Why is religious extremism so attractive?

Life together and the search for meaning

Thomas K. Johnson[1]

Abstract

Religious extremism must be understood, at least partly, as a result of meaninglessness in the lives of young people. A quest for meaning is part of what is driving thousands of young Muslims to become soldiers of the Islamic State and other extremist organizations. To address religious extremism adequately religious and civil communities must consciously offer appropriate life-giving meanings at both the ultimate and secondary levels, since inappropriate meanings can have terrible and deadly effects.

Keywords Religious extremism, Islamic State, meaning in life, church/state relations, relation between faith and reason.

Recently I read the public comments of a diplomat from Indonesia who was very happy that only a few hundred of his fellow citizens, of a population of some 200 million, of whom 87% are Muslims, have deserted their communities to fight for the Islamic State and its allies.[2] The number is so low it is striking, especially in light of the many thousands from across the globe who are streaming over land and seas to become Islamist soldiers. There is, rather obviously, significant religious, cultural, and ethical content that lies upstream from the decisions of many thousands of young Muslims, either to join or not to join one of the extremist organizations. Some of that content is likely to be found in immediate personal or family psychology. The lack of education and jobs surely plays a role for some. However, the largely secularized character of our education as western observers may blind us, so we do not perceive the complex phenomenon of religious extremism. To grasp an additional important dimension of the problem I believe we must turn to the

[1] Dr. Johnson, P.h., is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America serving through Global Scholars (www.global-scholars.org), Martin Bucer Seminary (www.bucer.eu), the Theological Commission of the WEA, and on the editorial board of IJRF. He lives in Prague and is the author of Human Rights: A Christian Primer (2008), available as a free download at www.bucer.eu/international. Article received: 8 April 2015. Accepted: 9 April 2015. Contact: Johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com.

[2] Prof. Agdurrahman Mas'ud, General Director of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, in a public discussion in Brussels on March 19, 2015, held jointly by the Robert Schuman Foundation, the Forum Brussels International, and the Hanns Seidel Foundation. See Bonn Profiles 347, www.bucer.org/resources/details/bonner-querschnitte-112015-ausgabe-347-eng.html

observations of a Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, and his powerful book from two generations ago, *Man's search for meaning.*[3]

In this book Frankl, who was an Austrian Jew trained as a psychiatrist, noticed in some detail who, from among his fellow prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp, survived the ordeal, even though the harsh conditions should probably have killed them. His answer was that those prisoners who found meaning in life often survived conditions that should have killed them, while those who lost any meaning usually died. Meaning was a source of life.

I wish Frankl had more strongly emphasized that meaning is not only a source of life, but that meaning is also a source of death. Think of the National Socialist political and military machine that was itself a gigantic collectivist search for meaning filled with quasi-religious slogans, symbols, and mythology. One of my colleagues describes the Nazi movement as a "War Religion."[4] Maybe we could call National Socialism a "Death Religion." Appropriate meanings support life; inappropriate meanings lead to death. We humans cannot avoid the search for meaning, whether it turns us into saints or demons.

And this should inform our responses to the Islamic State's global recruiting efforts. It is not only a lack of social integration, education, and jobs that drives young Muslims into the arms of IS; it is also a search for meaning. The promise of a caliphate provides a dramatic sense of meaning that has been lacking in their lives; it fills a vacuum. Therefore, part of the long-term response to reduce the attractiveness of IS has to address the meaning question, however difficult it may be. This is partly the realm of public ideology, partly the realm of theology.

Here we are at the border of faith communities and civil communities. I am a Christian apologist who argues that ultimate meaning is properly found in dialogue with the God of the Bible; I am also a social philosopher who argues that there are multiple secondary meanings that are properly experienced in our multiple civil communities. And a proper relation between ultimate meaning and secondary meanings is crucial to overcome religious extremism, regardless of the faith community to which we belong.

In our civil communities, such as stores, schools, hospitals, banks, factories, sports teams, research institutes, media outlets, government agencies, and humanitarian aid organizations, we should both practice and teach important secondary meanings. These secondary meanings include practicing justice, honesty, diligence, loyalty, and mercy, while talking about both universal human dignity and duties. These secondary meanings are real and address, in part, the human search for

[3] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's search for meaning,* first English translation under the title From death-camp to existentialism, 1959, first published in German in 1946. Various editions are now available in English.

[4] Thomas Schirrmacher, *Hitlers Kriegsreligion,* 2 vol. (Bonn: VKW, 2007).

meaning, while directing that search in a constructive direction. Religious extremism is, I believe, partly a response to a perceived meaning deficit in our multiple civil communities. And this deficit of meaning can be addressed in ways that do not destroy the needed boundaries regarding church/state relations, though it will require much careful effort.

In the western world, where I have lived my entire life, we spent centuries of blood, sweat, and tears to develop somewhat peaceful patterns of church/state relations, but it would be a terrible tragedy if we interpret these church/state relations in such a manner that we empty life in our civil communities of ethical meaning. The loss of ethical meaning in public, civil communities feeds religious extremism. People will search for meaning, sometimes leading to life, sometimes leading to death and destruction, so that the quest for meaning is not only a private, personal matter. The lack of meaning has consequences for entire societies.

Obviously, addressing the need for meaning is a central task of faith communities, but within the faith community, at least in my experience, the emphasis naturally falls on ultimate meanings. We talk about the hope of eternal life, about grace and forgiveness, about faith in "the Gospel." Within the Christian community we sometimes talk about how God's grace should equip us to become salt and light within the civil communities, but, honestly, we must improve both our talk and our walk in this area. We can do better, in words and in practice, in our efforts to demonstrate how the ultimate meaning found in dialogue with God bears fruit in the secondary meanings appropriate to the civil communities. I think other faith communities face a similar problem.

To avoid misunderstanding I should say that in the part of the Christian community in which I live, ultimate meanings and faith are not seen as a leap into a realm of irrationality, such that ultimate meanings are irrational and secondary meanings are rational. Again at Easter I heard that there are rational reasons to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. But there is a difference in the relation between faith and reason, depending on whether we are talking about ultimate or secondary meanings. In the realm of ultimate meanings, I believe it is far better for all of us (regardless of faith community) if we do not leave rationality behind. And in the realm of secondary meanings, when we are talking about ethical principles that should provide meaning to civil communities, it is simply foolish if we pretend to leave our respective faith identities behind. Our use of reason to articulate ethical meaning in the civil realms is always influenced by our faith community, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Hindu, or Buddhist.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference in the relation between faith and reason, depending on whether we are discussing ultimate meanings in faith communities or secondary meanings in civil communities. In a faith community, it is far

better if we never forget rationality while discussing ultimate meanings; in our civil communities, we should not forget the role of faith while using reason to articulate secondary meanings. But at this point in history, I think our two largest dangers are either that we neglect the need for meaning as a background cause for the attractiveness of religious extremism or that we neglect the need to articulate authentic secondary meanings within our civil communities. We need to respond, using our roles within both our faith communities and our civil communities. Religious extremism cannot be fully addressed by acting as if man can live on bread alone, without addressing the deeper human needs that lead to extremism, and these needs include the search for meaning.