Causes of Religious Extremism
By
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Personal Causes:

1. Religious Beliefs and Fundamentalism

"Fundamentalism is an approach to a religion's doctrine where its beliefs are enforced so strictly and literally that they are no longer compatible with the real-world as it is today. Some religions are more prone to fundamentalism than others. The uncompromising attitude is a psychological boost, and fundamentalists will happily seek out areas of conflict between their own values and the values of those around them in order to publicly highlight their own superior discipline. Also fundamentalists can be accidentally intolerant of others because by sticking so sternly to their own interpretation of the rules, they cannot make room for the diversity of real-life. It can descend into violent extremism but note, please, that some fundamentalist groups (such as the Amish and Jehovah's Witnesses) exist for very long periods with no sign of extremism. It often seems futile arguing with fundamentalists because most arguments against them merely prompt them to re-state doctrine.

Fundamentalist groups seem especially prone to schism and organisational instability, with most such groups being originally part of larger movements. Because personal beliefs are raised to the level of ultimate importance, every possible interpretation of (vague) doctrine will result in two sides who stake their entire religious outlook on the fact that their interpretation is correct and often "true believers are obligated to fight against corrupting influences from the broader culture" and to fight against any sign of 'false belief' from within their own ranks too, often leading to schism. Many people push for increased rights for their own religion and for theocracy, 'out of an emotional attachment to their religion' but some people take it too far. The declining strength of religion in the face of secularisation means there are fewer middle-ground religionists to rein in fundamentalists. Fundamentalist branches of religion across various religions tend to share certain traits and features, in particular scriptural

literalism, active resistance against multiculturalism and the rejection of human rights."

Some people opine that religious extremists are all deluded about the real teachings of their own religions. This is a tempting argument to make for liberals, because it means they can criticize extremists without criticizing entire religions. But life isn't so simple. Many extremists and fundamentalists have astoundingly good grasps of their own literature, and have devoted their lives to its study.

One thing that extremists do when encouraging each other is to highlight the role of the afterlife and to trivialise this life. In the words of Hoffer, "implanting in him a deprecating attitude toward the present and riveting his interest on things that are not yet". It also places such an emphasis on strict doctrine that the facts of the world are deprecated to the point of being forgotten. Again, according to Hoffer they are "interposing a fact-proof screen between him and reality (doctrine)".

Another factor of fundamentalist movements that prioritize religion over everything else is golden-age thinking, where a historical period of the religion is idolized and efforts are made to get "back to the roots" of the religion. Invariably, this means returning to an age of morality that pre-dates tolerance and human rights. According to Eric Hoffer, "A glorification of the past can serve as a means to belittle the present…."

2. An Abhorrence of Sexuality and a Reaction to Gender Equality

Neil Kressel notes that many of the worst extremists share beliefs in highly restrictive sexuality; a hatred of sexual liberality and a strong preference for "keeping women in traditional, subordinate roles". According to Kressel, "several psychoanalysts have detected a connection between religious extremism and feelings about sex. The hostility of most militants toward homosexuals, the exaggerated concern about the sexual goings-on of other people, the angry reaction to permissive mainstream media broadcasts, the preference for women in nonrevealing garb, and the insistence upon a male-dominated power structure can all be seen as suggestive of difficulties in the management of sexual impulses. Perhaps militants fear their own sexual impulses."

3. Broken Families

A conference on violent extremism in Dublin was attended by around 60 former violent extremists including ex jihadists, ex neo-Nazis and ex-gang-members, as reported by The Economist (2011). They had a surprising amount in common no matter how much their former ideologies differed. They talked of abuse suffered as children, "absent fathers, households plagued by alcoholism, lonely teenage years and their frustrated desire to belong" and struggles with cultural and religious identity amidst migrating families. In the modern globalized world, people migrate and move faster than communal ties solidify. Therefore, the pace and some of the negative effects of globalisation can produce disaffected individuals with fewer reasons to behave well towards others around them.

4. Psychology

It seems that there for someone to "become an extremist" capable of committing violent acts, there must be a period of build-up, in which violent acts are imagined and considered. This is a period of acclimatisation to future actions. The context for these acts is often the examples of religious martyrs from the adherents' own religion. Personal circumstances and personal psychology place a large role. So large, that the literature on what causes extremism is wild with speculation, but has not yet produced any formulaic or practical predictions about which individuals in particular will turn into extremists. It is important to note that "other reasons" and "something personal" is perhaps the most important factor to take into account. It means admitting that it is difficult to guess why us Humans go down any one bad instead of any other. Some theorize that religions are uniquely placed to encourage people into violence; others argue that religions are uniquely placed to stop radicalisation. The world is not a simple place.

When groups feel powerless, or even insufficiently powerful, members may turn to militancy in an attempt to overcompensate. Psychoanalyst W. W. Meissner comments that 'closed belief systems reflect underlying needs to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and

self-hate by excessive concerns over power status' Thus, people from groups that have been experiencing severe identity threats will tend to get very defensive, especially when the symbols of their group are treated disrespectfully. The problem, however, is that militant believers have developed finely honed antennae that detect all real insults and some imagined ones, judging none sufficiently small enough to ignore. Sometimes people seem drawn to extremist faith as the best means to alleviate guilt they've experienced because of certain misdeeds-major, minor, or purely imagined. By asserting their boundless commitment to their religion, they may be able to escape their consciences and achieve expiation in a way they could not with moderate faith.

The most important benefit that the believer gets from extremist faith may be the simpler solution it provides to existential problems. This may be what initially draws most people to religion in its various forms. For some, militant faith may work better (or seem to work better) than moderate faith in helping people to manage anxiety about death, believe life has meaning, overcome feelings of ultimate aloneness and bolster a sense of identity, escape from the overwhelming challenges brought about by too much freedom, address needs for strong self-esteem, and cleanse a sense of sinfulness."

Hoffer says that these types of factors are consolidated by people who encourage a group-mentality, a them-and-us attitude wherein the outside world is denigrated in every negative way possible.

Social Causes

1. Reactions to Multiculturalism

Religion is often used as a collective political and racial identity regardless of whether people agree with the actual tenets of a religion. To be a proper member of an ethnic group in many cases means adopting a certain religion. Or the opposite - some people join a symbolic opposition religion to signal rebellion and dissatisfaction with their own community. Studies have found that many people join a religion not because they agree with its theological arguments, but because religion endows "people with an

enhanced sense of solidarity to advance collective, often political intentions". Migration is often a trigger for adopting a religion. This works in two ways, together called "cultural transition and defence" by sociologist Steve Bruce: (1) Once removed from a community that they come to miss, some adopt a religion common in that community as a way of boosting their identification with it, regardless of whether they have started believing in the tenets of the faith. (2) When faced with immigration, some take up more extreme forms of what they perceive to be the 'proper' religion of their own culture.

2. Secularisation

The move of much of the developed world to a non-religious outlook has seen nation-states and institutions embrace technology, science and evidence-based logic instead of revelation. Those with a fundamentalist bent have clung to religion all the more tightly. As there are far fewer middle-ground religionists who can reign them in, extremist groups are growing in power within most established religions, as well as forming brand new movements of their own. They find themselves in frequent battles with those of the world who do not share their views on life. Fundamentalists, and many other religious folk, raise many elements of human behaviour to matters of eternal life-or-death, and, consider some areas of life completely taboo, and consider some symbols so sacred that they will not tolerate any criticism of them. The slip into extremism is natural.

The opposite to this is secularisation, which is the general loss of public religion, and it is often combined with large-scale loss of knowledge about religions. So "when political authorities deal insensitively - as they often have - with the symbols of culture and religion, identity threats became, for many, intolerable" to the extent that they will react with violence Putting it more simply, Anthropologist Richard Antoun says "fundamentalism is a response to the questioning of the great religious traditions... in the changing world".

Secularisation has a polarizing effect; often those who "cling to" religion are those who are naturally more fundamentalist and extremist.

The result is that there are fewer moderates to reign-in extremists. By weakening the number and powers of moderates, secularisation tends to given extremists more power within their religions. Growing Fundamentalism in Islam is somehow because the moderates are Subjugated by Muslim Hardliners.

3. Disordered Civic Life, Poor Governance

"Extremists are much more likely to come from times and places where events are unpredictable, unstable, confusing, and potentially dangerous. Modernization and globalization have unleashed destabilizing forces in many parts of the world, and the consequences have been most intense for latecomers to modernity. Failed societies are most at risk, where political and social systems deny basic gratifications to large segments of the population. The lack of protective constitutional provisions like freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and a strong independent judiciary all increase the potential for religious extremism."

In those places of the world where government forces are fighting wars against irregular enemies, there is a frequent refrain from military analysts: A side-effect of harming members of communities is that survivors sometimes become radicalized (even if they were previously tolerant) because the effect on their families and loved ones. The USA's infamous air-based "shock and awe" technique involves the widespread (targeted) use of using long-distance missiles. But critics have spoken out loudly about the negative psychological effect of those who live near such attacks - many of those signing up for extremist Islamic movements have cited air strikes as the reason that they personally chose to embrace violent ideology.

4. A Negative Reaction to a Dominant Culture and Modernism

On the personal scale: There have been violent extremists who have emerged from stable families that are not poor, who were undergoing good education in the West, who simply seem to have taken a morbid dislike of their surrounding culture.

On the cultural scale: It is a very common refrain amongst strict traditional religionists that they perceive the majority of the West to be marching down a liberal route that they simply condemn and abhor. From individual rights to equality and tolerance, and the moving of religion to the private sphere rather than the public, some cultures hate it all.

Several the causes listed above fall under the banner of modernism. As a total it represents a way of life that is radically different from that of a few hundred years ago; the work-life balance, individualism, family affairs, communications and interpersonal relations are all moderated by global concerns.

Besides, the God of the Abrahamic religions, so far as it is concerned in The Bible, The Koran, and in history, hates opposing Gods. The Israelites are described as being commanded by God, time and time again, to wage war against and kill nonbelieving pagans because they dare to worship icons, fake gods, and any number of unapproved things. Worshipping wrongly is prohibited in the traditional 'Ten Commandments' (set of biblical principles relating to ethics and worship), and is consistently one of the most punished crimes in the holy texts of Jews, Christians and Muslims. The emphasis on correctness of individual belief and individual salvation has led monotheism down an intolerant and often violent path in history. The development that "insiders are correct" and "outsiders are wrong" is not a feature of simple tribal religions, but this idea of correctness developed alongside literacy, especially in monotheistic religions, finding particular prominence in Christianity of the first century. It made the new monotheism sectarian, schismatic and aggressive; social and moral laws were deemed inferior to the new emphasis on textual fundamentalism. It heralded a new type of religion, fundamentally hostile to all other religions. The aggressive stance towards others who believe "wrongly" did not only engender intolerance towards other religions, but, is the cause of the long series of wars and conflicts within religions.

However, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs have better and more peaceful histories especially when it comes to religious tolerance. Polytheism is much more naturally tolerant towards having 'others' worship 'other' god(s). The times when Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs have

caused violence and terrorism in the name of the religions has generally come from times when they are repulsing multiculturalism. They haven't displayed the internal struggles and sect-based oppression that mainstream Christianity and Islam have.

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