

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM: CAUSES, CHARACTERISTICS, DIVERSITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Religious extremism is a global issue that raises questions and tensions in many countries. In Nigeria, it is a known fact that religion has been abused in many ways to suit the interests of some groups of people who consider themselves custodians and defenders of religious values and faith. Apparently, the trend of violence in Nigeria is a sign of the need for thorough research and study about religions in theological institutions in the area of comparative religion studies (Islam). Extremists use religion as a shield either for political or economic agenda and manipulate their gullible followers in order to impose their ideology on them. The reality of religious extremism in Nigeria is a challenge to theological education to search for a lasting solution that will enable Nigerians to overcome the problem and focus on their economic, social and genuine religious progress. Our institutions need to produce people with critical minds that will challenge religious extremism. This study, therefore, recommends that a good knowledge of Islam should not be limited to those who work in Islamic countries. It is high time a serious study of Islam was included in the Seminary curriculum. It is disingenuous enough to think that Islam is an issue for Islamic countries alone. A decade or so ago, no one knew that militant Islamic extremism would be an issue in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda. Hence, theological education has a very crucial role in curbing the problem of religious extremism in our nations.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf, Boko Haram, Al-Shabab, ISIS, Khorasan, Al-Nusra, - the list continues! History has always seen one religious extremist group or another coming up. However, there is something that is particular about Islamic extremism as we see it today: the proliferation of militant extremist groups and their capacity to do harm is unprecedented. While it is true that the means of doing harm are more sophisticated than in centuries past, the question is, how do we understand this phenomenon? Not just the phenomenon of extremism in Islam in general but its resurgence with a force not seen before.

We have to admit that it is we who name certain groups or trends of Islam as “extremists”. It is important to ask ourselves how a so-called extremist Muslim understands himself. There is a great likelihood that what the infidel calls “extremism” is just total submission in the proper sense of the word. It is purely ISLAM. And the moderates? The so called extremist sees the so called moderates as half-baked Muslims, people who need help to become better Muslims or else face the sort reserved for the infidels.

Given that the world’s increasing awareness of the reality of Islamic extremism has come mainly through the terrorist attacks and wars waged against governments by extremist groups, our reflection on the above theme will dwell mainly on modern Islamic extremism, without denying the fact that some roots of this phenomenon go centuries into the history of Islam.

From the outset, some points need clarification: Extremism can be found in other religions and not only in Islam. Secondly, not all extremist groups are armed or terrorist groups. However, Islamic armed groups

have always found their driving force in extremist theology and propaganda. Extremist theological and ideological positions have often given birth to extremist armed groups.

Since we are becoming more and more aware of Islamic extremism through its militancy, our reflection will tend to bend more towards militant extremism than merely theological extremism.

(A) Some of the Causes of Islamic Extremism

1. The Doctrinal Causes of Extremism

A number of gullible commentators have sought to talk of extremism while distancing it from religion. Faced with the atrocities committed by extremist groups but avoiding hurting feelings, comments have been heard such as this: "What we are seeing belongs to no religion because no religion condones the killing of innocent people". Whatever the case, the history of humanity has shown that while religion has been a motivating force in creating wonderful monuments such as the pyramids, wonderful pieces of art such as the *Pieta* of Michelangelo, religion has also been a force behind the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, the burning of heretics and witches during the inquisition and, of course, the bombing of the Twin Towers as well as the kidnapping of hundreds of girls in northern Nigeria.

Islamic extremism, at a doctrinal level, can be traced to the distant past, finding some of its seeds in the Kharijite movement, those men who chose to withdraw their support from Khalif Ali for having opted for human arbitration during the first intra-Islamic wars. As in modern times, although Islamic extremism has come and still comes dressed in different colours with different leaders, and sometimes feigning doctrinal differences, there is a common doctrinal denominator which can be traced generally, either in *Wahhabism* or in *Salafism*. Mention may be made of *Shi'a* extremist groups such as *Hezbollah* in Lebanon, but if taken at an international level, we discover that *Sunni* (*Salafist* and *Wahhabist*) extremism is more notable than any other.

Established in the eighteenth century by ibn Abdu Wahhab, *Wahhabism* remains a doctrinal well from which different extremist movements drink, though at different degrees. A number of Islamic scholars in the Islamic world itself contend that religious extremism cannot but be, to a great extent, traced to *Wahhabism*. After the 2002 bombing, which claimed more than 180 victims in Bali (Indonesia), an Indonesian writer, Yusuf Wanandi, had this to say: "Perhaps the most important thing is the ideological struggle against radicalism and terrorism in the name of Islam. Although Muslims in Indonesia are mainly moderate, they need help and assistance in expanding their educational systems, which have so far been able to withstand the extremist influences of *Wahhabism* from Saudi Arabia".

2. The Absence of a Forum or Space to Question Doctrine

Extremism in Islam is closely related to an abiding conflict, if not a lack of conjugation between doctrine and faith as a personal experience of God. Looking back at the history of Islam, we note that while being a Muslim was, at the beginning, something spontaneous and free to the extent that some collaborators of Muhammad, such as Ibn Waraqa, remained unconverted, there came a moment (at Medina) when not being a Muslim meant that one was an enemy. According to Malek Chebel, it is at this moment that Muslims lose the freedom to adhere to any faith that may suggest his/her conscience.

From the above, the resultant trend is that anyone who claims to be a custodian of doctrinal truth will as well claim power over other believers. What is to be noted is that extremist groups and movements claim, each in its own way, to be the true custodians of Islam or at least to be the right representatives of the interests of the Islamic community. In other words, it is generally accepted that the truth and validity of doctrine have to be guaranteed by the power and control of believers. This helps us understand why

extremist armed groups will be put in the category of unbelievers, even those Muslims who do not hold their own doctrine.

Put in other words, extremism is the fruit of the fact that what is acclaimed as orthodoxy, especially by the extremists themselves, cannot be questioned or debated. This is, as noted already, aggravated by the fact that those who claim to be custodians of orthodoxy reserve themselves a God-given mandate to control believers and annihilate whoever is judged an enemy of religion.

3. Modern Historical Factor

While it is possible to delve into causes of extremism right from the first days of Islam, here we note what has come out in modern history as historical factors which have contributed (not solely) in one way or another to Islamic extremism.

It must be noted that the abolishing of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 and the founding of the Republic of Turkey by Mustafa Ataturk was a turning point in the history of Islam and also in the sentiments of many Muslims. Having suffered the shame of seeing many Muslim territories colonized by infidels, the disappearance of the caliphate was the last thing that many Muslims would have expected. This resulted in the nostalgia for the “good old days” when Islam manifested its power and dominance. This situation, for many Muslims, had to be reversed in a way or another. In fact, many extremist groups have had as one of their main objectives to re-establish the Caliphate, a political space where only Islam rules and commands; a place where a powerful Islam can be seen. Boko Haram in Nigeria and The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria are doing just that.

Between the years 1968 and 1979, when many states were basking in the post-colonial sun, many Arabic states tried and failed to establish democratic states. Failure to establish democratic institutions led to the growth of Islamic-nationalist groups. Secondly, the war between Israel and Arabs was going on. This was also the moment when groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and *Al-Fatah* appeared on the scene. As Palestine groups, which borrowed not a few things from other revolutionary movements, especially in Latin America, carried on their struggle through kidnappings and hi-jacking, they became models for other movements in the region.

While it can be argued that Palestinian groups were not motivated by doctrinal reasons as such, other religiously motivated groups learnt much from the former. With time, these religiously motivated groups established themselves strongly in different countries and got financial support from conservative Islamic regimes such as Saudi Arabia to counter nationalist movements.

The years between 1979 and 1991 were marked by, among other things, two events which would later have a great influence on militant extremism. We have, in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution of Iran. The anti-soviet war in Afghanistan, for which many fighters were trained by the USA and Western powers, provided not only the basis for what we can name the modern “mujahideen culture” but also a good number of well-trained men who became key fighters in subsequent armed groups such as the *Taliban* and *Al-Qaeda*. Volunteers for the anti-soviet war in Afghanistan had been from many origins. They played roles in setting up armed groups in other parts of the world, such as North Africa, Chechnya, the Philippines, etc.

As for the Iranian Revolution, though Iran is, by doctrine, an enemy of Sunni Islam, the anti-Western propaganda (from Iran) found its way into the minds of many Sunni extremist groups.

4. Geopolitics and the Ignorance of Western Powers

A close look at modern geopolitical forces behind conflicts in the modern world cannot exclude the case we are treating. In other words, while we can talk of dormant extremism in some cases, we can as well mention that certain foreign political powers have fueled extremism. An example is that of the birth of the *Taliban*. The Soviet presence in Afghanistan had to be countered by the Americans by training young, zealous people into a force which the Soviets had to reckon with.

However, although the “young theology students” needed arms and training, their religious zeal was more of a determining factor in the war than the arsenal of arms received from the Americans. After the departure of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the students were to become (later) a real problem for their Western masters.

While Assad of Syria is fighting for his survival, the forces fighting him, which are of diverse extremist tendencies, have received much material and support from Western countries. In the same way, the USA and Western governments have continued to maintain political correctness by not talking about the help that extremist groups are having from Arab countries. In fact, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar are major American allies, they stand as the main source of finances for extremist movements.

Successive American presidents have always tried to be politically correct by talking of Islamic extremism as a reality that is at the periphery of true Islam. While doing so, they have, at the same time, portrayed a certain degree of ignorance about the subject of their talk. At a recent conference of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which was held in Detroit, Jimmy Carter (a former president of the USA) assured the gathering that “The principles of *Allah* are there to bring peace and justice to all”. What he did not know is that “peace and justice” for an Islamic extremist is not what it is for the average American. Following the extremist way of understanding, you can only talk of peace and justice for all when “all” have embraced Islam and the *Sharia*.

The ignorance of Western powers is what prevented them from foreseeing the danger which lay behind extremist groups taking power during the so-called Arab Spring. As NATO jet fighters helped in smoking out the forces of Muammar Gaddafi, they contributed, at the same time, to the confusion in Libya and, worse, to the expansion of the influence of *Al-Qaeda* in North Africa.

B. Some Characteristics of Islamic Extremism

Islamic extremism is characterised by certain diversity between groups; however, there are certain things which run through all these groups, like common denominators. These common characteristics are mainly based on theological orientation, political or social objectives and others. Here, we point out some of those general characteristics which are common to most of the extremist groups.

1. A Strictly Literal Interpretation of the *Qur'an*

The *Qur'an*, believed to be the revealed word of God, has to be taken as literally as possible. Obedience to God is to be measured, among other things, by the strict observance of the letters of the *Qur'an*. However, a question may arise as to why extremists do not take literally those verses which seem to promote openness to Christians. An example of such verses is: “Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians... Whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does well they shall have their reward from their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve” (Q. 2:62).

Among the issues about which Muslim theologians have no unanimous position is the exegetical approach to the text of the *Qur'an*. What can be said as far as extremist groups are concerned is that they follow the dominant exegetical trend, which gives priority to a verse “revealed” at a later date in cases where there are

two apparently conflicting verses. In other words, the latter verses abrogate earlier verses. Given that verses which carry a degree of violence and exclusiveness are generally “late comers”, the Islamic extremist naturally gives priority to these than to any other.

Noteworthy is the fact that not all extremist individual has the ability to read a verse in relationship with another (synoptically, as it were). If we are to speak of an extremist exegesis, this is founded, usually, on an individual or a few individual self-styled scholars who come out stressing the importance of certain verses without reading the others. No wonder that extremism is fueled mainly by Friday homilies, publications of individual spiritual leaders and, in our days, extremism media. The problem has to be looked at in terms of the inability of many individuals (in Islam) to read the text objectively by themselves and have a personal way of living according to it. It is the problem of a space where people can debate freely about exegetical issues.

2. The Stress on the *Jihad*

Although not all extremist groups are militant groups, and although differences can be traced between extremist movements and organisations, *Jihad* is one of those realities which are stressed by all. From Arabic j-h-d, meaning to endeavour, strive or labour, the term is commonly used to refer to a struggle. Although struggle can be of many forms (spiritual, economic, political), extremist ideologists have tended to use the term *jihad* for war against all un-Islamic individuals, societies, and systems. While advocates of a “moderate Islam” argue that ‘*Jihad*’ is more of a spiritual struggle than a physical one, a number of historians agree that the concept has been greatly used to refer to that duty which is of every Muslim believer, to take action against infidels or nonbelievers whether these individuals, governments or social structures.

One of the most notable ideologists of Islamic extremism, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, who is also a pillar in the pantheon of the Muslim Brothers, put the *Jihad* as the most important duty of a Muslim after faith in God and belief in God’s being one (*tawhid*). Usman bin Laden, Anman al-Zawahri and other leaders of *Al-Qaeda* affiliated movements have preached the importance of jihad as the only way to defend Muslims and also to raise the banner of Islam in all parts of the world.

According to Islamic extremist ideologists, the concept of the jihad implies seeing the world as divided into two: the believers and the infidels, the Muslims and their enemies. With this division, there is a conflict of forces which are competing to dominate the world. As long as Islam and the *Sharia* have not covered the whole extent of planet earth, the world is in a state of war, and the jihad is a duty for all believers.

3. Failure to have an Objective Reading of History

Extremist groups of all religions have always had a bad relationship with history. Objectivity is lacking as they bend history to serve their own ideology. Just as some Christian extremists find nothing worth calling Christianity between the death of the last Apostle and the Reformation, Islamic extremist groups see “unbelief” or *jahliyya* anywhere between themselves and the so called “well-guided Khalifs”. They thus have the mission to bring about an era of belief or faith which was lost centuries ago.

Another way of reading history upside down is the insistence on a “golden age” of Islam during the time of the first *Khalifs*. Extremist groups teach a time (past) of pure Islam and a perfect society. They fail to admit that the so called “golden age” was also a time of infighting between different factions of Islam. In fact, three of the four first *Khalifs* did not die a natural death; they were assassinated.

Islamic extremism writes history in such a way that Islam has always been a victim: **victim** of the crusades, **victim** of colonialism, **victim** of imperialism. Muslim historians, extremists or non-extremists fail to admit that if Islamic invasions went as far as Spain, it was not in defense of Islam but for expansionist motives. They never write about the injustices committed by Arabic Muslim slave traders on the African continent.

4. Conspiracy Theories

Islamic extremism, like other forms of extremism, has the tendency of holding conspiracy theories which are created and promoted to boost its propaganda, thus appealing to the sympathy of the masses. An example of such theories is the one so dear to Usama Bin Laden: the crusade. Bin Laden and many Muslims have held, as pure truth, the fact that the West/USA is, in fact, doing nothing other than continuing from where the Crusaders of the Middle Ages stopped. Western powers and their allies, according to the theory, are enemies of Islam and have a secret plot to wipe Islam from the face of the earth.

Given the fact that the dominant Arab-Islamic mindset is not famous for critical thinking, conspiracy theories which pit the West against Islam and Muslims have been so effective to the extent that even thousands of Western Muslims have joined the ranks of Islamic extremist fighters in the war against western powers and their allies.

C. Diversity of Extremist Movements

Islamic extremism shows many faces as represented by the many different groups of extremist orientation. The question is, how do we understand this assortment of groups and their diversity? The diversity of extremist groups can be understood based mainly on their ideological orientation and political or geopolitical goals.

i) Ideological/Theological Orientation

We have already affirmed that Islamic extremism is not a monolithic reality. Different theological orientations, for example, have given different theological motivations. Iraq has been and is a case that sheds much light on the issue. While there is a clear war between the government and the rebels, there is also a war between the different groups, mainly those of *Shi'a* orientation fighting against those of *Sunni* orientation. At present, while groups under the umbrella of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" are *Sunni*, others such as *Kataib* Hezbollah (Hezbollah brigades) and Promised Day Brigades are of *Shi'a* orientation. Ideological and theological orientations often define and determine the source of funding. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been very active in funding *Sunni* extremist groups, while Iran has been the main source of funding and support for *Shi'a* extremist groups.

ii) Political/Geo-Political vision

While all extremists share the belief of a future world ruled and dominated by Islam, their respective political visions, for the present, may differ. A number of extremist groups (such as *Boko Haram* of Nigeria, allied defense forces of Uganda and others) are endeavouring to establish in a definite geographical place a strictly Islamic state ruled by *Sharia*. Other groups, such as *Al-Qaeda*, are having an approach which is international or transnational.

What has been noted in recent years is that sometimes, groups with a locally limited political vision are a product of bigger extremist organisations with an international or transnational vision. As a principle, there is no contradiction between groups in this area.

D. Challenges Linked to Islamic Extremism

1. Security

After the 11th September bombing of the Twin Towers, the world has become extra security conscious. This can be noted at airports, train stations and other places. Security has become an issue in countries which have armed Islamic extremist groups. Such is the case for Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, Nigeria, and others. Even in countries where there are no guerrilla groups, small so called “terrorist cells” are a security threat. European countries are faced with this reality, especially in France, Great Britain, and Germany.

Kidnapping and piracy have become important sources of income for armed extremist groups. This has led to certain parts of the world to be marked in ‘red’ as far as security is concerned.

2. Displacement of Populations

With the upsurge of operations carried out by *Boko Haram* in Nigeria, the number of internally displaced people in Nigeria is estimated to be 2.5 million. As for the war carried out by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the number of refugees is believed to have reached about 7.9 million. The same trend can be traced elsewhere. Displacement of large numbers of people due to violent attacks by extremist groups has this in particular: Some of the displaced, especially in Iraq, are minority communities (Christian and *Yazidis*) whose future existence is in balance.

3. Social Disintegration and Alienation

This is a phenomenon which goes beyond the displacement of populations. Certain populations have lived together regardless of their religious differences. With religious extremism, marked by a clear discrimination of non-Muslims (for example, in “*Salaffi*” Islam), people who were once good neighbours begin to be suspicious of each other. This is the case in Zanzibar, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries where extremism has drawn a wedge between Christian and Muslim communities.

In Africa, where the extended family is still an important social institution, a new phenomenon is appearing: people who were once joined by family ties become as if they are unrelated. The *Salafis* are supposed to limit their contacts with infidels even if they are of their kin. Cultural celebrations such as last funeral rites are not allowed by *Salafis*, and they have to avoid such gatherings.

Social cohesion goes hand in hand with certain aspects of culture, such as the way people present themselves in public. Extremist Muslims are introducing something that is culturally alienating, and this is the strict exclusion of women from the public. This is done by the adoption of the **Burka** (an Afghan type of Islamic dress which covers the whole body of the woman, allowing her to see through a net) or the complete veil Saudi style, crudely referred to as Ninja style) which leaves just a small opening for the eyes. In an African setting, there are realities which shock!

4. Loss of Cultural Heritage and Treasures

The world remained dumbfounded in 2001 when Yaliban destroyed the 1700-year old Budha statues in Afghanistan. The reality has been the same, where the fighters of the Islamic State have passed. Monuments treasured by Sufi Muslims have been razed to the ground, not to speak of monasteries which have been ransacked. At the moment when the Muslim Brothers took power in Egypt, there were fears (never materialised) that the pyramids would be destroyed. Beyond ravaging monuments and manuscripts (as it happened in Mali), extremists have also been unfriendly with certain cultural

treasures such as traditional dances, music, theater and games. In brief, Islamic extremism has been, in modern times, one of the greatest forces against culture and civilisation.

5. Economic Challenges

Given the fact that economic growth is closely linked with security, it is to be noted that certain countries have seen their economies crumble due to the activities of economic extremists. Kenya, Egypt, Yemen and Nigeria are some of the countries whose tourist industries have been greatly affected.

While the effects of extremism on economies can be looked at from the point of view of security, another area is worth mentioning: freedom. Where extremists have tried to impose strict Sharia law, it is evident that the result has been a drop in tourists.

6. Growing Adherence to Extremism

Extremism breeds extremism! It is to be admitted that, at least for the moment, Islamic extremism is reminiscent of the legendary ten-headed hydra. When one head is cut off, another one sprouts. As successive governments continue to declare war on extremism, what is observed is that it is on the increase.

Islamic extremism is not only a phenomenon in predominantly Islamic countries. It is sweeping away, slowly but surely, that culture of freedom and liberty of which countries such as France used to be proud of. What we have to note here is that countries or societies which are well known for being secular societies are slowly being radicalised. A few cases below are indicative of this trend:

- a. France: At a moment when it is estimated that militant extremists in Syria and Iraq have required at least 3,000 Europeans, 1,000 of these are French nationals.
- b. Pakistan: After the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the Gilani Foundation did a poll of Pakistanis and found that 51% of them grieved for the terrorist mastermind, with 44% of them stating that he was a martyr.
- c. Egypt: As of 2009, 87% of Egyptians said they agreed with the goals of Al-Qaeda in forcing the US to withdraw forces from the Middle East. 65% said they wanted strict Sharia law in every Islamic country. As of that same date, 69% of Egyptians said they had either positive or mixed feelings about Osama Bin Laden. In 2010, 95% of Egyptians said it was good that Islam is playing a major role in politics.
- d. United States: A 2013 poll showed that 13% of American Muslims said that violence against civilians is often, sometimes or rarely justified to defend Islam. A 2011 poll showed that 21% of Muslims are concerned about extremism among Muslim Americans. 19% of American Muslims as of 2011 said they were either favourable toward *Al-Qaeda* or didn't know. What can be deduced from the above is that talking of "a tiny radical Muslim minority" or saying that "Islamic extremists are not representative of Islam" is to ignore the fact that extremism is not reducing but increasing. At local levels, and this has to be taken note of with all seriousness, there is always an increasing number of Madrassas or Quranic schools which are doing no more than sowing in small Muslims the seed of extremism. It is usually from these strict Quranic schools that we have the young fighters or *mujahideen*.

Conclusion

The Church has endeavoured and is still endeavouring to engage in dialogue with all religions, Islam included. When it comes to extremist groups, we have to admit that there is no space for real dialogue.

Otherwise, if Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are being decimated, it is not due to a lack of Christians specialised in interreligious dialogue.

Whatever the case, the question remains: What is there to be done at the level of the Church and its institutions in order to counter Islamic extremism? Here, I propose some avenues open to discussion and debate:

1. A good knowledge of Islam should not be limited to those who work in Islamic countries. It is high time a serious study of Islam was included in the Seminary curriculum. It is disingenuous enough to think that Islam is an issue for Islamic countries. A decade ago, no one knew that militant Islamic extremism would be an issue in countries such as Kenya and Uganda.
2. Christians In So Called Developed Countries (Especially In Europe) Should Be Taught To Come Out And speak for their brothers and sisters who are victims of extremism. This is almost in the category of wishful thinking for the reason that the West has lost the Christian spirit that would influence politicians and governments to act in defense of the rights of minority communities such as the Christians in Iraq.
3. Christians, especially in sub-Saharan countries, should be encouraged to be more active in politics and policy making. While Christians are the majority in a number of countries, their weight is seldom felt when it comes to policy making. One cannot but ask: Where are Christian politicians, and how does their Christianity affect their participation in the august house?

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