

Religious Minorities and Religious Majorities Facing Extremism

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ABSTRACT

Extremism is a movement that invaded our communities lately. Extremism has been the main focus point of several writers to either define the word “Extremism”¹ or to describe its origin². In this paper, the main aim is to understand how extremism affects religious minorities and religious majorities on one hand, and how the animosity of extremism is related to majorities’ acts on minorities. The paper will first define “Extremism” and from where it originated. A second part will revolve around the story of Minorities in history and how they were perceived, along with the inter-relationship of majorities and minorities in the implementation of extremism. As such, this paper is a real-time reading of some facts and some thoughts shared in this manner.

Keywords: Extremism, Religious Minorities, Religious Majorities, Religion, Violence; Religious, Extremism

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DLR	Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation
IS	Islamic State
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
NGO	Non-governmental Organization

¹Neuman, P, Prisons and terrorism radicalization and de-radicalization in 15 countries, *A policy report published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR)*, 2010, p.12.

²Coleman, Peter, and Andrea Bartoli, Addressing Extremism, International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, *Columbia University*, New York, 2003, pp.1-13

INTRODUCTION

Definition of Extremism

The twenty first's century has witnessed exponential evolution in almost every field. Public health achieved improvements in vaccine preventable and infectious disease which helped in the reduction of death and morbidities from certain chronic diseases³. Mobile evolution led human kind to use smart phones as an application store to ease their daily life⁴. Even robots are now able to analyze a command and act upon it⁵. These facts and many others illustrated the beginning of the "Newly Budding Century". However, totally opposite facts were taking place in chorus. Unfortunately, with all this evolution, and in some obvious scenarios, only "Humanity" was stepping back. In this regard, the word "extremism" started to be used more frequently and nowadays became very well known.

P. Neuman⁶ mentioned in The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought, that: "Extremism can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society's core values and principles. In the context of liberal democracies this could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights.

The term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realize their aims, that is, by using means that 'show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others.'"

To describe well the origin and history of extremism, P. Coleman and A. Bartoli⁷ mentioned:

Extremism is "grown", "constructed", has an "emotional outlet for severe feelings", is "a rational strategy in a game over power", and emerges from "apocalyptic, eschatological ideologies" which at the same time is "a pathological illness".

One can consider extremism as the result of two opposing perspectives, however, Donatella della Porta, a leading scholar of social movements and political violence explained that "Extremism is a process involving not only the beliefs and actions of oppositional groups but also of the states they are in conflict with: violence is the result of the interaction of the two and their constructed perceptions of each other's actions, not just the product of one side's ideology."⁸

³Keith, JA, Bigger L Agostini, PA Arthur, E Maes, and R Daems, Delivering the promise of the Decade of Vaccines: opportunities and challenges in the development of high quality new vaccines, *Vaccine*, 2013, pp. 184-193.

⁴Allen, Jonathan. The evolution of new mobile applications: A socio technical perspective. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, Vol.8, No.1, 2003, Oxford, pp. 23-26.

⁵Pennisi, Elizabeth. "Cooperative 'bots' don't need a boss." *Science*, 2014: 1444.

⁶Neuman, P, Prisons and terrorism radicalization and de-radicalization in 15 countries, *A policy report published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR)*, 2010, p.12.

⁷Coleman, Peter, and Andrea Bartoli, Addressing Extremism, International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, *Columbia University*, New York, 2003, pp.1-13

⁸della Porta, Donatella, Social Movement Studies and Political Violence, *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalization, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University*, Denmark, 2009, pp.1-30.

The phenomenon of “Group Polarization” was defined by Borum⁹ in the Journal of Strategic Security as the extreme attitude and behavior caused by group opinions. In this context, individual opinions tend to have less effect than those of the group. Nowadays, youth is being the major target of extremism indoctrination. Taking all these ideas together, how would youth react to this wave of extremism? And how could it become the sore of transformation to eradicate violent extremism and build bridges toward reconciliation?

Origin of Religious Extremism

With the emergence of extremist violation, research started to tackle the origin of extremism: where does it come from? P Coleman and Bartoli¹⁰ explained the origin of extremism:

- Extremism arose as counteract of harsh economic, social and psychological conditions. Human need for security, health care and employment paved the way for extremism to extend its arm and reach every aspect of the society.
- Extremism was built up in two forms. First, political leaders tend to offer rewards and guarantees on adverse life conditions of their people to engrave extremist thoughts. Second, dominant groups create extremist ambiance in attempt to boost their power and make what they call a positive change.
- Extremism appeared as an emotional revenge of poverty, oppression, insecurity, loss and many other severe feelings.
- Extremism was proven to be a strategy to gain power in a “hierarchical environment”¹¹ where war of powers is crucial to maintain one’s needs.
- Extremism was revealed by the ideologies of good vs. bad. It was recognized as an act of purification and justice¹². This aspect of extremism is transmitted to youth by families, communities, educational system or peers.
- “The lack of identity associated with extremists is the result of self-destructive self-hatred that leads to feelings of revenge toward life itself, and a compulsion to kill one’s own humanness.”¹³ This perspective explained extremism as a pathological illness where people see the destruction of life as a feeling of aliveness.

All these aspects of extremism open the gate for investigating the reason of engagement into extremism.

⁹Borum, Randy, Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories, *Journal of strategic security*, Vol.4, No.4, South Florian, 2011, pp.7-36.

¹⁰Coleman, Peter, and Andrea Bartoli, Addressing Extremism, International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, *Columbia University*, New York, 2003, pp.1-13

¹¹Coleman, Peter, and Andrea Bartoli, Addressing Extremism, International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, *Columbia University*, New York, 2003, pp.1-13

¹²Wessels, Michael, Terrorism, apocalyptic ideology, and young martyrs: Why peacebuilding matters, *American Psychological Association Conference in Chicago*, Chicago, 2002.

¹³Gruen, Arno, An unrecognized pathology: The mask of humaneness, *Journal of Psychohistory*, 2003, pp.266-272.

1. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND RELIGIOUS MAJORITIES

How to define minority in a land of majority

The word “minority” traced a history in the evolution of its definition throughout the years. Webster’s New World Dictionary definition of the word “minority” has progressed from 1950 to 2001. In 1950’s editions¹⁴, minority is “racial, religious, ethnic or political group smaller than differing from the larger, controlling group in a community, nation etc.” However, in 2001 edition¹⁵, minority is defined as “also called minority group, a group differing, esp. in race, religion, or ethnic background from the majority of a population.” Although the word “minority” did not have a legally stated definition, the United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities Francesco Capotorti proposed a definition based on article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Capotorti stated that minority is “A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language”¹⁶. more recently, Shirley Steinberg in “Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader”¹⁷ described both minority and majority in the same path, Steinberg stated that “Majority is more of anything. Minority is less than everything”¹⁹

How religious extremism is related to the balance between religious minorities and majorities

In history, South African social composition witnessed a wide gap between minorities and majorities. While majority group membership encouraged black community to persevere and stand against their struggle¹⁸, minority group membership may cause insecurity among dominant white majority¹⁹. From this point of view, one can elaborate the concept of damage caused by extremism. Are minorities impaired the same way as majorities by extremism? To start with, an agreement was set on the fact that both minorities and majorities can and are actually affected by extremism. However, the intensity of this damage increased in favor of minorities. Concretely, Christians in Iraq have been persecuted for more than 10 years by extremist Islamism known as Islamic State (IS)²⁰. The Chaldean Archbishop of Irbil, Bashar Warda stated that Christians in Iraq “have lost their trust in the land. Some 80 or 90 are leaving every day for Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Others would go if they had money and visas.” Persecution since 2003 convinced many Christians in Iraq that they can no longer stay in their land and that IS has put an end to the Christian

¹⁴Houghton Mifflin Company. *Webster's New College Dictionary*. Boston-New York, 1950.

¹⁵Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. *Webster's New College Dictionary*. Boston - New York, 2001.

¹⁶Capotorti, Francesco, *Study on the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities*, United Nations, New York, 1991.

¹⁷Steinberg, Shirley. *Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.

¹⁸Van den Berghe, P, *South Africa: A study in conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, California, 1976.

¹⁹Louw-Potgieter, J, *Africaner dissidents: A social psychological study of identity and dissent*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1988.

²⁰Cockburn, Patrick, The last christians in Iraq, *The independent*, 2014.

community in Iraq. "Have no doubt," concluded Archbishop Warda, "that here is massacre, here is a tragedy."

Another version of the story would prevent any unwanted generalization of the extremist group identification. While minorities are being more targeted by extremist acts and majorities are holding the full power, this should not imply that majorities are the ones responsible for extremism. As such, being a majority is considered as one additional benefit for extremists group, along with so many other assets like the power of weapon, the use of media to spread fear and to dispatch extremist beliefs. For instance, Islamic State known as IS used social media to spread the fear and show off its power by publishing threatening movies. IS was also attacking religious minorities in Iraq (Yazidis, Christians ...) with the power of weapon. Accordingly, minorities might -in a way or another- take advantage of their persecution to create a reason for their disappearance and eventually for the fact of being a "minority". Interestingly, earlier study conducted in 1999 by Bettencourt et al.²¹ suggested that smaller groups were found to reveal more in-group bias and discrimination than larger group. Bettencourt et al. explained this issue in a social psychological perspective that minorities tend to reflect their feeling of insecurity by discriminating majorities, another reason to say that feeling of insecurity has been always present. Nevertheless, when it comes to competition over power, extremism has spread a spirit of fear and execution. Thus, it was unlikely for minorities to reveal their bias even if they believe in it.

The word "minority" includes several aspects; linguistic, racial, national or religious. In the last 30 years, we have witnessed extremism mainly targeting religious minorities in some areas of the world, like Iraq and Lebanon. This is why, it is crucial to understand clearly what is the meaning of "religious minorities" and what can these two words highlight in the course of the consequent analyses.

Religious Minorities

In fact, if one intended to collect all religious divisions in all countries, it would be obvious that there are no countries on earth without at least one or more religious minorities²². These religious minorities were the result of either the worldwide unequal distribution or the splits within major religions such as Christianity and Islam. It is surely more common to find religions prevalent in specific areas. However, a significant percentage of each religion is still present in an area where it is not dominant. Around 27 percent of the world population is considered religious minority²³. Moreover, standards were put in place to define religious minorities. Of these standards, a religious community is considered a minority if its members:

- Share the same religion
- Have the will to maintain their religion with all its traditions and group identity
- Are "numerically inferior"
- Are considered nationals of the state
- Do not have a dominant profile

²¹Bettencourt, B.A, N Miller, and D.L Hume, Effects of numerical representation within cooperation settings: Examining the role of salience in in-group favoritism. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Britain, 1999, pp.265-287.

²²Lutz, Wolfgang, and Vegard Skirbekk. *The demography of religions and their changing distribution in the world*. Vatican City: Mary Ann Glendon and Hans F.Zacher, 2012.

²³Kirham, David M, *Sate Reactions to Minority Religions*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013.

In many cases, religious minorities were victims of marginalization in some countries. For instance, in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and many others declare Islam to be the official state religion. Israel declares itself to be a Jewish state. The Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ is considered the single “prevailing religion” in Greece²⁴. In other instances, many countries restrict the participation of religious minorities in public affairs. For example, in Russia, it is required to establish a local religious organization for the religious minority to be able to participate legally in public affairs²⁵.

Taking all the above information together, it was suggested that religious minorities have been attacked by violent extremism. The main aim of the upcoming section is to understand how extremist groups are misusing religion to justify their violent acts towards religious minorities.

2. VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RELIGION: THE INTER-RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

The linkage between religion and violence has not been well established yet. Appleby in his paper described two types of religions; the “strong religions” and the “weak religions”. The “strong religions” seem to be more attractive to appeal more individuals into their thoughts. They have also more power to encounter religious extremists, greater history and traditions. The “weak religions” tend to be manipulated by political leaders and used for extremists purposes²⁶. From these two explanations, two different points of views could be elaborated; the extremist perspective of religion and the non-extremist perspective of religion.

The extremist perspective

Philpott elaborated in “Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion”²⁷ that religions are vulnerable to violence when they embrace a political theology that explain their traditions, scriptures and divine commands. These religions can eventually become official and able to suppress other religions. Islamist ideologies that lead to violent extremist were justified by blaming the West for all Islam’s problem, as such, extremists are being violent to save Islam from the West poisoning²⁸. Additionally, militant leaders were able to use Islam successfully to pave the way for extremist ideologies, thus vanishing iniquity by violent acts. Spencer, in his 2008 interview²⁹ asserted that:

²⁴Johan, D, and van der Vyver, Religious Minorities' Rights to Self-determination, in: *State responses to minority religions*, David Kirkham, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013, pp.243-256.

²⁵Russian Federation, Law on freedom of conscience and religious associations, *Emory International Law Review*, 1998: pp. 656-714.

²⁶Appleby, R.Scott. Religious Violence: The strong, the weak and the pathological, in: *Handbook of religion and peacemaking*, R.Scott Appleby and David Little, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, pp 1-25.

²⁷Philpott, Dan, Explaining the political ambivalence of religion, *American Political Science Review*, Vol.3, No.3, Cambridge, 2007, pp.505-525.

²⁸Jordan, J, and L Boix, Al-Qaeda and Western Islam, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2004, pp.1-17.

²⁹Spencer, Robert, interview by Right Wing News, *Stealth Jihad: An interview with Robert Spencer*, December 13, 2008.

"Ibn Warraq's observation that there are moderate Muslims, but no moderate Islam, is absolutely true in light of the fact that there is no orthodox sect of Islam and no school of Islamic jurisprudence that does not teach the necessity to work toward the political dominance of Islamic law and the subjugation of unbelievers under that law."

Despite the ability of extremist groups to manipulate their people and convince them very efficiently of the need of violence to save their religion, many other arguments came along to oppose this thinking and face extremist beliefs.

The non-extremist perspective

Organizations like Pew and Gallup presented a global survey that showed the presence of tens of millions of Muslims worldwide who believes in the "jihadi aspirations", however, they are not using violence to reach it³⁰. The non-extremist perspective highlights the gap between the main doctrine of Islam and the teachings provoked by militant violent extremists³¹. To debate on this issue, Mozaffari explained the concept of Islamism in "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept"³². This study aimed to tackle the distinction between "Islam" and "Islamism" elaborating the identification of Islam as the conventional religion which does not promote hatred against non-Muslim or justifies killing of innocent people. However, Islamism denotes the extremist ideology to defeat the world. This example is concrete evidence that violent ideology and extremism are not always subscribed to religion and that many extremist groups are not even religious.

By all means, these two perspectives represent two opposing cultures. Indeed, it is controversial to analyze these two perspectives or even to judge their validity, but the exposure helps widen our thoughts and give space to different perspectives.

3. RECONCILING RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND RELIGIOUS MAJORITIES

In the context of religious extremism, it became crucial to eradicate the extremist's perspective and prevent its brainwashing effect from abusing our fruitful social interactions. In the case of national minorities in a multiethnic state, reconciliation resides in building some kind of self-government and seeking collective right arrangement³³. However, regarding the interrelationship between religious minorities and majorities, the reconciliation process is more branched and need a clear plan.

To start with, defining reconciliation is a complex concept. According to Nadler and Schnabel, the efficacy of instrumental reconciliation or socio-emotional reconciliation is contingent with the real goal of reconciliation. It is a double-faced sore, either to separate coexistence or to integrate "the other" in our

³⁰Atran, S. Pathways to and from violent extremism: The case for science-based field research, 2010.

³¹Borum, Randy, Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories, *Journal of strategic security*, Vol.4, No.4, South Florian, 2011, pp.7-36.

³²Mozaffari, M, What is islamism? History and definition of a concept, *Totalitarian movements and political religions*, Vol.8, No.1, 2007, pp.17-33.

³³KymlicKa, Willy, and Bashir Bashir, *The Politics of Reconciliation in Multicultural Societies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

society³⁴. From this description, one can critically interpret the reconciliation of the religious minorities with the majorities. Is it for the sake of integrating these minorities in the community or to reconcile them from far without getting the majorities in close contact with these minorities, as such, separating coexistence?

In their article, Nadler and Schnabel explained reconciliation in a very simple and concrete way of thinking. It is the process of refining the relationship between two opposing parties, thus, allowing the “coexistence”. The “gradual learning” relies on the fact of positively perceiving the “other” and build trust. Nevertheless, what would be the clear plan to adapt for the majorities to gradually learn to trust the minorities? What are the concrete actions to undertake and how can we promote this phenomena?

On one hand, a society can work on creating a resilient minority to counteract the animosity of the majorities. The actual illustration of this needs commitment and faith in this mission. Social engagement is one of the ultimate path to mediate minority resilience. A thought was released in a non-recent article, however, it was worth sharing in this context:

“our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves”³⁵

When Charles Taylor said this word of mind, it was clearly stating the perception each person has for his own identity. In the context of this paper, religious minorities are perceived by others as “minorities” in relation to their religion and eventually their number. As such, the first step toward creating a resilient minority is to help these minorities prevent shaping their identity by the recognition of others. The most practical way is to organize workshops and training sessions with these minorities to strengthen them with the appropriate tools to better perceive themselves and counteract the extremist view of some majorities.

On the other hand, as discussed earlier, the other facet of reconciliation is to promote co-existence and encourage the majorities to love and trust the minorities. This type of reconciliation needs high powers; it is a process that cannot be achieved without the participation of leaders from both sides. A concrete example was in recent decades when leaders of the Catholic Church have joined leaders of the Jewish faith to agree and acknowledge what the Church did and did not do during the Holocaust and in earlier periods of Catholic and Jewish relation³⁶. In this example, high authorities did the step toward reconciliation, as such, the people of the two conflicting communities are now able to better grasp the idea of reconciliation and accept it.

Kriesberg declared in his article entitled “Reconciliation: Aspects, Growth, and Sequences”:

“Actions that foster reconciliation need not await the ending of a conflict. Even when a conflict is being waged and escalated, attention to future coexistence and ultimate reconciliation can affect the way a struggle is conducted”³⁷

³⁴Nadler, Arie, and Burit Schnabel, Instrumental and socioemotional Paths to Intergroup Reconciliation and the Needs-based Model of socioemotional Reconciliation, in: *The social psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, Arie Nadler, Thomas Malloy and Jeffrey Fisher, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

³⁵Taylor, Charles, The politics of Recognition, in: *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, Ajay Heble, Pennee Palmateer Doma and J Struthers, Broadview Press, 1997, pp. 98-105.

³⁶Willebrands, Johannes Cardinal, *Church and Jewish People*, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992.

³⁷Kriesberg, Louis, Reconciliation: Aspects, growth and sequences, *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol.12, No.1, 2007, pp. 1-21.

From this point of view, a plan on the national level should be executed to deliberate the religious minorities from the animosity of the majorities. One thing can be done, is to integrate the religious minorities in social and political activities and have the right to be represented in the government.

This paper describes the struggle between cruel majorities willing to eradicate religious minorities for a variety of causes. Some are political, others religious or even ideological. The other aspect tackled by this paper is the extremist act of these majorities. Eventually, the reconciliation process under these conditions becomes more complex. First, the extremists most probably cannot be reached by their leaders to do the step toward reconciliation. In this case, the fact of reconciling the leaders is a very hard process, though always possible! Second, the religious aspect of this conflict is a double-faced sore. On one hand, it is beneficial in a way that one can reach these people through religion and awareness. However, being able to modify the extremist's ideology in religion becomes the obstacle.

Although the case of interrelationship between religious minorities and religious majorities is branched, there is always a way to reconcile and to go a step forward toward the change. As a first step, building a resilient minority can start the process of reconciliation. However, it is also crucial to empower these minorities with knowledge, authority and tools to promote their ideologies and defend their rights. In that way, one can reach a point where there might be common grounds and enough space for both majorities and minorities to live and interact together.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the current situation paved the way for the animosities in the name of religion. The imbalance between majorities and minorities created a favorable platform for boosting the power of majorities over marginalized minorities.

Today, with the chaos invading some societies, marginalization, extremism, violence and conflict, it is crucial to start pilgrimage toward the other. In order to do that, the first value to add it to us is "humbleness"; change starts from within, the only lock to be released is the will to do so. Taking all the above information together, societies are facing violent extremism; minorities are being marginalized and harassed. Not everyone perceives the religious scriptures the same way. This paper defined and presented the building blocks of reconciliation. It is absolutely important to open a platform for the religious minorities to express themselves and have the power to defend their rights in case of harassment. On the other hand, this is not the endpoint of reconciliation; it is also required to continue this journey toward a "co-existence" scenario between majorities and minorities without conflicts. Even though the reconciliation puzzle is difficult to build under these conditions, however, with commitment and faith, a society can reach a point where majorities and minorities can live actively together and not only next to each other.

Albeit all the contradictions and the differences, it is now time for reconciliation. Building bridges of peace and reconciliation is a journey of effort, sacrifice and love.

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