Kelsey Holtz

Why are the religious doctrines of Christianity and Islam, so often twisted into violence?

Asia Bibi and her co-workers spent hours picking berries from a hot field in the middle of Pakistan. They labored on, and as sweat beaded on their brows, Asia was asked to fill up water jugs for everyone. A seemingly helpful action that she completed without thinking twice, will put her in jail for years, facing one of the harshest charges in her country—blasphemy\*[[1]](#footnote-1) (Jaffery). All she wanted to do was have a drink of water, but because of her religion she was attacked, thrown in jail, and lived with the threat of the death sentence hanging ominously over her for more than eight years. As she was walking back from the well with water, she took a sip from one of the jugs before handing it to one of her co-workers (Jaffery). This is something that should be normal between two co-workers in Pakistan. It would have been normal, except for the fact that she was a Christian, and her co-workers were Muslims (Jaffery). When they saw that she drank from the jug harsh words were exchanged and a conflict sparked. Because she is a Christian, she was deemed, “not worthy,” to share water with her Muslim co-workers and was accused of blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed (Jaffery).

Despite the accusations, she left work like any normal day and made the trek home to her five children. Five days later, to her horror, her home was intruded upon by law enforcement (Jaffery). They grabbed her arms, threw her out of her home, and ripped her away from her family who screamed at the officers until they no longer see her. Outside of her home, she was beaten by angry mobs of Muslim protestors and the village cleric (Jaffery). The police do nothing but watch. A harsh testament to how Sharia Law[[2]](#footnote-2) works in Pakistan. After she endured what the police and the protesters deemed to be a sufficient brutality she was dragged to jail and thrown into solitary confinement. She was found guilty at her first trial and was placed back into solitary confinement. She was forgotten about for eight years (Jaffery). Prior to this date her lawyer put in many appeals for her charges to be dropped, all of which were unsuccessful except for the last one. On October 31, 2018 her final appeal was heard and she was freed. She was liberated from jail but she was still not free of her country. Her release sparked outrage and she knew that she was putting herself and her entire family at risk (Jaffery).

After Asia was released protestors attempted to force the government to reverse the decision regarding her freedom. For three days there were constant protests all around the courthouse and the country (Jaffery). Roads were blocked, vehicles were set on fire, and many attacks were made on buildings and the police. Along with that, many schools and businesses were closed and the country, mostly the eastern part of Pakistan, was in chaos (Jaffery). A Muslim extremist group called Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan took to social media and called for their followers to resort to violence and even suggested that the judges who acquitted Asia be killed.

Asia’s story is not the only case of blasphemy and violence in Pakistan. The fact that many other Christians and Muslims are being persecuted by each other supports the fact that the followers of peaceful religions like Islam and Christianity often fight with each other (Jaffery). According to the Centre for Social Justice, in Pakistan there have been 1,549 convicted cases of blasphemy with over half being against non-Muslim people. Most convictions of blasphemy were death sentences which are not carried out. Asia’s story is just one of many examples of religious persecution and conflict caused by religious radicalization (Jaffery). In Syria there are entire towns with no women because all of the Christian women have been killed by opposing groups, like ISIS, or have fled their homes (Hubbard). The world with religion is like a boiling pot of water that heated too quickly and overflowed, and as a result there is violence between what seem to be two very similar religions, Christianity and Islam.

The true doctrine of both of these religions is one of peace and love as is evident throughout the historical teachings of both the Bible and the Quran. Although historically these religions have had conflicts between each other the past conflicts should not be turned into the foundations for conflict in modern times. It is the radicalization and psychological process of radicalization that led to the violence within these two religions.

# Islam and Christianity

Christianity and Islam, the two largest religions in the world with around 4.2 billion practitioners are two religions that have messages of love and tolerance but often end up in senseless conflicts (Hackett). Both religions began their steady growth and formation during the same time period but in order to fully understand these two religions and their conflicts it is necessary to know their origins and historical interaction.

Christianity, while it is now its own religion, was once simply a sect of Judaism. When Jesus Christ, the son of God, was born approximately between the years 6 BCE and 4 BCE his followers, or disciples as the Christian people call them, were all Jewish (Christianity). Along with that, Christianity had deep origins in the Middle East and spreads to many different regions of Europe around 1000 CE. Christianity is based around the life of Jesus Christ, his teachings, and the many miracles he performed such as curing the blind. All of this is documented in the religious text of Christianity, the Bible, and the messages of the religion are often highlighted within stories about Jesus (Christianity).

The teachings of Christianity are well documented in the Bible and are mainly highlighted in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, which are God's laws, are as follows, “You shall have no other Gods before Me, You shall make no idols, You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, Keep the Sabbath day holy, Honor your father and your mother, You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, You shall not covet” (​*New American Bible, Exodus. 1:17*​). To understand the similarities between the religions it is necessary to understand the history and teachings of Islam as well.

Islam started around the same time that Christianity did and in some ways, they are very connected and similar. The geographical area that Islam and Christianity originated in were also relatively close together if not even in the same geographical region of the Middle East. Islam started in the year 570 CE when the prophet Muhammad was born in the religious hub of Mecca in Saudi Arabia (Islam). When Muhammad was in his mid-forties, he began to have contact with the angel Gabriel who told him about Allah, the God of Islam. All of the religious stories of Islam are documented in the Quran which is the religious book of Islam believed to have been revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century (Islam).

Similar to Christianity and the Bible, Islam has many principal beliefs that are all highlighted within the Quran. One belief of the Islamic religion is that there were multiple prophets sent to teach the Islamic message such as, Abraham, Moses, (both whom are Christian prophets), Noah, the final prophet Muhammad, and also Jesus Christ. Along with that there are the five pillars of Islam which every Muslim is supposed to follow (Mufti). The first pillar is

Shahada which is to declare one’s faith in God and belief in Muhammad. The second pillar is Salat which is to pray five times a day (at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening). The third pillar is called Zakat and is to give to those in need. The fourth is Sawm and calls for the Muslim people to fast during Ramadan. And the fifth and final pillar is Hajj which is a pilgrimage to

Mecca that a person must make at least once during their lifetime as long as the person is able (Mufti). Islam is practiced as a complete way of life focused on the belief in one God and commitment to his commandments (What is Islam).

Along with the five pillars of Islam there are also the six articles of Islam. The six articles of Islam are the basic set of fundamental beliefs that the Muslim people believe in. The articles are very similar to the Ten Commandments of Christianity and consist of, the Belief in One God, the Belief in Angels, the Belief in the Prophets of God, the Belief in Revealed Books of God, the Belief in the Day of Judgement, and the Belief in Destiny and the Divine Decree. The most important Article of Islam is the Belief in One God and states that God should be “served and worshipped” (Mufti).

*“They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it,” (New American Bible, Peter 3:11).*

*…*

*“Indeed, Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good to others; and giving like kindred; and forbids indecency, and evil, and wrongful transgression. He admonished you that you may take heed,” (Quran in English, An-Nahl 16:90).*

The relationship between Christianity and Islam has a long and complicated history with war and divide throughout. From the time when both religions were created until modern times, Christianity and Islam, two supposedly peaceful religions, have had no issues picking fights with each other. One of the first times that Islam and Christianity were not at peace with each other were The Crusades. From the years 1095 to 1291 C.E. the Christian Europeans attempted to take over Jerusalem which the Muslims were in control of since 638 C.E. The conflicts started as both groups attempted to secure holy sites that were sacred to both religions (Global Connections

The Middle East).

But why did they do this? Both European Christians and Islamic Muslims wanted to secure Jerusalem in order to have access to the birthplace of their religions. Although this seems like a solid reason for the debate over Jerusalem Europe was hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem and this debate caused war and death for hundreds of years (Crusades). Many can relate the conflicts of The Crusades to current conflicts as they ultimately expanded Christianity throughout Europe (Crusades). But how does this long history affect the question of why are the religious doctrines of Christianity and Islam, so often twisted into violence? It is not the religions of Islam and Christianity in their pure form that teach the violence. It is the psychology of radicalization and extremism of these religions that cause the violence. Psychological reasons for why these two religions are often perceived as violent exist and should be considered when trying to answer the question of why they often lead to violence.

# Psychology of Religion and Radicalization

Christianity and Islam are both religions that have large global followings. But why did people start to follow the religions and their teachings? Psychologists differ in their opinions of why people follow religion, many believe it has survived so many years as it brings people together to form larger social groups with common beliefs. Religious practice can also satisfy basic human desires. According to Professor of Psychology, Steven Reiss, there are sixteen basic desires that people share that are all fulfilled by religion which include: acceptance, curiosity, eating, family, honor, idealism, independence, order, physical activity, power, romance, saving, social contact, status, tranquility, vengeance (Gray). Radical groups capitalize upon these basic human desires and exploit individuals who are searching for a lack of these basic desires in their life. The tone of these religions from one of peace to violence thus creates extremists.

Although the religions are both very frequently practiced around the world the extremist views are practiced by a separate population of people other than the true followers. In order for someone to become radicalized it is almost always the case that the person is lacking a sense of one or more of the sixteen desires in their life and has a need to fulfill these desires through altered means (DeAngelis). The violence associated with these extremist religious beliefs can be connected back to the vulnerability of the individual giving them a perceived sense of purpose.

Ultimately, they are searching for a purpose in their lives and find that meaning in a group that shares in their idealism. Certain individuals are more likely than others to be susceptible to the lure of extremism and understanding its principles amongst Christianity and Islam becomes imperative.

In Islamic extremism there are more established groups that share radical views spun off of the Islamic teachings and are often related to the Jihadists movement. Jihad in Arabic translates to “determined effort,” and according to the Quran should include a struggle against sin and injustice. Extremist groups have twisted this meaning to create the ideology of Sharia

Law which is practiced to recreate a pure state similar to that of the early history of the religion (What is Jihadism). All of those that do not subscribe to the same view of the Muslim state must be eliminated as if it is God’s will. Although never directly called Christian extremism an ideology exists that can be related back to the distortion of the beliefs of Christianity in which violence is committed against those not sharing the same beliefs including Muslims.

The individuals that typically perform acts of violence against Muslims are not part of one specific group but are often linked together by the belief in the same twisted ideology. Christian extremist ideology can be linked to white nationalists who use religion to support their misaligned views of Christianity and that it has superiority over others of different faith and race. Although not all white nationalists have religious ties the nationalists that do go by the ideology of “Christian Identity,” which is a racist way of following Christianity (Winston). Similar to the ideology of the Islamic extremists they morph the teachings of the Christianity in order to create what they deem as a pure state, which does not include the Muslim people.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) people who are more easily turned towards extremism tend to “feel the need to take action rather than just talking about the problem,” which is a way to compensate for the lack of power in their lives. Power, one of the basic sixteen desires can be seen as the ability to influence others. Extremist groups often perform violent acts in the name of God or Allah with the purpose of making their cause the most powerful. These acts are usually so violent since the extremist craves attention and what better way to get attention than to show your power to the world. Beheadings are a common way that these Islamic extremist groups show their ultimate power. Beheadings often occur in large public places, displayed on television, and even broadcast to many social media platforms which displays their believed ultimate power and sacrifice to God (Rabil). Another radical extremely violent act linked to Islam extremism is that of the suicide bomber. Aligned with the grandeur of beheadings it also serves to show the power of Islamic extremism.

Suicide bombers are strongly dedicated to their cause as is evident by the radical act they perform. They are radicalized to believe that their suicide acts are the only way to power and victory over the enemy based upon Seven Rewards which are part of the brainwashing process. The Seven Rewards are as follows: forgiveness of all sins, paradise will be reserved, will be “crowned with glory” with a holy stone and will have 72 virgin wives, spared suffering at the grave, spared the horror of the Day of Judgement, places reserved in paradise for 70 members of the family (Don’t Dismiss Suicide Bombers as Madmen). Understandably suicide bombers are often seen with a smile upon their face prior to their final act of power. But not just Islamic extremist groups are committing acts of terror in order to gain power.

On March 15, 2019 a violent anti-Islamic act was carried out in Christchurch, New

Zealand. A man infatuated with ideas surrounding the misinterpretation of The Crusades and the

Christian religious extremism idea of cleansing attacked two Islamic mosques and killed fifty Muslims (Al-Marashi). During the Crusades the raid of Jerusalem was based on the Christian need for power over the Muslims. The Christian extremist took many ideas with him regarding the fact that in order to gain power like in The Crusades it was “necessary” for him to get the Muslim people out of the way of the Christians. In an ultimate display of power initially he live streamed his attacks on social media and released his Manifesto for all to see (Al-Marashi). But notoriety to some extent was stripped from him when the New Zealand prime minister declared she will never refer to the attacker by name. But power alone is not the only basic need that radicalization satisfies.

Another way that religious extremists are motivated is by honor, also one of the sixteen desires (Gray). Honor can be seen as loyalty to one’s heritage or in the case of extremism the God they worship. Religious extremists often “believe that engaging in violence against the state is not immoral” and go through their acts of violence in the name of God (DeAngelis). When Salah Abdeslam, the last surviving member of the terror cell that attacked Paris in 2015, was asked why he did what he did he responded with, “Allah guided me and chose me among his servants to open his path. It is for that reason that I had to fight the enemies of Allah with all my strength” (2015 Paris Terror Attacks Fast Facts). Abdeslam used his extreme religious beliefs and the fact the he was committing and act of violence in the name of God as an excuse to why it was justified.

The 2015 Paris attack was just one example of extremists claiming God as the rationalization behind their attacks. In claiming God or Allah it brings perceived honor or loyalty to the killings. A majority of the time when Islamic extremists commit acts of violence, they proclaim their reverence to God by stating “Allahu Akbar” or translated means God is great (Suleiman). Historically it is meant to be a term used for a celebration of life and is traditionally whispered into the ears of newborns by their fathers. By attacking people in the name of God the religion is blamed when in reality the extremist views are at fault.

An attack on a mosque in Quebec City that occurred January 29, 2017 by a Christian extremist also has a basis of perceived honor to God in its message. The offender entered the

Islamic Cultural Centre at prayer time targeting the praying Muslims. As the Muslims chanted “Allahu Akbar” they heard the same phrase come from the lips of the attacker, mocking them and claiming reverence to God. After his chant and proclamation to God was made, he opened fire on the Muslims in an attempt to kill as many people as possible (Chavez). Six Muslims lost their lives in this attack.

The third and final desire that relates closely to extremism is the idea of social contact (Gray). Social contact can be seen as the desire for companionship. Christianity and Islam both have gathering spaces, churches and mosques in which worshippers are able to have togetherness and normal social contact in their one belief. Extremism in both cases has been successful in satisfying social contact since most recruitment taps into the individual’s personal problems. According to the FBI, individuals who feel social alienation can be convinced that they will feel less alone by becoming part of the group. They capitalize on individual’s anxiety, frustrations, and painful experiences. This can be achieved either with personal interaction or via alternate methods.

The Islam and Christian extremist groups alike generally find ways to provide social contact for their members or followers which will propagate the violence. Christian extremists and Islamic extremist groups both have social media accounts and use the internet to spread their radical ideas and further promote the misguided messages of the religions. It is a successful platform since it is easy to use and can send its messages to a large audience. Recruitment of radicals through this method allows the individual to have a sense of belonging further rationalizing the altered belief system of extremism. Three of the sixteen desires have been substantiated as to the psychological rationale behind radicalization of Christianity and Islam; power, honor, and social contact. Alone they provide the psychological foundation to begin to form a solution to a very complex problem.

This a large global issue that has deep rooted complexity and the basis of psychology of radicalization is one means to better understand religious violence. It is not the religions of Islam and Christianity that teach or should be linked in their pure doctrine to the violence. It can be summarized as radicalization.

Although Asia Bibi was a victim of religious persecution and violence due to her religion, she was able to recognize that the true teachings of Islam were not to blame for her demise. Asia’s viewpoint suggests that the solution to changing these radical views is to continue to educate on the true teachings of Christianity and Islam. By doing so less correlation can be drawn between the religions and their ties to extremism.

*“Yet we all know that the Islam advocated by the fundamentalists bears little resemblance to the great religion upheld by Muslims for centuries. In Surat 5 of verse 32, the Quran teaches that anyone who kills an innocent person kills all humankind, and anyone who saves a life saves all humankind”*​ (Bibi).

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1. Blasphemy is the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God according to The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sharia Law is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as “the fundamental religious concept of islam- namely, its law. Also, in recent years Sharia law has been falsely equated with the misapplications of Islamic law by extremist groups and radical governments (Sharia). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)