



Introduction

The threat posed by religious extremists is global, immediate, violent and deeply rooted in issues of identity, theology and faith. Countless governments, think tanks and NGOs spend millions of dollars every year, debating and redeveloping strategies to deal with religious extremism but the Conference of European Rabbis believes that it is religious communities themselves who should carry the burden of responsibility to offer tangible solutions to this intractable global problem. Nobody truly understands the strengths, weaknesses and subtleties of a faith community as well as deeply committed adherents to that faith. They are therefore uniquely placed to create meaningful change and must recognise their responsibilities in this area.

Platitudes and strongly worded statements distancing mainstream faith communities from acts of terrorism are entirely inadequate. This problem calls for tangible and measurable steps with honest evaluation of progress.

Transparency, accountability and theological integrity are essential in rebuilding trust across faith communities.

This manifesto proposes a deeply challenging set of principles which has been composed by and in consultation with senior religious leaders across Europe including Christian and Muslim figureheads.

It is our hope and prayer that leaders of faith communities across the continent will endorse this manifesto; that they will commit on a voluntary basis to observe the principles contained within it and they will in turn, promote its ideals and objectives.

We welcome all constructive feedback from those involved in the fight against religious extremism and hope that this document provides a platform for further discussion and more meaningful engagement with the problem by religious figureheads.



The Training of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders are at the heart of this issue. Since by definition, the cultivation of a religious, extremist ideology will have religious leaders at its heart, it follows that they have a unique responsibility to preach an ideology of peace and tolerance.

Faith communities have a responsibility to have formalised, recognised, training structures in place which take account of the threat of extremism. In some cases, such training is already in place but it is undermined by the fact that scholars from outside Europe, who might promote extremism can move to western liberal democracies to preach an ideology of hatred.

The Conference of European Rabbis would like to see all faith leaders receive their training and their salary from within Europe. It may not be practical to refuse residency to scholars who have trained abroad but it is certainly possible to insist that they undertake further training in Europe which specifically deals with the dangers of extremism.

The argument that extremism represents the will of G-D must be challenged head on. Religious leaders should compile a body of religious literature and commentary with contributions from the most prominent religious scholars in their field which particularly focuses on the questions raised by extremism.

Commitments

- Establish formalised, recognised, training for religious leaders
- Ensure that religious leaders are trained in Europe
- Ensure that religious leaders are paid in Europe
- Create a body of religious discourse on the issue of extremism



Transparency in Funding

It is an unavoidable fact that the most direct way of influencing the activity and policies of an organisation is by exerting some kind of control over its funding.

We must prevent foreign extremist bodies from unduly influencing communities in Europe. We can do this by insisting that all funds donated to an organisation which are greater than 5,000 Euros, are made public. Any donation from outside Europe should be subject to much closer scrutiny – ideally an independent check. These measures will reduce the covert influence of groups like al muhajiroun and the Muslim Brotherhood. Groups who get a large proportion of their funding from countries where there is a great deal of support for extremist groups will be more quickly identified as high risk. Similarly, large donors will be more accountable for organisations they support, if they are found to be promoting an extremist agenda.

Donations to religious organisations from abroad could be made through grant making bodies based in Europe in order to circumvent these measures but these bodies would themselves be subject to careful scrutiny.

The more transparency there is in the way that non-profit, faith based organisations, receive their funding, the easier it will be to identify and root out extremist organisations.

Commitments

- All donations over 5000 Euros must be declared
- All donations made from outside Europe should be subject to independent review



Every Religious Congregation should have a designated Extremism Prevention Officer

It has become common practice in a number of European States for organisations of different kinds to have a child protection officer. This person is usually an existing member of staff who receives additional training in the most appropriate ways to react when concerns are raised about the welfare of children connected to the organisation. The Conference of European Rabbis believes that an Extremism Prevention Officer should be appointed by each religious organisation.

Following the example of child protection procedure, this individual would be expected to create a protocol for identifying and reporting concerns about extremism. He or she would also then be expected to produce regular confidential reports of issues of concern to the relevant authorities.

This provides law enforcement with a direct link into faith communities. It will also help to ensure that there is an appropriate emphasis on the communities themselves to take responsibility for identifying and reporting incidents of concern.

Commitments

- Appoint an Extremism Prevention Officer
- Compile and submit regular reports to relevant authorities about concerns related to extremism and how they were dealt with



Register of all Religious Congregations

The measures recommended in this manifesto are not straightforward and will require a great deal of commitment both in terms of time and money. Yet those who do sign up to them, will set themselves apart as recognised beacons of best practice.

Those who are prepared to commit themselves to fighting the scourge of extremism by taking on all of these measures should be added to a national register of religious congregations. This register will, in effect, provide a list of all those congregations who have set the highest possible standards in tackling extremism and will be recognised as such by parliamentarians, the media and the public.

A place on the register will act as a kite mark for religious groups and would add significantly to their credibility.

Commitments

- Create a national register of all religious congregations



Conclusion and Next Steps

The true power of these proposals lies in the fact that they are being proposed and championed by faith groups themselves, rather than being imposed by external agencies. Nevertheless we call upon faith communities to support and facilitate efforts made by national governments to challenge extremism. For example, recent proposals have suggested that governments should have the power to remove citizenship from those it believes to have been radicalised abroad, denying them entry back into the EU. We would be supportive of such a measure and we also call upon European Governments to increase their cooperation on issues of extremism and terrorism so that our economic union can be underpinned by unity in security.

The Conference of European Rabbis has identified a number of commitments that we believe could radically change the way that organised religious institutions deal with extremism. The net result of these measures would be to create an atmosphere of confidence that faith communities are taking responsibility for dealing with extremism which will in turn inspire more and more communities to adopt them.

They are:

- Establish formalised, recognised, training for religious leaders
- Ensure that religious leaders are trained in Europe
- Ensure that religious leaders are paid in Europe
- Create a body of religious discourse on the issue of extremism
- All donations over 5000 Euros must be declared
- All donations made from outside Europe should be subject to independent review
- Appoint an Extremism Prevention Officer
- Compile and submit regular reports to relevant authorities about concerns related to extremism and how they were dealt with
- Create a national register of all religious congregations



Next Steps

The Conference of European Rabbis will now seek to build support for these measures among relevant stakeholders and would like to invite all those who are interested in supporting them to work with us to develop and refine the proposals.

Please contact us on cer@theproffice.com