

## Concept Paper

# A Framework for Understanding the Relationship between Radicalisation, Religion and Violence

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This working paper offers a conceptual framework for exploring the relationship between radicalisation, religion and violence. In doing so it reviews the role of religion in radicalisation theories and delineates three main schools of conceptualising radicalisation.

The aim of this paper – one of three in a series - is to provide a conceptual cornerstone for the research being conducted in GREASE, an EU-funded project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents.

<https://www.grease.eui.eu>



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## **The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.**

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives

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## Introduction

The subject of radicalisation has routinely been a minefield fraught with a variety of theories and assumptions, as much scholarship and public commentary attests. Different elements of these theories and assumptions, which we elaborate on below, have deep utility for our exploration of the discursive relationship between radicalisation and religion, while others are less useful. The question we pose in this paper, as we consider a conceptual framework for understanding and explaining radicalisation, is whether there is any one concept of ‘radicalisation’ that consistently helps us understand its meanings in relation to religious formations and belief systems. In turn, this bears on a fundamental question for the GREASE project: how do we understand the role of religion and ideas in relation to trajectories of radicalisation to violence?

### 1. Defining radicalisation and extremism: Background and contexts

The chief conceptual debates about how radicalisation is currently explained in relation to religion (or otherwise) are delineated below, with reflections and comments from us in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. We then go on to consider a conceptual framework that aims to be robust in its analytical value, privileges the intersectional, and covers key constructions of radicalisation contexts and scenarios.

#### 1.1 Radicalisation: The continuing journey of a concept

To understand the way in which discourses of radicalisation have been deployed in relation both to terrorism and to religion in contemporary times, we turn first to the seminal work of Arun Kundnani (2012). In this highly influential article, Kundnani broke down conceptualisations of radicalisation to violence since roughly 2004 – some three years after 9/11 – into four categories:

- Radicalisation as a *cultural-psychological* disposition
- Radicalisation as a *theological process*
- Radicalisation as a *theological-psychological* process
- Radicalisation as an *action framework* applied in policing and security contexts.

Kundnani argues that each element in this typology of radicalisation depends for its utility on the ‘narrow question’ posed by the study of radicalisation since 9/11: ‘Why do some individual Muslims support an extremist interpretation of Islam that leads to violence?’ (2012, 5). The narrowness of this question, he asserts, was shaped by the needs of counter-terrorist strategists and officials to quickly fund and mount counter-radicalisation offensives, rather than by the effort to ‘objectively study how terrorism comes into being’ through ‘scholarly understanding of the causes of terrorism’ (5).

As Derek Silva (2018) points out in an article revisiting Kundani's critique, the first three categories outlined by Kundnani derive largely from the work of Walter Laqueur (1999, 2004), who argued for a new paradigm representing a shift away from the political and structural conditions that enable or provoke violent responses and toward the *individualisation* of radicalisation as a psycho-social process. This was inextricably linked to Laqueur's conception of a 'new terrorism' that could be defined as 'Islamic fundamentalist violence rooted in fanaticism' (as Laqueur puts it, and we problematise the term 'fundamentalist' later on in this paper), connoting a new era of lethality linked to religious motivation as its driving force.

Broadly speaking, efforts to define and operationalise 'radicalisation' as a concept were pragmatic responses to the challenge of trying to describe, as Peter Neumann (2008, 4) put it, 'what goes on before the bomb goes off'. Thus, from its inception in the post 9/11 period, the 'new terrorism's' concept of radicalisation – intimately bound up with its characterisation as Islamist or jihadist-inflected terrorism -- has been deeply shaped by *instrumentalist* rather than *analytical or interpretive* concerns and perspectives.

The focus on a break between the 'new' terrorism and the 'old' was critiqued by Martha Crenshaw amongst others, who pointed out that 'a strictly "new terrorism" viewpoint is bound to overestimate the effect of religious beliefs as a cause of terrorism and a cause of lethality'. She argues that the distinction between 'religious and nationalist or secular revolutionary motivations is not clearly established', with few groups able to be characterised as having other than 'mixed motives' (Crenshaw 2007). Nevertheless, 'radicalisation' in the meaning of this term within 'new terrorism' analyses became a conceptual byword for attempting to pin down the points at which interventions in the 'radicalisation process' could be offered that would disrupt the process and turn people or groups back or away from fanatical ideologies. This kind of thinking about radicalisation frequently involved a concern with what is often termed the 'root cause/s' of radicalisation to violence, particularly in relation to Islam or Islamism, depending on how it is conceptualised (see, for but two of many examples, Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2011).

The focus for radicalisation studies and theorisations that followed this Laqueurian turn sought to explain violent radicalisation's 'root causes' either in theological terms or – with greater sophistication and complexity – as 'an interactive process between theological and social-psychological journeys' (Kundani 2012, 14). As Kundani notes, this more nuanced radicalisation theorising held that:

Rather than religious beliefs by themselves driving individuals to violence, the picture is one in which ideology becomes more extreme in response to a 'cognitive opening', an 'identity crisis' or a group bonding process....a more sophisticated [formulation] that addresses the interdependence of theology with emotions, identity and group dynamics (ibid).

### 1.1.1 The role of religion in radicalisation theories

Scholarship that privileges only the 'theological basis' for radicalisation to violence, and also proceeds from the 'narrow question' of understanding religiously-inspired extremist individuals and their ideological affiliations, is exemplified by studies such as Gartenstein-Ross and L. Grossman (2009). In their work, 'theology' is equivalent to 'jihadist ideology'. They understand theologically based radicalisation to consist of six stages, all of which involve stepped movement toward religiously framed extremism that ultimately justifies the use of violence:

1. The adoption of a legalistic (sic) interpretation of Islam
2. Trusting only a selective and ideological group of religious authorities
3. Viewing the West and Islam as irreconcilably opposed
4. Manifesting a low tolerance for perceived religious deviance
5. Attempting to impose religious beliefs on others
6. The expression of radical political views (Gartenstein-Ross & L. Grossman 2009, 29)

More nuanced and intersectional analyses are typified by that of Marc Sageman, whose *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004) and *Leadersless Jihad* (2008) have also been highly influential in how radicalisation is conceptualised. For Sageman, a comprehensive theory of radicalisation must be based primarily on analysis of *social networks*: those bonds of kinship and friendship through which social influence on attitudes, orientations and behaviours is circulated and mediated. He argues that economic or political conditions could not be held primarily responsible for generating radicalised violence, since many more millions of people around the world who suffered under such conditions would otherwise be similarly radicalised, when in reality only a small number of people in any setting shift toward explicitly terrorist ideation and action.

This is not to say that Sageman completely discounts the structural role of politics, economics or ideologies in favour of the role of sociality in the production of radicalised violence; rather, he suggests we must 'ask how terrorists interpret the structural conditions with which they are confronted and how they attempt to forge a common struggle in response' (Kundani 2012, 14).

However, Sageman's social network or 'bunch of guys' theory of violent radicalisation has been criticised as an explanatory framework for understanding when and how radicalisation originates, and why 'violence is chosen over other means' of pursuing transformational social change (Kundani 2012, 15) without resorting to theological motivation. In this way, Kundnani suggests, entire communities of Muslims, and Islam as a religion – particularly Salafi interpretations – have become implicated in both radicalisation theory and counter-radicalisation discourse.

These assumptions around how radicalisation as a theologically based ideology of violence develops and spreads have influenced many subsequent interventions in the field. In response, there has been a critical counter-push towards theories of radicalisation that privilege social-psychological and structural dynamics such as social exclusion and alienation over those of religious belief systems. This work, notably proceeding from European rather than Anglo-North American context, attempts to reposition radicalisation discourse by suggesting that radicalisation, rather than springing from theological bases, finds expression through religious frames: it is radicalisation that comes first, not religion.

As Olivier Roy has argued, it is not so much the ‘radicalism of Islam’ but the ‘Islamisation of radicalisation’ that we need to grapple with. In his *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (2017), Roy suggests that most Islamist-attributed violent extremists are young second-generation Muslims in majority non-Muslim settings in the West or, to a lesser extent, converts. Roy includes in this second group both those who convert from other or non-faith backgrounds (what Francis and Knott [2017] term ‘new Muslims’), and also those whom he classes as ‘born again’ Muslims who adopt a more ardent and strict interpretation of religious identity. Neither ‘new’ nor ‘born-again’ Muslims, he suggests, possess strong knowledge of Islamic doctrine prior to radicalising and accordingly engage with and accept uncritically highly selective interpretations of theological precepts following their trajectory into extremist violence.

Roy’s considerations in this regard ought to be treated with some nuance, however. First, the question of how ‘converts’ is defined tends to vary across the literature, with Roy’s definition being particularly expansive. Second, the way in which converts or ‘born again’ violent extremists are identified and counted needs to be approached with some caution – the figures on which these claims are based are estimates largely based on Schuurman Gol and Flower’s (2016) policy brief showing a disproportionate number of foreign fighters who are converts (from other or non-faith backgrounds) relative to the population distribution of Muslims in countries such as Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Open-source data that could help confirm or triangulate such figures is hard to come by.

Moreover, studies such as Francis and Knott (2017) suggest that in the UK, ‘there’s no evidence that new Muslims [i.e. converts] in general end up more extreme than those born into Islam’. However, studies such as Zammit (2015), revealing that of 33 terrorist convictions in Australia up to the time of his writing, 22% of the sample were unambiguously identified as either ‘new’ or ‘born again’ Muslims (with Muslims only making up 2.3% of the Australian population as a whole) suggests that there are considerable country-by-country variations that need to be unpacked and analysed. The literature on this issue thus remains inconclusive at present.

Roy does reject the assumption that conservative Salafism should be uncritically equated with violent extremism, but also argues that hegemonic secularism, particularly in Europe, coupled with the denial or suppression of religiosity has created a space in which the desire for spiritual meaning and transcendence can make young people vulnerable to extremisms that appeal to this gap. The process of

radicalisation outlined by Roy is more aligned with the ways in which extreme forms of social and cultural alienation in specific structural contexts find expression in an urge toward nihilism that religious extremisms are able to accommodate.

## **1.2 Defining extremism: Approaches and debates**

This takes us to what we and others mean when we seek to understand ‘extremism’. We arrive at a definition of ‘extremism’ in relation to radicalisation by asking the following questions: what conceptual distinctions between ‘extremism’ and ‘fundamentalism’ might be useful? What is the relationship between ‘extremism’ and ‘exclusivism’? Between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’? And what role do concepts of identity and legitimacy in how we understand extremism as both an ideological and psycho-social phenomenon?

### **1.2.1 Extremism and fundamentalism**

Barkun (2003) argues that the term ‘fundamentalism’, especially when allied with notions of ‘religious fundamentalism’, is unhelpful in describing political violence undertaken in the name of religion. Barkun finds the term ‘fundamentalism’ itself to be misapplied, noting that it has been attenuated over time to include any religious movements that claim to represent a ‘historic religious tradition’ seeking to preserve and privilege traditionalist understandings of religious doctrine and interpretation against modernist interpretations. Making this leap, Barkun claims, ignores the specific nuances of how ‘fundamentalism’ originates within a sectarian schism in late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century American Protestantism, in which ‘modernists’ squared off against ‘traditionalists’. The ‘anti-modernists’ began to term themselves ‘fundamentalists’ (based on a series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals* ) and established ‘parallel institutions’ such as ‘publishing houses, religious conferences, denominational structures and educational institutions’ (2003, 58).

The traditionalist tendencies of this strand of American Protestantism during the period were characterised by withdrawal and isolationism in relation to mainstream politics and culture. Yet it is a mistake, in Barkun’s view, to infer from this that all varieties of religious traditionalism are intent on withdrawing from and rejecting the broader cultural and political dynamics in which they are embedded, and historical analyses show the futility of such an assertion. However, Barkun accepts that ‘fundamentalism’ is now ‘too entrenched in both common and academic usage’ for it to be relegated to the ‘lexicon of abandoned terms’ (2003, 69).

Equally problematic for Barkun is the way in which:

References to “Islamic fundamentalism” have become so commonplace in discussions of violence that they scarcely occasion any notice. ... The prevailing association between fundamentalism and violence, particularly terrorism, should not be regarded as self-evidently true. It is, instead, often an act of labelling for the purpose of condemnation, with little regard for the beliefs to which the label is attached. ‘Fundamentalism’ itself is a construct whose relationship to violence is extremely problematic (2003, 57).



He notes that while essentialist arguments seeking to link fundamentalist religious thought to a tendency for political violence include a focus on things such as styles of charismatic leadership, isolationist modes of organisation and apocalyptic religious beliefs, 'for purposes of understanding the relationship between religion and violence, it turns out to matter relatively little whether a group is a New Religious Movement or has emerged out of an existing religious tradition'. He goes on to note that it is 'always possible to find non-violent groups that are, for example, led by charismatic leaders, physically isolated and doctrinally rigid'.

Barkun also astutely draws attention to the ways in which fundamentalism's characterisation as a 'clash of civilisations' (for example, the 1996 Huntington thesis of a civilizational clash between 'Islam' and the 'West') elides the fact that fundamentalisms are frequently in conflict with 'enemies' *within* their own religion, as well as external to it; this was the case for competing sects of American Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for Jewish Haredism from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and of purist Salafism in Islam. Fundamentalism, for Barkun, may thus be extreme in relation to other tendencies within religious doctrines, but it is not always and everywhere 'extremist' in the political sense of the term, and especially not in relation to politically oriented violence.

### 1.2.2 Extremism and exclusivism

A similar argument has been made by M. Grossman et al. (2016) around the relationship between *extremism* and *exclusivism* in a systematic review of literature published on social cohesion, community resilience and violent extremism from 2011-2015. This research suggests that:

Exclusivism is... an umbrella term for a set of attitudes and actions informed by the assumption of inequality between groups and especially the superiority [of] one's own group. Exclusivist viewpoints tend to define group boundaries in rigid terms based on assumed fixed sets of values, traits and 'in/out' criteria. ... Exclusivism per se is not necessarily harmful [but there are] socially harmful manifestations of exclusivism, for example racism and violent extremism, that aim to humiliate, denigrate and/or harm others based on their actual or perceived membership of or identification with a particular ethnic, racial, cultural or religious group. ... Exclusivist in-group and out-group dynamics may, but do not necessarily, support trajectories of extremism. (2016, 4)

In this we see that exclusivism constructs what we might think of as a mode of structural extremism in the relationship between in-groups and out-groups along both vertical and horizontal axes: a vertical axis of superiority versus inferiority, and a horizontal axis of centralism versus marginalisation, in which the exclusivist in-group locates its values and practices at the centre of its own communal social structures and dominance and pushes out-groups to or beyond the margins.. This conceptualisation of extremism does not obviate the notion that a minority may well be able to dominate its own communal social structures while remaining unable to force these on others, especially when the in-group is a minority and the out-group is

a majority. It is also possible for structural exclusivisms to exist alongside of and in tension with other attitudes, practices and structures.

### 1.2.3 Extremism and violent extremism

However, this still does not support the automatic equation of *extremism* with *violent extremism*. We define 'violence' here to mean physical violence, rather than symbolic, epistemic, psychological or economic violence. It is not that these other types of violence are immaterial or unimportant, and it is possible to argue that the injuries caused by violent extremism can and do extend to such harms. However, the 'violent' in violent extremism has long been connected to the threat or commission of physical violence to achieve ideologically motivated outcomes within a matrix of legal, legislative and institutional norms and sanctions.

Alex Schmid (2014) has argued that non-violent extremism and violent extremism are equivalent. In his view, we should treat them as the same problem, 'two sides of the same coin' so that extremist ideology inevitably leads to violence. But when does ideology become a problem of violence if it is never acted upon (Khalil 2014)? Many dream of committing violent action and never act on this impulse. Nor do all acts of violence rely on extremist ideology or affect in framing their motivation. The argument that extremism must be tackled in order to combat political violence has been taken up enthusiastically by various political agendas, including in a number of counter-extremist programs such as the UK's Prevent, but it does not hold up well from a theoretical or analytical point of view. In other words, all extremisms are ideological at some level: but their disposition to violence *as a constituent feature* of extremist thinking and feeling should not be taken as a given.

In this regard, a very useful distinction between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism' is advanced by John Berger (2017, 2018). Berger (2017) argues that extremism is not always violent and it is not always associated with non-state actors. For instance, movements based on discrimination, separatism or voluntary social self-segregation do not necessarily advocate violence, although they may evolve in that direction. Moreover, in-group/out-group dynamics have fueled not only non-state but also state policies throughout history, from segregation to genocide to internment.

Berger thus distinguishes between *extremism* and *violent extremism* as follows:

**Extremism:** A spectrum of beliefs in which an in-group's success is inseparable from negative acts against an out-group. Negative acts can include verbal attacks and diminishment, discriminatory behaviour, or violence. Competition is not inherently extremist, because it does not require harmful, out-of-bounds acts against competitors (such as sabotage). The need for harmful activity must be inseparable from the in-group's understanding of success in order to qualify. Similarly, not every harmful act is necessarily extremist.

**Violent Extremism:** The belief that an in-group's success is inseparable from violence against an out-group. A violent extremist ideology may subjectively

characterise this violence as defensive, offensive, or pre-emptive. Again, inseparability is the key element here, reflecting that the need for violence against the out-group is not conditional or situational.

Berger's distinctions here point to two essential components of extremism, whether or not it is violent: in-group/out-group identity AND negative or harmful attitudes and behaviours toward an out-group by the in-group, plus one additional component for violent extremism: in-group/out-group identity AND negative or harmful attitudes and behaviours toward out-groups AND non-conditional or situational commitment to violence against an out-group in order to achieve the success of the in-group.

Berger's focus on the importance of in-group/out-group identity in structuring extremist ideologies and standpoints is supported by critics such as Lorne Dawson (2006), who notes that 'social identity processes, rooted in escalating tension between an in-group and an out-group, probably play a key role in motivating the turn to political violence and terrorism'. In later research, Dawson (2018) builds on work by Atran (2010, 2016), Cottee and Hayward (2011) and McBride (2011) to suggest that 'the very act of making a...new, risky and oppositional [self-categorisation] is a meaning-making action' in which the in-group/out-group dynamic 'has no power to drive behaviour in the absence of the desire for greater meaning' (Dawson 2018). In other words, extremism relies for its valency and impact on a propulsion toward the construction of alternative meaning-worlds which are inseparable from the redistribution of identities in relation to status and power.

#### **1.2.4 Extremism and legitimacy**

This leads the question of how varieties of extremism create and sustain legitimacy in contestable social and political contexts. Berger again, in his 2017 analysis of white supremacist terrorism, offers a helpful analytical framework for thinking about the relationship between extremism and its social legitimation. He proposes that identity movements are always oriented toward establishing the legitimacy of a collective group (on whatever basis 'collective' is described), becoming 'extreme' when an in-group's demand for legitimacy escalates to the point that such legitimacy can be achieved *only at the expense of* an out-group. This in turn sees the legitimacy of an identity-based in-group move from situated conflicts between an in-group and an out-group – for example, over territory or recognition – to a more generalised framing of such conflict as both historical but also future-oriented (for example, through religious prophecy).

Berger observes that any social collective – for example, that of liberal democracies or human rights movements -- requires the imprimatur of legitimacy to protect its identity, and that this need not be unhealthy. But – especially under perceived or actual conditions of threats to identity or integrity – the need for legitimacy can spiral out of control when identity-based groups turn toward extremisms that require harmful attitudes and behaviours toward out-groups. If unchecked by internal or external pressures, in-groups can escalate their demands for legitimacy in ways that cross the threshold from 'healthy' to 'unhealthy' forms of extremism at the expense of

others. This kind of analysis is critical because it avoids the tendency noted by Dawson (2018) to reduce religion – as one form of identity-based social collective – to the category of personal motivations for involvement in terrorism, which privileges the psychological over the political and social-structural aspects of how extremist violence may come to be embraced.

We thus work here with a concept of extremism that draws on these analyses to define (violent) extremism in the following way:

*Extremism is the effort to legitimise and assert the superiority and domination of an exclusivist in-group identity over other out-groups in ways that are inseparable from proposing or causing harm to those out-groups, often through a process of consistent and harmful 'othering'. **Violent** extremism seeks to achieve the success of the in-group by attempting to subjugate or eliminate out-groups through the use of physical violence to achieve socio-political change in ways that are fundamentally constitutive of in-group identity.*

Below, we look at how this definition may apply to different cases.

### 1.3 Critical approaches to radicalisation and religion

The debates canvassed here have led us to identify the following tendencies within scholarship on radicalisation and extremism. In relation to radicalisation, the analyses touched on above suggest that radicalisation has often been understood as:

- a. A multidimensional yet coherent *process* (i.e., that variations of the same process have similar effects on a variety of people) characterised by consistent escalation;
- b. That this process has certain key affective, cognitive, behavioural and structural attributes that are often present, such as in-group/out-group oppositions and exclusivist attitudes and behaviours, and
- c. That one of these key attributes involves the belief that ideology often plays, variously, a foundational, operational and/or contextual role in most instances of radicalisation to extremism, and that 'religion' is sometimes taken to be equivalent to 'ideology' in this context.

Irrespective of those disagreements, the basic frame of radicalisation being a coherent, identifiable process of escalation (whether one chooses to focus on individual factors, alternatively, group-level factors and influences or both) is remarkably common. This simplistic way of looking at radicalisation is often criticised, although we would suggest that these criticisms are often incomplete. Yet it remains the case that in the world of media and policy, such simplistic explanations remain remarkably popular – and thus the deconstruction of such assumptions remains continually necessary. As noted above, radicalisation is used more as a 'concept' than an empirically grounded theoretical frame (Kundnani 2012). This is to say that when the word 'radicalisation' is deployed, it is not a scientific term that is based on empirical analysis, but a floating concept used to indicate that a specific, common process of *countering* it is at work.

### 1.3.1 Separating ideology from religion in radicalisation theory

In this regard, we agree with Kundnani that radicalisation, while the subject of much serious academic analysis and debate, may also be accurately described as a polemical tool used to support or attack on the basis of ideological commitments and convictions. Indeed, the most appropriate way to describe radicalisation might be to declare it as an academic term which is deployed as a polemic tool as often as, if not more so, than it is utilised as an intellectual tool of analysis.

In our own approach, we reject the idea of a singular 'radicalisation process' in favour of recognising that there are in fact multiple 'radicalisation processes' (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). Acknowledging this multiplicity of experiences and trajectories is far more useful in trying to understand why different types of people from different backgrounds may gravitate towards the same group, ideology or cause – or, indeed, why people from similar backgrounds and experiences may be drawn to different ideologies and groups for very different reasons. Similarly, we suggest that ideas – both engaged with and separate from extremist religious hermeneutics – can and do play an important role here. The question is how.

Accordingly, we operationalise the concept of radicalisation this way:

*Radicalisation may connote a variety of multi-level processes – always contextual and situated -- by which people come to adopt an ideological framework that advocates for and drives action on the perceived need for fundamental transformational change in their existing socio-cultural and political order.*

This definition of radicalisation encompasses the possibility that radicalisation may be violent or non-violent. Arguing against critics such as Alex Schmid (2014), who asserts that radicalisation to extreme points of view inexorably leads to the adoption of *violent* extremism, we suggest that radicalisation processes need to be separated out from assumptions about the instrumentalism of violence in pursuing a radicalised agenda. Not all violence is ideological in nature, and not all ideologies, including those defined as 'radical', employ or support violence (Berger 2018).

## 2. Three schools of conceptualising radicalisation

Within the literature on radicalisation reviewed above we have sketched out three schools of radicalisation theory that we elaborate on below:

1. the *ideological* school, which can either include or dismiss 'religion' as a mode of ideology
2. the *social experience* school
3. the *intersectional* school

In critiquing these, we conclude that we see the third school as most productive, although it requires further nuance. Nevertheless, it is by far the most

comprehensively useful in explaining radicalisation as a complex, multi-level and multi-systemic process across a range of individual, social, political and cultural dynamics and environments.

## **2.1 The first school: Radicalisation as ideology**

The first school insists that *ideology*, as part of a broader process of cognitive and ideational development, is the most crucial factor in understanding why individuals may be radicalised. School One then divides into two sub-groups:

**Group 1:** where *religious ideas* are held as the inspiration for or equivalent of the ideology in question

**Group 2:** where *non-religious ideas*, such as nationalism or supremacism, are held as the inspiration of the ideology in question

### **2.1.1. School One, Group 1: Ideology as religious ideas**

When we discuss Group 1 in the first school, we can see that there are those who may either seek to hold specific religions responsible for radicalisation (for instance, the infamous Huntington hypothesis with regards to Islam); or seek to hold a particular interpretation or methodology of religion responsible for enabling and sanctioning radicalisation (usually referred to as Salafism or Wahhabism when it comes to Islam, though there are often problems with how these labels are used) (e.g. Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Gartenstein-Ross and L. Grossman, 2009) although this view has also attracted significant critique (Klausen, 2008; Aly & Striegher, 2012). There are, of course, other examples from other religious groups, such as Jewish extremism in the infamous Baruch Goldstein massacre in Hebron in 1994, or Christian extremism in the Lord's Republican Army in Uganda.

### ***Islam and radicalisation***

We do not seek in this paper to problematise the assumed relationship between Islam and radicalisation to violence to the exclusion of other ideas or trends that are discussed in relations to extremism. Nevertheless, Islam has come in for overwhelming – one might say disproportionate – attention in relation to discussing radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, and we feel the need for a number of correctives to be deployed as we move forward in our discussion.

The accusation that Islam as a religious belief-system is inherently responsible for radicalisation is nonsensical; if that were true, then we would find that there were far more people in a faith group that accounts for almost 2 billion people engaged in radicalisation processes of different kinds. Moreover, categories such as 'Salafist' or 'Wahhabist' are not themselves unitary categories, but nevertheless continuously get smoothed out in the process of attributing causality to religion in driving radicalisation to violence.

Islam, writ large, is also often blamed for being less amenable to cultural creation, to mirror Lucien Goldmann's (1976) meaning of the phrase, and thus impinges upon

social cohesion. This goes against the established historical work of academics in Islamic studies, and contemporary authors such as Umar. F. Abd-Allah Lyynggraf (2004). As far as these scholars are concerned, the historical Islamic tradition is replete with examples of cultural creativity, via an Islamic idiom, maintaining that which was fruitful in indigenous cultures, and causing them to flourish and further develop. Thus, before engaging further on this point, it is important to delineate how we consider different varieties of Islam to actually figure *vis-à-vis* themselves, and how extremism then stands in relation to Islam as understood by most Muslims when elaborated using a Islamic idiom.

The most contemporary form of attempting an internal Muslim community consensus around who was or was not a Muslim is the Amman Message of 2005 (<http://ammanmessage.com/>). It is important to note: this declaration, which was signed onto by a critical mass of Sunni and Shi'i scholars from around the world, did not establish *true* doctrine. It only established the minimum criteria upon which one might be considered 'Muslim'. It is further important to note the context: this declaration was a response to the anathematising that al-Qa'eda at the time was engaged in, that led to scores of mass murders on sectarian lines.

This 'Amman Message' suggests certain typologies, which we can draw upon to construct a preliminary typology governed by the categories of 'mainstream', 'aberrant' and 'heterodox'. We do so because, while not identical to the Amman Message, which focuses on establishing what is a minimum definition of normativity, we would like to create a typology that is more nuanced than the alternatives, such as the oversimplified binarism of 'moderate' versus 'extreme'. Such a typology has significant utility, particularly as our project goes forward, in examining different religious trends in different countries. We do not, however, *replicate* this typology – we see it as a stimulant rather than a prescription for our own discussion.

We do acknowledge that the notion that 'extremism' is very often used to connote an ideological extension or distortion of a group's beliefs and values that considers the rest, (or nearly the rest) of one's particular group as aberrant or heterodox. The latter is precisely what ISIS-style extremism believes with regards to Muslims, which in turn is what makes it 'extreme' according to the vast majority of Muslim religious scholars.

### ***'Mainstream' Muslims***

The first category of Muslims would be considered 'mainstream' Muslims, which would be sub-divided according to the different confessions of Islam: mainstream Sunnis, mainstream Shi'is, and mainstream Ibadis. Obviously, each of these three groupings deem themselves to be 'normative' or 'authoritative', in that they believe each of themselves to be valid and correct, while the others are seen to be following invalid approaches to Islam, even if they hold others beyond their confession to still be Muslim.

The terms 'normative' or 'authoritative' reflect value judgements that we are not particularly interested in making because they presume definitive faith-based

categories, whereas we are concerned with establishing, as far as possible, an analytical framework that does not necessarily demand such a normative claim. However, historical studies alone show that the mainstream position of each of these groups (Sunni, Shi'i, Ibadi) still continues to view the mainstream of these other strands to be *Muslim*, even if wrong on different dogmatic points; and each accepts that historically, these comprise the overwhelming bulk of Muslims worldwide and through time.

### ***'Aberrant' Muslims***

The second category would be 'aberrant'. Vis-à-vis the Sunni Muslim community, for example, certain types (though not all) of self-described Salafis would generally be considered 'aberrant' – that is to say, mainstream Sunnis would *generally* consider those kinds of Salafis that declare mainstream Muslims to not even be Muslim to be thus aberrant (in Islamic discourse, *mubtadi'*) on crucial points. At the same time, even such types of aberrant Salafis would normally be considered Muslim. That two-fold assessment is important, because generally, Sunni Muslims are particularly cautious about engaging in *takfir* (the process of anathema), while at the same time, they have internal historical systems of establishing what they consider to be religious normativity. In the past two hundred years, these have been challenged, partly due to the rise of different Salafi movements. [For further reading on the Salafi example: different movements that consider themselves to be 'Salafi' would fall into mainstream Sunnism or be considered 'aberrant', or otherwise (Hellyer 2019)].

### ***'Heterodox' Muslims***

Finally, the third category would be 'heterodox'. As an example of this, there are a number of extremist movements the likes of al-Qa'eda and ISIS. Indeed, the forerunner of these groups were described as 'heterodox' by Muslim scholars since they began in the 1700s. Crucially, that appellation was applied precisely because the intellectual bedrock of these groups condemned by the vast majority of Muslims. We recognise that the historical intellectual trajectory of any ideational justification for groups such as ISIS or Al-Qa'eda all bear the hallmark of these heterodox ideas – and as such, it is impossible to ignore a connection.

It is also important to note that generally, Muslims and mainstream Muslim scholars do not unanimously consider heterodox Muslims to necessarily leave Islam as a result of their heterodoxy. As noted, Sunni Muslim scholarship is especially cautious about considering groups as anathema-like groups, preferring to focus on individuals. At the same time, historical records bear out that identifying heterodox ideas, groups, attitudes and practices, is rather common place in Muslim scholarship.

This would be distinct from groups that most Muslims would consider to be deviant due to fundamental theological divergences, similar to how the 'Positive Christianity' movement promoted by the Third Reich in the Nazi era was considered to be outside of any recognised traditions of Christian confession, even broadly defined.



There are some exceptions of Muslim scholars who do consider the heterodoxy of groups like ISIS and al-Qa'eda to be so grave that they actually take the members of such groups out of Islam. This remains a minority position, however, and generally Muslims worldwide regard them as Muslim, even while wrong, and deserving of martial correction (military campaigns or criminal proceedings). The fact that this minority position exists nevertheless indicates the seriousness with which mainstream Muslim scholarship views this extremist trend.

At the same time, as we made clear at the beginning of this paper, it is important not to assume an importance accorded to such ideas, without actually proving it as such. Ideas may be used as an excuse after the fact; or they may be instrumental in driving individuals towards radicalising; and many other scenarios are also possible.

### **2.1.2 School One, Group 2: Ideology as political ideas**

Within the first school, as mentioned above, there are considerations around religion as the 'idea' or 'ideology' that is at work – but there are also considerations around political ideologies that may occupy the field of discussion. In this regard, ideology and ideas become a field in which 'political motivations' are described as an energising factor, rather than specifically or mainly religious ones. These are macrosymbolic, but macrosymbolic in a way that does not use or draw specifically on a religious hermeneutic.

Nationalism, anti-imperialism and other ideologies might seek to instrumentalise religious symbolism and religious vocabulary, of course – as we saw through the deployment of Crusader themes and motifs in the Christchurch attacker's 2019 written and visual narratives, for example. There are other examples that we can draw upon, including the 'sovereign citizen' extremist movement in the US, which denies the right of the judiciary or the legislature to decide which laws are to be obeyed in favour of the individual citizen's right to decide which they should ignore. This movement is often characterised by racist and anti-Semitic tropes that reflect anxieties about and rejection of perceived 'deep state' structures run by powerful minority elites, such as Jews. Various civil conflicts, insurgencies, inter-tribal struggles and genocides that deploy extremist concepts of in-group identity and power differentials to justify armed struggle – Tamil Tigers, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, for instance – would also fall into this category. However, this is markedly different than actually engaging in a religious hermeneutic, which is an actual (mis) interpretation of religion. At the same time, it may well be the case that such extremists were influenced by those who *did* engage in religious hermeneutics of some sort, and that such an influence was crucial to understanding that influence.

## **2.2 The second school: Radicalisation as social experience**

The second school's argument is what we might summarise as the *social experience* school. In School Two, socio-economic conditions and other social experiences are the prevailing determinants of radicalisation processes. For the purposes of our argument, those that emphasise socio-economic conditions, in particular the socio-cultural structural issues that affect people's social relationality, economic disadvantage and exclusion, are all part of the 'social experience school'.

There is some truth in this regard, as there is in the argument about ideology, but it is also often problematic. All too often, the socio-economic conditions arguments ignore the power of ideas. Analytically, this second school runs the risk of missing critical factors such as ideological drivers when they exist. A persistent critique of the 'social experience' school has involved pointing to those who radicalise to violence who come from well-educated, socio-economically advantaged (or at least not disadvantaged) backgrounds and who do not register on any of the common indicators regarding structural social exclusion. This does not mean that they do not experience the kind of alienation or sense of grievance that has been such a pervasive feature of radicalisation to violent extremism – but it highlights that such alienation and grievances may not be linked to collective and material forms of structural disadvantage in the way that the 'social experience' school conceptualises this.

More often, however, the analysis when going into the socio-economic conditions of certain individuals lacks depth and granularity. For example, the work of Rik Coolsaet (2016) in Belgium makes it clear that there are a broad variety of factors that apply in certain geographies within Belgium, which do not apply in other geographies within Belgium as well. All too often, these disparate geographies are merely aggregated together unnecessarily, missing key analytical points. This is important because it focuses on the importance of granular analysis in how we build our analytical categories and distinctions, and the ways in which a focus on social conditions always necessarily involve considerations of 'place' and 'region' as well as 'ideas' and 'affect'.

We might, following the work of scholars such as J. Nicholas Entrikin (1991), think of these as 'geographies of experience', which explore the tensions between humanist understandings of 'place' as involving active subjectivity in interpreting and making meaning of social landscapes, so that the 'mutually constitutive qualities of space and society' (Entrikin 1996) restore an understanding of how socio-structural conditions and individual agency and subjectivity intersect within specifically located dynamic fields of social interaction. The 'geographies of experience' frame in the context of radicalisation allows for theorisations of radicalised orientations 'from below' rather than following a more super-structural, 'grand narrative' analytical path. It also allows for productive comparisons between more locally situated radicalisation processes that may nevertheless be animated by meaningful cross-situational or transnational dynamics and features.

Drawing on the work done by authors such as Kwame Appiah (2018), or Zareena Grewal (2013), as well as Coolsaet (2016), we can see how important it is to break down our assumptions about the uniformity of experiences before individuals became subject to any kind of process that may lead them to radical groups. Some of the most crucial work breaking down a lot of the lack of nuance in the 'social experience school' is done by people such as Sageman (2004, 2008, 2017), and Roy (2017), discussed above, and Khosrokhavar (2013), whom we consider further below.

### 2.3 The third school: Intersectional radicalisation

School Three holds that *social experience*, such as social and political disenfranchisement, exclusion, discrimination, humiliation and rejection are also key drivers for radicalisation to violence but require alignment with *ideological frames* for their dynamism and force in relation to both ideation and action (Khosrokhavar 2013).

Khosrokhavar (2017) argues that extremist ideology is nurtured by alienating and dehumanising social experience, notably the dysfunctionality of social institutions and lack of access to social resources such as education, employment and the social dignity these confer, particularly in Western varieties of violent extremism. But he also focuses on the relevance of ideology's seductions in providing perceived antidotes to these experiences, especially the way in which ideological frames imaginatively redistribute and reorganise the power relations of those who experience abjection into more satisfying future-oriented narratives of destiny and triumph. We saw precisely these developments occur in the marketing strategies of Islamic State, which – unlike Al Qa'eda – explicitly addressed both the social and the ideological in how it structured both the narrative and material dimensions of its effort to establish its notion of a contemporary caliphate.

As Khosrokhavar's work suggests, the individual experience of social alienation can produce conditions in which humiliation, frustration and grievance prevail – all heavily affective as well as cognitive regimes of experience. This implies that both push and pull factors are linked to social relations that straddle *emotion* as well as cognition/ideation (Tahiri and M. Grossman, 2013; M. Grossman et al. 2016), in relation to experiences of exclusion and ostracism (Knapton 2014), the 'power of love' and bonding (Borum 2012), the propulsive energies of hate (Sternberg 2003) or even the disengagement from or reduction in morally-attuned states of feeling altogether (Bandura 2004) But emotions in and of themselves require forms of ideological structuration to transform them into concrete platforms for action and social change, whether or not they are based on or conceptualised within religious frameworks (which themselves frequently draw on affective as well as cognitive energies of experience).

School Three is expansive enough to recognise that while there are multiple explanations and pathways for radicalisation processes as part of a broader cohesive rubric, their specific application will often differ depending on context and circumstances. The third school, then, is one that admits the utility of the other two schools, but which recognises that different cases might be better explained via different schools. Another way of describing this may be what Tahiri and M. Grossman (2015) refer to as the 'convergence paradigm' of understanding radicalisation to violence, which privileges the intersectional and multilevel nature of radicalisation processes across ideology, affect, social structure, social experience and political context. Borum (2012) offers a succinct and helpful summary of this approach:

Many pathways into and through radicalization exist, and each pathway is itself affected by a variety of factors. Within this "developmental" or "pathway" approach, radicalization is viewed not as "the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time. (2012: 15)

This third school genuinely recognises that there is no absolutism in relation to radicalisation processes, whether or not religion plays a role in their formation or development. Sometimes, ideology –inspired and legitimated by religious ideas, political ideas or a combination of these – provides the overriding impetus for radicalisation to violence. In other cases, the push toward radicalised violence reflects the convergence of socially-derived grievances and motivations with ideological frames. In still others, ideological frames constitute the post-hoc rationale for a range of individual and social motivators. Such social motivations may arise from strongly held and experienced emotions, whether or not they have empirical authority, around dignity, humiliation, frustration, shame or pride, for example, and find their outlet and structure within ideological frameworks (Khosrokhavar 2013, 2017).

To give an example: the Christchurch massacre in March 2019. This deeply complex event makes sense only if one enters into an ideological analysis of contemporary social conditions which then drives the violent action of white supremacism and fascism. Yet there is little utility in discussing religion as an ideological motivator for the attacker in this regard – except in terms of the way in which the religion of the Christchurch victims themselves is used to construct an ideologically based target. Nor would social experience make sense as an analytical frame, without understanding how this intersects in specific ways with the ideology of white supremacism in understanding this massacre. This is an example of what Roy (2017) means when he identifies radicalisation – in the sense of a deep need or desire for change, transformation and redress of grievances – coming first and then finding a suitable ideational frame, which here is ideological rather than theological. The third school thus provides a helpful analytical frame in this instance precisely because of its insistence on intersectionality and avoidance of absolutism.

As such, the third school is good at identifying the contextual circumstances and drivers, and of showing that they are not especially peculiarly Islamic or even religious, where that is the case. However, it is also able to address the limitations of the first and second schools in explaining the role of ideas – such as Islam, nationalism, communism or even hyper-masculinity (Roose, 2016) – within radicalisation.

The third school may help us explain, for instance, the demand for the role that heterodox forms of Islamism are playing, but also why heterodox Islamism (as opposed to something else) is supplying that role. For example, Khosrokhavar has recently argued (2017) that radicalisation processes in Muslim-majority countries proceed from different bases than those in the West. He suggests that in these countries, radicalisation is mobilised not by socially disadvantaged denizens in Western countries that structurally marginalise Muslims, but by largely middle-class, well-educated youth who feel alienated by what they see as corrupt(ed) Muslim

political regimes and who turn to heterodox forms of Islamism in order to cleanse and re-set a tainted political and social order.

Here, the third school demonstrates its relevance insisting by abjuring a one size fits all approach, because Khosrovar's explanation may apply to certain individuals who have been radicalised in some contexts, but not others. His explanation does not, for example, explain why particular social classes in the Indian subcontinent are vulnerable to radicalisation processes that may quite differ to what he outlines above, for instance certain extremist ideologies taught at a minority of madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan with which the middle classes have little to no contact.

If the role of ideology or religion is contestable within theories of radicalisation trajectories, what then accounts for its persistence as an explanatory framework (Appleby, 2000; Schmid, 2014; Dawson 2018)? One answer to this may lie in the earlier analysis offered by Kundnani: that equating radicalisation with Islam is itself an ideological position: one that seeks, in non-Muslim majority nations, to externalise the threat of violent extremism and to instrumentalise radicalisation as a phenomenon connoting 'civilisational clash' rather than one produced by reluctance to redress or remediate social and political inequalities, or by resistance to multiculturalism in relation to national identity.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that such agendas are not deployed only by political or social discourses bent on (re)shaping narratives about the 'other' – they can also be used by terrorists and propagandists themselves as a form of *camouflage* or superficial justification for violent radicalisation, when in fact the motives are both more profane and more banal than this would suggest (Roy, 2010, 2017). In other words, the same strategies of linking religion and radicalisation can serve multiple, even competing socio-political purposes, and analysis must scrupulously pick these apart and analyse them.

Especially relevant here is the importance of critiquing the difference between the *strategic* mobilisation of religion (by violent extremist propagandists and leaders) as an attributed or explanatory pathway to/driver for radicalisation, and the *felt/experienced* mobilisation of radically altered religious states of consciousness/affect (by violently radicalised adherents and aspirants (Whitehouse 2014; McDonald 2014, 2018). This leads to the question of whether a sufficient distinction is drawn between what might be termed 'authentic' or felt experiences of religiously inspired radicalisation, versus their more instrumental manipulation by the leadership cadre of an extremist movement, so that worldly political aspirations are dressed up in the clothes of sacred obligation in order to motivate and manage the actions of followers.

### **3. Religion and extremism**

In examining the conceptual relationship between religion and radicalisation, we must also turn to the treatment of varieties of religious extremisms themselves. Religious extremisms per se historically run across virtually every major world

religion, not just Islam. Moreover, their ideational or ideological grounding frequently either accords or does different things with religious contexts and debates than contemporary analyses of Islamist extremism would suggest, as Douglas Pratt shows in his comparative discussion of Islamic and Christian religious extremisms (Pratt, 2010).

### **3.1 Religious extremism and liberalism**

Religious extremisms are often taken to be antithetical to particular types of liberal societies. However, religious extremisms are often tolerated precisely as part of liberalism's embrace of cultural pluralism and rights discourse – a position consistently critiqued by social conservatives as devolving into destructive forms of cultural relativism (see, for example, Trigg 2011; Huntington 1993). This can change when religious extremisms or 'fundamentalisms' become cast as threats because they are linked to the risk or presence of injuries or harms to mainstream or normative social orders. In other words, liberal tolerance of religious pluralism is embraced unless certain religious beliefs, attitudes or practices are perceived as or become injurious to the rights and freedoms of others. It is precisely when this line is crossed that the transition from understanding religious adherence as 'benign' to seeing it as 'malignant' occurs, because it threatens to break its boundaries by challenging liberal pluralism itself.

This in turn reflects the tendency to produce illiberal responses to religious faith itself, which is then cast as the source of extremist behaviours (Barkun 2003), rather than focusing on the convergence of multilevel factors that underwrite the actual threats posed by the mobilisation to violence of religious extremist discourse. Religious exceptionalism – the idea that liberal pluralist societies should make room for exceptions to various legal or social norms on the basis of religious freedom of expression – begins to fray. At its most extreme, this perception of threat can expand from objections to religious extremisms per se to a form of radical secularism which objects to religion itself as a counterpoint to Enlightenment-based democracy and rights-based pluralism.

We see this in the case of more aggressive state-based formulations of secularism in countries such as France, for example, in which any form of visible and public religious identity assertion is equated with social and political risk to national identity, and which has developed and implemented especially harsh legislative measures against patently non-threatening Islamic practices; an example would be the ban on burkinis for Muslim women on public French beaches in the name of 'anti-terrorism' (Quinn 2016).

## **4. Conclusion: Re-assessing the relationship between religion, radicalisation and violence**

Following the drive to complicate or dismiss the centrality of religion to violent radicalisation, some critics of religious studies have more recently argued that we need to re-engage with the idea that 'religiosity' plays a significant role in

radicalisation to violent extremism. This argument has been advanced by Dawson (2018) in ways that reflect a more nuanced perspective on the first school we discuss above. We agree with Dawson's argument that a 'both/and' approach is more realistic and helpful rather than an either/or' choice in terms of selecting an analytical framework. Dawson's typology for breaking down these possible interpretive models is quite useful. As he suggests, models of the relationship between religion and radicalisation to violent extremism can be broken down as follows:

- (1) religion and Islam are to blame;
- (2) religion is not to blame, but Islam is culpable;
- (3) religion is to blame, but not Islam per se;
- (4) religion is not to blame, and neither is Islam.

This covers much of the ground we have canvassed above in engaging with some of the key literature in this area. However, a limitation of using this typology is that when it does mention ideas, it really only specifies *religious ideas*. And when it mentions religion, it really only specifies *Islam*. Dawson is clearly not attempting to be reductionist here. Nevertheless, his typology is nevertheless limited by the empirical data that he is looking at, which happens to be related to Islam. This typology needs to be expanded comparatively across other religious contexts for its efficacy to be confirmed.

We do not think it is 'religiosity' per se that is the problem, since this would indicate that religious practice of any kind must be at play in explaining the radicalisation process. But when we consider that, where it is present, the religiosity of extremists is necessarily linked to heterodox forms of religion – as we explain above – it is important to be critically specific about what kind of 'heterodox religiosity' plays a role in radicalisation when it does feature. Religiosity connected to heterodoxy necessarily takes on the hue of that kind of contested interpretive approach to religion – in other words, the intensification of religious practice in reference to heterodox religious ideas is indelibly connected to those ideas. As such, this kind of religious practice cannot be simply assumed to be as historically normative or mainstream as non-heterodox formations. To claim that such heterodox religiosity is just as normative or mainstream as orthodox religiosity would be highly problematic.

Accordingly, if we adapt this typology to our own framework, it might produce the following:

1. Ideas – which may be religious, political or both – are core drivers of radicalisation to violent extremism, and the religion and/or political ideology that frames them is to blame. As an example: if extremists are Muslims claiming to be energised by Islam, then this interpretative model would take this at face value and claim Islam is to blame, which we have already discounted above, and the same would hold true for ideas about racial hierarchies *as an idea* in contexts of cultural supremacism as an ideology.
2. Religion or political ideology in general is not culpable per se, but specific religious and/or political ideas are, including heterodox forms of religious or

political interpretation. So, deeply committed secularists would blame Islam-as-religion specifically, as in (1), but not religious ideas in general. Even when looking at white supremacy, for instance, one can find a normative form of ideology that might link distantly to this but is not necessarily itself extremist, such as centre-right wing conservatism.

3. Some heterodox religious or political ideas are to blame, but not mainstream religion or political ideas in general, especially in contexts where religious ideas and extremist ideas are inseparable.
4. Religious and/or political ideas may not be always causative but they are always at least enabling. In other words, ideas are used to house, contextualise and legitimate beliefs and actions that originate in other motivations, such as psycho-social, economic or socio-structural drivers and experiences that then find an organising principle for belief and action through post-hoc ideological framing.
5. For ideas – religious, political or otherwise – to be salient in contexts of violent radicalisation they must become articulated within *violent extremist* frameworks by demonstrating: clear exclusivism in relation to in-group and out-group identity; the desire to dominate out-groups in ways that are inseparable from behaving harmfully toward those groups through consistent processes of negative ‘othering’; and either non-conditional or situational commitment to physical violence toward out-groups in order to achieve in-group goals.

While this typology requires further analysis and ‘thinking against’, we favour this approach for its capacity to work with multiple rather than singular analytical frameworks that are context-dependent and often intersectional. Different cases may bring up different analytical results, and our conceptual framework is meant to be flexible enough to capture those different scenarios and test them against these emerging hypotheses around the relationship between radicalisation, religion, ideology and violence.

The argument in this concept paper is thus focused on analysing and elaborating upon the complexities of how religion, ideology and extremism may (or do) interact discursively – at cognitive, affective social, political, governance and policy levels – rather than a simplistic binary discussion of ‘whether or not’ religion, ideology and radicalisation concern each other. As such, we ourselves land on an anti-absolutist analysis that emphasises context, confluence and convergence, and problematises superficial or homogenous assumptions about causality. We also assert the importance of ideas and ideology as a way of thinking through what not only political but also ‘religiously’-inspired or attributed violent radicalisation may actually mean in various contexts. It is both theoretically and empirically unsound to blame any specific ‘religion’ or religious faith systems in general for radicalisation to violence. However, it is equally unsound to ignore the ideational and ideological meanings assigned to religiously inspired or justified violence when violent actors themselves attribute their intent and action to such meanings and beliefs.



Following on from this, several questions arise in relation to how the relationship between violent radicalisation and the governance of religion plays out in specific countries and contexts. These questions include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. Do governance of religion arrangements which are not respectful of diversity more likely to produce radicalisation and violent extremism? In this regard, France is one example that begs further investigation, as indicated above, but other examples could be raised as well.
2. Does the presence of a certain scale of radicalisation and violent extremism make it very difficult to sustain governance of religion arrangements which are not respectful of diversity? Is that a question which explains more within Europe, or perhaps has more utility in Asia and Africa? These are questions to explore further.
3. How significant are the above factors in the production of radicalisation and violent extremism (relative to other factors, such as foreign policy or electoral competition)?

These are all questions that the GREASE project will seek to address both analytically and empirically going forward, keeping in mind that such questions are unlikely to be addressed with any universal explanatory framework. The concepts and analysis outlined here are intended to serve as a contribution to that endeavour.

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