

# *Abusing Cultural Freedom: coercion in the name of God*

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**Abstract** Using violence to promote one's beliefs grabs the headlines. Nevertheless, today the main threat does not come from the violent few, who do get some attention in this paper, but from the growing numbers who wish coercively to impose their views on others. Most world cultures encompass such coercive variants, and the factors that contribute to their rise are discussed. The main focus is on coercive religion and fundamentalism, but some attention is paid to factors common to all coercive ideologies, notably the rejection of multiple identities. The threat from coercive ideologies may be reduced by multiculturalism, by distinguishing desirable from misguided appeals to 'freedom of religion', and by supporting open-mindedness and religious reform movements.

**Key words:** Christianity, Coercive use of religion, Culture, Fundamentalism, Identity, Islam, Jihad, Judaism, Multicultural societies, Religious extremism

## **Introduction: coercive uses of culture**

There is an unfortunate but fashionable view today that differences in culture in themselves bear the roots of conflict. This year's Human Development Report (HDR) (United Nations Development Programme, 2004) proposes exactly the reverse: the multiplicity of cultures in the world enhances our human experience, and cultures also enrich each other. The HDR viewpoint is based on a central tenet: that humanity advances not only by the progressive implementation of the whole range of human rights (which includes the right to culture), but also by the expansion of its choices and opportunities. The expansion of cultural choice and freedom is part and parcel of human development.

These are indeed laudable ideas. Yet in the name of culture views have been propounded and actions undertaken that have brought about precisely the opposite: the limitation of choice, the closure of

opportunities, the promotion of exclusiveness, the imposition of viewpoints, the coercion of people and, in the extreme case, conflict, violence and brutality. Nevertheless, the most important issue is *not* the deadly threat of those using violence to impose their views: however spectacular and abhorrent their deeds, in most countries this is a tiny minority. 'Coercive' is not co-terminous with 'violent'. Wishful thinking about multiculturalism should not lead to playing down the main danger: *the growing and unchecked influence of coercive ideologies, today mainly underpinned by religious views*. It is these ideologies that ultimately enable a tiny minority to justify their destructive actions. It is, above all, the ideologies themselves, and the movements that promote them, that require to be addressed.

However, we are faced not only with movements that coercively and through repression try to impose themselves on others 'from the outside', but also with movements that are 'self-excluding' — with minorities who shun contact with the majority because they regard themselves, their ideas, and their way of life as superior. Beyond a minimum of 'live and let live', they reject the ideas that underlie multicultural societies.

Such a sense of superiority exists among a variety of coercive cultures, notably those organized around ethnicity and nationalism. This paper, however, while considering some of the broader similarities, will focus on the currently most visible and controversial manifestation, namely the religious. It is most glaring among various fundamentalisms, but is also manifest in mainstream religion, in so far as its message is said to be derived, through revelation, from God — most notably in mainstream Islam, which regards itself as the only true and 'final' religion. In multicultural societies such as The Netherlands, discussed as a case study throughout this paper, coercive cultures and ideologies present a serious threat to democratic values; in more homogeneous societies they limit the extent to which alternative views of culture can emerge and prosper. In both cases they inhibit human development.

## **Religions and believers**

All religions and religious ideologies, from the clearly coercive ones (those we call fundamentalist) to profoundly modernized and 'liberal' versions, rest on the same basis: on *belief*, and ultimately on belief in divine revelation. Most liberal versions of religion have been willing to reinterpret traditional doctrines in the light of modern critical scholarship. Their adherents accept that no one religion contains the complete truth, and hence that their own views should not be imposed on others, although even liberal religion has an assertive streak: you *must* accept this *because* it is God's will. The more traditional (or orthodox) approaches have much less sympathy for religious pluralism and usually no compunction to state that theirs is the divinely given truth. While accepting some reinterpretation, traditional religions give human values,

orientations and norms supposedly divine underpinning by direct reference to holy books. Most extreme in this respect are fundamentalist religious views, to be discussed in greater detail later.

A clear-cut demarcation between traditional and fundamentalist views is seldom possible. The characteristic that most clearly separates them is the extent of aggressiveness in propounding the beliefs, the degree to which intolerance is actually translated into attempts at coercive behaviour. Nevertheless, very few fundamentalist movements try to impose their beliefs by force on those outside their own circle. Most fundamentalists are not ready to die — let alone kill — for their beliefs. Yes, there *are* violent fundamentalists, but it cannot be said that fundamentalists, in general, are extremists.

### *How religion can be misused and become coercive*

The term ‘fundamentalism’ has its origin in a series of pamphlets, written by evangelical churchmen and published in the United States between 1910 and 1915, entitled ‘The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth’. There are many overlapping definitions. A serviceable one, by Bruce Lawrence (1989), runs as follows: fundamentalism is “... the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific ... dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced. ... The most consistent denominator is opposition to Enlightenment values”.<sup>1</sup>

All fundamentalisms legitimate their existence by reference to a body of sacred writings. For fundamentalists, belief in the unalterable truth of those writings constitute a prime test of faith. The texts are beyond critical comment, regarded as directly inspired by God, and the social or historical context at the time of their origin is regarded as irrelevant: they are valid for all time. Fundamentalists resist ‘revisionist’ interpretations, such as those that brought about the original break among American Protestants, the ‘original’ twentieth-century fundamentalists (Ammerman, 1991). In the case of Islam, *all* Muslims (not only the fundamentalists) accept that Islam is the ‘final religion’ — that the Qur’an and the Sunna (the body of traditional customs attributed to Muhammed) contain all the essential truths required by all humanity from now until the end of time, and that Muhammed definitely was the last of the prophets. Islam is considered the only true faith, which Muslims have a duty to spread (Watt, 1988). Hindu fundamentalists also have their Truth — Hindutva — revealed in an ‘inerrant text’ (Frykenberg, 1994).

Fundamentalists reject ‘the modern’<sup>2</sup> as a set of values (although modern technology and modern business practices are wholeheartedly embraced). Vice versa, modernity has difficulty with the traditional religious views that explain evil and suffering in daily life, and help one cope with them (Webber, 1987). The result in modern societies is much

doubt, questioning and uncertainty, which leaves people disoriented and perplexed. Fundamentalism can be a response to such perplexities. Through a closed system of faith and order, fundamentalism picks out *one* alternative as the only one that is acceptable.

Such a socio-cultural position can have significant political consequences. Meyer suggests that, notwithstanding their disparities, all the world's fundamentalisms have a common element that links them: "... a style marked by an antagonistic approach to cultural differences, a strategy — oriented to gain supremacy — of politicising their own culture against the culture of the others, both within their own societies and outside" (Meyer, 2001, p. 8). Fred Halliday shares this view: all fundamentalisms ultimately aspire to political power and are characterized by intolerance, which is "... principally directed against people of their own community, against the perceived traitors in their midst" (1996, p. 3). Fundamentalisms restrict individual freedom and hinder human development.

Virtually all fundamentalist movements do not merely wish to see their views prevail in society, but will actively enter the political arena to achieve this. In the United States the 1963 landmark decision of the US Supreme Court — which ruled against the practice or teaching of any specific form of religion in schools — was especially important in this process (Bruce, 1990). Fundamentalists wanted their long-held beliefs to be reflected in public life, and certainly to be taught in school to their own children. Other developments that were taking the United States firmly down a liberal and secular road also caused alarm among fundamentalists.<sup>3</sup> In reaction to these, in 1979 the ultra-conservative political organization 'The Moral Majority' was founded: fundamentalists played a leading role in it. This changed their primary relationship with the larger society from one in which the main message had been that of individual salvation, and the main instrument to achieve this that of individual conversion, to one in which active participation in the public arena became the driving force. These 'political Christians' have manifestly influenced politics and society at the local and state levels, and two Presidents (Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush) have willingly listened to their viewpoints. Under the latter, people with views close to those of the fundamentalists have occupied positions of influence, and even of power, in national government, and their voice has been heard increasingly in public.

Issues such as these are even more clear-cut in Israel. There, too, the fundamentalists (the *Haredim*) want the consequences of their particular view of religion to be accepted by the rest of the community, or even to be imposed on it. The incorporation of aspects of Sabbath laws into secular legislation is significant, as is the total control by the religious Orthodox establishment of matters of personal status in relation to Jews (marriage, divorce, definition of who is a Jew). Some have even more extreme religiously inspired views. *Gush Emunim*, particularly active in the 1980s, was bent on securing a Jewish theocratic state that encompasses all of the Biblical lands of Israel, but also one that follows biblical religious precepts to the letter (Aran, 1991). More recently, the proposed withdrawal of

Jewish settlements from Gaza — in spite of the concomitant perpetuation of most of the settlements on the West Bank — has aroused a storm of protests and threats of action from a variety of similar groups.

Fundamentalist or traditional minorities have been able to make their demands strongly felt in the ‘horse-trading’ that goes with coalition formation in Israel’s pure proportional representation system. The compromises seemed worth while to the secular parties when they were looking for coalition partners. Yet the accumulation of such compromises has entrenched the power of those who strive for a Jewish State based on rules formulated thousands of years ago, and imposed on all its (Jewish) inhabitants. They have, in fact, achieved a substantial part of the fundamentalist goal, which is to impose ‘God’s law’ on all (Jewish) citizens, whether they are believers or not, thereby curtailing the freedom needed for human development.

Hindu fundamentalism is another notable example of the politicization of religion and its consequences. It arose largely in reaction first to militantly aggressive forms of Islam, then to missionary Christianity, and most recently to the spread of radical forms of secularism, including Marxism. Hindu fundamentalism embraces a large number of organizations that have close links with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), until recently in power in India. The BJP is an impassioned promoter of religious politics, placing Hinduism at the centre of its ideology. Its worldview is aggressively anti-Muslim, anti-Christian and anti-secularist, and the BJP castigates the ‘foreign ideas’ of the Congress Party as a “... pseudo-secularism [which] had reduced [Hindus] to the role of an innocent bystander in the game of politics”.<sup>4</sup>

Islamic fundamentalism emerged after a long period during which a less demanding form of Islam was dominant where the demands of *shari'a* were tempered by human realities. This so-called ‘medieval synthesis’, a combination of ideal goals and pragmatic responses, became what is now called traditionalist Islam, where the preservation of Muslim society through compromise takes precedence over the complete implementation of the law (Ayubi, 1991). However, from the late eighteenth century onwards, Islamic society was humiliated by Western conquest — and it half-heartedly Westernized. From then onwards, the waning of its power, and the increasing feeling of relative powerlessness, is said to have made Islam closed-minded and repressive, suspicious of outside ideas and influences. These feelings were magnified since the end of World War II, as a result of the repeated defeats of the Arab states in their wars with Israel, which have traumatized Muslims. In recent years the focus has shifted onto the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The widespread perception that the United States has consistently favoured one side in the conflict has convinced many people of the futility of normal political processes and driven them into the arms of those who stand for radical and holistic solutions. The self-proclamation of the United States as the unilateral arbiter of conflicts in the world is resented as an unwarranted — and

self-interested — intrusion in local affairs. All this does not have a simple one-to-one relation with the attraction that coercive (religious) ideologies have for people in the Islamic world, but it is widely accepted as a significant contributory factor.

### **A clash of civilizations or struggles of cultural styles?**

This is a suitable place to refer briefly to the debate stirred up by Samuel Huntington (1998) and his theory of the ‘clash of civilizations’. Across civilizations, which Huntington defines largely by differences in religion, he sees incompatible convictions in a wide range of areas: state and citizen, woman and man, religion and the relation with God, rights and duties, the individual and society. He believes that these incompatibilities have often led to conflicts and that they will do so to a greater extent in the future. He points to the resurgence in religion — and its more extreme manifestations — in many parts of the world.

Huntington has come under widespread attack, yet his arguments are more subtle than many of his critics are willing to concede. He deserves recognition for his insight that culture now occupies a key position in future developments, and that the world is in the throes of a shift of one model of civilization (‘Western dominance’) to another (‘pluriformity’). However, his critics are right in stressing that he is mistaken in making civilization or culture the *one* explanatory factor.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Huntington all too easily presents cultures as homogeneous — his ideal types hide a great deal of internal difference and heterogeneity. Extreme ideologies and coercive identities are found within all civilizations.

Thomas Meyer (2001) places that issue at the centre of his whole analysis. Meyer starts out from the opposite position to Huntington; namely, that there are great similarities in the basic values between different civilizations. He argues that there are no fundamentalist, traditional or modern cultures (or civilizations), but that fundamentalism, traditionalism, and modernism are three different ways of understanding each major culture and of giving it practical expression. He calls these ‘styles of civilization’. Meyer holds that the main confrontations and conflicts are not *between* civilizations, but *within* them, as these three styles are present in virtually all. And the three styles show similarities among themselves. All traditionalists tend to defend the patriarchal system, hierarchy, and the extended family; they see religion as central for individuals and communities. (The issue of male dominance, and the disastrous effects this can have on the quality of life of women, are particularly significant in my view.)<sup>6</sup> All fundamentalists oppose both modernism and traditionalism within their own religion or culture; they all want to achieve lasting supremacy and make religion into the very core of identity.

Nevertheless, Meyer paradoxically reaches a conclusion that has echoes of Huntington, seeing a ‘global cultural fault line’ not between

civilizations but within them, as a result of this politicization of cultural differences by the fundamentalists. Conflict is likely because it is inherent in fundamentalism to want to gain supremacy, and then to keep it. In that sense it is thoroughly coercive and anti-democratic. Like the Marxist-Leninists in their time, the fundamentalists' political ambition to stay in power provides a one-way street in politics — *once in, never out*.

### **Coercive ideologies are alike**

Coercive religions share a number of characteristics with other coercive ideologies.

#### *Reject multiple identities*

In contemporary societies, individuals have *multiple identities*. They 'play many roles', and those roles are not activated at the same time. As people have different images of each other, they have to be able to endure ambiguity and ambivalence. Ideologies, in their 'explanations' of how societies work, help people to deal with identities and their potential ambiguities.

Many contemporary societies are multicultural, harbouring substantial immigrant communities. In such multicultural societies different groups cherish different core identities, yet their identities also need to contain other aspects. That is disapproved of by groups with coercive ideologies, which attempt to impose one identity on people, insisting on the central importance of that one particular identity while denying the acceptability of others. They often also try to impose one particular view of the past, making differences with other cultures and groups unbridgeable. Those 'others', who do not belong to the in-group, are not entitled to respect, nor are the cultures to which they belong. Pierre-André Taguieff (1997) called this *heterophobia* (Berting, 2002). Nazism was the extreme twentieth-century expression of this ideology. In contemporary situations the pursuit of identity 'purity' occurs through less extreme means, without the Nazi's overt use of violence: the extreme Right will demand that 'newcomers' — often people who are second-generation or third-generation immigrants — assimilate, that they 'adjust or return'. Even people who favour a more multicultural 'integration' in fact often strive for a fairly similar result.

Fundamentalist religions aim to overcome the tensions between different aspects of a person's identity and to restore it to an unambiguous 'oneness'. "For *baredi* [ultra-Orthodox] Jews this means a rejection of the acculturative model of the Jewish enlightenment or *baskalah* that urged people to be 'a man in the street and a Jew in the home' ... The same might be said about those who have revived their attachment to Islam. They seek to be *kamal*, complete, and reject the idea of having several faces" (Heilman, 1995, p.87). Among Christians, the seeking of

fundamentalist ‘oneness’ has been especially strong in the evangelical churches in North America, from where they have spread across the world; they have been particularly active (and successful) in Latin America. Their impact on individual freedom and cultural diversity, and hence on human development, has been doubly negative: they promote blinkered identity, making religion into *the* identity, but in the process also contribute to the destruction of existing culture — especially among indigenous peoples (Ammerman, 1991).

All of this also applies to a range of new-fangled sects that wholly envelop — coercively control — those who fall for their message. They “... offer their followers everything that modern-day fundamentalism could possibly offer by way of certitudes, claims to absoluteness, unified counterworlds, Manichaeic conceptions of the world, promises of salvation, of meaning in life and comfort. They create a world in which social identities are ‘absolute’, in the sense that everything different is excluded from the circle of experience ...” (Meyer, 2001, p. 40). One of the most notorious of these ‘psychosects’ is Scientology. Thomas Meyer describes them all as inherently manipulative and evil, in that the dependency of the members is the very purpose of the operation: members are treated as tools, and their psycho-social needs are exploited (Meyer, 2001). Human development is not advanced by the freedom given to these groups.

### *Demand ‘exclusive’ territory*

Claims to territory (often central in the conflicts between ethnic groups) can also play an important role in situations where religion is at the centre of the conflict. There, it is reference to God’s word that can greatly complicate the solution of essentially human problems. For example, Jews are said to have a ‘right’ to the entire land of Israel — not merely because they occupied this 2000 years ago, but because they had been ‘given’ it by God. Groups with influence on the Israeli government are bent on securing a state that encompasses all of the Biblical lands of Israel, a state where biblical religious precepts are followed to the letter. Many of the settlers in the occupied territories hold similar religiously inspired views. Various ministers in the current Israeli government insist on using biblical language in their discussion of contemporary problems — giving their claims a categorical flavour that will make compromise with the Palestinians even more difficult. The Christian Right, too, believes the bible gives Jews the right to settle in the West Bank, ‘because God promised them the land’. Those Jewish settlers “... are favoured children of the evangelical movements, which also believe the settlers play a role in God’s master plan”.<sup>7</sup>

If they cannot (fully) achieve power over the state and its structures, those with coercive ideologies may well withdraw into enclaves where their ideology can be upheld and imposed on their members (Lehmann



and Siebzeher, 2003). In such *withdrawal spaces*, pressure can be more effectively put upon members to conform, denying individual freedom, and they are coercive in that sense. They can also be coercive vis-à-vis outsiders, who are forced to conform to their particular view of culture. The ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in Israel are good examples: they seek to enforce their conception of Sabbath observance on all who enter their territory and force non-Haredi families by a 'war of attrition' from the neighbourhoods where they dominate (Heilman and Friedman, 1991).

### *Feed on each other*

Are there links between religious fundamentalism and other coercive ideologies? Some of the ideologues of Islamic fundamentalism are said to have been directly influenced by secular coercive ideologies of the Right or the Left. Francis Fukuyama and Nadav Samin (2002) argue that the coercive nature of the fundamentalist Islamic ideology does not just derive from Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, but was fed by twentieth-century extremist doctrines. Following Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand (2002), they contend that the main spokesmen for Islamic fundamentalism were inspired by fascism and communism, and explicitly referred to them: its key attributes, "... the aestheticization of death, the glorification of armed force, the worship of martyrdom, and 'faith in the propaganda of the deed' have little precedent in Islam, but have been defining features of modern totalitarianism" (Fukuyama and Samin, 2002, p. 35).

Although this overstates the case — many Islamic fundamentalists have been able to quote from the Qur'an and other Islamic sources to justify part of the aforementioned — it does seem true that influential recent leaders have also found inspiration in communist and fascist sources. Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, borrowed openly both from Italy's Fascists and from the Nazis (although a contributing factor here may have been hatred of the British). Maulana Mawdudi, the founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami movement, is said to have been 'well-versed in Marxist thought'. Sayyid Qutb, who became the Muslim Brotherhood's main ideologue after World War II, called for a monolithic state led by an Islamic party, striving for a classless society. And Iran's cultural dictatorship was consciously modelled on Mao's cultural revolution (Halliday, 1996).

### **Why is coercive religion on the rise?**

The emergence or strengthening of coercive ideologies and the attractiveness of religious fundamentalism depends on different factors in different circumstances — no simple explanation will cover all. The most significant differentiation is likely to be that between developed and less developed, between rich and poor countries. The latter, those that have been left behind in economic terms, where people's hopes for a better standard of

living have been frustrated, are likely to share common causal factors — an issue to which I shall return later. There are also ‘universal’ factors that have had an influence. The most notable was the profound change in the world’s political economy after the demise of the Soviet Union. Until some 15 years ago, Marxism seemed to promise a different kind of society and a better life. Its ideology — however coercive — gave hope to those who were ‘believers’. Since the end of the Cold War, the free market and the Washington consensus have taken over. For many this has left an ideological vacuum. Turning to religion, in those circumstances, was one possible reaction: the spectacular ascent of Algeria’s Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) appears to have been helped by this (Roberts, 1994). More recently, after ‘September 11’, another factor may have played a part among Muslims in the West: encounters with locals who openly or implicitly associate them with ‘terrorism’ just because they are Muslims. The reaction to such a taunt can be a withdrawal into and a conspicuous embracing of Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Long before those changes on the world scene, many traditional societies were faced with the effects of ‘modernization’ and ‘modernity’. I have already argued that modernization can be deeply disorienting, especially for those people who continue, even for part of their life, to be in the ban of the traditional, premodern values. It causes perplexities and these are especially acute when modernization comes in the form of rapid social change, a particularly serious problem in non-Western societies. There, a usually small minority of people educated in the ‘European’ mould came to hold the reins of government, modernized the country, and changed the workings of the state. Yet the majority continued to live in traditional communities. People came to feel that they did not belong in the world around them, no longer knew what was expected of them and were left to wonder who they really were (Watt, 1988).

Then there was the lack of *successful* development. Modernity can above all become a problem when, in addition to disorienting people, it also fails to ‘deliver the goods’, leaving most people poor and excluded, in increasingly unequal societies. There, people felt cheated — young people in particular.<sup>9</sup> Even if this was not the *primary* cause, it helped mobilize young people willing to listen to the rallying cries of the fundamentalists who appealed to that part of their identity that had been put under pressure by modernization. Fundamentalists have managed to mobilize populations in the face of those failures of development, made easier where the failures could be blamed on foreign, notably Western, domination (Meyer, 2001).

Lionel Caplan (1987) also argues that people who feel left out, or left behind, are more prone to become followers of coercive movements than others. He suggests that fundamentalist Sikhs in the Punjab were supported by peasants hit by the unequal distribution of the benefits of the ‘Green Revolution’ and that Islamic fundamentalism drew particularly heavily on an urban ‘intellectual proletariat’. The Islamic Revolution in

Iran has also been seen as a reaction to the modernization and secularization promoted by the Shah, and especially to the growing inequality and increasing corruption under a centralized and ultimately arbitrary regime (Keddie, 1988). In other words, *exclusion* can be a factor.

Failed promises were also significant. In the Arab world, even in the 1960s and 1970s, frustration found an increasing outlet in fundamentalist rather than merely Islamic tendencies (Ayubi, 1991). Daniel Pipes (1983) was already linking the failures of the newly independent governments and their 'imitative policies' with the emergence of fundamentalism at the beginning of the 1980s. Later in that decade, when structural adjustment programmes forced a retreat of the state from the provision of social services, Islamic organizations stepped into the breach, offering health care and education through mosques. This strengthened their claims to be a substitute for the state, and hence their hold on those who turned to them. Elsewhere, political structures experienced as ineffective may have also been a contributing factor, particularly in Africa. There, the accepted way to exercise power is for rulers to favour people from their own village, region, or ethnic group through extensive patronage practices, which pervade the entire apparatus of state, including the civil service. It led to a kind of mis-development process that has had particularly adverse effects on young people (de Kadt, 1999). Politically they were left out in the cold, while the failure to bring about sustainable economic improvement meant that the majority had to fend for themselves in the 'informal sector'. As in the Arab countries, people have turned for support to the mosque — a mosque that expressed hostility to the irruption of this Western world and to its broken promises (Otayek and Toulabor, 1990).

That also appears to have happened among Muslims in Europe. Thomas Meyer (2001) found that among 15-year-old to 21-year-old Turks living in Germany, more than one-half held views that could be characterized as coercive: they rejected adaptation to a more Western way of life and believed that religions other than Islam were 'invalid and false'. Meyer argues that these young people were driven to fundamentalism because of insecurity, lack of orientation, and lack of recognition by mainstream society.<sup>10</sup> Studies in Egypt and Tunisia show that the kind of people willing to be lured by coercive ideologies are often graduates in science, medicine or engineering who come from traditionally religious backgrounds. They are people in situations where the contradictions between values learned in the past and the realities of the present are most stark, causing disorientation and anxiety. For such people a comprehensive (Islamic) solution is appealing<sup>11</sup> (Hoffman, 1995).

One final consideration may be added here. While the direct impact of fundamentalism waxes and wanes (Iran is an interesting example), perhaps the more significant question is whether its influence has been seeping further into mainstream religion. In the United States, in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, this seemed indeed to be the case. George W. Bush's courting of the religious constituency (and especially

the Evangelical Christians), by emphasizing he was one of them, prodded John Kerry into following suit and bringing God into the campaign at a late stage.<sup>12</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II has ensured (through his general guidance and his appointments) that the influence of the Right is now thoroughly entrenched — not ‘fundamentalist’ in the strict sense of the word, but certainly well in the coercive direction. And as for Islam, the distinctions between various forms of fundamentalism and the mainstream have always been rather blurred. Even if he overstates the case, Bernard Lewis’s view is worth quoting here: “The Muslim fundamentalists, unlike the Protestant groups whose name was transferred to them, do not differ from the mainstream on questions of theology and the interpretation of scripture. They criticize the rulers in the Islamic world who have left the true path, calling themselves Muslims but allowing a version watered down through Westernization” (Lewis, 2004, p. 20).

Some factors, then, appear to be common to a number of situations where coercive religious ideologies take hold. Even so, these factors do not apply in all circumstances. Notably, ‘Reborn Christians’ — like George W. Bush — do not usually come from backgrounds where hopes were dashed or promises unfulfilled. Discovering factors common to some circumstances does not give us a full-fledged ‘theory’ of the rise of fundamentalism. I doubt whether such a theory could be formulated. In the final analysis, people turn to ‘faith’ — coercive or not — for reasons that are as varied as human nature. And social science can do little more than highlight a set of diverse probabilities.

### **Slippery slope to religious extremism**

I have noted that the borders between traditional religion (orthodoxy) and fundamentalism are difficult to define. That problem arises to a much lesser extent with the issue of violence. Yes, the coercion exercised by the more extreme fundamentalists can amount to ‘psychological violence’, but there is a clear distinction between that and the use of *physical* violence. The vast majority of fundamentalists, however much they may be prepared to engage in psychological pressure and ‘cultural coercion’, are not ‘extremists’. Nevertheless, while it is one thing to insist that the majority of fundamentalists are *not* violently coercive, it would be quite another to argue that none of them are.

Some say that an identification of (Islamic) fundamentalism and extremism has been systematically promoted both in the media and in academic writing, notably by the so-called Orientalist school.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Hastings Donnan and Martin Stokes write that, in the popular Western imagination, Islamic fundamentalism came to be associated with “... bearded, kalashnikov-carrying clerics, urban carnage and scimitars dripping with blood” (2002, p.8). Of course such an association is nonsense. Yet since the collapse of Communism, Islam seems

indeed to have taken over the role of the threatening 'Other' to the West — increasingly also internally, within Europe.

The awareness of Islamic extremism is so acute because extremist Islamic fundamentalists have been more willing to translate their beliefs into deeds. Suicide bombers are extreme extremists: their deeds are driven not only by their hatred for others, but also by their belief in the reward for their deed in the afterlife. Not many people are willing to sacrifice themselves in that way, and outside of Islam there are few persons who will argue that their religion condones, let alone actually encourages, such acts.<sup>14</sup>

Yet extremism can also be found among the other major religions (Bodelier, 2002). Extremist religious views are held by many in relation to Israel. Although Judaism explicitly forbids inter-personal violence (and that goes for all varieties of Judaism), in the past there have been 'ideologically inspired' violent acts by individuals. The best known cases are those of Baruch Goldstein, who was responsible for the death of some 30 Muslims at the grave of the patriarchs in Hebron in 1994, and of Yigal Amir, who murdered Premier Yitzhak Rabin in the same year. Goldstein was associated with the (small) Kach movement, outlawed that year by the Israeli government as a terrorist organization. Kach and its offshoot Kahane Chai propagated an 'ethnically pure' Israel within its biblical borders.

Potentially violent, rather than actually so, are a series of groups that wish to rebuild the Jewish temple on the Temple Mount (the site, now, of the Al-Aqsa Mosque). They are at least willing to contemplate blowing up Al Aqsa in order to re-establish the Temple, regardless of the likely consequences (Gorenberg, 2002). And these are not only ultra-orthodox Jews hoping to speed the arrival of the Messiah, but also fundamentalist Christians, believing that a rebuilding of the Temple is necessary in order to bring about the second coming of Christ.

Ralf Bodelier (2002) puts us on the trail of other Christian extremist groupings, notably the 'fanatical sect' Christian Identity, centred on Elohim City in Oklahoma, who believe that the world needs to be 'cleansed' in order to facilitate the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. Christian Identity certainly is an extremist group with a virulently anti-Semitic and anti-black ideology. It has some 50,000 followers in the United States alone and is "... prevalent among many right wing extremist groups and has been called the 'glue' of the racist right".<sup>15</sup> It has recently spread to South Africa, where its followers have taken up the abandoned white supremacist Apartheid doctrines.

Another extremist Christian organization is the anti-abortion group Christian Gallery, from Carrolton, Georgia, which used to publish (under the title 'Nuremberg Files') a list of all clinics and doctors performing abortions in the United States, with their names and addresses. The original 'Nuremberg Files' (having been regarded as a threat in a judgement by a US court) have been replaced by a somewhat less

offensive listing. Nevertheless, Christian Gallery's frontman Neil Horsley continues to revel in verbal and pictorial violence on its website<sup>16</sup> against those who condone, practice or undergo abortions in what he chooses to call 'butchertoriums'.

Extremism also exists among Hindu fundamentalists in India, although the cycles of interaction with Islamic violence have complicated the picture. These cycles started with the tearing down of an historic mosque in the northern city of Ayodhya in 1992, by a horde of Hindu extremists. Ten years later, in February 2002, a train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya was attacked by a Muslim mob in the Gujarati town of Godhra, and 59 pilgrims were burnt alive. The response was a campaign of mass revenge by Gujarat's Hindus, under the indulgent eye of a BJP state government; estimates of the number of Muslims killed range between 1000 and 3000. Since then, less spectacular incidents have continued to occur. Critics can be withering: "Well organised, wide spread and acting in the name of the majority religion in India, Hindu extremism is positioned to silence diversity through force and terror, the rhetoric of Hindu supremacy, and the positioning of minority groups as depraved enemies who must be punished".<sup>17</sup>

### **Can the threat from coercive religions be tackled?**

Coercive ideologies pose a diversity of threats, but the main concern must be their effect on democratic institutions and procedures. Because of the danger lurking in the 'democratic trap' (i.e. to curtail democracy itself in order to protect it from potential threats), the emphasis should be on helping to prevent the emergence of the conditions that fuel coercive ideologies.

#### *Promoting multiculturalism*

It has been argued that focusing on the state (at all levels) rather than on the nation could facilitate maintaining and developing multiple and complementary identities in multicultural societies (Linz *et al.*, 2003; United Nations Development Programme, 2004). Patrick Loobuyck (2002) contends that policy-makers should devote attention to what in The Netherlands is called *burgerschap*. While citizenship, the English translation of *burgerschap*, is basically coterminous with nationality, that is not so in Dutch. *Burgerschap* applies to all those who 'permanently' reside in the country; all *burgers* (not just nationals) living in the same social space have rights and duties and 'citizen relations' with the authorities. From a changing *burgerschap* perspective, 'natives' also have to adjust and integrate — they, too, have to *learn* to interact (culturally) with newcomers.

Straightforward devolution of political power is an option where multiculturalism has a clear territorial pattern. It is not an option in

circumstances where people of different cultural backgrounds live throughout the country, albeit often in neighbourhoods where — partly by exclusion from other locations — one group predominates. In such circumstances it makes sense to concentrate on the issue of democratic procedures, especially at the *local* level, so as to increase the chances that persons representing the views and interests of the various cultural groups are elected.

Multicultural countries should also consider whether their electoral system is attuned to the needs of society. Classical ‘first past the post’ systems are likely to yield parliamentary majorities that hail from the majority ethnic or religious group. This could well encourage coercive approaches to politics and prevent minority groups from properly expressing their historical identities (Salih, 2000). Pure systems of proportional representation can also have undesired effects. These require coalitions of different parties for the establishment of a parliamentary majority that will support a government. The bargaining process preceding coalition formation can allow relatively small coercive groups to gain a disproportionate voice in politics. As has already been noted, this has been the case with coercive religious minorities in Israel.

There are some other lessons worth considering. The Netherlands is one of those societies that has had multiculturalism in its banner for many decades; in response at first to immigration from Dutch or ex-Dutch territories in the Caribbean, and later to immigrants and their descendants from Islamic countries, especially Turkey and Morocco. In parallel with growing antagonism to Muslims in other Western countries in the aftermath of ‘September 11’, multiculturalism in The Netherlands has come under pressure.

Opinions hardened after the assassination in 2002 of the populist politician, Pim Fortuijn.<sup>18</sup> The views of Jan Berting (2002) are not untypical. He notes that it is not enough “... to exhort the ‘original’ population to have more understanding for the cultural and religious distinctiveness of non-native minorities. At least as important, if not more so, is the demand that these minorities devote their attention to the nature of the society of which they are part, and recognise their own failings in respect of expressions of intolerance, xenophobia and criminality within their own circles” (Berting, 2002, p. 251).<sup>19</sup> Jan Berting specifically regards it as undesirable to try and accommodate ‘self-exclusionary’ groups in a multicultural society. His position is close to that taken by the HDR 2004 and originally expressed by Amartya Sen (2003), who recognized that conditions may have to be placed upon the acceptance of cultural diversity, if cultural liberty is the ultimate aspiration. Both Amartya Sen and Jan Berting stress the importance of cultural choice. Sen does so by rejecting a situation in which people are compelled to retain their ancestral, inherited culture, in the context of the determination of identity. Berting stresses that not all cultures provide enrichment to society: this is only the case when there is openness and cultural ‘exchange’.

These positions provide a nuance to the usual argument that multiculturalism is required to defend and safeguard the lot of minorities. Coercive ideologies cannot be easily tamed by 'a dash of multiculturalism'. Even so, the public affirmation of the desirability of multiple and complementary identities, and the provision of public support for non-exclusionary, affirmative manifestations of the variety of groups in a multicultural society (in other words, for those who support multiculturalism), may help to counter some of the negative tendencies — among majorities as well as minorities.

### *Stimulating open-mindedness and religious reform*

Changes in a less coercive direction of extreme religious ideologies must, on the whole, come from within the religious groups concerned. Much depends on the specifics of their coerciveness. In Protestantism, fundamentalist groups exist side by side with traditional and liberal ones; followers of the former are more likely to listen (if at all) to someone who is from within the same religious tradition. Among Roman Catholics the arguments must come from within one unitary and hierarchical church. That hierarchical structure seriously inhibits change in a direction different from that promoted by the centre: the current incumbent of the Papacy can to a considerable extent safeguard continuity of 'style' through appointments of prelates who share his views. In the 1960s Pope John XXIII used this faculty to a limited extent to help the *Aggiornamento* of the church; more recently, Pope John Paul II packed the College of Cardinals with like-minded traditionalists — the closest one gets to 'fundamentalists' within the Catholic church.

As for Islam, it is not possible to overlook the variety of its expressions. There is the well-known distinction between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, widely discussed in the context of Iraq, for example. Then there is the more mystical Sufi variant, and the complex syncretic form of Islam found in the world's largest Muslim country, Indonesia. Both of these are significant examples of forms of Islam where the oft-quoted Qur'anic injunction that there should be no compulsion in matters of religion is put into practice. Yet while mainstream Islam may be tolerant of other religions, especially the Abrahamic, Muslims themselves are not granted religious freedom. It is still accepted by all versions of Islam that apostasy is an offence that merits the death penalty. The threat is seldom carried out in a literal sense, but it can hardly be seen as an encouragement to the exercise of cultural freedom.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, what constitutes apostasy is, itself, an issue of interpretation: the death sentence pronounced on Salman Rushdie was justified because his book was considered tantamount to apostasy, and the murder of President Sadat was defended on the same grounds (Lewis, 2004).

Commentators have speculated about ways in which the fundamentalist features of mainstream Islam might disappear, or at least be softened.



This usually assumes that resistance to fundamentalism will emerge from within Islamic societies. Yet in comparison with the other Abrahamic religions, Muslims are faced with a singular absence of *institutionalized* forms of progressive religion. As Charles Kurzman's (1998) collection of liberal Islamic sources testifies, there is no scarcity of liberal or reformist Islamic theologians. Yet these self-same reformers often bemoan their lack of institutional influence in the Islamic world, and feel that they are crying in the wilderness. Individual Muslims, even Muslim leaders, can be 'liberal', stating, for example, that Islam 'should' be able to live with homosexuals. Yet the organizations they lead and the people who belong to those organizations remain largely stuck in traditional, 'orthodox' Islamic viewpoints. Because liberal mosques have not banded together, mosques as a whole appear to remain coercive or oppressive: Islam, *as such*, is not being 'modernized'.

Moreover, some Islamic leaders have so far been at best half-hearted in discouraging the conclusions that violent extremists can draw from Islam's teachings. The non-violent Muslim majority needs to be explicit and unambiguous in its renunciation of the ideas that can underpin violence, notably the very concept of *jihad*. The tiny minority of violent Islamic fundamentalists continue to justify their acts by reference to *jihad*, saying their acts are *fi sabil illah*, the Arabic term for 'in the path of God' or 'to the glory of God'. While, over the centuries, acting *fi sabil illah* has taken on the broad meaning of acting piously, particularly if directed at the public good, "... [m]ost of the many occurrences of this expression [jihad] in the Qur'an are associated with warfare against infidels" (Pipes, 1983, p. 22). And that remains its predominant usage today.

Non-violent Muslims need to face up to a difficult fact: their Holy Book continues to provide not only the justification for terrorism for those who wish to read and interpret it in a certain way; it also lays large obstacles in the way of those who genuinely favour a multicultural society. Only a contemporary Islamic reform movement could truly challenge some of those basic tenets of Islam (hardly a simple matter in the light of the claims made for its status as the 'final religion'). But, in addition, the outside world needs to overcome its misguided reticence to point to those specific aspects of Islam that continue to underpin extremist positions. This includes non-Islamic governments and international organizations. They should stop sheltering behind otherwise admirable values such as freedom of belief and religion, and 'non-interference in the internal affairs of other states', when it comes to resisting coercive ideologies.

Finally, it has been noted that people may turn to coercive ideologies and movements because they feel excluded. However, exclusion is also relevant in a more conventional sense. There is considerable evidence (including from previous HDRs) to indicate that in most situations exclusion on 'cultural' grounds goes together with palpable socio-economic exclusion — with poverty, unemployment, and bad housing. In the circumstances where this is relevant, a frontal challenge of the

socio-economic mechanisms that bring about such exclusion can make it less likely that people will turn to those who promise 'salvation' by religious redemption. That involves, above all, the promotion of policies that lessen overall socio-economic inequality. Exclusion certainly cannot explain all situations where coercive movements take hold of people. Yet as a contributing cause it may well be significant in many situations. There, the improvement of people's life chances is most likely to stabilize societies — and to reduce the attractiveness of coercive ideologies.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/fund.html>.
- 2 Modernity and modernization originally refer to the significant changes brought about by the Enlightenment and the increasing application to social organization of scientific and technological ideas in all spheres of life. They brought about the 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*) of the world, and greatly reduced the areas where traditional, non-rational, explanations were acceptable.
- 3 Moves by the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the finances of religious agencies, the application of civil rights arguments to the rights of homosexuals, public certification requirements even for Christian schools, and finally the Supreme Court's *Roe-v-Wade* decision, which ruled that abortion was a matter of private choice (Ammerman, 1991).
- 4 See the BJP website: <http://www.bjp.org/philo.htm>.
- 5 Moreover, conflicts continue to result to a significant degree from being disgruntled about the economic situation, about *exclusion*, and about one's position in an increasingly unequal society.
- 6 Hirsi Ali, both as a journalist and as a politician, has tirelessly, even if rather flamboyantly, held up to shame the worst practices against women (such as female 'circumcision') still prevalent in some Islamic countries (Ali, 2004).
- 7 *The Financial Times* (15 June 2002), reporting on an International Christian Chamber of Commerce conference in Jerusalem, called 'The Business of Loving Israel'.
- 8 This was a not infrequent reaction among Muslim students in the Netherlands (Barbara and Louk de la Rive Box, personal communication).
- 9 Studies in Egypt and Iran, reported by Sami Zubaida (1987), have shown that there fundamentalism's main activists come above all from the young intelligentsia, the "... intellectual proletariat of students, teachers and minor functionaries". Zubaida adds: "These are the same social groups from whom support is drawn for all oppositional politics, left and right, religious and secular" (1987, p. 49).
- 10 Entzinger's (2003) research in the Netherlands points in the same direction.
- 11 Those who take their fundamentalism to extremes — suicide bombers — are predominantly middle class, too.
- 12 See *El País (Madrid)*, Sunday 24 October.
- 13 Those associated with Bernard Lewis and his followers. My own reading of Lewis suggests a rather more nuanced conclusion.
- 14 This position of Islamic extremists is hard to understand, as for Muslims suicide is regarded as a major sin and believed to be punished by 'eternal damnation' in the form of endless repetition of the act by which the suicide victim killed himself (Lewis, 2004).
- 15 'Christian Identity Movement', Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance ([www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)).
- 16 See [www.christiangallery.com/findabortionist.html](http://www.christiangallery.com/findabortionist.html).
- 17 Angana Chatterji, 'Indian Diaspora funding Hindu extremism', in *Daily Times*, Lahore, 21 July 2002.

- 18 His political movement had as one of its foci precisely this failure of immigrants to integrate in Dutch society and accept some of its central values. Another important issue was the growing sense of physical insecurity, experienced by many as a side-effect of what was seen as the excessively tolerant attitude to deviance in The Netherlands.
- 19 Author's translation.
- 20 "Individuals must be free not only to criticise the religion into which they are born, but to reject it for another or to remain without one" (United Nations Development Programme, 2004, p. 56).

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