Religion and Terrorism: Introduction to
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One regularly hears the expression “religious terrorism,” voiced as if hearers should immediately have a clear understanding of its intended referent and could point to “religious terrorism” as if it were a solid object, as hard and clearly formed as a pebble on the beach. However, in the reflexive intellectual atmosphere that emerged in the aftermath of post-modernism, both “religion” and “terrorism” have become contested terms. Shake vigorously with a little critical reflection and a veritable erector set of covert assumptions and full-blown ideologies spill out onto the discursive landscape. Though consisting of only three articles, the present special issue brings together a broad range of different approaches to the elusive animal, “religious terrorism,” from concrete counter-terrorism strategies to an analysis of discourse about the public face of Muslim women.

The people who lead counter-programs directed against the violent non-state actors we refer to as “terrorists” tend to be either members of the military or individuals who think in terms of military solutions. It is not difficult to perceive the strategy at work here. In addition to the tit-for-tat logic of responding to violence with violence, the appeals of a military response are that it is quick, simple (no complex socio-cultural variables to take into account), and strategists can sometimes experience a sense of “righteous vengeance,” such as one feels in the concluding events of many Hollywood action films. However, as Heather S. Gregg argues in “Understanding the ‘Trinamic’: A Net Assessment of ISIS,” any purely enemy-centric approach to “terrorists”—especially those who represent themselves as motivated by religion—is likely to alienate the population whose support is necessary for countering violent non-state actors. For “terrorists” as well as governments the focus should be on addressing the supporting populations, as opposed to
“defeating” the adversary. Authorities need to win critical populations away from non-state actors who require their support to survive.

Certain “terrorist-related” tropes, narrative structures and judgement calls have become so deeply embedded in our discourse that they are routinely summoned forth and come to dominate events that are only tangentially related to empirical realities. Such was the case with a situation in Gothenburg, Sweden, which began as a relatively minor event and quickly expanded into a national mediatized political affair. In Per-Erik Nilsson’s “Burka Songs 2.0: The Discourse on Islamic Terrorism and the Politics of Extremization in Sweden,” he demonstrates how discourse on terrorism comes to regulate access to the public sphere by what Nilsson refers to as the politics of “extremization”—by which he means “the performative identification of certain Muslim subjects as threats to the established order by their very presence in the public sphere.” Nilsson also points out that the mediatization of politics in combination with the polarized discourse on Islamic terrorism challenges sound, deliberate political debate.

The poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995 by the Japanese religious group AUM Shinrikyo has been studied extensively, and is well known among religion and terrorism researchers. On the one hand it became a primary example of the so-called “new” terrorism which, among other characteristics, was said to be religiously-inspired (vs. the “old” terrorism, which was politically motivated). On the other hand, writers on contemporary terrorism liked it because it gave them a non-Islamic example to discuss. Although much has been written, in “Monolithic Inferences: Misinterpreting AUM Shinrikyo,” James R. Lewis argues that there are still lessons to be learned from this event, and discusses certain errors arising from extrapolating understandings derived from the study of one level of an organization to the entire organization—what Lewis describes as monolithic inferences. He also describes the complexity of the epistemic situation into which he was thrust when he visited Japan in the spring of 1995. Additionally, he points out that one can often come across anomalous items of interesting information which are pushed aside as a generally-accepted narrative settles into place.

As a career academician, I have been around long enough to watch new topics emerge to become full-blown fields of specialization or sub-specialties. I was, for instance, involved in the early days when the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs) was establishing itself as a legitimate field of study, at a time when the religious studies establishment regarded NRM studies as a quaint distraction from research on, and analysis of, the “really important” traditions of Christianity, Buddhism and the like.
The establishment of religion and violence as a field of study followed a rather different process, emerging in a comparatively short time following the 9/11 attacks. Though the sub-topic of religion and terrorism has been an integral part of religion and violence since this beginning, the subject has suffered from analyses that, on the one hand, downplayed or even dismissed the role of religion, or, on the other, sought to pin the blame for terrorism on religious “fanaticism” or on religion as some kind of vague, trans-historical force. In more recent years, I have witnessed the emergence of more sophisticated approaches, approaches that appear to foreshadow the emergence of religion and terrorism studies as a legitimate sub-specialty. Thus, while the articles in this special issue represent divergent perspectives, all offer nuanced analyses that together reflect the new maturity in this area of scholarship.