

Losing my religion to Islamic radicals and Western progressives. By Aly Salem, The Wall Street Journal, 29 October 2014.

LAST week a Canadian Muslim gunman went on a rampage in Ottawa, killing a soldier and storming into the parliament building before he was shot dead. Authorities have since said he had applied for a passport to travel to Syria. Three Muslim schoolgirls from Colorado were intercepted in Germany apparently on their way to Syria, the base for attacks there and in Iraq by the terror group Islamic State. An August 20 article in *Newsweek* estimated that perhaps twice as many British Muslims are fighting for Islamic State as are serving in the British Army.

What could possibly inspire young Muslims in the West to abandon their suburban middle-class existence and join a holy war? How could teenagers in Denver or anywhere be lured by a jihadist ideology — or are grisly videos of Islamic State beheadings and crucifixions not enough of a deterrent?

What is so compelling about radical Islamism may lie within its founding texts. It is time we acknowledged the powerful influence these texts have had even on ordinary Muslims. The political ideology based on them has already dragged the Middle East back towards the Stone Age.

As a teenager growing up in Egypt in the 1980s, I liked to stroll through Cairo's outdoor book market, fishing out little gems like an Arabic translation of *War and Peace*. One day I stumbled upon a book that shook everything I believed in.

The book was *In the Shadows of the Koran*, Sayyed Qutb's magnum opus. The Egyptian writer, who died in 1966, remains arguably the most influential thinker in contemporary Muslim societies. He was the principal theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood and the intellectual impetus behind the Islamist parties it spawned. Qutb's ardent disciples included Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri of al-Qa'ida. It is not an exaggeration to say that Qutb is to Islamism what Karl Marx is to communism.

Qutb's brilliance as a theorist was in how he applied Western-style literary criticism to the Koran to interpret God's intentions. He concluded that the reason for the Muslim world's decline were external cultural and political influences that diluted Islam: the culprits included everything from Greek empiricism and liberal democracy to socialism, Persian poetry and Hegelian philosophy. The only path to an Islamic renaissance was to cleanse Muslim societies of these contaminants and restore Islam to its seventh-century purity.

Today, Qutb's outlook — Islamism — is the dominant political ideology in most Muslim-majority countries, often taking root in vacuums where secular politics have never had space to develop. Polls by the Pew Research Centre, such as last year's *The World's Muslims*, indicate that in many Muslim countries, the population is overwhelmingly in favour of veiling for women, the death penalty for leaving Islam and stoning as punishment for adultery; rabid anti-Semitism is rampant. The few exceptions to these statistics tend to be countries with a long history of militant secularism (like Turkey), or former communist states (Tajikistan, Bosnia, Albania, etc.) where religion was effectively wiped out of the public sphere. But Islamism is now growing even in those places.

The trend of history is being reversed. In Egypt, for instance, veiling was unheard of 50 years ago and was virtually extinct until the Islamists resurrected the practice in the 70s. Today an

estimated 90 per cent of Egyptian women are veiled. In many other countries the veil — originally a tribal norm, not a religious one — is now ubiquitous, as are views on apostasy in countries that were far more progressive 50 years ago.

Many of my fellow Muslims are trying to reform Islam from within. Yet our voices are smothered in the West by Islamist apologists and their well-meaning but unwitting allies on the Left. For instance, if you try to draw attention to the stark correlation between the rise of Islamic religiosity and regressive attitudes towards women, you're labelled an Islamophobe.

In America, other contemporary ideologies are routinely and openly debated in classrooms, newspapers, on talk shows and in living rooms. But Americans make an exception for Islamism. Criticism of the religion — even in abstraction — is conflated with bigotry towards Muslims. There is no public discourse, much less an ideological response, to Islamism, in academia or on Capitol Hill. This trend is creating an intellectual vacuum, where poisonous ideas are allowed to propagate unchecked.

My own experience as a Muslim in New York bears this out. Socially progressive, self-proclaimed liberals, who would denounce even the slightest injustice committed against women or minorities in America, are appalled when I express a similar criticism about my own community.

Compare the collective response after each harrowing high-school shooting in America. Intellectuals and public figures look for the root cause of the violence and ask: Why? Yet when I ask why after every terrorist attack, the disapproval I get from my non-Muslim peers is visceral: The majority of Muslims are not violent, they insist, the jihadists are a minority who don't represent Islam, and I am fearmongering by even wondering aloud.

This is delusional thinking. Even as the world witnesses the barbarity of beheadings, habitual stoning and severe subjugation of women and minorities in the Muslim world, politicians and academics lecture that Islam is a "religion of peace". Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia routinely beheads women for sorcery and witchcraft.

In the US, we Muslims are handled like exotic flowers that will crumble if our faith is criticised — even if we do it ourselves. Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats alike would apparently prefer to drop bombs in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond, because killing Muslims is somehow less offensive than criticising their religion? Unfortunately, you can't kill an idea with a bomb, and so Islamism will continue to propagate.

Muslims must tolerate civilised public debate of the texts and scripture that inform Islamism. To demand any less of us is to engage in the soft bigotry of low expectations.

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