

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Religion and Extremism: Rejecting Diversity*, by Douglas Pratt. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 196 pp., Pb., \$29.95 ISBN 978-14-74-29225-2

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The twenty-first century has seen a disturbing rise in violent and aggressive religious extremism. Why? In *Religion and Extremism: Rejecting Diversity* Douglas Pratt seeks to answer this question by analysing contemporary examples of religious extremism in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Pratt's survey of these extremes corrects biased notions that practitioners of any one of these traditions are more prone to hate speech, aggressive exclusion of religious others, violence, or even terrorism. For example, in Chapter 9, "Extremism and Islamophobia," Pratt makes the case that efforts to cast Islam as essentially prone to extremism and terrorism are part and parcel of the Western world's Islamophobia, which is itself driven largely by Christian religious extremism (this is one example of a dynamic Pratt describes as "co-radicalization"). Pratt's research indicates relatively equal possibilities for extremes of exclusivism and violence in all three Abrahamic faiths (and, presumably, others, though his research is limited to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Fundamentalist versions of these faiths, which reject religious diversity, are more likely to harbour and encourage extremist attitudes and behaviours. Religions which reject religious others also tend to reject other forms of human diversity (race, culture, sexuality, political ideology, etc.); when their influence grows, religious extremists lead their societies down "a path to closed, fascist insularity" (vii).

The major strength of Pratt's work is his insightful and systematic description of the problem of religious fundamentalism and extremism. He also offers a solid thesis that the problem of religious fundamentalism is rooted in rejection of religious diversity and can therefore be uprooted by affirmation of religious diversity. In this way, the text invites its readers to engage the problem of fundamentalism in a constructive way; for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readers, it invites self-reflection and reform. The part of Pratt's argument that I attempt to critique and strengthen is his response to the problem of religious fundamentalism. How can the possibilities of religious pluralism be brought into a more dynamic conversation with the problems of religious fundamentalism? How can newly emergent ways

of understanding religious identity and interreligious dialogue inform our vision of religious life in the twenty-first century?

In the 1980s, Jewish religious extremists plotted the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim sacred site; in 1994, they perpetrated a terrorist attack in which twenty-nine Palestinians were murdered during prayer; and they assassinated Yitzhak Rabin at a time when he was making progress with the Israel-Palestine peace process (74–75). Christian religious extremists in the US (largely inspired by British Israelite ideology) blend their faith with white supremacy and nationalism; their movements include the KKK, Christian Identity, and the Church of Jesus Christ Christian/Aryan Nations. They are often organized into heavily armed militias and have been responsible for numerous beatings, murders, lynchings, and terrorist attacks, including the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995 (90–94). Contemporary Muslim extremist groups such as Al-Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram have carried out a rash of terrorist attacks both in Muslim majority and Western nations. Pratt argues that while Muslim extremism could be seen as a backlash against Western colonialism's oppression and impoverishment of Muslim nations, it is rooted in certain strands of Islamic fundamentalist ideology (111–114).

For Pratt, religious fundamentalism is the essential basis of religious extremism. His detailed conceptual analysis identifies three progressive phases of fundamentalism: passive, assertive, and impositional. Each phase is described in detail with distinct “features” that are further dissected into “factors.” It would take too much space here to discuss this schema in detail, but Pratt’s conceptual terms themselves paint a picture: passive or “normal” fundamentalism features, first of all, “principal presuppositions,” with factors of “perspectival absolutism” and “immediate inerrancy”; second, it features “authority derivation,” with factors of “apodictic assumption” and “narrow narrative indwelling”; third, it features “implicit verification,” with factors of “narrative correlation” and “rhetorical corroboration” (40–42). Assertive or “hard-line” fundamentalism begins with the fourth feature of fundamentalism, “epistemological construction,” with factors of “hard factualism” and “applied necessity”; the fifth feature is “identity structure,” with factors of “communitarian intent” and “individual constraint”; the sixth feature is “contextual scope,” with factors of “ideological exclusivism” and “polity inclusivism”; the seventh feature is a “condemnatory stance,” with factors of “judgemental values” and “pietistic tyranny” (42–44). Then comes phase three of impositional or “extreme” fundamentalism. This final phase brings the eighth feature

of “value application,” with factors of “otherness negated” and “self-superiority asserted”; the ninth feature is “explicit justification,” with factors of “sanctioned imposition” and “legitimized violence”; the tenth and final feature of fundamentalism is “enacted extremism,” with factors of “manifest contempt” and “terrorist events” (45–47). At the root of the three progressive phases of fundamentalism is a religious absolutism that may be expressed passively, assertively, or in the worst case, in an impositional fashion; even in its passive state, fundamentalism rejects religious diversity.

One premise of Pratt’s argument, that religious extremism is on the rise in the twenty-first century, or manifesting on an unprecedented scale, is debatable. Certainly, the problem is significant in our time and deserves attention, but is this something new under the sun? Pratt characterizes interfaith dialogue as a dominant trend of the twentieth century (vi); this is true, but the twentieth century also bears the burden of the Holocaust, one of the most egregiously violent examples of rejection of religious diversity the world has ever seen. The twentieth century rise of Maoism in China and Stalinism in Russia also entailed stunning and wide scale rejections of religious and ideological diversity. From another point of view, the ecumenism of the early-mid twentieth century, and the interfaith dialogue of the mid-late twentieth century, might be seen as blossoming in the twenty-first century into new trends such as multiple religious belonging/participation and the growth of non-sectarian “spiritual-but-not-religious” identities. Part of the drama and scandal of twenty-first century religious extremism may be its juxtaposition with a newly ascendant pluralism. In many nations, widespread and robust religious pluralism now stands out in stark relief from various forms of religious fundamentalism—normal, hard-line, and extreme—which have been the status quo in many societies for centuries. As Pratt describes in Chapter 4, the Bible and the Qur’an contain numerous “toxic texts” that can be seen as warranting religious extremism (155). Since extremist attitudes and behaviours are encoded in the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions, their expression in the twenty-first century cannot be seen as a new or even abnormal development. The emergent dominance of the value of diversity acceptance, however, is a sign of the postmodern era and its growing prominence is more novel than forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which have long carried a fundamental sense of supremacy and a corresponding rejection of religious diversity.

While religious extremism as such is not a new phenomenon, and arguably not on the rise in aggregate form, one notable twenty-first

century trend that Pratt highlights is the rise of Islamophobia. The dramatic growth of Islamophobia is well documented and irrefutable. Since 9/11, Islamophobia, “a generalized fear of Muslims,” has been steadily intensifying in rhetoric and simultaneously becoming normalized. Pratt’s categories of religious extremism and rejection of diversity illuminate this disturbing trend. Fundamentalist Christians are the major drivers of Islamophobia, drawing on ancient Christian discourses against Islam (146). Pratt’s theory is borne out in fascist-type politicians like Donald Trump, who combine Islamophobia with other rejections of diversity such as anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. Here we see Christian extremism being emboldened to promote a generalized fear of Islam and Muslims in reaction to Muslim extremism, which in turn gives more energy to Muslim extremism; such “mutual extremism” creates dynamics of “co-radicalization” which quicken the progression of fundamentalism from passive, to assertive, to impositional (117). While it is helpful to understand Islamophobia as part of a larger dynamic of religious extremism or fear of the other, and also helpful to understand it alongside similar phenomenon such as anti-Semitism, the unique genealogy of Islamophobia is one that deserves further research. Pratt only gives this subject a brief historical overview (146).

*Religion and Extremism* is focused on understanding the problem of religious fundamentalism; insofar as it identifies rejection of diversity as the root cause of this phenomenon, it also suggests a solution: affirmation of religious diversity. For Pratt, the solution to religious extremism is not to move away from religion towards secularization. Rather, religious practitioners should become aware of their traditions’ internal tendencies towards absolutism and exclusivism, and work to correct these. Through internal ideological critique and reformation, religions can affirm religious diversity (158). To return to the problems of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, we might consider what such a turn from rejection of religious diversity to affirmation of religious diversity might look like in each particular case. For example, post-Holocaust Christians identified the trope of “the Jews killed Christ” as an essential theological lynch pin of anti-Semitism—and they have made major efforts, often prompted by Jews, to walk back this rhetoric. The simple idea that “Jesus was Jewish” has become a way to promote Christian acceptance of, and even appreciation for, Judaism. Christians today would do well to understand the specific ways in which their traditions support enemy images of Islam and Muslims. One obvious problem is Christianity’s historic dismissal of Muhammad as a heretic

or, worse, its demonization of him as a false prophet inspired by the devil. Such vestiges of Christianity's historic rejection of Islam as an illicit religion will need to be identified and contradicted in order to undermine the religious basis of Islamophobia. Specific rhetorical and doctrinal changes, such as Christians reinterpreting Muhammad as a legitimate prophetic figure, can be used as wedges to drive larger ideological shifts away from fundamentalism and extremism. The challenge that faces contemporary religious practitioners is to identify those parts of their traditions which might serve as platforms for affirmation of diversity, and to bring these from the margins to the centre. While Pratt identifies a proper solution to the problem of religious absolutism, he does not adequately envision the possibility of religious diversity affirmation. He is not specific enough about what this might look like for each faith, nor does he provide a compelling theological vision within which affirmation of religious diversity can take centre stage.

Pratt closes his argument by drawing a distinction between religious exclusivism and exclusive religion. He problematizes *religious exclusivism* because it "is intent on invalidating [...] otherness." But he affirms *exclusive religion* "as a matter of identity articulation." In interfaith dialogue and relations, Pratt argues, "[i]nterlocutors need to know who they are and that their respective identities are indeed mutually exclusive" (159). In this theory of dialogue, maintaining a sense of uniqueness or exclusivity is supposedly necessary (for dialogue without identity transformation?). But are religious identities truly "mutually exclusive," as Pratt contends? This was a dominant point of view in interfaith circles in the twentieth century; but with the rise of multiple religious participation/belonging, this theory must yield to the counterexamples that are flourishing in spite of its ideological limits. Pratt's fears of "syncretistic blurring or relativist reduction" drive a theoretical mandate for "some measure of exclusivity" (159). Therefore, Pratt calls for a "rehabilitation" of the paradigm of exclusivism rather than a departure from it. Yet the promise Pratt holds out for interfaith dialogue encapsulated in rehabilitated exclusiveness—for religious practitioners "to recognize, at least, the fact of other religions and engage in some sort of relation with them"—is less than enticing (159). Pratt's proposed "rehabilitation" of exclusivism stands timidly in the shadow of the problem of religious fundamentalism and extremism.

More imagination is called for to see that religion can flourish in a postmodern framework beyond a paradigm of exclusivism. Religions

can let go of their absolutism altogether, and embrace relationships of collaboration rather than competition; they can engage in transformative dialogue by positively embracing “syncretistic blurring” as “theological co-adaptation” and “relativist reduction” as “mutual recognition of limitation.” The basic problem with Pratt’s theory of dialogue is that it seeks to maintain a sense of religious absoluteness, conceding it as an essential aspect of religious identity. Yet what is needed to prevent fundamentalism is even more clarity that religions and their practitioners do not participate in the absoluteness of their object of worship. In the context of problematizing absolutism as a stepping stone to extremism—Karl Barth, please forgive me for saying this—even the symbolization of God as “the Absolute” is problematic. Pratt accepts as given that “[t]he underlying thread of all three—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—is the fact that all are centred on a belief in the Absolute: the Deity who has given revelation as recorded in a holy scripture” (154). In this definition, absolutist and literalist interpretations of Abrahamic faith are reified into “the fact” and “the underlying thread.” How can we continue to enable the belief that our scriptures are revealed by “the Absolute Deity,” when we know that the Bible and Qur’an contain “toxic texts” that must not be taken literally, let alone absolutized as divine revelation? Pratt appears to be stuck in a way of thinking that makes fundamentalism the centre of religious attention. Calling God “the Absolute” invites a constant struggle to avoid the logical conclusion of such faith; that is, absolutism. Instead, why not say that the underlying thread of all three faiths is the love of God and neighbour, the sacredness of creation, mercy, justice, faith, or some other defining value that is shared in common by all?

In formulating solutions to religious fundamentalism, Pratt assumes a modernist theory of dialogue in which practitioners of each religion operate out of absolute and exclusive universes of meaning. His proposed strategy of rehabilitating religious absolutism and exclusivism would allow religions to retain their traditional statuses as absolute centres of truth. A more transformative dialogue between religions can be envisioned in a non-absolutist paradigm of religious pluralism. This kind of dialogue would be built around non-sectarian centres of meaning that are shared in common by people of diverse faiths.

In “A Time to Break Silence,” Martin Luther King Jr. defined love as “that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.” While anchoring his message in the Christian faith, King nevertheless affirmed all religions: “this

Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: ‘Let us love one another, for love is from God.’” (1 John 4:7 NRSV). In this theological framework, the goal of each world religion is to grow in mutual love, not mutual exclusiveness. King does not claim the value of love as unique to Christianity, but presents it as a universal human value that transcends and at the same time relativizes the importance of religious boundaries. That which is absolute in Christianity, King argues, is not its unique or exclusive possession but rather a shared human heritage common to all religions. Is this an example of what Pratt calls “syncretistic blurring”? Another theological option would be to focus on a symbolization of God as the Creator of diverse life forms, cultures, languages, and religions, which would inspire us to affirm and celebrate this diversity.

Interreligious dialogue in the twenty-first century will succeed insofar as it incorporates a fundamental sense of humility that says, “our religion and our concept of God are limited; we are missing something that might only be gained through dialogue.” The forms of religions we currently enjoy (and are at once disturbed by) need not merely rehabilitation but a new creation. In the twenty-first century we have an opportunity to co-adapt our religions to meet the challenges humanity and our planet as a whole is facing. Because of the interconnectivity of world religions, changes in one religion affect all others; just as much as religions can co-radicalize one another, as Pratt points out, they can also co-adapt in life-giving ways. This can be achieved through creative processes of dialogue, collaboration, and shared ritual in which diverse religionists seek to resolve humanity’s common problems such as violent extremism, economic injustice, war, racism, sexism, and ecological destruction. The religions of humanity can make peace with one another by letting go of their pretensions to superiority and admitting their imperfections; having made peace with one another, they can then collaboratively define and advance common human values that both affirm and transcend our differences. In this way, they can guide humanity into a more life-giving future. Such religious evolution (to use Bellah’s phrase) is part of a complex process of socio-cultural evolution of the human species; in religious terms, we might call this humanity co-creating its future with God.