**Religious Extremism and the Risks of Partnership**

Comments for World Bank conference on Ending Extreme Poverty through Building Partnerships with Religious Actors

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Yesterday, during the discussion on strengthening health systems, my friend Mohammed Abu-Nimer asked why this conference was not considering the alternate religious actors who provide desperately needed social services to the poor, including medical clinics and health care, but who stand outside the circle of possible faith-based partners for ending extreme poverty. Mohammed was referring of course to paramilitary and extremist religious actors, including groups like Hizbollah, Hamas, local and regional Islamic militants such as the MILF in Mindanao and Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia and, even, in certain settings, ISIS.

The next 7 minutes focuses on this parallel universe of disruptive, often violent, vehemently anti-secularist “faith-based” actors. The ones, that is, who give faith-based actors a bad name. These reactive extremist groups are not above dealing with the devil (as they see things), namely, with adversarial regimes and even on occasion with secular development organizations —though when the extremists do so, they fly under the radar, lest their hard-won reputation for ideological purity be compromised. And they are certainly not allergic to adapting modern technology to their own ideological ends, from stinger missiles in the ‘80s to social media today.

But they are nonetheless driven—and propped up— by **a psychology of grievance, and a logic of reaction**. This syndrome splits the world into elect and reprobate, pure and impure; demonizes the other; and reserves a specially vicious hatred for fellow Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews who are seen to be collaborationists—let us say “partners” with, well, The World Bank.

Generalizations about extremist religious actors are hazardous; some scholars argue that there are six or seven different broad categories or types of militant groups inaccurately lumped under coarse terms like “extremist” or “fundamentalist”; and, indeed, in recent years there has been a proliferation of modes of faith-based resistance to the secular hegemon. So we generalize at our risk.

That said, in a multi year study of worldwide “fundamentalisms” conducted in the 1990s by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, researchers examined 75 different movements in five global religious traditions. These scholars identified certain “family resemblances” among these groups, allowing for their very different doctrines, practices, worldviews, ideologies, etc. These “family traits” include shared ideological, behavioral and organizational patterns. (For a full description and analysis, see Almond, Appleby and Sivan, *Strong Religion: the Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World* [University of Chicago Press, 2003]).

Allowing for the necessary adjustments of the new century, these identified patterns of extremist reactivity hold up pretty well today.

Of these ideological, organizational and behavioral traits, perhaps the one most relevant for our conference is **the reactive core** of these movements, and the theo-logic or theology of grievance generated by this core.

In the 250 page synthesis and summary volume of 3,700 pages of published scholarship, we called these extremist movements, like Al Qaeda, the Hindu RSS, the Jewish Gush Emunim and a dozen others, manifestations of STRONG RELIGION—strong, not because they were “strong” in orthodoxy or in traditional practice—hardly: they treat the religious tradition like an engineer treats a tool-box, selecting from its vast and multivalent teachings and practices whatever fits the purpose of building what they seek to build or destroying what they seek to destroy. Rather, “strong” because the fundamentalists seek to compensate for the perceived weakness or vulnerability of religious communities under the burden of an aggressive secular modernity. And “strong” because, although these movements attract many adherents who are not or were not particularly religious, the inner core of these movements draws explicitly and effectively on religious symbols, precepts, rituals, and warrants—however manipulated and distorted these may be in the charismatic leader’s presentation of them.

One must understand the reaction in its nuances. To begin with, **the reactivity is to the marginalization of religion**—which is felt as having been deposed from its once honored place at the center of village life and indeed of civilization itself. This displacement has come at the hands of Western colonial and neo-colonial imperialism; and the serial military and economic defeats and cultural humiliations experienced at the hands of the nonbelievers have been experienced as **emasculating** —a word Bin Laden was fond of using to describe Sunni disgrace following the abolition of the caliphate in 1924. Hence, the **sharply gendered nature of the fundamentalist reaction**, which pushes religious patriarchy to a harrowing extreme in its violence against and subordination of women, a subordination often abetted and even valorized by fundamentalist women themselves.

Thus the reaction is to the decades-long experience of exclusion, exploitation, and humiliation— not merely to being systematically left out of the global conversation, an exclusion which they now wear as a badge of honor, a marker of purity. The corollary doctrine holds that this exclusion is not merely contingent, a historical happenstance— but, rather, part of a demonic conspiracy to wipe religion off the face of the earth. This “pure remnant under persecution” doctrine provides justification for the extremists’ departure from the clear consensus of sacred texts and traditions in order to commit deadly apocalyptic violence indiscriminately, against noncombatants. (The most violent extremists refuse to acknowledge the category “noncombatants,” for the war they wage is all against all, not only global but cosmic in its scale and significance.)

From this experience of oppression, exploitation and exclusion, four successive generations of extremist upstarts—non-traditional usurpers of mainstream religious authority—have forged a theology of grievance, and a logic of resistance.

The theology of grievance can be heard in the claims of polemicists from Hasan al-Turabi, to Newt Gingrich to Shaykh al-Baghdadi, who trace the rise of divorce, addiction, immoral behavior, and the military defeats precisely to cooperation with the project to remove God—the divine law, the infallible religious leader, the sacred, inerrant texts—from the legal and moral center of society.

The logic of resistance holds that the most threatening enemy is the fellow believer who has betrayed the true faith and gone over to the other side. The most despised enemy is the former insider, the putative co-religionist, who has fallen asleep, who has been West-toxicated, who needs to be awakened and forced to choose—or in the theatrical, didactic violence of ISIS, who deserves only beheading or burning alive.

So: how do we integrate this less-than-rosy reality of proliferating religious extremism into our otherwise encouraging and constructive conversation about building deeper partnerships with faith-based actors?

Many lessons here, I have time to gesture only to three:

1. Have we sufficiently factored into the mix the risk many faith-based partners face for cooperating with the “nonbelievers”? Specifically how have the imperatives of security been integrated into the discussion about faith-based-secular partnerships?

2. These extremist groups, which include master tacticians, engineers, and other how-to experts, as well violent thugs, win hearts and minds, if and when they do, by providing social services under the banner of and in the style of religion.

This speaks to the importance of letting the religious be religious, a theme repeated frequently and rightly these last two days. The imperative takes on a new urgency when we realize that our putative partners’ opponents claim, sometimes successfully, that they are providing not “secular” services but halal, kosher, doctrinally pure, orthodox relief. They warn that there is more to the provision of services than the merely instrumental—while the betrayers, who been duped by or who have simply sold out to the secular hegemon, have abandoned the religious precept in favor of the cash infusion, and the prestige of inclusion. (There is breathtaking hypocrisy in this extremist claim, of course, but that is for another forum.)

3. It is not simply lack of jobs or economic opportunity that drive young people into extremist groups, as one of our earlier speakers at this conference claimed; it is also, and even primarily, their internalization of an ideology that explains the absence of jobs by pointing a recriminating hand to a social reality that we in this room assume to be normative and wish to take for granted, namely, the existence and desirability of **diversity**, represented not least by genuine and deep religious **pluralism**. The radical extremists are not only anti-secularist, but anti-pluralist. They trace the fragmentation of their communities and the loss of a supposed center to **relativism**, a particularly obnoxious post-Enlightenment “good.” The perceived widespread acceptance of the many, to them, makes a mockery of the one true God, who now is presented as one of many options.

So: We fool ourselves and undermine our own best efforts if we reduce the logic of grievance to mere economic factors. Ideology, and the educational and formational institutions and networks that inculcate it, attracts even the well-fed recruit.

All the more reason that we must find subtle but powerful ways to provide security to our faith-based partners who operate in war zones or on the edge of violent conflict; and who must never relent in contending against the extremists on religious grounds. We cannot yield the banner of orthodoxy and orthopraxis to the violent, who would otherwise bear it away.

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