THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXTREMISM
EXTREMISM AND THE BIBLE

SCRIPTURAL MODELS OF VIOLENCE
BIBLICAL ABSOLUTISM

Biblical narrative = historically reliable data
• Reflects naïve belief in the Bible as
  • directly given divine text,
  • absolute for all time,
  • containing unambiguous truth and instruction

that leads necessarily to
• direct obedient action
‘TEXTS OF TERROR’


Scriptures contain:

- Stories of profound violence *plus*
  - injunctions, and commandments
  - allusions and examples as resource for
- terrifying and terrorizing behaviours
- Ideological justification for
- extreme attitudes, values, and actions
BIBLICAL MOTIF OF THE BAN: ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PURITY EXTREMISM

- Eradicating a vanquished opponent
- Victims ‘offered’
  - slaughter has ‘sacrificial character’
- destruction of the Amalekites (1 Sam)
- eliminate the Canaanites (Numbers)
- destroy the Ammonites (Judges)
- The destruction is pleasing to God
- God rewards the eradicator
ZEALOTRY: MODEL OF THE PRIEST PHINEAS - 1

Impulsive murderous act (*Numbers*, 25) of
* Israelite man and a Midianite woman by
  * a temple priest – grandson of Aaron

Context:
* Israelite idolatry – imitating foreign cults, *meaning*
* Israel threatened with annihilation *therefore*
* Annihilate the attractive / seductive ‘other’
  * eliminate the distraction and threat of succumbing to idolatry & blasphemy
  * eliminate source of cultic & ethnic impurity
Sanction:

- The zealous act appeased and pleased God
- rewarded with guarantee of high priesthood
- *Phineas prevented Israel’s fall to idolatrous practices*

Implication:

- violence aimed at those opposing divine will
- *Biblical model and ideal of being religiously virtuous*
THE NEW TESTAMENT

• some NT texts that lend themselves to extremist interpretations

• Not so much models, as supportive values: e.g.,
  • pronouncements that God condemns nonbelievers
  • accounts of Jesus engaged in battle with demons
  • the ‘violent Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple
  • Jesus “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew)

• formation of hostile depictions of the ‘other’
• ‘exclusivist’ claims in relation to the religious ‘other’
‘OTHERING’ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

• Some texts suggest embracing inclusion of ‘others’
• Some texts indicate the rejection of otherness
  • on the grounds of a stark exclusionary position e.g.:
    • Jesus the ‘only way’ to ‘the Father’ (John)
    • Jews ignorant of God; sons of the devil (John)
• Thus early Christian exclusionary rejection of Jews
• Hence later antisemitism – Holocaust
• Heretics subject to rejection, even violent death
  • Such ‘othering’ gives basis for contemporary Christian extremism
Many biblical narratives are not reports of factual historical reality as such

• Rather, they mostly comprise ‘ideological fictions’

• However, such fictive constructs convey meaning, insight, and perspective – even forms of timeless truth.

And, importantly:

• ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ require interpretive discernment

This applies to all texts, including ‘texts of terror’
THE BIBLE AND EXTREMISM

• Scriptures can be both positively and negatively inspirational

• Texts can provide models, tropes and motifs for religious violence, extreme behaviours, attitudes etc.

• Phineas: model for lone-wolf extremists (Jewish & Christian)

• It is scriptural texts, and their interpretation, that provide ideological support for religious extremism
JEWISH EXTREMISM

SOME CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES
Brit HaKana’im: Covenant of the Zealots

- a radical religious Jewish underground organisation
- operated in Israel (1950-1953) against the widespread trend of secularisation
- ultimate goal: to impose Jewish religious law in Israel and establish a Halakhic state

Kingdom of Israel: Malchut Yisrael

- active in Israel in the 1950s
- carried out attacks on the embassies of the USSR and Czechoslovakia
- occasionally shot at Jordanian troops stationed along the border in Jerusalem
- Members of the group caught trying to bomb the Israeli Ministry of Education in May 1953
- acting because secular Jewish North African immigrants regarded as ‘a direct assault on religious Jews’ way of life and as an existential threat to the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel
**JEWISH EXTREMISM: RECENT EXAMPLES**

**Gush Emunim: Jewish Underground**
- Israeli religious-political activist-vigilante group (1979-84)
- Ultimate goals: destroy Dome of the Rock & Al-Aqsa mosque
- ‘awaken’ Jews; lay groundwork for construction of Third Temple
- avenge acts of Palestinian violence against settlers (revenge)
- charged as terrorist organization; eventually pardoned & released

**Lehava – ‘Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land’ (2010-)**
- strictly opposes Jewish assimilation
- objects to personal relationships between Jews and non-Jews
- denounces interfaith marriages
- opposed to the Christian presence in Israel
- members arrested for incitement
JEWISH EXTREMISM: RECENT EXAMPLES

Baruch Goldstein (b. 1956, d. 1994)
- American-born Israeli physician
- perpetrated the ‘Cave of the Patriarchs massacre’ in Hebron (25 Feb 1994)
- shot & killed 29 Muslim worshipers; wounded 125
- Goldstein beaten to death by survivors
- gravesite became a pilgrimage site for Jewish extremists
- Israeli legislation passed (1999) outlawing monuments to terrorists
- The ‘Goldstein shrine’ erected at the site of his interment but
- tombstone and epitaph, which calls Goldstein “a martyr with clean hands and a pure heart” left untouched

Yigal Amir (b. 1970)
- Israeli citizen and law & religion student
- assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (4 Nov 1995)
- currently serving a life sentence
- Motif: Rabin was leading Israel & Jews to disaster by signing peace treaty
- Model: Phineas – a lone-wolf operative
CHRISTIAN EXTREMISM

SOME CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES
Contemporary Christian Extremism

Ku Klux Klan  
- KKK organized at the end of American Civil War (1861-1865) by former Confederate soldiers  
- began by targeting freed slaves  
- 1915: new Protestant-led wing formed in Georgia, during period of xenophobia  
- advocates white supremacy, white nationalism, anti-immigration and antisemitism  
- targets Jews, Catholics, other social or ethnic minorities (e.g. African-Americans, LBGT)  
- goal: to “reestablish Protestant Christian values in America by any means possible”  
- believes that ‘Jesus was the first Klansman’  
- cross burnings intimidate potential targets, and demonstrate piety for Jesus  
- considered a right-wing extremist organization  

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY (CI)

- Umbrella concept’ ideology
  - Aryan Israel & Christ
- Bible is ultimate authority
  - read ‘literally’
- ‘Two Seed theology’
  - Adam / Satan (snake)
- White Separatist movement
  - European races descend from ancient Israelites
- Europeans are the ‘chosen people’
  - Jews the cursed offspring of Cain

A conglomeration of loosely associated individuals and churches
THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST CHRISTIAN/ARYAN NATIONS (CJCC/AN)

- Rallying point for many US hard-line white supremacists
- **Significant role in forming of Christian extremism**
- ‘Theological roots in the British Israelite movement
- **Self-perception of superiority and biblical-like chosen status**
- **Enemies: Jews and American Government (ZOG)**
THE ‘PHINEAS PRIESTHOOD’ (PP)

- Extreme CI ideology – prone to violence
- Leaderless, anti-organisational, resistance movement
- Biblical reference (Num. 25) read as model for Christian zealotry
- Biblical paradigm – justification for violent means
- ‘Lone-wolf’ operatives (McVeigh; Breivik)
CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EXTREMISM

- Christianity has known extremism historically:
  - application of violence for political and spiritual ends
  - violent clashes in respect to competitive theologies etc.
  - marginalised variants of the faith

- Today we see:
  - Rise in fundamentalist mentality and groups
  - Increasing evidence of hard-line Christian assertiveness & exclusivism
  - Ongoing examples of extremist groups / orientations
CONTEMPORARY PARADOX

• ‘Postmodern’ context:
  • tolerance affirmed; multiple identities/alterities OK
  • mutual acceptance / respect advocated
  • plurality and liberality in secular context

• Contrasting with:
  • resurgent intentional-exclusivist religious identities
  • increasing (mutual) hostilities
  • increasing rejection of ‘alterities’