

3 THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN RESPONDING TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the role that religion and religious freedom can have in responding to violent extremism. It is important to differentiate between religion and religious freedom, as each has a distinctive role in addressing issues that arise at the intersection of religion and security. The two are mutually beneficial: religious freedom can help solve some of the problems that arise from religion, while religion can help solve some of the problems that arise from religious freedom.

Both religion and religious freedom can facilitate violent extremism. Religion can do this through religious ideologies that rationalise violence in the name of religion. Religion can be misused, abused, misinterpreted, and even appropriated by those who want to use it for political ends. One illustration of religion being misused, abused, and misinterpreted for political ends is a manifesto created by Al-Qaeda, which states that “Islam is ... jihad [holy war]” and that “an Islamic government would never be established except by the bomb and rifle. Islam does not coincide or make a truce with unbelief, but rather confronts it.”² The manifesto goes on to say that “[t]he confrontation that Islam calls for ... [is] the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun.”³ This is a clear utilisation of religion in the name of violence.

As the King of Jordan, King Abdullah II Ibn Al-Hussein, has explained in the foreword to a book by his cousin, Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, “[a] tiny minority of Muslims seems to be bent on hijacking the religion of Islam – which comprises about a quarter of the world’s population – and bringing it into perpetual conflict with the rest of the world.”⁴ They do this in three primary ways: “Firstly, through distorting and subverting the teachings of Islam by misunderstanding and thus misinterpreting Islamic scripture. Secondly, by attacking and brutalizing Muslims and trying to terrorize them into joining them. Thirdly, by terrorizing and killing

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2 United States Department of Justice. 2002. “The Al Qaeda Manual”, 28 October. Online at: https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/ag/legacy/2002/10/08/manualpart1_1.pdf

3 U.S. Department of Justice, “The Al Qaeda Manual”.

4 H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. 2016. *A Thinking Person’s Guide to Islam: The Essence of Islam in 12 Verses from the Qur’an*. U.K.: White Thread Press.

as many non-Muslims as publicly and viciously as they can in order to provoke an overreaction that targets or stigmatizes all Muslims, so that more Muslims will in turn join their cause.”⁵ All three of these tactics are a misuse of religion.

Given these examples, it is not helpful to simply assert that extremism in the name of religion has nothing to do with the religion itself. In one example of extremist violence in 2015, Islamic militants attacked the office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.⁶ This magazine’s publications are often controversial, and are often especially critical of many different religions.⁷ One edition in particular depicted multiple cartoon versions of the Prophet Muhammed, which angered Muslims around the world.⁸ In response, two men broke into the magazine’s office and killed some of those responsible for the cartoons while shouting, “[w]e have avenged the Prophet Muhammad” and “God is Great” in Arabic.⁹

This illustrates the real tension between the broad scope of permissible satire of beliefs of all types that has developed in France and the freedom of religion. On the one hand, is France’s culture of particularly pointed criticism of a particular religion and, on the other hand, there is the respect for the Prophet that is a very important part of Muslim culture and legal systems, which often creates deep sensitivities about depictions of him. The circumstances of the attack made it quite clear that the motives for the violence were, at least in significant measure, religious in nature: there was an effort to protect the reputation of the prophet, and to punish those who were ridiculing and mocking him.

Not long after the incident, I attended a conference on violent extremism in Turkey and we discussed the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. Interestingly, the Muslim scholars who were a part of this conference asserted – almost to a person – that there was no connection at all between the attackers and their religion. Islam, they said, had nothing to do with it; the actions were on the individuals’ heads alone. This explanation, however tempting it is to accept, is a convenience we cannot afford. Even if those who conducted the attack were completely unjustified, it would be inaccurate to say that it had nothing to do with Islam. The motives, as the attackers understood them, were quite clearly religious in character. Even if the attackers were misunderstanding or misapplying the teachings of Islam, that does not mean that their actions had nothing to do with religion. Quite the opposite, in fact. The people acting and committing violence in the name of religion often think they are acting as faithful and justified defenders of the faith.

5 H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, *A Thinking Person’s Guide to Islam*.

6 “Paris attacks: Suspects’ profiles”, *BBC News*, 12 January 2015; “*Charlie Hebdo* attack: Three days of terror”, *BBC News*, 14 January 2015.

7 Taibi C. 2015. “These Are the *Charlie Hebdo* Cartoons that Terrorists Thought Were Worth Killing Over”, *Huffington Post*, 7 January.

8 Taibi, “These Are the *Charlie Hebdo* Cartoons”.

9 “*Charlie Hebdo* attack: Three days of terror”.

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There are scholars who argue that religious extremism is motivated more by political aims than by religion.¹⁰ It is likely true that some acts of religious extremism are in fact politically motivated but justified in the name of religion. But regardless of whether the extremism is religiously motivated or just religiously rationalised, we must recognise that sometimes religion itself does have something to do with violent extremism. As painful as it is to admit, religion can indeed help generate religious violence.¹¹

We must also acknowledge that religious freedom can play a role in enabling violence, as well. Religious freedom, as part of a culture and legal system that respects freedom more generally can, in fact, make it easier for extremists to operate. A free and open society makes it possible for terrorists to move around, plan, educate and motivate each other, and execute their violent activities. Consequently, some might consider restricting religious freedom in order to address the problem of violence in the name of religion. In most situations, this would be a mistake, since restricting religion and religious freedom is likely to make problems relating to security and violent extremism worse rather than better.

The challenge that I address in this chapter is how to get beyond the effort to either exonerate or blame religion for violent extremism. Although both religion and religious freedom are part of the problem, they can be part of the remedy as well. Indeed, they are key components of the solution to the security issues that arise from violent extremism perpetrated in the name of religion. This chapter first addresses what can be done by *religion* – and here I am focusing on churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious institutions, as well as religious leaders and legal institutions – to help combat such extremism. This chapter then addresses what *religious freedom* can do to help combat extremism.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN COUNTERING EXTREMISM

I will begin by addressing what religion and those who belong to particular religious traditions can do to counter extremism in the name of religion. Much of the highly publicised extremist violence is perpetrated in the name of Islam.

10 See, e.g., Fraser G. 2015. "It's Not the Religion that Creates Terrorists, It's the Politics", *The Guardian*, 27 June 27. See also Pape RA and Feldman JK. 2010. "Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It", 8-9 (arguing that "military occupation is the main factor driving suicide terrorism").

11 But it is important to remember that if counterterrorism efforts – even peaceful efforts – are focused on a particular religious group (e.g. Muslims in the U.K.), then it is likely to alienate members of that religious group. See, e.g., Kundnani A. 2009. *Spooked! How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism*. London: Institute of Race Relations, 40 (explaining that it is dangerous to focus ideological counterterrorist efforts on Muslims because of the danger that "British Muslims become, in the imagination of the counterterrorist system, no longer citizens to whom the state is accountable but potential recruits to a global counterinsurgency that is threatening the state's prospects of prevailing in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere").

Thus it is important to remember that some of the key tenets of Islam are human dignity, freedom of conscience, justice, and peace.

Better interpretations of our own religious traditions

The first opportunity for change is to seek and express better interpretations of one's own religious traditions. It will be the best aspects of religious traditions that will counter the worst aspects of religious traditions. Virtually every religious tradition has resources that can be used to justify violence as well as resources to justify peace, respect for the dignity of others, and working with others in harmony.¹² To some extent, religious believers – as interpreters of their own traditions' texts and histories – are responsible for making use of the resources and doctrines already available to them.

Much of the focus in the world today is on Islam, as much of the most salient violent extremism is perpetrated in the name of that religion. Such acts are often motivated by people who are interpreting and utilising the Islamic faith as a basis for violence. This is true of groups such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and ISIS. However, the reality is that Islam itself has deep resources that can be used to promote peace and freedom. It will be primarily faithful Muslims interpreting their own traditions and educating and persuading other Muslims about the meaning of Islam, who will help us to find the resources to truly promote peace and freedom. I am not saying that what is needed is a reformation, a renaissance, or a restoration of Islam. Rather, I am talking about the ongoing interpretation of the meaning of foundational texts and traditions.

I am not an expert on Islam, so what I can say about it is tentative and incomplete. However, as I understand it, one of the important concepts within Islam is the idea of *karama*, which is often translated as human dignity. In the Quran it states, "... We have honored the children of Adam [with dignity or *karama*] and carried them by land and sea; We have provided good sustenance for them and favoured them specially above many of those We have created ..."¹³ This is significant, because the foundational principle of international human rights as developed in the aftermath of World War II is also human dignity. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) begins by stating that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," and that "[t]hey are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."¹⁴ It is thus widely understood that human dignity is one of the foundational concepts that is at the heart or the core of contemporary human rights. Many people believe that human rights are in tension with Islam, but it is noteworthy that this idea of *karama* or human dignity is really at the heart of both Islam and international human rights.

12 See Sarkissian A. 2015. "Why (Some) States Use Religion to Justify Violence", *The Washington Post*, 20 January; Smock DR. 2006. *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1 January.

13 Holy Quran 17:70 (Abdel Haleem MAS (transl.), Oxford: Oxford University Press).

14 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948).

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This is not to say that Islamic law and human rights law are going to be completely consistent or overlapping, but there are common resources and foundational concepts that are more similar than people sometimes recognise.

Another concept important to Islam is the idea of freedom of conscience.¹⁵ This may at first seem unlikely, as people are often more familiar with the prohibitions on conversion that exist in many interpretations of Islam. Yet in virtually every religious tradition, apostasy is a very serious sin that has at one time or another been considered a crime.¹⁶ Many Islamic scholars have pointed out that the prohibitions on apostasy were articulated by Muhammad at a time of religious war,¹⁷ where apostasy was a form of treason. To this day, treason is (to the Western mind) considered a serious legal offence.¹⁸ Treason often carries severe penalties, and is one of the few crimes for which the death penalty is still enforced in many Western countries.¹⁹

Despite this background, freedom of conscience is a key Islamic concept as well. The idea of voluntarily worshiping God, turning your heart to God, and obeying God by choice is important to Islamic theology and culture.²⁰ The Quran counsels believers by saying, “[t]he truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so.”²¹ There are thus deep resources for thinking about freedom within the Islamic tradition.²²

Another important Islamic concept is justice. In a well-known *hadith*, “the Just” is one of God’s ninety-nine divine names.²³ In fact, some Muslims believe that justice is the key concept in Islam, the root of all rights in Islam, and the ultimate goal of *sharia*.²⁴ It is sometimes said that the foundational concept of Judaism is law and the foundational concept of Christianity is love. In the same sense, the foundational concept of Islam could be considered justice. As such, the discourse and the doctrine concerning the meaning of justice are very meaningful and multifaceted within Islam.²⁵

15 Engineer AA. 2007. “Religion and Freedom of Conscience”, in Engineer AA. *Islam in Contemporary World*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd, 19-26 (describing the importance of freedom of conscience in all religions, including in Islam).

16 See Library of Congress. 2015. “Laws Criminalizing Apostasy”, 30 June. Online at: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy>

17 Alalawani TJ. 2012. *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*. Roberts N (transl.). London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 9.

18 See International Commission Against the Death Penalty. 2013. “The Death Penalty and the ‘Most Serious Crimes’”, January.

19 See 18 U.S. Code, sec 2381 (2017).

20 See “Concept of Freedom in Islam”, *Masjidma.com*, 3 February 2011.

21 Quran, 18:29.

22 Quran 2:62, 2:256, 18:29, 109:6.

23 Abu `Isa Muhammad at-Tirmidhi, “Jami` at-Tirmidhi”, 15:8, 5.

24 See “The Meaning of Justice”, *IslamReligion.com*, 19 February 2008.

25 See Quran, 5:8, 5:42, 60:8.

Peace is another important concept in Islam. Indeed, the word Islam includes peace (*salam*) as one of its components.²⁶ It is clear that the discourse and doctrines of peace are important to and well developed within Muslim religious traditions.²⁷ Other concepts such as mercy (*Al-Rahman*)²⁸ and love (*Al-Wadud*)²⁹ are important to Islam as well, and are incidentally both names for God mentioned in the Quran.

Compare these Islamic concepts to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in the preamble that, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."³⁰ Many of the values articulated in the preamble of the UDHR, are important concepts in the Islamic tradition: dignity, equality, freedom, justice, peace, mercy, and love. All of these concepts are not only common but fundamental to both the legal world view of international human rights and to the legal world view of Islam. There is far more room for dialogue, and perhaps even consensus, between human rights and Islam than people often recognise.³¹

The role of religious majorities

The second way that religion can counter extremism is through religious majorities and the influence that they have on religious freedom. A series of studies published by the Pew Research Center provides striking evidence of the effect that religious majorities can have on religious freedom and other important social values.³² This research analysed two types of restrictions on religious freedom in various countries around the world: legal restrictions and social hostilities involving religion.³³ The results show that there is a very high correlation between countries that have a high

26 Pennington R. 2008. "What is the Meaning of the Word 'Islam'?", *Muslim Voices*, 1 October.

27 See Quran, 2:208.

28 Quran, 55:1.

29 Quran, 85:14.

30 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, preamble.

31 See Sachedina A. 2009. *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; Maududi AA. 1976. *Human Rights in Islam*. Leicester: Islamic Foundation; Baderin MA. 2003. *International Human Rights and Islamic Law*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; Jayyusi SK. 2005. *Human Rights in Arab Thought: A Reader: Ethical Universalism and the Arab Tradition*. London and New York: IB Tauris; Hunter ST and Malik H. 2005. *Islam and Human Rights: Advancing a U.S.-Muslim Dialogue*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies; Hasan U. 2013. *No Compulsion in Religion: Islam & the Freedom of Belief*. London: Quilliam; Ganji A. 2015. "Islam and Human Rights", *Huffington Post*, 6 May; Salam G. 2014. "Are Human Rights Compatible With Islamic Values?", *Huffington Post*, 10 February.

32 Pew Research Center. 2014. *The Global Religious Landscape*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, December.

33 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

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level of legal restrictions or of social hostilities relating to religion and countries that have a dominant religious group that represents more than seventy percent of the population.

Regarding legal restrictions on religious freedom, the Pew Research Center identifies twenty-three countries that have very high legal restrictions,³⁴ with eighteen of those countries having a dominant religious group representing a supermajority (defined as representing seventy percent or more of the population).³⁵ And of the countries that the Pew research identifies as having high legal restrictions, twenty-three out of twenty-seven of those countries also have a single religion that is a supermajority.³⁶ These numbers are startling for those who believe that religion is and should be primarily a positive force in society. The fact that so many countries with a dominant religious group have high restrictions on religious freedom is a rather sobering source of concern.

The statistics are similar with respect to social hostilities relating to religion. According to the Pew research, there are eleven countries with very high levels of social hostilities, and ten of those countries have a supermajority religion.³⁷ For those countries with high social hostilities, thirty-three out of forty-two of those countries also have a dominant supermajority religious group.³⁸ Many of these countries have Muslim supermajorities, but there are countries with Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist majorities as well.³⁹

These statistics might lead to the conclusion that religious majorities are among the more powerful forces that limit religious freedom around the world. However, it is significant that none of the countries with very high or high legal restrictions has a Catholic supermajority. Though there are thirty-three countries that have a Catholic supermajority, these countries all have moderate or low legal restrictions on religious freedom.⁴⁰ The same is true of the countries with very high social hostilities (none have a Catholic supermajority) and is largely true of the countries with high social hostilities as well, with only four of them (Italy, Mexico, Slovakia, and the Philippines) having a Catholic religious majority.⁴¹ What is the reason for these statistical discrepancies? Why is it less likely for a nation with a Catholic supermajority to have high legal restrictions or social hostilities toward religion? A large part of the answer can be found in the Catholic doctrine of religious freedom.

34 Pew Research Center. 2017. *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 11 April, 4.

35 Pew Research Center, *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015*.

36 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

37 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

38 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

39 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

40 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*, 45-50.

41 Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*.

Catholic doctrine of religious freedom

In 1965, the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council issued *Dignitatis Humanae*, a Declaration on Religious Freedom.⁴² This declaration emphasised religious freedom as not only compatible with Catholic doctrine but as a God-given right.⁴³ It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to determine whether this attitude toward religious freedom can explain the correlation between Catholic supermajorities and lower restrictions on religious freedom, but I posit that it is not a mere coincidence.⁴⁴ It is the influence of and actions taken by a religious supermajority to protect religious freedom that has made the difference.

The correlation between Catholic supermajorities and low restrictions on religious freedom is even more remarkable because, in the century and a half before the Second Vatican Council (especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth century), Catholic leaders were very critical of religious freedom. In 1791, Pope Pius VI called religious freedom an "imaginary dream" and "senseless words."⁴⁵ Pope Gregory XVI, in 1832, denounced what he called "the putrid font of indifferentism, the insanity that liberty of conscience should be claimed for just anyone."⁴⁶ However, it is important to understand the historical context surrounding those statements. In large measure, they were responding to the French Revolution, which was in many ways a fight against the Catholic establishment and a denunciation of the Church of Rome.⁴⁷ Thus, it is quite understandable that the Catholic Church viewed the values of the French Revolution, including liberty and equality, as being inimical to truth and to the interests and stature of the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, the Second Vatican Council marked a change in that perspective. Its declaration on religious freedom arose in the aftermath of the human rights revolution, and was at least in part rooted in the experience of Catholics from the United States. They had experienced life as a religious minority in the United States and had come to value religious freedom as an important right that made it possible for them to live and thrive in American culture. *Dignitatus Humanae* accomplishes something truly significant: it declares that the human person has a

42 Second Vatican Council. 1965. *Dignitatus Humanae*, 7 December.

43 Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatus Humanae*.

44 Scharffs BG. 2016. "Religious Majorities and Restrictions on Religion", *Notre Dame Law Review* 91:1419 (analysing the correlation between Catholic supermajorities and lower restrictions and "considering the role that *Dignitatis Humanae* may have played in this remarkable pattern of low legal restrictions and social hostilities in Catholic-majority countries").

45 Pope Pius VI. 1791. "Brief *Quod Aliquantum*", 10 March, in *Recueil des allocutions consistoriales encyclique et autres lettres Apostoliques* [Collection of encyclical consistorial addresses and other Apostolic letters]. Second Edition. Paris: Librairie Adrien le Clere, 45, 53-55.

46 Pope Gregory XVI. 1832. *Mirari Vos* (On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism), 15 August, para 14.

47 See Aulard A. 1966. *Christianity and the French Revolution*. Frazer LG (transl.). New York: Howard Fertig, Inc.; Betros G. 2010. "The French Revolution and the Catholic Church", *History Today* 68, December.

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right to religious freedom and that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the fundamental right to dignity of the human person. The Catholic Church found within the Catholic tradition, within its own doctrine and teachings, the resources to defend religious freedom as an important human right. Significantly, the declaration was not a rejection of church doctrine, but rather a deeper understating and elucidation of the truths that were already a fundamental part of the Catholic Church.

Islamic resources for religious freedom

The Islamic tradition similarly has meaningful resources that articulate the importance of religious freedom. One of these was called to my attention by a friend, a convert to Islam, and comes from the story of Noah and the ark. The story of Noah is common to Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.⁴⁸ There is an account of Noah and the ark in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and there is also a version in the Quran. The Quranic version, however, includes a detail that is not included in the Old Testament story. In the Quran's telling, Noah has a son who chooses not to board the ark with the rest of the family. As the rain falls and the water rises, Noah sails by the mountain where the son is scrambling up, and Noah lovingly implores him to come to the safety of the ark. The son, however, responds by saying, more or less, "Papa, don't worry, this mountain will save me."⁴⁹ Noah respected his son's freedom to choose, even though it brought about his own destruction. My Muslim friend explained that this story teaches her just how important religious freedom was to Noah and how important it is to Allah.

There are also a number of other scriptures and passages in the Quran that are cited in defence of religious freedom. One such scripture states that "there is no compulsion in religion."⁵⁰ Another scripture states that "[t]he truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so."⁵¹ Still another verse teaches that a love for the truth cannot be compelled: "[y]ou ... cannot guide everyone you love to the truth; it is God who guides whoever He will: He knows best those who will follow guidance."⁵² Thus, while it is clear that apostasy is a serious sin in Islam, as it is in Judaism, Christianity, and many other religious traditions, freedom to choose is similarly important. To say that religious freedom is a foundational right does not mean to say that the way one exercises that freedom is unimportant.

48 Ahmad F. 2012. "Noah and the Flood", *Review of Religions*, January.

49 Quran, 11:42-43.

50 Quran, 2:256.

51 Quran, 18:29.

52 Quran, 28:56.

Radicalisation and relationships

Radicalisation and extremism often have as much to do with relationships as they do with ideologies. I would like to illustrate this point with a story. I was recently in Indonesia participating in a conference. While there, I was able to attend a presentation that was given by a reformed terrorist with the name of Ali Imron.⁵³ This man was one of the infamous Bali Bombers,⁵⁴ but that day he recounted the story of how he had been deradicalised.

In telling his story, the ex-bomber stated that we often think of radicalisation as a matter of ideology. We often have the idea that there is a contest between radical ideology and moderate ideology, and that whichever is more persuasive will win out. And while he admitted that there was some truth to this view, his own experience had demonstrated otherwise. He had been radicalised, he explained, simply because his brothers were radical. They were his older brothers, he listened to and trusted them – and his brothers had been some of the key masterminds behind this bombing. After the attack, both of his brothers were executed and Imron, along with some others, were sent to jail.

Imron and his brothers were from a city in Indonesia called Malang. In Malang, there is a prevalent moderate movement, called Muhammadiyah, that is looking for more of a “middle way” within Indonesian Islam. Syamsul Arifin, a scholar at Muhammadiyah University, was troubled by the fact that these extremists had come from within the Muhammadiyah movement, from within his own community. Syamsul started visiting Imron and the others with him in prison. Ali Imron recounted that Syamsul visited him and the other prisoners each week and would talk to them about Islam and why their interpretations were mistaken. Imron explained that, as prisoners, they had nothing to do. They were bored and the visits became almost fun because they could argue and debate and pass the time. After a while things began to change for Imron; he began to sense that Syamsul really cared about him. It was then that Imron started to trust and truly listen to Syamsul. Imron realised that what Syamsul had to say about Islam was better, more appealing, and more true than what he had been taught by his brothers. This was the first step towards his deradicalisation, and it began with a relationship of trust.

Imron transformed from a radical ideologue who countenanced the use of violence in the name of God to someone who now spends his life trying to deradicalise other young Muslim men. This story illustrates the importance of relationships. Radicalisation is not just a matter of ideology, it is a matter of trust. It is a matter of whom people look to for guidance as to what their religious tradition means and what the religious tradition requires of them. People must remember this principle as they seek to make a difference through their own relationships and within their own religious traditions.

53 Imron A. 2007. *Ali Imron, Sang Pengebom* [Ali Imron, the bomber]. Jakarta: Penerbit Republika.

54 “The 12 October 2002 Bali bombing plot”, *BBC News*, 11 October 2012.

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Religious majorities protecting religious minorities

Religious majorities can also play a direct role in protecting religious minorities. This point is also best illustrated with a story. Not long ago, I was participating in a teaching programme in Mandalay, Myanmar. While there, I met a Buddhist monk named Uzin Pein, a man small in stature, perhaps only five feet tall and maybe 100 pounds soaking wet, who runs a monastery near Mandalay. Now in Myanmar, there is a great deal of ethnic and religious tension between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority. This tension was especially heightened in the area near Mandalay because of the sizeable Muslim community that resided there, though they were still in the minority. Due to this tension, conflict escalated quickly when a dispute arose involving a Muslim shopkeeper and her Buddhist customer.

As I understand the story, the shopkeeper ran a jewelry store and the customer wanted a refund. This disagreement led to an argument and the shop owner and the customer were taken to the police station, where the situation was resolved. However, many of the Buddhist motorbike taxi drivers were already unhappy with this shopkeeper because she had previously complained to authorities about their bikes blocking her store. They used this dispute over a refund to claim that she (as a Muslim) had unfairly harassed a Buddhist buyer, and in retaliation they burned down another building that she owned.

Muslims in the area were furious. Tensions increased dramatically, and everyone in the community waited with baited breath to see what would happen next. At first, each group kept away from the other – both the Muslims and the Buddhists remained in their own neighborhoods. However, during this time there was a Buddhist monk from the countryside who came riding into town on his scooter to run some errands. He was not part of the community or the conflict, but, while riding through the Muslim part of town, he was knocked off his scooter in front of the mosque. An angry mob gathered there, beat him, and then burned him alive.

This was the spark that started the fire, and it was soon open season on Muslims in the area. Over the next week, there were hundreds of Muslims who were killed, some barbarically. There was even a Muslim orphanage that was raided, and some of the children were cut to pieces. Muslims in the area were afraid for their lives, and anyone who had a place to go fled the area. Many of them, however, were poor, had families, and did not have the option of fleeing. Some of the Muslims turned to Buddhist friends and found shelter with them. More than eight hundred of them took shelter at a nearby Buddhist monastery, which was run by this Buddhist monk, named Uzin Pein. He gave them shelter and food for a number of days.

One night a mob marched on the monastery. The mob was made up of more than a hundred people with pitchforks, burning torches, machetes, and spears. They went to the door and demanded that the monk release the Muslims that he was sheltering. However, the monk stood in front of the entrance to his monastery and rebuffed the mob, saying, “[i]f you are to harm them, you need to kill me first.” He stood his ground until eventually the mob grew tired and went home.

Through his actions and his moral courage, this one Buddhist monk saved the lives of more than eight hundred people. He saved people who were different from him. People who had a different faith and a different ethnicity, people who belonged to a group that had done something terrible to one of his colleagues. Yet, he not only refused to blame the group for the wrongdoing of the few, but he actively protected them. This is an incredible example of the importance of religious majorities being willing to protect minorities within their midst, and the potential that they have to do so.

The protection of religious freedom can often be focused on protecting the rights of majorities. We hear, for example, about the “War on Christmas” in the United States.⁵⁵ However, the truly extreme and dire violations of religious freedom – persecution, genocide, people being forced from their homes, churches or places of worship burned – usually happen to religious minorities.⁵⁶ That is why religious majorities need to step in and take an active role in protecting religious freedom.

Religion itself is an important resource in the effort to develop respect for the religious freedom and rights of others. Indeed, such freedom is fundamental to almost all Abrahamic religious traditions, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other, in that freely choosing obedience is an important prerequisite to obtaining God’s favour.⁵⁷ Without freedom, individuals are not able to choose that obedience. Therefore, it is not surprising that when one considers such religious traditions, we find meaningful and rich resources to defend the rights of conscience and the rights of freedom of religion and belief.

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN COMBATTING EXTREMISM

Not only can religion provide us with the resources that we need, but religious freedom itself can effectively help to counteract violence and violent extremism. Too close of a relationship between a majority religion and a state can be harmful for both the religion and the state. Close relationships between the state and a

55 See Stack L. 2016. “How the ‘War on Christmas’ Controversy Was Created”, *The New York Times*, 19 December.

56 See Summers O. 2016. “Religious Freedom Violations Affect 74% of World”, Washington, DC: American Center for Law and Justice, September; WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. 2011. “Religious Minorities and Rights for Religious Freedom”. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2 December; Wickremesinhe R. 2016. “Confronting Intolerance: Continued Violations Against Religious Minorities in Sri Lanka”. London: Minority Rights Group International, 16 December, 20; United States Department of State. 2016. “2015 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran”; United States Department of State. 2016. “2015 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sudan”.

57 See “Lesson 19: Free Will”, *Al-Islam.org*; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2011. “Freedom to Choose”, in *Gospel Principles*, 17-21; Jacobs J and Broyd I. 1906. “Free Will”, in *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Online at: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6337-free-will>; Ligonier Ministries. n.d. “What is Free Will?”. Online at: <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/what-free-will/>

3. The role of religion and religious freedom in responding to violent extremism

majority religion tend to increase conflict among different religious groups and political dissension by members of minority religions.

Government identification with one religion

Difficulties often arise when a government is identified too closely with one particular religion. We see evidence of this in the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the governments of Russia and Greece, where many are worried that the secular state is deteriorating.⁵⁸ We also see this in the relationship between the government of Iran with the clergy of the Shiite sect,⁵⁹ and in the relationship of the Saudi Arabian government with the Sunni family of Islam.⁶⁰ This is also evident in India, in the relationship between the current government and Hinduism. There, President Narendra Modi has been widely criticised for his wide embrace of Hindu nationalism. Many religious minorities in India, even those who previously felt safe and defended the approach to secularism and pluralism in India, are now feeling threatened.⁶¹ We also see similar problems in the over-identification of Buddhism with the governments of Bhutan and Myanmar.⁶²

What we can learn from these examples is that a robust alliance between a majority religion and a state can be detrimental not just for the state, but for the religion itself. Both the religion and the state become more unstable and alienate religious minorities. A good illustration of this is what happened to the Catholic Church in Spain after its controversial connection with the government throughout the twentieth century. There, the relationship between the two served to undermine the moral authority and legitimacy of the Church.⁶³

Another of the most salient problems that can arise when the government identifies too closely with a single religion is that other religions might feel that they are the victims of discrimination or even hostility.⁶⁴ When this occurs, the religious minorities may be inclined to oppose the government, perhaps even by violent

58 See Salles A. 2001. "Orthodox Church Appears To Be Exempt From Austerity Measures", *The Guardian*, 4 October; Watson I. 2017. "The Rise of the Russian Orthodox Church", CNN, 30 March.

59 See Bruno G. 2008. "Religion and Politics in Iran". New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June.

60 See Shane S. 2016. "Saudis and Extremism: 'Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters'", *The New York Times*, 25 August.

61 See "What Hindu Nationalism Means for India's Future", *Stratfor Worldview*, 6 June.

62 See Crossette B. 2013. "Buddhist Violence in Burma", *The Nation*, 30 April; Arora V. 2011. "Buddhist Bhutan Wrestles With 'Shocking' Abuse Study", *Huffington Post*, 10 February.

63 See Relaño Pastor E. 2007. "Spanish Catholic Church in Franco Regime: A Marriage of Convenience", *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* [Ecclesiastical History] 20:275-287; Richburg KB. 2005. "Church's Influence Waning in Once Ferently Catholic Spain", *The Washington Post*, 11 April.

64 See Shellnutt K. 2016. "Russia's Newest Law: No Evangelizing Outside of Church", *Christianity Today*, 8 July.

means.⁶⁵ Religious freedom can help to prevent the development of such a situation by providing peace of mind and protection to those who might otherwise feel isolated or defenceless because of governmental connections to larger religions.

Misuse of blasphemy laws

Another way that religious freedom can counter violent extremism is to avoid misusing blasphemy laws. Blasphemy laws are in many places understandable: religious sensitivities often seek protection, and that is not unreasonable. Indeed, for one who takes their faith seriously, mockery or blasphemy of the sacred, including that which is held sacred by others, is deeply offensive. However, prosecution for violating blasphemy laws is in large measure directed against minorities and dissenters from within majority groups.⁶⁶

A recent chilling example of this occurring is the prosecution of a former Indonesian Christian candidate for governor of Jakarta.⁶⁷ This Christian candidate suggested during the campaign that it was permissible for Muslims to vote for a non-Muslim. However, after he was defeated in the election by a candidate who argued that Muslims should vote only for another Muslim, his claim was deemed to be blasphemy. This assessment was upheld by a court and he was sentenced to prison.⁶⁸

Situations like this are almost guaranteed to increase radicalisation. Condemning ordinary disagreement as blasphemy will almost certainly make Indonesia less tolerant and will result in less protection for religious freedom. In Indonesia there is a troubling faction of the Muslim majority who seek to replace Pancasila, the official state ideology of Indonesia that respects freedom of religion, with Islam as the state ideology.⁶⁹ For many years, those in the West have harboured a hope that the more moderate and pluralistic Islam in Indonesia would be a positive influence on countries in the Middle East. However, this hope has been replaced with worry that Indonesia will instead be influenced by countries in the Middle East. Given what has already been permitted in the name of blasphemy laws, such shifts are concerning.

65 See Jerryson M et al. (eds). 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Violence*. New York: Oxford Press; Under Caesar's Sword Project. 2018. "The Contexts of Persecution", in *In Response to Persecution: Findings of the Under Caesar's Sword Project on Global Christian Communities*, Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame. Online at: <http://ucs.nd.edu/report/the-contexts-of-persecution>

66 See World Council of Churches Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. 2013. "Misuse of the Blasphemy Law and Religious Minorities in Pakistan". Geneva: World Council of Churches; "Pakistan: How the Blasphemy Laws Enable Abuse", *Amnesty International*, 21 December; United States Department of State. 2016. "2015 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan", 10 August.

67 Cochrane J. 2017. "Christian Governor in Indonesia Found Guilty of Blasphemy Against Islam", *The New York Times*, 9 May.

68 Cochrane, "Christian Governor in Indonesia Found Guilty of Blasphemy Against Islam".

69 See Azumardi A. 2006. *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy*. Jakarta: Solstice Publishing.

3. The role of religion and religious freedom in responding to violent extremism

Religious freedom (if respected and promoted) could act as a counterbalance to blasphemy laws, allowing them to fulfill their purpose without becoming tools of suppression.

Moving beyond thinking in terms of trade-offs

Still another way that religious freedom can help respond to violent extremism is through the perspective that it can provide. By understanding and seeking to protect the rights of others as well as our own, we can hope to advance beyond thinking in terms of violent trade-offs. Religious freedom can help us to better examine our own biases and allows us to empathise and find common ground.

The failure to compromise and protect freedom can result in political unrest and, ultimately, revolution. In the United States Declaration of Independence, the failure to protect liberty was cited as one of the primary reasons for the revolution: “[b]ut when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government.”⁷⁰ Similarly, the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us that “... it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”⁷¹ Fundamental rights must thus be acknowledged, and religious freedom is an avenue of compromise and conciliation, one that respects and protects the rights of all people and paves the way for peace, where there might otherwise be conflict.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a truth that we must confront: a great deal of the violence in the world is tied to religion. As much as this may pain us to acknowledge, we do not have the luxury to ignore or deny this. Rather, we must recognise this and move on to finding solutions.

Fortunately, there is evidence that many of the excesses of religion can be addressed by religion itself, while other excesses can be addressed through religious freedom. The coexistence of religion and religious freedom can be powerful tools in our attempts to find and create lasting peace.

Religions can promote religious freedom as a religious doctrine and can seek to better emphasise fundamental religious traditions that teach constructive and positive doctrines. Religious majorities can use their influence to promote peace and to protect those who may be marginalised or defenceless. Individual believers can strive to build relationships of trust that will facilitate greater unity. Religious freedom can provide an alternative to violence through the equal treatment of all different groups. The state can decrease social tensions by avoiding

⁷⁰ United States of America. 1776. Declaration of Independence, para 2.

⁷¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

over-identification with and favouritism towards a majority religious group. Religious freedom can also act as a counterbalance to ensure that religion is not twisted into a channel for persecuting others, and it can create better understanding and empathy in areas that might otherwise seem black and white. Indeed, simply respecting religious freedom can be powerful: extremism in the name of religion is less likely to occur in environments where religion is free and the rights of conscience are respected as constitutional and social values.

Together, religions and religious freedom themselves can be some of the best tools available to confront the growing violence and religious extremism that is present in the world today. These tools could be particularly effective in confronting religious extremism in Africa. Many African countries are divided along religious lines and suffer from sectarian violence and violent extremism. The tools analysed in this chapter could be instructive for governments and religious groups in Africa that are attempting to ease religious tension and combat religious extremism.