"What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme but that they are intolerant. The evil is not what they say about their cause, but what they say about their opponents." —Robert F. Kennedy

Although the word extremism is used frequently in political and religious discussions and by the news media, what the term actually means is sometimes unclear. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says an individual behaves as an extremist "when you do not allow for a different point of view; when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive; when you don't allow for the possibility of difference." Extremism is rooted in a system of beliefs that is far from that of mainstream culture, and it allows for little flexibility or tolerance of other beliefs. These beliefs can be religious or political or often a combination of the two.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines extremist as "one who advocates or resorts to measures beyond the norm, especially in politics." Note that this definition goes a step beyond merely a belief system—the extremist takes action. That action may be verbal advocacy for his or her point of view or other "measures beyond the norm." Extremist beliefs often result in violence against others who do not share the same beliefs. John W. Gardner, secretary of health, education, and welfare under President Lyndon Johnson, said, "Political extremism involves two prime ingredients: an excessively simple diagnosis of the world's ills and a conviction that there are identifiable villains back of it all." Extremists identify a villain as someone to fight against to further their own cause.

Extremism is often related to strong religious beliefs. In a panel discussion at the International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security in March 2005, Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik summarized the influence of religion on extremism this way:

All religions can be misused by extremists who are seeking to find arguments for persecution or a holy war. History has shown it again and again. We have seen it in Christianity, in the form of the Medieval Crusades, and the persecution of non-Christian and heretics right up to our own times. I am thinking for instance of the so-called Army of God in the U.S. which condones the killing of medical personnel who are involved in abortions.

We have seen it in Judaism; the very expression zealot comes from a group of Jews who used assassination in their fight against the Romans and the Romanization of the Jews. And we see it today in the form of groups such as Khatz, and Chanitri.

And we have seen it in Islam. The word assassin comes from an extremist Muslim sect of the 11th century, which used murder as a tool in their fight against the crusaders and mainstream Muslim leaders.

However, not all extremist groups are influenced by religion; some groups share a common set of values, ideas, and ideology unrelated to religious beliefs. For example, in the United States, many extremist groups are racially motivated. White supremacist movements such as the neo-Nazis and Aryan Nations demonize people of other races. Other groups, such as the Militia of Montana, believe that individuals are not subject to the authority of government. The militia movement is a relatively new right-wing extremist movement consisting of armed paramilitary groups, both formal and informal, with an antigovernment,
conspiracy-oriented ideology. Extremist movements have also formed around ideologies that express ecological concerns and antigay or antiabortion sentiments.

Members of extremist groups may choose to express their extreme beliefs in a peaceful way, or their beliefs may incite them to violent actions. While a relationship between extremism and violence often exists, this relationship is not inevitable.

Since the attack on New York’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, by Muslim extremists, the word extremism has often been used almost synonymously with terrorism. However, they are not exactly the same. Extremism describes a certain type of belief system, while terrorism describes violent actions, usually stemming from extremist beliefs. One definition, from the government of the United Kingdom, says that terrorism is “the use or threat, for purposes of advancing a political, religious, or ideological course of action which involves serious violence against any person or property.” The U.S. Department of State adds that terrorist violence is "perpetuated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." In other words, terrorist acts are violent in nature, conducted by smaller groups rather than by a national government as an act of war, and are often perpetrated against innocent bystanders. Since terrorism in general, and Islamic terrorism in particular, is one of the most prevalent manifestations of extremism in the early twenty-first century, many of the viewpoints in this book consider the extremist beliefs behind these acts of terrorism.

The viewpoints in the first chapter consider the relationship between religion and extremism. The second chapter specifically addresses the motivations of Islamic terrorists. In the third chapter, the viewpoints discuss various methods of countering extremism. The final chapter presents several forms of extremism that are being experienced in the United States.

Further Readings

Books


• Frank Schaeffer *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*. New York, Carroll & Graf, 2007.


