

**Cherian George.** *Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016. Xviii, 308 pp. (\$29.95 cloth).

In this insightful volume, Cherian George makes a very simple and compelling argument: specifically, that the mobilization of religious anger is often a useful tool in the arsenal of political elites in democracies with large numbers of religious adherents. That is, strategic political leaders can often make use of the anger of religious citizens toward religiously defined minorities to achieve narrow political goals.

In order to provide support for this hypothesis, George presents qualitative case studies of three established democratic countries: India, Indonesia, and the United States. The case selection is adroit and sophisticated. Each of these countries is a well-established and consolidated democracy, without recent interruptions in democratic competition. Moreover, each nation under examination places a high positive value on religious liberty and toleration, and on free expression more generally.

George describes a cycle of “indignation-incitement” to characterize this phenomenon. That is, if a religious or secular minority is engaged in practices which offend the sensibilities of a religious majority, political candidates or leaders can publicize and decry the offending practices or communications in order to gain political support for electoral or policy goals. George notes that such leaders do not operate in social or political vacuums, but often rely on a number of informal organizations (which may in turn be loosely or tightly coordinated). George describes in some detail the organizations that comprise the network of Sangh Parivar in India (which includes RSS), which consists of a number of organizations that share a commitment to the idea that an authentically “Indian” India must adhere to Hindu values (“Hindutva”). Less organizationally and ideologically coherent are loose collections of Islamist organizations in Indonesia, as well as the Christian Right and the Tea Party movement in the United States. In each case, religiously-defined minority groups, which seem to George to be relatively non-threatening, have engaged in activities which appear to violate consensual norms of the religious majority. Thus, Indian Hindus are made indignant by reports of “cow killing” and “love jihads,” while US officials (primarily at the state level) pass measures prohibiting the imposition of Shari’a law in their states, or seek to restrict the construction of mosques. While the targets of Indian and American “hate spin” are primarily practitioners of Islam, the objects of such propaganda in Muslim-majority Indonesia are more diverse. The targets of Indonesian incitement include Christian missionaries, Buddhists (who are often described as non-Indonesian Chinese) and “heretical” Muslim sects such as Shi’ites or Ahmadiyah (a Muslim movement which denies that Muhammed was the final Prophet). In each case, to use the language of the schoolyard, “They (persons who violate the religious sensibilities of the majority) started it.”

The existence of organizations and network that seek to connect normative (if not legal) citizenship with membership in the dominant religious community provide an important resource for political leaders. Thus, Prime Minister Modi of India was able to achieve an absolute legislative majority in 2014, obviating the need to engage in standard Indian coalition politics. Modi was able to achieve his majority by mobilizing anti-Muslim sentiment, and the

existence of such a BJP majority provides incentives to continue such tactics. Similarly, President Suharto of Indonesia was able to harness religious indignation to achieve his office. Although this book was published before the 2016 American Presidential election, the Trump campaign provides an excellent example of the hate spin phenomenon in the United States. Of course, the mobilization of Islamophobia in the US was well under way before the emergence of Donald Trump as a leader of the GOP, and can be traced to the Iranian hostage crisis that bedeviled the Carter administration, as well as the attacks on the U.S. associated with 9/11.

George describes the phenomenon of hate spin as multilayered. That is, strategic political leaders such as Modi, Suharto, or Trump cannot create religious indignation out of whole cloth, but can take advantage of pre-existing sentiments and organizations for political gain. Moreover, political office-holders can publicly reject the “extremism” of religiously indignant civil society actors, while making similar cases in more moderate language. Thus, although President George W. Bush was careful to distinguish Al-Qaeda from what he described as the “peaceful” values of the majority of Muslims, he was also able to describe U.S. opposition to Al-Qaeda and similar movements as a “Crusade.”

Despite the pervasiveness of the hate speech phenomenon in these three democracies and elsewhere (including the nations of the EU) George expresses confidence in the resilience of liberal democratic values to combat the worst effects of the indignation-incitement cycle. He does suggest that certain narrow and carefully crafted anti-incitement laws would be useful ways of heading off the religious indignation on which hate spin depends. George suggests that the definition of incitement on which U.S. First Amendment law is based (which requires “imminent” threats of lawbreaking or violence) are too narrow, and that very limited restrictions on the content of expression critical of particular religions may make reduce the demand for networks that depend on religious indignation. George further calls for stronger laws that prohibit religious discrimination, and for an “assertive pluralism” in which citizens of democratic regimes would consistently reinforce the values of pluralism, equality, and freedom of expression.

All of this, of course, depends on certain theological assumptions, which George does not analyze in detail. George does assert that all religious traditions are “multivocal,” and extreme intolerance and indignation are not intrinsic to any religious tradition. I would add that most religions (especially the monotheistic traditions of Islam and Christianity) are curative, in the sense of providing solutions to pervasive problems of the human condition. Both the Islamic concept of “Greater Jihad” (the struggle of believers to overcome their own worst impulses) or the Christian notion of “Original Sin,” would seem to demand a certain humility on the part of practitioners of these traditions. The moral and theological confidence on which the “indignation-incitement” cycle depends may well be considered heretical.

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