



Harris Manchester College
Mansfield Road
Oxford
OX1 3TD

Conference on Common Modalities of Fundamentalist Thinking in different Religions

Recent years have seen a rising tide of religious fundamentalism. While it has forced itself on to the agenda of governments and security agencies because of the apparent association between extreme forms of religious thinking, political radicalization and terrorist acts, social scientists and theologians have also been forced to pay attention to a phenomenon that many had hoped would fade with increasing education.

Research suggests that when a community feels under existential threat it resorts to forms of thinking quite different from those that prevail in times of confidence. Scott Atran has described how the 'rational actor' model of political engagement, where the drivers of decision-making are primarily social and economic, gives way in times of threat to a form of individual and group thinking that has been described as 'devoted actor' in which the drivers are sometimes called 'sacred values', not primarily because they are religious, but because they transcend normal socio-economic criteria.

While those whose minds are captured by such fundamentalist thinking believe themselves to be proclaiming a unique truth, which they must in many cases enforce on others, it is notable to the outsider how similar are some of the 'rules of thinking' across entirely different religious faiths. Indeed the more fundamentalist they are, they more similar their forms of thinking become, and the more antagonistic they are to other faiths. This form of thinking can also exist in non-religious groups.

There is also a loss of complexity in thinking and in experiencing identity in such contexts and this has been noted by many authors, for example, by Amartya Sen who uses the term 'singularity' to describe the loss of diversity which occurs when the primacy of one element of identity, often the badge of a religious or nationalistic group, becomes pre-eminent. The way in which the individual becomes willing to fight and die for the group has been described in some detail by Harvey Whitehouse.

This descent into a different way of thinking and experiencing one's identity when one's large group feels a sense of existential threat is almost always associated with aggressive thinking, not only to others outside of the group, but also to group members who are women or members of in-group minorities and because political radicalization and violent acts are often committed by individuals who claim just such ideas and beliefs, it is often assumed by security agencies and others that there is a direct developmental line through increasing religious (and other) fundamentalism, to political radicalization and then violence. This perspective has informed many policy approaches to counter-terrorism. However the overwhelming majority of people whose thinking can be characterized as 'fundamentalist' are not politically involved and are opposed to and often horrified by politically-motivated violence, and there is increasing concern that policy approaches informed by this thinking may actually be counter-productive. Deepening our understanding of these processes of large group thinking is therefore of considerable practical and public policy importance.

The Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Harris Manchester College and the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford propose to bring together a group of scholars from different disciplines including psychology, anthropology, political science and theology for a two-day seminar to try to take forward our thinking about religious fundamentalism by examining from

different disciplinary perspectives the commonalities of the form of thinking and experiencing of identity of individuals in such large groups, and to explore the evidence for how far it is related to political radicalization and violence.

The conference will be held at Harris Manchester College from 15/17 September 2014 and will be organized by Professor Harvey Whitehouse, Chair of Social Anthropology in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (SAME) and John, Lord Alderdice, Professor Scott Atran and Dr Richard Davis of Harris Manchester College and Research Associates in SAME.

Funds will be provided by the Winchester Lecture Committee to cover some of the costs of this seminar.