



Making Peace in a Violent World

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WHAT IS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

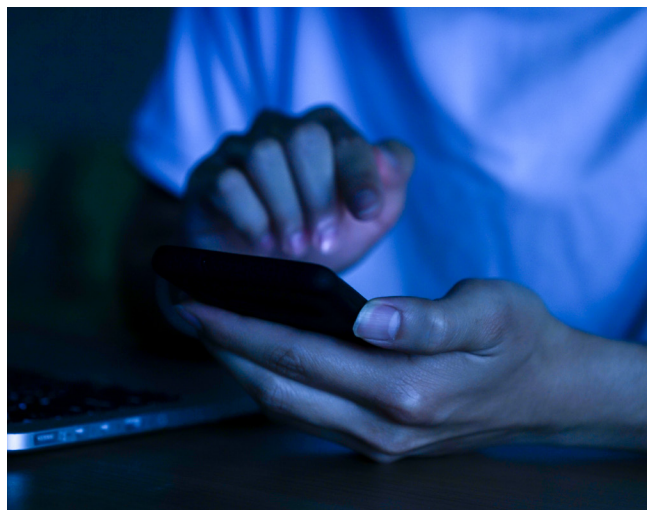
Violent extremism refers to the use of violence against civilians to achieve an ideological goal. The term *violent extremism* also refers to the *beliefs* that encourage, condone, justify, or support acts of terrorism.

- Violent extremism and terrorism attempt to create a “pure” society by killing members of certain groups.
- Violent extremist groups demonize, dehumanize, and blame other groups for complex social and political challenges.
- Violent extremism rejects democratic methods of decision-making (like voting or dialogue), and instead advocates for strict patriarchal (male-led) authoritarian leaders who dictate rules to others.
- Rather than use political processes or nonviolent methods of change, violent extremist groups believe that violence is necessary to create their vision of a “pure” society.

WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Examples of violent extremist movements are found throughout history, in most religious traditions, and across geography.

- In the United States, along with Europe, New Zealand, Canada, and other countries, far-right white supremacist groups foment violence against Jews, Muslims, Black, Indigenous, and people of color. In the United States, white supremacist groups have killed nine times as many civilians as have Muslim extremists.¹
- Governments like Nazi Germany have carried out genocidal violence against Jewish, Roma, LGBTQ+, and disabled people to create their vision of a pure society.
- Al Qaeda and ISIS carry out violence against Christian and Muslim civilians whom they deem unfaithful to achieve their vision of a “pure” Islamic caliphate.
- In Myanmar, extremist Buddhist monks foment violence against Rohingya Muslims.
- In India, Hindu extremists foment violence against Muslims.



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WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS?

There are individual, social, and political reasons why someone may join a violent extremist group.

Psychological vulnerabilities

- To respond to feelings of isolation, humiliation, confusion, or anxiety
- To gain a sense of belonging, adventure, identity, empowerment, and dignity

Ideological beliefs

- To respond to perceived economic, social, and political injustices
- To advance an interpretation of “purity”
- To affirm a belief in authoritarian and patriarchal decision-making
- To express an intolerance of social differences, multiculturalism, and democracy

Behaviors

- To blame, demonize, and dehumanize certain groups in society
- To attempt to purify society through using violence

1. Meghan Roos, “White Supremacists Killed More Americans Than Muslim Extremists in Recent Years, Terrorism Report Shows,” *Newsweek*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/white-supremacists-killed-more-americans-muslim-extremists-recent-years-terrorism-report-shows-1517096>.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

The book of Genesis describes God as creating diversity of plants, animals, and peoples. Diversity is part of God's design for humanity.

Biblical references to "purity" emphasize a purity of intentions toward others, doing good to others, and taking care of diverse parts of God's creation. Jesus often intentionally breaks rules that prevent people from mixing with people different from them. For example, Jesus reaches out to lepers, to the woman at the well, to fishermen and tax collectors. Jesus offers a model for multiculturalism and caring for people no matter what they look like or what they do.

The Bible repeatedly implores humans to not kill others, from the Ten Commandments to Jesus' teachings on loving enemies and welcoming the stranger. Jesus never gives a justification for killing people.

HOW CAN THE CHURCH RESPOND TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

- **Acknowledge feelings of confusion and vulnerability** that may lead people to embrace the simple worldview of violent extremism
- **Address the fear-based and false news media** that encourage dehumanizing migrants or people of color

- **Warn about the addiction that social media companies build into their platform**, and stress that violent extremist recruitment on social media is widespread in the United States and Canada
- **Actively rehumanize migrants, people of color, and women** in sermons, prayers, and faith formation classes
- **Offer a theology of inclusion** and coexistence, and emphasize God's design for a diverse world
- **Offer opportunities for meaningful community engagement** to enable people to understand that "social justice is God's love in action" to help neighbors in need
- **Create spaces for belonging and shared identity** especially during the pandemic and climate crisis and its humanitarian disasters from storms, floods, fires, droughts, and so on
- **Deconstruct purity narratives** and offer a theology of the beauty of diversity in the natural world
- **Offer methods of pursuing justice** through nonviolent collective action; hold up youth movements on climate, racial justice, and inclusion
- **Offer spaces for youth leadership** and empowerment to ask questions and voice ideas
- **Question those who spread hatred and dehumanization of other people**



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