

Joint Statement Opposing Religious Extremism

by the Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations

Religious extremism

Religious extremism has various and alarming results. The world community has witnessed tragedies such as the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India in December 1992 and the violence that followed, the massacre of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in July 1995, the aircraft that were flown into the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11th September 2001 and the terror in Oslo and on Utøya 22nd July 2011. Religious extremism is part of the global reality. But religious extremism also threatens the life, welfare and rights of human beings in many local situations and in many ways, without being given the same attention as these vast tragedies, for example by religiously legitimized violence in close relationships, the desecration of holy places and threats to those who take part in public debates. Whatever the extent, we cannot accept that individuals or groups in various ways are made the victims of religious extremism.

Extremism involves the use of violence, force or threats to promote the extremists' ideal society or to attack individuals or groups. This often happens without religion being involved. But some use religion or religious rhetoric to explain or justify extremism, for example by interpreting religious writings so that they seem to support extremist attitudes and actions. This is what we mean by religious extremism, which we as religious leaders have a special responsibility to oppose.

Characteristics

Religious extremism has many characteristics. We mention especially these:

- Extremists believe that they are alone in interpreting their own religion correctly, so that they cannot cooperate with others who think differently, even though these belong to the same religious tradition.
- Extremists are convinced that there are groups of people that it is impossible to co-exist with, and which they must therefore oppose or remove, either from society as a whole or from certain places or areas.
- Extremists reduce human dignity for groups that they oppose, and reject the idea that human rights apply to these groups.
- Extremists accuse those who think differently of having certain political, ethical or religious opinions, without allowing them to define for themselves who they are or what they believe.
- Extremists use gender-based hierarchies and power structures in which women are denied human rights and human dignity on the same level as men.
- Extremists use a language of hate, inciting to conflict with certain groups of people and with those who disagree with their convictions.
- Extremists are willing to use terror, violence or other forms of compulsion in order to enforce the consequences of their religious views on others.

This is not intended to be a complete list, but includes what we think are important characteristics of religious extremism. The more of these characteristics that are present in a specific case, the more serious it is. Each of these characteristics can be present with different degrees of seriousness. We therefore believe that it is important to identify and oppose tendencies to religious extremism as early as possible.

With this in mind, it is also clear that there is no reason to use the term “religious extremism” for everyone who is strongly committed to his or her faith and who lives out this commitment in different ways. To have a sincere and intense commitment to one’s faith has in itself nothing to do with religious extremism, as long as it is combined with respect for the dignity and human rights of others and is not combined with attempts to force the consequences of one’s religious or ideological convictions on others.

Joint appeal

The Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations reject all forms of religious extremism. Religious extremists put themselves in the place of God and believe that they are fighting on behalf of God against the enemies of God. Religious extremism is therefore contrary to the teachings of our religions, especially with respect to the basic dignity and rights of all human beings. The idea of forcing one’s opinions on others is fundamentally opposed to the responsibility and right which we believe that God has given to all human beings, to make their own decisions. To live in peace and reconciliation with one another across the boundaries of culture and religion is in fundamental harmony with the basic values of our religions.

The Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations are especially concerned that possible tendencies to religious extremism in our own ranks should come to light. We therefore urge Muslims and Christians to prevent and oppose all forms of religious extremism both in their respective communities and in their fellowship with one another.

- We urge religious leaders to continue to raise these questions in their preaching and teaching, in order to reject and prevent extremism in their own ranks.
- We urge religious leaders and faith communities to join together and speak out publicly against religious extremism.
- We urge religious leaders and faith communities to develop contingency plans to prevent and oppose extremism.
- We urge congregations and assemblies to raise these issues in study groups, plenary sessions and dialogues.
- We urge religious leaders, congregations and assemblies to protect one another’s members, holy places and other institutions which could be threatened by religious extremists.
- We urge religious leaders, congregations and assemblies to expose and oppose the use of holy writings and religious rhetoric in a way that can create conditions for the development of religious extremism.
- We urge religious leaders, congregations and assemblies to speak out against hateful and threatening descriptions of others, not least in the media and on the internet.
- We urge religious leaders, congregations and assemblies to oppose hateful descriptions and harassment of women.
- We urge the media and other public bodies to present a nuanced picture of religious belief when violence and force are committed in the name of religion.
- We urge the various faith communities to use their international contacts and networks to strengthen the struggle against religious extremism nationally and internationally.

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