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## Unmasking Tony Blair's 'Interfaith' Crusade: Using Religious Extremism to Impose a New World Order

By Matthew Butler

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*Aa sectarian violence re-erupts in war-torn Iraq, Tony Blair has again justified waging the catastrophic Iraq War.*

*From the pulpit of his interfaith charity, he claims religious extremism is at the root of 21st century conflict – not western wars.*

*Why does Blair excuse western violence while pushing an “interfaith” agenda where “religious extremists” take all the blame for global strife?*

Tony Blair wants the world's major faiths to play a role in globalisation. But what role? In 2008 he founded his eponymous interfaith foundation to promote “greater knowledge and understanding between people of different faiths,” and advance education in “faith and globalisation”.



A satirical anti-war photomontage artwork created by KennardPhillipps titled “Photo Op”

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation is a charity and ostensibly benevolent. But the former UK Prime Minister’s recurrent war cries to rally western governments to the cause of fighting “religious extremism” – which he hypes as the prime source of conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – reveals an agenda and thinking that is warped and not conducive to peace, and completely ignores western culpability in starting wars and fomenting extremism. Blair is taking the same agenda that ushered in an era of war last decade to another arena – that of faith – where he believes the West should fight both through force and ideology.

Given the tragic consequences of Tony Blair’s rhetoric and campaigns in the past, which he continues to justify, it is important to take a closer look at the implications of his post-politics “interfaith” crusade.

### **From Warmonger to Interfaith Luminary**

Tony Blair is considered by many guilty of war crimes for his role in the invasion of Iraq. After George Bush, he was the most influential western leader calling for the unprovoked “pre-emptive strike” and subsequent invasion of a sovereign country based on the supposed imminent threat posed by non-existent weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) – which he told the world Iraq could deploy in just 45 minutes. The invasion and occupation led to the estimated deaths of somewhere between 100,000 and a million people. No WMDs were found and the war did nothing to make western countries safer; rather it inflamed violence, hostility and terrorism. Al Qaeda never existed in Iraq before that war, and now it does. And with renewed violence breaking out, the Iraqi people continue to suffer in the war’s wake.



It is well-known now that the “intelligence” on WMDs used to justify this war of aggression was at best dubious and exaggerated and at worst a complete sham. It is also believed that Tony Blair knew, or should have known, that war would likely throw the country into chaos (the Chilcot inquiry is due to report on the decisions and policies leading up to the invasion, but it continues to be suppressed and key information is expected to be omitted).

Whatever the case, Blair is not apologetic. This month he again defended the decision to go to war in a widely republished essay posted on his website, and once again called for more use of force in Iraq and the Middle East region to deal with religious extremists. Blair’s narrative ignores how Western Governments have encouraged extremism by waging foreign wars as well as directly supporting Islamist militias, which has gone on at least since the US armed and backed the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1970s, which helped to lay the groundwork for the formation of Al Qaeda. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), responsible for the latest spiralling violence in Iraq, has also been linked to US intelligence – which has been covertly supporting Sunni extremists in Syria to fight the Assad government. Syrian extremists now threaten Iraq. Some believe a deliberate “divide and conquer” strategy is at play here with the US backing both sides in Iraq’s current fighting.



Tony Blair and George Bush after a White House press conference in November 2004

Despite the culpability of Western countries in spurring conflict and fomenting extremists, earlier this year Blair claimed religious extremism is at the root of 21-st century conflict and said a “global strategy” was needed to counter it. He also blamed the bloodshed in Iraq and Afghanistan on extremists, saying the coalition campaigns were “thwarted by religious extremism” in an attempt to exonerate himself.

Religious extremism, though no doubt a source of conflict in the world, is clearly not the cause of major conflicts waged by great powers in recent history. It is strange to see Blair make this argument, while taking no responsibility for his part, and that of Western powers, in starting wars this century. The 2003 Iraq war was waged by western secular countries against Iraq's Baathist secular government (which was itself formerly backed by the US) for political and economic objectives, not religious ones. Blair not only justifies such imperial incursions, but frequently calls for more. Last year he strongly supported intervening in Syria and arming rebels there (who now threaten Iraq) and this month he called for intervention in Iraq to deal with ISIS.

Blair's solution to the scourge of extremism? More use of force and interfaith "education". It is for the latter that he founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. Why does Tony Blair of all people preach about religious extremism being the root of conflict today from the pulpit of an interfaith charity he founded and named after himself?

### **The Tony Blair Faith Foundation: A Charitable Cover for a Global Agenda?**



Bill Clinton with Tony Blair at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation launch. Source: Spencer Platt/Getty Images North America

After resigning from politics the previous year, Tony Blair launched his Faith Foundation in 2008 at the Time Warner Center, accompanied by former US President Bill Clinton. Blair said his foundation would concern itself with the world's six main faiths: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jewish.

He remarked that, "Globalisation is pushing people together. Interdependence is reality. Peaceful co-existence is essential. If faith becomes a countervailing force, pulling people apart, it becomes destructive and dangerous."

While indicating he did not want to "engage in a doctrinal inquiry" or "subsume different faiths in one faith of the lowest common denominator" he launched studies into "faith and globalisation" concerned with examining the place of religion in modern society. He also indicated that tackling religious extremism was a major focus of the organisation across multiple faiths and cultures:

“...we will help organisations whose object is to counter extremism and promote reconciliation in matters of religious faith. Though there is much focus, understandably, on extremism associated with the perversion of the proper faith of Islam, there are elements of extremism in every major faith. It is important where people of good faith combat such extremism, that they are supported.”

In spite of his claims the foundation would not seek to “subsume different faiths in one faith”, not everyone is convinced. A common criticism of globalisation is that it homogenises and erodes cultural identities, including religious identities, under a dominant global culture. Some believe this agenda lies behind Tony Blair’s Faith Foundation and its focus on faith and globalisation.

According to Hugh O’Shaughnessy writing in The Guardian in 2011, Tony Blair faced a pushback from his own religion – the Catholic Church – after reportedly making “demands for wholesale changes in Catholic belief and practice”.

O’Shaughnessy also reported of an “attack” on Tony Blair and his Faith Foundation “spearheaded by Professor Michel Schooyans of the Catholic University of Louvain, a specialist in anthropology and political philosophy” who “accused Blair and his wife of supporting a messianic US plan for world domination”. He quoted some of Schooyans’ scathing critique:

“One of the aims of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation will be that of remaking the major religions, just as his colleague Barack Obama will remake global society. With this purpose, the foundation in question will try to expand the ‘new rights’, using the world religions for this end and adapting these for their new duties. The religions will have to be reduced to the same common denominator, which means stripping them of their identity ...

This project threatens to set us back to an age in which political power was ascribed the mission of promoting a religious confession, or of changing it. In the case of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, this is also a matter of promoting one and only one religious confession, which a universal, global political power would impose on the entire world.”



Tony Blair’s Faith & Globalisation programme runs in 30 universities worldwide. Source: The Office of Tony Blair

Could it be that Tony Blair's endgame is the formation of a one-world umbrella religion expressed through multiple faiths under one global power, as Professor Michel Schooyans suggests? Could that be part of the reason why Tony Blair is trying so hard to portray "religious extremism" as the root of conflict in the world, while pushing globalisation (backed by use of force) as the cure?

Let's take a closer look at Tony Blair's recent rhetoric about religious extremism.

### **Portraying Religious Extremism as a Global Existential Enemy**

This year Tony Blair's calls to tackle extremism became more strident. In January 2014 when he published his essay in The Observer claiming extremism would "define the nature of peace and conflict in the first half of the 21st century," he asserted:

"The battles of this century are less likely to be the product of extreme political ideology – like those of the 20th century – but they could easily be fought around the questions of cultural or religious difference."

He wrote of the need for a "global strategy" to defeat extremism "not only by arms but by ideas" and suggested this war should be waged by introducing tighter controls over religions themselves and over free speech on the internet:

"...security action alone, even military action, will not deal with the root cause. This extremism comes from a source. It is not innate. It is taught. It is taught sometimes in the formal education system; sometimes in the informal religious schools; sometimes in places of worship and it is promoted by a vast network of internet communications.

Technology, so much the harbinger of opportunity, can also be used by those who want to disseminate lessons of hate and division. Today's world is connected as never before. This has seen enormous advances... But it comes with the inevitable ability for those who want to get across a message that is extreme to do so. This has to be countered."

He also wrote of a need to "fight the formal, informal and internet propagation of closed-minded intolerance. In the 21st century, education is a security issue."

So here we see Tony Blair implying that religious differences must somehow be removed through use of arms and ideas to make way for globalisation, and suggests education toward this aim is a security issue. He does not mince his words when he describes what the purpose of his Faith Foundation really is:

"...the purpose is to change the policy of governments: to start to treat this issue of religious extremism as an issue that is about religion as well as politics, to go to the roots of where a false view of religion is being promulgated, and to make it a major item on the agenda of world leaders to combine effectively to combat it. This is a struggle that is only just beginning."

Then in April he gave another speech calling for the West to unite with Russia and China to fight Islamic extremism, which he called the “biggest threat to global security of the early 21st Century”:

It is interesting to note that Tony Blair is quite open about his desire to influence government policy and present extremism as “an issue that is about religion as well as politics” to be combated jointly by world leaders. But who are these world leaders to decide which views of religion are “false” and which are not?

### **Will ‘Extremism’ be used as a Catch-all to Quash Rights and Dissent?**

Perhaps Tony Blair has already made headway in influencing government policy in the UK itself. The government of David Cameron is also increasingly denouncing extremism in its rhetoric.



I recently wrote about the authoritarian web filtering infrastructure introduced by the UK government last year under the pretext of blocking pornography. This occurred on the back of an engineered moral panic about pornography; however, the ISP filtering actually blocks a lot more than porn and the system operates without transparency or oversight.

Recently, the government mentioned its desire to block “extremist” and “unsavoury” content (as opposed to illegal content) on the internet. This is dangerous territory. Content that is illegal can be blocked through transparent legal processes. But who will be the faceless judge that decrees what constitutes an “extreme” view and blocks communications before any law is broken or charges are laid?

Back in 2011 after the UK riots, David Cameron announced he was working with intelligence agencies, police and industry to “stop people from communicating” using social media when they were plotting disorder, in a parliamentary speech that won praise from Chinese state media. Now that a murky system of censorship infrastructure is in place in the UK, the Government has a new lever it can pull behind closed doors to filter out any views it deems “extreme”.

I also explained how the UK government was using its supposed difficulties deporting the Islamic extremist Abu Qatada as a pretext for scrapping the Human Rights Act – when in fact that same extremist was an MI5 asset clothed and fed by British intelligence services. Was the UK government deliberately creating a problem with an extremist as a pretext to curb civil rights? Is this just part of a pattern playing out worldwide on a larger scale, where extremists are

used as scapegoats by Western governments to erode rights at home, or bring in draconian laws or give police and intelligence even more powers?

In my view, we should be wary of this rhetoric about extremism, because it may simply be a pretext for a clampdown and assault on everyone's rights, to justify foreign wars, and to impose a global order. But I also think it will have a significant impact on religious freedom as globalisation advances.

### **The Endgame for Faith in the New World Order**

Tony Blair's repeated references to religious extremism do seem to suggest he has an agenda to push. But what does he hope to achieve in the realm of religion?

I believe Tony Blair's efforts fall in line with a wider agenda pushed by global elites. As I see it, this agenda seeks to achieve two main things. Firstly, it creates a false dichotomy where practitioners of the world's religions are carved up into acceptable and unacceptable categories; either "extreme" or "moderate," based on their utility and acquiescence to economic and political globalisation led by the West. Secondly, it deflects blame from Western imperial actions which stoke the flames of extremism (and sometimes directly support it), in an attempt to validate the ongoing fight against extremism which is portrayed as an existential threat to civilisation – while globalisation is peddled as the cure.

In this way, the fight against extremism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the West covertly supporting religious extremism on one hand, while fighting it on the other (in turn fomenting further extremism in response and continuing the cycle) which then gives credence to the narrative that extremism must be fought through force and ideology, and that globalisation pushed by the West is a civilising, saving force.

The consequences of this strategy abroad could be perpetual catastrophic foreign wars. But a more silent consequence may be in the steady erosion of cultural identity and a narrowing of spiritual choices in the West and abroad, through the hollowing-out of major religions to make them more "integrated" to serve under the aegis of Western-led globalisation. These co-opted faiths would then help to bring the populations they service into line as the economic and political phalanx of globalisation advances. Meanwhile, beliefs and practices that do not integrate well with this new world order will be increasingly seen as outdated obstacles to progress, or tarred as "extremist" – a manoeuvre helped by foreign policies fuelling violent extremism, with the violent religious fanatics fought by the west reflecting poorly on spirituality in general, and its place in the world today. In a global climate where faith-based groups and cultures are increasingly seen as "backward," world faiths will likely feel greater pressure to "integrate" into a sterile global system to survive and avoid being left behind.

The long-term aim may ultimately be to establish a global economic and cultural order advanced by the world's elite as the superior moral authority worldwide, rendering spiritual reverence either subservient to it or irrelevant.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There is undoubtedly some truth in Tony Blair's claim that extremism is a cause of 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict. But his selective application of the "extremist" label completely leaves out and excuses extreme and violent actions by western powers. Extremism can be defined as imposing one's belief, ideology, or worldview forcefully to the detriment of others. Invading and occupying a country on the basis of a false claim and causing countless deaths – and continuing to justify such intervention and calling for more in the name of "democracy" or whatever cause – surely meets the definition of an "extremist" position. If Tony Blair really wants to understand and counter extremism in the world, he would do well to start with the man in the mirror.

Religious extremism is a problem in the world, but shifting all blame onto it for global conflict while ignoring and advancing western extremism serves a global agenda that has grave consequences, both for world peace, and for religious freedom.