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 <u>action</u>**

'TEXTS OF TERROR'

- **Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984)**

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***

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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*

ZEALOTRY:
THE MODEL OF THE PRIEST PHINEAS - 2

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*

SCHOLARSHIP

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

JEWISH EXTREMISM: RECENT 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
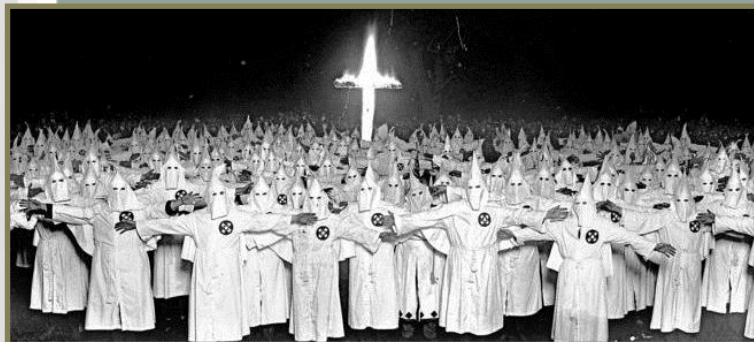
CHRISTIAN EXTREMISM

SOME CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

Contemporary Christian Extremism

Ku Klux Klan

- KKK organized at the end of American Civil War (1861-1865) by former Confederate so
- 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

Sources: Aref Al-Khattar (2003) *Religion and terrorism: an interfaith perspective*. Westport: Praeger; Kelly Baker (2011) *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America*, 1915–1930, University Press of Kansas; David Chalmers (1987) *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Durahm: Duke University Press; Jack Nelson (1993) *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign Against the Jews*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Philip Perlmutter (2015). *Legacy of Hate: A Short History of Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Prejudice in America*, New York: Routledge.

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'*