Islam's predicament with modernity. By Alan Johnson, The Telegraph (UK). 19 December 2014.

"There is nothing in Islam that justifies acts of terror." (**Prime Minister David Cameron reacting** to the beheading of British soldier Lee Rigby by two Islamists who shouted "Allahu Akbar" and quoted 22 verses from the Koran.)

"They don't represent Islam or Muslims in Britain or anywhere else in the world." (**David Cameron's reaction** to the massacre by Islamists in Nairobis's Westgate shopping centre of anyone who failed to name the mother of the founder of Islam or recite verses from the Koran.)

"This hateful ideology has nothing to do with Islam... Let the message go out that we know Islam is a religion of peace." (**Theresa May's speech** to Conservative Party Conference, 2014.)

Islamic State has "nothing to do with the great religion of Islam, a religion of peace." (David Cameron, denying any connection between the creation of an Islamic caliphate and Islam.)

"[The massacre in Pakistan] is nothing to do with one of the world's great religions - Islam, which is a religion of peace." (**Prime Minister David Cameron speaking** after a group of Taliban gunmen murdered 141, including 132 children at a school in northern Pakistan.)

Please. Enough.

The mantra that Islamism "has nothing to do with Islam" is well-intentioned. It aims to delegitimise the terrorists and strengthen the vast majority of Muslims who oppose terror. It is no doubt what the "comms" experts are telling the Prime Minister to say. But they are wrong. The unthinking, kneejerk, pro-forma and near-Orwellian denial of the deep and manifold connections between Islam and Islamism has to stop.

Forget Alistair Campbell. We have to start "doing religion" because, as I learnt in 2008-2010 when interviewing 25 young British Muslims who had taken a journey in and out of extremism, we have to start "doing" Islam if we are to defeat Islamism.

We are petrified of speaking obvious truths. When a lord recently dared to invite Muslim leaders to address the violence in the Koran, he was **condemned**.

This groupthink has to stop.

Listen instead to Perry Anderson, writing in the flagship journal of the Western left, New Left Review: "Since Muhammad clearly enjoins jihad against infidels in Holy Places, latterday Salafism – notwithstanding every effort of Western, or proWestern, commentators to euphemise the Prophet's words – is on sound scriptural grounds, embarrassing though this undoubtedly is to the moderate majority of Muslims."

Here is what we can't ignore any longer: religious reform is essential if Islam is to overcome what **the great Muslim scholar Bassam Tibi calls** its "predicament with modernity".

Until we admit that Islam has such a predicament, admit that the Islamists exploit that predicament to radicalise, and admit that when they do they can point to canonical sources (even if it is also true that moderates can point to other sources, and more of them) then we are not going to win.

My interviews with former extremists were collected over many hours sitting in homes, mosques and community centres all over the country. I learnt that "radicalisation" often took the form of a terrible detour in what had begun as a journey of religious seeking. That journey, at once pious and political, vulnerable and angry, was diverted by a skilled Islamist recruiter into what **the Cambridge scholar TJ Winter (Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad) calls** the "hermeneutic of suspicion rooted in zealot attitudes to the Other". I called it, more simply, the Islamist detour.

Though each story was unique, it became clear to me that "deradicalisation" was the difficult process of casting off an acquired Political Islamist conception of Islam, a politicised piety of breast-beating and resentments, and embracing in its place some version of the Islamic concept and practice of "sakinah".

Sakinah means tranquillity, or peaceable (co)habitation, and is drawn from the Quran: "He who sent down tranquillity (sakinah) into the hearts of the believers, so that their faith may grow stronger" (48:4). The term is associated with stillness, contentment, and mercy, and with the notion that Muslims should be a just and moderate "middle community". In Sufism the word carries the sense of internal illumination, or "seeing the light".

Winter argues for the significance of the concept and practice of Sakinah in these terms:

"Once the sakinah (tranquillity) has been found again, once religion becomes a matter of love of God rather than hatred of our political and social situation, we can begin to extract our communities from the hole which we have dug for ourselves'."

Listening to the former radicals, playing pool with them all night in youth clubs, walking up and down snowy mountains with them discussing Qutb, and giving talks myself in mosques, I realised that Sakinah mattered so much to deradicalisation because of what "deradicalisation" actually is.

First, deradicalisation was often immanent to the radical's experience and identity as a British Muslim. The individual became connected (or sometimes reconnected) with a rich Muslim tradition of spirituality, social justice, and moderation. The notion of Muslims as a "middle community" was critically important here – it provided a license for moderation. (A concept that also has much to teach a UK society that is broken in some important ways, by the way.)

Second, deradicalisation was almost always a positive achievement, an active working on the self; a strenuous and critical review of one's past mistakes, a determined creation of a redemptive script for one's future, a good start made on living out that script.

Third, deradicalisation was only very rarely a single-authored work. Mostly it happened within what Winter calls a "matrix" of institutions, ideas and relationships which helped to root the individual, and Islam itself, "in the British soil". De-radicalisation was the stunning realisation that, **as Winter puts it**, "Muslims are not committed to jumping ship". It was a rejection of

grandiose utopian short-cuts in favour of working things out with oneself, where one is, and with whom one shares a home.

The notion of "sakinah" offered a powerful symbolic resource to counter radicalisation, because it was resonant with Muslim experience and identity, because it was a powerful tool to remake the self, and because it eased the adherent into more peaceable relationships with their God and their country.

"Sakinah" - and a cluster of other canonical Islamic virtues - invoked home, duty, decency, tranquillity, and respect. It resonated with both traditional Islamic and classically "British" ways of speaking and thinking.

Most importantly, Sakinah framed extremism as a form of impiety and that was a very powerful weapon that young Muslims could use to resist those who tried to turn them into fanatics, or to find their way back from the radical Islamist fantasy into which they had been diverted.

With its Quranic roots, its valorisation of tranquillity, and its links to notions of "cooperating towards goodness", Sakinah implied a justice-oriented activism and a form of prophetic witness. As such it offered more than that wholly privatised piety of the kind that Christianity has cultivated but which Islam struggles to adopt. And that too was attractive to people who may have been seeking to journey away from extremism but wanted to stay in the public square.

As one ex-extremist said to me, the key to his own deradicalisation had been learning to separate the faith he grew up with from the Islamist political ideology he had absorbed as part of a fateful encounter with an Islamist recruiter:

"It's that recognition, from your own religious persuasion, and from classical theological persuasion, [that] most of this [Political Islamism] is complete nonsense, so you just don't have to buy this. I can just be myself and have that sense [of being] completely at home in my faith. I can be as Muslim as I was before and I can hold that faith strongly, without having this kind of, you know, really antagonistic political ideology that just looks at everything else as wrong."

The bad news is that we are talking of nothing less than a global religious reform if Islam is to overcome its "predicament with modernity".

The good news is that we are well positioned in the UK to contribute to that work. A major report, Understanding Society, published by the Institute for Social and Economic Research in 2012 concluded that British Muslims feel more strongly about their British identities than their non-Muslim counterparts. Indeed, "those of Pakistani origin scored highest in the research and Bengalis and Indians shared the second place in their sense of belonging to Britain." (So much for the feat that Europe is turning into "Eurabia".)

From the Quilliam Foundation to British Muslims for Secular Democracy, from Inspire to the Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA), from Sisters Against Violent Extremism (Save UK) to the hundreds of thousands of British Muslims who are engaged in a quiet revolution of integration and contribution, there are forces at work to "extract our communities from the hole which we have dug for ourselves".

It's time to do religion. It's time to talk about religious reform.

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