

Mapping the Terrain

of Fundamentalism and Extremism

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Rik Peels and his team have taken a unique approach to exploring fundamentalism and extremism. They are delving into the complex interplay between extremists and society, tracing the historical roots and examining ethical considerations. The team values inclusivity and is committed to gaining a detailed understanding of extremism, moving beyond simplistic views and towards a richer comprehension of this complex phenomenon.



In a large room overlooking the tramway, with trees bearing the last autumn leaves, Rik Peels welcomes us to the second floor of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Muted afternoon light seeps through the large windows, illuminating the office and casting its glow on the stacks of books under the window as well as on the massive bookcase containing hundreds of works. Two distinctive antique oak chairs under the window, amid modern furniture, attract attention—they are heirlooms, owned by Vrije Universiteit, Peels informs us.

The coat of arms of Heemstede is engraved on both chairs, but their grandeur's history is unknown to him. He pushes the stacks of books aside on the round table and rearranges the chairs to make space. We are here for an in-depth interview on fundamentalism. His research group, *Extreme Beliefs – The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism*, investigates fundamentalism, extremism, fanaticism, terrorism, and conspiracy thinking. His colleagues, Naomi Kloosterboer and Nora Kindermann, join him via an online link.

There has been a global rise and resurgence of fundamentalist movements for years. Though the images of 9/11 and various terrorist attacks in Europe are still etched in our collective memory, we are now seeing a growth in extremist groups in Europe and North America. Extremism is also on the rise in the Netherlands. There is likely to be a significantly large group of Dutch-speaking followers of right-wing terrorist ideology and the growth of anti-government extremist groups. This is according to a recent report by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV).

These are people who, from a fundamental distrust, target the government and other institutions. This group emerged as a radical undercurrent of corona protest and is increasingly focusing on other issues, such as the nitrogen issue and peasant protest. Some of them, according to NCTV, believe in conspiracy theories. Under Peels' leadership, the Extreme Beliefs research group is developing a normative-theoretical framework that will provide a deeper understanding of the drivers of fundamentalist behaviour and beliefs.

The research project is an interdisciplinary effort that involves the faculties of religion and theology as well as humanities. It involves scholars from various disciplines, including philosophers, theologians, religious scientists, historians, economists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists. The social debate about the emergence and influence of these groups is becoming more frequent. Peels and his colleagues delve into the philosophical and theological studies of numerous extreme beliefs. What began as a philosophical exploration of fundamentalism has expanded into the realm of extremism, terrorism, and fanaticism.

Peels, a professor at the Free University, underscores the need for a broader view of radicalisation. 'The debate,' he says, 'has for too long been dominated by social psychology and hard empirical sciences. The aim is to unite these discussions and uncover the fundamental philosophical questions, thereby consolidating existing debates.' He is convinced that it is not enough to explain radicalised people purely based on psychopathology. He stresses that understanding them goes beyond a strictly psychopathological explanation.

'It is a philosophical challenge; it confronts us with questions about normal, healthy, rational people who hold extreme beliefs. We look at these phenomena through a philosophical lens.' Again, it's not that philosophers have never thought about this, he adds. Hannah Arendt is a well-known example, who reflected on genocide and totalitarianism in her work.

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Peels strongly emphasises the multifaceted nature of extremism and terrorism, which can cut across the entire political spectrum. His thesis is that extremism—like terrorism—can manifest itself in various political movements. This may range from Christian fundamentalism to Salafist jihadism, to the far right—both religious and secular. Thus, Extreme Beliefs examines a wide range of views to gain a deep understanding of the various manifestations of extremism.

Kindermann complements this by pointing out the diversity in its definitions by referring to the philosopher Quassim Cassam. In his recent book, *Extremism*, he distinguishes three different types: ideological, methodological and psychological extremism. This highlights the different ways the term is used and how it can be applied to identify extremists. He analyses various concepts related to extremism, including ideology, violence, radicalisation, grievances, counter-narratives, fanaticism, radicalism, and fundamentalism.

In recent years, anti-institutional extremism has been increasingly mentioned, especially in connection with events such as the coronavirus crisis and the rise of large groups of angry citizens. We also see that some of these groups are becoming radicalised. How do researchers view this development? 'Expressing dissatisfaction does not immediately make someone an extremist,' Peels replies.

According to Kloosterboer, it may be related to conspiracy thinking: both processes received an enormous boost during the coronavirus crisis and by people who turned to it then. It becomes worrisome, however, when that discontent translates into actions aimed at undermining democracy. 'We want to take fundamentalists and extremists seriously,' Peels says, 'and understand their perspectives.' It is generally difficult for researchers to engage with terrorists, which is due to the nature of the research. One does not know in advance who will become one.

The investigation almost always takes place after the fact, making it difficult to collect enough data. 'There are also ethical limits to this type of research: you have to think about the ethical boundaries. How far can you go in taking extremists seriously? Doesn't that generate empathy or even sympathy? Isn't that giving extremism a platform it doesn't deserve? They then plug the findings into the debate. That's why new researchers conduct empirical or other research, ranging from interviews with ex-ISIS fighters in the Middle East to field research in Mumbai and conspiracy theory studies.'

A phenomenon like fundamentalism is often associated with violence in public discourse and perhaps in our everyday discourse, says Kindermann: 'Many of the groups called fundamentalist have historically not been violent at all.' According to her, it is often assumed that fundamentalism leads to violence, or that fundamentalism is inherently militant.

She explains that the original historical fundamentalism was a fairly conservative Protestant group in the U.S. in the early 20th century. Its behaviour did not align with the notion of conservatism, which typically entails the preservation of tradition or something of value. Rather, it developed its theology in response to what was a modernist theology, which tried to deal with progressive developments. They found this trend dangerous and resisted it. Thus the term was born, through a theological struggle. This struggle, due to circumstances, became particularly aggressive, but never violent. It consisted of a passionate discussion of their ideas.

As part of this struggle, the modernists labelled the fundamentalists' way as regressive and militant. The notion that the fundamentalists are militant was created then and has stuck. In the second half of the twentieth century, Islamic fundamentalism emerged, and with it the link between militants, fundamentalists, and violence became strong.

This historical perspective leads us to the series of violent terrorist attacks that we have seen in recent years. So, how do Peels and his colleagues explain the emergence of fundamentalist or terrorist groups that use violence? Or, rather, what are the circumstances that lead groups to turn to violence? Peels argues that we need to look at three levels for the various factors that lead to extremism and radicalisation that can affect groups, individuals and institutions.

At the macro level—the society—ranges from a democratic rule of law to the lawlessness of a crisis zone. We can think of global issues, such as the phenomenon of a failed state, where a government is unable to ensure the safety of its citizens. In addition, issues such as famine, civil war, and climate change come into play. The latter is considered a threat multiplier because of the frequent problems it brings, such as food shortages and migration.

At the meso level—the middle level—we observe the environment where a person lives, particularly in terms of their religious or political affiliation, the social circle they belong to, and the presence of minority groups within society. This level often showcases the dynamics of identity formation and polarisation between different groups. The concept of perceived injustice, where groups believe they have been wronged, emerges here.

This is often rooted in historical contexts, such as a colonial past. The micro level involves individuals or small groups, such as the Hofstad Group. Here, psychopathology may play a role. However, a plea is made to also take seriously the perspective of the extremist fundamentalist. This includes understanding narratives, stories and experiences that lead to radicalisation.

Nevertheless, Kloosterboer, Kindermann and Peels emphasise that macro and meso factors cannot explain everything. Some people share similar circumstances at the meso level but do not turn to violence. The problem of radicalisation seems complex and multifaceted, with agreement on injustice. Nonetheless, only some radicalise and an even smaller proportion turn to violent acts.

'There is recognition that a comprehensive explanation may not exist,' Kloosterboer says, 'but understanding and gaining insight into the factors that contribute to radicalisation is crucial.' That explanation leads us to the next point: the impact of terrorism is immense and affects large segments of society. That attacks do not occur in a vacuum is scientifically interesting, but the question of understanding extremism may not be easily comprehensible to the general public. How important is this?

'The question of whether we can understand extremism leads to a philosophical discussion of the distinction between explaining and understanding,' Peels says. 'Understanding does not necessarily imply being able to fully adopt another person's perspective, especially if we have not experienced what they have gone through. Rather, it's about recognising patterns, and sometimes it requires a degree of empathy.'



Naomi Kloosterboer

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Clyde Missier, an external PhD candidate from Extreme Beliefs, has conducted empirical research on the influence of right-wing rhetoric and religious fundamentalism on social media. His study focuses on young adults (18-25) from religious minority groups residing in Amsterdam (Netherlands) and Mumbai (India), where social media plays a pervasive role in their lives. His focus is on analysing the impact of right-wing rhetoric and religious fundamentalism on young adults' perceptions of the world. This research goes deeper than the surface of digital media, where Missier thoroughly explores what young people are looking for beyond pure entertainment.

A crucial aspect of the research focuses on determining whether social media use has a significant impact on these young people's world perception. He explains: 'I'm investigating whether young people who are

exposed to religious scriptures such as the Bible, Gita or Quran from a young age are changing their perception of the world through the use of social media.'

He seeks to discover whether online influencers are more influential than traditional religious writings, to identify trends and understand the role of social media in radicalisation. For example, the controversial influencer Andrew Tate came up during field research in India.

During his search for answers, Missier interviewed several young people from diverse backgrounds. He emphasises that fanatical religiosity is not always accompanied by negative connotations: 'Social media influences young people in different ways. My job is to understand the nuances and identify trends without pigeonholing people'. According to him, a person can be cognitively radicalised without

resorting to violence or illegal acts.

'You can also be cognitively radicalised and otherwise function just fine,' he adds. The difference between cognitively nonviolent fundamentalism and other forms of radicalisation lies not only in worldview but also in behaviour. 'You can determine it by certain attitudes a person has toward the other. Can you respect the other person or not? It's about how you interact with others in a pluralistic society,' he says.

He also explores whether early exposure to different religious sources and dialogues, such as encounter education in schools, can play a preventive role against radicalisation. He stresses the importance of interaction and understanding in a pluralistic society: 'Understanding these influences is essential for constructive dialogue in a world full of propaganda and fake news.'

Kindermann stresses the importance of listening to the narratives of those who commit violence. She points to the work of Professor Beatrice de Graaf, who has interviewed convicted terrorists and observed patterns in their stories. De Graaf cites the importance of understanding the sense of injustice that leads to a personal mission to address that injustice, often linked to jihadist narratives that offer actionable perspectives for redemption.

Peels notes that only a small minority of the literature on radicalisation includes interviews with actual perpetrators. He argues for an increase in this type of primary data to gain a broader understanding, especially as new forms and blends of extremism emerge. The limitations of such interviews are also discussed, including ethical obstacles, the fact that terrorists can blow themselves up, and methodological concerns about the reliability of the story obtained.

According to Naomi Kloosterboer, thorough understanding is necessary to avoid misinterpretations. She points to previous misinterpretations of terrorism as completely irrational, when there are always reasons and a worldview behind it. Religion is also mentioned, with the idea that it is necessary to talk to people about what religion means to them before concluding its role.


'Over the past three years we have been researching different aspects of extremism,' she says. 'An important focus was on approaching fundamentalism dialogically, no longer seeing it as an irrational movement, but rather as a group with different perspectives on modernity. Critically considering our understanding of modernity was an integral part of the approach.' An interesting comparison was drawn between fundamentalists and conspiracy thinkers.

Peels emphasised that while there may be overlap between fundamentalists and conspiracy thinkers, it is incorrect to consider all conspiracy thinkers as fundamentalists. He pointed to ongoing research specifically focused on conspiracy thinking and collecting empirical data to gain a deeper understanding. A central question in this is about the definition of conspiracy thinking and whether the concept of 'founded mistrust' might be a more specific and useful term.

The debate over conspiracy thinking is complicated. Some generalise and consider all conspiracy theories to be evil and unfounded, while others advocate a more nuanced approach. Kloosterboer notes that the dominant position seems to be to judge each conspiracy theory individually. In society, the problem of conspiracy thinking revolves around the fact that people are sucked into a worldview in which they distrust science, government, and mainstream sources of information.

They seem to distrust anything where processes are built in to ensure quality and reliability. She points to the worrying trend that people are less concerned about whether there are such processes embedded in alternative sources of information. The crucial question, she says, is whether there are mechanisms in place to hold up reliability and quality in the information people consume.

She emphasises that the problem lies not so much in asking critical questions, but in the fact that some people do not question whether similar processes of quality assurance have been applied to information presented in conspiracy theories. The contemporary complexity of extremism requires an innovative and holistic approach. We cannot separate the history of fundamentalism and its various concepts from current developments and its relationship to



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the social debate on extremism. Kindermann therefore stresses the importance of understanding the concepts and history of terrorism, extremism and fundamentalism. “Those concepts have a long history in public political discourse and influence how research is framed,” she says. There is a danger, she says, in the stereotypes that are unconsciously included in research, which can lead to distorted interpretations of the results.

Another crucial aspect that emerges in her research is the concept of polarisation. Kloosterboer sees this not as an isolated problem, but as a sign of a deeper issue, namely: not listening to people and feeling unfairly treated. She calls for a deeper analysis of the root causes of polarisation and stresses that reducing it is not enough; we must also understand why it occurs.

She adds an ethical perspective to the concept of extremism. She emphasises that it is not only about gaining knowledge but also about acting ethically. It is important to stand up against injustice, but also to treat others as human beings, engage in conversation and understand the values and needs of others.

Peels bring up concrete examples, such as the use of the term ‘wappy’ during the coronavirus crisis and labelling terrorists as ‘human animals.’ He points out the dangers of such language and how it can justify behaviour. From this follows the importance of careful use of language in social debate and policy.

Peel’s fundamental insight is that our understanding of extremism needs to shift from a binary ‘us vs them’ mentality to a more nuanced understanding of how extremist and non-extremist groups interact with each other in society. In other words, these groups are not isolated from each other, but rather, they shape and influence each other. He argues for an understanding that sees the extremists and society as dynamically linked.

“That observation underscores the need to look not only at extremism as an external phenomenon, but also at the interaction between society and the extremists. The results of three years of research highlight the complexity of extremism, the influence of language and stereotypes in studies, the deeper understanding of polarisation, the ethical dimension of research and the need to view extremism as a dynamic process that affects both extremists and society.”

Do we see similar trends in development within fundamentalism and extremism worldwide? “The rise of fundamentalist groups is a global phenomenon with similar patterns,” says Peels, ‘especially in the area of populism. While the phenomenon seems to be out of control in the United States, we are also noticing an increase in diverse groups in the Netherlands.’

It is important to keep a close eye on particular trends in different countries, as there are emerging forms of extremism that are often called ‘salad bar extremism’ or ‘collections.’ These new forms combine elements from various extremist ideologies, making analysis more difficult and complex, Peels says. One notable development is the combination of right-wing extremism and elements of Salafist Jihadism or radical Islam. This mixing of different ideologies makes analysing extremism less straightforward and requires more complex approaches.

An important aspect is the rise of populist leaders who do not conform to democratic norms and condone violence. The phenomenon is not limited to the United States but also extends to countries such as Brazil. This suggests that populism is often accompanied by conspiracy theories and autocratic tendencies.

Social media plays a crucial role in reinforcing these trends, with algorithms often leading to the spread of extremist ideas. The impact of social media on conspiracy theories and extremism is new and creates dynamics that did not exist before.

Finally, Kloosterboer emphasised the importance of interdisciplinarity: “This is essential for a deeper understanding of these complex social phenomena.” Kindermann adds that researchers must involve not only different scientific disciplines but also diverse backgrounds, such as cultural, religious and gender diversity. The realisation that research on extremism is often concentrated on the Global North emphasises the need for more inclusive perspectives.

To complement interdisciplinarity, Peels noddingly adds that it is a practical necessity to bring diverse people on board, with different fields, methods and backgrounds. However, practice is recalcitrant: “It is a time-intensive process to develop real understanding. The project runs until the end of 2024, but it will take a few more years until all the results are published.”

In a study that challenges traditional assumptions about extremism, Scott Gustafson, a PhD candidate with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam’s Extreme Beliefs programme, explores the unexpected paths taken by former ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra members. His work, blending Christian mission efforts with de-radicalisation, peels back the layers on how some former extremists not only dropped their radical views but also converted to Christianity.

His work focuses on de-radicalisation and religious conversion from Islam to Christianity in the Levant region, with a focus on the intersection of Christian mission work and de-radicalisation. His years of experience in the Middle East and built networks were crucial elements in working on this research. The research took place in the Middle East, primarily in the Levant region, with some emphasis on Syria. His background in Middle East studies and extensive experience in Jordan facilitated his exploration of this complex topic.

He conducted interviews with a diverse group, including former ISIS fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra members, and religious workers involved in relief programmes. The surprising revelation from the interviews was that a significant number of former extremists not only de-radicalised but also converted to Christianity. Several key themes emerged. One notable factor was the experience of

precarity, reflecting the chaos in the lives of these individuals.

They faced death, hostility, violence, displacement, and a decline in social status. Another significant aspect was the prevalence of supernatural experiences, with eighty-three percent reporting dreams or visions of someone they identified as Jesus. These encounters played a crucial role in their departure from radicalism and conversion to Christianity.

The cultural and religious context of these experiences plays an important role, according to Gustafson. In Islam, dreams and visions are esteemed, and the research found a surprising frequency of such experiences among former extremists. The involvement of clergy and religious workers in relief programmes contributed to what Gustafson termed ‘mutual transformation,’ challenging the concept of mutual radicalisation.

The research challenges the traditional dichotomy between hard, militaristic responses and softer approaches in counterterrorism. Contrary to the instinctive governmental reflex of punitive measures, Gustafson’s study, rooted in the narratives of former extremists, unveils a surprising truth—that harsh retaliation rarely plays a significant role in reducing extremism or terrorism.

The crux of Gustafson’s findings centres on describing the exit pathways from extremism. It emphasises the potency of what he terms ‘soft methods’: like surprising kindness,

family, belonging, relationships, and social circles. The testimonies of these former extremists highlight that their departure from extremist environments was not triggered by fear of punishment but by the allure of belonging to a new community.

The research presents a paradigm shift in counterterrorism strategy, advocating for investments in social institutions, humanitarian aid, and relief efforts. While acknowledging the genuine security concerns that persist, he posits that a departure from a solely punitive stance could lead to a more effective counterterrorism approach. By acknowledging the validity of the extremists’ testimonies, Gustafson suggests that fostering a sense of belonging and surprising kindness may be more impactful in deterring radicalisation than conventional punitive measures. In essence, the main finding challenges the prevailing notion of treating extremist terrorists merely as enemy combatants. Instead, he advocates for a more nuanced and compassionate approach, urging policymakers to consider methods that address the holistic needs of individuals, creating a sense of belonging for the whole person.

The study prompts a reevaluation of counterterrorism strategies, steering toward a more empathetic understanding of the factors driving extremism and terrorism.