How does Violence end up in World Religions?

On prevention of religion-based justification of extremism

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Popular perception holds that there are more peaceful and more warlike religions, such as Buddhism and Islam. However, an analysis from the perspective of religious studies shows that no religion is immune from coining variants on glorification of violence; just as vice versa, every religion can also be interpreted as peaceable and life-enhancing. Conspiracy theories are common to all violent groups – whether political and ideological or religious. These allege a worldwide supremacy of evil and also try to justify terrorist violence as self-defence. Jews (anti-Semitism) or Illuminati and the US elites controlled by them (anti-Americanism) are regularly identified as the super-conspirators. New digital media enables the networking and recruitment of kindred spirits to be accelerated and promoted. In large parts of the Arab, Islamic world, as well as in Russia, Venezuela and some African countries, oil and gas rents also favour the consolidation of authoritarian structures and mentalities. The article concludes with concrete proposals for the prevention of radicalisation processes among religious communities.

ARE THERE PEACEFUL AND WARLIKE RELIGIONS?

The initially small group of the extremely faithful became more radicalised under the eyes of the regional and world powers. Eventually, they captured a city, expelled or killed more moderate forces and proclaimed a state according to God's holy commandments. Judgement Day and the final battle between the powers of good and evil was imminent. This news spread and soon young volunteers in particular poured into the young state from near and far. The leader reintroduced harsh laws and also the death sentence in the name of God and the faithful community, just like those in the Holy Scriptures. It was only when a very broad alliance was successfully formed beyond denominational boundaries that the theocracy was finally surrounded by the military and eventually defeated.

What nowadays sounds like a description of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" already happened once hundreds of years ago in the German-speaking world and among Christians. A small branch split off from the initially profoundly non-violent movement of Christian Anabaptists ("Re-baptisers", because they regarded child baptism as unbiblical and ineffective), also accompanied by often brutal persecutions, and gained control of the city of Münster. The "Baptist State of Münster", understood as a restored "Kingdom of Zion", took shape between 1531 and 1535. Its leader, the learned tailor, innkeeper and singer John of Leiden (1509–1536), did not only officiate as King John I, marrying several

women during this time, but was also only too happy to execute any death sentences imposed himself. Only a Catholic and Evangelical army, united in the midst of denominational confusion finally managed to defeat the state militarily. King John I was among the captured leaders, who were ultimately publicly executed after torture and interrogation. Their three metal execution cages, in which they were also exhibited after their death, are hanging to this day from St. Lambert's Church in Münster as a macabre memorial (Vinzentz 2014).

Of course, the other Anabaptist groups suffered severely from the extremely rapid radicalisation of this baptismal branch and only a few survived the ensuing persecution. However, the Anabaptist Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites also grew in America with strict pacifism, abandonment of active mission and growth through abundance of children and became virtual embodiments of "Churches of Peace" which reject violence – and once again attracted suspicion as "stupid Germans", as they would not allow themselves to be drawn into the Union or the World Wars (Ester 2005).

But not only the Christian Anabaptist movement was capable of developing branches with radical violence despite its dominant peaceable nature. Buddhism, commonly regarded in the West as the most peaceful religion, has also spawned, for example in Sri Lanka, extremist branches led by monks, who eventually turned to violence against the Muslim, Christian and Hindu minorities of the country. Even the nationalist Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike (1899–1959), himself a Buddhist, was ultimately murdered by a monk for daring to start peace talks. The security guards had not considered it necessary beforehand to search a Buddhist monk for weapons. Even at the end of the 20th century, a scholar lamented the continued nationalistic and violent betrayal of Buddhism on the island, which had contributed to a series of bloody conflicts with thousands of casualties (Tambiah 1992; Blume 2014, 150–162).

However, cases of the opposite are no secret either: parts of pre-Arabic Judaism in Israel were regarded at the time of Christ as extremely nationalistic and prone to violence. With reference to the Hebrew Bible, which was not yet conclusively canonised, zealots ("fanatics") and suicide attackers ("Sicarians", from the Latin sica = dagger) turned against the Romans and their Jewish allies in order to cleanse the Kingdom of God of idolatry and to precipitate the coming of the Messiah. Jesus himself was one of dozens of aspirants to the eschatological king's throne, who were executed by the Roman occupying forces, accused of rebellion. However, the followers of this anointed (Greek: chrestos) and a group of Jewish scribes, the later rabbis, decided to strictly renounce violence and survived the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as the suppression of several revolts by the Romans. Until this day, numerous particularly pious Christians and Jews (the Haredim, Hebrew for "God-fearing") are greatly opposed to any direct interpretation of the Hebrew Bible regarding military service of any kind, since only the Messiah may establish the coming Kingdom of Peace (Aslan 2013; Blume 2013).

Finally, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the suppression of a number of uprisings at the beginning of the 20th century, Islam was regarded as a broken religion, far removed from the course of the world. Even Karl May (1842–1912) represented pious Muslims in his novels above all as fatalistic and subservient to authority. Uprisings and revolutions in the Arab world continued until the 1970s, mainly by nationalist and socialist movements, such as the Baath Party or the

PLO. It is not only in Afghanistan that religiously shaped tribes even expressly received weapon deliveries to use against the Soviet invaders. Accordingly, the West responded helplessly and then also haphazardly to the "Islamic Revolution" in Iran in 1979 and the following increase of Islamic movements, which continue to this day. Many people believe that after the attacks of 11.09.2001, an "always" violent religion of jihad (actually "effort on God's part", but also understood as "God-willed war") resulted from the religion of the allegedly fatalistic Kismet ("fate"). A hundred years after its supposedly inevitable decline, Islam is perceived as expansive and conquering (Blume 2014, 173–184).

A clear finding emerges from the point of view of religious studies: every living world religion always produces new variants, which can be both peaceable and prone to violence, as well as life-enhancing and repressive. A constructive interest in religions, the promotion of good approaches and vigilance against religiously legitimised extremism are the right way to enable a successful co-existence based on human rights. Instead of an essentialist classification into peaceful and warlike religions, which does not keep up with developments and can lead to serious mistakes, we recommend looking for features and development paths in order to recognise and nip violent radicalisation in the bud. Research has made progress in this over the last few years, which may be productive for prevention measures promoting peace and security. Two particularly effective features are described below: the belief in conspiracy and the rentier state, primarily shaped by oil and gas income.

BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY AS BASIS FOR EVERY RADICALISATION

There is, in fact, a doctrine which all terrorist groups of political, ideological and religious nature have in common: the belief in a global super-conspiracy, which has already become so threatening and overpowering that even violent self-defence is justified, indeed imperative.

While both the general public and journalists still predominantly tamper with the fuzzy and thus confusing concept of "conspiracy theory", it makes analytical sense to distinguish between verifiable theories and myths which can no longer be verified and ultimately result in a belief system.

The accusation of membership in a criminal of even terrorist association is, for example, a conspiracy theory, which can ultimately be examined and confirmed or rejected in a legally ordered procedure. Even serious media organisations, whistleblowers and parliamentary investigation committees have already supported many real conspiracies; and on the other hand, also rejected unfounded conspiracy theories.

However, conspiracy theories which, for example, proclaim that "witches" destroyed the harvest, "Illuminati" controlled the French and American revolutions or the "Elders of Zion" secretly controlled the world are no longer verifiable. What is psychologically extremely interesting is that such believers in conspiracies practically never assume that there are also different fallible conspiracy circles competing with each other all over the world. Instead, they nearly always construct so-called conspiracy pyramids, headed by supernaturally talented and globally active super-conspirators (Brotherton 2015; Blume 2016).

The impact of such conspiracy beliefs is enormous in ideological and religious terms. Those affected may acknowledge an absolute good – for example a loving

god of creation, the "natural superiority" of their own nation or the inevitable victory of world revolution. In fact, they believe that the workings of the world are in the hands of evil, conspiratorial powers who are to blame for evils and setbacks including those in their own lives. In his remarkable study on the roots of religiously legitimised violence, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote of a "pathological dualism", in which the world is experienced as twofold: here, the small group of the supposedly wise, there, the evil super-conspirators, who dominate politics, media, economy, law, science and naive followers and can only be repelled with force (Sacks 2015).

Almost paradoxically, this pathological dualism became clear in the trial against the IS returnee Nils D. before the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court at the beginning of 2016. The German former drug addict reported that the friends of his cousin, who had converted to Islam, failed to convince him of the existence of God. However, they would then show him a "sixty-part internet documentary about the Illuminati" and their global conspiracy. Upon this, he acknowledged "that there is a devil" and thus "there must also be a God" (Burger 2016). In this case, it is clearly recognisable that the positive identification of a good power is not in the forefront of the extremist and terrorist ideology, but rather resistance against a supposedly world-dominating evil.

SURGE IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES VIA NEW MEDIA

The conversion and radicalisation of Nils D. by new, digital media is no exception. In fact, religious and cultural history is aware of close links between available media and conspiracy beliefs. Even in oral traditions, there is a belief in conspiratorial witches – an accusation which, in parts of Africa and Indonesia, still results in thousands of crimes or even murders each year, especially towards women and children. After the introduction of writing, not only the Holy Scriptures of the first world religions emerged, but, accompanying them, also the opposition movements of "Gnosis". These claimed a higher, "secret knowledge" about global conspiracies for their followers. In extreme forms, even the god of creation turned into the conspiratorial, evil "demiurge" confronting a hidden and threatened spiritual deliverance. Judaism, in particular, as the oldest and supposedly conspiratorial religious minority was already the target of pre-Christian Gnostics, whose conspiracy theories have been deeply embedded in modern anti-Semitism.

The introduction of book printing around 1450 not only led to the dissemination of intelligent and learned works, but also the most evil conspiracy theories like the Hammer of the Witches (from 1486) and pamphlets against Jews, "gypsies" (especially Roma and Sinti), Catholics, Protestants and Muslims. The 18th and 19th centuries were characterised not only by the explosive spread of reading and increasingly cost-effective paperbacks, but also by nationalist, anti-Semitic and racist creations. In papal decrees and the "Taxil hoax" accompanied by millions of copies, freemasons were accused and charged with "fellowship with Satan", of being behind the machinations and revolutions of subversive forces against the authority willed by God, and ultimately of striving for a "new world order". Today anti-Mason and anti-American conspiracy theories are associated with the symbols on US seals and dollar notes, which were actually derived from Masonic symbols for the avoidance of state-church claims (Blume 2016).

Conspiracy literature reached its disastrous climax with the anti-Jewish fabrication of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" (from 1905). After having been

celebrated by European and American anti-Semites and having contributed to the crimes of German National Socialists, they have been experiencing a second heyday since the late 1930s in the Arab and Islamic world, and are even frequently published by governments and religions foundations as supposedly authentic Jewish texts. The belief in a Jewish-Zionist super-conspiracy is now widespread among Muslims in Europe and contributes repeatedly to radicalisation processes (Matussek 2012; Mansour 2015).

The end of the 20th century is characterised by the rise of espionage and thriller genres from "James Bond" to "The X Files", in which democratically elected governments appear at best helpless and naive, at worst infiltrated by conspirators. The classic Gnosis also reached the digital age with the film "Matrix" (1999) at the latest. There is a good reason why e.g. Islamic groupings use Matrix motifs like the "red and blue pill" to recruit followers. Whether people (want to) believe in the threat to their own nation or religion, in the supposedly criminal machinations of a supposed "vaccination mafia", the use of toxic chemtrail aircraft by their own government or concealed alien contacts, never before has it been so easy to connect online with like-minded people with just a few clicks. Thus, the construction of alternative worldviews ensues through a digitally filtered or simply faked news stream along with the radicalisation by mutual confirmation and encouragement (Mansour 2015; Blume 2016; Schmitz 2016).

PROMOTION OF BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY BY OIL RENTIER STATES

Why, however, is the Islamic world above all affected by the massive spread of extremist and terrorist ideas? Part of the ex-

planation is again to be found in the spread of the media – the Ottoman Empire had forbidden the introduction of book printing around 1485 and thereby stabilised the realm. However, it also indirectly ended the long golden age of scholarship and sciences in the Islamic world. From the 17th century onwards, the signs of the retreat and collapse of the erstwhile high culture could no longer be overlooked. This end of the supposedly golden age of Islam, still puzzling and also psychologically damaging for many Muslims, is often interpreted by conspiracy theories, especially in the context of the new media, developed almost exclusively in the West (Mansour 2015; book printing Blume 2016).

Many Arab and Islamic movements, as well as regimes also fostered the dissemination of anti-Semitic conspiracies in order to deflect their own failures – even in the conflict with Israel. The rentier state theory of political science provides a significant explanation for this. It assumes that societies develop negatively under the influence of massive incomes from raw materials (oil and gas especially). While the state in "normal" societies is financed by tax revenues and therefore has to grant legal certainty, education and citizen co-determination ("no taxation without representation", budget and tax laws as an "essential right" of a true parliament, etc.), the world of a rentier states looks different. Here, a dominant group appropriates the sources of income and secures these through a coalition of dependent clients, security services and religious scholars with authoritarian and repressive arguments. Rentier states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, but also in part Russia, Venezuela or Nigeria do not even have functioning tax systems and also have little interest in the promotion of independent economic sectors and a vibrant civil society. Instead, both the ruling and the opposition movements ex-

plain processes and failures using foreign and domestic conspiracies, thus undermining any confidence in the rule of law and democratic discourse.

As long as the economic foundations of these rentier states do not change, revolutions and coups are only followed again by new, bloody wars for raw materials, followed by the next, just as authoritarian regime. Our own hunger for fossil fuels is thus creating those resource rent incomes running into billions, which are poisoning the states, economies and also religions in the Arab, Central Asian and African world in an authoritarian, conspiratorial and ultimately extremist fashion (Matussek 2012; Blume 2015).

CONCLUSION: PREVENTION AT THE ROOTS

A whole series of starting points for the preventative avoidance of conspiracy and radicalisation processes can be found using religious and political analyses.

Thus, security services would be well advised to monitor religious developments closely – since every religion can be interpreted and practised peacefully in a life-enhancing manner, but can also express violent variants. Indeed, secularisation takes place on the condition that existential security (prosperity, education, healthcare) is in place, however, this is always accompanied by crises of meaning, isolation processes and a decline in birth rates. Religiously binding movements, on the other hand, can be sustained by the provision of meaning and fellowship as well as an abundance of children and immigration. Therefore, for purely demographical reasons, a further increase in religious diversity is to be expected in all liberal societies (Sacks 2015).

Thus, the active promotion of inter-religious dialogue between churches and religious communities is an indispensable
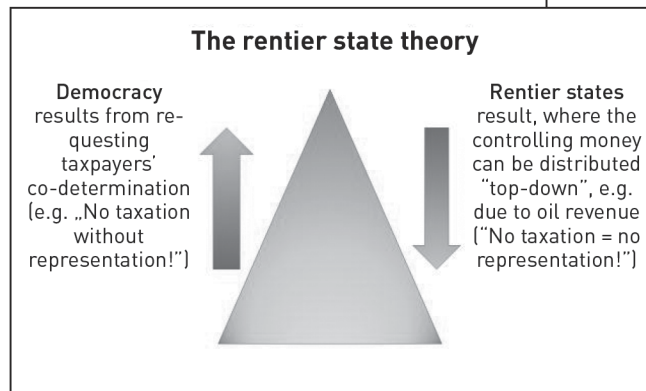
The scheme of the rentier state theory

means of peacekeeping; it enables the building of trust, common activities and senses of achievement. The training of religious leaders and officials within the country and based on European norms and scientific standards provides further protection against the infiltration of extremist conspiracy theories into local religious communities. Moreover, since immigrants' children gain not only access to schools and the private sector but also opportunities in public administration, mutual knowledge increases and the alienation between the state and parts of society is counteracted in everyday life. Both aspects increase the visibility of those religious groups that try to keep their distance from social processes or even seek to spread hostile content.

Conspiracy theories and, ultimately, extremist and terrorist groups also flourish to a much greater extent via digital media. More intensive monitoring and prosecution, as well as the rapid elimination of criminal content by international providers, such as Facebook and YouTube, should be one of the central concerns of European security policy.

Ultimately, the education and integration of younger generations, who are growing up in media-saturated world full of conspiracy theories, are also crucial. Information about the history and psychology of

conspiracy beliefs is extremely important for pupils and is in great demand where offered. One example is the first-rate graphic novel "The Plot" ("Das Komplott") by Will Eisner on the fabrication and history of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which should also be conveyed to adolescents with a migration background. My teaching experience has shown that the interest in serious information about the backgrounds of the US and European world of symbols is also very important.

However, it will only truly be possible to sustainably overcome authoritarian rentier regimes and to subsequently "detoxify" affected religions and ideologies if we decisively reduce our consumption of fossil fuels. The so-called decarbonisation through fuel savings, the expansion of sources of renewable energy and electric mobility do not only benefit environmental and climate protection, but also remove the economic foundations of violent regimes, authoritarian opposition movements and also radical religious variants like the Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. It is no coincidence that the first economic joint venture of the new Russian-Turkish coalition will be a gas pipeline to Europe (!). It is up to us to stop the transfer of billions to regimes and militias which in turn directly encourage conspiracy beliefs, extremism or even terrorism.

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