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## **Islamism, Radical Islam, Jihadism: The Problem of Language and Islamophobia**

*By Paul Hedges*

### **Synopsis**

*There are problems with terms used to discuss religiously justified violence, like Islamism, Radical Islam, Jihadism, etc. They may provide legitimacy to terrorists, increase Islamophobia, and distort or misrepresent the actions and ideologies they seek to describe.*

### **Commentary**

VIOLENCE IN the name of religion, especially Islam, is a global concern: the Charlie Hebdo and Paris attacks, and the ongoing ISIS conflict being two prominent examples. The language used to discuss this is, however, deeply problematic, with terms used by the media, politicians, and academics often distorting or oversimplifying the issues.

The focus, here, on Islam is because it is the most discussed example, although I do not believe Islam is inherently violent or more violent than any other religion. Indeed, no clear evidence suggests religion is more likely to incite violence than other ideologies or worldviews; nevertheless, in the current geopolitical environment it often provides a claimed motivation or seeming explanation – both for actors and commentators.

### **Naming religious violence**

The language used seeks to distinguish what is termed “moderate Islam” from the actions and ideologies of terrorists and militants; politicians like George Bush and Tony Blair wished to distinguish their “War on Terror” from a war against Islam. The terms used include: Islamism, Radical/Extremist Islam, Fundamentalist Islam, Jihadism. However, none of these is really adequate.

Islamism often denotes a political form of Islam, which sees “religious” aspects being extended into areas of statecraft, law, and the public sphere. In some respects, this misunderstands what “religion” and “Islam” are. Developing from a modern Western/Christian worldview, contemporary understandings of “religion” and the “secular” divide the world into a private sphere of personal religious belief and a public sphere of law, politics, economics, etc.

Such a division comes from the specific European and North American context of the last couple of

hundred years, but is adopted now more globally. Prior to this, Christianity was involved in almost every aspect of life, law, politics, morality, and economics. Countries where Islam predominates tend to uphold a (more traditional) worldview where the “religious sphere” naturally encompasses law, public morality, and politics.

Further, while Christianity stresses beliefs and creeds (personal belief), Islam has emphasised duties, embodied in Shariah Law (public actions). Therefore, to speak of “Islamism” as a militant political form of Islam makes no sense: all Islam, traditionally speaking, is political and legal. Indeed, when Tony Blair said that his Christian beliefs guided aspects of his governmental policy, including the war in Iraq, no one accused him of “Christianism”. “Islamism”, as a term, is therefore unhelpful to analyse contemporary militant/terrorist actions.

### **Problems with terms like “Radical Islam” or “moderate” Islam**

Radical Islam names a counterpart to “moderate” Islam. However, it is not very useful. What is “radical” ? In everyday language, radical suggests something new, dramatically different, or unusual. In this sense liberal Muslim reformers are “radicals”. Unhelpfully, it may also suggest those only “moderately” Islamic are the peaceful ones, while those who take their religion more seriously (are “radical” about it) turn to violence: young people especially want to be radicals.

Likewise, use of “Extremist Islam” may suggest those who take Islam to its extremes; this implies that, taken seriously, Islam leads to violence. Contrarily many deeply committed Muslims understand Islam as a religion of peace, while many of the terrorists/militants demonstrate only limited commitment to or understanding of it: this is seemingly true of both the Hebdo attackers and the ISIS leadership.

Fundamentalism originated in the United States in the early 20th century, used by Christians who adhered to what they saw as fundamental beliefs. These varied but often included the infallibility of scripture, belief in the virgin birth, etc. It has been debated whether we can accurately use “fundamentalist” outside of this original context, but if we do what does it mean?

In common usage it refers to violent and extremist ends of any group. If we take it more precisely, however, we apply it to those who follow (what they believe are) the fundamentals of their religion; as with the terms “extremist” and “radical” this may play into the hands of those who wish to argue for terrorism and militancy by implying that the most “fundamental” Islam is that which endorses this.

Most Muslims who adhere to the “fundamentals” of Islam see this as including principles like peace, tolerance, and respect. In this latter sense, many of the nicest Muslims I have met are “fundamentalists”.

### **Consequences of names**

“Jihadist” is often used of terrorists/militants engaged in what they want to be seen as global jihad. Jihad is a complicated term in Islam, nevertheless, we may mention a commonly used distinction between the “lesser jihad”, warfare, and the “greater jihad”, spiritual and moral cultivation. The regular use of jihad as warfare/violence therefore misses out on the primary element of it for many Muslims; meanwhile, potentially legitimating terrorists and militants.

Notably, Shariah has historically regulated “just war” practices within combative jihad in principles like not attacking non-combatants (including women, children, priests, and rabbis), and not destroying people’s means of livelihood. The violence of ISIS or Al Qaeda- inspired terrorists/militants is clearly not practised according to Islamic principles, and so for many Muslims they put themselves outside of Islam.

All these terms highlight “Islam” in association with terrorists/militants. Analysis suggests that this results in a popular perception leading to Islamophobia and distrust of Muslims in general. Given the implications, for example that Islam has “fundamentals” that supposedly involve violence, the problem can clearly be seen.

These terms also hide the primarily political motivations around much of the religiously named violence. Moreover, it unifies often very different agendas and motivations. We cannot avoid religion’s

power to motivate and legitimate violence (it can also motivate and sustain irenic and pacifist agendas), nor the fact that some involved may well believe they are acting in defence of their religion, or on “pure spiritual” motivations. But the terms currently employed are unhelpful, even counterproductive, for description and analysis.

While not ignoring the religious dimension, we should not use headline names for these militants and terrorists using any claimed religious motivation. While studying religion and ideology plays an important part in the analysis, the currently used terms give pseudo-legitimacy, hide the complexity of factors (land, identity, oppression, etc.) behind events, and help fuel Islamophobia.

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