Editorial

Introduction: The Intersection of Religion with Radicalization and De-Radicalization Processes in Comparative Perspective

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1. Religion, Radicalization, and Deradicalization

Radicalization continues to be considered a contentious concept with little consensus on what categorizes a movement or individual as "radical" (or extreme). In the post 9/11 era, the understanding of radicalization that coalesced was contextualized by instrumental policy and political goals (see Kundnani 2012; Schmid 2013; Rane 2009). This conceptualization was fraught because it suggested a "clash of civilizations", which was an idea grounded in centuries-old myths, identities, and imaginaries (Bottici and Challand 2010, 2013). While it is axiomatic that some value judgements will be involved in defining the legitimate boundaries of political, normative, and moral discourse, similar to the dilemma of distinguishing between freedom fighters and terrorists, these assessments should still be part of a continuous dialogue that is subjected to constant review and critique.[1]

Notwithstanding the contention surrounding the concept of radicalization, for the purposes of this Introduction, radicalization is considered the decisive rejection and/or subversion of the established legal, social, and political orders through the pursuit of alternatives that license the use of violence.[2] There is thus a distinction between, on the one hand, radicalization and the actual perpetration of extremist violence, and, on the other hand, radicalization and the channelling of grievances into lawful protest and political action (UNDP 2016). There has been growing recognition that radicalization takes into account a multitude of different socio-political standpoints, including religious extremism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, and, more recently, environmental extremism (see Peucker et al. 2023). Of particular note is the increasing incidence of violence linked to white male grievance; cases include Charlottesville in 2017, Chemnitz in 2018, and Christchurch in 2019, as well as the incel violence in Toronto in 2018. These examples point to the need to assess radicalization as a highly complex process that may be independent of any pre-conceived actor.

The interplay between religion and religious diversity with radicalization processes merits further scrutiny for two major reasons. Firstly, in many parts of the world, religious minorities have been, and are currently, vulnerable to xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes and even to violent attacks and violent forms of extremisms and radicalization (De Varennes 2022; Castellino and Thomas 2021). The recognition of the particular vulnerability of religious minorities in many contemporary societies (Ferrari et al. 2021) has also led to debates over accommodations for religious minorities, especially groups stemming from more recent migration flows (Medda-Windischer et al. 2023). Secondly, it is important to reference what Habermas has called a "resurgence of religion" in recent decades, which he argues is based on three overlapping phenomena, namely, missionary expansion, but also fundamentalist radicalization and the political instrumentalization of what the German philosopher describes as "smouldering conflicts that are profane in origin [and then] ignited once coded in religious terms" (Habermas 2008). Indeed, if religion is considered by many to have the potential to be a source of positive values like tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality and a means to protect against alienation, discrimination, and

the scapegoating of minorities, at the same time, religion can also be an instrument and vehicle for strengthening divisions and reinforcing polarization and alienation (Larsen and Jensen 2021; Aly and Striegher 2012; Hashemi 2021). Against this background, this *Religions* Special Issue aims to shed light on the role of religion and religious diversity within radicalization and deradicalization processes and the extent to which they are intertwined with a real or perceived sense of injustice—economic, symbolic, political, recognition, and redistributive—leading to grievance, alienation, and polarization (see Fraser 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2003).

The concept of grievance has been investigated across disciplines in fields including international relations (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), social movement theories (Crossley 2002; Ennis and Schreuer 1987), and political sociology (Ivarsflaten 2008; Maškarinec and Bláha 2014; Kriesi 2012). This research has found that grievances are a useful frame for understanding injustices, crafting solutions to perceived injustices or democratic deficits, and driving specific actions. The article by Rami Ali, Özgür Özvatan, and Linda Walter in this Special Issue connects the effects of online discourses by Muslim actors to the notion of grievances by examining inclusive and exclusive discourses surrounding three historical events that are significant for Muslims to build insights into the processes of radicalization and deradicalization.

At the same time, the concept of alienation has come to the fore as a key driver for radicalization (Mccauley 2012; Ventriglio and Bhugra 2019; Blackwood et al. 2012). Alienation has been defined as an individual's sense of unease or discomfort resulting from their exclusion or self-exclusion from social and cultural participation (Ventriglio and Bhugra 2019, p. 18). What makes individuals vulnerable to recruitment into initiatives of violent extremism may be this very distancing from immediate social, political, and economic ties. Another finding in this field concerns the individual's feeling of powerlessness in the face of wider, apparently hostile forces, which leads them to experience weakened agency in their everyday surroundings and interactions with others (among others, see Parker 2007; Schwartz 2017; Ventriglio and Bhugra 2019). Along these lines, the article by Mohammed Khalid Rhazzali and Valentina Schiavinato in this Special Issue looks inside prisons to examine the ways in which alienation, particularly around religious identity, is detected and confronted in incarcerated adolescents as part of preventing radicalization.

Finally, the elevation of the theme of polarization points to the ever-widening space between political attitudes or behaviours in alignment with extreme positions, which has affected and, at times, ruptured the possibilities for constructive dialogue (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). This phenomenon is based on the manifestation of "us and them" identities that might lead to increased segregation (Pemberton and Aarten 2017). Extreme expressions of polarization that have been documented include hate crimes, xenophobia, intolerance, and street violence. Complementing this work on fragmentation, the authors Bidzina Lebanidze and Shota Kakabadze in this Special Issue apply the concept of *resilience*, the capacity of societies to both "bounce back" and "move forward", to analyse the impact of a religious actor's recent radicalization on social cohesion. Additionally, online technologies have accelerated this process by allowing extreme discourses to infiltrate the mainstream, gaining new audiences and fostering cultural and political divisions (e.g., Nagle 2017).

Various contributions in this Special Issue adopt the so-called I-GAP spectrum (Injustice-Grievance-Alienation-Polarization), developed as part of the D.Rad project, to better unpack how radicalization and deradicalization processes are closely tied to conflicting narratives of justice or injustice that are sometimes experienced through the lens of religion or by religious minorities (RAN 2015).[3]

If radicalization is a controversial topic with contested definitions, trends and drivers, deradicalization is no less contentious. In particular, grasping the difference between lawful protest, radicalization, and violence, as well as the substantial overlap between preventive measures and countering violent extremism, remains one of the main challenges for devising deradicalization programs (Scrivens et al. 2019). The literature further differentiates deradicalization (change in political or ideological belief) from disengagement (change in

behaviour) (Bjorgo and Horgan 2009). For the purposes of this Special Issue, the editors subscribe to a broad conceptualization of deradicalization and disengagement programs as "any method, activity, or program designed to reduce individual or collective physical and ideological commitment to a group, milieu, or movement designated as 'extremist' or violently radical" (Koehler 2017, p. 29). However, conceptual confusion remains and deradicalization programs often overlap with prevention and intervention initiatives as these programs are considered to be "situated at the boundary" in an approach that is a "methodological hybrid", which includes early prevention and later-stage interventions (Koehler 2017, pp. 6–7, 10).

Examples of this methodological hybridity can be seen in typologies for prevention that, according to the literature, operate on tri-partitions that relate to different phases or stages.[4] Indeed, there is the possibility for interventions in what is considered the late or tertiary phase with persons in extremist environments who may have already engaged in adverse behaviours or may appear to be at risk of committing crimes (see Schmid 2020, pp. 20–21, 27). As an illustration of the use of mixed methods and approaches, Roman Zinigrad and Stephen W. Sawyer in this Special Issue provide an overview of the state-led deradicalization interventions in France, demonstrating that while there continues to be monitoring of signs of radicalization in schools and prisons in a securitized manner, there are also attempts for social reintegration of individuals through a variety of interventions ranging from sanctions to public campaigns. In another strategy, the Italian State approaches radicalization in a model within a "securitarian" dimension that links preventive measures with the management of cultural and religious diversity, as Mohammed Khalid Rhazzali and Valentina Schiavinato explain in their contribution.

Engaging in intervention programs on deradicalization and disengagement raises a number of moral, ideological, and practical dilemmas. Among these, it has been recognized that addressing the ideological elements of radicalization, which may also have a theological basis, is a highly complex and even burdensome process. Therefore, some experts maintain it is better to confine these types of interventions to focusing on *disengagement*, which, as seen earlier, pertains to shifting the attitudinal component "from offending to non-offending", rather than pushing for a full questioning of the ideological and/or theological framework of radicalized individuals (see a review of the debate in Koehler 2017, p. 3; Horgan 2009; Noricks 2009; see also Butt and Tuck 2014, p. 3).

Another issue related to deradicalization programs is that they may have a counter-indoctrination effect, with the result being that one set of values, ideological positions, and worldviews is elevated and inculcated over others (Foley and Korkut 2022; Vidino and Brandon 2012). In this regard, the discussion on deradicalization programs touches upon the so-called Böckenförde paradox, namely the fact that a liberal state cannot impose, through coercion and authoritarian methods, its values and a shared sense of community, which is its prerequisite; otherwise, it would no longer be liberal (Böckenförde 1991). Another way of understanding this risk is through what the political sociologist Christian Joppke (2012) defines as 'muscular liberalism', according to which the values of liberal societies and institutions "are to be intrinsically and unconditionally accepted for what they are. . . The problem is that implementing this muscular liberalism would entail moral intrusiveness and curtailment of individual liberties that would destroy precisely the liberal values it means to achieve" (see also Orgad 2010).

Therefore, there is a need to calibrate the balance between what Koehler best summarizes as "not to intervene too far" into the freedom of thought, expression, and religion, while also intervening "substantially enough to ensure a sustained effect of leaving violent radicalization behind" (Koehler 2017). The same author suggests that one fruitful approach to mitigate these dilemmas is for democratic societies to base their deradicalization programs on core values as well as to include civil society actors, who may operate with more transparency and legitimacy than government agents (Koehler 2017).[5]

Among these programs, there are those based on civic education, which can be defined as all initiatives of instruction based on core values such as tolerance, justice, equality, and

solidarity, which aim to affect "people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities" (Crittenden and Levine 2018), as well as foster critical thinking to address biases (Lilienfeld et al. 2009). Such programs have, indeed, been found to be helpful in shaping "personal efficacy", i.e., the individuals' belief in their ability to effect change, engender political participation, and instil tolerance (Mouritsen and Jaeger 2018, p. 2). Civic education programs may be conducted in public spaces, arts and sports settings where emphasis is placed on fostering social cohesion, democratic literacy, active citizenship, and a shared sense of belonging to counteract tendencies of grievance, alienation, and polarization (see Zeba 2023a, 2023b). Theatrical performances and social media spaces may also prove to be a useful ground for deradicalization interventions among young people (see Macaluso et al. 2020). Extending the analysis to sites for deradicalization, the way in which public parades in Israel can be agents of deradicalization by acting as civic counter-responses forms the subject of the contribution by Sophia Solomon and Kobi Galin.

It is, however, acknowledged that even with notions of core values, there is an inherent risk of cultural bias, an inevitable mixing of moral requirements and cultural preferences. Moreover, as Banulescu-Bogdan and Benton have pointed out, "while values courses may celebrate equality and the rule of law, many minorities may experience discrimination or ethnic profiling by authorities" (Banulescu-Bogdan and Benton 2017, p. 17). There is, thus, the further risk of promoting common values that are not being implemented uniformly, matching rhetoric to practice, in what are seen as double standards.

By analysing drivers and trends of radicalization and deradicalization processes as intertwined with religious actors and diverse social contexts, the articles in this *Religions* Special Issue aim to identify the building blocks of these processes through the analysis of discourses and narratives—such as victimization, a sense of powerlessness, and "us vs. them" identities—in and across contexts of religious plurality such as churches, political elites and public opinion, social media, penal facilities, and parade grounds. Close examinations of these contexts reveal the presence of moderating voices, though these may be eclipsed by anti-liberal elements. In addition, many authors examine these same contexts to see the possibilities and opportunities that they may form the basis for deradicalization. In particular, this Special Issue looks at how issues revolving around religious diversity interplay with radicalization concerns. Which dynamics trigger processes of religious radicalization and deradicalization? Which policies should be implemented to achieve this aim? And how can we thereby overcome the risk of essentialization of religion, religious communities, and minority cultures by political mobilization that may lead to the division of societies into us-versus-them antagonisms?

2. Studying Religion and (de)Radicalization from a Comparative Perspective

This Special Issue brings together authors to confront one or more of these questions from a variety of national perspectives that represent different traditions of thought and religions. The first contribution examines the role of religious actors who exert their influence in national spheres. Bidzina Lebanidze and Shota Kakabadze trace the evolution of radicalization trends within the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is one of the most popular institutions in Georgia and operates with considerable support from the government and ruling elites. The authors examine speeches and interviews by the Catholicos-Patriarch, influential bishops, and clergy and find that, whereas previously the GOC had been characterized by pragmatic balancing of views, there has been a notable diffusion of anti-liberal, anti-European, anti-LGTBQI+ narratives in the past decade. These illiberal discourses are accompanied by an increase in violent episodes, which have been organized by radical right wing and Orthodox groups and featured the involvement of radical representatives of the clergy. The authors argue that this radicalization turn within the GOC is undermining societal resilience by negatively impacting social trust and weakening national identity by endorsing anti-Western narratives. The contribution demonstrates the ways in which a prominent religious actor's radicalization fragments social cohesion, strengthens societal polarization, and weakens its status as a critical pillar of stability within a country.

The second contribution by Roman Zinigrad and Stephen W. Sawyer explores the ways in which public opinion and political discourses frame jihadist radical violence in France, a country that continues to experience high levels of jihadist terrorism and threats compared to neighbouring countries. The authors explain firstly how policies towards religion in France are being redirected as a result of the legal and political amalgamation of jihadism and Islam, which threatens the physical safety, national identity, and fundamental values of the French. In particular, French legal reforms and political discourses envision a jihadist threat to laïcité (the principle of regulating individual conduct in the public sphere in support of moderate religious practices). This leads to the conflation of concerns for religious communitarianism (the prioritization of ethnic groups for traditional or religious values over those of the nation and republican society) and those for jihadist violence. The drivers of radicalization are a combination of the influence of organized jihadist networks, the role of online information and communication efforts, and the systemic discrimination and stigmatization of incarcerated individuals. The authors then investigate the deradicalization efforts of the French government that go beyond surveillance, detection, and prevention of attacks and that focus on agents of jihadist violence. While there is some success noted in social reintegration programs, initiatives in schools and prisons have also been characterized by securitization, stigmatization of Islam, and ineptitude. The authors argue that the double meaning of the government's position towards jihadist violence—linking the process that nurtures violence with the process that leads to stricter religious observance—runs the risks of increasing discrimination against the Muslim population and activating the sense of their injustice, grievance, and alienation along the IGAP spectrum.

The penal circuit is the focus of research by Mohammed Khalid Rhazzali and Valentina Schiavinato that contributes to the debate on the extent to which the prison context is an incubator for the radicalization of adolescents. This piece draws attention to the vulnerability of adolescents of migrant backgrounds who may be subject to multifaceted dynamics relating to identity amid the everyday experience of discrimination and prejudice. The case study was conducted in Italy, a country where various factors have led to a "beneficial delay" in the expression of jihadist radicalization (Guolo 2018; Khosrokhavar 2021). The government has responded to jihadist radicalization by adopting a model that links prevention to efforts to manage cultural diversity and religious plurality; this includes training in issues of religious plurality in the prison context as well as permission for religious ministers to enter prisons to provide assistance. Through focus groups with prison operators who are tasked with watching for signs of radicalization, the authors unpack the assumptions that shape how these personnel view the process of countering radicalization tendencies. The authors report on the insights gleaned from operators, who noted the ways in which cultural and religious aspects were important for constructing identity for adolescents, with different degrees of significance played by the religious dimension. The authors found that operators are well positioned to detect signs of radicalization but that specific trainings—on minors' cultural and religious background, for example—would be needed to distinguish risks of radicalization from normal adolescent tendencies.

Taking us into the online context, Rami Ali, Özgür Özvatan, and Linda Walter compare the ways in which Muslim actors promote radicalization and deradicalization through social media. The authors draw on the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies to identify the mechanisms of narrative persuasion that were reflected in Instagram posts by three Muslim organizations in Germany, which ideologically fall along a spectrum between particularism and pluralism. They ask the following question: How do Muslim actors create discursive spaces that are open and closed to self-reflection and liberal-democratic principles in Muslim-minority Western European contexts? This work contributes to unpacking the role of "Islam" in "Islamic radicalization" by distinguishing among multiple "Islamisms" (Ayoob 2004). Focusing on the element of grievance, discourses around three historical events that were significant for Muslims were chosen for analysis. The findings reveal the specific narrative genres and techniques deployed by Muslim actors for producing particularistic, illiberal, anti-pluralist, and anti-democratic

discourses, considered exclusive, in contrast to universalist, liberal, pluralist, and democratic discourses. This research demonstrates that there are ways for online discourses to be deradicalizing and preventative, thereby helping to bridge perspectives and promote inclusion.

Delving into the spectacle of public parades and how they can "both unite and separate", Sophia Solomon and Kobi Gal introduce us to the Israeli street-level context as a space for (de)radicalization. The authors situate parades as collective gatherings that are part of building social relations but also serve civil and political purposes for religious communities; parades may further form the site of violent clashes between groups. The authors argue that radicalization and religion are refracted through parades held in Jerusalem through the lenses of religious nationalism and cultural civicism. The contribution demonstrates how parades as platforms of pluralism can be exploited for religion-based radicalization and deradicalization through an examination of the participation practices, agenda-setting, and political affiliations of stakeholders. The authors found that parades manifest the public expression of the link between religion, nationality, and territory that in turn is responsible for extreme agendas against Muslims and LGBTQ+ communities and has led to increased societal polarization. Violent responses to parades reflect the ways in which extremists use civic freedoms to advance ethno-religious nationalism. Meanwhile, parades that adopt inclusive practices can strengthen deradicalization processes.

The multiple perspectives of the articles collected in this Special Issue demonstrate that the ambiguous role of religion and religious diversity within the processes of radicalization and deradicalization endures with mixed effects. This volume advances the conversation between religion and (de)radicalization to improve modes of understanding illiberal trajectories and promoting disengagement with polarizing forces.

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List of Contributions

1. Solomon, Sophia, and Kobi Gal. 2022. On Pride, Flags and Flowers: Jerusalem's Public Parades as a Mechanism for (de)Radicalisation. *Religions* 13: 1190. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121190.
2. Lebanidze, Bidzina, and Shota Kakabadze. 2023. Spoiler or Facilitator? Radicalization of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Its Impact on Societal Resilience in Georgia. *Religions* 14: 272.
3. Zinigrad, Roman, and Stephen W. Sawyer. 2023. State and Religion: The French Response to Jihadist Violence. *Religions* 14: 1010. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081010.
4. Rhazzali, Mohammed Khalid, and Valentina Schiavinato. 2023. Adolescence as a "Radical" Age and Prevention of Violent Radicalisation: A Qualitative Study of Operators of a Juvenile Penal Circuit in Italy. *Religions* 14: 989.
5. Ali, Rami, Özgür Özvatan, and Linda Walter. 2023. The Narrative Foundations of Radical and Deradicalizing Online Discursive Spaces: A Comparison of the Cases of Generation Islam and Jamal al-Khatib in Germany. *Religions* 14: 167. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020167.

Notes

[1] This point is well illustrated in the recent judgment of the ECtHR in the case of Yalçınkaya v. Türkiye, which concerned an applicant's alleged membership in an armed terrorist organization; for an analysis on the judgment, see Turkut (2023).

[2] For more on radicalization, see Kundnani (2012); Heath-Kelly (2013); Koehler (2017).

[3] The Horizon 2020 project D.Rad (DeRadicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate) was a comparative study focused on radicalization and polarization, primarily among young people in urban and peri-urban areas in Europe and beyond. See https://dradproject.com/ (accessed on 15 November 2023).

[4] In the tri-partition classification of prevention, one can distinguish between primary, secondary, and tertiary stages. According to Schmid (2020, p. 27), the stages include "Upstream, primary (early) prevention: reducing the risk of the formation of a terrorist group or organization, Midstream, secondary (timely) prevention: reducing the risk of such a group or organization being able to

prepare a terrorist campaign, and Downstream, tertiary (late) prevention: reducing the risk of execution of individual terrorist operations by foiling and deterring these".

5 See, for example, the Civil Society Empowerment Programme of the EU Commission Radicalisation Awareness Network-Practitioners: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/civil-society-empowerment-programme_en (accessed on 15 November 2023).

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