

The Roots of Religious Extremism and Our Response

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In these troubled times, understanding the roots of religious extremism is central to understanding modern socio-political realities. The task is an important one because a commitment to such understanding is a precondition to formulating a rational and effective response to violence committed in the name of religion. What are the roots of extremism and what should be our response? The question does not lend itself to glib and superficial answers, although many are offered. As a religious scholar and political leader in my home country of Algeria, I offer a simple yet necessarily tentative answer. It is the politics of religion rather than faith itself that commonly acts as a divisive force in society, and it has been the imbuing of political action with the certainties of faith that is the source of conflict. Thus, while the complex nature of the problem requires a sophisticated multi-faceted approach, a commitment to dialogue and democratisation must be central to any solution.

Extremism and Fundamentalism

There is a normative rule in Islamic literature which says that in order to make a judgement about something, you have to imagine it and to understand it from all perspectives. Thus, for present purposes, the starting point must be to propose a definition of religious extremism. To begin, it is helpful to consider, but ultimately to reject, another term often used in a synonymous fashion – religious fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism, at least in the Islamic context, is a concept that did not emerge from the social or political reality that it purports to represent and is linguistically unfamiliar. It is, as I will discuss, unsatisfactory as a label for the phenomena that it seeks to describe. In the modern context, fundamentalism tends to be a Western term of opprobrium for strict and unyielding adherence to Islam. Linguistically, this is a curious development - since the term 'fundamentalism' was first coined by Christians about Christians as a term of praise for Protestants who were true to the fundamentals of their faith ! Indeed, stripped of its pejorative connotations, to describe a person of faith as a fundamentalist simply means that they have a strong belief in the fundamentals of their faith. In that positive sense, all of us – Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus

and Buddhists alike – should regard the fundamentals of our faith as precious and a cause for celebration.

The closest Arabic translation for 'fundamentalism' is *ousolea* which is, in fact, a compliment for someone who knows the fundamentals of Islam. To depart from these fundamentals is to move away from Islam. For example, belief in inerrancy of scripture cannot be a defining characteristic of Islamic fundamentalism because a basic tenet of Islam is fidelity to the text of the Koran. King Hassan II of Morocco, when asked in a 1980s interview on French television about his plans to deal with fundamentalists, replied that he had no such plans, for all Moroccans as Muslims were fundamentalists. But, he said, we will deal with extremism.

However, there is clearly much overlap between the characteristics of "fundamentalism" and phenomena described as extremist. The American Catholic scholar David Forte suggests the following as a 'checklist' of the traits that the fundamentalists of various faiths have in common:

...a reliance on the will of God as the source of truth, typically codified in a particular source (scripture), a relative disparagement of the role of reason, a tendency towards literalism, a reaction against foreign or modern elements or accretions, and a duality in one's eschatological conception of existence (good/evil, spirit/matter, God/Satan, us/them, certainty of triumph/imminence of defeat).

I would add three other traits to this list: a view that one monopolises the truth, intolerance to diversity and difference, and violent rhetoric which excludes 'the other'. Taken together, these traits describe the mindset of those who I would regard as religious extremists. At this stage, I would also observe that extremism and related terms cannot be used to describe obedience to rituals that may appear 'irrational' to the secular observer. For example, I once read of an Italian scholar who narrated a story of meeting a 'fundamentalist' Muslim, for the Muslim did not drink alcohol ! A personal experience I have had in this matter is being described as a "fundamentalist" for observing the fast during Ramadan!

Extremism and Islam

The traits which compose the phenomenon of religious extremism can be found – and this should be obvious to all - within the ranks of believers in all of the great religions. They do not represent the essence of those religious traditions. Consider Islam. There are, by some estimates, 1.4 billion Muslims in the world today. One third of them reside in non-Muslim countries, and about 25 million

live in Europe and North America. The vast majority embrace and practice the messages of tolerance and mutual respect that, I would argue, are the fundamentals of Islam. It is not a faith to be followed blindly. "Islam does not demand unreasoned belief" says the translator and linguist Thomas Clearly: Rather, it invites intelligent faith, growing from observation, reflection and contemplation, beginning with nature and what is around us. Accordingly the antagonism between religion and science that is familiar to Westerners, is foreign to Islam.

Islamic tradition proceeds from a platform of reasoned belief. There is a story in the Hadith in which several people asked Prophet Mohammed the following question in order to test his ideas. They asked, if this is the God who created us, who created God? The Prophet replied : by asking these questions, and reflecting within your heart and mind, you are at the core of this faith. It is through this mediation between faith and reason - from Islam's intrinsic dialogue between the head and the heart - that Islamic civilisation helped Europe to emerge from the Dark Ages, and thus helped lay the groundwork for the Renaissance.

As well as encouraging thought and reflection rather than blind belief, Islam allows for a plurality of beliefs between Muslims. Imam Shafir (the 8th Century Islamic scholar and head of one of the major schools of thought within Sunni Islam) used to say that though he believed his teachings were true, there was a possibility he was wrong, and though he believed the teachings of other schools were false, there was a possibility that those views were true.

This tolerance should also extend to other faiths. The Koran exhorts Muslims to be tolerant towards the other children of the Book:

Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelations otherwise than in a most kindly manner - unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing - and say: We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed on you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we all surrender ourselves. (46:29)

In Islam, tolerance is a dynamic rather than static prescription. When it was argued in the 7th Century AD that, unlike the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism should be condemned by Islam because of its idolatry, it was decided by Caliph Omar that Hinduism would have the same protection and recognition as the Abrahamic faiths.

Yet one cannot get away from the reality that extremist traits can certainly be

seen in the Muslim world. Indeed, these traits appeared in the time of the Prophet, and were described by terms such as *ghouluw*, *tashaddud*, *tanatu*, and *khawarij*. The Prophet criticised the extremist state of mind and urged all Muslims to, at all times, avoid falling into such a trap. But what is it that we can detect in the Islamic tradition, and in the experience of Muslims in the modern world, that fosters the opposite message? What makes it attractive to believe that one monopolises the truth, to engage in violent rhetoric, to deny diversity and difference?

Identifying the roots of religious extremism is a difficult task, for which there cannot be a simple answer. Extremists are not a homogenous group. Rather than offer bland generalisations, it may prove more fruitful to analyse the origins and content of one strand of fundamentalist thought – the life, writings and influence of Sayyid Qutb.

Qutb

Born in 1906 in a province in Southern Egypt, Qutb studied to be a teacher and graduated in 1928. In 1948, he was sent on a government scholarship to the U.S. to research Western methods of teaching and graduated with a M.A. in education at the University of Northern Colorado. During this time in the U.S. Qutb became convinced that the West was spiritually and morally bankrupt. In “The America I Have Seen”, a personal account of his experiences in the U.S, Qutb expresses his admiration for the great economic and scientific achievements of America, but is deeply troubled that such prosperity could exist in a society that remained “abysmally primitive in the world of the senses, feeling and behaviour”. This rejection of the West led Qutb to a radical agenda when he returned to Egypt which eventually placed him in direct conflict with the Nasser government, which, ironically, he and the Muslim Brotherhood had helped to bring to power. Qutb spent ten years in prison - in which he suffered physical and psychological torture - and was eventually hanged in 1966.

One of Qutb’s main ideas was a reinterpretation of the concept of *jahilyyah*. *Jahilyyah* is a state of ignorance of divine guidance and can be found in the Koran to describe pre-Islamic societies. Qutb argued vehemently that Western societies and the nominally Muslim authoritarian regimes in the Middle East were *jahilliyyah*. According to Qutb, *jahili* societies such as these ignore God’s guidance and submit to man-made laws and conform to man-made ways of life. Qutb argued that Muslims who submitted to any man-made government are guilty of *shirk* (idolatry) because obedience to such governments and their laws is to

worship the same men who created them. The fundamentalist tendency to create false dualities, as described above, can be clearly seen in the following passage from what has become Qutb's most popular work, Milestones:

"Islam cannot accept any compromise with jahiliyyah, either in its concept or in the modes of living derived from this concept. Either Islam will remain, or jahiliyyah; Islam cannot accept or agree to a situation which is half-Islam and half-jahiliyyah. In this respect Islam's stand is very clear. It says that truth is one and cannot be divided; if it is not truth, then it must be falsehood...Command belongs to Allah, or else to jahiliyyah. The Shari'ah of Allah will prevail, or else people's desires."

While Qutb did not explicitly prescribe violent action against jahiliyyah societies and governments, his re-interpretation of the concept of jahilliyyah has been crucial in providing the intellectual foundation for jihad against such societies. Qutb's ideas were assimilated by many Muslim leaders in Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and the Sudan who were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood. Mohammed Qutb, Sayyid's brother, was a teacher and mentor to the young Osama Bin Laden.

The symbolic nature of Qutb's death caused an explosion of interest in his work and has made his work attractive to the powerless and dishonoured – and these include many of the educated and affluent – right across the Muslim world. When I was studying in University, I read one of Qutb's books. It was my first and last. I felt very agitated inside. When I talked to the people around me, they advised me not to read Qutb for his ideas were dangerous and tend to inspire readers to hate and blame society. When I returned home to my town in Algeria and saw people reading Qutb, I advised them against it. Unfortunately, the young are particularly vulnerable to Qutb's message - not so much for its content but because of the persecution and eventual fate of the author. As a teacher of religion, I once asked some teenagers to read and learn a certain book. They asked me whether the author of the book had been imprisoned or killed. I replied that he had not. Then, they said, they were not interested in learning from him. I am reminded of a story told by the Islamic scholar Jalabi. Jalabi gave some teenage Islamists some writings, ostensibly from Sayyid Qutb, and contrary writings, ostensibly from Malek Bennabi, the renowned Algerian intellectual. When Jalabi asked the teenagers who was right and who was wrong, all said that 'Qutb' was correct and 'Bennabi' was wrong. In fact, Jalabi had purposely misattributed Bennabi's ideas as Qutb's, and vice versa!

In my view, the credibility that Qutb received because of his persecution and execution is unfortunate, for Qutb's ideas are contrary to the essence of Islam.

This can be seen in comparison to the ideas of Malik Bennabi, who I admire greatly, but who, as an academic and an intellectual who was not persecuted like Qutb, does not have Qutb's popular credibility among the impressionable. Qutb's ideas disclose false and simplistic dualities. For example, in a speech on Islam and government, he argued that Islam must be embraced as a whole or not at all. In contrast, Bennabi's ideas were much deeper and more nuanced. Bennabi focused on the crisis of modern Islamic culture and civilisation and argued that Islam and democracy were by no means incompatible. The progressiveness of his views can be seen in his analysis of how the weakness and corruption of Muslim societies rendered them vulnerable to colonisation. Further, Bennabi proposed a highly-respected methodology for thinking about problems in the Muslim world. These subtleties and depth of understanding cannot be seen in Qutb's work. Indeed, Qutb and Bennabi were operating on very different levels, as the following anecdote illustrates. Qutb wrote a draft of a book entitled 'Towards a modern Muslim society', but then chose to alter the title by removing 'modern'. Bennabi wrote to Qutb saying that when he had read the original title, he had been encouraged by its theme, and that Qutb had been mistaken to alter the title. Qutb responded that Islam did not need to move towards modernity, for Islam itself represented the apex of modernity.

Why did Qutb adopt such an extremist ideology? In my view, the main cause was the persecution he suffered at the hands of Nasser's regime. Although Qutb's writings before his imprisonment were certainly divisive and at the fringes of Islam, his extreme rhetoric was expressed in what he wrote during his long period of imprisonment and torture by what was in his view a jahilliyah government. Despite the fact he never directly advocated violence and revolt, because of the threat that his writing posed to the legitimacy of the regime, the Nasser government persecuted him and thus made him the credibility and aura of a political victim. This was a serious mistake, for which the repercussions are still being felt today.

The lack of democracy as the main cause of extremism

By denying Qutb normal democratic freedoms in the name of cracking down on Islamic extremists, the regime has unwittingly fostered the extremism of generations of Qutb's followers. This link between the denial of democratic freedoms and the fostering of extremism can be seen in many cases - and is, I would suggest, the main cause of extremism and its expression in violence, in modern society. People are willing to listen and accept extremist ideologies because they are disenchanted. There is fervour for change at the grassroots level

in the Muslim world but there are absolute blocks in political life. While it is important to look at each case of extremism and avoid generalisations, the link between the lack of democracy and religious extremism cannot be accidental. In Egypt, since 1982, there has been a curfew and state of emergency. In Syria, a law known as 'law 49' condemns without exception everybody who belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood. In Saudi Arabia, the repression and lack of freedom is particularly severe. In Algeria, the limited freedoms that were present post-independence were lost after the military coup in 1991.

In my view, in some cases extremism is in fact encouraged - tacitly or more directly - by authoritarian Muslim governments to justify the continuance of their power, with the support of the West. For too long, the West has cooperated and supported anti-democratic regimes in the interests of 'stability in the Middle East'. The events of the past few years must be proof enough that the pursuit of stability at the expense of democracy is foolish and counter-productive.

The counter-argument that is often made is that if the political life is opened up, Islamic extremists will come to power, and therefore democracy must be sacrificed in favour of stability. I reject this entirely. Extremists cannot function effectively and credibly in an open democratic society. Extremist ideologies only carry weight when proponents are seen to be marginalised and persecuted. Exposed to the full glare of public scrutiny and debate, extremist ideologies tend to be moderated and 'absorbed' into the system in the interests of pragmatic political compromise.

So far, I have analysed the problem as being largely political in nature. What role does religion itself play? As I said at the outset, conflict is fuelled by the imbuing of political action with the certainties of faith. Religion is invoked as the highest authority, and thus, to justify means contrary to the tenets of all religions, in particular the preservation of life. By invoking religion, the extremist obtains a calmness, and can view himself as a deliverer. Yet, as I have argued, this is entirely contrary to the essence of Islam which encourages belief based on reason and does not countenance the justifying of means for ends. Moreover, it is well-known that those who employ violence in the name of religion are often very ignorant about the ostensible religious legitimacy of their actions. Religion is used as a pretext and a rallying point for a culture of frustration generated by the denial of democratic freedoms.

Therefore, any earnest and meaningful attempt to address the violence committed by religious extremists must involve a commitment to the process of dialogue and democratisation. Dialogue must occur about the shape of Muslim

societies in the modern world, about structures of governance, and, importantly, about the role of religion in society. This dialogue can form a background to establishing a broad political agreement between the different parts of Muslim societies, with the assistance of Western governments and civil society, where appropriate.

In conclusion, several themes are clear. Firstly, religion itself is not the source of conflict. At its essence, Islam promotes plurality and dialogue. However, the false invocation of religion lends certainty and an absoluteness to political action. Secondly, as illustrated in the case of Qutb, the denial of democratic freedoms plays a large role in fuelling religious extremism. Thus, a commitment to democratisation and dialogue must be central to any response to extremism.