

which produced textbooks in the Dari and Pashto languages.⁶¹ These books were then used to educate Afghan children and adults.⁶² In a 2016 article titled *Both Arsonists and Firefighters*, the *New York Times* elaborated the nature of the USAID-dispensed “education” in Afghanistan during that time:

In fact, the United States spent \$50 million from 1986 to 1992 on what was called a ‘jihad literacy’ project—printing books for Afghan children and adults to encourage violence against non-Muslim ‘infidels’ like Soviet troops. A first-grade language textbook for Pashto speakers ... used ‘Mujahid,’ or fighter of jihad, as the illustration: ‘My brother is a Mujahid. Afghan Muslims are Mujahedeen. I do jihad together with them. Doing jihad against infidels is our duty.’⁶³

Now, these people are known as Jihadists!

Extremist Ideologies Hijacking Religion

The reality of the abduction of religion by ideological extremisms was captured by Eqbal Ahmad, a globally renowned political scientist. In evaluating the motives of modern Islamic zealots, he clarified that they “are concerned with power, not with the soul; with the mobilization of people for political purposes rather than with sharing and alleviating their sufferings and aspirations. Theirs is a very limited and time-bound political agenda.”⁶⁴

Incidentally, Ahmad is pointing to the *raison d’être* of religious extremism in general, not just its Islamic variety. Echoing a similar sentiment, David Shulman of the Hebrew University highlights: “As has been the case throughout Jewish history, humane voices such as Hillel’s are today at war with sanctimonious, atavistic ones such as those that now dominate the public sphere in Israel. But ... ‘the fight isn’t over.’”⁶⁵

Our myriad identities are brought into the middle of all kinds of confrontations and political games. Our religious identity will almost always be one of them, and we should be well aware of that. When we know the agendas in play, we will have the capacity to not

allow our religions to be bartered in the marketplace of money and power.

Many religions are facing their own crises of extremism today. Given the human tendency to stay in denial, however, most followers of these religions also may not see or understand the signs and parameters of such phenomena. Greatly contributing to our obliviousness is a concept known in the field of psychology as “attribution bias” in which, cognitively, we humans tend to attribute different reasons to ourselves than we would to others—for the same action. What Rabbi Heschel said decades ago is still valid: “The religions of the world are ... no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences, and ideas that come to life [for one] ... continue to challenge and to affect every religion. Horizons are wider, dangers are greater. No religion is an island.”⁶⁶

Whether the extremisms are promoted in the name of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism—or an entirely other belief system (democracy, freedom, human rights, free market, technology, values)—we have to be able to see them through the shrouds within which they are packaged. That’s important because these extremisms pose a threat to the common human civilization, heritage, and well-being. And the route to this eventuality goes through serious spiritual as well as intellectual deprivation.

The Evil Promoted by the Hobbesian Mindset

There is no denying that we live in a world that is highly adversarial—perhaps much more so than ever before on most dimensions. Even the system of nation-states⁶⁷ as well as the legal systems worldwide seem to have been built upon that very assumption of the fundamentally adversarial nature of human relationships. By marginalizing the role of culture, the current politico-economic institutional system also weakens the concept of society in our lives. The collective and individual patterns of thought and behavior seem to have evolved in recent history to follow the guidelines of Thomas Hobbes, the influential Enlightenment philosopher.⁶⁸ The assertion of Hobbes’s outlook on human nature is unambiguous: “There Is Always Warre Of Every One Against Every