

## How to Counter Islamic Extremism

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Two great challenges for reform of education have to be addressed if Muslim society is to respond meaningfully to the threat of terrorism.

Most Muslims are strongly opposed to acts of violence, in any form, undertaken in the name of religion. Consequently, it hurts us to constantly see the name of Islam, 'the religion of peace', linked with international terrorism. Nevertheless, as Muslims we must face the reality that if we fail to address the challenges before us we will find ourselves constantly confronted with accusations of harbouring terrorists – regardless of how fair those generalized accusations might be. If, however, we are prepared seriously to address these two challenges, people such as Osama Bin Laden will find increasingly little solace or support in Muslim society.

At the moment within the Muslim world, sadly, groups justify their violence on the grounds that they are defending Islam against the tyranny of the uncivilized West. We need to undercut the kind of thinking that justifies such simplistic assertions in order that those who advocate terrorism will find no refuge in our communities.

The first challenge is the urgent need to develop a new approach to understanding Islamic law. At the moment the formal canonical approaches leave us with a number of unresolved thorny issues. For example, according to a formalistic understanding of Islamic law, when a Muslim converts out of Islam to embrace another faith they are said to be guilty of apostasy, which, according to this narrow understanding, renders them liable to punishment by death. Such an understanding of Islamic law is, to say the least, problematic. If rigidly enforced, it would seem to demand the deaths of tens of millions of people who have converted from Islam to Christianity.

Clearly something is wrong here, especially when we consider that Muslim nations around the world have ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights wherein an essential element is the right to freedom of belief and freedom of conscience. Needless to say, we need immediately to address these apparent contra-

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dictions between our understanding of Islamic law and the universal values that we not only endorse but also proclaim to be at the heart of our faith.

If we fail to address this in our institutes of higher learning and in our theological discourses, we condemn ourselves to be trapped in an infantile stage of development, and as Muslims failing to achieve the maturity required of us by the core principles of our faith. Indolence in this matter will produce for us a growing gap between formalistically minded Islamic leaders on the one hand, and the people whom they lead on the other. Such a basic tension is very unhealthy and it is high time we honestly addressed the challenge before us.

The second challenge that needs to be confronted lies in the field of general education. We face a dangerously schizophrenic approach to educating our young people. At present, tens of thousands of Muslim students, mostly from the impoverished developing nations that comprise the bulk of the Islamic world, are sent abroad to study in technologically more advanced societies in order that they may bring back home and apply to their own societies an understanding of modern science and technology. And so it is that every year thousands of young Muslims from developing nations such as Indonesia come of age while studying as strangers in foreign lands. Their education provides for them an understanding of modern technology and science, but it is, of course, left to them to reconcile this newly gained knowledge with the faith that, as foreign students in the West, they increasingly come to feel to be at the core of their identity.

Because they have not been trained in the rich disciplines of Islamic scholarship, they tend to bring to reflections on their faith the same sort of simple modelling and formulaistic thinking that they have learnt as students of engineering or other applied sciences. Students studying liberal arts are rather better served when it comes time to reflect on the place of Islam in the modern world. But precious few young Muslims from developing nations have the privilege of undertaking liberal arts courses in western universities.

This might seem but a small matter, but the ramifications are far-reaching. Left to themselves, these future leaders of Muslim societies apply the same intellectual principles they have learned in the classroom to understanding the place of Islam in modern society.

Many end up on a familiar path, taking a more or less literal approach to the textual sources of Islam: The Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, otherwise known as the *Hadith*. Grabbing a few verses out of context, they seek to find answers to the challenges facing Muslim society today. The result is that they use these texts in a literal and reductionist fashion without being able to undertake, or even appreciate, the subtly nuanced task of interpretation required of them if they are to understand how documents from the 7th and 8th centuries, from the alien world of tribal Arab society among the desert sands, are to be correctly applied to the very different world that we live in today.

Analysing problems in a reductionist fashion and rigorously applying a simple formula may be an appropriate approach to building a bridge, or even erecting a skyscraper, but it is grossly inappropriate and inadequate to the task of building modern Muslim society. Sadly, without at all intending it to be so, we take the best of our young people and school them in such a way that, in the face of alienation,

loneliness and the search for identity, they are unable to approach their faith with the intellectual sophistication that the demands of the modern world require of them.

Until we begin to value a broad education for our young and face up to the nature of the intellectual challenges that face them, we are unwittingly condemning ourselves to forever struggle with the very forces of violent radicalism that we regard as being anathema to our faith.

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Translated by Greg Barton

### **Note**

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