FUNDAMENTALIST AND OTHER OBSTACLES TO RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

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We live in troubled times. Religious conflict – or, to be more precise, conflicts to which religious labels have become attached – are causing devastation in many parts of the world. Inter-religious and inter-communal tensions have flared up not only in Egypt and Malaysia but also in Sudan, Nigeria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The resulting conflicts have varied from acts of discrimination, to forms of violence including individual assassinations and the destruction of villages, churches, schools, hospitals and mosques. Iraq and Pakistan have seen vicious sectarian attacks mainly directed at Shi'ite worshippers who are systematically targeted by suicide bombers. In Bahrain democratic protests by Shi'ites complaining about decades of repression under a minority Sunni regime have been brutally suppressed by the government with the aid of Saudi co-religionists. A few hundred kilometers to the west, in the Arab republic of Syria, protestors are shot by security forces commanded by a Shi'ite sectarian group – the so-called Alawites – who hold the levers of power.

In Egypt the Christian Coptic Community has been under systematic attack. During the strife that led to the fall of the Mubarak regime earlier this year, evidence was produced to support oppositionist claims that the attack on a church in Cairo was deliberately provoked by the authorities as part of a 'divide and rule' strategy aimed at sustaining an increasingly unpopular regime in power. Communal tensions may be exacerbated by government agencies, but they were not invented by them. At Nag Hamadi in Upper Egypt, at least seven people were killed when gunmen attacked a crowd of worshippers following the celebration of midnight mass on the Coptic New Year's eve in January 2010. The escalation of communal tensions in this town, (famous for the discovery in 1945 of texts dating from the second century CE that are shedding new light on Christian origins) were said to have been caused by the alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Christian man. In this case government officials and religious leaders, including leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Shaikh al-Azhar and the Grand Mufti joined the Coptic Pope in condemning the atrocity. One year later, on January 6 2011, thousands of Muslims turned out for candle-lit vigils that served to protect Coptic worshippers celebrating mass by serving as human shields.

But government complicity also exists. In Pakistan Salmaan Taseer, the governor of the Punjab, who strongly opposed that country's blasphemy law, was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards in January this year. Unlike in Egypt it was the assassin, not the atrocity, that attracted public support. According to Ahmed Rashid, the well-known Pakistani journalist, five hundred lawyers signed up to defend Mumtaz Qadri, Taseer's alleged killer; but not a single registered Imam in the city of Lahore, which has 13 million people, was willing to read Taseer's funeral prayers, and his widow could not find a single lawyer to prosecute the killer. The blasphemy law, despite widespread recognition that it is manipulated to pursue personal claims or vendettas, remains on the statute book.[1]

Perhaps the most devastating example of recent conflicts involving religion – or, as I prefer to call it, religious labeling – has been Northern Nigeria where some 50,000 people have been reported killed in sectarian and ethnic violence since 1999.

Democracy was restored to Nigeria in May 1999 after years of autocratic military rule. In the North newly-elected parliaments with large Muslim majorities demanded 'restoration' of the Islamic Shari'a law, as applied in early colonial times. Restoration was described as the 'dividend from democracy'. A Shari'a-based penal code was introduced in Zamfara, Kano, Sokoto and nine other states or governorates. In colonial times Shari'a included the death penalty for Muslims who participated in 'pagan' – i.e. traditionalist – religious rites. A Muslim accused of murdering a Christian could be freed by the court if he swore his innocence on the Koran. Nigerian Muslims are defensive about outside criticism of Shari'a punishments.[2]

Thus the Southern Council for Islamic Affairs said in a statement: 'Islam and Shari'a are inseparable. No amount of black mail … will stop Muslims from the pursuit of their fundamental human rights to practice their religions in full, without dictation, as to which aspect of their faith should or should not be observed'.[3]

The issue, of course, is highly controversial and contentious. In Muslim-majority states Muslim norms, such as sex segregation in schools and ban on alcohol are being imposed on Christians and other non-Muslims. Yet in

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[1] John L. Esposito and Sheila L. Lalwani, Christians Under Seige. *Huffington Post* 27/1/11, accessed 12/4/11.

[2] Johannes Harnischfeger, *Democratization and Islamic Law. The Shari'a Conflict in Nigeria*, Frankfurt 2008, p. 13-41; 239-249.

[3] *Ibid*. p. 41.

the absence of a Supreme Court ruling declaring Shari'a constitutional, judges are reluctant to impose Shari'a penalties, such as amputation for theft. In 2007 the Baluchi State Shariah commission asked the newly elected governor to ratify 43 amputations and death penalties for adulteries, sodomy & c., passed by the State's Shari'a court since 2003. The issue is clearly subject to official embarrassment not least because Nigeria is, in theory at least, a fully secular state. Johannes Harnishfeger, a German academic, states that it is 'almost impossible to access court files, and the authorities do not provide reliable information'.[4]

Gunnar Weimann, a researcher attached to the German Embassy in Abuja[5] has identified a number of cases where floggings for sexual misdemeanors and amputations for theft have been carried out, but public embarrassment has also been a powerful restraining force. Three Nigerian women sentenced to death by stoning were acquitted on appeal after massive publicity campaigns. In the case of Safiyya Hussain, a widow accused of having a lover outside of marriage, in Spain alone six hundred thousand people signed an Amnesty International petition, Pope John Paul II urged Catholics to pray for her, while the mayors of Rome and Naples declared her an honorary citizen of their cities. Sentenced in October 2001, she was acquitted on appeal in March 2002.

The issue of Shari'a law in Nigeria is particularly problematic, as it is a religiously mixed society with significant minorities living in majority areas. While the Northern States are largely Muslim, there are substantial Christian minorities. The same goes for the mainly Christian south, where substantial numbers of Muslims are located. Authorities differ on the overall proportion of Christians and Muslims. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia Christians form an overall majority; but *The Economist* magazine and CIA put the Muslims ahead, with 50 per cent against 40 per cent of Christians (with the balance of ten per cent being animists or adherents of traditional religions). Harnischfeger sees religious populism as dangerous, not least because of the ethnic and social tensions it articulates.

> What looks like a national conflict that splits the 140M Nigerians into two camps, appears, on close inspection, as a series of local conflicts in which very different actors are involved. In Kano and other cities of the far North, Christian migrants from the South, mostly

[4] *Ibid*. p. 35.
[5] Gunnar J. Weimann, *Islamic Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria: Politics, Religions, Judicial Practice*, University of Amsterdam Press 2010.

Igbo and Yoruba, have clashed with Muslim Hausa-Fulani who use the Islamization campaign to assert their ancestral rights over the economically successful 'settlers'.[6]

Further south, in the so-called Middle Belt, where Hausa-Fulani settlers compete with the indigenous non-Muslim population over the dwindling supply of land, calls for restoration of Shari'a amount to an assertion of political supremacy. 'In this context', Harnischfeger comments, 'religion is attractive not as a resource for peace, but as a means for mobilizing for violent conflict. Political Islam, with its claim to enforce religious laws, is well placed to mobilize for the defense of land and to assert political dominance'.[7]

Political Islam – or Islamism – is by definition political, so one should not be surprised that it can be seen to function as a faith capable of advancing the material interests of its adherents. But can such religious conflicts be reduced to competing claims over material resources that can theoretically at least be resolved by political means? A central difficulty, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is that conflicts over territorial resources couched in religious terms tend to be 'absolutized' or 'transcendentalized' since divine imperatives are deemed to be non-negotiable. An obvious case in point is the Arab-Israel dispute, where religiously-inspired rejectionists on both sides of the divide, elevate the historical quarrel between Israelis and Palestinians into a Manichean contest between the absolute values of good and evil. Under these circumstances political accommodation needs to be underpinned by an acceptance of 'toleration' that sincere believers may see as damaging spiritually, as imperiling their commitment to their faith.

Toleration is a problematic term. Religious tolerance has been described as 'the recognition of the relative and subjective right of error to existence … A person who is tolerant in the domain of dogma resembles the botanist who cultivates in his experimental beds both edible plans and poisonous herbs as alike valuable growths, while a person intolerant of error may be compared to a market-gardener who allows only edible plants to grow, and eradicates noxious weeds'.[8] It is 'akin to patience, which also connotes an attitude of forbearance in the face of an evil'.[9] The Nigerian example, however, suggests that there are situations where the processes of toleration or the accommodation of religious differences may actually exacerbate religious conflict in a wider theatre.

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[6] Harnischfeger, p. 37.
[7] *Ibid.* p. 239.
[8] *Catholic Encyclopedia* 1911, ed sv Toleration.
[9] *Ibid.*

The introduction of Shari'a, with the conspicuous application of the *hadd* (Koranic) penalties of stoning and amputation served as a unifying shibboleth for disparate Muslim groups that had long been divided historically. As Weimann demonstrates in his discussion of the famous 'Miss World' controversy that erupted in Nigeria in 2002, a *fatwa* (legal opinion) calling for the death of a young Christian journalist Isioma Daniel, for 'insulting' the Prophet Muhammad, though controversial because of its origin, produced a closing of Muslim ranks, exacerbating Christian–Muslim tensions.

In 2002 the annual Miss World pageant was scheduled to take place in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, as a Nigerian woman had won the previous contest, held in South Africa, in 1998. Muslims of all persuasions had made their objections known as the event, accompanied by massive publicity, was scheduled to take place during the final days of the sacred month of Ramadan. The crisis point came when Daniel published an article in *This Day* magazine which was seen to rile the Muslims for their puritanical attitudes.

> The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them.[10]

Although the magazine and the journalist issued apologies that were widely carried by the Nigerian media, they failed to counter the news of the alleged slander to the Prophet carried by text messages and mobile phones, and uproar was inevitable. Mamuda Shinkafi, deputy governor of Zamfara state, made a public statement, subsequently described as a fatwa, comparing Isioma Daniel to Salman Rushdie, as someone whose blood it was legitimate to shed. 'It is binding on all Muslims wherever they are to consider the killing of the writer as a religious duty'. Non-Muslim intellectuals such as Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka considered the statement an appeal for murder. Within the Muslim religious establishment there were deep divisions as several trained scholars doubted the authority of the deputy governor to issue a fatwa. His boss the governor of Zamfara State, Ahmad Sani, told the BBC that Shinkafi's fatwa was not a 'fatwa per se' – he had been 'misquoted for simply trying to state the position of Islam as regards making derogatory remarks about the Prophet Mohammed. Therefore I can say that he did not pass a death sentence on Isioma'.[11]

Nevertheless the JNI – the Jamat Nasr al-Islam – one of the constituent bodies of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) with

[10] Weimann p. 150.
[11] *Ibid*. p. 154–5.

competence to issue fatwas – concluded after appointing a committee to study the matter, that Shinkafi's statement was an 'evident and unavoidable fatwa' and that Daniel had insulted the Prophet. Pardon was not acceptable and death unavoidable. However the death sentence must be carried out by an independent body appointed by the state. As Weimann comments, it was inconceivable that the secular Nigerian state would empower a group to carry out such a sentence, a factor that would have been clear to all the members of the committee: in this way the JNI acceded to populist demands by affirming the validity of the 'fatwa', while subjecting its execution to conditions that would be impossible to fulfill.[12]

Weimann study shows that in this case, as in the divisive efforts to Islamize the law in the northern states, the Islamic establishment put unity before principle. At first the religious establishment demonstrated leadership by declaring that the Zamfara State government had no competence to issue fatwas. However their efforts to outflank populist politics were thwarted when more radical elements joined the campaign, questioning their prerogatives to interpret the Shari'a by issuing fatwas. In order to maintain their claims to be the voice of Nigerian Islam, they had to embrace the position of their critics.

> Paradoxically in order to retain authority and safeguard the unity of Muslims, the Muslim religious establishment had to acquiesce in the demands of radical factions among its constituencies which challenged this very authority.[13]

The outcome of what might be called intra-Muslim ecumenism has been a radicalization of the discourse. As Weimann puts it

> To avoid offending parts of their constituencies, they have tended to support, at least verbally, positions that satisfy the radical factions, while the subtleties of their formulations have been difficult to detect for outside observers.[14]

Members of the Muslim religious establishment who disagreed with the manner in which Islamic criminal law was introduced and initially implemented, were reluctant to voice their criticisms in public. In sum, they gave priority to maintaining the façade of Muslim unity and consensus over improving relations with Christian communities.

> In effect, the agreement on mutual tolerance, conceived as a means to achieve Muslim unity in the face of an alleged Christian threat,

[12] *Ibid.* p. 155.
[13] *Ibid.* p. 168.
[14] *Ibid.* p. 169.

has made it impossible for religious leaders to contain more radical Muslim voices aiming at, or willingly accepting, further deterioration of inter-religious relations.[15]

The Nigerian crisis – and there are many similarities both with the Rushdie affair that preceded it and the Mohammed cartoons crisis that came after – gives us cause to question how we fashion our approach to 'respect' when we state that toleration means 'mutual respect' for each other's religion. Religious polemic is part of the contemporary cultural landscape. Competing religious traditions rub shoulders in a way that occurred in the past, but not to the extent that happens in today's media-saturated globalized world where, as Clifford Geertz once stated, 'From no one no one will leave anyone else alone'.[16]

Fundamentalism – to use a problematic term – is a profoundly modern phenomenon, being the outcome of interactions between competing religious traditions and struggles within religious traditions. Fundamentalists, despite claims that are sometimes made about them, are not a monolithic group, and nor are they static. They are surprisingly shifting and adaptable. Since they make absolute claims about the supremacy of their own tradition, fundamentalists may seem constitutionally averse to compromise. In actuality the picture may be considerably more complex. Among American fundamentalists opposed to Darwinism, for example, one can observe a shifting of epistemological ground, from the 'six-day creationism' of the 1980s to the 'intelligent design' of today. Believers in the forthcoming apocalypse, known technically as pre-millennial dispensationalists, have quietly shifted from the literalistic apocalypticism described in of the Scofield Reference Bible (first published in 1909, with numerous subsequent editions), towards the fictionalized 'end time' scenarios described in the hugely popular *Left-Behind* series of novels recently heading the best-seller lists in America, with sales exceeding 70 million copies.[17] Writing biblical fiction – and reading it – may be a way of de-literalizing textual hermeneutics without acknowledging that the 'end times' are not going to happen just yet.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Cited in Martin Marty, The Fundamentalis of Fundamentalism, in Lawrence Kaplan (ed.) *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective* (Amherst MA 1992) p. 18.

[17] *Left Behind* is a series of 16 best-selling novels – named after the first in the series – by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins dealing with the Christian dispensationalist view of the end of the world. The series has yielded at least three action thriller movies and several videogames built around theme of the rise of the Antichrist. In 2005 *USA Today* reported that sales of the original novel exceeded 8 million with 62 million copies of the related titles. Source: *Wikipedia* sv 'Left Behind'; *USA Today* 28/02/05 accessed 17/4/11.

Indeed it may be in the United States, the country that gave birth to 'fundamentalism' in its modern forms, that the best approach towards addressing religious conflict may be found. The post-Westphalian state that emerged from the European wars of religion finds its most completed and formalized expression in the US system of church-state separation. The US has seen a bitter civil war, but very few killings in the name of religion.

How do we accommodate competing religious absolutisms? Arguably church-state separation de-absolutizes religion by maintaining the neutrality of the state. This may be easier in the New World than the old one, because the experience of migration canonized by history inculcates a sense of identity that is more open to diversity and change than are old world religious legacies. One may argue, with American fundamentalists, that the United States was founded as a Christian, specifically protestant, nation, and that the 'Wall of Separation' between church and state guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution does not mean that the state whose currency bears the legend 'In God We Trust', is atheist or even secular in the fullest sense of the word. According to US constitutional doctrine the state merely maintains a posture of neutrality towards different churches or denominations, a category progressively extended by Supreme Court rulings to embrace Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians, including 'secular humanists' or non-believers. However the pluralistic assumptions of American Protestantism during the colonial period, and the evangelical competition between rival sects, have tended to de-couple religion from personal or group identities (though exceptions can be made for Mormonism, the most successful new religion to have originated in North America, and for Judaism, with its strong sense of community cohesion). According to a 1985 survey, one in three Americans had switched from the faith in which they had been raised, compared with one person in 25 thirty years previously. In the intervening period the population had not only become more religiously mobile, but the denominations had made it easier for people to switch.[18] Indeed, in comparison with the old world, including Europe, 'denominational switching' is a compelling fact of social and religious life, telling us that for a majority of Americans religion is a matter of choice.

This may be formally in line with the rights of religious freedom enshrined in the UN charter, but the reality is that much of the Old World honors religious freedom in the breach.

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[18] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton 1988, p. 88.

The glue, I would suggest, that ties most 'old worlders' to the religions of their forefathers is less the voluntarism of choice than the accumulated habits of the centuries in which personal and group identities are forged. The Dutch sociologist Hans Mol sees the 'sacralization of identity' as a phenomenon that 'produces immunity against persuasions similar to the biological immunization process'. 'Sacralization' he argues 'is the inevitable process that safeguards identity when it is endangered by the disadvantages of the infinite adaptability of symbol-systems'.[19] In the New World, one might suggest, ubiquitous symbol-systems such as the McDonald arches, the almighty dollar and the American flag (the desecration of which is regarded as an act of sacrilege) may weaken the attachment to older tokens of religiosity or religious identity that serve as identity-markers in the Old. In Mol's formulation, the process of sacralization is Janus-faced in that it can either obstruct, or legitimate change. Mol's view of sacralization is much more fluid and flexible than that of Emile Durkheim, who made an absolute distinction between the sacred and the profane.

This is a complex area of inquiry that cannot be fully addressed in this paper. However few social scientists would deny that group identities are socially constructed and interactive, or that they are often, if not invariably, formed in contradistinction to a concept of 'the Other'. I write as post-Christian Irish-born protestant, raised partly in the republican south where protestants have been a dwindling minority for the better part of a century. As Marianne Elliott reminds us, Irish Protestantism was structured around the paranoid fear of 'popery' long after the British Isles had ceased to face any major strategic threat from Catholic Europe.[20] Hatred of Catholicism was enshrined in protestant hermeneutics: the Pope was the anti-Christ of the Book of Revelation. Rome was the 'Whore of Babylon'. Prejudice was frozen in time, like some vicious insect suspended in amber, yet readily provoked into life. Instructions given to his clergy by the Protestant Archbishop of Armagh in 1745 encapsulated a theme that would endure for at least two centuries:

> You are to raise in your people a religious abhorrence of the Popish government and polity for I can never be brought to all Popery in the gross a religion … Their absurd doctrines … their political government … [make] it impossible for them to give any security of their being good governors, or good subjects in a Protestant kingdom.[21]

[19] Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A sketch for a new social-scientific theory of religion*, Oxford 1976, p 5.

[20] Marianne Elliott, *When God Took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland – Unfinished History*, Oxford 2009.

[21] *Ibid*. p. 54.

A similar message was conveyed by the Protestant leader, Pastor Ian Paisley, in a statement to the European Parliament during a papal visit to Ireland in 1988:

> There is no difference between the Europe of today and the Europe in Reformation times. The Hapsburgs are still lusting after protestant blood. They are still the same as they were in the days of Luther.[22]

These are not just matters of rhetoric. There were consequences for human life and safety. The most recent cycle of what Irish people on both sides of the border choose to call the Troubles began in 1969 when Ulster Catholics, and some Protestants, inspired by the American civil rights movement began demanding their own civil rights in peaceful protests not unlike those we are witnessing in the Arab world today. Instead of seeing this as a back-handed compliment to the British state where a new generation was beginning to seek its destiny, rather than looking to the republican south, the all-Protestant 'B-Special' militia reacted with violence. Protestants would see in the demonstrations the all-too-familiar sign of a popish plot, orchestrated by the Catholic church: 'Rome never changes' proclaimed the *Loyalist News*. 'One word from their Cardinal would have ended the violence, the responsibility lies at the door of the papist Hierarchy, the Red Robes are [Bishop] Conway's and they drip with innocent blood'.[23]

Protestant mythology is rich in martyrdom, dwelling on the St Bartholomew's Day massacres of 5,000 Huguenots in France as if it were a recent event or on the troubles of the 1680s when Protestants suffered during the reign of the Catholic King James II. The massacre of Catholics at Drogheda by Oliver Cromwell in 1649 when 2,000 mainly unarmed Catholics were murdered in cold blood, including hundreds who had taken refuge in a church, do not feature in Protestant memory. The same selectivity and focus on victimhood applies equally on the other side. The writer Colm Toibin, brought up in Catholic Enniscorthy, grew up without ever learning that during Ireland's 'Year of Liberty' in 1798 when the whole country (including Protestant dissenters) rebelled against Britain, a massacre took place at nearby Scullabogue, where – as Toibin quietly puts it 'our side took a large number of Protestant men, women and children, put them in a barn and burned them to death'.[24]

One might suggest that toleration – like confession, should begin with acknowledgement of the crimes of one's own tradition – a discipline that

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[22] *Ibid*. p. 120.
[23] *Ibid*. p. 89.
[24] Colm Toibin, *The Sign of the Cross – Travels in Catholic Europe*, London 1994, p. 290.

could subvert the Manichean fear of the 'Other'. Elliott says that it is only recently that 'Protestant church leaders have been prepared to talk publicly about the anti-popery at the heart of their theology'.[25] The cultivation of victimhood serves to perpetuate sectarian attitudes, fusing with the ethnic, nationalist or ideological drivers.

The religious component that serves the sense of victimhood – or anticipated victimhood – relates less to theological issues of belief in a deity or deities, than to the manner in which religious teachings are transmitted by means of highly routinized ritual processes. As Harvey Whitehouse observes,

> many routinized religious are successful at holding on to their followers through a variety of mechanisms, including supernatural sanctions (such as eternal damnation) and, more positively, incentives (such as eternal life and salvation). Of course, the power of these mechanisms depends on people believing the religious teachings. In order for people to believe in a set of doctrines, these doctrines have to be cast in a highly persuasive fashion … Routinized religions tend to be associated with highly developed forms of rhetoric and logically integrated theology founded on absolute propositions that cannot be falsified. All of this is commonly illustrated by poignant narratives that can easily be related to personal experience.[26]

Poignant narratives – often reproducing memories of victimhood or danger – invite our sympathies. Acts of brutality, cruelty and injustice, when ritualized or reproduced in ritualized texts, are invariably committed by 'others'. The Irish essayist, Hubert Butler, caused the Papal Nuncio to walk out of a meeting in a famous Dublin hotel, when he challenged him for speaking only of the mistreatment of Catholics by communists in Eastern Europe, without reference to Catholic massacres of Serbs and forced conversions in Croatia during the Second World War. Butler was ostracized in his home town of Kilkenny, because, as his biographer put it, 'he had upset a delicate balance in whereby Catholics generously affirmed the principle of toleration so long as Protestants ensured its actual practice remained unnecessary. By voicing his dissent publicly on such a sensitive topic, Butler had put an end to this charade, leaving Catholics sounding curiously defensive even as they spoke of how offended they were'.[27]

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[25] Elliott p. 240.
[26] Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A cognitive theory of religious transmission*, Lanham MD 2004, p. 67.
[27] Elliott p. 233.

As Elliott points out, it has been the traditional propensity of Irish Catholics and Protestants 'to look for insults and feel satisfied at their prejudices being confirmed when they apparently found them'.[28] The same mentality, I would suggest, can be found among Jews and Muslims. Holocaust memory, enshrined in museums, perpetuates a sense of victimhood for a group of peoples whose actual situation has changed from being the oppressed to becoming oppressors. The Orange marches, commemorating the landmark historical events that guaranteed protestant survival in northeastern Ireland, perpetuate the memory of a threat that disappeared more than three centuries ago. Supposed 'insults' to the prophet Muhammad, suggested by the Danish cartoons or passages in a highly complex literary novel, conferred the dignity of victimhood on disparate groups of Muslims in Europe seeking patronage from the wider, and sometimes wealthier, Muslim *umma*.[29]

The sense of victimhood, cultivated but also repressed, can become a powerful revolutionary force, but also a highly destructive one, especially when violence is directed towards an alienated 'other', where mirror neurons in the mind that engender empathy are suppressed or overtaken by notions of disgust.

What might be called 'othering' may also be effected through rhetorical tropes, gradually transformed into fixed assumptions. As Susan Greenfield, one of Britain's leading neuroscientists, explains 'disgust is a biological defense against things that harm the body. It has nothing to do with anger or fighting something. It's preserving your body against contamination'.[30]

Greenfield points out that the language Hitler used in *Mein Kampf* is pseudo-medical rather than rooted in rage: Jews are parasitic aliens, like viruses, that infect and endanger the purity of the Aryan race. As Hitler had it the wandering Jew is not a nomad, who has some noble characteristics – he 'has never been a nomad, but always a parasite, battening on to the substance of others … He is and remains a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider areas according as some favourable area attract him'.[31]

In condemning Nazis and anti-Semites for their fastidious disdain of the Jewish 'other', it is all too easy to overlook the extent to which similar

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[28] *Ibid*.
[29] Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, New Haven 2009; Malise Ruthven, Why are the Muhammad Cartoons Still Inciting Violence?, *New York Review* blog 9/2/11.
[30] Professor Baroness Greenfield: author's interview, Oxford 28/2/11.
[31] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, tr James Murphy, London 1939, p. 255.

rhetorical tropes, embedded in popular language, have infected less obviously discredited *religious* attitudes. Elliott suggests, somewhat mischievously, that there is a long history connecting one early 19th century Irish protestant landowner's descriptions of Catholic as 'varmin' with Unionist Prime Minister David Trimble's outburst in 2000 that that Sinn Fein needed to be 'house-trained'.[32] But there is substance underpinning her point: she states that when Catholics moved into urban areas, Protestants moved out 'as much from the old fear of 'pollution' as for religious reasons.[33]

The association of dirt with the Irish goes back – at least – to the Elizabethan conquest and the early protestant plantations. Geoffrey Keating's *History of Ireland* (1634) describes the Irish as a 'filthy people wallowing in vice'.[34] In the 20th century Unionist propaganda depicted the nationalist quarter of Belfast as 'Microbe Street, its sub-tenants emptying chamberpots into infested streets below'.[35] When loyalists demonstrated at the opening of a branch of a southern chain store in the mainly protestant town of Portadown in 1998 they threw maggots over the merchandise to dramatize the dangers of Catholic infection.[36] In the late 20th century Catholics were routinely described at DUP (Democrat Unionist Party) meetings as 'greedy pigs wallowing in muck, taking family allowances and government grants and always demanding more'.[37]

In *Purity and Danger*, her masterly study of pollution fears, the anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that the pollution rules that define or draw boundaries around many religious activities are actually substitutes for morality, for in contrast to moral rules, they are unequivocal.

> They do not depend on intention or a nice balancing of rights and duties. The only material question is whether a forbidden contact has taken place or not. If pollution dangers were placed strategically along the crucial points in the moral code, they could theoretically reinforce it. However, such a strategic distribution of pollution rules is impossible, since the moral code by its nature can never be reduced to something simple, hard and fast.[38]

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[32] *Irish Times*, May 29 2000, cited in Elliott p. 15.
[33] Elliott p. 15.
[34] *Ibid*. p. 188.
[35] *Ibid*. p. 192.
[36] *Ibid*.
[37] *Ibid*. p. 193.
[38] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966/1984, p. 130.

Pollution taboos maintain the condition of purity, but as Douglas suggests purity can be a deadening concept. It 'is the enemy of change, ambiguity and compromise'.[39] She cites, with approval, Jean-Paul Sartre's observation that anti-Semitism is rooted in the quest for purity:

> It is simply the old yearning for impermeability … there are people who are attracted to the permanence of stone. They would like to be solid an impenetrable, they do not want change, for who knows what change might bring? … It is as if their own existence were permanently in suspense.[40]

This is not to argue that concepts of purity are always deadening, or that purity is dangerous in itself. The condition of ritual purity that some religions demand – for example in connection with the Islamic pilgrimage, or after sexual activity – may be psychologically liberating, reinforcing emotional experience by linking it with the divine idea of purity. The problem with purity lies in its opposite. The notion that infidels, aliens and in some cases women are unclean and therefore dangerous can engender postures similar to those described above.

In her study of sexuality in modern Iran Janet Afary describes the inhibiting effects born of the 'dangers threatening the body'[41] affecting young women, as well as the traumatic effects of unveiling to which women were exposed under the modernizing reforms of the Pahlavis:

> Unveiling and also modern clothing for women exposed believers to ritual pollution and possible damnation in the afterlife – contributing mightily to antagonism toward gender reforms on the part of the old middle classes.[42]

The consequence was a society living under what the philosopher Daryush Shayegan has called a condition of 'cultural schizophrenia':[43] as Afary explains with regard to the *bazaaris* or traditional urban trading classes in Iran,

> modernity instituted a double life for pious Muslims. Outwardly they behaved as modern citizens of the state, ignoring religious hierarchies and engaging not just in business and trade with women and non-Muslims, as they had always done, but also mingled socially, shaking hands and sharing tea or meals with them. Inwardly, many *bazaaris*

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[39] *Ibid*. p. 162.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, Cambridge 2009, p. 26.
[42] *Ibid*. p. 152.
[43] Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, trans. John Howe, London 1992.

harboured a constant sense of anxiety since they continued to believe that a pious Shi'i Muslim who ignored the proper rituals of purification after encounters with *najes* (polluted) individuals had 'nullified' his prayers and supplications to God and the Imams.[44]

One can read the Islamic revolution that erupted in Iran in 1979, in part, as a response to ritual pollution, a reaction against personal defilement. The consequences are beyond the range of this paper – but it is worth noting that ritual purity now rules officially in the Islamic Republic, with socially awkward results. A Canadian friend (of Shi'ite origin) who has a diplomatic post in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek tells me that neither of the two Iranian ambassadors who have been there during her tenure will shake her hand. One, she says, seemed a 'bit uncomfortable' – the other, who she knows quite well and she is friendly with his wife, has sent message explaining that he cannot be seen to be shaking her hand 'for diplomatic reasons'.[45]

Religious intolerance, I venture to suggest, is not so much about differences of belief as about manifestations of customs or social habits that are the outcome of those beliefs. Theological differences – about God, or the Virgin, the Real Presence, the divine mission of Muhammad, the docetic Christology of the Qur'an, the inheritance of Ali ibn abi Talib or the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein – are not the reasons that people indulge in murderous behaviour towards their neighbours or 'intimate enemies'. Religious conflicts, between Catholics and Protestants, Sunnis and Shias, Hindus and Muslims, are best seen as 'turf wars' between parties over resources and rights and the less tangible, but not of itself theological, issue of human 'respect'. Threats were made against the life of Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses* and Kurt Westermaark, the Danish cartoonist who depicted Muhammad with a bomb-shaped turban, not because they may or may not be 'non-believers', but because they were deemed to have insulted Muslims by violating what might be called two of their sacred icons: the aniconic image of the Prophet and the integrity of the inerrant Qur'an. One could even extend this notion to the September 11 attacks on America – which were motivated, in part, by Bin Laden's accusation that holy Islamic soil was being violated by the presence of infidel US troops.

The defence of the sacred can be expressed territorially, iconically, or even sartorialy – when the idea of the sacred is configured around women's clothing, because sexual activity is deemed to have mystical overtones. But

[44] Afary p. 150.
[45] Personal communication Doha, Qatar 25/11/10.

it is too simplistic to argue that conflicts arising from clashes over the contested symbols that represent the sacred, are necessarily motivated by questions of faith or belief. The more problematic issue is the way that sacred symbols become the bearers of identity, both personal and group identity.

In her book *ID – the Quest for Identity in the 21ˢᵗ Century* Greenfield stresses the importance of narrative in making sense of experience. For the neuroscientist, she argues, the

> old dualism of 'mental' and physical, indeed of 'mind' and 'brain' is as unhelpful as it is misleading. The mind, far from being some airy-fairy philosophical alternative to the biological squalor of the physical brain, IS the physical brain – more specifically the personalized connectivity of the otherwise generic brain.[46]

After describing the extreme plasticity of the infant brain she stresses the importance of the pruning of synapses and connections in the construction of individual identity:

> Many of the haphazard experiences, the deluge of disconnected events that were the hallmark of our early years, are 'forgotten' as the synapses that subserved them are pruned away in favour of a clear, connected, conceptual framework for how we see ourselves, the rest of the world and our life story as a 'connected chain': a narrative.[47]

Thus far, I would guess, her description would be acceptable to most of her colleagues in the field. More controversially she makes interesting structural parallels between the development of individual and group identities, and between the growth of the individual and that of the organization.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BRAINS AND SOCIETIES	
Brain region	**Culture/tribe/group**
Distinct, large structure constituted from nested hierarchy of cells-synapses-networks	Distinct, large structure constituted from nested hierarchy of networks
Quasi-permanent, but can be modified by large-scale event (eg stroke)	Quasi-permanent, but can be modified by occasional large-scale event (eg tsunami, strike, revolution)
Together make up whole brain	Together make up global society

[46] Susan Greenfield, *ID – The Quest for Identity in the 21ˢᵗ Century*, London 2008, p. 59.
[47] *Ibid.*

SIMILARITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY	
In the mind...	**In the organization...**
Neurons become increasingly specialized as network grows ... and more resistant to change in general function	People become increasingly specialised as network grows ... and more resistant to change in general function
Supernumerary connections atrophy via under-use	Friendships/non-essential posts fade/redundant when not active/needed
Transition from omnipotence of external influences to interaction with environment	Transition from omnipotence of external (eg market) forces to interaction with inner resources
Balance of network-environment interaction constantly shifting	Balance of internal-external forces constantly shifting
A unique identity of a brain evolves into a mind	Organizations evolves a unique identity

I was impressed by these parallels and asked Professor Greenfield if she had empirical data to support her idea of structural parallels between individual brain development and that of organizations. Her answer was problematic, but nonetheless interesting:

> So far as I know, I'm the only person who has come up with this. Unlike many scientists I talk very much to the private sector and to companies I know the kind of language they enjoy and like – so I'm very comfortable looking for analogies – the average neuroscientist thinks you're mad if you said – 'Can you talk parallels between brain cells and people?' And they would say, 'Of course not. Brain cells are brain cells and persons are persons'. Scientists are very literal in the way they see the world – they are not used to metaphor.[48]

Metaphors, she pointed out, elude young children and people suffering from schizophrenia. Yet they are absolutely crucial to our understanding of language. As Julian Jaynes, another scientist who, like Greenfield, had a habit of straying outside his chosen field – psychology – into the world of classical literature, metaphor is fundamental to language and hence to the way we think as adults.

> Metaphor is not a mere trick of language, as it is so often slighted in old schoolbooks on composition; it is the very constitutive ground

[48] Professor Baroness Greenfield: author's interview, Oxford 28/2/11.

> of language … It is by metaphor that language grows … In early times, language and its referents climbed up from the concrete to the abstract on the steps of metaphors, even, we may say, created the abstract on the basis of metaphors.[49]

The same applies, a fortiori, to religions. All religions approach the divine by constructing narratives whose meanings are approached via metaphor. The events recorded in religious narratives, whether they occurred in actuality, or merely in human minds or memories, acquire their symbolic charge, their organizing power, not because they refer to actual events (such as the Hebrew sojourn in Egypt, or the battles of Muhammad and his Companions, for which there may be no archaeological evidence) but because through a process of reproduction and routinization they confer collective identity on the groups that rehearse, celebrate and sometimes seek to replicate them.

A similar point was forcefully made by Abd al-Karim Soroush a reformist Islamic thinker from within the Shi'i tradition at a discussion I recently attended at Yale University. In terms that are not incompatible to the passage already cited from Mary Douglas, Soroush argued that a significant portion of the books of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) derived from Islamic Shari'a law concerns the maintenance of boundaries or the collective identity of the *umma* – the Muslims community. Such regulations, he argued, were not about ethics, but about maintaining the distinct identity that the Prophet Muhammad wanted for his community. These identity-strengthening measures included the highly controversial law of apostasy that makes conversion to Islam a one-way street: in some Muslim majority countries, apostasizing from Islam is still punishable by death. Issues of identity, argues Soroush, have nothing to do with the truth or falsity of religious ideas.[50]

A noted Harvard scholar of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, uses the term 'reification' to describe the process by which religious ideas are externalized and made accessible to outside observers. In defining religion he cites the Catholic Encyclopedia (in a definition that should encompass all the monotheistic faiths). 'Religion … means the voluntary subjection of oneself to God'.[51] Smith's argument, however, is best put negatively: 'a religious understanding of the world does not necessarily imply that there is a generic religious truth or a religious system that can be formulated and ex-

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[49] Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Boston 1977, p. 48–51

[50] Abd al-Karim Soroush, Round Table discussion, Yale University 4/4/11.

[51] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, London 1962, p. 113.

ternalized into an observable pattern theoretically abstractible from the persons who live it'.[52]

His book, first published in 1962, is a classic of religious studies. But it is slender on the construction of group identities. Reification is the process by which the subjectivity of feeling (the sense of transcendence, the belief that ordinary activities have cosmic resonance) acquires external configurations. Smith understands that these configurations can be observed by outsiders, but not the inner experience itself. According to Smith reification is a gradual process: it is 'the preaching of a vision, the emergence of followers, the organization of a community, the positing of an intellectual idea of that community, the definition of the actual pattern of its institutions'.[53] These external configurations, I would suggest, can be highly problematic because group identities formulated through collective narratives – and forged into the synaptic configurations of individual human brains – are often predicated on heroic struggles against the evil 'Other'. 'The God of other religions is always an idol', as Emile Brunner put it.[54] Jews – and indeed Mormons – require 'gentiles' – to sustain their group identities (a predicament that Philip Roth exploited, brilliantly and playfully, in *Portnoy's Complaint*).[55]

Every August Orange Ulstermen solemnly re-enact the closing of the Gates of Londonderry against the forces of James II; on July 12th they march to commemorate their the victory over what they regard as Popish superstition at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Needless to say they appear oblivious of the inconvenient historical fact, that at that particularly juncture, Pope Alexander VIII was supporting a European coalition that included the forces of William of Orange. It was the Pope who sung *Te Deums* after the victory of the protestant forces of King William.

Toleration obviously requires recognition of diversity and pluralism, as well as the value and legitimacy of personal religious experience. But if charity begins at home, so does toleration. Its beginnings must lie in the recognition that the narratives that serve to confer identities on persons or groups are necessary for personal or group development. They are not scientific truths subject to disconfirmation. Religions – with their truth claims – are vital to human cultures. We can begin to look more generously at the group identities of others if we recognize the arbitrary and ephemeral configurations underpinning our own.

[52] *Ibid*. p. 57.
[53] *Ibid*. p. 67.
[54] *Ibid*. p. 140.
[55] Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, London 1969.