



What is Extremism?

BRIEFING NOTE

This briefing is intended to equip you as a teacher, with accurate, objective, and nuanced information about extremism. Please note that we have **NOT** produced this resource with the intention that it is used directly with students.

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objective, and nuanced information about extremism. We aim to help you feel more confident exploring issues around extremism with your students.

In particular, it will consider where violent extremism occurs and who its victims are; how some extremists use religious ideology to justify their actions; and explore the challenges of talking about extremism.

Please note that we have **not** produced this resource with the intention that it is used directly with students. If you have any questions or comments please get in contact with us at: helpdesk@generation.global

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To provide you with a deeper and more complex understanding of what extremism is, its links to violence, key groups and movements involved, and whom extremism affects.
- To provide you with knowledge from trustworthy sources and information that will enable you to feel more confident facilitating dialogue, and answering questions from your students on this topic.
- To help support you in developing your students' ability to think about extremism in a more critical way so that they are better able to recognise, analyse and resist extremist views, by creating a space in your classroom for dialogue on this topic.
- To identify some of the most important challenges that people face when exploring these issues. While these debates are the same that are discussed in the media, and occur in government, they are also likely to be the most important ones in your classroom discussions.

We strongly recommend that you also refer to our *Teaching Difficult Dialogue, Theory and Practice* resource before using this briefing in the classroom.

Introduction

Discussions about extremism, particularly the global threat of ISIS, currently dominate public debate, column inches, and the halls of government. Classrooms constitute a crucial forum for young people to engage with the many challenging elements surrounding this subject.

Generation Global has used its expertise in developing innovative educational pedagogies and teaching resources, informed by the research and understanding of the Centre on Religion & Geopolitics, to develop a series of briefings that break down the current media and policy debates surrounding extremism into resources for facilitating dialogue on these issues in the classroom.

This briefing is intended to equip you as a teacher, with accurate,

What is Extremism?

THE FOCUS OF OUR APPROACH

While extreme manifestations of religious and political ideologies exist all over the world, and in every religious tradition (and a variety are discussed in the case studies in the appendix), this document will focus on two different phenomena, Salafi-jihadism and Theravada Buddhist Nationalism.

Salafi-jihadi extremism is an issue that affects over 50 countries around the world – particularly Muslim majority countries – and is absolutely at the forefront of the news agenda in every country. This is the manifestation of extremism that you are most likely to discuss in class, and about which your pupils are most likely to have strong, and possibly misinformed opinions, so it is important that you have tools to handle those discussions.

The term *Salafi-jihadi* is used to denote groups who believe that they are trying to return to the perceived ‘pure’ Islam of the Prophet and his companions (‘Salafi’), and who believe that this is best accomplished through violent struggle (‘jihad’) against everyone who disagrees with their interpretation. Salafi-jihadism is highly sectarian, calling for the killing of Shia and other Muslims deemed ‘apostates’, and believes that ‘disbelievers’, including civilians, should be killed. Ultimately, the ideology seeks (or claims in the case of ISIS) the creation of an Islamic state, or Caliphate, which is governed by a strict interpretation of Sharia.

Salafi-jihadi extremism is manifested most notably by ISIS, but also by other groups, including [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#), [Jabhat Fateh al-Sham](#) (formerly al-Qaeda’s franchise in Syria), [Boko Haram](#) (Nigeria), [al-Shabaab](#) (Somalia), and [Abu Sayyaf](#) (Philippines) and many others. This is, therefore, a global movement, and one that seeks to overthrow or replace governments through violence.

The second example outlined is that of **Theravada Nationalist Buddhist extremism** in South East Asia (notably Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Southern Thailand), which has featured persecution of, and violence against, Muslims and other minority groups in those countries. We’ve chosen this as it is, largely, sidelined by the global media, yet is another manifestation of the way that religious ideas are corrupted and used to justify violence and oppression. This is a much more regional issue, and one where the extremists are likely to work within the governmental processes to achieve their aims.

The *Buddhist Nationalist* movement of South East Asia includes groups such as [969](#) in Myanmar, [Bodu Bala Sena](#) (Buddhist Power Force) in Sri Lanka and the [Tahanpra](#) (Military Monks) in [Thailand](#). This is a regional movement, specific to these countries. These groups exist in countries where there is a substantial Buddhist majority, and small Muslim minorities, where they articulate their actions as ‘defending’ Buddhism from attacks from external forces. They have often used the atrocities of Salafi-Ji-

hadi groups around the world to build up their narrative of a ‘Muslim’ threat, enabling them to instigate riots directed against minority Muslim populations. This violence has killed hundreds, forced hundreds of thousands into camps and to flee (leading to thousands dying at sea), forced thousands of others into exploitation by people traffickers, and have whipped up prejudice and hatred within communities. This particular manifestation of Buddhist Nationalism is found in countries where the dominant Buddhist tradition is Theravada.

DEFINING EXTREMISM

This document does not seek to conclusively define ‘extremism’, a term that is used in many different contexts by politicians, religious leaders and the media, with limited existing consensus (some aspects of this are explored in the ‘Challenges’ section below).

It is beyond the scope of this document to resolve this intractable issue – and it is likely to be beyond the scope of your classroom discussions too. It is **not** unreasonable however, to identify some of the *patterns of behaviour* that might characterise an extremist approach. Even if we do not precisely set out to define extremism, we can effectively identify its characteristics.

For the extremist, their beliefs, whether religious or political, are entirely correct and unquestionable; and they believe themselves to have a duty to impose those beliefs on the rest of humanity – if necessary using violence – in order to bring about a more perfect future state.

As such, some of the signs of extremism include:

- Seeking to impose one’s beliefs, ideologies or values on others through force or indoctrination and being intolerant of other beliefs and perspectives.
- A binary ‘them and us’ world view, which seeks to divide communities along communal lines, enforcing this through violence.
- Seeking to limit or curtail the civil liberties or human rights of others on the basis of gender, religion, sexuality and race.
- Excluding other groups, particularly minorities, from public life through discrimination, fomenting hatred, or through acts of violence.

EXTREMISM IN RELIGION

While we often think of religious traditions as monolithic (i.e. ‘one single thing’), the truth is a great deal more complicated. Within every religious tradition lies a complex and inter-related diversity; many different traditions coexisting (frequently uncomfortably) within one larger tradition. Each of these

sub-traditions or denominations¹ has its own specific narrative, ideology, set of values or particular practices; each of which may be complete anathema to the members of other sub traditions. Indeed, there is often more animosity between groups who hold beliefs that to the outsider may seem practically identical, with the animosity centered around one specific element of theology, than between individuals from entirely different faiths.

Thus, for example, one may find Sunni, Shia, Salafi, and Sufi Muslims; Protestant, Catholic, Methodist, Evangelical and Baptist Christians; Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Pure Land and Zen Buddhists; the same breadth can be found in all religious traditions. Each of these denominations believe slightly (or sometimes very) different things from one another, each practice in a different way, and each has a set of values that may be related or unique. Religion is a complicated thing.

Religious extremism does not simply involve identifying the followers of one particular denomination as ‘the extremists’, and thus absolve all the other traditions of any such association. Extremism may well exist across a range of denominations, even if it always amounts to only a tiny minority of the tradition as a whole. This means that many discussions about the ideology of religious extremism can be quickly inflated into very abstruse and challenging theological arguments – of interest to, and comprehensible to, only a small number of people. This aids the extremists who are then able to suggest that their points of view are just as valid as anyone else’s, while also obscuring the distinctions between conservative and extremist points of view. (See the ‘Challenges’ section below).

So once again, we should look for the *characteristics* of extremism: what does it look like in this context?

Probably the most critical element here is that extremist interpretations are *unrepresentative*. This means that, by definition, they are rejected by the vast majority of the practitioners of that religion. While it may be possible to construct a theological argument for these beliefs or practices, this is an unsound construction, based upon unusual and misinformed interpretations of traditions or texts. While the majority voice of the religion may speak out against the extremists², it is often hard for them to be heard, as extremist groups are well equipped to dominate public debate, politics and media.

SALAFI JIHADISM

Salafi-jihadi ideas are unrepresentative of the broad spectrum of Islamic belief and practice which promotes compassion and justice for all people regardless of religion or social status.

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to

¹ While denomination is the easiest English term, it is usually applied in a specifically Christian context. We use it here only for ease of use – and not to ignore other terms that are more accurate in various traditions.

² For an example of this see the ‘Not in my name’ campaign set up by British Muslims opposed to the destructive ideology of ISIS. <http://isisnotinmyname.com/>

God, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for God can best protect both” (Quran, 4:35).

Orthodox Islam emphasises that religion should not be characterised by extremes, and that faith should be promoted by the example of the good lives led by those who practice it.

“We made you to be a community of the middle way, so that (with the example of your lives) you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind” (Quran, 2:143).

In rejecting some of the key ideas espoused by Salafi-jihadi thinkers, mainstream Muslims emphasise the critical idea in Islamic teaching that people should not be forced to accept religious belief;

“There is no compulsion in religion” (Quran 2:257).

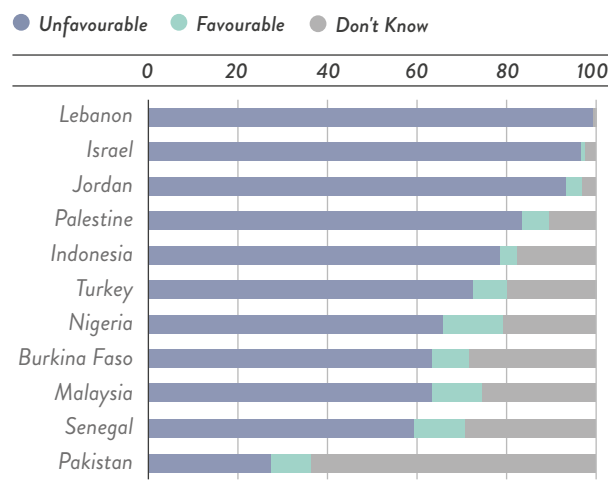
And would refer to the Hadith (reported sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) saying his teaching was that people should obey their government, and not seek to overthrow them;

“You should listen to and obey your ruler, even if he is [not among your tribe]” (Bukhari, 9-89-256).

Please see the diagram below, illustrating the overwhelmingly negative views of ISIS from countries with majority Muslim populations.

FIG. 1 Views of ISIS Overwhelmingly Negative

Do you have a _ _ _ _ opinion of the Islamist militant group in Iraq and Syria known as ISIS?



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%. Source: Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey. Pew Research Centre.

If they are unrepresentative, then how do these violent extremists use religious ideology to justify their actions?

Religious ideology is used by violent extremists to justify their actions in a variety of ways – for example:

They *pick and choose* which parts of religious texts to use and how to interpret those religious texts, emphasising elements of

scripture and ignoring other parts as suits them. Usually the majority of a religion's adherents take a holistic and full-spectrum approach to understanding religious scripture by acknowledging the time and context in which it came about. Extremists often misuse religious scripture in order to justify their own violent actions.

This is a particularly important issue in Islam, where the Quran has a very central place for all Muslims. This is made more complex by the challenges of 'translating' the Quran. Whenever a text is translated it is changed, so translations are thought of as interpretations. Just as Salafi-jihadis might critique some English translations of the Quran, it is equally important to note that some of their interpretations are unorthodox too. Examples of interpretations of scripture that would be considered unorthodox include:

The Quranic verse, "*kill the pagans [or infidels or unbelievers] wherever you find them*" [9:5] is often cited by Salafi-jihadi groups for their killing of those they do not consider to be Islamic. When contextualised as taking place within a segment on military ethics in the time of the Prophet Mohammed, however, it is clear that the verse is applicable only in the case of 'polytheists' who continue aggression and attacks against Muslims during the course of a war, despite peace offerings (i.e. those who were breaking what were seen at the time as the rules of engagement).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claim to quote the Quran when they say in their propaganda "*and spend in the Cause of Allah (Jihad of all Kinds) and do not throw yourselves with your own hands into destruction. And do good; Truly, Allah loves the doers of good*" [2: 195]. However the translation of 'Cause of Allah' as 'Jihad of all Kinds' is an unconventional one, and stretches the meaning of the verse far from the mainstream understanding. Even a rival jihadi group translate the meaning of this phrase as referring to not being "*miserly with the wealth that Allah has provided them with*" during Ramadan.

Extremists also ignore prevailing messages of peace within the text, encapsulated by prominent verses, including, "*if anyone kills a person, it is as if he kills all mankind while if anyone saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind*" (5:32).

Extremists use religious concepts that many people of their faith are familiar with but their *interpretation* of those concepts is not the same as most. For example:

"*Jihad*", meaning "struggle", is understood by many Islamist extremists, such as ISIS, to relate exclusively to violent action. The concept of jihad, which literally means struggle, is something that Muslims the world over consider to be a responsibility, however the nature of the jihad that the vast majority of Muslims ascribe to is a struggle within one's self. This struggle, which has been described as the 'greater jihad' by the Prophet Muhammed, is a constant spiritual endeavour that centres on the pursuit of truth, justice, and peace, while the armed struggle,

which comes with numerous conditions and stipulations, is described as the 'lesser jihad'.³

The Islamic concept of "*iman*", broadly meaning "faith", is interpreted narrowly by ISIS to focus entirely on violent "acts of faith." "*Ihsan*", roughly translated as "good works" is also used in ISIS propaganda. Once again, however, they describe the ultimate "good work" as violent jihad.

Extremists have a divisive approach to others, they create a "them and us" narrative along religious lines. They identify themselves as the small, oppressed and persecuted group of righteous believers, and the rest of the world as their adversaries. The theological implication is that they are the small group who are on God's side, and thus their opponents are also the opponents of God. For example:

A defining feature of Salafi-jihadi groups is the insistence on declaring "*takfir*" meaning "excommunication", on those who disagree with the particular understandings and interpretations of the group. Such a judgement makes the person, even if they are a Muslim, a legitimate target for violence in the eyes of the jihadists. Thus, it is simple for Salafi-jihadis to reject the work of respected Muslim scholars, community leaders, or thinkers – just by declaring them "*takfir*" they are no longer regarded as Muslim, lose all authority, and become legitimate targets of jihadi violence. However, there remains no consensus on who receives this designation among different Salafi-jihadi groups. ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham are three major Salafi-jihadi groups operating in Syria today, yet their attitudes towards who should be considered a 'true Muslim' differ greatly. Ultimately, these attitudes have been demonstrated as being incredibly fluid and unpredictable, with each group using the designation as and when it suits their battlefield objectives.

A key ideological weapon in ISIS' arsenal is its rigid categorisation of who may be classified as a Muslim. Despite there being almost 1.8 billion Muslims in the world, the only people that ISIS considers to be Muslims are those that abide by its strictly enforced interpretation of Islam. By constantly accusing people of apostasy, the act of leaving the religion, or *kufr*, of being a disbeliever, ISIS defines all those opposed to its worldview as outsiders. Furthermore, in ISIS' view, all those designated as apostates and disbelievers must be killed.

They use the transnational nature of religion to universalise individual grievances as being part of a global struggle.

Salafi-jihadi groups work hard to twist the local grievances felt by people in many different places into a narrative of a global struggle between Muslims and the non-Muslim world. Thus they are able to attach smaller local narratives to their grand narrative of the global struggle between Islam and the enemies of Islam. They use the terms "*Dar al-Islam*" (the abode of peace) to refer to their Islamic state, and "*Dar al-Harb*" (the abode of war) to re-

³ Welby, P. What makes a religious extremist? <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/what-makes-religious-extremist>, 2016.

fer to all others; making their opposition to all who do not share their interpretation very clear. ISIS understand their struggle in cosmic terms – against evil, and for God.

Modern violent religious extremists sometimes refer back to historical conflicts and the failings of others to justify their current violence.

ISIS often refers to the Crusades of the 11th-13th century to justify violence towards others. However, as with their approach to scripture, historical references are ‘cherry picked’ to reflect their particular understanding. Saladin, a prominent commander who led Muslim forces during the Crusades, is exalted by extremist groups for his bravery in defending Islam, but the mercy he showed towards Christian invaders, including sparing the life of Richard the Lionheart, is written out of this understanding of history.

For more detailed analysis on the ideology behind Salafi-jihadism read the Centre on Religion & Geopolitics’ report [Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda](#).⁴

THERAVADA BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

The same phenomenon of unrepresentative ideas and approaches can be seen in the actions of *Buddhist Nationalists*, as the vast majority of Buddhists emphasize the Buddha’s profound teaching of non-violence, and the encouragement to cultivate *Metta* (Loving kindness) and *Karuna* (compassion) to all other beings.

The Buddha encouraged his followers to take responsibility for their own actions, and the key for judging this was whether or not harm would result for the self or others. The Buddha taught in the Dhammapadda that;

All are afraid of the stick, all hold their lives dear. Putting oneself in another’s place, one should not beat or kill others (Dhammapadda 130).

The Buddha also taught that his followers should also cultivate ‘right speech’, so merely speaking badly about others is strongly discouraged in Buddhism;

And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech (Magga-vibhanga Sutta).

Contemporary Buddhist leaders around the world have spoken out against violence, and particularly against the extremist views of the Buddhist Nationalists.

Buddha always teaches us about forgiveness, tolerance, compassion. If from one corner of your mind, some emotion makes you want to hit, or want to kill, then please remember Buddha’s faith. We are

followers of Buddha. (HH Dalai Lama XIV).

We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough. We must also learn ways to prevent others from killing. We cannot say “I am not responsible. They did it. My hands are clean.” (Thich Nhat Hanh).

Like Salafi-jihadi groups, Buddhist Nationalists also use religious ideology to justify their actions in a variety of ways:

For Buddhist nationalists, a selective use of scripture is effected through the authority traditionally ascribed to monks to be able to teach and interpret the teachings of the Buddha. Scriptures are important, but each individual’s guided spiritual practice is a source of wisdom as well, so it can be comparatively straightforward for monks to stress unorthodox viewpoints in an authoritative way.

They use religious concepts that many people of their faith are familiar with but their *interpretation* of those concepts is not the same as most. For example:

The Buddha condemned the killing or harming of other beings, and encouraged the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion. Buddhist Monks are seen as trained experts who possess authority to interpret these teachings, so when the Sri Lankan Monk, Venerable Piyadassi Maha Thera suggests ‘*You have to defend yourself. These are difficult questions. If someone goes to kill my mother, I’m going to stop him. So this could be a condition in which I am forced to kill*’ his hearers know that he is validating violence to ‘protect’ a Buddhist national identity.

Extremists have a divisive approach to others’ they create a “them and us” narrative along religious lines. They identify themselves as the small, oppressed and persecuted group of righteous believers, and the rest of the world as their adversaries. For example:

Buddhist nationalists across SE Asia, in countries where different religions have coexisted peacefully for centuries are now using language that clearly shows their prejudice against other minority communities; U Wirathu of the 969 movement in Myanmar stated that the aim of the Muslim Rohingya minority was to ‘*overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation*’, and he has also justified violence against Muslims by saying; “*You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog.*”

They often distance themselves from those who hold different beliefs for political purposes. For example:

- The leader of the Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) stated ‘This is a government created by Sinhala Buddhists and it must remain Sinhala Buddhist. This is a Sinhala country, Sinhala government. Democratic and pluralistic values are killing the Sinhala race’ – rejecting both the minority engagement with politics, and the democratic system itself.

⁴ El-Badawy, E. Comerford, M. Welby, P. Inside the Jihadi Mind, <http://tonyblair-faithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/inside-jihadi-mind>, 2016.

In Myanmar, the government have drafted restrictive laws at the urging of Buddhist groups – including both a law making it more difficult for couples of different religions to marry, and a law prohibiting people from changing religion.

- They use the transnational nature of religion to universalise individual grievances as being part of a global struggle. For example, land is often presented as religiously entitled or ‘holy’, and thus requiring political or even military action to reclaim it.
- The 969 movement in Myanmar is only one of a number of radical Buddhist organisations that seek to identify their Buddhist identities as under threat from outside influences. At a September 2014 meeting in Colombo, Buddhist leaders from Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka shared their concerns that Muslims are part of a global financial network stretching from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia that seeks to overthrow Buddhist control in their countries. At the same time, they seek to create narratives that suggest that the only correct identity for their countries is related to Buddhism.

For more detailed analysis on religion, conflict and extremism in Myanmar, [click here](#) for a detailed situation report.

WHY ARE THESE NARRATIVES COMPELLING?

These narratives, although they go against the majority understanding of these religious traditions, have gained considerable traction in populations around the world. As one can see when looking at the list of countries with active Salafi-jihadi groups, this is truly a global movement.

The essential simplicity of the narratives of these groups is usually based upon a clear series of opposed dichotomies; ‘we are good, they are bad’, ‘we serve God, they are against God’. These in turn can then be used straightforwardly to globalise any particular local grievance. So if I experience difficulty in achieving my aspirations, my understanding of the situation can be manipulated so this specific situation is seen as a result of a global prejudice against people of my group; in which case the solution is to see my struggle as part of a global one.

Violent extremists are also able to abuse the teachings of religion like this for a large number of reasons, but significant among those are:

A Lack of Religious Training (Religious Literacy)

Many people do not know their own traditions well, and rely on interpretation by local scholars or religious experts. If someone sets themselves up as a scholar, and is able to produce quotes that appear to represent a particular interpretation, people are not equipped to challenge them.

Many people do not have the language skills to be able to access their own texts. Most Muslims agree that the Quran should be

read in Arabic, and very often people will learn the Arabic texts without a full understanding of the context and traditions that go with it (or even, sometimes, of the meaning). Similarly, many Theravada Buddhists are only able to access the key Pali texts of their traditions in translation. They can then be easily convinced by those with a malicious agenda that narrow understandings are correct.

People often feel uncomfortable talking about religion, even their own religion, and may find themselves easily swayed by those who proclaim to have a deep understanding.

A Lack of Critical Thinking (Particularly Applied to Religion)

A well-rounded education is one that encourages people to analyse what they are being told, and critique the ideas – asking themselves if they are relevant or correct. Many education systems do not encourage this, and teaching is done in a very didactic way that implies that there is always only one correct answer. A mindset that is convinced that there is always only one answer will be attracted to a system of belief that encourages rigid adherence to a clear set of rules.

Many leading extremists are highly educated, but emerge from education systems that prioritise ‘knowing the right answer’ over analytical and critical thinking.

Many specifically religious systems of education emphasise rote memorisation over analysis of the text, and this can make individuals more vulnerable to extremist messages. This is often compounded by a requirement to study texts in a traditional or classical language (in the case of the example above either Arabic or Pali), rather than in a vernacular translation that can be more easily understood and questioned.⁵

The Politicisation of Religion

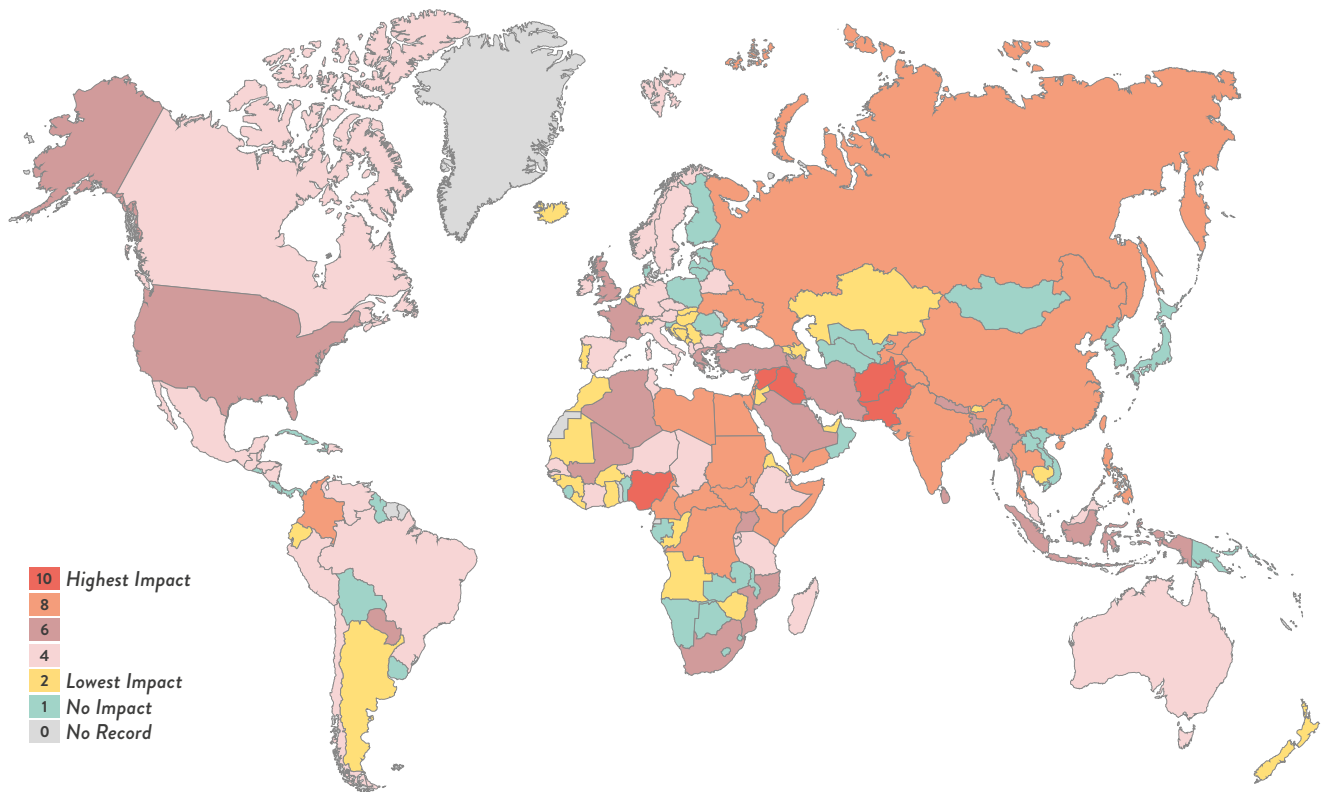
Religion and politics have been closely associated throughout history, but there is a growing global trend of the politicisation of religion in the public space, particularly where secular democratic models or processes of globalisation are perceived as having failed communities. This conflation of politics and religion manifests itself in a number of different ways, and in some cases can potentially leave society more vulnerable to violent extremist narratives.

Examples of the politicisation of religion include systems that promote voting along communal lines, majoritarian parties that neglect minorities and narrowly associate citizenship with a specific religious tradition, as well as parties seeking election in order to implement religious law as state law

⁵ For a deeper analysis of this challenge, see ‘Inside the Jihadi Mind’, p.50 onwards. El-Badawy, E. Comerford, M. Welby, P. Inside the Jihadi Mind, <http://tonyblair-faithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/inside-jihadi-mind>, 2016.

MAP 1 The Biggest Victims of Terror are Muslim

Index ranking of terrorism's impact across the world in 2014. Source: Institute for Economics & Peace



WHO SUFFERS FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

As we've seen above, Salafi-jihadism is a global form of violent extremism, and this means that the experience of violence is global too. In February 2016, it was estimated that 52% of violence attributable to religious extremism occurred in the Middle East and North Africa. 34% was in sub-Saharan Africa, and 13% in Central and South Asia.⁶ On 22nd March 2016, three bombings occurred in Belgium, Europe, killing 32 victims and injuring 300 others.

The vast majority of the victims of all violent Salafi-jihadi extremism attacks are Muslims. As well as targeting those of other faiths and beliefs, Salafi-jihadists target any Muslims who do not agree with their very narrow and extreme interpretation of Islam (having been declared apostates). Their victims include Muslims from a range of different traditions including Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Ahmadi, as well as other religious minorities such as Christians, Yazidis and Druzes.

The vast majority of attacks take place in Muslim majority countries, and as these are frequently indiscriminate, most victims are themselves Muslim. Where attacks have occurred in Europe, the violence has also been indiscriminate, and the victims have included those of many faiths, including Muslims. The many Muslims killed in the November 2015 attacks in Paris and six months later in Nice, are prominent examples of this.

Beyond the direct victims of the violence, the fact that most of this violence is based in Islamic countries means that the silent victims of this violence: those who are coerced or threatened into changing their way of life; those who are beaten, raped or enslaved; those who are robbed; those who are intimidated, are themselves Muslims. Responses to Islamist extremism that demonise Islam as a religion are both incorrect and alienate many of those people most profoundly affected by extremist violence.

CHALLENGES OF TALKING ABOUT EXTREMISM

In this section we will discuss some of the reasons why talking about extremism is itself so difficult. These are issues that have often been raised at a global level, but are also likely to affect the discussion in your classrooms as well.

The Difficulty of Definition

While, as we have seen, it is very difficult to define what extremism is, it is important not to allow the challenges in reaching a consensus on defining the issue to paralyse our response. As teachers we know that our students are exposed to many of these ideas, whether through the media, or through online connections, and we know that we have a duty to try to protect them from these influences. Fundamentally, if we're not helping young people to understand these issues, they will go to the internet for information, and evidence suggests that this is not necessarily an effective source for credible information on extremism.⁷

⁶ <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Extremism%20Monitor%2002.16.pdf>

⁷ For more on extremist content online, read Ahmed, M. & Lloyd George, F. A War of Keywords: How extremists are exploiting the internet and what to do about

While we might not be able to produce a consensus definition of extremism, we know that the actions of certain groups in the world are absolutely beyond the pale, and contrary to our shared human values. It is therefore critical to ensure that we are able to contribute effectively to our students' understandings of these key issues. There is enough clear and obvious extremism in the world, causing enough damage, for us to feel confident about engaging with this as an issue, and not allowing ourselves to get bogged down in complex debates about definition.

Active vs Passive Extremism

Probably the biggest single difficulty in this area is examining the grey area between those who might have extreme beliefs, but do not put them into practice. This is why we have particularly used the term Salafi-jihadism, as Salafis may have some very conservative religious views, but may also be outspoken non-violent opponents of groups like ISIS. Salafis may also approach scripture in a very literal manner and tend to ignore the importance of historical context in their understanding of religion, however they are by no means violent by definition. The majority of those who subscribe to the Salafi school of thought are quietist and do not engage in violence, with a greater focus placed on ritual worship and proselytizing.

In practical terms when dealing with this, it is most useful to consider the point made above about the 'signs' of extremism. While people might have ideas that we personally find extremely distasteful, and against which we are quite at liberty to argue, it is problematic to take action against people for 'having ideas.' Others would argue that having such ideas or beliefs might make one more vulnerable to becoming involved in or with extremist violence, and that a degree of intervention should be undertaken for the benefit of society as a whole.

One useful analogy for considering where we stand in relation to this are the ideas that have emerged from recent studies of the Holocaust in Europe during World War II. As well as those who were victims and those who were perpetrators, it is suggested that everyone else played a role; some were enablers, who took actions to help carry the crime out, others were bystanders who watched, knowing that it was happening; and a tiny few were upstanders, standing up against it and taking actions to sabotage the processes. One might suggest a similar approach for thinking about non-violent extremists; arguing that enabling extremist violence, either through conscious action or inaction also effectively makes one an extremist.

Piety/Conservatism vs. Extremism

One argument that is often put forward to make this discussion challenging is the assertion that 'one man's religious believer is another man's extremist'. This argues that all these ideas are relative, and that many forms of religious practice appear to be 'extreme,' meaning that anyone adopting those practices must

by definition be an 'extremist'.

This is fallacious.

From a western, secular perspective, some people might argue that religious practices which seem particularly uncomfortable or unusual (such as fasting, adopting modest dress, performing ascetic practices, or prolonged periods of silence) might be 'extreme', but these all fail the 'signs of extremism' criteria outlined above.

It is important to be able to make judgements about extremism based upon the 'signs of extremism.' If a believer's actions and practices are things that we would personally find uncomfortable or unusual, that does not make them an extremist. If, on the other hand, they seek to impose those practices on the rest of society particularly through violence, if they use their particular religious belief as a reason to oppress others, or to deny them their fundamental human rights, then that is more legitimately described as extremist.

Conflating religious conservatism with extremism is not just incorrect, it also alienates some of the most important allies in the battle against violence and militancy.

Security vs. Liberty

One of the particular challenges of the narrative of extremism is the way that quite legitimate concerns about extremist violence can be manipulated by governments and other organisations to serve their own agenda. The threat of Salafi-jihadi violence is a very real one in many countries around the world, and many different security and police agencies are waging a struggle to do what they can to protect their communities.

It is also true that this emphasis on security can be used to restrict liberty – either in the sense of removing or restricting rights from a whole population, or in the sense of using the accusation of 'terrorist' as a catch all term to deal with either perceived enemies of the regime, or minority populations.

The controversy over the recent 'Burkini Ban' in France, framed directly as a response to a series of devastating terror attacks in the country, shows the danger of conflating extremist threats with religious expression. Commentators have pointed out that the sight of four armed men forcing a woman to remove her clothes in public propagates the extremist narrative that the West is at war with Islam, rather than extremism and terrorism.⁸

Majority vs. Minority

An issue which is deeply embedded in many discussions of extremism is the issue of the relationship between majority and minority populations in any given society. In many societies

⁸ See Ferber, A. The shocking images of police undressing a burkini clad Muslim on Nice beach will fuel support for Isis, *Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/burkini-nice-beach-police-woman-undressed-isis-support-west-war-with-islam-a7207001.html>, 2016

it, <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/war-keywords>, 2016.

extremists emerge from minority populations, and are often able to use the grievances, real and perceived, felt by many minorities (social exclusion, poverty, lack of jobs, lack of social mobility, lack of representation) as a lever to impose their particular extremist worldview.

So for example, young people who feel disenfranchised and excluded from society are more likely to be easily recruited by extremists who wish to capitalise upon those feelings of exclusion. In return the recruiters offer a sense of belonging to a wider, global community; a strict set of rules that enable their hearers to turn their imposed exclusion into a virtue that they have chosen; as well as clear goals and aims (to overthrow that society that has been so indifferent to them, and replace it with a perfect society which will be ‘fair to everyone’).

These recruits then get involved in activities which, when enacted, or reported, serve to ratchet up their government’s security apparatus, and exacerbate fear and lack of understanding in communities, thereby creating a more fertile ground for the next round of extremist recruiters.

Free Speech vs. Hate Speech

This is a particularly challenging issue for many societies, and it is often useful to clarify quite precisely what we mean when we are talking about this, as different societies and cultures have different approaches to this issue (and frequently assume that everyone shares their approach, only to get angry when they discover that this is not the case).

So what are the limits to freedom of thought, speech and conscience? Should there be any at all? In the United States of America, free speech is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. This effectively means that everyone has the right to say exactly what they want, and can be sure that they have an inalienable right to do so, even if what they are saying is intended to stir up hatred, or prejudice. An idea often put forward in defense of this approach is that good ideas – those that are beneficial for society – will always overcome bad ones, and that it is the duty of all to engage in public discourse, and to challenge ideas to which they object.

Other countries have a very different approach, and limit freedom of speech in a number of ways. When this is done in relation to religious ideas, this is generally referred to as ‘blasphemy.’ In Pakistan there are blasphemy laws that carry punishment for anyone found guilty of desecrating the Quran or insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Many critics of this law point out that the prosecutions under this act are invariably used to either oppress religious minorities (over 50% of prosecutions have been brought against non-Muslims, who represent 3% of the national population), or to settle personal vendettas. It is also true that some prosecutions have been brought against Muslims for harassing non-Muslims.

As recently as 2009, the Republic of Ireland passed a law prohibiting the “publishing or uttering [of] matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters sacred by any religion, thereby intentionally causing outrage among a substantial number of adherents of that religion.”

Equally, many other countries with laws outlawing criticism of the state or imposing strict censorship may not be motivated by a religious ideology, but nevertheless place limitations on the freedoms of thought, speech, and conscience. Germany, for example, has strict laws against the use and display of uniforms, slogans or logos associated with the Nazi party in a political context.

An example of this debate:

On 7th January 2015 two Salafi-jihadi gunmen affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula killed 12 people at the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris, France. Charlie Hebdo magazine publishes content satirising many different points of view including a range of religious beliefs and practices, as well as political stances, including the French National Front party.

The extremist assault led to an outpouring of solidarity from around the world, encapsulated by the tagline ‘Je Suis Charlie,’ but it also spurred a debate about freedom of speech. The gunmen’s cited motive for the attack was retribution for the magazine’s controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. For many Muslims, any portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad is seen as profoundly disrespectful, but the Charlie Hebdo cartoons were particularly designed to be provocative, above and beyond the mere portrayal of the Prophet. The attack, which was condemned from all corners, nonetheless launched a wide discussion across Europe about freedom of speech, which was widely portrayed as a fundamental European value (although in fact most European countries impose some limitations on absolute freedom of speech).

Meanwhile, governments who are trying to prevent extremism spilling into violence are also entering into the controversial ground of balancing security and freedom of speech. After the Charlie Hebdo attack, the French comedian Dieudonné was arrested for an incredibly offensive, anti-Semitic post he wrote on his Facebook page. The French authorities arrested him on the basis that he was being an “apologist for terrorism”.

You can read further in-depth analysis on this [here](#).⁹

⁹ Shabi, R. Charlie Hebdo free speech debate: nobody is listening, *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/01/closed-debate-free-speech-charlie-hebdo-france-muslims-160114083733533.html>, 2016

Case Studies

CASE STUDY 1

JEWISH EXTREMISM: PRICE TAG ATTACKS

Militant Jewish extremists have carried out attacks, often involving arson and vandalism, in the name of their religion. These attacks are often called “price tag” attacks as the words “price tag” are often painted on walls during them. The attacks are perpetrated as supposed revenge for the Israeli government’s restrictions on the growth of settlements in the occupied West Bank, attacks carried out by Palestinians, and the mere presence of other religious groups in the country. According to Israeli law enforcement the attacks are carried out by extremists who seek to destabilize the country and overthrow the Israeli government in order to establish a new regime based exclusively on their interpretation of Halacha, Jewish religious law.¹⁰

Attacks have been aimed at multiple groups within Israel; in July 2015 an arson attack in the village of Duma in the West Bank killed a Palestinian infant. On the 17th June 2015 an arson attack took place at the Catholic Church of the Multiplication on the Sea of Galilee. The words “idols will be smashed” taken from a Jewish daily prayer, were written on the church’s walls, presenting an undeniably religious motivation for the attack.¹¹ In the wake of these events in 2015 Israeli officials have been clear in their commitment to end religious extremism of any kind and the state has made efforts to signal it treats all terrorists alike, regardless of religion. The Israeli government has called for “price tag” attacks to be referred to as “terrorist attacks”.

For more on Price Tag attacks [click here](#).

CASE STUDY 2

HINDU NATIONALISM

Hindu nationalist groups promote the concept of Hindutva – “Hindu-ness” – where Hindus have a position of dominance over other religious believers and support the assimilation of Hindu culture and traditions into state policies and institutions. Since independence the Indian state has been secular, and the inclusion of these ideas is extremely contentious.

Hindu nationalists have been known to perpetrate violence in the name of religion. In 2015, a state in India banned the sale and consumption of beef after pressure from right-wing Hindu groups that hold the cow as sacred. Although cow slaughter is

¹⁰ Price Tag and Extremist Attacks in Israel, ADL, [¹¹ 'Price Tag' Attacks and Jewish Extremism, Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, \[illegal in many states, the new law banning consumption and sale had repercussions across the country. Members of religious minorities and Dalits¹² have been harassed, attacked and even killed in several different states across the country even on the suspicion of possessing beef, or removing the corpses of dead cows.\]\(http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/briefing-note/%E2%80%98price-tag%E2%80%99-attacks-and-jewish-extremism, 2016.</p>
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Since December 2014, at least a dozen churches across India have been vandalized, several convent schools have been the target of attacks, and violence against the Christian community in India has peppered the headlines. In several cases, during late-night attacks Christian crosses were swapped for Hindu deities.

For the past few years, a group of Hindu nationalists has been involved in a conversion programme called “ghar wapsi” designed to convert members of minority religions to Hinduism. These minorities are promised economic and other social security benefits if they convert to Hinduism. Many of them are coerced and bribed into changing their faith – largely due to their extreme poverty and vulnerability.

For more reading on this [click here](#).

¹² Dalits are the social group at the bottom of the Indian Caste Hierarchy. Formerly known by different names such as Untouchables or Harijans, the term 'Dalit' meaning 'oppressed' is the term that the group's members prefer.