

Filip Novaković*

Review Paper
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RELIGIOUS KILLING: A REVIEW OF THE MURDERS OF TYLEE RYAN AND J. J. VALLOW

The case of taking the lives of Tyla Ryan and J. J. Vallow is a complex illustration of criminal behavior motivated by religious beliefs. This paper delves into the intricacies of the case, examining the background, circumstances and legal implications surrounding the tragic deaths of two children, focusing on the perpetrators' alleged religious justifications for their actions and the court proceedings that followed. Through a comprehensive analysis of the relevant legal frameworks, including the doctrines of mens rea, religious freedom and insanity, this review clarifies the challenges and dilemmas faced by the criminal justice system in adjudicating cases involving (aggravated) religious murder. In addition, this paper highlights the wider social implications of such crimes, emphasizing the imperative of legal and social mechanisms to address religious extremism and protect the basic rights and safety of individuals, especially vulnerable children. The phenomenon of murder motivated by religious beliefs represents a disturbing intersection of religion, ideology and criminal behavior. The case of the murders of Tyler Ryan and J. J. Vallow attracted widespread public attention for the gruesome display of religious fanaticism that culminated in the tragic loss of life. Against the backdrop of an ardent religious movement, the victims, aged 17 and 7 respectively, fell victim to the heinous acts of individuals who allegedly acted in accordance with their religious beliefs. This paper tries to break down the multiple layers of the case, revealing the legal, psychological and social dimensions underlying the killings for religious reasons.

Keywords: murder, religious extremism, legal implications, child victims, mens rea.

* Corresponding Member of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian-American Academy of Arts and Sciences, e-mail: filipnovakovic.iur@gmail.com, [ORCID 0000-0001-9979-5824](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-5824)

Introduction

The intersection of religious belief and criminal behavior presents a complex and often troubling dimension of legal and criminological study. Religious convictions, while typically associated with moral guidance and community cohesion, can sometimes devolve into a rationale for extreme and violent actions. This paradox is starkly illustrated in the case of Lori Vallow Daybell and Chad Daybell, whose involvement in what has been widely termed the “Vallow-Daybell Domsday Murders” raises significant questions about the role of religious ideology in motivating criminal acts. The murders of Tylee Ryan and J. J. Vallow, both of whom were Lori Vallow Daybell’s children, have garnered widespread media attention and legal scrutiny, not only due to the tragic loss of life but also because of the deeply disturbing beliefs that appear to have underpinned these acts.

This article examines the phenomenon of religiously motivated killings through the lens of the Vallow-Daybell case, exploring how religious conviction can be weaponized as a justification for murder. Drawing on criminological theories and legal precedents, this review seeks to understand the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to such extreme outcomes. It also considers the broader implications for law enforcement and legal systems when confronted with crimes that are intricately linked to religious ideology. By delving into the specifics of the Vallow-Daybell case, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of religion and criminality, offering insights into how legal frameworks might better address and mitigate the risks posed by radicalized religious beliefs.

People kill for religious reasons due to a complex interplay of psychological, sociocultural, and ideological factors.¹ While religion typically promotes

¹ Life is regarded as a fundamental social and legal value, serving as the cornerstone upon which many legal systems and human rights frameworks are built. This principle is enshrined in international human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which assert the inherent right to life as a universal and inalienable right. The protection of life is not only a legal obligation but also a moral imperative that reflects the intrinsic worth of each individual and the need for society to safeguard human existence. From a social perspective, the sanctity of life underpins ethical norms and societal values. It dictates that every individual, irrespective of age, race, gender, or social status, possesses an inherent dignity that must be respected and protected. The recognition of life as a core value

moral behavior, it can also be interpreted or manipulated in ways that justify violence. Firstly, some individuals or groups adopt extreme interpretations of religious teachings, believing they are fulfilling a divine mandate. This can lead to the belief that violent acts are justified or even required to defend or spread their faith. Religious texts or doctrines may be selectively interpreted to support these views, often in ways that deviate from mainstream religious teachings. Secondly, religion often provides a strong sense of identity and community. In some cases, individuals may feel compelled to commit violence to protect their religious group from perceived threats or to assert the superiority of their beliefs. This is particularly prevalent in contexts where religious groups are in conflict with one another. Thirdly, some individuals may believe they have received a direct message from a deity, commanding them to commit violent acts. This can occur in contexts where mental illness intersects with religious belief, leading to delusional thinking that rationalizes murder as a divine command. Fourthly, certain religious sects or movements hold apocalyptic or messianic beliefs, where adherents believe the end of the world is imminent. In these contexts, violence may be seen as a necessary step to bring about or prevent a prophesied event, or to fulfill a religious mission believed to be of cosmic significance.

Furthermore, charismatic religious leaders can exert significant influence over their followers, sometimes convincing them that violent acts are necessary to fulfill a religious purpose. This is particularly dangerous in closed, insular communities where questioning authority is discouraged. And last but not least, in some cases, religiously motivated violence is intertwined with social, political, or economic grievances. Religion can be used as a rallying cry or justification for

reinforces the idea that society has a duty to create conditions conducive to the flourishing of its members, ensuring their physical safety and well-being. This respect for life fosters a sense of security, stability, and mutual respect within communities, which is essential for social harmony and cohesion. Legally, the protection of life is paramount, guiding the formulation of laws and policies designed to prevent arbitrary deprivation of life. Criminal laws across jurisdictions are structured to deter and punish acts that threaten life, such as murder, manslaughter, and serious bodily harm. Additionally, life is a key consideration in the development of public policies related to healthcare, safety regulations, and environmental protection, all of which aim to preserve and enhance human life (Stevanović & Grozdić, 2021). In essence, life as a social and legal value underscores the recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. This fundamental principle shapes the moral and legal obligations of society, requiring both the protection of life and the promotion of conditions that allow individuals to live with dignity and security.

violence in situations where groups feel oppressed or marginalized. The religious aspect provides a powerful moral justification for actions that might otherwise be seen as criminal. Draw to a close, people may kill for religious reasons when religious beliefs are radicalized, manipulated, or otherwise interpreted in ways that legitimize violence. These acts are often driven by a combination of personal conviction, group identity, and the influence of leaders, and they are sometimes exacerbated by social and political conditions. Understanding these motivations is crucial for addressing and preventing religiously motivated violence.

1. Vallow-Daybell Case Background

Chad Daybell and Lori Vallow are central figures in a case that has drawn national and international attention due to the tragic and bizarre nature of the events surrounding them. Both individuals had backgrounds deeply intertwined with religious beliefs, which played a crucial role in the crimes they (allegedly) committed.

Chad Daybell was born on August 11, 1968, in Provo, Utah (USA), and was raised in a devoutly religious environment as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). He graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in Journalism, and initially pursued a career as a writer and publisher (Melendez, 2024; Sottile, 2022). Daybell authored and self-published numerous books, primarily focusing on themes of near-death experiences, the afterlife, and apocalyptic scenarios. His writings, while initially resonating with certain segments of the LDS community, gradually evolved into more extreme interpretations of religious prophecy and end-times theology. Over time, Daybell's views became increasingly radical (McBride, 2020). He began to present himself as a prophet with unique insights into the future, including the imminent end of the world. His beliefs diverged significantly from mainstream LDS doctrine, particularly in his assertions about the impending apocalypse and the need for spiritual preparation for the end times. These views found a receptive audience among certain individuals, including Lori Vallow, whom he met in 2018.

Lori Vallow was born on June 26, 1973, in San Bernardino, California (USA). Like Daybell, she was raised in a religious household as a member of the

LDS Church. Throughout her life, Vallow was known for her deep and fervent religious beliefs, which became increasingly unorthodox over time (Miller, 2020). Before her marriage to Chad Daybell, Vallow had been married multiple times and had several children, including Tylee Ryan and Joshua “J. J.” Vallow (Sharp, 2023). Vallow’s religious convictions intensified after she encountered Daybell’s teachings. She became deeply engrossed in his apocalyptic prophecies and his claims of possessing special spiritual powers (Krutzig, 2020). Vallow reportedly began to believe that she had a divine mission and that certain people in her life, including her own children, were “zombies” or possessed by dark spirits. This delusional belief system, heavily influenced by Daybell, contributed to the tragic events that unfolded.

Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell met in 2018 through a mutual interest in preparing for the apocalypse. Their relationship quickly became romantic, and they married in November 2019, shortly after the suspicious deaths of both of their previous spouses (Seariac, 2023; Mark, 2021; Eaton, 2020a). Their marriage marked the culmination of a series of events that led to the disappearance and subsequent deaths of Vallow’s children, Tylee and J. J., in 2019.

Together, Vallow and Daybell shared and reinforced each other’s extreme beliefs, forming a partnership that would ultimately lead to a series of heinous crimes. Their case highlights the dangers of religious extremism and the way in which shared delusional beliefs can escalate into criminal behavior, with devastating consequences for those involved. The deaths of Tylee and J. J., as well as the deaths of other individuals connected to the couple, shocked the public in the United States and prompted widespread media coverage and legal proceedings.² The case today serves as a chilling example of how deeply held religious

² The act of taking a child’s life, particularly for low motives, constitutes a grave violation of human dignity, infringing upon the child’s inherent right to dignity. Human dignity, as recognized in international human rights law, forms the foundation of all rights and freedoms. It embodies the intrinsic worth of each individual, regardless of age, and mandates respect and protection from inhumane and degrading treatment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underscores the child’s right to life, survival, and development, reflecting a recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, including children. The deliberate taking of a child’s life, especially driven by low motives - such as personal gain, revenge, or prejudice - strips away the child’s inherent worth and value as a human being. Such acts degrade the child’s personhood, treating them not as a bearer of rights and dignity but as an object to be discarded. This dehumanization is fundamentally at odds with the principles enshrined in the Con-

convictions, when taken to an extreme and manipulated by charismatic figures, can result in unimaginable tragedy.

2. Vallow-Daybell Criminal Charges and Trials

On February 20, 2020, Lori was apprehended in Hawaii by the Kauai Police Department, subsequently being extradited back to Idaho on March 5, 2020 (Burke & Paredes, 2020). In Madison County, Idaho, she faced charges including two felony counts of desertion and nonsupport of dependent children, along with three misdemeanor charges (Miller & Culver, 2020). Following Lori's arrest, Chad returned to Idaho and attempted to persuade the Gilberts to use their

vention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments that seek to protect the sanctity of life and dignity. Furthermore, the heinous nature of low-motive killings magnifies the offense against human dignity. These acts are not merely a violation of the right to life but are also an affront to the very concept of human decency, signaling a profound disregard for the moral and ethical values that bind human society. The recognition of a child's right to dignity is essential to safeguarding their well-being and ensuring their development as autonomous individuals. The unlawful taking of a child's life for trivial or ignoble reasons thus stands as a repudiation of these fundamental values, underscoring the critical need for robust legal and social mechanisms to protect children's rights and uphold their inherent dignity (Velasco Guerrero, 2022). Children, whether as perpetrators or victims of crimes, occupy a distinct and protected status within the criminal justice system, a status grounded in the recognition of their developmental vulnerabilities and their potential for rehabilitation. This special status acknowledges that children, due to their physical, psychological, and emotional immaturity, require a legal system that is sensitive to their needs and capable of providing appropriate care and protection. As perpetrators, children are often viewed through the lens of rehabilitation rather than punishment. Juvenile justice systems, established in many jurisdictions, focus on diversion, education, and rehabilitation, aiming to reintegrate the child into society as a responsible individual. This approach is informed by the understanding that children's behavior is more malleable than that of adults and that punitive measures may hinder rather than help their development. Legal provisions often include alternatives to detention, such as counseling, community service, and educational programs, ensuring that the response to juvenile delinquency is proportionate, constructive, and conducive to personal growth. As victims, children require tailored protective measures due to their heightened vulnerability to harm and their dependency on adults. Criminal justice systems must ensure that children are treated with care, respect, and sensitivity throughout legal processes. Special procedures, such as child-friendly interviewing techniques and the use of trained professionals, are designed to minimize trauma and prevent re-victimization. Legal frameworks also prioritize the confidentiality and protection of child victims, emphasizing their right to be heard and to have their best interests considered in all proceedings. Thus, the distinct status of children as both perpetrators and victims within the criminal justice system reflects a broader commitment to upholding their rights, dignity, and future well-being, recognizing the unique challenges they face and the importance of fostering their development as integral members of society (Bacićani & Hubić Burković, 2022).

home as collateral for Lori's bail, claiming that this idea was divinely inspired. When confronted by Alice Gilbert about the children, Chad deflected by suggesting it was a custody issue and used past tense when referring to Lori's daughter, Tylee, indicating that she "didn't like people" and did not like him. On June 9, law enforcement discovered human remains buried in unmarked graves in the backyard of Chad's residence. These remains were found in an area the Daybell family referred to as the "pet cemetery", where they had previously buried cats and dogs (Boone, 2020). During the search of his property, Chad called Lori in jail to warn her, and upon realizing that the police were uncovering the bodies, he attempted to flee the scene but was apprehended and charged with obstruction or concealment of evidence (Gearty, 2020).

The decision to search Daybell's property was influenced by tracking data from Alex Cox's cell phone. On September 9, 2019, the day after Tylee's last confirmed sighting, Cox's phone records placed him at Lori's residence during the night and at Chad's home in the morning. Similarly, on September 23, the day following J. J.'s last confirmed sighting, Cox's phone again pinged at Chad's property (Eaton, 2020b). Further suspicion was raised when the FBI intercepted a text message from Chad to his then-wife Tammy on September 9, wherein Chad claimed to have shot a large raccoon in their backyard and buried it in the "pet cemetery", despite raccoons being typically nocturnal animals (Truesdell, 2020).

On June 10, the families of the victims, the Woodcocks and Ryans, confirmed that the human remains discovered on Chad's property were those of Tylee and J. J., a finding that was officially verified by Rexburg police on June 13 (Burke, 2020). Tylee's remains showed signs of burning, with her hands severed, while J. J.'s body was found wrapped in plastic (Conclin, 2023). J. J. had been buried with significant care, surrounded by rocks and wooden planks, contrasting with the treatment of Tylee's remains (Cesaric, 2023). It was determined that J. J. died from asphyxiation with a plastic bag and duct tape covering his mouth. However, due to the condition of Tylee's remains, her cause of death was listed as "homicide by unspecified means", with fractures in her bones suggesting an attempt to dismember her body. Tylee's DNA was later discovered on a pickaxe and shovel found at Daybell's residence (Conclin, 2023). Additionally, Alex Cox's fingerprints and Lori's hair were identified on the plastic and duct tape used on J. J.'s body. In August 2020, Chad Daybell was excommunicated from

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints due to his religious teachings, which were later characterized by media as aligning with a “doomsday cult” (CBS News, 2024).

On July 2, 2020, prosecutors dismissed two of Lori’s felony charges related to the desertion and nonsupport of her dependent children, instead charging her with obstruction or concealment of evidence pertaining to the remains of her children (Eaton, 2020b). On May 25, 2021, both Chad and Lori were indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit first-degree murder for the deaths of Tylee, J. J., and Tammy, as well as on charges of grand theft by deception related to the children. Lori was also charged with grand theft for illegally accessing her children’s Social Security Survivor benefits. Chad faced an additional charge of insurance fraud related to Tammy’s life insurance policy (Eaton, 2020c). In June 2021, Lori was indicted by a Maricopa County grand jury in Arizona for conspiracy to commit first-degree murder in the death of her former husband, Charles Vallow (Vera, Alsup & Razek, 2021). According to police reports, Charles’ murder was a premeditated act intended to prevent him and others from challenging Lori’s extreme religious beliefs, thus facilitating Lori and Chad’s marriage and the fulfillment of their religious prophecy (Grossarth, 2021). However, in July 2021, Maricopa County prosecutors declined to bring charges against Chad regarding Charles Vallow’s death, citing insufficient likelihood of a conviction. In September 2021, Chad Daybell’s children publicly defended their father, asserting that he had been misled by Lori in a tragic and deadly manner (Vigliotti, 2021). In 2022, Lori was indicted on an additional count of first-degree premeditated murder, related to allegations that she conspired with her brother, Alex Cox, to murder Brandon Boudreaux, purportedly to gain access to Boudreaux’s financial assets through her niece (Boone, 2023).

A jury trial for the charges against Lori Vallow Daybell in Madison County was originally scheduled for January 25-29, 2021 (Eaton, 2020d). However, on May 27, 2021, Lori was declared incompetent and unfit to stand trial, resulting in a stay of her case (Deliso, 2021). After undergoing mental health treatment, she was deemed competent to stand trial on April 11, 2022. On October 6, 2022, Judge Steven W. Boyce issued an order suspending the case following several motions filed by Lori’s attorney, necessitating a further determination of her competency. She was again found competent on November 16, 2022 (Seikaly,

2022; Ellis, 2022). Both Lori and Chad Daybell pleaded not guilty to all charges in Idaho. Their cases were severed in March 2023 at Chad's request, as his attorneys cited the need for additional time to review DNA evidence and pointed to the "mutually antagonistic nature of the defendants' positions". Since Lori had not waived her right to a speedy trial, the court ruled that her case would proceed as scheduled. On March 21, 2023, the judge removed the death penalty as an option for Lori Vallow Daybell due to the late discovery of new DNA evidence that could not be tested and admitted in court before the trial began (AP News, 2023).

Lori Vallow Daybell's trial commenced on April 3, 2023, in Boise, Idaho (Sharp, 2023). She chose not to testify in her defense, and her lawyers did not call any witnesses, while the prosecution presented testimony from approximately 60 witnesses (McCarthy, 2023; Bianco 2023). In light of evidence suggesting Alex Cox's direct involvement in the murders, prosecutors argued that Lori had "groomed" and "manipulated" her brother to participate in her crimes. Lori's sister, Summer Shiflet, testified that Alex had suffered brain damage in a car accident, which left his decision-making abilities "stuck at a teenage level" (Brizee, 2023). Zulema Pastenes testified that Alex was under the complete influence of Chad and Lori, who had convinced him that he was a reincarnated warrior of God with the sole purpose of protecting Lori. In his closing argument, Lori's attorney, Jim Archibald, portrayed her as being under Chad Daybell's psychological control (Polisek, 2023). On May 12, 2023, Lori Vallow Daybell was found guilty of all criminal charges, including two counts of first-degree murder and three counts of conspiracy (*Idaho v. Vallow aka Daybell*, Case No. CR22-21-1624, Verdict, 12th May 2023).

She was subsequently sentenced on July 31, 2023, to consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole for the murders of Tylee Ryan, J. J. Vallow, and the conspiracy to commit the murder of Tammy Daybell. In addition to these sentences, she was fined and ordered to pay restitution for grand theft charges (Madani, 2023). During sentencing, Judge Boyce stated that Lori had murdered her children to "remove them as obstacles and to profit financially", choosing "the most evil and destructive path possible" and descending into a "bizarre, religious rabbit hole" to justify their killings (Andone, 2023). Before her sentencing, Lori made her first public statement since her arrest, claiming she had

been communicating with Jesus, her children, and Tammy. She asserted that Tylee, J. J., and Tammy were “happy and extremely busy” in heaven, and stated, “Jesus Christ knows that no one was murdered in this case. Accidental deaths happen, suicides happen, fatal side effects from medications happen” (Madani, 2023; Andone, 2023). In November 2023, Lori was extradited to Arizona to face two conspiracy charges (Eaton, 2024a). She pleaded not guilty to both. In February 2024, her trial was scheduled to begin on August 1 of the same year, though the judge noted that the date might be postponed due to the volume of evidence to be processed (Lum, 2024a). In June, Lori’s lawyers filed a motion to delay the trial, but Lori objected, insisting on her right to a speedy trial (Eaton, 2024b). On July 2, the request for a delay was granted, and the trial date was moved to February 24, 2025 (Lum, 2024b).

On November 9, 2023, Chad Daybell’s legal team filed three motions to remove the death penalty in his murder trial, arguing that Lori had “manipulated” Chad through “emotional and sexual control” and that Chad had “lesser culpability than his co-defendant, who did not face the death penalty” (Grossorth, 2021). These motions were denied in December (Curtis, 2023). Chad Daybell’s trial began on April 10, 2024. In his opening statement, prosecutor Rob Wood characterized Chad as a man driven by “sex, money, and power”, who viewed his spouse and Lori’s children as obstacles to his perceived destiny. Chad’s attorney, John Prior, presented him as a religious man who had been “lured” into an inappropriate relationship by Lori Vallow, focusing on Alex Cox’s history of violence and his role as “Lori’s protector” (Sanchez, 2024). Chad did not take the stand in his defense (Herrera, 2024). In closing arguments, prosecutor Lindsey Blake summarized the evidence demonstrating Chad’s pivotal role in orchestrating and providing a religious justification for the murders. John Prior portrayed Lori and Alex Cox as the true culprits, arguing that Lori was motivated by greed, that she had manipulated Chad throughout, and that Chad might have been her next victim (Eaton, 2024c). On May 30, 2024, the jury found Chad guilty of first-degree murder and conspiracy in the deaths of Tammy, Tylee, and J. J. He was also found guilty of grand theft by deception related to the children’s killings and of insurance fraud related to Tammy’s death. The Woodcocks, who had closely followed the trial, expressed their satisfaction with the verdict, with Larry Woodcock commenting on the futility and devastation caused by Chad and Lori’s crimes: “What

did they accomplish? Nothing. What did they do? They destroyed families” (Boone, 2024; Eaton, 2024d). At his sentencing hearing, Chad chose not to present any mitigation evidence (Pace, 2024). On June 1, 2024, he was sentenced to death.³ For the insurance fraud charges, he received a 15-year prison sentence, to run concurrently with his death sentence, and was ordered to pay restitution of \$ 130,000 plus \$ 300,000. No fines were added to the insurance fraud sentence due to Chad’s indigent status (Hart, 2024).⁴

³ Capital punishment remains a legal form of punishment in Idaho, reflecting a broader, ongoing debate within the United States about the appropriateness and morality of the death penalty. Idaho’s legal framework permits the death penalty for certain severe crimes, such as first-degree murder with aggravating circumstances. The use of capital punishment in Idaho underscores the state’s commitment to a retributive form of justice, wherein the most severe crimes are met with the most severe penalties. Proponents argue that the death penalty serves as a deterrent to heinous crimes and ensures that justice is served by proportionally punishing those who commit egregious acts of violence. In contrast, several states in the United States have abolished the death penalty, highlighting a shift towards a more rehabilitative or restorative justice model. States such as California, New York, and Illinois have either banned capital punishment or imposed moratoriums, citing concerns about wrongful convictions, racial bias, the high costs associated with death penalty cases, and ethical considerations regarding the state’s role in taking a life. The abolition of the death penalty in these states reflects a growing recognition of human rights, emphasizing the value of life and the potential for rehabilitation and redemption even among those who have committed serious offenses (Škulić, 2022; Desai & Garret, 2019). The right to spend the rest of one’s life in prison rather than face the death penalty is seen by many as a humane alternative, respecting the intrinsic human dignity of the individual, regardless of their actions. Life imprisonment without the possibility of parole provides a severe, yet non-lethal, punishment that allows for the possibility of introspection, remorse, and transformation over time. It also eliminates the risk of executing an innocent person, a critical concern in the administration of justice. This alternative underscores a broader ethical and legal argument: that the state’s responsibility is to protect life, even when addressing the gravest of crimes, and that justice does not necessarily require taking a life to uphold the law (Matić Bošković & László Gál, 2021).

⁴ The sentencing of Lori Vallow Daybell and Chad Daybell in connection with the deaths of Tylee Ryan and J. J. Vallow represents a critical instance of providing access to justice for the victims’ grandparents and, more broadly, for older people affected by crime. This case, which involved the murder of two children by their mother and her partner, profoundly impacted the extended family, particularly the grandparents, who sought accountability and closure. The criminal justice system’s successful prosecution and sentencing of Vallow and Daybell serve not only to punish the perpetrators but also to affirm the rights of the victims’ family members to seek justice and acknowledgment of their profound loss. Access to justice is vital for ensuring that the rights and interests of all parties affected by crime are recognized and respected. For the grandparents of Tylee Ryan and J. J. Vallow, this process of justice provides a sense of vindication and a public acknowledgment of the suffering and emotional distress caused by the tragic loss of their grandchildren. The legal proceedings allowed them to participate in the judicial process, share their grief, and voice the impact of the crimes, thereby fulfilling an essential need for emotional healing and societal recognition. This involvement in the justice process underscores the importance of transparency and fairness in criminal cases, particularly for those directly affected by the crime. Providing access to justice for

3. Why Do People Kill for Religion?

Religious motivations have long been a driving force behind acts of violence, including homicide (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). From historical conflicts to contemporary incidents, the notion of killing for religion remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. One of the most recent and harrowing examples of this is the case of the Vallow-Daybell doomsday murders, which shocked the world with its gruesome details and apparent religious motivations. This part of the paper aims to explore why individuals kill for religion by analyzing the Vallow-Daybell murders within the broader context of religiously motivated violence. It delves into the psychological, sociological, and theological factors that drive such extreme actions and examines how religious beliefs can be manipulated to justify murder.

Religious violence can be understood as acts of aggression or harm that are either motivated by religious beliefs, doctrines, or texts, or are perpetrated in reaction to the religious identity, precepts, or practices of others. This form of violence encompasses a wide range of actions, including attacks on religious institutions, individuals, sacred objects, and events associated with religious expression. However, categorizing and understanding religious violence is inherently complex and context-dependent, necessitating a nuanced approach that avoids oversimplification. Religious violence, like other forms of violence, should be seen as a cultural and social process that unfolds within specific histor-

older people, especially in criminal cases, is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, older individuals often face unique vulnerabilities, including physical, emotional, and financial challenges that can be exacerbated by involvement in criminal cases. Ensuring that they have the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in the justice process helps protect their rights and promotes their dignity. Secondly, older people often play meaningful roles in family structures, serving as caregivers, guardians, or primary support systems. In cases where they suffer the loss of loved ones, their emotional and psychological needs must be addressed through the justice system, offering them a pathway to closure and healing. Furthermore, access to justice for older individuals reinforces societal values of respect, fairness, and the rule of law. It acknowledges that justice should be inclusive and accessible to all, regardless of age, and that the perspectives and rights of older people are integral to the broader pursuit of justice (Matić Bošković, 2023). In the context of the Vallow-Daybell case, the ability of the grandparents to seek justice affirms these principles, ensuring that their voices are heard and their loss is recognized, thereby contributing to a more just and compassionate legal system.

ical, political, and social contexts. This complexity makes it challenging to pinpoint religion as the sole or even primary cause of violent acts. As anthropologist Talal Asad suggests, the very notion of religious violence is deeply entwined with cultural processes that are themselves influenced by a multitude of factors, including economic conditions, political conflicts, social tensions, and ethnic rivalries (Asad, 2007). Therefore, attributing violence purely to religious motivations often oversimplifies the reality of these multifaceted events, ignoring the broader sociopolitical contexts in which they occur. For instance, studies examining purported cases of religious violence frequently find that these acts are less about religious doctrines themselves and more about underlying ethnic, economic, or political conflicts. This is evident in cases where violence is ostensibly justified through religious rhetoric but, upon closer examination, is primarily driven by longstanding ethnic animosities or competition over resources. The conflict in the Balkans during the 1990s, often framed as a religious war between Christians and Muslims, was, in fact, driven significantly by ethnic nationalism and historical grievances, with religion serving as a marker of identity rather than the primary cause of the conflict (Carmichael, 2002).

The relationship between religion and violence is further complicated by the fragmented and context-dependent nature of religious beliefs and practices. Decades of anthropological, sociological, and psychological research have shown that individuals' religious beliefs do not directly dictate their behaviors. Religious ideas are often inconsistent, loosely connected, and highly influenced by personal experiences, social environment, and cultural norms (Geertz, 1973; Boyer, 2001). This fragmentation means that the link between religious belief and violent behavior is not straightforward. The decision to engage in violence is rarely, if ever, based solely on religious tenets but rather emerges from a complex interplay of personal, social, and situational factors.

It is essential to recognize that religions, ethical systems, and societies typically do not promote violence as an end in itself. While sacred texts and religious doctrines may contain passages that appear to endorse violence, these are often interpreted within specific historical and theological contexts. Many religious traditions emphasize principles of compassion, peace, and the sanctity of life, advocating for non-violence as a fundamental value. However, within these same traditions, there can be allowances for the use of violence under certain

conditions, such as self-defense or the protection of the community, which are seen as morally justified responses to greater perceived evils (Juergensmeyer, 2003). The tension between the desire to avoid violence and the acceptance of its justifiable use is a recurrent theme in many religious and ethical systems. For instance, the concept of jihad in Islam, often misunderstood and misrepresented, traditionally encompasses both a spiritual struggle for personal moral improvement and, in certain contexts, a physical struggle to protect the Muslim community against oppression and injustice (Bonner, 2006). Similarly, Christian just war theory, developed by theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, sets out ethical guidelines for when the use of force is permissible, emphasizing that violence must be a last resort, conducted by legitimate authority, and proportionate to the threat faced (Johnson, 1981).

Given the complexities involved, it is often difficult to discern the extent to which religion itself is a significant cause of violence. Religious motivations are typically intertwined with other sociopolitical factors, making it challenging to isolate religion as the primary driver. The notion that religious violence can be neatly separated from political, ethnic, or economic violence is increasingly seen as a false dichotomy, as religious and secular identities often overlap and influence each other in significant ways (Cavanaugh, 2009).

One of the key psychological factors that can drive individuals to commit murder for religious reasons is cognitive dissonance. This concept, rooted in psychological theory, refers to the mental discomfort that arises when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs, values, or attitudes (Festinger *et al.*, 1956). In the case of Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell, the cognitive dissonance likely stemmed from their deeply held apocalyptic beliefs, which were incongruent with societal norms and laws. To resolve this dissonance, they may have felt compelled to act in ways that aligned with their beliefs, even if those actions involved murder.

Also, the process of radicalization also plays a crucial role in understanding why people kill for religion. Radicalization often involves a gradual adoption of extreme religious or ideological views that justify violence as a means to an end. In the Vallow-Daybell case, Lori and Chad's belief system evolved to the point where they viewed themselves as divine agents tasked with preparing for the apocalypse. This sense of a divine mission, coupled with a black-and-white

worldview that categorized individuals as either “light” or “dark”, allowed them to dehumanize their victims (Harris, 2004). Such dehumanization is a common feature in cases of religiously motivated violence, as it enables perpetrators to view their actions as morally justified.

Religion can often create a strong sense of community and belonging. However, when religious beliefs take on a cult-like nature, these same dynamics can lead to social isolation and an “us versus them” mentality (Wright, 1987). Lori and Chad interactions with like-minded individuals reinforced their apocalyptic beliefs and isolated them from outside perspectives. This echo chamber effect, where only conforming views are accepted and dissenting voices are excluded, can foster an environment where extreme actions become normalized (Kimball, 2008). In addition, the role of group dynamics in the radicalization process cannot be understated. The Vallow-Daybell murders were not merely the actions of isolated individuals but were influenced by the larger context of a group dynamic that reinforced and validated their beliefs. In cult-like settings, charismatic leaders can exert significant control over followers, often manipulating them into committing acts they would not otherwise consider. In this case, Chad Daybell’s role as a self-styled religious leader and his influence over Lori Vallow provided a powerful framework within which violent actions were rationalized as necessary for a higher purpose (Wright, 1987).

Theological interpretations, also, play a central role in understanding why people commit murder in the name of religion. Apocalyptic beliefs, in particular, have a long history of inciting violence (Catlos, 2014). The Vallow-Daybell case is a contemporary example of how apocalyptic theology can be twisted to justify heinous acts. Apocalyptic thinking typically involves a sense of urgency and a belief in the imminent end of the world, which can lead individuals to adopt extreme measures in preparation for the perceived final confrontation between good and evil (Hall *et al.*, 2000). In the Vallow-Daybell case, the belief in doomsday prophecies and the idea of being part of a chosen group tasked with ushering in a new era created a framework within which murder was seen as a necessary evil. This narrative often involves a dualistic worldview that sees the world in stark terms of good versus evil, light versus dark. Those labeled as “dark” or “evil” are viewed as threats that must be eliminated to achieve the

prophesied utopia. This form of moral absolutism can erode empathy and justify violence as a righteous act.

Travis Hirschi's control theory, particularly his social bond theory, provides a compelling framework for understanding deviant behavior by emphasizing the role of societal bonds in preventing crime. This theory posits that individuals with strong ties to society are less likely to engage in deviant or criminal activities, as these ties encourage conformity to societal norms (Hirschi, 1969). In contrast, weak social bonds may result in a lack of self-control and increased susceptibility to deviant behavior. The Vallow-Daybell doomsday murders, a case that has captured multi-national attention due to its shocking details and complex web of religious extremism and familial betrayal, offer a poignant illustration of Hirschi's theory.

Attachment. - Hirschi's concept of attachment refers to the emotional and psychological bonds individuals have with others, particularly family, friends, and institutions (Hirschi, 1969). These bonds foster a sense of care and responsibility, discouraging deviant behavior due to fear of disappointing or hurting those one is attached to. In the Vallow-Daybell case, Lori Vallow's weakening attachment to her family members, particularly her children, is a critical factor (Glatt, 2022). Reports suggest that Vallow became increasingly absorbed in the apocalyptic teachings of Chad Daybell, whom she married after a short courtship. Her attachment to Daybell and his beliefs appeared to eclipse her attachment to her children. This shift in attachment likely contributed to her perception of her children as obstacles to her new life, rather than as individuals she was emotionally and morally obligated to protect. Moreover, Lori Vallow's relationship with her extended family, including her previous spouses and her surviving children, deteriorated as her involvement with Daybell intensified. Vallow's estrangement from her family and the subsequent alienation she experienced could have weakened her sense of connection and responsibility, facilitating her participation in the murders. The detachment she exhibited - refusing to disclose the whereabouts of her children and lying to investigators - suggests a profound breakdown in the natural attachment a mother would typically have towards her offspring, underscoring Hirschi's argument that weakened social bonds increase the likelihood of deviant behavior (Glatt, 2022).

Commitment. - Commitment, as outlined by Hirschi, refers to the investment one has in conventional activities, such as career goals, education, and family life (Hirschi, 1969). Individuals with high levels of commitment to these conventional paths are less likely to engage in criminal behavior due to the fear of losing their investments. The Vallow-Daybell case reveals a disturbing abandonment of such commitments. Lori Vallow, once seen as a devoted mother, appeared to shift her commitment away from her family and societal expectations and toward a doomsday belief system. This shift involved the acceptance of radical ideas about the end times and a subsequent realignment of her priorities, which seemingly placed less value on the lives of her children and more on the fulfillment of a prophetic vision shared with Chad Daybell. Vallow's and Daybell's commitments to their apocalyptic beliefs arguably eclipsed their previous commitments to social norms and familial responsibilities (Glatt, 2022). Their actions can be viewed as attempts to fulfill these new commitments at any cost, even if it meant engaging in criminal activities, such as conspiracy and murder. In this light, their investment in the doomsday ideology led them to perceive conventional social bonds as hindrances to their higher goals, illustrating Hirschi's notion that a lack of commitment to societal norms can facilitate criminal behavior.

Involvement. - Involvement in conventional activities serves as another deterrent to deviant behavior, according to Hirschi (1969). The more time individuals spend in socially approved activities, the less time they have to engage in deviant behavior. Lori Vallow's increasing involvement in the extremist religious teachings promoted by Chad Daybell, which included participation in doomsday preparation and belief in a divine mission, left little room for conventional societal involvement. Her withdrawal from traditional roles, such as nurturing her children and engaging in normal community activities, illustrates a significant shift in her lifestyle and priorities. The Vallow-Daybell case demonstrates how immersion in a subculture that glorifies deviant behavior, under the guise of religious conviction, can replace involvement in conventional activities. This immersion created an alternative reality for Vallow and Daybell, where traditional societal norms and laws were no longer binding. Their involvement in apocalyptic preparations and their identification with a radical subculture acted as a substitute for normative societal engagement, thus enabling their criminal behavior.

Belief - Hirschi's control theory also highlights the importance of belief in the validity of societal rules and laws. Strong belief in the moral legitimacy of societal norms acts as a deterrent to criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969). Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell's acceptance of extreme religious doctrines that justified violence undermined their belief in conventional moral and legal standards. Their adoption of a belief system that viewed certain individuals as "zombies" or threats to their divine mission provided a distorted moral justification for their actions. In the Vallow-Daybell case, the couple's radical beliefs eroded any respect they may have once held for the law and societal expectations. This loss of belief in societal norms aligned with Hirschi's theory that weakened belief systems can facilitate deviant behavior, as individuals no longer feel morally obligated to adhere to societal rules.

The Vallow-Daybell doomsday murders present a tragic example of how weakened or distorted social bonds, as explained by Travis Hirschi's control theory, can lead to criminal behavior. Through attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, Hirschi's framework provides valuable insights into the psychological and sociological processes that contributed to the unfolding of these horrific events. The case underscores the importance of maintaining healthy social bonds and societal engagement as protective factors against deviant behavior, highlighting the profound consequences when these bonds are severed or corrupted.

The intersection of religion and violence poses significant challenges for legal systems, especially when assessing culpability and intent. In cases like the Vallow-Daybell murders, defendants may argue that their actions were a result of genuine religious beliefs, raising questions about the role of religious freedom and mental health in criminal liability (Wright, 1987). The legal system must balance the right to religious belief with the need to protect individuals from harm, which often involves difficult determinations about the sincerity of beliefs and the influence of mental illness (Kimball, 2008). From an ethical standpoint, the Vallow-Daybell case raises questions about the limits of religious tolerance and the responsibility of society to intervene when religious beliefs appear to be leading to harmful actions. While religious freedom is a fundamental right, it is not absolute. The challenge lies in identifying when religious practices cross the line

into criminal behavior and how to address such situations without infringing on individual rights.

To wind-up, the Vallow-Daybell doomsday murders underscore the complex interplay of psychological, sociological, and theological factors that can lead individuals to commit murder in the name of religion. Cognitive dissonance, radicalization, group dynamics, social isolation, and apocalyptic beliefs all contributed to a distorted worldview where murder was seen as a justified means to a divine end. Understanding these factors is crucial for preventing similar tragedies in the future and for addressing the broader issue of religiously motivated violence. As society continues to grapple with the dark side of religious extremism, it must remain vigilant in promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and open dialogue to counteract the forces that drive individuals toward violent actions. By examining cases like the Vallow-Daybell murders through an interdisciplinary lens, we can better understand the underlying motivations behind religious violence and develop more effective strategies for prevention and intervention. As the boundaries between religious belief and criminal behavior become increasingly blurred, a nuanced approach that respects religious freedom while safeguarding public safety becomes essential.

Conclusion

The tragic case of Tylee Ryan and J. J. Vallow's murders serves as a profound illustration of how religious extremism, when intertwined with personal and psychological factors, can lead to heinous criminal acts. Through the lens of the Vallow-Daybell case, this paper has explored the multifaceted role of religious beliefs in motivating and justifying violence. The intersection of apocalyptic theology, cognitive dissonance, and social isolation played a significant role in transforming Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell's religious convictions into a destructive force, culminating in the senseless loss of innocent lives.

From a criminological perspective, this case highlights the dangers of radicalization and the impact of charismatic leaders who manipulate religious ideologies for personal gain or to fulfill perceived divine missions. It underscores the necessity for robust legal frameworks and law enforcement strategies that can

effectively address crimes committed under the guise of religious beliefs, ensuring that the rights to religious freedom do not extend to the perpetration of violence. This case also raises critical ethical and legal questions about the limits of religious freedom, the role of mental health in criminal responsibility, and society's responsibility to protect vulnerable individuals from the harmful impacts of radical ideologies. As we continue to grapple with the complexities of religiously motivated violence, this case serves as a reminder of the need for a balanced approach that respects religious liberties while safeguarding public safety.

Ultimately, the Vallow-Daybell murders call for a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, sociological, and theological factors that contribute to religiously motivated violence. Only through a multidisciplinary approach can society hope to prevent similar tragedies and promote a future where religious beliefs are a source of compassion and community, rather than division and destruction.

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