



Fundamentalism & militancy: Beliefs alone not to blame when faith turns violent, scholars say

By Greg Warner

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ATLANTA (ABP) -- Every faith group has its extremists, but not all extremists turn violent. What makes the difference?

While most religious violence follows common patterns, faith seldom turns violent except in response to social oppression, say experts who study extremists.

"In most cases, it's not a religious thing as much as frustration in an encounter with society at large," said Graham Walker, a Baptist theology professor who studies religious violence in Asia. "But it takes just one imam, one leader or pastor to trigger a group -- one authoritative person who speaks for God and who can establish a [group's] identity or paint a scapegoat. Then the rage within the [faith] community can be projected outside the community."

When that happens, religious doctrine is distorted to rationalize violence, Walker and others agree. And no faith system is exempt from that danger.

"Religious extremist violence is a potential in all major religious faiths, including even Buddhism," said Bruce Knauft, an anthropologist and director of Emory University's Institute for Comparative and International Studies, which recently hosted some of the world's top religion scholars for a conference on extremism.

But religious-inspired violence is relatively uncommon, said Knauft. Instead, the worst violence is "secular and political forms of large-scale killing and brutality," such as World Wars I and II, he said.

While 9/11 has come to symbolize religious violence for Americans, that attack is the exception that proves the rule, said Kurt Anders Richardson, a Baptist who teaches comparative religion at McMaster Divinity College, an evangelical school in Hamilton, Ontario.

"In the major faiths, there is not a single case where violence in God's name is accepted," said Richardson, who taught at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1987 to 1995.

Some Christians tend to see al Qaeda, the Islamic terror group responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, as typical of all hard-line Muslims. Ironically, they do so the same way Osama bin Laden labels all 2,603 people killed in the World Trade Center as "infidels" and all Westerners as oppressors.

In reality, violent extremists of any faith have more in common with other violent groups than with the majority within their own faith, added Shlomo Fischer of Israel's Tel Aviv University. He presented a paper on violent Jewish Zionist groups during the Emory conference, called "The Wrathful God: Religious Extremism in Comparative Perspective."

"Violent extremists may be different from us in crucial ways," he said. On the other hand, violent extremists are "not far removed" theologically from mainstream believers. "We tend to see fundamentalists as irrational totalitarians, while we are rational. That's probably not true."

Extremists -- whether Eric Robert Rudolph, Mohammed Atta, or the Zionists who tried to blow up Islam's Dome of the Rock shrine in 1981 -- see themselves as part of a "revolutionary vanguard" whose violent tactics are in the best interest of the public, Fischer said. "It's rational within its own terms."

He added: "We're not talking about people who are from the moon."

So what's the difference between Jerry Falwell -- the late Religious Right leader who prayed for the death of pro-choice Supreme Court justices -- and Rudolph, the fundamentalist Christian whose

anti-abortion views drove him to bomb the 1996 Olympics, a Birmingham abortion clinic and other targets, killing two and injuring dozens?

Charles Kimball, author of the seminal book *When Religion Becomes Evil*, identifies five major warning signs of religion gone awry:

-- Claims of absolute truth. "When people absolutize their truth claims, they can justify anything," said Kimball, professor of comparative religion at Wake Forest University. "We should always have a measure of humility."

-- Blind obedience. "When any religion tells you, 'We'll do the thinking for you,' something is terribly wrong."

-- The end justifying the means. Even the recent Catholic child-abuse scandals bore this symptom, Kimball said. "They saw protecting the ministry of the church as an end" that justified lying about sexual abuse by priests.

-- Declaring holy war.

-- The pursuit of the "ideal" time. Much of the violence associated with Christianity is linked to eschatology, or end-times theology.

Violent extremists see themselves as "avant-garde catalysts" ushering in "a utopian order," added Fischer. When such a socio-political goal appears achievable, Richardson added, "it will lead to this kind of theologizing," where the extremists' goals are identified with God's will.

Perhaps the deadliest example of such an episode relatively unknown to many modern-day Christians: the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864 in southern China. Christian convert Hong Xiuquin, claiming to be the brother of Jesus, established an army to overthrow China's Qing dynasty. His apocalyptic theology identified the dynasty as the dragon in the book of Revelation. The rebellion and government retaliation claimed between 20 and 30 million lives -- more than World War I.

The tragic chapter is often blamed for the Chinese government's continued distrust of Christianity. "The Chinese government is realistically terrified of this apocalyptic power," said Walker, professor of theology at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

Walker, a former missionary and seminary administrator in Southeast Asia, is studying Christian tribes of northern Myanmar that have been largely cut off from outside Christian influence for years because of government restrictions. In that vacuum, "two different eschatologies" have developed among the tribes, Walker said. Those with an apocalyptic interpretation of the faith are inclined toward revolution and violence; those with a present-world interpretation of eschatological scriptures have remained peaceful under a repressive government, he said.

But, Walker added: "Christian fundamentalists are not more prone to violence than other faiths. It is possible in any faith community." He cited fundamentalist Hindu rioters in India who have killed Muslims in recent years and the quasi-Buddhist sect Aum Shinrikyo, an apocalyptic cult that committed the 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo's subway that killed 12.

Despite the prominent role of religion in the world's violence, Knauff said in an e-mail interview, it must be kept in perspective. "During the last 150 years at least, the tally of those killed by secular political causes -- and in massive response to extremist political violence -- far draws the number killed in religious extremism."

For example, while almost 3,000 people were killed in the Islamic-inspired attacks of 9/11, Iraqi deaths attributed to the American-led invasion are estimated between 200,000 and 1.2 million.

But there's often a connection between secular oppression and violence and subsequent religious violence.

"Most extremist religious violence has occurred in tandem with political antagonism and the perception of social injustice from those who are powerful," said Knauff, who has written extensively on social inequality, politics and violence.

"During the last 50 years, political disempowerment, disenfranchisement and discrimination have greatly increased the possibilities and likelihood of extremist religious violence," he continued. "This pertains to Sikhs in India, Christians in eastern Indonesia, and perhaps even Buddhists in Tibet, as well as Palestinian Muslims and many of those in Iraq."

Other scholars agreed religious violence almost always comes in tandem with social and economic

conflict. "I've seen that over and over again, all over Asia," said Walker, the former missionary.

"There often is a nexus between religion and power," added Kimball. "When the two get interwoven, religion is used to justify power." It occurs more often in Islamic countries and Israel, he said, where religion and the state are joined.

Fischer, the Israeli scholar, agreed most violence is more political than religious, particularly when social conflict exists first. But sometimes those factors are hard to sort out. Zionism is "a nationalist movement," and "Zionists believe the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people," he said. "Still there is a violent conflict going on with the Palestinians that need not have anything to do with religion."

When religion comes into political power, said Richardson, the McMaster theologian, even a non-violent faith "can be complicit with extremism" by providing the rationale and opportunity for merging religious and political might. When that happens, Christians lose all influence in advancing peace, he said.

Despite the tensions between religion and politics, most of the scholars did not predict a worldwide wave of violence in the future.

Knauff said Christianity tends to be peaceful in the developing countries of the Southern Hemisphere, where it is expected to grow fastest.

"Violent confrontations between Christians and Muslims in Africa and Asia are mostly confined to limited areas where land and political disputes, and ethnic differences, have a long history of sowing discord -- such as northern Nigeria and eastern Indonesia," he said.

"Violent polarization between Islam and Christianity is not inevitable or even likely," Knauff continued, "except where state discrimination, disenfranchisement and disempowerment render people few options of counteraction or resistance except through religious extremism."

But the greater threat, said Knauff and others, is that the military superiority of the United States, the sole superpower, would "increase resentment and frustration of disempowered peoples."

Still, the wild card in the violence equation, most scholars said, is the possibility that terrorists would acquire a nuclear weapon or other weapons of mass destruction. "Today," Kimball said, "the world is so much more interconnected that a small group of people can affect the whole world."

So what can be done to reduce the risk of extremist religious violence?

More and more people are becoming aware, said Mercer's Walker, that the solution is "to reduce the sources of anger and frustration" in less powerful countries and regions. Work for "sustainable economic development," he advised.

And Kimball suggested America export one of its best inventions – separation of church and state. "In our world, we have to have freedom of religion, freedom from religion, and respect for diversity," he said. "America has some experience that can help the world. The rest of the world desperately needs that kind of modeling."

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