cognitive processes active across the globe, can any of us disregard these beliefs and their power? No. These kinds of spiritual interpretations of acts of violence need to be recognized as serious psychological realities that can trigger fear, mobilize people to change, invoke high levels of defensiveness, and solidify people's determination to retaliate against the aggressors. Ignoring the spiritual meaning that people attach to acts of violence risks overlooking critical points of individual and worldwide healing and transformation.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations of desecration, demonization with psychological, spiritual, and interpersonal adjustment.

	Desecration		Demonization	
	BG	NY	BG	NY
Psychological. Distress				
Post-traumatic rxns	.23***	.41***	.12*	.24*
Depression	.22***	.36***	.09	.07
Psychosomatic rxns				
Physical sym.	.17***	.00	.04	.20
Visits to MD	-.03	-.13	.12*	.02
Miss work/school	.28***	.09	.15**	.04
Personal Growth				
Psychological growth	.32***	.47***	.17**	.18
Spiritual growth	.26***	.30**	.20***	.14
Interpersonal Rxns				
Extreme Retaliation	.22***	.26*	.23***	.52***
Support US gov'n.	.29***	.34**	.02	.38**
US Solidarity	.18***	.21	.01	.12

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Note. Criterion measures consisted of Post-traumatic rxns = Impact of Event Scale - 15 items (Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979); Depressive = CES Depression Scale - 20 items (Orme, Reis, & Herz, 1986); Psychosomatic Reactions = Physical Health Questionnaire - 17 items (McIntosh, Keywell, Reifman, & Ellsworth, 1994), one item: "Number of MD visits in past mo." and one item: "Number of days missed work or school in past mo."; Psychological Growth = Post-traumatic Growth Inventory - 19 items (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996); Spiritual Growth = Short Spiritual Growth Scale - 3 items (Pargament, 1990); Extreme Retaliation Scale = a new scale (e.g., sample item include "No punishment is too extreme for these people"; "These people should suffer for all eternity"); support for US Government about 9/11 Scale = new scale (e.g., sample items include "willingness to temporarily put aside some of political views to support the US government"); US Solidarity Scale = new scale (sample items include -"I have displayed the American flag, or worn red, white and blue." Contact author for copies of new scales.

Also contact author for copies of desecration and demonization scales.