

Moral Insanity and Spiritual Disorder: Conceptualizing the Terrorist Mind

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Readers of Eric Voegelin are well aware of his awareness that a search for order begins from resistance to disorder in the surrounding environment. Few would dispute the proposition that terrorism is a pressing political disorder in our time, perhaps the single most pressing one. Resistance to it can take a variety of forms, and the effort to understand the motivational wellsprings of terrorism is certainly among the most important. To express this a bit more precisely, terrorism poses a challenge for political scientists not merely to define and identify it, but rather to understand and diagnose this murderous phenomenon at its source, an effort requiring rigorous research guided by critical concepts.

Voegelin's work offers conceptual tools and an analytical perspective that can be very powerful in this effort, as shown most notably by Barry Cooper in his book, *New Political Religions*.^[1] Another important contribution was published last year by English historian Michael Burleigh, a book entitled *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism*. A hefty book running to 577 pages, *Blood and Rage* is a weighty work not least because Burleigh is quite evidently familiar with the work of Voegelin, as well as the writings of other leading diagnosticians of ideological consciousness and spiritual disorder such as Norman Cohn, Waldemar Gurian, Franz Borkenau, Nikolai Berdyaev and Raymond Aron.

My objective in this essay is to assess the implications of Burleigh's recent work for those analyses of terrorist thought and activity that would take Voegelin's analyses of spiritual disorder and political religion as their point of departure.

A few preliminary remarks will help me to streamline my account while also clarifying my primary objective. On one hand, it is clear that Voegelin's diagnoses of spiritual disorder can be quite illuminating with regard to the thought and activity of certain terrorists and terrorist organizations. More specifically, evidence indicates that some terrorists arrogate to themselves a status as members of "an elect," one that is engaged in apocalyptic or epochal, world-transforming action. Believing that they are surpassingly enlightened and pure, they bestow upon themselves a violent mission of purification in the service of some divine power, or some perfected future state which they prophesize. Operating in the everyday "first reality," but on the basis of a mission stemming from an imaginary "second reality," they refuse to apperceive the facts

that their murderous actions are pragmatically futile as well as morally depraved. As such, they exhibit patterns of consciousness and activity that are essentially equivalent to those exhibited by the earlier communist and fascist ideologues who were diagnosed so penetratingly by Voegelin.

However, it is just as clear that Voegelin's diagnoses have very little pertinence with regard to the activities of other terrorists. In most cases of this sort, the lack of pertinence has nothing to do with any shortcoming in Voegelin's diagnoses, but has everything to do with the sheer absence of spiritual content—ordered, disordered or otherwise—in the activities of the terrorists. In some instances, terrorism is simply a tactically useful mode of combat in the course of a mundane power grab, and a spiritual analysis of it would be akin to the proverbial effort to wring blood from a turnip. In some cases, the terrorist does not arrogate to himself any sort of transcendent status or historical mission. Rather, he does what he does merely to make a living, or out of a fascination with guns, or to impress women, or to exact retribution for a slain compatriot in the midst of an essentially tribal conflict.

To sharpen the point, some terrorist organizations and creeds bear the marks of political religions, whereas others are so spiritually obtuse—so flat-lined in spiritual terms—that “political religion” is simply unwarranted as a descriptor. All terrorism is pathological, but not all terrorism is pneumopathological. That being the case, those who are interested in the applicability of Voegelin's mode of analysis to contemporary terrorism would do well to consider capable historical accounts of recent terrorist activity to help determine just how large pneumopathology looms, and just how energetically one should argue for the usefulness of the mode of analysis that diagnoses and explicates it.

This is where Burleigh's recent work recommends itself. It is important not only because it is extensive in scope and meticulous in detail, but also because it is “capable” in the sense that Burleigh is very well informed theoretically regarding the phenomenon of political religions. Those who do not follow the academic literature on terrorism should know that the average level of philosophical and theological sophistication evinced in it is quite low by almost any standard, and this is true even for a surprisingly high percentage of those writers who deem themselves capable of offering specialized studies of religiously-inspired terrorism. Burleigh is a very conspicuous exception, and one who is—at least potentially—an especially valuable guide for those wondering about the viability of a Voegelinian analysis of terrorism since he writes with an explicit admiration for Voegelin's work, at least as it pertains to totalitarian ideological movements.

Another very promising aspect of Burleigh's recent work is that he shows a keen awareness that the

political convulsions of the past 75 years are an upwelling from currents flowing from at least as deep as the Enlightenment. Burleigh made his reputation initially as a historian of the Nazi era in Germany, writing five books that culminated in the award-winning, *The Third Reich: A New History*.^[2] Interestingly, admirably, and in a way rather reminiscent of another conscientious analyst known to those in this room, Burleigh shifted his research program dramatically just as his work became widely heralded. In 2005, he published *Earthly Powers*, which he describes as “an exploration of the politics of religion, and the religion of politics, in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War.” This was followed by a second, “entirely free-standing” volume, published in 2007, entitled *Sacred Causes*, a book that follows on *Earthly Powers* by linking “these themes to the totalitarian political religions and beyond.”^[3]

The subtitle of *Sacred Causes* is, *The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror*. Thus, the span treated by the two books preceding *Blood and Rage* runs from 1789 to 2001, or from “The Terror” to The War on Terror,” and the principal category employed in these works is political religion. Consequently, when Burleigh sharpened his focus directly upon terrorism in 2009’s *Blood and Rage*, one might quite reasonably have anticipated that he would treat contemporary terrorist organizations predominantly (or at least fairly frequently) as political religions. But he did not.

Those who haven’t read Burleigh’s writings but do know Voegelin’s diagnostic analyses should perhaps ask two distinct questions at this point: First, does Burleigh’s reticence in applying the category of political religion to terrorism suggest that the notion of political religion should be regarded with wariness as a critical concept in relation to terrorism? Or, second, does Burleigh’s reticence suggest the presence of possible shortcomings in his understanding of Voegelin’s work, or in his willingness to put forward a truly theoretical analysis of terrorism, as opposed to offering “merely” descriptive narratives?

Although these questions seem to be posed against one another as contraries, I would answer both of them in the affirmative, and I shall devote the remainder of this essay to the task of setting forth my reasons.

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The acts perpetrated by certain terrorists have become more spectacularly destructive during the past decade, partially obscuring that facts that terrorist acts were numerous, widespread and frequent for more than 100 years prior to 2001. Those who seek understanding of terrorism suffer no shortage of cases to study, as Burleigh’s *Blood and Rage* shows very effectively. In less than 20 years in Italy alone, between 1969 and

1987, “there were some 14,591 terrorist attacks; 1,182 people were wounded and 419 killed, the worst year being 1979 when there were 125 fatalities. One hundred and ninety-three of these deaths were caused by neo-Fascist terrorists...143 were attributable to the extreme left, and 63 to Middle Eastern terrorist groups operating in Italy” (*Blood and Rage*, hereafter *BR*, 191). Of these various numbers, it isn’t really the body count that shocks the reader in the post-9/11 world, but rather the sheer number of incidents. And of course that number of 14,591 only covers a relatively brief span in Italy and omits the many thousands of incidents perpetrated by groups like ETA in Spain, the Red Army Faction in Germany in Germany, or the Provisional IRA in Ireland.

However, for those readers inclined to regard terrorist violence as a spiritual disturbance of some sort, what is even more bracing about Burleigh’s account is how often he finds merely mundane personal motivations underlying terrorist violence. Burleigh’s book seems to suggest that many, many more terrorists acted as they did—and became who they were—not because of spiritual agitation or any sort of “second reality” apocalypticism, but rather because of “first reality” processes involving motivations and attractions that were thoroughly prosaic. In Italy, for example, he suggests that student leftists were gradually hardened by violent encounters with riot police, shifting from protest signs to slings to firearms, and then becoming entranced by the aesthetic and sexual appeal of guns. He quotes an Italian Red Brigades terrorist as noting that:

Arms have a fascination of their own, it is a fascination that makes you feel in some way more...more virile...this sensation of feeling stronger, more manly...I found myself...showing them to women to try to impress them...and then it seemed somehow more noble to use arms instead of, I don’t know, fighting with one’s fists let’s say. [\[4\]](#)

Pecuniary interests were also involved in cases like that of Patrizio Peci, head of the Turin Red Brigades, who was initially recruited by being given a factory job that exceeded his former earnings as a waiter, plus 200,000 lire per month as a logistician as well as free accommodations, utility bills, clothing, equipment, and an annual holiday on a property owned by the organization. The deal was so sweet that his girlfriend threatened to kill herself if she could not join too, though she seems to have had multiple grounds for envy, since Burleigh writes that,

Peci liked guns, reaching out for his .38 Special on the bedside table first thing each morning. “It gave me a feeling of power and security. It was my good friend. I was more jealous towards it than

towards a woman” (*BR*, 215).

In Burleigh’s telling, the story of how most Provisional IRA terrorists took to killing requires little more in the way of conceptual equipment than one can find in the everyday toolkit of psychologists and sociologists. Humiliating man-handling by British soldiers is cited, along with the enraging effects of discriminatory arrest and unjust detention. Individuals didn’t need to experience brutality or discrimination directly, as televised beatings of northern Catholics were enough to excite tribal sympathies and render southern Republicans militant even though they resided many miles away from the violence. From the perspective of the terrorist’s self-understanding and also in his external interpretation, Burleigh’s account is decidedly this-worldly, with very little evidence of spiritual engagement:

The decision to embark on a career of politicised violence was invariably construed by PIRA members as something forced upon an individual, in this case by state or sectarian violence against the community that he (or she) was defending, rather than a personal choice that could also reflect a no less keen desire to experience the thrill of clandestine activity within a secret organisation that bestowed status on its members. Status within the PIRA partly derived from belonging to an ultra-republican family already, not least because this brought automatic trust. If the terrorist came from a republican family living in a republican area...then his adoption of the gun and bomb was both socially sanctioned and morally justified (*BR*, 313-4).^[5]

At other points in *Blood and Rage*, Burleigh accords motivational significance to simple *esprit de corps* within militant organizations, impulses of hatred and revenge in the midst of ongoing struggles, and “habituation” to violence (*BR*, 61).

Likewise, when treating “jihadi-salafist” terrorists, his explanatory account is seamlessly aligned in standard sociological terms with his accounts of European terrorists. For example, he contends that young Palestinians in Gaza were drawn to the Islamic Congress or Hamas by comparison to the PLO because these groups were suited to a generational rebellion against the social hierarchy and the politics of older generation (*BR*, 386, also 441). He also accords importance to the coddling treatment of male children within Muslim households as “little princes” who subsequently “go off the rails” frequently, turning to violence “as an outlet for pervasive sexual repression in their communities” (*BR*, 441). Membership in radical Islamist groups is also ascribed to a desire for atonement for lives of crime. Writing of Islamist gangs in European prisons, Burleigh observes that they:

Provide security and solidarity to new prisoners and a co-ordinated response, up to riot and mutiny,

when one of them is confronted by a prison officer. Many of them are bitter and disillusioned, prey for Islamist recruiters operating either among fellow inmates or as social workers and chaplains. Poorly educated, these men are like empty vessels for jihadist recruiters who can peddle them any version of Islam they wish provided it is implacable enough and promises personal redemption through focusing their aggression on the host society (*BR*, 441-2).

Here as elsewhere, Burleigh accords no importance to anything like a genuinely spiritual revolt against the limitations of worldly existence. Tellingly, he does not even raise the question of whether the jihadist recruiters who are doing the pouring of implacable Islam into the empty vessel prisoners might themselves be motivated by a disordered spirituality. Indeed, disordered spirituality—by contrast to dysfunctional personality or social dislocation—is simply absent from Burleigh’s account at every organizational level from mere functionaries like Richard Reid up to leaders such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed or Osama Bin Laden.

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Viewed as a whole, *Blood and Rage* is a conventional historical narrative, and Burleigh is content to offer descriptive accounts of people and events, rather than diagnostic analyses of underlying spiritual disorders. Of course, there is nothing improper about that, and it would be silly to fault a historian for writing descriptively as a historian rather than analytically as a political theorist or a spiritual psychologist. However, the mode in which Burleigh elects to address terrorists and their organizations poses an issue of importance because, when addressing totalitarian movements, he treated them consistently as political religions rooted in a disordered spirituality. His chapter on “The Totalitarian Political Religions” from *Sacred Causes* (pp. 38-122) is in fact an extraordinary analysis of disordered spirituality, one that can be regarded on a quality level roughly comparable to anything ever written about fascists or communists by the likes of Voegelin, Aron, Gurian, or Henri de Lubac. That Burleigh has broken from this mode when turning to terrorists compels us to ask: Should we follow him in discarding the concepts of political religion and disordered spirituality when considering terrorism? Or should we regard *Blood and Rage* as a disappointingly flat effort that fails to penetrate to the deeper wellsprings of terrorist activity?

My answer is this: We should take pause from Burleigh’s departure from his earlier work in *Blood and Rage*, but we should also consider the shortcomings of the book before concluding that the concepts of political religion and disordered spirituality are inappropriate for understanding terrorism. In the interest of brevity, I’ll enumerate the two principal shortcomings that I see in *Blood and Rage* as concisely as I can:

1) Burleigh's primary concept for categorizing the problem with terrorists is "*moral insanity*." It appears occasionally throughout the book (as well as in earlier books), and is first employed on the second page, where Burleigh describes terrorists as "morally insane, without being clinically psychotic" (*BR, Preface, x*).

Burleigh is correct, in my view, to employ this concept and to employ it in contradistinction to clinical insanity. "Moral insanity" is not only appropriate, but importantly helpful, though in the final analysis it is a merely descriptive term rather than an analytical concept. Backing up a bit, we can see the appropriateness and helpfulness of the notion of "moral insanity" by considering the case of a man like Mohamed Atta, leader of the 19 hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks, which cannot be understood adequately by reference to conventional notions of "ignorance" or "immorality" or "insanity." Far from being an ignorant man or a foolish pawn who was manipulated by commanders more clever than himself, Atta was a bright, reasonably well-educated student of architecture, and was quite effective in his role as an operational planner and commander. And far from being "immoral" in the ordinary sense, Atta was an intensely religious man who conceived of himself as a willing martyr for a cause that he regarded with an almost superhuman moral seriousness.

Atta's effectiveness and intelligence, as well as the strength and seriousness of his convictions, place him outside of what we mean when terming someone "insane." No pill prescribed by a psychiatrist would have cured his affliction. That affliction, however, is no less real simply because it eludes conventional psychiatric diagnosis or therapy. A man who regards the killing of thousands of innocent non-combatants as a sacred act pleasing to God is most definitely afflicted, and afflicted with a very grave condition. We cannot term it "insanity" in the standard clinical sense, though we may indeed need to understand it as some sort of "moral insanity."

However, associating Mohamed Atta with moral insanity is a *categorical description* of his condition, not an *analytical diagnosis* of it. The categorical description of moral insanity is not useless, since it highlights an important distinction between a moral/spiritual condition, on one hand, and a psychotic condition on the other. Nevertheless, it remains a mere categorical description, just as "clinically insane" is a categorical description and not a psychiatric diagnosis. A psychiatrist who authorized the commitment of an individual to an institution on vague grounds of being "clinically insane" would be drummed out of his profession--unless he could back it up with a specific diagnosis of a condition such as manic-depressive disorder or paranoid schizophrenia. Interestingly, Barry Cooper also employs the term, "moral insanity" in

New Political Religions, yet he backs it up with specific diagnostic concepts such as pneumopathology, scotosis, second reality, and the refusal to apperceive reality (Cooper, *New Political Religions*, pp. 41 – 47), for which he provides detailed descriptions. Cooper’s analysis could conceivably be wrong, but it is much more robust because it is built upon specific, content-laden concepts of analysis that are in turn built upon a theory of consciousness. Burleigh’s analysis is not an analysis at all, properly speaking, but rather a narrative description, due to the fact that it is built on a categorical term lacking in specific content. [\[6\]](#)

2) Burleigh’s treatment of terrorism tends to be flatly descriptive rather than penetratingly analytical partly because “moral insanity” lacks specific content, but also because he chooses to address neither the self-understanding of terrorists nor the writings that guide their thought and activity. He is explicit about this on the first page of *Blood and Rage*, where he writes that,

This book focuses on life histories and actions rather than the theories which validate them, roughly in accord with St. Matthew’s precept, “By their fruits shall ye know them”. This is not because I am dismissive of ideas and ideology – quite the contrary – but because these seem a relatively neglected part of the picture. Ideology is like a detonator that enables a pre-existing chemical mix to explode. Terrorists make choices all along their journey, and it is these I am most interested in (ix-x).

Underlying this passage, I see an unspoken premise to the effect that the actions or “fruits” of terrorists interpret themselves. That is a premise that I do not share. Burleigh isn’t contending that terrorist actions don’t require interpretation when he cites, “By their fruits shall ye know them.” Rather, he implies that we can “know” terrorists, or interpret them as actors, by considering their specific actions and choices rather than the words they speak or the ideologies they heed. But this I would deny.

To be clear, I would agree that we can *judge* terrorists in moral terms on the basis of their actions and choices, but that is not the same as *understanding* the consciousness in which they undertake these actions, for which we need access to the words they speak and the ideologies to which they pay heed. The actions of terrorists cry out for condemnation, but they also cry out for understanding. Of these two, understanding is by far the more difficult, requiring a detailed knowledge of what terrorists have done, what they have written about what they elected to do, and finally a developed spiritual psychology for interpreting their words and deeds. Of these three elements, Burleigh provides the first but not the second nor the third.

What does Burleigh mean by the analogy that, “Ideology is like a detonator that enables a pre-existing chemical mix to explode”? Based on *Blood and Rage*, one could only conclude that the pre-existing mix consists of ignorance, poverty, humiliation and generational revolt, which are then “weaponized” and detonated through the agency of ideology. However, cities like Cairo and Damascus are home to millions of

individuals who are relatively unlearned and poor, who chafe under the domination of an older generation, and who feel humiliated by their powerlessness by comparison to modern Israel and the West. Despite the fact that the atmosphere in these places is thick with jihadi-salafist ideology (alongside more mainstream Islam), relatively few individuals succumb to extremism--much less terrorist violence.^[7] Consequently, the really pressing question is: What makes some individuals prone to accept an ideology that can, in turn, fanaticize them and actuate specific violence from sources of discontent that are general and latent in the broader population? This is a question that can be answered only by reference to a spiritual psychology built upon a theory of consciousness. It is not a question that can be answered by a historical narrative describing the actions of terrorists.

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In conclusion, I would contend that *Blood and Rage* is an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary terrorism despite the fact that it is not very helpful theoretically. The book may be disappointing in light of the many theoretical implications suggested by Burleigh's three preceding books, but as I tried to argue above, his reticence about employing the category of political religion stands as a warning to those who might utilize it all too lightly. It is easy call someone a gnostic or a pneumopath, but much harder to credibly establish the actuality of spiritual disease in a writer or activist. The very ease with which these terms can be thrown around should make us wary of them, since they offer the opportunity to render summary judgments upon people we'd rather not bother with at length. Yet bothering with them in detail at multiple levels is a scholar's duty if one wishes to achieve understanding of a dangerous pattern of pathological consciousness rather than simply point the finger of blame. For, as Eric Voegelin observed in a late essay,

I am speaking cautiously of a suspension of consciousness because it frequently is difficult, if not impossible, to determine in the case of an individual activist whether the suspension is an act of intellectual fraud or of persuasive self-deception; whether it is a case of plain illiteracy or of the more sophisticated illiteracy imposed by an educational system, whether it is caused by a degree of spiritual and intellectual insensitivity that comes under the head of stupidity, or whether it is due to various combinations of these and other factors such as the desire to attract public attention and make a career.^[8]

Beyond its worth as a cautionary tale regarding terrorism as a political religion, *Blood and Rage*

provides a wealth of material thanks to its combination of comprehensiveness and concision. It also points to people and events that might be examined with profit with concepts such as pneumopathology and political religion—even if Burleigh himself declined to do so.^[9] Like his other books, *Blood and Rage* is written with a stylistic flair that is admirable or even enviable, and more important, the book shows that Burleigh is an independent and even-handed thinker rather than the conservative ideologue for which he might be mistaken by some readers due to his affinities and antipathies. For example, Burleigh is sharply critical of both torture and Guantánamo-style confinement (predominantly on practical grounds; see 119-21, 454-59 and 481). He also offers a blistering critique of the concept of a “War on Terror” and the more general rhetorical posture adopted by the administration of George W. Bush, as well as the decision to divert resources from Afghanistan to invade Iraq (448-52).

In the interest of fairness, it should also be said that while I found *Blood and Rage* disappointing when viewed against the backdrop of Burleigh’s three preceding books, it is nevertheless far more perceptive and penetrating than most of what has been published on terrorism during the past decade. Now only 55 years of age, Burleigh has already used his considerable powers to do for modern totalitarian movements what Norman Cohn did for medieval chiliastic sects, namely, illuminate the connections between their surface manifestations and their roots in distorted spiritual experience. We can hope that he will still, someday, bring terrorism within the ambit of this vitally important enterprise.

[1] Barry Cooper, *New Political Religions, or An Analysis of Modern Terrorism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

[2] Published by Hill and Wang, 2000.

[3] Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War* (London, HarperCollins, 2005); *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terrorism* (New York, HarperCollins, 2007).

[4] *Blood and Rage*, 194. The quotation appears exactly as abbreviated by Burleigh in the text.

[5] One more quotation should suffice to show how consistently the same themes are intertwined in Burleigh’s assessment: “There were plenty of people in the traditionalist PIRA who were Catholic bigots, motivated by little more than ‘wishing to see those Orange bastards wiped out.’ IRA membership also granted a status equivalent to that of a Mafia ‘made man’, able to intimidate by his steely presence, and an object of adoration to women and young boys. Every pretty girl was available, dross to these ultimate bad boys, whose reality was invariably that they were unemployed or in lowly occupations. For some of the full-time activists the few pounds a week they were paid by the IRA was the only money they had earned in their entire life (316).

[6] As an aside, it might be noted that Burleigh does not cite Cooper’s *New Political Religions* in *Blood and Rage*, nor do his references to Voegelin in other books make it clear that he has read much other than the early German-language works. I am not in a position to say what Burleigh has or has not read, but note this parenthetically to imply a question about the conceptual shortcomings of *Blood and Rage*.

[7] The comparative question of the Islam’s propensity for sprouting extremist offshoots relative to other religions is an exceedingly complicated one that cannot be taken up in earnest within the confines of this essay. It should be noted, however, that Burleigh has relatively little to say about it, and among the few points that he does make, the following is particularly unsettling: “Since Islamist

terrorism is a deviant outgrowth of a religion, much attention needs to be paid to the terms on which that religion is permitted to function in non-Muslim societies” (483). Even when we allow for the historical facts that the founder of Islam was a warrior as well as a prophet, and that the divine and the political are not as rigorously distinguished as in Christianity and Judaism, and that the pragmatic victories of early Muslim armies was regarded as proof of the truth of the creed, thereby intermingling matters of faith with the occupation of worldly territory, I still believe it is inaccurate to flatly state that Islamist terrorism is a deviant outgrowth of Islam. On the contrary, instrumental terrorist violence against innocents—as well as adherence to a distorted creed that sanctifies such violence—are outgrowths of a personal disorder at the level of the spirit. Historical peculiarities of Islam are not irrelevant to the phenomenon as it exists in Muslim lands, but neither are they the *core* of the problem.

[8] Voegelin: “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation,” *Southern Review*, n.s., XVII (1981), p. 236.

[9] See, for example, Burleigh’s treatment of Vera Figner and the Russian Populists in connection with the refusal to apperceive, p. 42; his account of Babeuf’s Conspiracy of the Equals in French Revolution and their “faith in the redemptive powers of chaos” and justification of their actions by reference to a “sacred” end,” despite sometimes practicing “something resembling an operational morality,” a combination that resembles pneumopathology much more closely moral insanity (67). See also the recourse to “second reality” justification of political murder by members of the Red Brigades (204), and the apocalypticism of Arab jihadists during the civil war in Bosnia (400).