

Islamic State v Islam

Article by Tom Harley, The Australian, 30 December 2015, a counter view by ‘Andrew’ and a full response by Andrew Bolt, Herald-Sun

It is always wise when fighting a war to pick the right enemy. In many of the commentaries on Islamic State this would not appear to be the case.

Linking Islamic State with mainstream Islam is exactly what it would like to have everyone believe. Yes, Islamic State claims to fight in the name of Islam, uses its terms, references variants of its beliefs in its propaganda and imposes the most extreme interpretations of Islam where it has taken territory.

IS is a group of opportunists filling a vacuum

But, in truth, it is a group of opportunists filling a vacuum. The movement has received significant strategic direction out of Baghdad by Sunni Baath party commanders formerly loyal to Saddam Hussein.

They once had been the ruling elite of Iraq and lost virtually all power when the Iraqi army and Baath party were disbanded following the US-led invasion in 2003. They were further marginalised by Nouri al-Maliki’s Shia-backed government in Baghdad that used its position to exclude Sunnis from influence throughout the country. They are not pious Islamic clerics but whisky-drinking, disco-visiting secular figures; they have used an extreme and perverted version of Islam to give themselves a standing, to mobilise supporters and to claim some form of respectability.

IS: a form of Islam that is more extreme than the al-Qa’ida

Islamic State subscribes to a form of Islam that is more extreme than the al-Qa’ida brand, particularly on the point of regarding Shia Muslims as apostate — worse in many ways in Islamic State’s mind to be a non-Sunni Muslim than it is to be a non-Muslim. It is also an appealing point of difference by which Islamic State can capture the support of the Sunni of Iraq and Syria ahead of their rival al-Qa’ida affiliates.

Like many insurgencies, a charismatic front proselytises a cause while cynical hardheads amass power, wealth and influence. Islamic State has been highly effective in concocting an extreme and “pure” version of Islam to access and mobilise people who feel marginalised within their own communities or Western nations. Fanatical evangelical sects do the same thing throughout the world, garnering vulnerable people, making them feel empowered and confident, and giving them a standing in a cause in return for their submission to direction.

Not an Islamic phenomenon

It is an age-old political technique to “evince a piety” and promote an extreme version of a faith and denounce those who are impure and inconvenient. All faiths have done this; it is not an Islamic phenomenon. There are examples throughout Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism of extremists, building literal and figurative armies by collecting fringe dwellers and enlisting them to do things they would not normally do, and have them do the work of the political, not religious, aims of their leaders.

Jan of Leyden, the Anabaptist leader who took Munster in the 16th century, convinced the population they were running a holy war and used claims of divinely conferred powers to justify outrageous acts of barbarity, personal enrichment and polygamy. It all ended badly for him and everyone else. Waco, Texas, and Jonestown are more recent examples of the same phenomenon, albeit far smaller. The worst possible thing to do is to publicly give such fringe dwellers and extremists the dignity of linking them to some mainstream organisation. It is exactly what they want and exactly what they must not have. It is an even more foolish step to then denounce the whole faith for the actions of people who want to claim to represent it; it merely gives the zealots further cause.

The defeat of Islamic State is more a problem for the Islamic world than it is for the non-Islamic world and, for that reason alone, the solutions must necessarily be found within the Islamic leadership through the formation of coalitions and prioritisation of their enemies. Declaring all of Islam as being accountable is wrong, as it by implication condemns Islamic leaders — within our own community and in the region — who want to reclaim their faith's reputation from its hijackers.

No such thing as an institution called Islam

There is another flaw in making Islam the target: there is no such thing as an institution called Islam. Trying to call for its reform has the absurd, simplifying notion that Islam is a functioning organisation that is capable of being ruled. Unlike the unreformed Catholic Church, there is no pope, no single body of authority. Luther and Calvin could call for reformation because there was a pope and a college of cardinals plus a Holy Roman Emperor to do the job. Those authorities had the choice to accommodate the demands of the Protestants or to resist.

Many of the unattractive elements in various versions of Islam are not capable of remedy or reconstruction by a mufti, ayatollah, ulama, king or emir because no such authority exists. There is nothing even approaching a unified structure for Islam.

Uniting the Islamic world against Islamic State is extraordinarily difficult, as the Saudis' most recent effort shows. The Saudis have pulled together a coalition of nations to fight terror and even have the support of one of the leading Sunni theological centres, Al-Azhar University in Cairo. However, the coalition excludes Iran and Iraq and does not include Algeria, which has one of the most feared armies in the Arab world, nor is Indonesia a member. Even Saudi Arabia — with the most economically powerful and best equipped Arab military force, and home of Islam's most sacred sites — cannot pull it together.

Dangerous to lump all Muslims into one basket

It is also a dangerous notion to lump all Muslims into one basket. Muslims all venerate the Prophet Mohammed and follow the teachings in the Koran but that is the beginning and the end of commonality in the Islamic faith.

There are many Muslim communities that share the values we generally associate with liberal democratic Western society and repudiate sharia law — they believe in the secular life but still follow their own faith. Many such communities are integrated into US, European and Australian mainstream societies. There are a huge range of Islamic countries. At one end are theocracies: Iran ruled by a cleric with the strong support of a military junta. At the other end are secular, multicultural, multi-religious countries that are vibrant democracies, such as Indonesia. To hold Islam responsible for Islamic State is even more ridiculous than holding the

Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury responsible for the IRA and the extreme Ulster Orange groups — worse in the instance of Islamic State as it has the risk of making enemies out of allies.

A glib catchcry of Islam versus the West

It is common knowledge that responsible leadership in various Australian Muslim communities has been critical in maintaining a high level of public safety. The responsibility taken by those leaders for members of their community has led to the foiling of life-threatening plots to Australian citizens. It is not only ignorant but dangerous to oversimplify the issues into some glib catchcry of Islam versus the West. Care, intelligence and common sense are required, not indiscriminate belligerence.

In all wars you identify the enemy and attack it without compromise. In this instance, the would-be knights and crusaders do not resemble Richard the Lionheart but Don Quixote.

Tom Harley is chairman of the Menzies Research Centre.

Comment from Andrew:

This article would be better suited to The Age or The Guardian, where leftist collectivists lump all Muslims into one homogenous victim group so they can enlist them to their cause. Those 'not of the left' who don't think in collectivist terms do, in fact, see heterogeneity in the Muslim community. They understand the issue is nuanced. This article is confused and simplistic. Take Maajid Nawaz, he is a Muslim who has argued that Islam needs to reform. Add to this the President of Egypt and myriad others. Everyone knows that Islam has no figure head, this does not mean there cannot be a grassroots cultural change vis-a-vis the religion of Islam - the ideas. Leaders are not everything! In fact, I would argue that our governments have made a huge mistake in confusing so called 'Islamic Leaders' of the 'Muslim community' with the Muslim community. Further, it is pretty common knowledge that the issues facing the Muslims with respect to Islam do not all relate directly to the Islamic State. The issues are broader and go back to the 9th century, when freedom of intellectual inquiry was extinguished in the Islamic world. Figurehead or no figurehead, the advent of the printing press and the enlightenment meant that the interpretation of the Bible had to change with the times. The author of this piece has clearly confused two issues, which are loosely related: ISIS and the cultural malaise of the Islamic world in the middle-east. I would also add that this article purports to be nuanced, but it is not. For example, it says 'There are many Muslim communities that share the values we generally associate with liberal democratic Western society and repudiate sharia law'...yes, and there are many who don't. It goes on to talk about the spectrum of Islamic countries, from authoritarian to democratic. It would have been a more intellectually coherent article if he had applied his 'spectrum' to his characterisation of Muslims communities in the west. I could go on...

And a response by Andrew Bolt, Herald-Sun

What a curious piece on Islam in today's [Australian](#) by Tom Harley, former Liberal vice-president and still chairman of the party's think tank, the Menzies Research Centre.

Harley's denialism, straw men and false analogies in defending Islam are plain, as is the apparent spite of this Turnbull supporter towards Tony Abbott, who as Prime Minister ruled that lobbyists should not hold Liberal party positions and Harley should go.

Harley denied then he was a lobbyist, and today denies there is anything inherently violent in Islamic theology.

There may well be a respectable argument to be made for Harley's position, but, if so, why would Harley resort to one as deceptive and shoddy as this? Is this a reflection of the quality of reasoning that informs the Prime Minister's own benign statements on Islam?

Observe:

Linking Islamic State with mainstream Islam is exactly what it would like to have everyone believe. Yes, Islamic State claims to fight in the name of Islam, uses its terms, references variants of its beliefs in its propaganda and imposes the most extreme interpretations of Islam where it has taken territory. But, in truth, it is a group of opportunists filling a vacuum. The movement has received significant strategic direction out of Baghdad by Sunni Baath party commanders formerly loyal to Saddam Hussein.

They once had been the ruling elite of Iraq and lost virtually all power when the Iraqi army and Baath party were disbanded following the US-led invasion in 2003... They are not pious Islamic clerics but whisky-drinking, disco-visiting secular figures; they have used an extreme and perverted version of Islam to give themselves a standing, to mobilise supporters and to claim some form of respectability... Like many insurgencies, a charismatic front proselytises a cause while cynical hardheads amass power, wealth and influence.

Calling the Islamic State leaders whisky-drinking hypocrites does not actually get us far in diagnosing the appeal of the group's Islamist message to tens of thousands of its fighters and hundreds of thousands of its supporters around the world. You could equally point out that Stalin was a murderous paranoid and psychopath and Mao a power-mad sexual predator without having explained why communism appealed to millions, including many of our intellectuals.

Likewise, whether or not the Islamic State leaders are as Harley claims says nothing about Islam or the Islamic State's appeal, which Harley begrudgingly concedes.

Islamic State has been highly effective in concocting an extreme and "pure" version of Islam to access and mobilise people who feel marginalised within their own communities or Western nations. Fanatical evangelical sects do the same thing throughout the world, garnering vulnerable people, making them feel empowered and confident, and giving them a standing in a cause in return for their submission to direction.

Here Harley actually begins to concede the point - that the Islamic State actually claims to preach a "pure" version of Islam, and it is this that resonates so strongly with so many Muslims, making them feel "empowered". Mind you, he tosses in some classic victimology about Muslims being peculiarly "vulnerable" and "marginalised".

So Harley starts to relativise:

All faiths have done this; it is not an Islamic phenomenon. There are examples throughout Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism of extremists, building literal and figurative armies by

collecting fringe dwellers and enlisting them to do things they would not normally do, and have them do the work of the political, not religious, aims of their leaders.

Really? Looking around, where do we find similar examples, of, say, Christianity inspiring “literal” armies as Islam does today?

Harley must stretch - all the way to the German city of Munster more than 400 years ago:

Jan of Leyden, the Anabaptist leader who took Munster in the 16th century, convinced the population they were running a holy war and used claims of divinely conferred powers to justify outrageous acts of barbarity, personal enrichment and polygamy. It all ended badly for him and everyone else. Waco, Texas, and Jonestown are more recent examples of the same phenomenon, albeit far smaller.

True, every creed has its kooks. Every society has its men of violence. The health of those creeds and communities, though, is measured by the reaction to those extremists. Do the majority disown or expel them? Do the religious leaders take responsibility for reforming their faith and reclaiming it from those who use it to wage war?

In the case of the Anabaptists, actually a communistic cult, the armies of Christendom were ranged in opposition to them. Munster was besieged and the Anabaptists wiped out.

As for Waco and Jonestown, I defy Harley to name a single Christian preacher of note who thought the cult leaders had a point. I defy him to cite the New Testament passages which licensed what the cult leaders did. I defy him to demonstrate how the example of Christ’s own life could be used by the leaders of Waco and Jonestown to legitimise their own actions. In every way - in numbers, in theological justification, in the reaction of the mainstream - the extremists Harley cites are the wildest aberrations. illustrative of nothing in Christianity then or now.

But regard Islamism today - whether preached by the leaders of the Islamic State or al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Jamah Islamiyah, al Nusra and the many other Islamist terrorism groups listed by the US State Department. Note their numbers. Note that they are fighting now, not in the 16th century. Note how few Islamic clerics and leaders lead the fight against such groups, theologically or militarily. Note how these groups can and do quote the Koran and Surah to licence their terrorism. Note how then can point to the example of Mohammad himself in killing and enslaving unbelievers.

The scale of this religiously inspired or legitimised violence threat is beyond anything the world has faced from a faith in our lifetimes. For Harley to counterpoise this world-wide threat with Waco is simply ludicrous. For him to limit the examples of Islamist terrorism to merely the Islamic State is myopic. Yet he continues:

Note The worst possible thing to do is to publicly give such fringe dwellers and extremists the dignity of linking them to some mainstream organisation. It is exactly what they want and exactly what they must not have.

Just because the Islamic State wants to be seen as an expression of Islam is no reason to deny it is. In fact, its power has lain in being able to convince hundreds of thousands of Muslims that it is indeed Islamic.

It is an even more foolish step to then denounce the whole faith for the actions of people who want to claim to represent it; it merely gives the zealots further cause.

This is in part a straw man argument. Many critics I've read do not "denounce the whole faith" or all believers. They call for reform of the faith or more action from the faith's mainstream representatives to combat the interpretations of Islam that Harley deplors.

And note that warning that is so typical of apologists such as Harley: that to criticise Islam as excusing violence will invite violence. That it "merely gives the zealots further cause".

Why would criticising Islam be potentially lethal if Islam did not indeed legitimise a lethal response to those who attack the faith?

Again, let's contrast. Have you ever heard a political apparatchik or journalist warn against criticising Catholicism or Catholic priests for fear of inciting Catholic extremists to kill?

Harley actually confirms what he seeks to deny. But he has a solution - of sorts:

The defeat of Islamic State is more a problem for the Islamic world than it is for the non-Islamic world and, for that reason alone, the solutions must necessarily be found within the Islamic leadership through the formation of coalitions and prioritisation of their enemies.

Yes, yes - we keep hearing that the Islamic State is worse for Muslims. So why do so many Muslim countries refuse to fight it? And why does the West fear a victory over the Islamic State if that victory leaves the militant Iranian regime - itself a sponsor of terrorism - dominant in Iraq and Syria?

Declaring all of Islam as being accountable is wrong, as it by implication condemns Islamic leaders — within our own community and in the region — who want to reclaim their faith's reputation from its hijackers.

Where are those Islamic leaders? What have they actually done to reclaim their faith's reputation? What does Harley have to say of the likes of our own Grand Mufti, who initially responded to the Islamic State attack on Paris with a statement blaming it on the sins of the West? Is Harley describing what actually is or just dreaming of what should be?

Excuses follow for the inaction of the clerics that Harley has just claimed "want to reclaim their faith's reputation":

There is another flaw in making Islam the target: there is no such thing as an institution called Islam. Trying to call for its reform has the absurd, simplifying notion that Islam is a functioning organisation that is capable of being ruled. Unlike the unreformed Catholic Church, there is no pope, no single body of authority. Luther and Calvin could call for reformation because there was a pope and a college of cardinals plus a Holy Roman Emperor to do the job. Those authorities had the choice to accommodate the demands of the Protestants or to resist.

Again, a ludicrous analogy. When the Pope refused to reform his faith, did Luther then stop? Did the proto-Protestants pack up and go home? Did they simply leave their faith to the Pope's care, or did they wrest it from him?

Many of the unattractive elements in various versions of Islam are not capable of remedy or reconstruction by a mufti, ayatollah, ulama, king or emir because no such authority exists. There is nothing even approaching a unified structure for Islam.

Nor is there for Christendom, actually. No single figure speaks for the Anglicans, Catholics, Protestants, Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists, Christian Scientists, Pentacostals, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Copts and dozens of other Christian churches. That does not excuse the leaders of each church taking responsibility for the interpretation of their faith.

But Harley, having just claimed “no such authority exists” to reform Islam goes on to cite one of the many which actually could:

Uniting the Islamic world against Islamic State is extraordinarily difficult, as the Saudis’ most recent effort shows. The Saudis have pulled together a coalition of nations to fight terror and even have the support of one of the leading Sunni theological centres, Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

So Harley actually accepts what he the paragraph before denied - that institutions such as the “one of the leading Sunni theological centres, Al-Azhar University in Cairo” can indeed be deployed in disputing interpretations of Islam deployed by the likes of the Islamic State. Indeed, this was just the kind of theological work urged on Egypt’s clerics in January by Egypt’s president. And the muftis and ayatollahs listed earlier by Harley have the authority to attempt the same - should they wish.

Harley continues:

It is also a dangerous notion to lump all Muslims into one basket.

Straw man. Who does what Harley claims? Apart from Harley himself, that is:

There are many Muslim communities that share the values we generally associate with liberal democratic Western society and repudiate sharia law — they believe in the secular life but still follow their own faith.

An exaggeration and denial of reality. Having just told us to not “lump all Muslims into one basket”, Harley himself does just that to assure us “many Muslim communities ... repudiate sharia law”. In fact, many Muslims may do that, but there is no such unanimity in their communities. Islam itself advocates sharia law, and - not surprisingly - polls suggest most Muslims around the world want sharia law. The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils has also argued for the adoption here of sharia principles.

Yet again I wonder, is Harley describing the world as it is or simply as he wishes it to be?

Then there’s yet another absurd analogy:

To hold Islam responsible for Islamic State is even more ridiculous than holding the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury responsible for the IRA and the extreme Ulster Orange groups — worse in the instance of Islamic State as it has the risk of making enemies out of allies.

The Irish Republic Army was an avowedly nationalist - not religious - terrorist group. It killed in defiance of Christian teaching, not in accordance with it. It never quoted the Bible to

legitimise its violence, as the Islamic State quotes the Koran. And the Pope indeed denounced it.

Why would Harley make this absurd analogy - if not to minimise the reality of Islamism?

And after this farrago of false analogies, straw men, exaggerations, excuses and denialism, Harley gets to what I believe is the whole point of his article - a barely disguised slur of Tony Abbott, who has called for the reform of Islam to the discomfort of Harley's ally, Malcolm Turnbull:

It is not only ignorant but dangerous to oversimplify the issues into some glib catchcry of Islam versus the West. Care, intelligence and common sense are required, not indiscriminate belligerence. In all wars you identify the enemy and attack it without compromise. In this instance, the would-be knights and crusaders do not resemble Richard the Lionheart but Don Quixote.

Actually, Tom, you've hit on yet another dud analogy. Don Quixote actually saw things that were not there - things he wished were true but were not. But I won't flatter you by calling you the real Don Quixote here. That role is actually filled by someone more senior, relegating you to merely his Sancho Panza.

But here is the real concern for me. Harley is not just a Turnbull ally but a director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University.