

Battlefield of ideas is where fanatics will fall

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 4 March 2015

IT'S tempting to agree with the Prime Minister and ban the Islamic extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. It is divisive. It is odious. It preaches racial and religious hatred. It is committed to a caliphate and to overthrowing democracy.

Our most cherished value, freedom of speech

But in a liberal democracy, this is where the rubber hits the road for our most cherished value of freedom of speech. The reason we shouldn't ban this foul group is simple. We are better than them. Our values are superior to theirs. And it's time we said so more often. By doing so, and for the sake of human rights, we may encourage Islam to adapt to modernity in the same way other religions have.

When Hizb ut-Tahrir exploits our liberties to espouse its freedom-loathing notions, let's exploit them in the best way a liberal democracy can — using our own freedoms, by confronting them and their ideas, by critiquing them, by exposing their agenda as medieval and immoral.

That first requires taking Hizb ut-Tahrir at its word. Fighting for a caliphate and the annihilation of democracy sounds so silly it hardly warrants serious debate.

No point fobbing them off

But there's no point fobbing them off as a bunch of wackos unworthy of examination. Islamic State has the same aims, only it has worked out how to better catch our attention. Beheadings, sexual slavery and mass killings are harder to ignore. But both groups have identical aims. And their aims are as territorial as they are ideological.

Operating brazenly within our midst, Hizb ut-Tahrir should be seen as a proxy for Islamic State. The two groups have different means but each works in tandem. By consciously exploiting our freedoms to preach aims inimical to democracy, Hizb ut-Tahrir is a potential effective feeder group in Australia and, in every country in which they operate, for Islamic State.

They dance around our laws

To be sure, we have laws making it a crime to incite violence or to promote, advocate or encourage terrorism. But the young men from Hizb ut-Tahrir are a slippery bunch. They dance around our laws. So let's expose, debate, confront every one of their utterances instead of ignoring them.

Last July, for example, the spiritual head of this group said this at a meeting in Sydney's west: "The entire world suffers from the children of Israel today and complains about them ... Who will set the world free from the children of Israel so that the world will be able to say that it has rid itself of that hidden evil? This mission will be accomplished by none but you, O Muslims ... Tomorrow you Jews will see what will become of you — an eye for an eye, blood for blood, destruction for destruction."

Understand the real nature of this internal enemy

Call me tough on crime but this bloke seems to have crossed the legal line, and even if he hasn't, it's time to understand the real nature of this internal enemy.

British commentator and best-selling author of *Londonistan*, Melanie Phillips, delivered that warning last week. Speaking with Tom Switzer, host of Radio National's *Between the Lines* program, Phillips said unless we understood the wellspring of this religious fanaticism, we could not defend ourselves.

Phillips lamented how Western leaders spoke as one, saying Islam was not the problem. She said that, while millions of Muslims didn't subscribe to violence or extremism, they were the most numerous victims of this particular interpretation of their religion, and it was lazy thinking to pretend the violence was not a legitimate interpretation of their religion.

There is a problem in the religion

Unlike so many Western leaders who flinch at difficult debates, Phillips does not: "There is a problem in the religion ... it has not been reformed to enable it to coexist with Western notions of human rights."

That problem is compounded by the fact Islam has no tradition of introspection or self-criticism, she said. Contrasting her own religion, Judaism, which is introspective and self-critical, subjecting itself and God to critical interrogation, Phillips said: "On the contrary ... anyone who comes along and says there is a problem with Islam, that has to be vigorously denied."

Christianity reformed itself

Phillips said in medieval times, Christianity perpetrated similar violence — beheadings, disembowelling, burning people alive — in the name of religion. But Christianity reformed itself.

"It came to an accommodation in the Reformation with secular authority. It divided church and state. Islam has not had that kind of reformation," she told Switzer.

Encouraging an Islamic religious reformation first requires confronting the legitimate interpretations of Islam by groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Islamic State. In *The Atlantic*, Graeme Wood's recent cover story — "[What ISIS Really Wants](#)" — ought to be read, re-read and read over again if we are to have any hope of understanding and combating this abhorrent terrorism.

Wood writes that through the best of intentions "we have denied the Islamic State's medieval religious nature".

Writing later in response to readers, Wood outlined the breadth of his chilling investigation: "I read every ISIS statement I could find, including fatwas and tweets and road signs, and I front-loaded my mornings with execution videos in hopes that by bedtime I'd have forgotten enough of the imagery to sleep without nightmares.

“I picked through every spoken or written word in search of signals of what ISIS cares about and how its members justify their violence. I also asked a small group of its most doctrinaire overseas supporters for guidance, and they obliged.”

The Islamic State is Islamic

It led Wood to conclude: “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.”

Rather than Islamic State being a “thrill-kill group” that has hijacked Islam for its own cynical, pathological and secular ends, Wood’s investigation found the opposite: “ISIS had hijacked secular sources of power and grievance, and was using them for religious ends — ends that are, at least among some supporters, sincere and carefully thought through.”

Just as we have ignored Hizb ut-Tahrir as a genuine follower of Islam, we have failed to take at their word Islamic State and the Islamic terrorists who kill innocent people from Toulouse to Sydney.

As Wood writes, there is “a Western bias that if religious ideology doesn’t matter much in Washington or Berlin, surely it must be equally irrelevant in Raqqa or Mosul. (But) when a masked executioner says Allahu akbar while beheading an apostate, sometimes he’s doing so for religious reasons”.

Unless we identify the source of this evil...

Unless we identify the source of this evil, whether it’s perpetrated in Syria or Iraq, or in the US, France, Canada, Australia, Belgium or Copenhagen, we cannot hope to confront and defeat it. And in an ideological battle, our best weapon is the strength of our own ideas.

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