

The Fusing of Race and Religion in the Christchurch Terrorist Attacks

Description

When conducting a post-mortem examination of a significant white supremacist terrorist movement or incident, motivation is often at the forefront of the minds of scholars, analysts, and those directly impacted by the events. On the one hand, in some attacks, such as the mass shootings at an El Paso, Texas, [Walmart](#) in August 2019 and a [Tops Supermarket](#) in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022, it is reasonable to assume that the perpetrators' racial hatred for their victims was the sole driver for carrying out horrific acts of indiscriminate violence, as the selected targets were predominantly Latino and African American, respectively. On the other hand, attacks such as those on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, five years ago this month, can raise more questions than answers. When taken as separate and distinct sociological concepts, neither his victims' race nor religion sufficiently explains Brenton Tarrant's thirst for mass murder or the reason for his actions as a whole.

Tarrant's hatred of Islam and Muslims is blatant, but after a rigorous examination of the evidence, a more appropriate explanation for the attack seems apparent, namely that Tarrant's racialization of an entire religion—Islam—crosses the traditional boundaries separating race and religion from one another as mutually exclusive characteristics. Instead, Tarrant's fears surrounding the conspiracy theory known as *The Great Replacement* and his perception of Islam as an intersectional racial and religious identity contrasted with that of his own broader, self-proclaimed European (i.e., white and Christian) identity provides a more thorough explanation for his motivation and may facilitate further discourse on similar cases.

The Great Replacement — Theory

At the crux of Tarrant's ideological underpinnings lies his belief in the [Great Replacement Theory](#), which—as the title of his manifesto—can trace its roots to 20th-century French nationalism. *Le grand remplacement* first came into the public discourse through the novels of [Maurice Barrès](#), an ardent French nationalist and believer in race science. Consisting of two primary components, the theory posits: 1) that Western identity is under attack by an invasion of non-European (i.e., non-white) immigrants with higher birth rates that will eventually replace European peoples, and 2) the replacement is a —wicked plot orchestrated by the same hidden hand behind all malign events through world history: the Jews.— The Great Replacement is part of the more extensive—and

explicitly antisemiticâ??•[white genocide](#)â?? conspiracy theory fashionable in American far-right ideological discourse. While encapsulating several fundamental characteristics of the white genocide theory, the Great Replacementâ??s prominence among its European adherents and its focus on the erasure of European culture through the â??[Islamization](#)â?? of Western society provides the most relevant context through which one can presuppose Tarrantâ??s motivations.

Following heightened Muslim immigration from the former French colonies in North Africa and Turkey, the emergence of the *nouvelle droite*, or New Right, further popularized the theory through the founding of the [Research and Study Group for European Civilization](#) (*GRECE* in French) in 1968 by a group of several dozen far-right activists. The most notable figure birthed from GRECEâ??s strain of populist ultranationalism was [Alain de Benoist](#). Benoist railed against the multiculturalist â??idea of the American â??melting potâ?? forced on European cultureâ??• through â??McDonaldismâ??• and Western-style capitalism, and considered â??the gradual homogenization of the world, advocated by the two-thousand-year-old discourse of egalitarian ideology, to be an evil.â??• According to historian [Walter Laqueur](#), Benoistâ??s rationale is congruent with the neo-fascist thinking of the time, which drew upon Italian philosopher [Julius Evola](#)â??s disdain for the liberalized modernity often associated with the decline of the West, which he saw as corrupt and irredeemable. Evola campaigned for a new aristocracy, a negation of the ideals of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, and a pledge to save Europe from foreign invasion.

In keeping with the xenophobic and nativist genealogy derivative of mid-twentieth-century French nationalism, [Jean Raspail](#)â??s dystopian 1973 treatise, *Le Camp des Saints*, depicts the fall of Europe and the complete collapse of Western society at the hands of mass immigration by â??dark-skinned refugeesâ??• from afield. Raspail would go on to influence the most visible of the theoryâ??s current progenitors, French author [Renaud Camus](#), whose work as a travel essayist in the mid-1990s first inspired his desire to translate his demographic concerns into a more contemporary literary work that built upon the foundation previously laid by Benoist and Raspail.

Camusâ?? cornerstone 2011 essay, *Le Grand Remplacement*, and subsequent works consistently reference his concern over the erasure of French culture by Muslim immigration from the Middle East and North Africa. According to [Roger Bromley](#),

the dispossessed majority in Europe faces the possibility of extinction â??! and will be substituted by immigrant hordes: â??global substitutionismâ?? (remplacisme global) is the phrase used by Renaud Camus. This paranoid narrative, the idea of the sacred nation, brings to mind the mystical and mythical â??blood and soilâ??, at the root of much white nationalist ideology.

This process of “genocide by replacement,” entailing higher birth rates by non-whites (“colonization-by-belly”) and the subsequent demographic crisis caused by mass immigration and sub-replacement fertility, is, according to Tarrant, “an assault on the European people that, if not combated, will ultimately result in the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people.” As a believer in such conspiracies, Tarrant projected his racial anxiety onto the immigrant communities of Australia and New Zealand, ultimately casting them as foreign invaders.

Brenton Tarrant and His Manifesto

In his 87-page manifesto titled *The Great Replacement*, Tarrant describes himself as “just a regular White man, from a regular family. Who decided to take a stand to ensure a future for my people.” By Tarrant’s admission and from those who knew him, his life was extraordinarily mundane but “marked by a number of stressors,” according to [New Zealand’s Royal Commission of Inquiry into the attack](#). Between the ages of 12 and 15, Tarrant became overweight, which led to bullying at school and social isolation. As Tarrant reached high school, his father’s health deteriorated significantly as a result of cancer, ultimately leading to his suicide in April 2010. After his father’s death, the then-20-year-old Tarrant further secluded himself, spending more time on Facebook and other infamous online breeding grounds for white supremacists and mass shooters, such as 4chan and 8chan. Even after receiving more than AU\$450,000 from his father’s estate, Tarrant continued his online habits, where he “would openly express racist and far-right views” with his friends during gaming sessions.

According to the “Q & A” section of his manifesto, beginning in 2017, three events, in particular, ultimately drove Tarrant to take up arms unilaterally in what he saw as an existential conflict. First was the April 2017 murder of Ebba Åkerlund and four others in Stockholm, Sweden, at the hands of [Rakhmat Akilov](#), a 39-year-old Uzbek asylum seeker sympathizing with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In contrast with previous terrorist attacks in Europe, Tarrant viewed this incident as the catalyst for a clash of civilizations between Islam and Europe. Second was the victory of Emmanuel Macron over far-right and anti-immigration candidate Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French presidential election. Though a staunch critic of the “globalist, capitalist, egalitarian, ex-investment banker” Macron, Tarrant was not a strong supporter of Le Pen. Tarrant thought “the possibility of a victory by the quasi-nationalist was at least a sign that maybe a political solution was still possible.”

Third, the apogee in Tarrant’s arc of radicalization and ultimate motivation for mass violence was his travels to multiple European countries, funded by the payout from his late father’s life insurance policy. Reminiscent of Camus’ disdain for seeing veiled women during his time in Hôpital, Tarrant’s visit to France convinced him “the stories to not only be true, but profoundly understated. In every French city, in every French town the invaders were there. No matter where I

travelled, no matter how small or rural the community I visited, the invaders were there.â• The sight of increasing numbers of veiled womenâ•both in Europe and at home in Australiaâ•reinforced his belief in white Europeansâ• falling birthrates compared to that of Muslims. Tarrant makes no effort to hide this concern, even beginning his manifesto with, â•Itâ•s the birthrates. Itâ•s the birthrates. Itâ•s the birthrates.â• Together, these experiences facilitated Tarrantâ•s decision to move to New Zealandâ•a country he described as a â•target-rich environmentâ•and plan an attack on the Muslim â•invaders.â•

The Christchurch Legacy

Five years removed from the attacks, the carnage of Christchurch is not unique, nor is it confined to geographic borders. Tarrant drew direct inspiration from Norwegian terrorist [Anders Breivik](#), who, in July 2011, massacred 77 as an act of defiance against a government he perceived as complicit in the â•Great Replacement.â• Tarrantâ•s actions then further influenced the evolution of so-called [saints culture](#), whereby far-right terrorists such as Breivik, Tarrant, and others who commit similar acts of violence are deified by an online ecosystem of accelerationist white supremacist extremists.

Through juxtaposing his attachment to the concept of being European (i.e., white) with that of the non-European Muslim â•occupiers,â• Tarrant subsequently created an â•other.â• Despite being greeted at the door to the Al Noor Mosque with â•Hello, brotherâ• by a prayer service attendee, Tarrant was incapable of perceiving the humanity in his victims. In his mind, Tarrantâ•s personal experiences and warped worldview, congruent with the Great Replacement, provided the basis for racializing his victims and ultimately justifying his actions against the perceived enemies of Europe and the white race.

On the surface, the March 2019 Christchurch attacks, which claimed the lives of 51, present themselves as a manifestation of the paranoia endemic to adherents of Renaud Camusâ• and other far-right thinkersâ• theory of *le grand remplacement*; it characterizes increased Muslim immigration to the West as a nefarious plot by those who control the levers of world power. However, in the minds of the true believers, this planned Huntingtonian â•clash of civilizationsâ• attacks an identity beyond solely that of race or religionâ•it encapsulates the notion of white supremacy tied to association with European culture, blood, and soil. Moreover, the association of Muslims with â•traditionally Islamicâ• lands outside of â•traditionally whiteâ• Europe and the West continues to serve as a mechanism by which Muslims are placed into a separate racialized category of people and inspires racially- and religiously-motivated terrorismâ•often with devastating consequences.

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Main Image: The Masjid Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, after the terror attacks in March 2019. (Photo by James Dann, March 17, 2019, [Wikimedia Commons](#))

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