POLITICS OF SOUTH ASIA

Religion, Extremism and Violence in South Asia

Edited by Imran Ahmed · Zahid Shahab Ahmed · Howard Brasted · Shahram Akbarzadeh

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Howard Brasted, Imran Ahmed, Zahid Shahab Ahmed, and Shahram Akbarzadeh

Religious extremism is among the most pertinent challenges to state and society in the contemporary world. While it is a global phenomenon and the subject of considerable academic scholarship and journalistic inquiry, in South Asia those challenges manifest in equally deadly but often decidedly different ways. Whether it is the coordinated suicide attacks allegedly

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orchestrated by the Pakistani-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) on the Indian parliament in 2001 and the central business district of Mumbai in 2008, or the 'epidemic' of 'mob' lynching of Muslims in 2017–2018 carried out by Hindu extremists in India under the guise of enforcing doctrines of cow protection,[1] or the murderous assault by Bangladeshi militants in 2016 on the Holey Artisan Café in Dhaka in which 29 people, mainly tourists, were killed, or the Sinhala Buddhist attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka in the wake of the 2019 Easter bombings by an Islamist militant group on Christian Churches that killed several hundred worshippers,[2] few challenges create violent conflict as fervently as religious extremism does in the region. The question is in what ways and why? The papers in this collection are designed to provide some of the answers. While religious extremism can manifest in a variety of forms—political, social, theological—and be activated for quite different reasons, it is the political dimension of religion and violence that informs much of their treatment.

To date Islamic militancy has been the focus of much of the literature, and research has often been framed by questions and assumptions guided by the West's 'war on terror'. While Middle Eastern reference points have understandably attracted most attention because of this, in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism it is Pakistan that has begun to be cited as the epicentre of global terrorism.[3] Because of Pakistan's known ties to Muslim terrorist groups the suspicion has grown that it is actually a training entrepot for terrorists, and as such might better have qualified for President George W Bush's 'axis of evil,' than topping his 'A list' of anti-terrorist partners.[4] Bangladesh, the third largest Muslim majority country in the world, has been touted to join it as a comparable 'hotspot'

[1] Cassie Adcock and Radhika Govindrajan, "Bovine Politics in South Asia: Rethinking Religion, Law and Ethics," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1095–1107.

[2] Siobhán O'Grady, "'Hundreds of Pieces of One Person': The Death Toll in Sri Lanka Was Wrong—This Might Be Why," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/26/hundreds-pieces-one-person-death-toll-sri-lanka-was-wrong-this-might-be-why/.

[3] P. Sakthivel and P. Sakthival, "Terrorism in India: The Unholy Neighbours," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 1 (2010): 159–161.

[4] Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal, *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); Leon T. Hadar, "If Iraq, Iran, and North Korea Are the "Axis of Evil," Why Is Pakistan an Ally?," *Cato Institute*, February 28, 2002, https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/iraq-iran-north-korea-are-axis-evil-why-is-pakistan-ally.

for terrorist incubation and export.[5] Supplying mujahideen (soldiers of God) in helping eject the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in the 1980s and in aiding and abetting the Taliban to impose a fundamentalist form of government in Kabul, Pakistan and Bangladesh have subsequently faced increasing religious pressure themselves to radicalise along similar lines. How they respond to this challenge is an unfolding story that will doubtless impact South Asia as a whole.

But what also makes religious extremism in South Asia worthy of investigation in its own right is that it is not only the home of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world, it is also the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. In Huntington-esque terms, South Asia uniquely provides fault-lines of religious intensity and inter-action. A study of religious extremism in South Asia that re-examines conventional wisdom about its underpinnings and motivations has much to offer and not simply in the cause of countering radicalisation and serving counterterrorism. It also presents complex political, sociological, historical and legal debates on the role of religion in politics and pertinent case studies of the complex process of radicalisation.

In the generalist literature—especially in the aftermath of 9/11—much of the investigative focus has centred on uncovering the 'broad-spectrum' nature of the relationship between religion and violence and identifying the causal intersections between them. In this global project the examination of religious extremism and its association with terrorism and violence has not to date extended to detailed geographic investigation. This is certainly true of the monumental *The Oxford Handbook on Religion and Violence* (2016 ed.), which legitimately claims to be the first 'Road Map' of this particular field of study.[6] In what is undoubtedly a panoramic guide, this volume looks at every major religious tradition through a range of disciplinary lenses and analytical angles to provide generic clues about why religions can inspire and indeed justify various forms of violent action. These can vary from individual acts of killing to large scale outbreaks of warfare, including references to and depictions of

[5] By Staff, "Bangladesh, New Epicentre of Terror: Jaswant," *OneIndia*, June 2, 2008, https://www.oneindia.com/2008/06/02/bangladesh-new-epicentre-of-terror-jaswant-1212406623.html.

[6] Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

the ultimate sacred battle predicted in both ancient and present-day apocalyptic religiously inspired narratives.[7] To be fought-out between good and evil, between the forces of belief and the followers of the devil, this cosmic battle is predicted to destroy the current world order and replace it with a single religious civilisation. Depending on the origin of the end-time story in question, the post apocalypse civilisation will be entirely Christian, Islamic or Judaic.[8]

What emerges very clearly from the 40 chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* is that while violence may not be intrinsic to any religion, it enduringly pervades their sacred texts, their images and their practices, and can be invoked in the name of god or gods to legitimise or cloak often less than holy pursuits.[9] Religion may not 'ordinarily' cause violence,[10] but it is never far removed from worldly matters that can.[11] Issues such as, for example, the essence of national identity, the basis of moral society, the place of religion in public life, the globalisation of secular international rules and standards are almost guaranteed to generate religious, often violent, responses. Empirical evidence suggests that there is a direct correlation between religiously inspired violence and the growing apprehension, certainly in poorly governed countries, that the world is going awry and needs to be put right and suitably in accordance with the ways religious texts lay down. Secular forms of government have been facing mounting pressure from religious parties, particularly in Muslim majority states, demanding their eradication and the installation

[7] Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious Terrorism as Performance Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 281–286.

[8] See Chapters 6 And 7 in this collection.

[9] Juergensmeyer, Kitts and Jerryson, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*.

[10] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (Oakland: California University Press, 2017), 10.

[11] In a comprehensive review of literature on religious fundamentalism and religious extremism, Ahmed and Bashirov trace roots of religious fundamentalism and religiously motivated violence in some of the most prominent religions like Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism. They argue that "in contrast to other religions, it is Islamic fundamentalism that is widely considered to be prone to violence, so much so that Islam equals fundamentalism equals violence in popular parlance". Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Galib Bashirov, "Religious Fundamentalism and Violent Extremism," in *The Difficult Task of Peace: Crisis, Fragility and Conflict in an Uncertain World*, ed. Francisco Rojas-Aravena (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 245–260.

of constitutions that enshrine the place and role of religion in politics and society.[12] These demands are increasingly being made not necessarily through democratic channels but also and increasingly on the streets.

All this places a premium on relating actual outbreaks of violence in the name of religion to the specific contexts in which they occurred. What were the actual circumstances that led to these events, carried them along, and conceivably explain them? This set of essays rests on the basis that South Asia, as a geographic region, provides an often-clearer testing ground for the application of theory and the provision of specific disciplinary case studies than almost anywhere else in the world of investigative scholarship. It arguably did so with respect to both the phenomenon of decolonisation—a process deemed to have begun with the ending of British empire in India—and the development of subaltern studies or the study of nationalist politics from below, and the transformative part the peasantry and proletariat played in that history. That said, the wide-ranging, ostensibly definitive *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* hardly touches on South Asia at all. Apart from a general overview of the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in the first part of the book, there are no specific chapters on South Asia in this otherwise comprehensive volume.[13]

Much the same can be said of *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (2019). In a study of encyclopaedic scale, *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* does mention the coordinated 4-day attacks in 2008 on a variety of public places in Mumbai by the Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist LeT. But in a book of 795 pages, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka do not rate more than a few passing references.[14] There is a chapter on 'Terrorism in Asia', but its emphasis is on violent 'Islamic extremism' and its particular role in the 'upsurge' in the region of 'militant ideology

[12] Imran Ahmed and Howard V. Brasted, "Recognition and Dissent: Constitutional Design and Religious Conflict in Pakistan," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 2 (2021): 351–367.

[13] Juergensmeyer, Kitts and Jerryson, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*.

[14] Erica Chenowtha, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis Kalyvas, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

that sanctifies violence'. While it is acknowledged that this kind of religious activism extends beyond Asia's Muslim communities, non-Muslim forms of it are really only pointed to in passing.[15]

In the latest 4th edition of *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2017), Mark Juergensmeyer includes a new section on Hindu violence to a chapter originally entitled 'The Sword of Sikhism', which analyses the Sikh separatist movement and its involvement in the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the Chief Minister of Punjab, Beant Singh, in 1995; although both acts emerge as more politically than religiously driven. The updated chapter—'The Spear of Shiva, The Sword of Sikhism'—adds the story of the brutal murder and removal of thousands of Muslims living on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in 2002 and the role and possible complicity of Narendra Modi, formerly a Hindu nationalist hardliner and Chief Minister of Gujarat at the time, in fomenting this 'carnage'.[16] Traced back to the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 by extremist Hindus and the months of communal violence that ensued, the Gujarat massacre takes place against the background of the Hindu nationalist ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindutva agenda which they promoted. But whether this history and the 'threat of religious politics' it presages can be classified in terms of 'terrorism', 'religious violence' or 'ethnic cleaning' Juergensmeyer leaves somewhat open-ended.[17]

II

While providing the detailed regional contexts of violent conflict, the South Asia specific literature does not normally extend its treatment of religious extremism to the global sphere or venture a model of

[15] Brahma Chellaney, "Terrorism in Asia: A Rapidly Spreading Scourge Tests the Region," in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenowth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis Kalyvas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 590–606.

[16] Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Spear of Shiva, the Sword of Sikhism," in *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (Oakland: California University Press, 2017); Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Rajeshwari Balasubramanian, *Extremism in Pakistan and India: The Case of the Jamaat-E-Islami and Shiv Sena* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2010), 12.

[17] Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 104.

universal explanation based on any perceived trans-national ramifications. The exception, perhaps, is John Braithwaite and Bina D'Costa's *Cascades of Violence: War, Crime and Peace-building Across South Asia* (2018), which uses South Asia to identify general preconditions and patterns of violence.[18] Drawing on dozens of multi-layered conflicts in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Myanmar since 1947, Braithwaite and D'Costa construct a conceptual framework of 'violence' that has relevance not only to South Asia, but also internationally beyond it.[19] This model of violence, however, is not so much about religious extremism per se as about how violence of any kind tends to multiply and 'cascade' with cumulative effect.

By and large the literature on South Asia does confirm that religious related violence manifests in as deadly a fashion as has been shown elsewhere in the world, and arguably on occasion more so. Examples of violent extremism in South Asia are always on a large scale, involving as they do some of the most heavily populated countries in the world. None was larger than the massacre of over 2 million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims during the 1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent and the creation of the two separate sovereign states of India and Pakistan, which had ostensibly been formed because of irreconcilable social, cultural and religious differences between Hindus and Muslims. In one of largest transmigrations in history vast numbers of displaced peoples were killed as they attempted to cross over newly formed borders into either India or West and East Pakistan. Whatever the causal trigger of this tragedy, not only were pent-up tensions arising from the politics of separation suddenly released, but so also perhaps were long-standing if frequently dormant religious enmities as well.

This foundation history has ever since cast a long and bitter shadow not only over the relations between India and Pakistan as adjacent nations, but also communally between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living within them. India and Pakistan continue to clash over the latter's territorial claim to Jammu and Kashmir, which acceded to India in 1947 despite its predominantly Muslim population. Having gone to war on four previous occasions—in 1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999—these two nuclear

[18] John Braithwaite and Bina D'Costa, *Cascades of Violence: War, Crime and Peace-building Across South Asia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018).

[19] Braithwaite and D'Costa, *Cascades of Violence*, xv, 1–4.

armed countries routinely engage in conventional military skirmishes usually sparked by periodic incursions into Kashmir by Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, such as the LeT, though more recently Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM). Led by a Pakistani cleric, JeM aims to liberate not only Jammu and Kashmir from Hindu rule, but also India itself.[20]

Sri Lanka too has experienced decades of violence since becoming independent in 1948. In 1983 notably, a civil war broke out between the Tamil Hindu minority and the Sinhala Buddhist majority, ending with the military defeat in 2009 of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and its objective of a separate homeland. In total, upwards of 140,000 people were killed in the conflict that appears to have been fought, despite the Aranthalawa killing of 33 Buddhist monks in 1987, largely along national and ethnic, rather than religious lines. Not so the assault on a mosque by a Buddhist mob in 2013 or the 2019 coordinated targeting of Christians and tourists on Easter Sunday by Islamist terrorists linked to the National Thowheeth Jama'ath. The 253 fatalities that were recorded in April 2019 shattered a relatively lengthy period of communal calm.[21]

In Myanmar the persecution of Rohingya Muslims by Buddhist nationalists and various governments dating back to the 1970s has seemingly culminated in what the UN has labelled as 'ethnic cleansing' and the mass exodus of over 700,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh and other neighbouring South East Asian states. Although many Rohingyas have been able to trace their roots in Myanmar back centuries, both military and civilian governments have considered them to be illegal immigrants originally from Muslim Bengal and over the years have refused to grant them access to citizenship. Recently forced to carry national verification cards, they are effectively classified as foreigners without basic political rights.[22]

[20] Asad Hashim, "Profile: What Is Jaish-e-Muhammed?," *Al Jazeera*, May 2, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/profile-jaish-muhammad-190215061851082.html.

[21] Michael Safi, "Death Toll in Sri Lanka Bombings Revised Down to 253," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/25/death-toll-in-sri-lanka-bombings-revised-down-to-253; A. R. Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 3–16.

[22] D. B. Subedi and Johanna Garnett, "De-mystifying Buddhist Religious Extremism in Myanmar: Confrontation and Contestation Around Religion, Development and State-Building," *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no. 2 (2020): 223–246, https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2020.1739859.

That any of these outstanding examples of violence by majority religious communities against minority religious communities can be traced directly to extreme religious ideologies and motivations remains problematic. Recent examples of communal and ethnic intolerance in South Asia need to be balanced and weighed up against previous periods of apparent harmony between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. Suffice to say that the extent and brutality of current intercommunal violence throughout all the countries making up South Asia fit the generalist overview that religions themselves are seldom the cause of such violence, though when invoked to further political agendas or whip up communal antagonisms they have the propensity to fuel violence on a savage scale.[23]

While those antagonisms and agendas are likely to stem as much from temporal as religious considerations and differ country by country and region by region, the South Asia landscape of extremist religious violence serves to confirm a number of common salient features. Terrorism and theology do not generally go hand in hand. From his hideout in Afghanistan Osama bin Laden, for example, may have based his concept of offensive jihad against the non-Muslim West on contested passages in the Qur'an and berated 153 of Saudi Arabia's leading ulama for not being able to see that there was no such thing as 'non-violent' Islam. There was only Islam. But his declaration of war against the US and the West and his call to Muslims to obliterate unbelief in the world, wherever it existed, appeared conditional rather than ordained. If Europe and even the US would withdraw completely from the Middle East and guarantee never to return, Al Qaeda expressed its willingness to call a halt to its campaign of violence against them.[24]

Though Jurgensmeyer and his team of researchers have interviewed an impressive array of religious extremists around the world, the world views they hold, rather than the particular theologies they may subscribe to, seem to have underwritten the violent acts they carried out and are remembered for. This is probably true as well of religious extremists and the particular parties they belong to in South Asia, though there has been

[23] Ishtiaq Ahmed, "The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia," in *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Ishtiaq Ahmed (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 1–12.

[24] Howard V. Brasted and Adeel Khan, "Islam and 'the Clash of Civilizations'? An Historical Perspective," in *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 283–285.

no similar attempt to get into their minds and interrogate their motives. That is a work yet to be done.

Again, in line with generalist trends, research seems to show that what prompts religious violence, whether in the world at large or for instance South Asia**,** is not necessarily any existential threat to Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism as such, which are certainly not in danger where they are the unchallenged markers of majoritarian national identity. More often than not it is every-day economic, social and political factors such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, state oppression and ethnic rivalry that lie at the heart of religiously expressed discontent.[25] Blame is easily attributed to a godless world system that so openly privileges the corporate and capitalist elites, but serves the interests of everybody else—including the god-faring—so poorly.[26]

Disgruntled young South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans), not unlike aggrieved Middle Eastern Muslims, can be seen turning to religion to confront an 'alien' secular modernity that globalisation seemingly foists on them from the distant financial centres of New York, London and Tokyo and which pays no heed to cultural and customary practices.[27] Globalisation in this guise is easily depicted as a post-colonial form of Western imperial hegemony and exploitation. It is in this context that the time-honoured calls of 'Islam in danger' or 'Buddhism in danger' appear to strike a galvanising chord.[28]

[25] Sajid Haider, Carmen de Pablos Heredero, Munir Ahmed and Sumaira Dustgeer, "Identifying Causes of Terrorism in Pakistan," *The Dialogue* 10, no. 3 (2015): 220–236; Shafi M. Mostofa, "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: An Examination of its Cause and Trajectory (2009–2017)" (PhD diss., University of New England, 2020).

[26] James Kenneth Galbraith, *The Predator State: How Conservatives Abandoned the Free Market and Why Liberals Should Too* (New York: The Free Press, 2008), 126ff; Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump* (London: Penguin, 2017); S. Winchester, "Power, Ideology and Economic Change: An Examination of Ideological Perdition Within Western Capitalism" (PhD diss., University of New England, 2020), 1–18.

[27] Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and Terrorism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenowth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis Kalyvas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 286–287; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 280–281; Jamal Malik, "Introduction," in *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?*, ed. Jamal Malik (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–22.

[28] Meera Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

On the other hand, while also responsive to grievances of this type, the springs of violent religious extremism can be tapped by fundamentalist ideology[29] and revivalist attempts to restore a more conservative, purer form of Islam.[30] This has certainly been the case in the sub-continent where madrasa or religious-based grass-roots education is concerned. There are thousands of such schools in Pakistan and in Bangladesh, where they are on the increase, but also in India as well.[31] Featuring in the popular imagination as the breeding ground and conduits of terrorist ideology, madrasas are widely believed to teach a fundamentalist version of Islam that feeds into religious extremism and promotes militancy of a jihadist kind.[32] While recent research does not rule this out, a lot depends on the particular South Asian Islamic sect madrasas are funded and influenced by: whether the Deobandi who aggressively promotes a puritanical interpretation of Islam and especially against the Shias whom it regards as non-Muslims, the Barelvi who inclines to the more mystical practices of Sufism and until recently eschewed the use of violence, or the Wahhabi who promotes a Saudi brand of Islam that strictly adheres to the original texts and the traditions of Muhammad and is implacably opposed to Islamic modernism.[33] With cultural pluralism an anathema, madrasas have become 'battlegrounds' for contesting Muslim

[29] Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam versus Global Jihad* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21, 24, 78, 81; Benjamin Schreer and Andrew T. H. Tan, eds., *Terrorism and Insurgency in Asia: A Contemporary Examination of Terrorist and Separatist Movements* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

[30] James Warner Björkman, *Fundamentalism Revivalists and Violence in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988); Samina Yasmeen, "Pakistan and the Struggle for "Real" Islam," in *Islam and Political Legitimacy*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 70–87.

[31] Zakir H. Raju, "Madrasa and Muslim Identity on Screen: Nation, Islam and Bangladeshi Art Cinema on the Global Stage," in *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?*, ed. Jamal Malik (London: Routledge, 2008), 125–141.

[32] Sakthivel and Sakthival, "Terrorism in India," 160–161.

[33] Arif Rafiq, "Sunni Deobandi-Shi'i Sectarian Violence in Pakistan. Explaining the Resurgence Since 2007," *Middle East Institute* (December 2014): 9, 21, 29, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Arif%20Rafiq%20report.pdf.