Will religious fundamentalism become increasingly violent? *

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It is not too difficult to understand why the question, which forms the title of this session, should be posed. Terrorism and other forms of violence committed in the name of religion seem to have become regular media headline material. Christian fundamentalists in Texas provoke a shoot-out on top of an arms hoard worthy of a minor independent state – and remind us of earlier violent events also in the name of Christ. Jewish fundamentalists seem set on using all means at their disposal to sabotage any move towards even a slight compromise in the Middle East peace process. Hindu fundamentalists demolish a mosque in India in a process of escalating religious violence which has seen numerous riots and killings in Bombay and, earlier, a major clash between the Indian state and Sikh fundamentalists in the Indian Punjab. One may assume that it is only due to lack of physical media access that we have not heard too much about clashes between the Chinese authorities and Buddhist fundamentalism in Tibet, even if it has occasionally been hinted at in analyses of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka.

Fundamentalist violence has, over the last decade and a half, come to be associated in the Western mind especially with Islam. Again, it is not too difficult to understand why. The Lebanese civil war was very quickly, and lazily, categorized as a Christian-Muslim conflict. The temptation to such analysis by religion was soon strengthened by news of the Muslim uprising against the Syrian secular-nationalist one-party state, the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat by an extremist Muslim faction and, above all, by the Islamic revolution in Iran. There came a point during the early 1980’s when the popular presumption, that Middle Eastern civil conflicts were likely to be religious in nature, was so strong that a church newsletter insert circulated in the mid-western United States sought to explain the Damascus government’s repression of the Muslim uprising in the city of Hama as a Christian-Muslim conflict!

More recently, we have experienced events inside our own borders in Europe and the US, which appear to confirm the phenomenon. During the mid-1980's France had to deal with a series of violent episodes related to the Lebanese civil war, including hostage taking and attacks linked to the imprisonment of alleged Muslim terrorists. Whatever the origins of the Berlin bombings and the Lockerbie disaster may have been, in the media mind they quickly became linked with Muslim terrorism. The public perception of terrorism was further influenced by a general and sometimes justified assumption that certain domestic terrorist groups in Europe were being encouraged, supported and trained by organisations in the Middle East, especially Palestinian groups. As the public perception moved during the 1980’s, it was relatively simple to place such groups under a general Muslim umbrella.

A new dimension also appeared, namely a relationship between immigrant and ethnic minority communities, and external movements or governments which were perceived as sponsors of violence for political ends. The Dutch were among those who first experienced this directly with the train hijacking by a group of Moluccan extremists. Sweden also experienced some of this process in its relations with Kurdish exile groups, especially in connection with suspicions of Kurdish involvement in the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme.

During the last five years attention here has also focussed very markedly on religiously defined violence, again particularly Muslim. The Rushdie affair soon acquired a potentially deadly Iranian dimension to add to its generally Muslim air, a dimension which has been kept constantly in public attention by the provocations of Kalim Siddiqui. In France, the affair of the headscarves in the secondary school at Creil coincided unnervingly with reflections on national identity on the 200th anniversary of the French revolution. It was not too long before the prospects of a FIS election victory in Algeria appeared to threaten also France with increasingly active Muslim fundamentalism. In Spain and Italy, the belated discovery that they have become countries of immigration has also been a rediscovery of Islamic elements in both current population and past history, if only because the discovery has taken place now rather than twenty years ago. Last of all there is Bosnia as a symbol of the break-up not only of Yugoslavia but of the whole of the Communist edifice. The explosion in the New York World Trade Centre was a reminder that the other side of the Atlantic is not immune.

The Bosnian experience may serve to remind us, however, that we are not facing a new phenomenon, even if the expressed categories may be different. Two decades ago there was a wave of Croat violence in various parts of Europe followed soon after by Armenian attacks against Turkish institutions. During the late 1960's and the 1970’s Palestinian terrorism dominated our attention.