

Overcoming Extremism and Promoting the Peaceful Resolution of Conflict

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Overcoming Extremism and Promoting the Peaceful Resolution of Conflict - The Contribution of Religious Leadership

Overcoming Extremism Panel set in the House of Commons Religious extremism challenges western secular political thinking. What role can religious leadership play in confronting extremism in Eurasia, in the Middle East, in North Africa and in Europe? Does it mean restructuring political decision making to have a greater role for religious leaders? At what level can their cooperation with political leaders bring effective, lasting solutions to the current crisis? Panellists in this session will offer their perspective and recommend policies and action steps fostering a positive contribution of faith-based organisations and leaders in the prevention of extremism.

Moderator: Rt. Hon. Tom Brake, MP, has a great deal of experience with religious diversity as a London MP since 1997. He was the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons and has hosted a number of UPF activities.

Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham greeted the audience and welcomed them to the House of Lords. He mentioned that he welcomed the work of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) because this was a time of greater international tension in several key areas. He spoke of his work to defuse tensions over extremism and encourage a true, non-violent, expression of Islam. He attended that he had attended the launch of the #IAPP in Seoul, South Korea in February.



The Rt. Rev. the Lord Robin Eames OM, House of Lords, has both experience of dealing with extremism in Northern Ireland and working with political leaders in the House of Lords.

The Rt. Rev. the Lord Eames OM, Anglican Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland (1986 – 2006) Lord Eames is a distinguished religious leader who made repeated peace initiatives during Northern Ireland's 'troubles'. They all failed for 13 years amid terrible suffering and grieving, until his persistence was recognised by the men following a violent path who could see that the conflict was not going to fulfil their goals. They chose him as a trusted figure to open a dialogue. He became a passionate campaigner for the peace process, empowered by the experience of ministering to those in grief. Numerous deserved awards and accolades have followed including the Order of Merit from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. He was raised to the peerage in 1995.

H.E. Fatmir Sejdiu, President of Kosovo (2006-2010) President Sejdiu was one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo (DLK) in 1989. He became the DLK President in 2006, position he held until 2010. He was elected as Member of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo in 1992 and 1998. That year he became Secretary General of the Assembly and President of the Committee for Constitutional Issues. He was elected again in 2001 and became a member of the Assembly's Presidency, then re-elected in 2004. In 2006 he was elected President of Kosovo, position he held until 2010. For 33 years, President Sejdiu has been a professor at the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Pristina and has published numerous scientific works.

Senator Latifa Gahouchi, Member of Parliament, Belgium. Senator Gahouchi was born in Oujda, Morocco. Her father, a social activist, had to leave his country for political reasons. She engaged in politics in Belgium and became in 2007 Charleroi City's Alderman for Education. In 2012 she became a Deputy of the Walloon Parliament. Since 2014, she is a Belgian Senator, and presides the Commission on Education of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

Dr Afzal Ashraf, Consultant Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, UK, has studied, specialised and commented on terrorism and extremist religious figures. He has been in Iraq with the Royal Air Force. He has trained officials of many Governments on strategies for coping with religious extremism.

What role can religious leadership play in confronting extremism?

My Lords ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. The question that we have been asked to address is: What role can religious leaders play in confronting extremism?

The simple answer to that is that religious leaders should emphasise the commonality of humanity, tolerance and the importance of empathy and social justice. In particular, where extremists misuse Scripture to justify their violent actions, religious leaders have a duty to highlight the errors of these interpretations.



Just about every religious leader in the world including the Pope, the Dalai Lama and here, in London, the Caliph of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the only counterweight to the Caliph of Daesh as done this to some degree. Despite their noble efforts, there has been little improvement. To understand why, we need to ask a number of questions:

- What is the relationship and difference between religion and politics?
- How do we get religious extremism?
- What role does religion play in extremist ideologies?
- So, what can religious leaders actually do?

Political systems have 2 essential components: who exercises power and the value framework within which that power is exercised. In most cases, it is religion or the religious heritage of the politicians that provides the value systems by which power is exercised, or at least justified. Western Liberal Democracy draws many of its legal principles and frameworks from Judaio-Christian values. So, the two are usually linked that way.

The difference between the religion and politics is that religion aspires people to high principles. Any

compromise in these can be seen as a compromise in faith. Religion on the other hand, necessitates pragmatism which, in turn, requires compromise. That is why in systems that are primarily political, the pragmatism required to work with others with different outlooks and values can often be achieved. In systems that are led by religious leaders, decisions made for pragmatic reasons are difficult because they can be seen as a weakness of faith. Such systems often lead to extremist off shoots.

That is not the only way extremism arises in religion. Scholars who have studied extremism have postulated that people develop extremist interpretations of religion when they experience social and political crises. I have confirmed this by looking at cases studies that included the Dutch Reform Church's support of Apartheid, development of the Hindutva Ideology and Islamism. In such circumstances, social and political grievances are interpreted as threats to the identity and values of believers, and religion is reinterpreted to confront those perceived as responsible for the threat.

In so doing, religious extremist ideologies primarily serve two purposes: they mobilizes followers around their

religious identity against the perceived threat, and they provide an ethical justification for violence and control over others.

So, what can religious leaders do to confront extremism? Firstly, they must maintain a separation from power. They need to avoid having power or influencing who has power. But they should influence positively the debate on the values by which power is exercised. In particular, the values universal to all major religions of peace through the exercise of absolute justice, beneficence and altruistic love.

We are today being asked to offer policies that might be effective in countering extremism. Many policies are needed. Indeed, many already exist. But if these policies do not directly link to the religious principles I have mentioned then they risk being ineffective.

For example, we must encourage governments to think more critically about the current fashion in foreign policies aimed at enforced regime change, where the price of the change is paid for the lives of innocent citizens. We have a bizarre situation now where, in order to be liberated from the oppression of dictators, many times more innocents die during and following liberation than if the oppression of the dictator continued.

Absolute justice requires that all people are equal before the law. That is not just within a country but also between countries. I think all of the countries represented here will not arm and encourage vigilante groups to fight crime, no matter how well meaning they may be. We know that eventually, these groups are likely to threaten the very peace and security they aim to protect. We only grant such power to police and other forces who can be controlled.

Why then do we encourage, arm and support groups in other countries? How many examples are there in recent times of such groups transitioning to peaceful governance? Not many. But there are many more examples of such groups becoming extremists. Indeed most of the prominent extremist groups have benefitted from either direct or indirect state support to develop their reigns of terror.

So while religious leaders should continue to progress interfaith dialogue, encourage critical and accurate study of their scriptures, they should also focus on understanding that it is both local and global social and political crises that lead to extremism. They should advise and guide political leaders on how to work towards, peace through universal justice, beneficence and altruistic love. That requires that the structures of international law and cooperation, imperfect as they may be, are upheld and strengthened rather than being ignored and weakened.